China Annals: Interview with Antonia Finnane

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Antonia Finnane: It's hard to say, but the Cold War and the Vietnam War were probably factors. When I started university in 1971, I might have studied Vietnamese had it been available; as it was I enrolled in Elementary Chinese. But I did have a long-standing interest in China from reading children's fiction, most memorably Ho Ming, Girl of New China, which I later found out won the children's book of the year in the US in 1937; also House of Sixty Fathers, Plum Blossom and Kai Lin, The Chinese Twins – all borrowed from the local library. My parents had a copy of Ling Shuhua’s Ancient Melodies, which I also read when I was young. All this childhood reading must have made an impression on me, because I have been interested in China and Chinese for as long as I can remember. I wasn’t a very good language student, but Chinese is very addictive and having started on the China road in my first year of university, I never really looked back though I have sometimes thought that life is not long enough to study Chinese if you want to do anything else, such as have a life.

NB: How did the field look when you first started? (i.e., What topics were being explored? How much collaborative work between Chinese and Western scholars was being done?, etc.)

AF: When I was an undergraduate, a vast gulf separated China from Western researchers. Historians seemed to be studying a dead society, and China-watchers wrote about a society that seemed to have no past. There was some convergence between research interests in China and the West, to the extent that workers and peasants were studied on both sides of the gulf, but collaboration between mainland and Western scholars was not possible. Even for Chinese scholars research was very difficult because libraries and archives were in such disorder, and access to collections was so difficult. To tell the truth, I found Indian history a lot more interesting at that time, and I still like reading Indian history, both because of that early interest and because it helps me think about Chinese history in a polyphonic mode.

When I began my Ph.D. in the Department of Far Eastern History at the ANU, China and the USA were just about to establish relations and in retrospect one can see that a seismic shift in China studies was underway. The 1911 Revolution was a hot topic at that time, and a lot of work was being done on the transition from empire to republic. I was muddling around in precisely that area when I stumbled on a path that led me from Shanghai in the early twentieth century to Yangzhou in the eighteenth. The Skinner volumes on the Chinese city had not long been published, presaging a shift in Chinese history towards urban studies and local history, though it took some time for that shift to become evident. It takes so long to research Chinese history: nothing ever happens overnight.

I first visited Yangzhou in 1980 – it was not yet “open” in 1977, when I was studying at Nanjing University. Even in 1980, it was not possible to conduct research in a small place like Yangzhou, although I met a few local scholars there through my Nanjing connections. The local archives were not open, and the local university, only a college then, had no relations with overseas institutions. No archives at all, anywhere in China, were open at that time as far as I know, and foreign scholars were only slowly gaining access to libraries. The arrival of American scholars pushed things along: there were so many of them, and China was relatively responsive to their demands because they needed American universities to be responsive to Chinese needs. Young American women scholars active in China in the eighties made a big difference to the field of Chinese history because they brought gender into the picture. This immediately made the field more interesting, for me anyway. Suddenly I could see where “Ho Ming, Girl of New China” came from, and what happened to her.
**NB:** What is your favorite part of your job as a professor of Chinese history?

**AF:** Poking around collections of old Chinese books. Currently I’m spending time in the old and rare books room at Peking University library, and also in the library at the Institute of Modern History in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which has an extraordinary collection of materials from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I have enjoyed time spent in US collections, too – especially the East Asian Library at Berkeley, and Harvard-Yenching. The China collections in American libraries are wonderful in my experience. There is a difference between the way librarians are trained in China and the West. In China they seem to be trained to take care of the materials, and in the West to take care of the users. It varies a bit with the institution. The No 2 archives in Nanjing is infamously tough to use: getting the materials is like pulling teeth. Shanghai is a different matter – the institutional culture at both the library and the archives is much more service-oriented. I spent a very enjoyable summer browsing through old magazines in the Shanghai Library and Shanghai Municipal Archives while working on *Changing Clothes*.

**NB:** What topics in Chinese history do you feel are most pertinent to contemporary issues?

**AF:** History itself is the most pertinent topic. A certain story about how China came into being is the cornerstone of the Chinese people’s understanding of nation and state, which is in turn the foundation of legitimacy for the present government. In Australia in recent years a lot of media attention has been paid to historians clashing with each other over interpretations of Australian history. The resulting history wars, as we call them, have been quite ugly, but I have grown to appreciate the fact that they can take place. Such open wrangling about history is virtually impossible in China. Readers might recall Professor Yuan Weishi’s article on Chinese history education as “wolf’s milk,” which led to the closure of the magazine in which it was published a couple of years ago. It is very difficult to think and write about history in such a climate, which means it is difficult to think and write about anything very important.

**NB:** What are some of your own future research plans?

**AF:** I have received funding from the Australian Research Council for research into aspects of urban consumption in the Ming-Qing period. I am focusing the study on shops and “shopping” (whatever that means in historical context), partly inspired by the possibilities for comparative history offered by Evelyn Welch’s *Shopping in the Renaissance*. I am also involved in a collaborative project with my colleague Catherine Kovesi, an historian of Renaissance Italy, on comparative understandings of luxury in the early modern world. But living in China is distracting me into an interest in contemporary developments, and I have begun to collect materials on history teaching in China. I am currently helping with the English-language production of the *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, which is a new journal produced by the Institute of Modern History (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), and will be lecturing in the history department at Peking University in the first half of 2009. I like having this contact with the history industry here.

**NB:** What do you feel are the most pressing issues for China’s international relations today and how do you think journalists and academics can be involved in those issues?

**AF:** If you mean the most pressing issues for the US, Australia or other Western powers in relationship to China, I think the answer to the first part of your question – and I am identifying just one issue here – is how to deal responsibly and ethically with a non-democratic government. In my view one of the most important contributions that journalists and academics can make to this issue is to write in a way that demystifies China, so that our leaders in business, government and so on are not always making excuses for the absence of human rights, democracy, due legal process, etc. on the grounds that China is different, Chinese values are different, the economy is still developing, and so on. Clear-sightedness is important. But it is important also that we focus on our ways of relating to China, and on what our governments should be doing, rather than attempting to lecture China on matters that can only be solved internally while gaily continuing to sell them our minerals and buy up their cheap products.
NB: In your estimation, has Prime Minister Rudd’s ability to speak Mandarin affected Australia’s relations with China? Has it affected the amount of attention the Australian media devotes to China?

AF: I have been living in Beijing since February this year, and Kevin Rudd was elected only in December, so I am a rather distant observer of the local media response, but my mother, who keeps me abreast of Australian politics by phone and email, complains to me about the sniping to which Rudd has been subjected by journalists and members of the Opposition, with particular reference to his Chinese-speaking skills. (I don’t know whether the phrase “tall poppy syndrome” means anything in the US, but in Australia it signifies an inclination to target anyone who stands out of the crowd and cut him or her down to size.) As far as media attention is concerned, the Olympics and the milk scandal have rather overwhelmed the significance of our Prime Minister as a factor in China’s newsworthiness. But on the Chinese side, it is striking that the day after the Olympics opening ceremony, the Xinjingbao – Beijing’s main daily – gave Australia prominence in its report on the foreign participants. By prominence, I mean that the paper published a full page photograph of the Australian team – the only team to be so distinguished. Australia’s high level of visibility in China at present is attributable to a number of factors, not least of which is Chinese interests in Australian resources, but a Chinese-speaking Prime Minister helps. I have been asked in taxis, in shops, and at the markets where I come from, and the word “Aodaliya” (Australia) often elicits a smile of recognition and the words “Lu Kewen!”, which is Kevin Rudd’s Chinese name.

NB: When you are writing your books, who do you imagine reading them, and how do you want to impact that audience?

AF: When I wrote Speaking of Yangzhou, I was writing for my peers in the field and earning my stripes, which took me a long time to do. I had great difficulty finding a publisher for that book, before it was finally accepted by the Harvard Asia Center. When it won the Levenson award in 2006 I felt like the character Fan Jin in Rulin waishi who when he was in his fifties finally passed the provincial exam in first place – some of your readers will recognize the reference, which is to one of the most famous comic scenes in Chinese literature. My first sole-authored book, Far from Where? was written very much with the informants in mind. The book developed out of a class project on immigration to Australia, centered on interviews with Jewish immigrants from Shanghai in the post-war period. I wanted to write a book for the interviewees, as well about them. The book was very enthusiastically reviewed in popular and community presses, on the basis of which I can safely say that it is a very readable book, but one reviewer commented that it “verges on the scholarly.” I think this comment points to a bit of a problem for academic writers: that their scholarship often makes their writing inaccessible to the general public. Of course it is not important that every book be accessible to the general public. Some books are important for quite other reasons: they advance the field, they document something new and important, or they do something the significance of which is not at all apparent at the time but that becomes evident over time. But given a choice I would prefer to write for a broader audience. When I wrote Changing Clothes, I wanted to write a book that could be read both by people in the field and by people without a specialist knowledge of Chinese history.

NB: For those students who do not arrive at your classroom door eager to learn about China, how do you get them involved?

AF: My China-related classes are always electives, so students coming to class should have some interest in the subject. I don’t have tactics for engaging bored students. Probably they should be doing something else with their lives at that moment. I don’t think I have ever taught a mature age student, or even an upper-year student, who was bored. That said, I am very grateful that so much teaching material is available on film now – not only documentaries but also feature films, from early talkies in the 1930s to historical dramas made in present times. Few books can match film for quickly engaging a student’s attention.

NB: If you could invent a book—and magically assign its creation to some other person—on either past or present China that would fit perfectly into your courses, what would that book be?
The words “fit perfectly” don’t seem to match any course I have ever taught, but I would like my students to have access to more studies of social life and organization in relationship to politics, religion, the economy and the arts, and to more biographies. Very few people outside China know anything about the major figures in Chinese history, ancient or modern. A good biography is a great way of disseminating knowledge, as Jung Chang’s Wild Swans has shown.


By Nicole Barnes

Dr. Finnane’s latest book is a beautifully illustrated, eloquently argued, theoretically innovative, and eminently readable history of fashion in late imperial and modern China, from the Ming dynasty through the first years of the 21st century. For China Beat readers, perhaps the most notable element of the book is the amount of energy Finnane has to spend on convincing her readers that China does in fact have a fashion history. As we see in her cogent introduction, this is a case of the ghost of Hegel, reincarnated in the likeness of Fernand Braudel. Forty years ago, Braudel published a very well-received book in which he made a case for fashion being unique to Western society, to which he juxtaposed China, India, and Islamic societies with their “unruffled times and ancient institutions”. Finnane remarks that, four decades later, most scholars of fashion still agree with Braudel, in part because they are still terribly ignorant of Chinese clothing culture, so she sets out to refute this misguided notion and fill the gap in scholarship on fashion. Her book is a commendable contribution to a debate that we all wish we didn’t have to continue into the 21st century, but such is the work of “provincializing Europe.”

The second chapter examines Westerners’ attitudes about Chinese clothing from the 16th through the 19th centuries, and demonstrates that for over two hundred years, Western missionaries in China did not see clothing as a marker of East-West difference. Rather, they noted that Chinese clothing styles were very similar to those in Europe—essentially long, flowing robes worn over loose pants (at least for the élites on both sides of the Eurasian continent). It wasn’t until the Enlightenment that Western accounts treated Chinese sartorial culture as fundamentally different from its Western counterparts. Footbinding, though it had spread throughout China by the 12th or 13th century and had come to Westerners’ attention in the 16th century, became a key fulcrum on which the new Western accounts of Chinese barbarism turned. This comes as no surprise, but Finnane links the new concern with Chinese women’s feet to concepts touted by Enlightenment writers such as Voltaire, which encouraged Europeans to treat women’s status as a measure of a given society’s degree of civilization. This sparked new debates on the role of women in European society, debates in which China served as a reference point. In this manner, Finnane demonstrates the mercurial nature of European attitudes about Chinese fashion, and pinpoints the historical moment when Europeans began to think of China as a static society of “a semi-barbarous people” as they tried to invent themselves as members of uniquely advanced societies.

In the next chapter Finnane returns to China and conducts a brief but engaging review of fashion in the Ming and Qing dynasties, in which she notes the influences of Mongol, Korean, and ‘retro’ (Han-
Tang-dynasty) fashions in the Ming dynasty. She also uncovers seventeenth-century fashions of "contemporary styles" (時樣) of the "new times" (新時), whose wearers—mostly young people—invited criticism for stepping outside the bounds of sartorial convention. In particular, women who donned a new garment that looked a lot like a man’s tunic sparked great worry among statesmen. In the late Qing, fashions also changed as new products—including woolens and clocks from Europe—arrived at the inland Yangzi River port of Yangzhou. Finnane deftly challenges Braudel by showing that late imperial China had a fashion culture, replete with debates and innovations.

The book then moves through each decade of the twentieth century, and charts the vicissitudes in Chinese fashions for both women and men, with occasional attention to children’s clothing. Throughout, Finnane pays close attention to gender. She remarks that Qing fashions paid far less attention to gender differences than to distinction of rank or social status. That is, until the very late Qing, when Western and Japanese imperialism sparked a heightened interest in all things martial and physically valiant, including military uniform-inspired clothing for men, and natural feet for women. The accompanying vestimentary changes, for both boys and girls, often first materialized in school uniforms. By the turn of the century, the movement for women’s rights had inspired a new identification of women’s bodies as distinct from men’s, which was of course reflected in a new style of clothing for women: tight-legged pants and a long-sleeved, high-neck tunic that was increasingly form-fitting, an ensemble that anticipated the qipao (旗袍).

Also inspired by the long Manchu gown worn by Chinese men throughout the Qing dynasty, the changpao (長袍), the women’s qipao underwent numerous alterations in the twentieth century, even as the changpao retained its loose and flowing form as well as its cultural cachet among men of a certain class throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As the years progressed, the qipao clung ever tighter to women’s bodies, showing off the bust, hips, and legs, particularly after the practice of breast binding was abandoned in the 1920s and 30s. It received its final death knell in the 1980s, when it became linked to women of questionable chastity, a state from which it has yet to return. Now the qipao is worn chiefly by hotel and restaurant hostesses, prostitutes, Chinese dignitaries addressing foreign audiences, and women at weddings and other formal occasions (not to mention foreign Sinophiles).

Although men in the Republican era had more choices than women about what to wear, the cultural meaning of their outfit was dictated by contemporary politics. Men could choose between the Western suit (often identified with financial success, but also with Western imperialists and their Chinese
cronies), the conservative changpao robe of the educated class, or the Sun Yatsen suit, a civilianized military uniform that confirmed its wearer’s revolutionary spirit. Men dressed according to their political convictions, social status, and the occasion, but not without some anxiety as to how they would be received in public.

One of the most intriguing parts of the book is Finnane’s discussion of fashion debates in the mid-1950s. In April 1955, the New Observer magazine hosted a discussion forum on the future of Chinese dress in which the vibrant and colorful clothing of the USSR emerged as a prominent example. In 1956, fashion shows were staged across the country. Most of the designers leading this movement were women, and they invented new hybrid clothing styles inspired by various Chinese and Western styles. Everything from the originally Manchu qipao to ethnic minorities’ clothing patterns was blended with American dress and French blouse styles. Although this fashion frenzy was brief—already eclipsed by 1957—it demonstrates that the mono-chrome scenes of the Cultural Revolution era cannot accurately be extended back to the early years of CCP rule. Although Red Guard uniforms and Sun Yatsen suits (misnamed Mao suits) later dominated the sartorial stage, a wide variety of clothing styles emerged in both the pre- and post-Cultural Revolution eras.

Finnane’s discussion in the last chapter of the Chinese fashion industry from the 1980s reform era through today demonstrates that the ghost of Hegel-Braudel extends beyond the halls of academia to the catwalks of Paris, London, and New York. Chinese designers and models have struggled for decades to get the Western-centric fashion world to take them seriously. Although Japanese, Korean, and Chinese fashions circulate and influence one another with surprising rapidity, East Asian—especially Chinese—designers do not have quick or untroubled reception most anywhere else. Instead, Chinese fashion is made to confirm precisely the same notions that first emerged in 18th century Europe of an ancient and undying culture of “Oriental” exotica. But change may be afoot. In September 2007 director Jia Zhangke’s documentary “Wu Yong” (Useless) premiered at the Venice International Film Festival, where it won the Orizzonti Doc prize. It showed later that same month in Toronto, and in LA this past summer. The film documents and takes its name from the latest collection from experimental designer Ma Ke, which launched in Paris last year to apparent acclaim, despite its complete lack of chrysanthemums, dragons, and Mandarin ducks or collars.

Finnane’s book is a delightful read replete with gorgeous photos in both black & white and color. It firmly establishes the existence of a lively fashion culture in China over the past six hundred years, shows how changes in clothing reflect shifts in politics and gender roles, and challenges long-held views of Chinese sartorial culture as unerringly dominated by the blue “Mao” suit. Finnane clearly aimed for a broad audience, and this reviewer hopes that she gets just that.