

CHINESE LIFE AND FASHIONS

By EILEEN CHANG

This article needs no recommendation to the ladies among our readers; for them, the word "fashions" speaks for itself. But perhaps we should mention for the benefit of our male readers that the following pages contain more than just an essay on fashions. Indeed, they offer an amusing psychoanalysis of modern China.

This is the author's first appearance in our magazine. It is a pleasure to present to our readers such promising young talent as represented by Miss Chang, who wields the pen so well that she has produced not only this charming article but also its expressive illustrations.—K.M.

COME and see the Chinese family on the day when the clothes handed down for generations are given their annual sunning! The dust that has settled over the strife and strain of lives lived long ago is shaken out and set dancing in the yellow sun. If ever memory has a smell, it is the scent of camphor, sweet and cosy like remembered happiness, sweet and forlorn like forgotten sorrow. You walk down the path between the bamboo poles, flanked on each side by the walls of gorgeous silks and satins, an excavated corridor in a long-buried house of fashion. You press your forehead against the gold embroideries, sun-warmed a moment ago but now cold. The sun has gone down on that slow, smooth, gold-embroidered world.

We find it hard to realize that less than fifty years ago it seemed a world without end. Imagine the reign of Queen Victoria prolonged to the length of three centuries! Such was the stability, the uniformity, the extreme conventionality of China under the Manchus that generation after generation of women clung to the same dress style.

250 YEARS OF FORMALIZATION

Almost throughout the Chin Dynasty (1644-1911), the classical ensemble was a jacket-

and-trousers combination. In size and length the jacket corresponded to the modern swagger coat. The collar was very low; huge sleeves and trousers gave a feeling of statuesque repose. The sleeves measured over two feet in width but were later somewhat modified. The complete costume included not only the "Great Jacket" worn outside but also the "Intermediate Jacket" (shown only on informal occasions when the Great Jacket was removed), and the tightly fitting "Small Jacket" worn in bed and usually of some enticing shade, peach or "liquid red." On top of all this came the "Cloudy-Shouldered Sleeveless Jacket," so called because of its broad edging in the pattern of stylized curling clouds, striking against the plain dark ground.

Under those layers of clothing, the ideal Chinese female, petite and slender, with sloping shoulders and a hollow chest, made herself pleasantly unobtrusive, one of the most desirable qualities in a woman. History shows that even the more spectacular virtues—hacking off an arm, for instance, when it was accidentally seen by a stranger in its entirety—though much eulogized by the vulgar, were never quite approved by the intelligentsia, for a woman should not attract too much attention or get her name



1650-1890

tarnished in the steamy breath of men. As women who sought distinction even by such honorable means were severely censured, no mention need be made of those who claimed attention by some disturbing deviation from the accepted mode of attire.

The strictest formalization prevailed in the matter of the skirt, worn outside the trousers on ceremonial occasions. Made of either gauze or crepe, it was usually black, but on festive days red for the wife and pink for the concubine. Of course, red was taboo to the widow, who was confined to black; but she might, after a decent number of years had elapsed since her bereavement, wear lavender or "lake blue," provided that her parents-in-law were still alive. The narrow pleats, numbering up to a hundred, served as a time-honored test of feminine grace. The thoroughbred took such tiny steps when she walked and held herself with such dignity and restraint that there was visible but a slight, practically imperceptible quiver in the pleated lines; whereas the maiden of low degree, however enchanting, went tramp, tramp, causing a boisterous commotion in the delicate folds. Even more trying was the bridal skirt, also pleated, and red, with innumerable sashes half an inch broad hanging down vertically, each with a little bell attached. The idea was to walk in such a manner that there was but a faint tinkle, like that of the bells on a distant pagoda in a dying wind. These skirts were not abolished till long after the Revolution, in the 1920's, when gathered skirts with a freer, more billowy effect came into vogue.

RULES FOR FURS

The least heterodoxy in the wearing of furs betrayed the parvenu. Since only a few weeks were assigned to each kind of fur, one was very liable to wear furs out of season. In an unexpectedly cold October it was permissible to wear three

fur-lined jackets, but in picking the right jackets one had to refer to the season rather than the weather. In early winter "Small Furs" were worn, starting with Persian lamb, proceeding up the scale with "purple lamb," "pearly lamb," ermine, squirrel, and then on to the "Intermediate Furs"—"squirrel back," "fox leg," "Japanese sword"; then the "Great Furs"—white fox, blue fox, "western fox," "black fox," "purple sable"—the last named, however, being confined to those with official rank. Men from the lower-middle class downwards, much more accustomed to wearing fur than their modern counterparts, generally contented themselves with sheepskin and "gold-and-silver fox"—an inexpensive patchwork of the white and yellow parts on the belly and back. The fur linings stuck out showily half an inch or so at the cuffs and the hems.



The Chow Kwuen hood and the nineteenth-century version

Young ladies brightened up the bleak winter months with the "Chow Kwuen Hood," named after the historical beauty Wang Chow Kwuen, an imperial handmaid in the second century A.D. She is always pictured on horseback, with a fur hood and a despondent expression, on her way north to marry the king of the Huns, whom it was China's policy to pacify. Her celebrated hood had the grand simplicity of the modern Eskimo variety which Hollywood made popular. But the nineteenth-century Chinese version was gay and absurd—a black satin cap of the kind worn by men, but fur-rimmed, and with a large red pompon on top and a pair of pink satin ribbons trailing behind, at the ends of which gold seals were sewn which made a bell-like tinkle.

SIGNIFICANT DETAILS

This excessive attention to details characterized the Chinese costume of that era. In modern hats and dresses the details always have a point—to bring out the color of the eyes, to create the illusion of a bosom, to lengthen, to

shorten, to call attention to the waist, to annihilate the hips, etc. The details of old Chinese clothes, however, were astonishingly pointless. They were purely decorative, and sometimes rather obscurely so. No artist could, for instance, have hoped for anyone to notice his intricate designs on the soles of women's shoes, except indirectly by the imprints left in the dust. The homemade soles, manufactured from cardboard and paste and bits of old cloth, had white stitching on a dark ground, forming chaste, abstract patterns with a Moslem touch. The edges of the slightly raised heels were also covered with elaborate designs, in fact, there was not a square millimeter on the tiny shoe that was not alive with some rhythmic motif.

The spacious jacket was overloaded with either "three pipings, three bindings," or "five pipings, five bindings," or "seven pipings, seven bindings." Sequins sparkled at the hem and the flapped-over opening in patterns of orchid, chrysanthemum, or plum blossom. The middle of the sleeve, at some distance from the bindings, featured a special kind of trimming bought in rolls about seven inches wide, called the "railings." It consisted of embroidered silk with holes cut out to form the characters "blessing" and "longevity."

This tremendous amassing of bits and bits of interest, this continual digression and reckless irrelevancy, this dissipation of energy in things which do not matter, marked the attitude towards life of the leisurely class of the most leisurely country in the world. It took as much time and energy to appreciate as to create such nice distinctions between a hundred lineal designs that were almost the same, but not quite.

The trouble with old Chinese dress designers was that they did not know the all-importance of brevity. After all, a woman is not a Gothic cathedral. And even with the latter, the diffusion of interest by the heaping up of distracting details has occasioned much criticism. The history of Chinese fashions consists almost exclusively of the steady elimination of those details.

DAMSELS IN DISTRESS

It was, of course, not as simple as that. There was above all the wax and wane in size. The first real change came near the end of the dynasty, in the thirty-second or thirty-third year of the reign of the Emperor Kwang Hsu, when the railways, no longer a novelty, began to play a vital part in Chinese life and the whims and fancies of high society in the great commercial ports were swiftly introduced into the interior. The size of clothes dwindled. For a time, the traditional pipings and "railings" still prevailed, but they soon gave way to the single line of "wick binding," thin and delicate. In periods of political unrest and social upheaval—the Renaissance in Europe, for instance—tight-

fitting clothes which allow for quick movement always come into favor. Jerkins in fifteenth-century Italy were so tight that slits had to be made at the joints of the body. Chinese clothes just stopped short of bursting open in the turbulent days when the Revolution was in the making. The last emperor, Pu-yi, reigned for only three years, and by then the jacket clung like a sheath to the arms and body. And such were the wonders of Chinese corsetting that even then we did not see the realistic picture of a feminine figure, but rather the disembodied conception, one of Byzantine severity and Pre-Raphaelite spirituality: slim,



1890-1910

straight lines flaring a little at the knees, whence issued tiny trouser legs which dropped a timorous hint of even tinier shoes apologetically attached to the ground. There was something infinitely pathetic about those pencil-slim trousers, and in Chinese poetry the terms "lovely" and "pitiful" were identical. The protective instinct, always strong in men, was perhaps stimulated by the hard times which saw the death of the old order and the birth of the new. Women, formerly staid and self-possessed in their wide garments, now found it to their advantage to act the "damsel in distress."

It was also an age of extremes, with the evils of the governmental and domestic systems intensified by decay. We had on the one hand the sweeping condemnation of all that was traditional—nay, all that was Chinese—by the young intelligentsia, and, on the other hand, increased oppression by the old and sedate, who were shocked into action. Hysterical controversies raged day in and day out at home, in the newspapers, in the restaurants, at the playhouses. Even the perfumed and powdered leading man, the darling of wealthy concubines, commented *ad lib.* on contemporary politics to his ladylove on the stage.

The atmosphere of emotional excess, unprecedented in the history of a land of moderation and good sense, produced such a thing as the "Sycee collar," a tall, stiff collar reaching to the level of the nose. A long neck of swanlike grace was consequently much admired. This formidable collar, in addition to the oppressive hair-down coiffure of that period, was altogether disproportionate to the willowy limbs and torso in fashion. The top-heavy, unbalanced effect was one of the signs of the times.



COIFFURES DIGNIFIED
BUT DULL

The earlier hair-do (prevalent from the

founding of the dynasty in the middle of the seventeenth century down to the close of the nineteenth, when it first sensed the coming doom) was clean-cut and matronly. The hair was gently drawn back, pulled down a little over the ears to cover them, and formed a knot at the back. The Yangchow style had the knot higher up and the Soochow style had it lower down the nape of the neck—Yangchow and Soochow being then the foremost cities, rival centers of wealth and sophistication, roughly equal in position to Hongkong and Shanghai today. A wide, squarish forehead, a little rounded at the temples to complete the oval outline of the face, was held to be ideal. Women with irregular hairlines shaved their forehead. Instead of razors they used a cotton thread pulled to high tension. It had no hardening effect on the hair-roots and left no bluish mark.

Young girls had either plaits or two round knots of hair done high on the sides of the head. When they married, before they switched over to the grown-up coiffure, they broadened and heightened their foreheads for the first time with the method described above.

The only experiment to temper the monotony, the alarming stateliness, of such a hair-do was made in the middle of the dynasty. A short fringe about one inch long, sticking out almost horizontally from the forehead, stayed in vogue for years, though we now consider it extremely unflattering. For some obscure reason it was called "a sky full of stars."

The general features of this coiffure were calculated to give a self-sufficient, sedentary, precociously old expression symbolical of the Celestial Kingdom, its confidence in its own strength, its happy imbecility, its flashes of philosophy and wisdom.

PROFUSION AND CONFUSION

Then came the great shake-up. The utmost confusion in the matter of women's hair near the end of the dynasty and the beginning of the Republic can well be imagined from the account given by

Lin Chin-Nan, (林琴南), a well-known novelist responsible for the large-scale translation of popular English fiction into classical Chinese, in his book *Sketches in the Hut of Fear* (畏廬瑣記):

"When I was young, a woman's hair-knot was usually in the shape of a Sycee. A little later it was prolonged to the shape of a spoon, called the 'Soochow Hair-knot.' Two knots right and left were called the Pipa Style. [*Pi-pa* is a form of guitar.] Wire-matting was tucked inside the 'Castanet Hair-knot' to give it shape. The 'Round Hair-knot' was the most common during this last decade, but recently I have seen the greatest eccentricities. The hair-knot trails so loosely on the back that to hold it up you have to fix some false hair under it, matted to make two little hard saucers, which can be obtained in the shops. Another style has the hair twirled over the forehead like spirited serpents; some call that the 'Republican Hair-knot.' Occasionally, I see ladies passing by in carriages who just let their hair down and tie a false knot at the end of it—I can't think of what to call that."

Mr. Lin enumerates all the famous hair styles in ancient times. Quite apart from the historical value of such a record, it is interesting to find that, as far as we can guess at the shape of the ancient hair-do's from the picturesque titles, all the modern creations of Western hair-dressers have been done before, the only difference being that the old Chinese hair-knots were solid while the modern puffs and rolls are hollow.

The earliest hair-knots were merely hair twisted together with nothing to tie it up. A king in about the twelfth century B.C. added dangling ornaments of pearls and jade to make the "Hair-knot which Sways at Every Step." Ching Hsi Huang, the first emperor of united China and the builder of the Great Wall, found pleasure in the "Hair-knot which Rises above the Clouds," very becom-

ing to petite maidens, if we are to believe the writers of modern beauty columns. Ladies at the Han Court designed coiffures entitled "Welcome Spring," (with an eager forward tilt) and "Two Hearts in One," "Smoky," "Joy and Melancholy." The Han princesses were the first to wear wigs. The "Double Hair-knot," the "Half-turned Hair-knot," the "Hair-turned Hair-knot," the "Hair-knot of the Homing Bird," the "Hair-knot of the Coming Mood," and the "Hair-knot of Surrender," charmed many an emperor in the Tang palaces.

Aside from those court fashions, the wife of an official dressed her hair in a style called "Falling off the Horse," with a towering puff tilted on one side and plenty of soft loops flying free (which, by the way, is very popular in present-day Shanghai). "Falling off the Horse," in vogue in Tang China just before the civil wars and the invasion of the five barbarian tribes, was reputed to be an ill omen, foreshadowing the tragic spectacles of high-born ladies taken captive by unruly soldiers and borne off struggling on the chargers. Also fashionable in the capital city of Chan-An were the "Hair-knot of Homeless Wandering" (suggestive of the "wind-blown" bob of some years ago), the "Hair-knot à la Japanese," the "Hair-knot of One Hundred Ringlets," and the "Loose Hair-knot," or the "Hair-knot of Disintegration."

"As for the latest, hair-style," concludes Mr. Lin who wrote in the last years of the Manchu Dynasty, "that which ties a false knot at the end of loose-hanging hair, a likely name for it should be the 'Hair-knot of Disintegration and Homeless Wandering.' What an omen! The times are indeed out-of-joint! I tremble to think of what is to come."

In spite of this welter of fantastic hair-do's to choose from, the only universally popular style in the first decades of the twentieth century was the thick fringe cut in the shape of the Chinese character for man (人), a pointed arch which gave the features underneath a melancholy downward slant, a sickly prettiness. The heavy fringe and the



"Falling off the horse"

tall collar cut across the face left very little of the face to be seen. The encased feeling typified the suppressed, unhappy atmosphere of the age.

HATS AND MENTAL EQUILIBRIUM

Chinese women do not wear hats nowadays, but they used to. The hat was nothing but a black satin band around the head. In the early Chin period, the hat-line on the forehead was round, echoing the rounded hairline. Later it became pointed to match the pointed arch of the fringe. Jewel ornaments, called "Hat Equilibriums" because they were placed in the very center of the brow, numbered as many as five in the very beginning, making a single vertical row down the broad band. As the hat altered its shape the jewels were left out one by one. Finally there was only room for a solitary pearl. The last we saw of that pearl was also the last of the hat. Since the Revolution, millinery has been a lost art.



Change of the hat-line

It was no mere coincidence that the "Hat Equilibrium" disappeared simultaneously with the traditional emphasis on balance. Republican zealots found the hallowed principle of the golden mean to have a retarding influence on the great amount of destructive and constructive work to be done in the new state. It is noticeable that in China even a passionate renunciation was delivered with tact. The jewels on women's hats dropped off one at a time, so as to avoid an abrupt break with the past.

EARLY REPUBLICAN IDEALISM

With the Manchu Empire overthrown, there followed a period of superficial enlightenment. The infancy of the Republic, was a time when Rousseauistic sentiments were taken very seriously. Students of Western culture had great

faith in "Every Man with a Vote," "Away with Filial Piety," "Free Love," etc. Experiments were also made in purely mental love, without much success. The typical coiffure of the day—hair parted in the middle to form a knot on each side, a fringe long enough to cover the eyebrows—had an air of affected naivité.

Clothes were never before so light and gay. The "Trumpet Sleeve," like the Western bishop sleeve, only shorter, began tight and ended a little below the elbow, large, breezy, and fluttering. The jacket reached only to the hips. The waist was beautifully molded. Ladies of the upper classes wore a gathered skirt, usually black, when they went out, but at home they had on only short pants ending at the knee, which was also where the silk stockings ended—very daring and provocative. A stockinet sash with silk fringes was used to tie up the pants. Naughty ladies had about a foot of it hanging down in front under the jacket. It was declared to be of frankly erotic interest.

WESTERN INFLUENCE

Much of the inspiration in early Republican styles was drawn from the West. The collar was at first reduced in height, then practically done away with. The open collar, round, square, heart-shaped, diamond-shaped; white stockinet scarves for all seasons; white silk stockings with black embroideries crawling up the ankles: these were taken directly from European fashions of the day. The indiscriminate importation of things foreign went to such an extent that society girls and professional beauties wore spectacles for ornament, since spectacles were a sign of modernity.



1910-1920

New China was in a state of unrest. Warlords came and went, each trailing his own cloud of employees, civil government bodies, measures of reform; and Fashion tripped behind on its light,

fantastic toes, trying to catch up. The hem of the jacket, square at first, became round, then V-shaped, then hexagonal. The swift changes rendered women's clothes practically worthless in the pawnshops. Gone were the days when clothes were as ageless as jewelry, fetching as ready a price on the market.

SWIFT CHANGES=MENTAL ACTIVITY?

Quick alterations in style do not necessarily denote mental fluidity or readiness to adopt new ideas. Quite the contrary. It may show general inactivity, frustration in other fields of action so that all the intellectual and artistic energy is forced to flow into the channel of clothes. In an age of political disorder, people were powerless to modify existing conditions closer to their ideal. All they could do was to create their own atmosphere, with clothes, which constitute for most men and all women their immediate environments. We live in our clothes.



1921

THE DISILLUSIONED LATE '20'S

The year 1921 saw the advent of the long gown for women. This garment, the native costume of Manchu women, called even now the "Banner Gown" in memory of the Eight Banners under which the Manchu hordes invaded China in the seventeenth century, had always run side by side unnoticed with the main current of Chinese fashions. It was stiff and masculine. Manchu ladies, when they first settled down in China, showed an inclination to switch over to the softer, more alluring Chinese jacket and trousers, but were severely reprimanded by imperial edicts. The sudden universal adoption of this tribal gown was not caused by a popular restoration movement but by women's desire to copy men. Women's clothes in China from time immemorial had been analogous to the "blouse-and-skirt" institution, while men's clothes since the beginning of the

Manchu Dynasty had no break at the waist. A he-man, when challenged, would strike his breast and protest that he was not one who "wore clothes with two sections," that is, he was no woman. A small point perhaps, but women in the 1920's were supersensitive to immaterial differentiations of this sort. Having cheered themselves hoarse for the Western pamphleteers who championed the cause of their equality with men, they looked around at humiliating reality and, soured



Late 1920's

and angry, were driven to reject their very womanhood. A new wave of hardened feeling prevailed over the gushing girliness of the early Republic. The first long gowns for women were angular and puritanical. Idealism and dainty escapism could not forever maintain themselves in the face of repeated national disasters. The fashions now had a curt, tightened look. The long gown, first given wide sleeves, soon had long, narrow ones. The "incense-stick binding" was fine and round. Fringes and bangs went out. Hair was pulled back straight to form a bun in the "Cooling Coiffure."



1930's

When Chinese women first became curl-conscious in 1928, they drew their hair back, flat and smooth, made halfhearted little waves at the ends, and compromisingly clipped them into an imitation bun. From that time on, Chinese coiffures strictly followed Western trends, though always lagging a year or two behind.

THE CYNICAL '30'S

In the 1930's the elbow-length sleeves were cylindrical,

and so was the collar. The tall collar was revived, this time uglier than ever because it no longer cut diagonally across the jawbones as it had formerly been in order to give a heart-shaped effect to the face. It was now tubular, pressing the chin hard to make it double. No excuse could be made for such a collar except that it acted as an adequate expression of the intellectual sensuality of the '30's—an upright, remote little head, the head of a goddess, perched on top of a voluptuous, free-flowing figure. What sensuality there was, was reasoned and deliberate.

The military-looking, double-breasted, belted coat of the West fell in with the stringent mood. Was it the Oriental sense of moderation which softened it by wearing underneath a floor-length gown of sleek velveteen, with scandalously long slits up the thighs, revealing the long floppy pants of the same fabric, edged with silver lace, suggestive of harems? A strange combination it was, symbolic of the educated women of the day, aggressive feminists in theory but rapaciously materialistic when it came to the point.

SIMPLIFICATION AND TRADITIONAL REVIVAL

The most important of latest innovations were the removal of the sleeves (a gradual and infinitely cautious procedure, judging from the number of years it took) and the reduction of both the height of the collar and the length of the gown. It all added up to a grand sum of subtraction—the stripping off of all ornaments, either necessary or unnecessary, to conform to principles of the barest functionalism.

The newest trends point to an inclination to go back to the past, in general aspect if not in decorative details. They herald a traditional revival in more serious fields.

Fashion in China is not an industry under the control of a few great fashion houses like Lelong's or Schiaparelli's. Our tailors are help-

less before the vast, unaccountable strange waves of communal fancies which make themselves manifest from time to time.

It is impossible to tell who starts these fashions, because the Chinese do not greatly prize originality, regarding imitation as a great compliment,

so that the first one to wear something different is invariably lost among a host of copycats. Shanghai attributes the birth of the recent movement for wide, three-quarter length sleeves to Hongkong, and Hongkong, with the shirking of responsibility habitual to the Chinese race, lays the blame on Shanghai.

In pre-Revolution costumes, the individual was wholly submerged in the form—the form being a subjective representation of the human figure, conventionalized as always in Oriental art, dictated by a sense of line rather than faithfulness to the original. Post-Revolution clothes slowly worked towards the opposite direction—the subjugation of form by the figure. Two years ago, when we had got to the sleeveless gown, nothing was left of the gown but a molded trunk, with bare arms and neck. The return of sleeves in 1941 meant the return of form. It marked the turn of the tide towards a new formalization. Once again, China is standing at the threshold of life, more grim and practical this time, surer of her own mind because of the lessons she has learnt.



1942

