When Modernity and Nationalism Intersect: Textiles for Dress in Republican China

Lorsque modernité et nationalisme se croisent : les textiles vestimentaires dans la Chine républicaine

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When Modernity and Nationalism Intersect: Textiles for Dress in Republican China

Mei Mei Rado

Following the fall of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the Republican era (1912-1949) in China witnessed rapid modernization of the textile industry, which went hand in hand with changing social life and dress styles. It was also a turbulent period with intensified national crises when China suffered from successive encroachments of foreign imperialist powers and eventually sunk into the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). At the intersections of global economic and political expansion, development of Chinese national industry, modern design reform, and fashion revolution, new textiles in the Republican period were charged with unprecedentedly complex meanings. They played an essential role in creating the visual and material surface of modern China, and were highly contested objects in Chinese nationalist pursuit and discourse on modernity, capturing and externalizing the yearnings and anxieties in a politically unstable and culturally transitional period. In official discourses and the popular imagination, the origins of production and stylistic sources of textiles frequently evoked issues of patriotism and China's position in global power structures, whereas certain types of fabrics were central to the definitions and controversies of modern Chinese masculinity and femininity.

This essay will briefly examine the multivalent political and cultural meanings embedded in the production, design, materiality, and representations of dress textiles in Republican China. I will demonstrate how, in their own transformation and in fashioning modern Chinese appearances and identities, Republican textiles crystalized the inherent paradox between China's endeavor for modernization in the Western mode and a resistance to Western and Japanese imperialist powers. While Republican Chinese textiles have been studied from the perspectives of technological history, economic history, and fashion history,

scholars have not paid attention to their deeper cultural significance.¹ This essay aims to shed light on this neglected aspect in order to understand how modern Chinese textiles were perceived, imagined, and experienced; methodologically, it seeks to explore the links between the visuality and materiality of textiles and their symbolic meanings.

Modern and Patriotic – The New Textile Industry

Traditional Chinese textile workshops centering on handicraft silk production in the region of the lower Yangtze River began to change in the second half of the nineteenth century. After defeat in the two Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), China signed a series of unequal treaties with Western countries that opened a number of trading ports on its East coast and granted the foreign powers privileged status of extraterritoriality in these ports. The resulting influx of wool and cotton into Chinese markets, as well as the introduction of machines and foreign investments, had a significant impact on indigenous textile manufacture. These unequal treaties also initiated a century-long foreign aggression and encroachment on China, undermining the traditional socio-economic structure and political stability. In response to such crises, between the 1860s and 1890s Qing reformist officials launched a series of projects to improve Chinese industry, driven by a goal of conquering the foreign powers by appropriating their science and technology. For textile manufacturing, the reform measures included importing steam-powered filatures for reeling silk cocoons and appointing foreign engineers.² From the beginning, the transformation of Chinese textile production was marked by industrialization and a nationalist agenda, a struggle to resist Western and Japanese imperialism while embracing foreign machinery and management as the means for such a resistance.

This tension became more salient in the Republican period. Newly developed Chinese textile enterprises constantly competed with the imported fabrics market and with foreign factories and companies established in China. The success of the domestic textile industry depended on mechanization and modernization. Jacquard looms had been widely adopted by the 1910s, and in the 1920s, electrical-powered looms became

the mainstream in the new textile factories, now centered in Shanghai.³ One leading Chinese manufacturer was the Mayar Silk Mills, founded there in 1920. By the mid-1930s, it had expanded into a multi-site company with 1200 electrical looms and 3600 employees.⁴

Industrialization in the Western mode already signified economic strength and political power in the late Qing dynasty; in the Republican period, it acquired an additional layer of symbolic meaning of modernity. Modernity in China, as the literary scholar Leo Ou-fan Lee elucidates, was associated with a “new historical consciousness” based on a linear conception of time and human progress. It emphasized the “new” and the “now” as “the pivotal point marking a rupture with the past and forming a progressive continuum toward a glorious future.”⁵ Derived from the Social-Darwinian theories translated by Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century, this new historical consciousness became increasingly prevalent in the Republican period. In every aspect from intellectual discourse, social life, to material culture, modernity largely meant “Western civilization,” and modernization was equated with “Westernization.”⁶

The modernity of Republican textiles was not simply constituted by the Western mode of mechanical production. As I will detail below, it was more directly shaped by and emanated through their fresh visual and material modes. By assimilating Western design and technology, Republican textiles created a whole new spectrum of patterns and textures, which radically departed from the tropes of traditional Chinese textiles. Silk remained the primary fashion fabric and major product of Chinese textile mills throughout the Republican period. However, traditional silk damasks, satins, and brocades with conventional auspicious motifs – now implying the backward, stagnant past – quickly faded out of fashion and were almost completely abandoned in urban areas by the mid-1920s. Western-style artificial silks and modern designs came to be associated with the fashionable and cosmopolitan. Chinese textile mills eagerly turned to the Western fashion of materials and designs for their products.

Synthetic silks were first imported in late Qing and began to be produced in China in the mid-1920s, and by 1937, artificial and semi-artificial silks (interweaving pure silk or wool and man-made threads) dominated the market.⁷

1. Swatch of printed grosgrain (ge), wool and synthetic silk, mid-1930s, Hangzhou, China National Silk Museum.

Often bearing exotic or poetic names such as “Paris satin” and “lingering fragrance crêpe,” synthetic silks had extensive varieties. In a sample book compiled by the Shanghai Silk Association in the mid-1930s with thirty-nine of the latest representative swatches from major Chinese textile mills in Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu, fifteen are synthetic or semi-synthetic fabrics featuring various weave structures, textures, and sheen, including printed soft taffeta and jacquard with woven patterns. New types of fabrics were invented after foreign models. For instance, grosgrain (Chinese: *ge*) with ribbed effect in the weft direction, and often mixing wool and silk (pure or synthetic) threads, imitated and competed with imported Japanese fabrics of this type (fig. 1); the fanciful velvet *dévoré* with dramatically contrasted sheer ground and piled patterns (fig. 2), achieved by chemically removing part of the fibers, came into vogue in the 1930s, almost contemporaneously with Europe. Chemical dyes imported from European companies were widely adopted by the 1920s, allowing for more precise and colorfast printing.⁸ The industry of printed textiles developed rapidly in China. From the mid-1920s throughout the 1930s, light-weight, supple fabrics such as taffeta, crêpe, and chiffon with printed design eclipsed woven and embroidered textiles and dominated the fashion scene.⁹

Silk pattern designs in the Republican period moved away from the traditional stock and developed a modern repertoire. Traditional Chinese silk patterns were primarily constructed as visual puns or signs carrying auspicious meanings. Throughout the Qing dynasty, familiar motifs and forms were recycled without significant changes. In the Republican period, a modern concept of “industrial design” strongly influenced by Western and Japanese modes emerged, leading Chinese artists to focus on purely decorative and abstract patterns

2. Qipao made of velvet dévoré, mid-1930s, Hangzhou, China National Silk Museum.

suitable for the textile medium and modern lifestyle. Chinese artists who studied in Europe and Japan adopted modern design principles and vocabularies to reform Chinese products.¹⁰ For example, Chen Zhifo (1896-1962), arguably the most important artist in promoting modern Chinese textile design, founded Shangmei Design Institute in Shanghai in 1925 upon his return from Tokyo. He published a series of drawings and theories on textile patterns.¹¹ While the practice of drawing patterns for objects had long existed in imperial dynasties, “design” with a principle to match the patterns with the functions of objects, to reflect the spirit of contemporary life, and to convey good morality was an entirely new pursuit in China. Good modern design was further linked to nationalist discourse, as the painter and art theorist Yu Jianhua (1895-1979) eloquently stated in his influential book *Laws of Latest Design* (1926):

“We Chinese wish to develop national industry and improve the quality of our goods in order to compete with the West and Japan, therefore, the first thing is to come up with good designs.”¹²

Major Chinese textile mills devoted great effort to creating innovative designs. For example, the Mayar Silk Mills in the mid-1930s staffed a team of seventy-eight members for developing textile patterns, headed by the Lyon-trained artist Li Youxing (1905-1982). New designs were released almost every week.¹³ Mayar’s summer 1936 catalogue states, “People’s desires and aspirations evolve when the time progresses, and the materials and patterns of silks must also follow the steps of our epoch to satisfy such desires. [...] To seize the opportunity of the present and be prepared for the future, we should never stop researching [for new development and improvement].”¹⁴ Emphasizing change, a new era, and a vision of the future, this mission statement integrates textiles into the fast advancement of modern life, closely echoing the popular discourse on modernity in which rapid transformations and the newness of the present time were central themes. Two Mayar samples included in the aforementioned mid-1930s swatch book offer a glance into the company’s designs that reflected the spirit and aspirations “of the epoch” (fig. 3a-b). Both are soft crêpes with floral prints in the Art Deco style, featuring abstract, vibrant patterns and bright, boldly contrasting colors. Their texture and design resonated with the contemporary Western vogue for dress textiles and created a sleek, dynamic modern look.

In addition to meeting the challenges brought by fast-paced modern times, Chinese textile manufacturers were also motivated by an ambition to promote “national products” (Chinese: *guohuo*) as a way to strengthen Chinese industry and resist foreign encroachment on China’s economy and sovereignty. Chinese textile mills played a leading role in the nationwide movement for boycotting imported goods and promoting domestic commodities. They enthusiastically advertised the comparability or superiority of their products to foreign imports and stressed the patriotic significance of purchasing domestic textiles. The Mayar Company, for example, presented itself as the “prominent pioneer in boycotting foreign goods.”¹⁵ Its printed silks were advertised as at once a battle against “foreign printed textiles that dominated the Chinese market” and “imitations of the latest Paris fashion, indistinguishable from the

3a-b. Two swatches of printed crêpe, pure silk, manufactured by Mayar Silk Mills, mid-1930s, Hangzhou, China National Silk Museum.

foreign ones.”¹⁶ These two seemingly contradictory attributes in fact characterized a whole range of “national products” and indexed the inherent paradox of the nationalist pursuit in Republican China: Western goods and Western style posed imminent threats, as their consumption hampered the Chinese economy and national power; at the same time, Westernization as a means of modernization contributed to the patriotic goal, as it symbolized China’s “catching-up” with advanced foreign powers and elevated China’s status as an equal, modern nation-state on the international stage. The China-made conditions of production rather than stylistic origins defined the patriotic quality of modern goods.¹⁷ Westernized and domestically-made textiles were therefore modern, patriotic products ideally suited for the “enlightened” spirit and “correct” morality of new Republican citizens. However, the “modern” visuality and materiality of textiles also aroused controversies. As I will discuss in the next session, different types of new fabrics came to embody the “good” and “bad” aspects of modernity in popular imaginations and official discourses; textiles inextricably constituted a part in the country’s search for new identities and related debates.

Textiles and Modern Femininity

Republican textiles played a prominent role in defining the fashionability of dress and in foregrounding the visibility and dynamism of the body. They were crucial in fabricating modern Chinese appearances, which assimilated Westernized dress styles to emphasize the bodily contour and manifested the nationalistic pursuit of strong and healthy physiques. In constant debates on what modern Chinese men and women should wear, dress textiles for both genders were highly contested fields, charged with political

and ideological significance. For example, the Republican government established Western-style frock coat and trousers as men’s official wear, for which the choice between wool (largely relying on imports) and domestically-produced silks became a subject of heated debates in the beginning of the new regime. Patriotic protests against wool finally led the government to mandate the sole use of Chinese black silk for such garments in the 1912 Clothing Law.¹⁸ Given that women were the primary force in fashion culture and textile consumption during the Republican period, and that female body and social roles were central to Chinese discourses on nationalism and modernity, I will focus on fabrics for women’s dress and examine how textiles served as a potent marker of modern femininity. In particular, I will discuss how certain types of materials and textures embodied the division and the tension between the images of “degenerate modern girls” and those of state-sanctioned virtuous modern women.¹⁹

Thanks to the movements for women’s liberation and education, Chinese women in the Republican period became more visible and mobile within society. New types of modern women emerged during this period, including westernized female students, society ladies, and public women such as dance hostesses and film actresses. Women’s fashion became increasingly body-conscious and closely followed the international vogue. Western-style clothing was adopted, and indigenous fashion developed hybrid styles synthesizing traditional Chinese sartorial elements and Western-inspired designs or fabrics. From the 1910s to the 1920s, women’s dress evolved from a jacket-skirt or jacket-trouser ensemble to one-piece loose-cut *qipao* gown, and by the early 1930s, the close-fitting, streamlined form of

4. Calendar poster for Grande, Price, and Co., 1934.

the *qipao* was fully established as the ubiquitous style for women. Such style featured a slim cut that echoed the natural bodily curves, side slits that partially revealed the legs, side closure, and a standing collar (figs. 2, 4, 5).²⁰

Textiles for fashionable dress often conveyed the distinctions between different categories of modern women. For instance, a 1925 fashion report offers detailed observations on women's identities as coded in the materials, texture, patterns, and origins of the textiles they sported: Europeanized female students could be recognized by their "exuberant silk, especially imported crêpe with floral patterns and exquisite European gauze," while most stylish and sophisticated "ladies in their twenties and thirties from

prominent families" "wore elegant silk, but never dull wool," preferring "*changeant* damask," "silk poplin," "romantic French crêpe with floral prints," and "deep blue and pure black silk with luster."²¹

Thin, diaphanous fabrics popular in the early 1930s were probably the most controversial type of textiles in Republican China. Revealing the female body, they aroused anxiety about Chinese women's sexual empowerment and moral "degeneration"; and through the same tendency of exposure, they drew attention to the physicality of the female body, externalizing the collective pursuit of a healthy female physique. See-through dress was first adopted by the Shanghai movie actress Yang Naimei (1904-1960) in the late 1920s.²² One of China's first generation of movie stars, Yang came from a wealthy and educated family, but she went against its wishes to become a movie actress in the 1920s, when such a public career was not

deemed respectable for well-to-do ladies. She led an extravagant lifestyle and became a trendsetter in the fashion scene.²³ Yang's screen characters and public image characterized by audacious sexuality imbued sheer fabrics with a sexy, immoral, and rebellious undertone.

This implication of see-through fabrics was deeply anchored in the public imagination, as illustrated by a 1934 poster for a liquor company, which depicts a free-spirited, but morally dubious woman after a night rendezvous (suggested by the two wine glasses) clad in a revealing *qipao* made of sheer silk with striped patterns (fig. 4). The flimsy fabric cut in the simple shape without darts and folds exposes her slip and flesh beneath, while the high slits of the dress, accentuated

by her crossed legs, open wide to allow a full view of her calf and lace-trimmed underwear. This picture captures well the subtle interplay between the sartorial form of the *qipao*, the textile, and the body, and her image exemplifies the liberated, highly Westernized “modern girls” who indulged in material decadence and casual love – a stereotyped image also popularized by movies and literature of the period. The see-through textile of her dress formed the most immediate visual code for such a message. Although images of “modern girls” fascinated the literary and cinematic imaginations, they were frequently condemned in the moralistic and authoritative discourse as the negative, evil manifestation of modernity and a hindrance to China’s national progress.

Despite such stigma, see-through fabrics ascended to mainstream fashion in the mid-1930s, worn by actresses and society ladies alike. Apart from the power of the fashion craze, the social acceptability of these revealing textiles was supported by the widely shared value of physical liberation and the patriotic discourse on the importance of the healthy female body for national salvation. In the twentieth century, especially with the influence of the New Culture Movement that took place in the 1910s, individual freedom became a widespread social value in China, and this value advocated the liberation of the female body as the antithesis to the “suppressed” one in the imperial past when women had bound feet, flattened chest, and a body completely hidden beneath ample clothing. Meanwhile, the nationalistic agenda for China’s salvation also emphasized a natural and robust female physique. In light of women’s reproductive role, the fragile body of Chinese women was deemed as the major cause of the weakness of the Chinese race, and hence, of national vulnerability. Both discourses culminated in the 1930s when the national crisis intensified, converging on a collective cult for training and displaying wholesome female bodies. In popular lifestyle magazines, images of Western and Chinese women with exposed bodies in swim suits and revealing clothing, together with full nudes, were ubiquitous, all subsumed under a coherent theme of the “beautiful and natural” body required in the modern epoch.²⁴ In this context, see-through fabrics participated in the national display of the modernized Chinese female physique, representing this new attitude towards and expectation of women’s bodies.

In contrast to the sensual see-through fabrics, the plain, demure Indanthrene cloths [Chinese: *yindanshilin bu*] represented the exemplary femininity propagandized by the Republican government in the mid-1930s. “Indanthrene cloth” referred to monochrome cottons produced with the colorfast, synthetic Indanthrene dyes, first introduced by the German company I.G. Farben in the 1920s and manufactured in Shanghai.²⁵ Indanthrene cloth had become very popular since the mid-1930s, especially the dark blue shade. Its subdued elegance and durability ideally suited the modest lifestyle and virtuous womanhood advocated by the New Life Movement. Launched by the government in 1934, this movement promoted a disciplined, patriotic lifestyle with traditional Chinese virtues, combined with modern scientific knowledge, in order to revitalize social morality and strengthen national power. The excessive and ostentatious Westernized lifestyle was a major target attacked by this movement, as it symbolized degeneration and treason. Drawing on Confucian ethics of conduct, the movement redefined the role of modern women, reviving the traditional model of the “wise mother and good wife” but imbuing it with modern sophistication.²⁶ The very antithesis of the frivolous, irresponsible “modern girls,” the “virtuous women” should have a strong sense of duty for family, society, and nation. Primarily defined by their “womanly roles” in a reinforced patriarchal social structure, they were imagined as possessing the essence and authenticity of the Chinese nation – the timeless motherly figure that nurtures the country’s future. The advertisement campaign for the Indanthrene cloths in the heyday of the New Life Movement produced a series of images of modern women conforming to this new role model, successfully connecting this type of textile with educated, savvy, and “morally correct”

5. Poster for Indanthrene cloth, mid-1930s.

housewives (fig. 5). Despite the fact that the Indanthrene dyes almost completely depended on German imports until the outbreak of World War II,²⁷ the images of women purchasing and wearing Indanthrene textiles implied a patriotic gesture of frugal and wise consumption. This mode of consumption was regarded as an act of saving state resources and hence an essential contribution to national salvation.

The blue Indanthrene cloth was so closely associated with this idealized Chinese womanhood in Republican China, and such an iconic image embeds deeply in the memory. Half century later, the famous Chinese poet Mu Xin (1927-2001), who spent his youth in Shanghai in the 1940s, suffered during the Cultural Revolution, and lived in New York from the 1980s onwards, sentimentally recalled how blue Indanthrene cloth embodied “the graceful and dexterous quality of Chinese women” and exuded “a natural sense of motherhood and sisterhood” of the time before the Communist regime.²⁸ Such fabric captured the atmosphere of a bygone era and became an ever-lasting symbol in nostalgic longings.

In short, modernity and nationalism constituted two central themes in the manufacture, design, consumption, and representations of Republican dress textiles. Embedded in these new textiles was an inherent tension between China’s endeavor for modernization through Westernization and a resistance to foreign imperialism. While the former could effectively serve the purpose of the latter under the overarching interest of enhancing national power, the quest for modernization in the Western mode also gave rise to a fear of losing Chinese authenticity through unchecked Westernization. Republican textiles served as a rich field where they manifested the political and cultural concerns in a transitional period; their visuality and materiality were encoded with aspirations, anxieties and struggles.

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