

How to Make a Mao Suit: Clothing the People of Communist China, 1949–1976

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How to Make a Mao Suit, by Antonia Finnane, intricately examines the evolution of China's textile and apparel industry, highlighting its significant contributions across various dimensions. It disenchants the "1949 divide," depicting a historical "capillary flow" from the clothing regimes of the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China, illustrating the development from urban centres like Beijing and Shanghai to rural areas and beyond to other Asian countries through the lens of clothing technology transfer, distribution and consumption. Emphasizing the modernization of China's textile and apparel industry, she uncovers the interplay of gender, labour and state policies under Mao's rule, presenting a vivid account of the societal impact of clothing. The book further explores how the histories of material culture and of sciences enrich our understanding of policy decisions and state-building in Communist China. Beyond technical and economic developments, it also deeply engages with the cultural and social fabric of China, revealing how clothing acts as a mirror to societal changes, technological advancements, and the shifting dynamics of power and identity.

Finnane meticulously structures the chapters to explore clothing practices in Mao's China (1949–1976), emphasizing continuity and transformation. Chapter one discusses the Red Group tailors and the Zhongshan suit, highlighting the fusion of Eastern and Western tailoring and its significance. Chapter two explores the evolution of tailoring tools and materials, showing technological influences from abroad. Chapter three details the shift to *zhifu*, examining its widespread adoption and regulatory frameworks. Chapter four highlights women's roles in clothing production, stressing the importance of sewing schools. Chapters five and six explore the impacts of rationing and the rise of the sewing machine industry, respectively. Chapters seven and eight delve into pattern books, their development and challenges in garment-making instructions. Chapter nine discusses gender and clothing, questioning the appropriateness of attire for Chinese women. This organization not only charts the transformation of dress but also situates clothing within broader socio-political dynamics, offering a deep dive into the period's unique vestimentary regime.

Historical empathy matters for morality. In the scholarly realm, where intellect and capability are abundant, it is the scholars of moral integrity, empathy and decency who truly stand out. One distinct advantage enjoyed by the 'boomer' generation of China experts is their first-hand experience with China's historical evolution from the Mao years to the present. Direct evidence includes a photograph from 1972 which describes the author as a foreign teacher wearing a Chinese-style grey cotton jacket with continuous sleeves in a Shanghai classroom (p. 272). This perspective affords them a comprehensive view of China's transformation. Among distinguished China scholars from that generation, Finnane establishes a high standard of scholarship for the younger generations. Scholars with deep Chinese roots often write from a place of suffering, our narratives shaped by historical fear and trauma. Finnane and her peers, however, approach their research with a markedly different sentiment – driven by a profound empathy, despite the heartache that accompanies their engagement with China's complexities. This contrast presents a model of empathy for researchers like me, who have been "more critical than tolerant" (*rong bu zu, keze youyu*), as we explore the intricacies of PRC history.

Moreover, Finnane demonstrates a multifaceted engagement with her academic community, leaving a metaphorical “piece of bread” for future scholars to explore the untapped resources at the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Her critical assessment of archival sources is noticeable, acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of these resources since the 2000s. Furthermore, her personal dedication to her students, evidenced by dedicating her first post-retirement book to them, showcases a unique and admirable commitment, contrasting with traditional dedications to family or mentors.

The book draws comprehensively on a wide array of sources, demonstrating an exceptional devotion to historical accuracy and depth. Archival documents, such as investigative reports and government documents from various municipal archives, offer a first-hand glimpse into historical events and societal changes. Finnane incorporates an expansive range of published works, including scholarly articles, books and periodicals that cover multiple facets of clothes history and culture, providing a solid scholarly context. Personal accounts, letters and memoirs add a unique, personal dimension, while official records and statistical data contribute to the detailed analysis of demographic and socio-economic trends. Additionally, the engagement with visual and material culture, through references to exhibitions and design manuals, further enhances the narrative by highlighting the cultural significance of physical objects. “A needle of two cities,” this multidimensional approach not only enriches the narrative with varied perspectives but also underscores the author’s diligence to crafting a detailed and well-rounded exploration of “big histories” beyond Beijing and Shanghai.

In the scholarly pursuit of excellence, it is important to approach critiques with a constructive lens, mindful of the effort behind authors’ academic endeavours. In this spirit, I wish to highlight areas of potential refinement within the book. One aspect pertains to the presentation of visual materials. Given the book’s thematic focus, which inherently suggests a reliance on rich visual documentation – including high-quality images of attire, pattern books and historical photographs – the expectation for visual excellence is understandably high. The author commendably compiles an impressive array of images through extensive research, which significantly contributes to the analysis presented. Nevertheless, the quality of printed images is inconsistent; certain pages (pp. 70, 29, 57, 122, 180) feature images that seem to suffer from lower digital resolution, contrasting sharply with the high-quality images found on other pages (pp. 120, 150, 190). This discrepancy is not attributed to the original quality of the images, considering the variance in clarity among images from similar historical periods.

The text discusses the shift from traditional to simplified Chinese characters in the 1950s, noting inconsistencies in character usage across various sections like the appendix and glossary. Specific examples include variations in terms for women’s trousers (坤单西库 vs. 坤单西裤) highlighted on pages 326, 299 and 298. Finnane’s differing applications of characters exemplify these discrepancies, which may confuse those versed in Chinese script.

However, the tiny flaws do not hide the greater beauty of the jade. The merits of Finnane’s book far outweigh any imperfections. *How to Make a Mao Suit* provides invaluable teaching material. Its nuanced exploration contributes richly to our understanding of China’s modern history and its global interactions through the lens of “a needle and a thread,” making the book a valuable contribution to the fields of history, economics and cultural studies.

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