

## Military Uniform as a Fashion during the Cultural Revolution

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This paper investigates the development and significance of military uniforms during the Cultural Revolution. Due to superior material and appealing colors, in conjunction with the ideology they stood for, the military uniforms were the clothing of choice for revolution-minded youth. Starting with the political and military elite, the fashion for military attire spread to Red Guards and Educated Youth, and eventually became popular throughout China. This reflects two ideological connotations of the military uniform at that time: anti-individualism and equality. After the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989, the military uniform ceased to be fashionable. Gone with the military uniform is not only the chaos of those years but also a certain zeal to reform Chinese society.

There are three parts to this article. The first part focuses on two conditions that led to the military uniform becoming fashionable, including both economical circumstances and their effect on fabric and color and ideological notions about style. The second part deals with the spread of military uniforms. The third section addresses the value system represented by the military uniform, which emphasized social rather than individual benefits and equality between men and women.

The nineteenth century French critic and historian [Hippolyte] Taine [1828-1893] wrote:

My decided opinion is that the greatest change in history was the advent of trousers. It marked the passage of Greek and Roman civilization to the modern. Nothing is more difficult to alter than a universal and daily custom. In order to take away man's clothes and dress him up again you must demolish and remodel him. (Clerget, 1914, p. 763)

Clearly, clothes are an important marker of social trends, values, and status, no less so in China than elsewhere. Even, perhaps especially, during times of upheaval, this is true. The years 1966 to 1976 saw the turbulent Cultural Revolution in China. Its far-reaching influence provides boundless topics for investigation, among them the topic of dress.

People picture the Cultural Revolution as a period when almost everyone wore a uniform. To some critical eyes, these dull uniforms show that at that time mainland Chinese were aesthetically challenged and lacked fashion sense. But the modern avant-garde writer Wang Shuo (1992) disputes this idea and asserts that there was a fashion, and it was precisely the military uniform:

No famous brand's fashion today can match the Cultural Revolution's military uniform with its stylishness and sense of status. Only the military uniform manifested a variety of materials and color at the time when people generally wore blue uniforms made of khaki or cotton. The government made brown, cream-colored, snow-white and lake-green summer and winter military uniforms of khaki, tussah silk, whipcord and woolen cloth, along with thin, pointed leather high boots made of

superior cowhide, for the generals and military officials who were the first group bestowed with military ranks.

... ..

Those boys and girls wearing diverse, second-hand military uniforms of the army, navy and air force really caught one's eyes on the dull streets ten years ago (pp. 429-430).

Wang Shuo pointed out three key points. First, wearing a military uniform was a fashion during the Cultural Revolution. Second, although there were several other uniforms (for functionaries, farmers and workers), all such uniforms were very similar to one another and rather drab. The military uniform became a fashion because of its superiority in material and color. Third, there was a certain group of people that set this fashion: the young boys and girls who frequented various popular street corners in the larger cities.

However, fabric and color were not the only reasons military uniforms were fashionable. Alternatives, both domestic and foreign — *qipao* (cheongsam), Western suits and blue jeans, etc. — were competitors to the military uniform. Perhaps Wang Shuo should also have stressed the so-called Zhongshan style of the uniforms, so named for the revolutionist first president of China, Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen), who popularized it (See Figure 1). Military uniforms adopted this style after the Land Reforms of 1927-1937, and retained it during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1945-1949). After 1949, the military uniform was redesigned eight times, but the basic style remained Zhongshan style (Wang, 2000). Because of its origin and history, this style came to symbolize revolutionary thought and tallied with the spirit of the Cultural Revolution.

Superior fabric, appealing color, ideological symbolism—what made these so desirable? When did this vogue begin, and when did it disappear? Who wore such apparel and what were its implications? I will attempt to answer these questions in three parts. The first focuses on two conditions that led to the military uniform becoming fashionable: for example, economic conditions and their effect on material and color, and ideological notions about style. The second part deals with the spread of the military uniform. As a fashion military garb spread from high civil officials to lower ones, which for the purposes of this discussion are treated as one group, due to their shared assumptions and motivations. The third part addresses the value system represented by the military uniform, which emphasized gender equality and social rather than individual benefits.

#### Military Uniforms as Fashion

After 1949, all uniforms were in the Zhongshan style. But for financial and ideological reasons only military uniforms were made from high quality fabrics in a variety of colors. It is common practice during times of war or economic hardship that uniforms or standardized costumes be made to mitigate the scarcity of materials. For example, as Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher report during the World War II “in England there had been mass production of one-style utility dresses, utility shoes, and other garments, to be had only in exchange for rationing coupons” (1965, p. 329). This corresponds to the case in China during



Figure 1: Sun Zhongshan with Liao Zhongkai in Guangzhou at the Seventh Annual Conference celebrating the October Socialist Revolution (Shang, 1979).

and after the Civil War. Observing this phenomenon, Zhang Qinqiu (1955), the vice president of the Textile and Industrial Department of the PRC, commented as follows:

More and more men and women wear uniforms. In recent years not only do office workers generally wear a uniform, but people in uniforms have spread to every class in society, from housewives to country women. And even many elementary school students wear uniforms (p. 16) (See Figure 2)

Later, especially during 1968 and 1969, economic conditions in China worsened, which prolonged the duration and dominance of the Zhongshan style. People did not have enough money to buy clothes, and the government did not have enough raw materials to produce more clothing for people. The government had to ration clothes by issuing clothing stamps. Such stamps were often worthless, however, due to the scarcity of clothing in stores. The average amount of cloth available for one person in 1969 was seven to eight *chi*, or about 243.84 centimeters, which was far from sufficient to make a set of clothes. Yet military



Figure 2: Xiao Li. "Standard Dress." *Xin guancha* (1956): 6:16

officers were provided with a clothing ration of fourteen *chi*, or about 426.72 centimeters (Institute for the Study of Chinese Communist Problems, 1979, p. 95). In addition, the government gave them uniforms of higher quality, both in terms of material and color, than were available to other people.

Military fabric changed over the time. The military uniform of 1955 was made of domestic materials and was durable. The 1965 uniform was made of cotton (Li & Wang, 1992). In 1968, the material used for military uniforms became a topic of discussion. Researchers suggest that synthetic fibers like dacron be used. In 1971, polyester-cotton blends gradually replaced other materials (Wang, 2000). Such blends are not only durable, but also light and easy to wash. In contrast, non-military uniforms were only made of cotton and khaki, and, as has been noted, most people did not have enough material to make clothes of any sort. This imbalance helped determine the high status of the military uniform.

Like fabric, the color of military uniforms improved with time and was comparatively better. During the War of Resistance against Japan and the Civil War, the Eighth Route Army's uniforms were yellow or gray, and the New Fourth Army's were gray. In 1950, the first military uniform reform changed the color of army uniforms to green. The 1958 reform changed it to palm green. From then on the color of the military uniform basically remained green, which is a natural color. In contrast to this, other uniforms in black, dark blue and gray were too heavy (See Figure 3). When people went to a store, as one writer notes, "there are only three colors—dark blue, black and gray" (Ge, 1955, p. 17). This made the palm green military uniforms all the more striking and appealing.

Let us turn now to ideological considerations. The uniform was widely accepted and worn by Chinese from 1949 to 1978. This sometimes leads to the misconception that other



Figure 3: Photograph of Pianist Yin Chengzhong and Conductor Li Delun (Tongbao, 1970)

forms of attire did not exist. But some traditional, foreign and ethnic attire did exist in China in those years and did attract public attention.

For instance, from around 1955 onward, some people began to pay more attention to their dress. In August 1955, Ge Yang, a reporter of *Xin guancha*, invited selected artists, writers and officials, including Ai Qing, Zhang Ting, Jiang Feng, Zhou Guangren, and Yu Feng, to discuss fashion. Their opinions were published in an article entitled “Does Our Attire Need to

be Changed?” in *Xin guancha*. They all thought that the style of dress needed to be changed, and therefore called on people to wear different styles of clothing according to their roles and jobs. Zhou Guangren regarded the *qipao* a proper and elegant dress for women (Ge, 1955). Yu Feng promoted the little coat and short skirt of the women of Suzhou for its ethnic flavor (Ge, 1955). Jiang Feng and Yu Feng both said men should wear Western suits, which were already an international standard (Ge, 1955). After its publication many readers immediately responded to the article, and some of the feedback appeared in volume 11 of *Xin guancha* that same year. This feedback was greatly enthusiastic and positive.

Before long, jeans were also introduced into China. In the following can be seen the Red Guard’s response to the introduction of jeans into China.

In the last ten days of August [1966], in front of the Beijing Department Store, and at the entrance to Nanjing Road in Shanghai, and in the downtown district of Guiyang, there were notices saying: “the legs of jeans must be cut” (Jiang, 1994, p. 59).

This shows that in China people were wearing jeans in the 1960s, almost at the same time as this item of clothing became fashionable in America, where one anti-establishment youth of the 1960s described blue jeans as “a righteous garment.” In the 1960s, “cheap, practical, and unpretentious jeans expressed the affluent generation’s rejection of gray-flannel capitalism” (Polley, 1980, p. 195-196).

But Western suits, jeans, traditional *qipao* and ethnic skirts did not come into fashion simply because they were regarded as symbols of anti-socialism. Eventually they vanished from the public eye, especially once the Red Guard movement began. People had begun to believe that attractive clothing was a sign of backwardness (Ge, 1955), and anyone who wore such clothing must be corrupted by capitalism. These ideas were lampooned in a comic dialogue by Wei Liao and Chen Hongkai in 1956. Even so, during the Cultural Revolution people still fervently held such beliefs about the symbolism and significance of one’s dress.

Under such a social mood, the Zhongshan style gained a privileged position over these other styles, and the military uniform essentially fulfilled the expressive function of fashion, especially the function of group identification, for dress is clearly an important and visible way to express group identity and convey one’s adherence to group values and standards. (Roach & Eicher, 1965, p. 6)

#### The Military Uniform and the Fashion Cycle

Fashion in general “always has a cyclical movement: it rises, reaches a peak, and falls” (Anspach, 1969, p. xiii). The military uniform, originally worn by members of the political and military elite, then spread to the Red Guard and Educated Youth, and finally was popularized in the country as a whole.

Anspach (1969) calls a dress style that has not yet been accepted by a group, but soon will be, an “incoming fashion” (p. xiii). This describes the status of the military uniform from the early 1960s to 1966.

Celebrities and important public figures play a key role in promoting a fashion. For the military uniform, these important figures were Mao Zedong and members of the military.



Figure 4: The Liberation Army Firmly Supports the Proletarian Revolutionaries (Powell & Huo, 1996, p. 10)

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, soldiers were idolized. Their role in the revolution was greatly emphasized, and Lin Biao worked hard to raise the position of the army in society (Shabai, 1968). The image of the military was found everywhere, in real life, in literature and in the news media. As the Cultural Revolution became more chaotic, the government sent troops to factories, schools and the countryside to buttress the Party's support. This was called the Three Supports (See Figure 4). The number of troops was huge, somewhere around 2,300,000 army, 200,000 navy, and 600,000 air force personnel.

On March 7, 1967, the military was tasked with giving the youth military training. In order to calm down armed fighting, the military again stepped in to take control of companies, banks, government offices, radio stations and such. Two-thirds of the leaders of key provinces concurrently held military rank. The government called on people to learn from the military and established several models, such as Lei Feng, Wang Jie, Liu Yingjun (See Figure 5), Men He, and Yu Chun.

In addition to the elevated image of the military, Mao Zedong personally enforced the appeal of the military uniform by deliberately wearing one when he had called up the Red Guard on August 18, 1966 (See Figure 6). Bu Dahua, one of the founders of the Red Guard, described this moment as follows:

Chairman Mao wore a military uniform on that day. This was the first time since the establishment of the PRC. Many old cadres were not prepared for it, and after they saw this they gruffly went back home to change clothes. Chairman Mao deviously wore a military uniform only after consideration. What did it mean? Was it perhaps



Figure 5: Cui Minghua. (1966, July 14). "To Die for the Good of the People is Weightier than Mt. Tai – Liu Yingjun Died a Heroic Death to Safeguard the Lives of the People." *Renmin ribao*.

to show his determination to resolutely carry on the Cultural Revolution? The special love of the Red Guard for wearing military uniforms probably derived from this. (Liang, 1986, p. 6)

In the following two days, the daily *Renmin Ribao* was full of articles praising Chairman Mao's donning of military garb. It is impossible to overemphasize the influence of Mao on the rise of the uniform as fashion. With the help of Mao and the military, the sign underlining the military uniform became clear to everyone. Whoever wore the military uniform was a believer in socialism. Further, such people could be trusted to bear the responsibility of class struggle, while also protecting socialism and socialist China from the evil influences of the West and old China. The military uniform per se was the instrument with which a group could show its political power and assist people in dominating others. It was an unmistakable token





Figure 6: A Long, Long Life to Chairman Mao, our Great Mentor, Great Leader, Great Commander, Great Helmsman (Powell & Huo, 1996, p. 8).

to differentiate “us” from “enemy.”

From 1966 to 1977 the military uniform became essentially high fashion, for it was adopted by an important social group. This group included two subgroups: the Red Guard and the so-called Educated Youth, who together created the youth culture of the era. They held similar beliefs and carried out similar activities. They both believed that they were the torchbearers of China and the People’s Liberation Army, and that it was their duty to protect China from outside invasion. In fact, many Red Guards later became Educated Youth. The difference between them was that the Guards stressed their class purity and identified themselves with those who had the same pedigree, being successors of the proletarian revolution; while the Educated Youth were more inclusive, for they defined themselves by age and educational background. Based on these differences, these two subgroups played somewhat different roles in the fashion cycle.

The Red Guard was fostered by socialist education. They believed what the government believed, and did what the government said: as first the Red Guard easily and naturally adopted the military uniform. After 1949, the government paid great attention to socialist education, largely because it was afraid that the next generation would be influenced by the West or traditional culture and thus betray Mao’s socialist revolution. In the 1960s, even nine-year-old children were affected by this education, drawing pictures that quoted slogans against America and capitalism and calling for class struggle (See Figure 7). The development of the Red Guard was an expected result of this education. Bu Dahua said:

If you want to trace the thought trajectory of the Red Guards, you can’t ignore one important fact: we were the same age as New China, we all grew up with the new China. The education we got, whether from family or society, made us very easily



Figure 7: Bai Lili (nine years old). (1966, August 17). "Watching Tax Collecting Courtyard, Bearing in Mind Class Enmity." *Renmin ribao*.

accept any propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party. (Liang, 1986, p. 5)

From 1962, the government increasingly stressed class struggle, which affected the outlook of the youth. In 1964, the government stated that it would train millions of heirs of socialism, which stimulated the young people's enthusiasm for politics. As a result, on May 29, 1966, during a political discussion, Bu Dahua and his classmates at the Tsinghua University Affiliated High School founded the first Red Guard organization. Soon afterwards, they received the support of Mao Zedong. From their propaganda, we can see what their movement aimed to achieve:

We the Red Guard soldiers  
Only have one belief —  
Protect the Party Central Committee! Protect Chairman Mao!  
We the Red Guard soldiers  
Only have one determination —

To carry the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution without fail through to the end!  
 For the noble Communist enterprise,  
 Revolutionize forever, struggle forever, and follow Chairman Mao forever!  
 (Anonymous, 1968)

These young people regarded themselves as soldiers and imitated soldiers. As they went to the countryside, the temples, and entered the homes of city folk, they destroyed everything they considered old, bourgeois, or class or class divisive, attempting to consolidate and propagate their revolution. As is well known, this movement caused tremendous chaos. In March of 1967, the government ordered the army to train and indoctrinate the students to force them to settle down and study. In July of 1968 the worker propaganda team entered schools and filled the positions occupied by the Red Guards, marking the end of the Red Guard movement.

The Red Guard was a very privileged group: not every young person who believed in socialism at that time could become a Red Guard. They strictly emphasized class purity. On the basis of class background, youths were classified into three groups: the five red types, the red peripherals and the five black types. The five red types included children from the families of revolutionary military men, revolutionary cadres, revolutionary martyrs, workers and poor peasants. The red peripherals included children from the families of teachers, townspeople, middle peasants, low-middle peasants and clerks. The five black types included children from the families of landlords, upper peasants, counter-revolutionaries, evil-doers, and rightists. The Red Guard was made up of the five red types and some red peripherals. The five black types were the target of the revolution and could not join the Red Guard. Among the Red Guards, there was a hierarchy reflecting their parents' positions. People could tell the differences in status via the fabric of their red armband, which came in wool, flannel, silk, satin and cotton (Jiang, 1994).

At this stage of the fashion cycle, the military uniform was a class label. For the Red Guards, this uniform was the best way to show their status, power, and privilege. Further, it was instrumental for them in order to identify with people of their own group and differentiate themselves from others. The military uniform each Red Guard wore was sometimes that of his or her parents. Jiang Pei (1994) wrote:

In order to show that the noble blood of the Red Guard had a long history, many Red Guards got out the old military uniforms of their fathers or brothers, already faded from washing, and wore them... They regarded themselves as the natural red successors, and that red had been carried with them from their mother's womb and was inherently noble. (p. 88)

It has been observed that "upper-status groups are connected with prestige-ranking symbols—rare goods that come in limited supply" (Anspach, 1969, p. 37). It was difficult for people to get military uniforms during the Cultural Revolution. Even among the Red Guards, only those with connections with the military could obtain them. This fact ultimately served to buttress the stature of the Red Guards. The prestige of the Red Guards gradually caused more and more poor, working class and rural youths to wear military uniforms, which were becoming increasingly available.

After 1966, the normal admissions system for schools was abolished, and for three years universities only admitted students especially loyal and of significance to the socialist revolution. So from 1966 to 1969 there were tens of millions of students who graduated from high school but had nowhere to go (Jiang, 1994). At that time the economy of China—already devastated by foreign invasion, civil war, and Mao’s policies—and cities did not have the capacity to absorb such a huge population of unemployed youth. The only places to send them were the countryside and borderlands. Employing slogans such as: “Go to Villages; Go to Borderlands; Go to the Places where the Country Needs You Most,” (See Figure 8) and “Become Reeducated by the Poor and Low Middle Class Peasants; Take Roots in the Countryside for Revolution” (Powell & Huo, 1996, p. 11), the government ordered millions of young people into rural areas in the famous sent-down movement.

As it did the Red Guards, the government expected the Educated Youth to develop China. But unlike the Red Guards, who were asked to carry out class struggle, the Educated Youth were mainly required to learn from peasants. In this mass movement, various classes intermingled and worked together. The Educated Youth, schooled and urbane, constituted a peer group, sharing feelings of comradeship from working and being with people who had similar needs and inclinations (Anspach, 1969). At this stage, the military uniform became a peer group identifier. Because this group (60 million) was bigger than its Red Guard forerunner (20 million) (Xu, 1994), and worked and resided in the countryside for a long time, they not only spread this fashion to country youths, but also helped keep it in fashion.

Fashion stimulates desire, but once a fashion becomes available to everyone, it is sure to decline (Anspach, 1969), and a new fashion will emerge among various trendsetters. Beginning in 1978, China launched political and economic reforms, which brought more freedom of thought and a growing economy. People started to accept non-socialist ideas and goods, and found a much wider variety of items on the market. This development marked the demise of the military uniform as fashion.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. Although people still discriminated against others according to socio-economic differences, they were not quite as mindful of class elements as before. Most of the Educated Youth who had been sent to the countryside returned to their native cities. The development of the economy speeded up the disappearance of the military uniform. There were more products in the market and military surplus stores appeared. Due to the Demobilization of One Hundred Million in 1978, there were even more surplus military uniforms. Anyone, from farmer to urban dweller, regardless of class and status, could buy a military uniform if he chose to do so.

If there had been no Tiananmen incident in 1989, the military uniform might still be very common on the streets of China, although no longer in fashion. During the 1980s, the number of people wearing military uniforms noticeably decreased, even though some groups, such as high school boys, still wore them. But the Tiananmen conflict between the masses and the military caused people to lose trust in the military and government. From then on few people cared for military uniforms. Paradoxically, politics was responsible for both their rise and the fall as fashion.



Figure 8: Go to the Villages. Go to the Borderlands. Go to the Places Where the Country Needs you Most (Powell & Huo, 1996, p. 11).

#### Ideological Implications of the Military Uniform

The role of the military uniform in fashion has two prominent implications: anti-individualism and equality. The fashion cycle is in a sense vertical, flowing from an upper elite group to somewhat less privileged groups, and then to more general groups (Anspach, 1969). In the initial stage of military fashion, Mao Zedong occupied the most prestigious

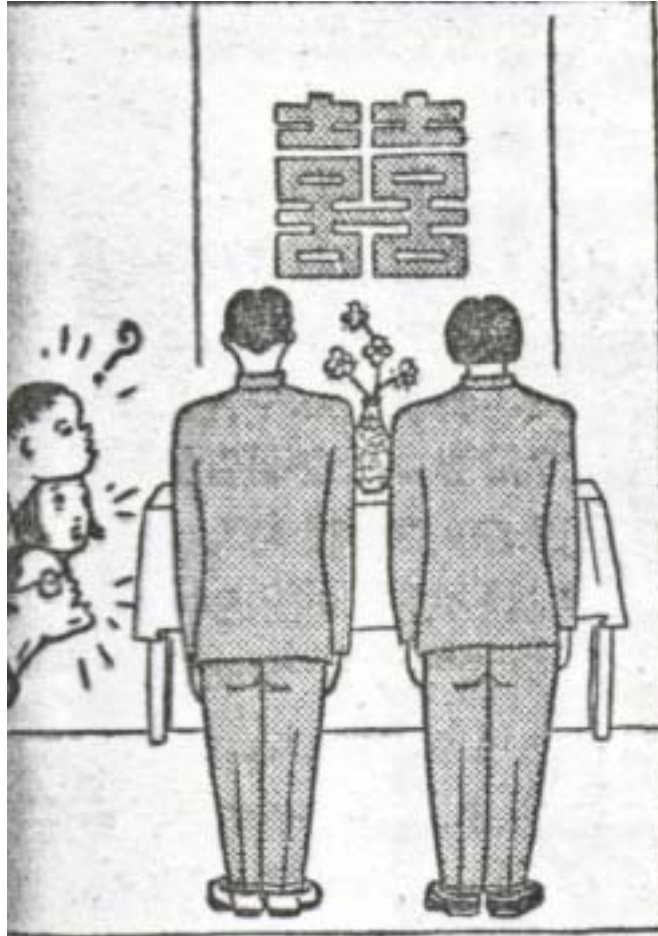


Figure 9: Lu Tian. "Which one's the Bride?" *Xin guancha* (1955): 11: 17.

positions both in and out of politics, and the position of the army was at its highest level. Next, when the vogue was at its peak, the Red Guards occupied a very privileged position, and they imitated Mao and military celebrities in dress, ideology, and sense of mission. The Educated Youth did not have the social stature of Mao, military men or the Red Guards, but they were still a relatively select group. They imitated the Red Guards in dress and followed to a certain degree the Red Guard's ideology. Finally, marking the decline of military fashion, common youth imitated the Educated Youth in dress, even though they did not hold exactly the same ideals as the Red Guard and the Educated Youth.

These changes are the result of imitation, which has the dual function of constructing identity and discriminating one's own group from others. Ideology often serves as the underlying factor driving fashion (Anspach, 1969). Group fashion negates individuality and satisfies one's sense of belonging (Anspach, 1969). By wearing a uniform one shows that he



Figure 10: “Changpao and Oipao in 1930s” (Zhu & Wang, 1997, p. 182)

will forsake his right to act freely as an individual in order to obey the rules of the group (Roach & Eicher, 1965).

Chinese civilization has long contained a strand of anti-individualism. More recently, at least theoretically, there has been a stress on social duty. This attention to social duty has its most recent historical roots in China’s well-known late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conflicts with other nations. In those days, a number of intellectuals took the reform of society and the rescue of China as their duty. With the advent of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards regarded themselves as the heirs of the Chinese Communist Party and took on the role of a paramilitary, protecting China from outside invasion and destroying class enemies within. This notion was expressed in part through the military uniform, with the Red Guards enjoying the sense of having a hand in social reformation and political activity. When people ceased to care about the military uniform, they also generally ceased to care about politics.

Equality is also reflected in the military uniform fashion trend. Such uniforms obscure the differences between men and women. This underlines a cartoon captioned “Which one’s the bride?” that depicts a new couple side-by-side, with their backs to the guests at their wedding banquet (See Figure 9). This cartoon obviously pokes fun at the practice of wearing uniforms. But at the same time it plays upon the fact that uniforms do make men and women equal on a visual level. Scholars have long considered dress as an important weapon in

spreading the idea of the equality of men and women. In the early years of the 1920s, the *qipao* was a vehicle for equality because of its similarity to the *changpao* worn by men (See Figure10). In “Notes on Changes in Clothing” by the modern writer Zhang Ailing (1984), we read:

In 1921, women took on the long robe...Women all over the country suddenly adapted the *qipao* ensemble, which was not for pledging loyalty to the government of the Qing and advocating the restorationist movement, but because women intentionally wanted to imitate men. ... Therefore the newly popular *qipao* was severe, correct, and had a puritanical style. (p. 71)

Later, we have seen, people adopted the Zhongshan suit for the same reason: both men and women could wear it. These two events were not particular to China; this phenomenon is also found in other parts of the world. Jeans, for example, were created in the mid-eighteenth century, but became a unisex fashion for both men and women in the 1960s.

After 1989, the military uniform ended its fashion cycle and disappeared from general use in Chinese society. Other styles of clothing had by then become more affordable and passed out of the control of government. The freedom to choose one's clothes marked an increase in political and economic freedom. Shed, too, with the old uniform, was some of the popular concern for society and country, which has been replaced by the more individualized concerns associated with a market economy.

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