TREND

Historical opening-up paves way for fashion revolution

From the Zhongshan suit to Guangdong's textile trade, self-expression through clothing brings sense of pride, **Zhao Xu** discovers.



A scene from China International Fashion Week in September last year. ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

At 3 pm on Oct 1, 1949, Chairman of the Communist Party of China Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China from the tower of Beijing's Tian'anmen Gate, joined by other prominent figures who would form the core of the country's leadership. More than 300,000 people filled Tian'anmen Square to watch the announcement.

"For 75 years, this moment has been viewed by generations of Chinese as a deeply emotional milestone in contemporary Chinese history. Yet not many are aware of the fact that almost all who had turned up at the tower that day, including Chairman Mao himself, was wearing a special type of formal suit known in China as the Zhongshan suit," says Liu Wei, a professor from the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, one of China's top fashion colleges.

For those unfamiliar with the history, Zhongshan is the name of Sun Zhongshan, more commonly known as Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), a Chinese revolutionary widely revered for his instrumental role in the 1911 Revolution, which overthrew the rule of China's last feudal dynasty — Qing (1644-1911).

With its stand-up collar and buttoned-up design, the Zhongshan suit (Chinese tunic suit), combining traditional Chinese aesthetics with a Western cut, endeared itself to Sun and his progressively minded countrymen who wore the design proudly, partly as a call for change.

"The suit got its name not from Sun himself but from his followers and admirers, including Mao, who decided to continue what he started," says Liu, who has researched and written extensively about the history of Chinese fashion.

According to Liu, Chinese fashion in the 1950s and 60s was characterized by uniformity and practicality, due to the dominant social ideology and the era's economic situation. Somber, muted colors like "army green" and "police officer blue" reigned. Functionality was prioritized; and a straight cut was favored for its minimal use of material.

"The need to feed and clothe everyone was pressing. And it was against this background that the Huadong Institute of Textile Science and Technology, the very first of its kind, was founded in Shanghai in 1951," says Liu. "Huadong" means East China, where Shanghai is located.

This was followed eight years later by the founding of the Beijing Institute of Textile Science and Technology, which changed its name in 1961 to the Beijing Institute of Synthetic Fiber Engineering, and again in 1988 to the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, or BIFT.

"The name changes were reflective of the larger trends both within the industry and across society," says Liu, pointing to a type of polyester fabric whose durability and wrinkle resistance had made it so popular among Chinese between the 1960s and 70s that it was effectively dubbed "*di que liang*", meaning "really good".

In the case of the second name change, the decision was made a decade after the official start of China's reform and opening-up in 1978. Spearheaded by Deng Xiaoping, whom many today regards as the initiative's "chief architect", the reform focused on transitioning Chinese economy into a more market-oriented one and making the country more connected to the rest of the world.

The message was sent out, first and foremost, by top Chinese leaders donning Western suits, which had been absent from view for the previous decade as China weathered the tumultuous "cultural revolution" (1966-76).

One Chinese city to feel the immediate effects of Deng's reform measures was Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province, whose historic name "Canton" was familiar to those working in trade between China and the West during the 18th and 19th centuries. Adjacent to Hong Kong, the port city became a bridge between the Chinese mainland and the global fashion and textile markets, and in that process transformed itself into China's first fashion hub.





Left: The first generation of Chinese models walked onto the stage after the country's reform and opening-up was officially launched in 1978. **Right:** The Zhongshan suit worn by Chairman Mao Zedong on Oct 1, 1949. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"With preferential treatment for investors, many of whom were from Hong Kong and Taiwan, the factories in Guangdong started to manufacture at an unprecedented scale, mostly with materials and samples provided by whoever placed the order," says Liu. "Many who had placed orders were European fashion companies who decided not to deal with the Guangdong factories directly but instead through their business partners in Hong Kong. But it didn't take long before they switched, as Guangdong rose in prominence as 'the world's factory.'"

It's no coincidence that the very first joint venture between the mainland and Hong Kong was a factory located in Guangdong's Dongguan city that produced sample-based handbags. From Guangdong, the influence of Western fashion started to spread throughout the rest of China, first in trickles then in waves.

By the time Yang Jie, Liu's colleague at BIFT, was in middle school in the mid-1990s, the cultural impacts of opening up were fully felt. "Film, music, fashion, hairstyles … they were all one package," says the 42-year-old. For him and many of his peers back then, Hong Kong entertainment stars, whose images flooded TV screens, were indisputable fashion icons.

"Those were the days when young people dressed up like hippies and danced to loud rock music pouring out of cassette players," continues Yang, who remembers vividly wearing a leather jacket to school before anyone else and was gently reprimanded by the head teacher to put his studies first. "The economic reform had led to a substantial improvement in living standards for the average Chinese, which led to an explosion of ideas and a newfound need for self-expression, which the younger generation reveled in. Fashion allowed them to make bold statements, not completely unlike the way the revolutionaries did with the Zhongshan suit."

"And you know what's so great about that moment? The internet had yet to appear, which meant we didn't have many references while trying to interpret fashion. As a result, people came up with their own answers, which sometimes resulted in raw creativity," Yang says.

The leather jacket, which Yang wore with great panache — so he thought — was given to him by his mother who belongs to China's Miao ethnic group, whose members were known as gifted singers and dancers and whose traditional clothing often features intricate, colorful embroidery.

"Unlike most of my older family members who would often dress up from head to toe in ethnic attire, my mother loves to deck out her traditional looks with a few modern pieces. She instilled in me an idiosyncratic sense of fashion long before I studied it, first at BIFT and then at a fashion institute in Milan," says Yang.

In 2006, Yang opened BIFT's first menswear courses after returning from Italy. "What I have come up with as a designer today represents everything I've been through — physically, emotionally and aesthetically," he says. "I believe it's the same for Chinese fashion."

Contact the writer at zhaoxu@chinadaily.com.cn

Powering today's emerging designers

By ZHAO XU

In November 1978, French fashion designer Pierre Cardin (1922-2020) visited China, the first of any Western fashion designers to do so since 1949. His trip marked not only the beginning of his influence on the Chinese fashion scene, which came to a peak in the 1980s and early 90s, but also a significant moment in Chinese fashion history at a time when the country was on the cusp of change.

"Cardin wasted no time entering the Chinese market upon the country's reform and opening-up, following the end of the 'cultural revolution' (1966-76)," says Liu Wei, who taught at Beijing's Fashion Institute of Technology.

While the French designer had foreseen the immense buying power about to be unleashed by hundreds of millions of Chinese consumers, he was also poised to shock audiences with his first-ever fashion show in the chilly spring of 1979.

Held on a makeshift stage inside Beijing's Cultural Palace of Nationalities, the show saw a parade of French and Japanese models in front of a packed audience, which hosted news agencies and reporters holding cameras, all left flabbergasted.

For his Chinese viewers, Cardin's bold, futuristic looks were mind-blowing, to say the least, but the event had a motivating effect. By the end of 1980, China published its first fashion magazine and debuted its first modeling team under the publicly-owned Shanghai Municipal Fashion Company, whose 19 members were chosen from 30,000 candidates.

"The 1979 show generated intense interest for the brand that Cardin introduced to China, ever so cleverly, through licensing," says Liu, referring to an arrangement whereby all Cardin fashion items sold on the Chinese mainland were locally designed and manufactured under strict quality control.

"Apart from bringing down costs, this practice also allowed the brand to adapt to local preferences, which, at that time, were nowhere near the geometric and structural creations Cardin was known for. In a sense, Cardin's business acumen was even more inspiring for a generation of Chinese designers who were awakening to the power of fashion branding, me included," continues Liu, who worked for the Beijing-based Chinese brand Botao between the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In 1998, Botao held a grand runway show inside a historical building in Beijing that once served as the imperial ancestral temple between the 15th and early 20th century, with models milling about in heavy makeup, fanciful hairstyles and vibrant, body-conscious designs constructed on Western sartorial principles, yet radiated a clear Chinese stylistic influence.

"The location choice and the clothes themselves hinted at an effort to maintain the brand's cultural roots, yet Western influence was obvious," says Liu, who would travel to Paris during its iconic fashion weeks.

Among the notoriously hard-to-get-in shows Liu attended were John Galliano for Dior and Alexander McQueen for Givenchy, stunning him for "the kind of creative extremes they were willing to pursue in order to shape an image for the brand".

For those who couldn't behold the spectacles in the French fashion capital, there was a hunger for the images, which spawned a business. "There were 'image-vendors' in those days who were able to buy show pictures from fashion photographers before selling them to us, at a price that was anything but cheap," recalls Liu.





Left: A woman dressed up in *hanfu* at a cultural event in Beijing on Sept 22. **Right:** Pierre Cardin's fashion show in Beijing in the spring of 1979. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

He had a throwback while visiting the Botao office not long ago, where a shelf lining the wall was filled with video cassette tapes, one labeled "Chanel", another "Dior". "They contain transcribed show footage from the fashion weeks in Paris, London, Milan and New York," says Liu.

Partly to fulfill that longing for information, in 1995, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, which had been promoting Hong Kong designers on the Chinese mainland through fashion shows and other events, set up a fashion library inside the Beijing institute in partnership with the college and the China Fashion Association, the latter founded in 1993.

In 1997, the association hosted the first China International Fashion Week in Beijing, followed by the first edition of Shanghai Fashion Week six years later, which have become major platforms for Chinese designers.

Back in the early 2000s, Yang Jie was a fashion student who had frequented the library. He now teaches at the college. "To get the card for this particular library, one needed to pay a 200 yuan ($28.35) deposit. The books, which included imported fashion magazines, were not only expensive but also precious — they allowed me my first glimpses into international fashion," he says.

But change was already in the air. A little more than a year after Yang entered the institute as an undergraduate in 2000, China joined the World Trade Organization on Dec 11, 2001. The accession opened international markets for Chinese fashion and textile products. At the same time, the influx of global fashion brands meant more exposure to international trends and more competition for both domestic fashion companies and foreign brands already established, including Pierre Cardin.

"Since the early 2000s, the Cardin brand continued to lose its cachet with Chinese customers who, having seen for themselves the world's top fashion brands, were no longer content with buying licensed designs," says Liu.

In 2001, Shanghai, the rising fashion hub, hosted the 9th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting. Participants of the event, which signaled the country's increasing prominence on the global stage, were required to wear a tailor-made Tang suit, named for the Tang Dynasty (618-907), a period of social prosperity and inclusivity. Made of fine silk and characterized by its distinctive standing collar and knotted buttons, the suit was widely seen as a symbol of cultural diplomacy — China's way to showcase its rich fashion heritage.

"For the next two decades, that heritage has managed to capture the imagination of China's younger generation who entertain themselves with historic attire that often includes multilayered flowing robes with wide sleeves," says Liu.

"Behind the phenomenon, there's a fascination with beauty and a growing cultural confidence, as well as a desire to stand out rather than blend in as their parents and grandparents often preferred to do," he continues.

Yang recently flew to Milan Fashion Week for the spring/summer 2025 season held from Sept 17 to 23. "Approximately 50 kilometers north of Milan there is a small city called Como, well-known among international travelers for its stunning lake views, historic architecture and silk production, which can be traced back to the 15th century," he says. "Many of the workshops and archives in Como hold historical collections, which include samples of ancient silk fabrics. Some of the samples came from China via the Ancient Silk Road, which was first established in the 2nd century BC and reached its height during the Tang Dynasty," he continues.

"Vision and history — what's behind the success story of Chinese silk is what's needed today for Chinese fashion to really emerge and thrive globally."