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2004

## Protest to Persuasion: Chinese Textiles as Political Tools in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Diana Collins

*Independent researcher and textile conservator, ginger1@netvigator.com*

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Collins, Diana, "Protest to Persuasion: Chinese Textiles as Political Tools in the 19th and 20th Centuries" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 443.

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**Protest to Persuasion:  
Chinese Textiles as Political Tools in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

Diana Collins  
Independent researcher and textile conservator  
Hong Kong  
[ginger1@netvigator.com](mailto:ginger1@netvigator.com)

**Constancy of Governance and Symbols of Power**

Throughout historical China, symbols of power and style of governance coexisted despite significant turmoil and shifts in authority. The events that have shaped modern China have produced radical transformations but also some unexpected continuity. Nowhere are these more directly evident than on the textiles and clothing worn by China's vast population or more surprisingly as propagandist art.

Strict sumptuary laws evolved from early times to govern the opulent dress of rulers and the elite while the simply styled clothing of the vast numbers of the lower classes rendered them inconspicuous. Though constantly flouted, these laws visually separated the populace into a two-class system of the rulers and the ruled until the close of dynastic rule in 1911.

The emperor was regarded as the Son of Heaven and therefore held the Mandate of Heaven. Thus he was primarily responsible for the welfare of his people; while he assumed supreme authority, he was expected to rule wisely and impartially. His ceremonial garments bore the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority reflecting his power, virtue and dignity and relationship to Heaven. The Twelve Symbols were in use at least by the time of the Han dynasty 206 BCE-221 CE and were used thereafter by all native Chinese dynasties as well as by the invading Manchu rulers during most of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911CE).

Emperors changed, sometimes at alarming speed, dynasties came and went and there were periods of foreign occupation, however government in China, based on Confucian political philosophy, remained largely unchanged for over 2,000 years. Civil servants oversaw the administration of imperial rule. An imperial university was established in 124 BCE where civil service candidates were taught the philosophies of Confucius that underlined morality, moderation, filial piety, and respect for authority. While in theory government was based on meritocracy with study and examinations open to all men, in fact this system proved to be largely dominated by a self-perpetuating elite class. Rigorous civil service examinations, first devised in the seventh century, were founded on the Confucian Classics and intended to produce orthodoxy in thought.

Distinctive clothing styles and accessories were assigned to civil servants. In the early 1390's woven or embroidered insignia badges (*buzi*), denoting rank, now often referred to as rank badges, were incorporated into officials' dress to be worn over the chest at front and back. Though undergoing several evolutionary style changes, these highly noticeable and distinguishing emblems persisted until the close of imperial rule. There were nine civil ranks, each represented by a different bird, and nine military ranks identified by different animals.

Civil and military badge insignia were contained within a square perimeter, denoting the Earth. The circle, representing Heaven, held the dragon symbol of the emperor, nobles and imperial officials.

### **Dress Regulations and Compliance in the Qing Dynasty 1644–1911**

Foreign invaders from Manchuria ruled China's final dynasty. They named their dynasty the *Qing* meaning "pure". And their style of government followed that of previous Chinese ruled dynasties with a Confucian administration system employing the traditional examinations for civil office bearers.

The Manchus never numbered more than 2% of the population of China<sup>1</sup>. To emphasize their presence and dominion over the ethnic majority Han population, new sumptuary laws were devised. As with previous dynasties, strict and elaborate dress regulations were imposed for all those who served the government, from courtiers to civil and military officials all of whom continued to be identified by embroidered or woven rank insignia. While many symbols and decorative motifs were maintained from the Ming dynasty, others evolved over the first century of Manchu reign. However the construction of clothing for the ruling elite changed radically to reflect the nomadic style of the Manchu people.<sup>2</sup>

Not only was the appearance of the clothing of the ruling class modified to demonstrate a change in power, the entire male Han race was required to exhibit submission to their invading rulers. Manchu and Han populations were kept segregated and Han male commoners were obliged to wear a black skullcap over heads that had been shaven at the front. The remaining hair was to be worn in a queue, a long plait from the nape of the neck, to display their loyalty and obedience to the Manchu. Manchu women were forbidden to bind their feet and several times the Manchu rulers issued edicts prohibiting foot binding amongst Han women.<sup>3</sup> Ironically their efforts would appear to have increased the popularity of foot binding amongst the Han and some ethnic minorities. Attempts to outlaw foot binding were discarded in 1668.

### **Middle Kingdom in Decline 1800–98**

The emperor Qianlong's long and celebrated reign in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw China expand in wealth and population. By 1775 China had become the richest and most populous nation in the world. Though he is generally respected as a venerable ruler, Qianlong's final years of power marked the beginning of a century of famines, substantial shortfalls in taxation objectives and rebellions that, along with an inadequate and corrupt civil service resulted in dynastic downfall.

Badges of rank from the 18<sup>th</sup> century bear relatively scant symbolism when compared to badges made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Reflecting a strong belief in the supernatural to overcome strife, these later badges typically contained at least a selection if not all the eight Daoist precious objects and eight Buddhist emblems of good fortune and other auspicious symbols often involving complex puns while endeavoring to invoke long life,

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<sup>1</sup> Paludan, Ann, *Chronicle of the Chinese Emperors*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1998, p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> See Vollmer, John, *Ruling from the Dragon Throne Costume of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)* Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Han women, to varying degrees, had engaged in the practice of foot binding since c. 10th century CE.

happiness and prosperity. These were dispersed throughout the composition around the bird or beast representing rank, eventually resulting in a surfeit of motifs and meanings. Symbols invoking good fortune were not only used on badges of rank but on all manner of objects, especially clothing during the troubled 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Imperial Collapse 1898–1912**

Plagued by discontent and weakened by corruption and invasions, China suffered almost continuous internal unrest. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a number of civil officials demonstrated their disregard for the ineffectual emperor Guangxu (1875–1908) by changing the symbolic shapes of their badges. While maintaining the square perimeter, some badges now depicted the general format required of badge design rimmed by a circular inner border. Later a few officials' badges with true circular perimeters, imitating those of the emperor, princes and imperial officials, were made. This mimicry of court attire, which could have incurred a death sentence, could be interpreted as an apparent act of bravado indicative of the emperor's lost power.<sup>4</sup>

By 1898 a forward thinking group of scholar-reformers convinced the emperor Guangxu to issue edicts that would correct and reform a broad range of problematic issues. These included the inflexible civil service examination-system based on outdated policies that held little consequence to contemporary situations as well as other issues including, corruption, defense, agriculture, postal services, and education. One proposal suggested a constitutional monarchy replace the existing autocracy. Many of these reforms were based on Russian or Japanese models.

As an outward sign of acceptance of what was to become known as the Hundred Days' Reform, austere badges of rank for officials were prescribed. The designs were to reflect frugality amongst the officials. Badges were simply bordered black squares with a background of blue clouds and a sun representing the emperor with the bird or beast that denoted rank. Still superstition prevailed and many badges incorporated the symbols of good fortune and moreover some circular Reform badges were made.

Motivated by the Hundred Days' Reform, scores of privately funded students left China to study in Europe and the United States however many were now inspired to study in Japan, which had become regarded as an international power by the early 1900's. Japan had taken advantage of exposure to foreign education and had used a German model upon which to establish their army as early as 1878. Law and military studies were popular with Chinese students who wore Japanese students' uniforms styled on German military uniform.

In 1904 China's New Army was formed along similar lines to the German army. Full length, loose belted robes were replaced with German styled military uniforms featuring narrow trousers and a fitting, center-buttoned jacket with a stand collar. Chinese school students' uniforms also started to take on a military appearance from around the same

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<sup>4</sup> Jackson, Beverley and Hugus, David, *Ladder to the Clouds Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*, Ten Speed Press, Berkley, 1999, p. 278.

time. From this uniform can be seen significant inspiration for the Sun Yat-sen suit which would define the outward face of China over the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

### **Early Republican Period 1912–16**

In October 1911 a rebellion against the Manchu finally overthrew the Qing monarchy and government. On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1912 the National People's Party of China (Guomintang) set up a provisional government in Nanjing with Dr Sun Yat-sen at its helm. As an act of collaboration, the presidency was handed to Yuan Shikai, a politically ambitious military leader because of his experience and influence.

At the winter solstice in late 1915, Yuan Shikai proclaimed a new dynasty of which he was emperor. The dynasty was named the Great Constitution (*Hong Xian*). His robes and those of his officials were styled on traditional Ming dynasty (1368-1644CE) robes worn for sacrifices to Heaven. On a black satin robe he wore were 12 roundels, each embroidered with the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority. A complex set of imperial dress regulations was again formulated prescribing the insignia to be worn on officials' similar black satin robes. These were also adorned with embroidered roundels, decreasing in number according to rank and likewise each roundel contained a lesser selection of the twelve symbols as the rank decreased in status. A short period of strong protest ensued before Yuan Shikai was demoted to president in March 1916. He died of natural causes in the summer of that same year.

### **The Influential Wardrobe of Dr. and Mrs. Sun Yat-sen 1912–25**

In imperial China, generously proportioned garments employed embroidered and woven ornamentation as a means of expressing political and spiritual alliances. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the dress regulations of imperial times no longer existed, these embellishments were in essence eclipsed by a preference for more modern, tailored dress. Dr. Sun Yat-sen (*Sun Zhongshan*) and his wife, Song Qingling, provided sartorial inspiration to the changing political face of the new China in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Earlier in his life Sun Yat-sen, who studied in Hawaii and then Hong Kong where he gained a medical degree, wore western dress as did many foreign educated students and middle class Chinese from around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As provisional president, he wore the quasi-military uniform popularized by students who had been educated in Japan, and then a western suit during his time in office in the early Republic. After his ousting by Yuan Shikai in 1913, he made a deliberate attempt to contrive a new image to signify contemporary China and ordered a special suit to wear at the founding of the Revolutionary Party in 1914. The distinctive though modest jacket was a hybrid of the Japanese student uniform, German military uniform and the western suit jacket.

This was to become known as the Sun Yat-sen suit (*Zhongshan zhuang*), the powerful emblem of China in revolution. Both the Nationalists and Communists Parties adopted it for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The suit was subjected to a variety of modifications particularly the collar, buttons and pockets resulting in a more military appearance. In 1929 it became regulation dress for civil servants in the Nationalist government and was

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<sup>5</sup> See Steele, Valerie and Major, John, (eds.) *China Chic East meets West*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1999, chapter 6, "Military Culture and Chinese Dress in the Early Twentieth Century," Antonia Finnane.

also adopted around that time by the Communists. While the Nationalists wore a well-tailored fitting version, the Communists wore a baggy, less tailored and more practical interpretation of the suit.

In 1917 Sun headed a separatist military government in Canton (Guangzhou) and, following the lead of Yuan Shikai while he was president of the Republic, donned a Prussian military styled uniform, complete with gold braid, ceremonial sword and plumed hat, typical of the contemporary attire of Chinese Warlords. Both his military government and appropriation of military uniform were short-lived. During the early 1920's until his death in 1925, Sun Yat-sen wore either the Sun Yat-sen suit or a scholar's robe (*changpao*) and jacket (*magao*) with western trousers and shoes.

Song Qingling, who along with her two sisters had studied in the United States, is not credited with initiating any dress styles however her choices did reflect political undercurrents of the time and influenced women whose new political savvy and modernity was expressed in what they wore. Though she often opted for western styles in early Republican times, she conformed to Chinese dress traditions from 1922 to the end of 1925, adopting a Chinese jacket with a stand collar and skirt (*aoqun*).

After her husband died in 1925, Song Qingling invariably wore a *qipao* (or *cheung sam*), a garment developed as a result of changing political times in China (see below) until the early 1950s. During the first decade after Liberation in 1949, Song Qingling slowly adopted pants and jacket, the unofficial uniform of the proletariat, as an appropriate replacement for the *qipao* that she was thereafter only to wear on rare official foreign visits.

### **The Need for a Chinese Identity 1919–49**

An unprecedented event on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919 inspired anti-imperialist and anti-feudal fervor that resulted in a popular reversion to Chinese dress styles as an expression of patriotism. Frustrated by the unfair treatment of China at the Treaty of Versailles, a demonstration was staged by 3,000 Beijing University students in Tiananmen Square despite warnings from officials. This landmark incident stimulated a refreshed drive for western reforms as a method to resolve political crisis within China. Sentiment ran high and resulted in a search for national identity.

From this time more women were encouraged to become students. Most female students wore blouses with large bell sleeves and stand collars with skirts (*aoqun*) or with trousers (*aokun*) while some took to wearing male scholars' robes (*changpao*). This was a political statement, indeed a radical and defiant choice for women. The *qipao* evolved from around 1920<sup>6</sup> and is thought to be a hybrid of the scholar's robes and the Manchu women's garment (*majia*).

This garment became extremely feminine and figure revealing by the 1930's, causing concern amongst conservatives. With natural sized feet shod in high heels sometimes

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the evolution of the *qipao* see Finnane, Antonia, "What Should Chinese Women Wear? A National Problem", *Modern China*, vol. 22, no. 2, April 1996, and Steele, Valerie and Major, John, eds., *China Chic: East Meets West*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1999, essays by Antonia Finnane, Martha Huang and Hazel Clark. Also Roberts, Claire, ed. *Chinese Dress 1700s – 1990s Evolution and Revolution* Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 1997.

with revealing peep-toes, bobbed hair and sexy silhouettes adorned in foreign prints, the new urban Chinese woman looked like she had somewhere to go and was getting there fast and fashionably. This was in stark contrast to her mother who, a mere two decades before, who was restricted to mincing on bound feet wearing modest full-cut garments, being rarely seen or heard in public.

For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, the vast majority of women in China were destitute and did not have the opportunity to contemplate a choice of clothing let alone make political or fashion statements with their choice of attire. Many still had bound feet, a practice that continued in more remote areas until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and dress for the lower classes had hardly changed over the preceding centuries.

A small group including Mao Zedong founded the Communist party in 1921. The Communists felt the *qipao*'s racy image was distant from their ideals and women in the Communist Party wore roughly constructed jackets and pants<sup>7</sup>, a style easy to imitate or obtain by the millions who were seeking salvation from oppression.

The Communists encouraged the abolition of many deep-rooted social customs such as religion, respect for elders and other ethical traditions. Nationalists however, set about to reform social behavior by introducing a combination of Confucianism and fascism and during the 1930's there existed amongst the Guomindang a Blue Shirt Society of political extremists, similar to the Italian Black Shirts and German Brown Shirts.

With China experiencing Japanese occupation from 1934 and then war with the Japanese from 1937- 45, the Communists and Nationalist agreed, despite their differences, to defy the Japanese as a United Front. Any co-operation that had existed from 1937 dissolved in 1941 after the Nationalists attacked a Communist unit killing all members. After the Japanese were defeated in 1945 there followed years of bloody civil war underlined by corruption and outrageous inflation in a battle for supremacy. The Communists finally liberated China from decades of disunity in August 1949.

### **The People's Republic of China 1949**

The proclamation of the founding of the People's Republic of China was held in Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949 with the official participants standing on the gate of the Forbidden City. Chairman Mao Zedong, advised to wear western attire, is quoted as responding, "We have our Chinese customs, why should we follow others?"<sup>8</sup>. By now Mao took the Sun Yat-sen suit to be an "authentic" Chinese garment<sup>9</sup>.

At the ceremony men in the official party wore Sun Yat-sen suits, eventually to become known in the West as Mao Suits and military officials wore People's Liberation Army suits. Women wore Lenin suits in blue or mustard. There were never any official dress regulations in the Peoples' Republic however from the early years it was recognized that conformity in dress style was advisable.

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<sup>7</sup> Finnane, Antonia, 1996 suggests the rise of the *qipao* was concurrent with the rise of the Nationalist party while the trend of women wearing jackets and pants follows strengthening of the Communists, pp. 120-21.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Finnane, Antonia, 1996, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

The Soviet Union had been allied to China from the early 1920s and for the first decade of the People's Republic, Soviet ideals provided models for education, economics, and culture in China. Marxism and Leninism were taught in schools and the educated elite spoke Russian. Silk jacquard woven portraits copied from engraved images of Marx, Engels, Stalin, Mao and many Chinese political luminaries were mass-produced at the time for display in offices and homes.

The Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing employed Soviet artists who specialized in Socialist realism to teach painting that was to have some effect on the style of propaganda posters. As Wilson explains in her essay "Dress and the Cultural Revolution"<sup>10</sup> no matter how well planned propaganda photographs were "airbrushed and orchestrated (they) do not give the same control as graphic representation." The production and distribution of propaganda posters was gargantuan during the first decades after Liberation. One particular poster of Mao was reproduced 900 million times.

Stylistic influences on propaganda posters were perhaps as much indigenous as foreign. As a medium for disseminating information to what was a principally illiterate population in historical China, posters were a familiar choice. They stemmed from the development of wood-block prints illustrating methods of production, history, religious, and moral conduct that had been part of popular culture for centuries. Some wood-block prints were copied in embroidery in the Qing dynasty. Folk-style Lunar New Year wood-block prints were exchanged by families and mass-produced imitations continue to circulate in current times. Following in this tradition, poster-styled calendars were distributed by companies from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to advertise life-style products such as cigarettes, cosmetics, alcohol and garments. These commodities were usually endorsed by the convincing smiles of attractive and happy middle class women where satisfaction rather than the advertised article predominated.

Evolution of advertising styles over the 1930's followed by Soviet inspiration during the 1950's gave birth to characteristic Chinese propaganda styles. However propaganda mediums were as varied as the methods by which the government attempted to improve China's potential.

### **Silken Persuasion**

Embroidery, along with weaving, was to become one of the more unusual tools for Party doctrine and the cult worship of Mao. These followed very closely in style to the popular posters. Of particular note is a set of embroideries that together create a fascinating chronology of the development of the People's Republic and variety of embroidery techniques. The embroideries date from the late 1950's to the mid 1970's after the death of Chairman Mao.

An embroidery titled "People's Communes are Good" dates to The Great Leap Forward (1958-60), a disastrously failed attempt to modernize China. A large variety of stitches have been used to produce different textures in this scene of rural harmony and productivity almost as if it were a sampler, enhancing the folk-art charm of this embroidery. The stitches are on a satin ground that has been painted with washes to represent some parts of the background where there is no embroidery and also illustrate

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<sup>10</sup> Steele, Valerie and Major, John, eds., 1999, p. 182.



fine details such as facial features. This mixed media approach to embroidery has existed in China since at least the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1280CE). A band of happy and productive peasants, young and old are portrayed going about a multitude of rural tasks while some simply enjoy the surroundings. Marching through the middle of the scene are youths holding a red banner emblazoned with the Double Happiness characters emphasizing the festive, joyous tone of the composition.

Three embroideries date from the Cultural Revolution period, a time now officially condemned by the Chinese government. Both are embroidered on sheer grounds and, like the previously mentioned example, stitching does not cover the ground fabric. One, titled “Seize the Revolution, Promote Production” is on a silk gauze ground. Counted stitch embroidery, popular since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644CE) is worked in brilliant colors with a smooth surface, imitating the flat style of poster art. The square-jawed, resolute workers are brandishing their Little Red Books, *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, against a background of industrial buildings and smoke stacks. The main figure is wearing a Red Guard armband that reads “Rebel Group”. The other embroidery is a portrait of a popular contemporary hero for whom Mao himself created the catchphrase “Learn from Lei Feng”. Lei Feng (1940–62) was an iconic soldier whose life story has taken on mythological proportions. He came to represent exemplary, selfless behavior to the Chinese nation and was often depicted in propaganda posters standing in uniform armed with a machine gun in front of a pine tree. This embroidery is on organza and is worked in random or chaos stitch, a technique that imitates the application of tiny brush strokes of easel paintings. (A website established in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is dedicated to Lei Feng, created to inspire moral behavior in Chinese youth).

The other Cultural Revolution embroidery depicts a young girl in the countryside. The over-zealous activities of the Red Guards had brought China to the brink of civil war and former members, referred to as Sent-down Youth, were transported to the country to be re-educated by peasants. Clutching her copy of *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, strangely with a yellow rather than red cover, the smiling subject stands in a field of wheat, wearing a towel at her throat and a large sun hat hanging behind her head and shoulders indicating she is there to labor in the fields. This painterly embroidery almost completely covers a satin ground mainly in encroaching satin stitch while the towel is realistically depicted in looped knot stitch. The author knows of similar embroidery which suggests that propaganda embroideries were possibly each produced many times.

Amongst the finer political embroideries to emerge from modern China have been realistically imitated copies of formal easel paintings. Portraits of Chairman Mao Zedong and his successor, Hua Guofeng (leader of the Chinese Communist Party from 1976–81, premier 1976–80) were copied from easel paintings and worked in encroaching satin stitch with shaded backgrounds in chaos or random stitch. It seems doubtless many other officials from within the Party have also been immortalized in silk stitches.

From around this time ordinary Chinese women created embroidered images of Mao. These albeit crudely executed embroideries worked with whatever thread and ground fabric was at hand, contrast ironically to the highly refined embroideries created by superstitious women of imperial China who embellished cloth with images of good fortune, imbuing the gods to bestow a better future on believers. Paradoxically

needlewomen who had been admonished, “*A revolution is not ...doing embroidery*” by Mao were now placing all their aspirations in Mao to improve their destinies, perceived to be carrying the Mandate of Heaven.

While embroidered examples of propaganda and cult worship required the time consuming efforts of skilled needlewomen, silken persuasion was also mass-produced in China’s weaving mills. Though not produced in numbers as vast as posters, woven portraits of Mao were made depicting the Great Helmsman at various celebrated moments of his life. His calligraphy was often included as lines of his poetry or other quotes as well as icons that symbolized his achievements. In a set available for study, the average size is 28cm x 18cm, and red is the dominant color. These factory samples were made by the “Hangzhou East is Red Factory” in 1969.

### **Conclusion**

In imperial China the choice of clothing was limited to what was prescribed by the emperors, with the vast majority of the subjects wearing similar clothes of plain cut devised to distinguish commoners from the opulently dressed rulers. For the upper levels of society, access to elaborate embroidery and weaving provided identity, an opportunity to connect with the supernatural as a means to improve their lot, and finally a channel for some to object to their leader.

With the 20<sup>th</sup> century came an end to the clothing dictates of an emperor and while embroidery and complex weaves were still produced, they were not perceived as “modern” and production focused on less time consuming methods to produce cloth. With national pride burgeoning, there came a new pressure to express identity through dress. Though a choice of western garments was one of the outward signs of the beginning of a modern China, political events led to some reversions with the eventual evolution of distinctive styles.

Ironically, further developments resulted in the entire nation once again dressing alike, although this time in the absence of clothing regulations, but imitating the ruler who had reached godlike stature. Wearing decoratively woven or embroidered clothes during the early decades of the People’s Republic was deemed anti-revolutionary. However, because of international trade demands and the strong cultural identity lent by these arts, the skills involved in their manufacture persisted in Modern China. Moreover, weaving and embroidery found application in political persuasion either by intent or convenience. Propaganda often promotes acceptance by cloaking the new in the familiar. In these more unusual examples, the time-honored mediums of fine weaving and embroidery are employed to encourage nationals to patriotically accept new ideals utilizing the traditional means of silk seduction.

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