

Refashioning Suzhou: Dress, Commodification, and Modernity

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Clothing is a tool of body ornamentation and a symbol of a national people's culture. With each successive change of dynasties, the design of apparel must be altered in order to renew one's feeling of connection and establish etiquette.

—Neizhengbu, *Domestic Affairs Yearly* (1936)

On 6 January 1912, the shape and principles of Republican administration and politics, not to mention the social and cultural ramifications of the newly completed revolution, remained unformed and seemingly open to all possibilities. Citizens of the nascent Chinese Republic were still reveling in the audacious success of the 10 October Wuchang Uprising and the founding of their six-day-old nation. Nonetheless, as that day's commentary of the "fashion (*shimao*) clique" in the lively "Free Talk" section of *Shenbao* [Shanghai news] made clear, the recent political uprising was already provoking dramatic cultural and social transformations, some of which were being imprinted onto the very bodies of newborn Republicans.

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Figure 1 "Ziyou tan: Nan nu zhi xin jiaoji" [Free talk: The new social intercourse between men and women], *Shenbao*, 21 June 1912.

We now suddenly all find ourselves to be Republicans and want everything to be improved and made better, with the clothes on our backs being the most pressing concern of all. Let's first mention the things that a lady can't do without: a pair of sharp-toed, high-heeled, premium leather shoes; a pair of "violet mink" gloves; two or three plain or jewel-encrusted gold pins; a white lace . . . handkerchief; a pair of gold-rimmed, new-style eyeglasses; a curved ivory comb; and a silk kerchief. Now let's address the things a man can't do without: a Western suit, greatcoat, Western hat, and handkerchief, with the addition of a boutonniere, a pince-nez, and a few words of pidgin English.¹

The recent lurch toward Republican government had occurred with surprising, almost casual swiftness so that even the most ardent revolutionary

lady and gentleman of means may have been astonished to find themselves tyro Republicans. Yet, the material consequences of this political turn provided concrete evidence of the Republic's modernist, cosmopolitan aims and the lingering resonance of its foreign bourgeois referents. Though radical in their ambition to remake society, China's unexpected Republicans were hardly sansculottes in their fashion choices. Quite significantly, "fashion"/*shimao* was hardly an incidental accessory to the violent reconstitution of political and social institutions. Like leather shoes and jeweled gold pins, the Republican state and Republican nationality were indeed *shimao*, the "style of the times." The "Free Talk" writer wickedly suggested that fashions, whether political or sartorial, were fundamentally related, if not interchangeable. Was adopting Republican identity as simple as donning a set of new clothes? If so, would the meanings of Republican nationality and politics or the creation of a Republican political form and culture be as fleeting and superficial as the latest fashions?

Assessing the fashion change unleashed by the Xinhai Revolution, Wang Jie'an, a merchant leader of the Yunjin gongsuo (Cloud Brocade Silk Guild), argued later in 1912 that it was necessary "to make everyone emphasize National Products and not make following *shimao* their main aim."² Wang worried that far from defining notions of Republican nationality, *shimao* posed a threat to China's integrity. He pessimistically assumed that his fellow Republicans' fashion choices would be motivated more by an overwhelming desire for style or modernity than by nationalist considerations. If people were truly free to choose their clothing, unhindered by considerations of style, a garment's national identity, or the origin of the fabric, how would the domestic commercial sector compete? The significance of Western garments and accessories as immediate and popularly acknowledged Republican icons underscores the hybridity of Chinese modernism. Yet to Wang Jie'an and others, this dynamic also revealed the tension between the role of clothing as both symbol of national identity and prime material artifact of modernity, highlighting the effect of the changing market on the manufacture, trade, and significance of clothing as a commodity.

Within weeks or in some cases days of assuming power, local, provincial, and national organs of the new Republican government issued pronouncements promoting clothing reform. As such, the Republican state was enacting an imperial prerogative established by the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and

consequent millennia of kingly and dynastic practice, albeit with a uniquely modern cast. Virulently anti-Manchu revolutionary rhetoric dredged up Dorgon's 1644–1645 imposition of the queue and Manchu-style dress as a national humiliation to be avenged. Yet jettisoning Qing imperial garments and hair for timely Republican clothing also produced more fundamental salutary effects. Postulating that clothing exercised a formative influence on the physique and culture, and abashedly aware that Qing garb was derided abroad as evidence of China's atavistic singularity, late-nineteenth-century thinkers like Kang Youwei and Tan Sitong argued that the adoption of Western clothing and hair was a prerequisite for creating a new Chinese identity and increasing national power. Clothing reform was thus viewed as a rite of ethnic rehabilitation that would expunge three centuries of ignominy and reinvigorate the nation to redress its recent humiliations at the hands of the "West." Revolutionary and later Republican clothing discourse underscored the fundamental connection between material culture and politics: strict controls over the styling and the political and social meanings of garments were established, in principle if not practice, as essential prerogatives of the modern Chinese state. And so it remained until the loosening of political and economic strictures at the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution.³

Yet, as *Shenbao* and Wang Jie'an attested, state regulation of clothing and its nationalist import existed in tension with the popular force of *shimao*. The term *shimao* can be found in the classical lexicon as referring to "a righteous, flourishing age." However, as historian Yue Zheng has argued, it emerged from the late-nineteenth-century Shanghai brothel demimonde as a new coinage for "fashionable/popular" to describe the burgeoning, often hybrid Chinese-foreign consumer culture of the treaty port.⁴ The use of this novel term in relation to clothing underscores the appearance and articulation of a new social phenomenon, modern fashion: the cultural, social, and political import of newly styled garments, as well as the vertiginous changes in production, consumption, and taste propelled by the seasonal shifting of mass industrial capitalism. I mean this in a relative, not absolute sense. Clothing in China and elsewhere has clearly had important social significance, changing according to various political, social, and cultural influences and exhibited stylistic fads. Nor was this the first time Western clothes became "fashionable"; important work by Antonia Finnane in this volume

shows that “Occidental goods” enjoyed favor and set the tone for “fashion” at different points in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as styles were introduced in Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Guangzhou and disseminated through merchant networks, fiction, and other still-murky marketing structures. More explicitly, I speak of “fashion” in Georg Simmel’s sense of stylistic change, as in late-nineteenth-century Europe, characteristic of the increased tempo of urban life created by a capitalist mass consumption economy.⁵ Indeed, the European referent and the influence of global capitalism were intrinsic to the genesis of *shimao* itself.

The vogue for Western garments was not a mere symbolic register of the new Republic. Consumption lay at the center of modern, Republican nationality. *Shimao* both symbolized and effected the greater modern material transformation that constituted the core aims of the Xinhai revolution and consequent Republican politics. As both sign and formative practice, the unruly transformations of fashion highlighted a plethora of anxiety-provoking possibilities regarding the constitution of the modern Republican self. The quickened pace of cyclical fashion shifts, like the greater workings of industrial capital itself, proved difficult to predict or regulate, leaving the integrity of both the economy and the modern Republican culture vulnerable to the maelstrom of the market. In Suzhou, commercial and public disquiet at the overweening power of *shimao* provoked calls for the state to define and regulate the social semiotics and political-economic effects of clothing as a commodity. The limited effectiveness of state controls was highlighted by the gendered assessment of *shimao* and its market effects and the difficulties of fixing the nationalist significance and production of particular garments.

Like much excellent scholarship on Chinese modernity, discussions of clothing change usually consider the nation as a whole or Shanghai, the Chinese modernist metropolis par excellence.⁶ This essay, by contrast, focuses on the historic Jiangnan cultural city and major silk-production center of Suzhou. It is essential to augment the usual national perspective with local views of how new-style dress, Republican citizens, and modernity were fashioned on the ground in and by particular cities and individuals. Just as the clothes worn in different cities varied according to regional and local styles, the ways in which clothing was worn and assigned social significance were inflected by place. Suzhou was simultaneously a place for the production

and consumption of clothing as well as a nodal site in national geographies of politics, elite and public culture, commerce, and industry. By examining the manufacture, sale, and wearing of contemporary dress as locally situated practices, we can observe how the experience of people dressing themselves or dressing others in *shimao* garb informed their understanding of themselves as Republicans and the Republic's fraught negotiation of material culture and capitalist production and consumption.

Hair and Clothing Change and the Definition of Republican Nationality

In Suzhou and other Jiangsu cities, revolutionary or reform-inspired changes in dress during the first decade of the twentieth century intersected with the recent and growing influence of foreign fashions. Travelers and other social observers noted that in the years before 1910 imported fabric and such items of Western dress as men's silk socks and women's accessories enjoyed periodic favor among the urban upper and middle class.⁷ As Western garb became more familiar on city streets, some expressed reservations. Dissenters such as the feminist social critic Jin Tianyu argued that the wholesale adoption of foreign dress was suspect as a means for achieving societal progress. Writing in 1903, Jin asked, "How can the harm caused by Chinese women's garb not provoke sympathy? Yet, European women cinch their waist in order to lift up their bosom. . . . I don't know whether this promotes health or not, but as a mark of [superior] civilization it seems suspect. Therefore, I don't endorse the recent trend of Chinese women emulating Western fashion." More fundamentally, Jin worried that the materialist thrall of shifting dress styles would distract women from their primary duty to improve themselves and engage in social projects furthering national progress.⁸

In some progressive quarters, adopting foreign dress in the spirit of modernist reform was viewed suspiciously as an extremist, even latently antinationalist cultural gesture. For instance, Wu Tingfang, the Qing ambassador to the United States who advocated cutting the queue, adamantly rejected adopting foreign dress. If national rehabilitation required the removal of one foreign imposition, what sense did it make to willingly don another? Echoing Jin Tianyu, Wu passionately denounced fashion as "the work of the devil," noting that its changing dictates enslaved people of all classes.

Arguing that Chinese clothing was superior to Western dress in terms of hygiene, comfort, and safety—and seemingly untainted by the sullying influence of “fashion”—Wu argued that “many things in China could be very well improved [by learning “from the Western peoples”] but certainly not dress.”⁹ As Wu foresaw, emulating Western fashion involved more than adopting foreign clothes, yet his belief that Chinese dress and political economy were both distinct and superior to their Western variants was not widely shared.

Rejecting Qing hair and clothing and adopting new garb were fundamental to the creation and definition of the Republic. As Jiangsu governor Cheng Dequan confidently explained to a local Suzhou audience in early March 1912, “Now that our government form is remade and a Republic established, hair is being cut and clothing changed as part of our trend toward becoming one with the rest of the world.”¹⁰ Indeed, in Suzhou city itself hair was being cut. During the winter of 1912, roving Republican vigilantes went hunting for “pigtales” and forcibly detained countless pedestrians to relieve them of their “oily, soft, fat queues.” Such public zeal provoked sometimes violent conflict. Despite government orders requiring queue removal, city officials urged soldiers not to forcibly cut queues but to inform citizens to do so quickly. As with the initial imposition of the queue, its removal, though mandated by Cheng in February 1912, was to be carried out at one’s own initiative. The gesture constituted a declaration of membership and allegiance to the new national community. In addition, official dissuasion of forced queue removal bespoke the Republican ideal that political sovereignty lay with the people. As a contemporary Shanghai directive argued, state leaders did not wish to “interfere with each person’s bodily autonomy.” However, if individuals persisted in not regulating their bodily attire, it might seem “not clear that the mass of 10,000 all share the same heart,” belying the revolutionary belief that the masses’ hearts were—or in cases of extreme recalcitrance, should be made to be—as one.¹¹ State and civil respect for individual bodily/political integrity had limits.

Clothes were being changed as well. Commenting in 1912, Wang Jie’an noted that in the months after the Wuhan Uprising, the populace enthusiastically cleansed the body politic and themselves by “washing off the loathsome system of [imperial] vestments.” Though this “glorious project

of washing away past shame” might leave the people’s bodies and minds cleansed, it was not clear what clothes they should put on afterward. The political symbolism and economic consequence of changing dress were too important to leave to the caprice of *shimao* and called for state coordination. Its lack was manifest in a variety of contemporary approaches to expressing national identity through dress. Many had cut off their queues and adopted Western dress; by the end of 1911 “it was [already] the exception to see such a thing as a queue, and all sorts of conditions of foreign hats and caps were the fashion.”¹² Others, by contrast, bound their hair back and put on Han dynasty–style dress. As a classical period of “Han Chinese” cultural florescence and political strength, the Han provided a compelling referent for the new nation.¹³ Suzhou was also an epicenter of a short-lived early Republic attempt to revive Ming dynasty dress and hairstyles as a modern vestimentary order of domestic origin. Yet some locals satirized this trend as a resurrection of seventeenth-century antiques; the Republic’s future hinged on “becoming one with the rest of the world,” not reviving historical particularities.¹⁴

Clothing Reform: The Economic Cost

The “trend toward becoming one with the rest of the world” required the removal of the queue and the donning of new vestments. Yet the relation between “modern” clothing, whether “Western,” “Chinese,” or hybrid, and notions of Republican nationhood was unclear. Questions as to whether clothing reform in practice would produce its intended effects and whether the ostensible national interest accorded with that of the locality were not questions of mere theoretical interest but matters of immediate and crucial economic import. In late Qing Suzhou, the local chamber of commerce contained almost three hundred silk firms alone; textiles and corollary industries such as clothing production and agriculture, in a later Republican estimate, employed more than 100,000 people, almost one-third of the urban population.¹⁵ Would joining “the world,” especially in matters of hair and dress, necessarily advance nationalist and local development? If so, how?

During the late autumn and winter of 1910–1911, the increasingly strident and popular nature of the clamor for hair and clothing reform had already provoked deep concern among clothing and textile concerns in Suzhou and



Figure 2 Bun, "Ziyou tan: Xinshi mao" [Free talk: New-style hat], *Shenbao*, 4 May 1912. New-style hat (A mandarin's hat is remade in the colors of the Republican flag).

other cities, not to mention the Qing central government Bureau of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce. In their view, the main threat posed by societal vestimentary reform was not sedition but economic unrest. Clothing reform in military and educational circles in the years before 1910 had sparked work stoppages, political agitation, and general disquiet among textile and clothing firms.¹⁶

Business leaders apprehensively saw clothing change as an attack on their businesses and general social order. They were concerned that if the national costume changed at once, people would blindly esteem foreign clothes, and sales of foreign textiles would rapidly expand. "Our country's vestments, hats, and silks would all become refuse; the commercial sector would suffer large-scale losses."¹⁷ As many commentators noted, by harming firms

manufacturing clothes, hats, silk, and related shipping and retailing concerns, clothing reform potentially endangered the jobs of several million people. However, they continued, changes in fashion would most adversely affect three interrelated economic sectors: silk, clothing, and pawnshops. The potential damage to pawnshops was particularly worrisome because it threatened to spread economic travails of textile and clothing concerns to an even broader swath of domestic industry and commerce. Clothing provided a large volume of pawnshop business and profits. Pawning clothing not in season provided many people with urgently needed loans of cash. Pawnshops were also a main supplier of crucial commercial capital for many Chinese-run textile concerns, not to mention other industrial sectors. Change in national dress thus had the potential to undermine the capital structure of commerce and industry as a whole.¹⁸ To business critics, clothing reform constituted a self-inflicted attack on Chinese commerce calculated to help foreigners open markets and stifle the national economy.

Early experience did not quell these fears. During the fall of 1911, even before the successful conclusion of the revolution, the strength of popular support for clothing reform and a widespread belief that foreign dress would soon become the new national costume provoked a precipitous 50 percent drop in sales of Suzhou silk cloth and accessories. This sudden lack of demand, in conjunction with a tightening of seasonal investment capital, moved firms to decrease their production by almost half. The speed and severity of this market pall prompted panic among many different constituencies and levels of Suzhou society. Manufacturers lowered the amount of work put out to loom workers, who largely existed on the edge of penury. This action prompted fears of social unrest and provoked the police to prevent at least one planned action by three to four hundred "hooligans" and newly unemployed workers to press their grievances. In response, the Yunjin *gongsuo* urged all affiliated silk manufacturers to resume normal production levels in order to maintain social order. These exhortations produced little effect. The guild also urged pawnshops not to accept weaving tools as pawn for fear that workers would be permanently deprived of their livelihood. However, the unemployed had few other assets and continued to hock their loom implements well into the first year of the Republic. When production resumed and

manufacturers again put out jobs, many weavers found themselves unable to redeem their items and thus unable to resume work.¹⁹

The local market in the manufacture and selling of silk remained depressed for the first two years of the Republic as people in Suzhou and elsewhere continued to shun traditional clothing and adopted foreign garb en masse under the influence of revolutionary fervor. As a Mr. Jiang Qiying from Suzhou wrote in an August 1912 letter published in *Shibao*, “Now that the Republic has recently been established, everything imitates the manner of Europe and the West. . . . Western clothes have become fashionable, and among so-called enlightened girl students there is not one who does not love Western products.”²⁰ Sales of traditionally styled silks remained at half of their prerevolutionary level as the populace continued to discuss the possibility and merit of donning foreign dress as the new national costume. The public chose to consume those textiles identified as “new,” mainly foreign cottons or woollens. These materials were traditionally used to make Western dress, for which Chinese-produced silks were perceived as inadequate in terms of texture, thickness, pliability, and draping effect. At the same time, consumers were drawn to domestic cloth with names (one locally sold brand was called “Patriotic Cloth”) and designs (imitations of foreign patterns or seemingly novel Chinese designs) that appealed to the public’s burgeoning Republican sensibilities.²¹

When the Republic of China was established in January 1912, textile and clothing firms feared that their direst apprehensions would be realized: the change of state and creation of a new vestimentary order would precipitate their demise. Thus, from the founding month of the Republic, Suzhou’s textile concerns cautioned the new government that jettisoning traditional fashion and adopting normatively modern, largely European, Republican garb might cripple their business. During the summer of 1912, Wang Jie’an and other Suzhou silk firm leaders mobilized with silk makers in Hangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, and elsewhere to form the Chinese Guohuo (National Products) Promotion Association.²² Suzhou business leaders immediately set to work on behalf of the association in urging the new Republican government Industrial and Commercial Bureau to “support” the domestic silk sector by mandating the exclusive use of silk fabric for prescribed formal ceremonial dress worn on official state occasions. Silk interests successfully

remonstrated with the new government to delete all reference to wool cloth from the draft regulations, which mandated the use of “Chinese wool and silk,” despite the fact that the European-style morning coat and other formal regalia that served as regulation formal dress were usually made with woolsens. Citing the historical importance of silk to the Chinese state and its general cultural significance, Wang Jie’an and other association leaders persuaded the national government to issue sumptuary regulations declaring that these traditionally woolen Western garments should be made with silk manufactured in China. Furthermore, they argued, the undeveloped state of the domestic wool industry made woolen cloth an inappropriate choice for new national fashions from the perspective of domestic political economy.²³

As for the larger, more pertinent question of everyday wear, the association urged the government not to issue any regulations, perhaps for fear that the state would mandate the general adoption of foreign clothing as the new national dress. Rather, the association advocated instructing the Chinese populace to “not study *shimao*” but, rather, to consider questions of domestic economy. Thus educated, consumers could be trusted to dress as they desired. The association optimistically anticipated that silk manufacturers would flourish like textile manufacturers in Japan, where despite several decades of clothing reform, ordinary Japanese continued to prefer Japanese dress and the silk industry was much stronger than in the period before reform.²⁴

In Suzhou, the initial radical phase of vestment change lasted less than two years. The reasons for the return to Chinese dress were not especially clear. According to Suzhou’s Japanese inspector of customs, the return to Chinese fashions was “largely due to the discovery made by those who discarded their national dress that foreign dress is much more expensive and uncomfortable to wear than flowing silken robes; and as a result, many rushed back to their old costume with the same avidity with which they had abandoned it a few months before.”²⁵ Whether this characterization accurately reflects social attitudes remains moot. Yet, regardless of the reasons behind the mass adoption and subsequent abandonment of foreign dress, it seems that the population as a whole was not convinced that Western clothing was a necessary component of Republican life.

To a great extent, the extreme fluctuation between the wholesale embrace and rejection of foreign clothing in Suzhou played out in other areas as well.

Within three or four years, local commerce in silk garments with regions near and far had returned to and in some sectors exceeded prerevolutionary levels. Fashion journalist Quan Bohua later credited the revolution for precipitating the popularization of Suzhou silks in some northern areas. No longer under the social sway of the imperial court, these places began to mimic trends emanating from the newly culturally dominant metropolitan Jiangnan area.²⁶ The immediate postrevolutionary vogue for foreign clothes had quieted three thousand of the city's seven thousand looms producing high-quality satin silks used for elite Chinese-style garments—and yet fears that unemployed workers would foment unrest were unrealized. When Chinese costume revived beginning in 1913 and continuing for several years thereafter, demand for Suzhou silks so outstripped output that an additional two to three thousand looms were brought into production.²⁷ However, this increase in the number of looms in production, as well as the recovery of the local silk trade, would be largely temporary. The early Republican recovery uneasily took place against the ongoing development of modern dress and the quickening of the cycle of *shimao* clothing. Awareness of this predicament can be seen in the prominent promotion of silk piece goods in local/domestic product exhibitions during the early 1920s in order to encourage their use and stave off the already evident prognosis of impending disuse and decline.²⁸

The pace and magnitude of fashion change during the later Republic differed considerably from that of the early 1910s. Unlike the immediate rejection and subsequent resurgence in Chinese textiles that characterized the postrevolutionary mania for Western dress, the overall trend toward “modern” dress developed gradually over several years. Nonetheless, textile and clothing concerns necessarily concentrated most of their educational efforts on local events, which attempted to reform women's consumption of fashion. Exhorting the consumption of local Suzhou or other domestically manufactured “national” products, these efforts sought to mitigate women's ostensible vulnerability to manipulation by foreign trends. Textile and clothing makers exerted strenuous effort on product development and marketing to promote their wares as the fabric of Republican culture itself. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, exhibits-cum-sales-events and rallies such as the national 1932 Year of the Woman or the 1934 celebrations heralding

the opening of the city's Guohuo department store critiqued the consuming habits of local women and touted the fashion and economic benefits of buying local silks. Nonetheless, local clothing firms increasingly articulated concerns regarding the growing instability and volatile pace of stylistic change in the clothing market, the advent of the modern fashion cycle.

Given the instability and resultant anxiety of allowing dress and greater national characteristics to be determined by the caprice of *shimao*, constituencies of manufacturers, National Products advocates, and retailers repeatedly petitioned the Republican government to enlarge upon the immediate postrevolutionary prescription of the queue and follow the precedents of earlier dynasties by clearly defining national dress standards. The stability ostensibly achieved through the previous imperial state-regulated "sumptuary order" became a compelling, if somewhat mythic, standard throughout the Republic. Business leaders attributed Qing regulations with commanding influence and rather conveniently forgot the consternation caused by the initial adoption of Western dress and the popularization of clothing and hair reform, all of which took place under Qing rule in the 1900s. For instance, in 1923, noting the turbulence of the contemporary market in female fashions, the Yunjin *gongsuo* petitioned the central government to redress the lack of state standards for women's formal wear (regulations passed in October 1912 had addressed this) as a means of regulating the marketplace.²⁹ The imposition of state clothing standards to limit the influence of *shimao* remained an attractive, though seemingly ineffectual, commercial ideal throughout the Republic, inspiring this and several successive calls for the promulgation of more comprehensive codes. Judging from fashion and general cultural journalism, the pace of fashion change only increased after 1923. Political controls seem to have had scant effect on marketplace trends. Suzhou clothing and textile makers nonetheless persisted through the early 1940s in pursuing state regulatory intervention as a means of encouraging consumption of their products.³⁰

As for what actually appeared in the public arena in Suzhou, modern dress was naturally never universal during the Republic. Class and individual taste, as well as local fashions and social codes, ensured a diverse mixture of traditional and modern dress on the contemporary street. Japanese writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, for one, was pleased that on his 1921 visit he saw

practically no Western clothing or other signs of “infect[ion] with Yankee customs.” Faced with the same phenomenon a decade later, one Shanghai leftist reporter reached the opposite conclusion and denigrated the city as backward and feudal.³¹ According to one early ethnographic study from 1928, such hallmarks of modern fashion as women’s high-heeled shoes, commonplace in Shanghai, were rarely seen in Suzhou. *Zhongshan zhuangs* (Sun Yat-sen suits), Western suits, and student uniforms were commonplace, along with the occasional Japanese kimono, though scholars’ gowns, vests, and black skullcaps predominated over pants and jackets. The middle- and upper-class male population continued to wear traditionalist-styled clothing, as did many women. As Lu Xun sarcastically commented in an essay titled “The Decline of Western Clothing,” the Republic’s original vogue for foreign clothing had played out in many areas so that “now [in 1934] one only sees the remaining traces of Western clothing on Modern Men and Women, just as one occasionally sees a queue or bound feet on ultraconservative men and women.” At the same time, the long scholar’s gown and short mandarin jacket had, since the May Fourth Movement, somewhat incongruously been re-adopted by male student radicals as the preferred uniform of nationalist revolutionaries.³²

Women, Men, and the Perils of *Shimao*

By the late Qing and first years of the Republic, one could argue that almost all styles of male and female clothing, whether “Western” garments like the *Zhongshan zhuang* or even Chinese garb such as the scholar’s gown and mandarin jacket, were demonstrably new in that their styling differed from earlier Qing garments. By the mid- and late 1920s, women’s and men’s clothing alike was widely perceived as shifting at an increasingly rapid pace, though the dynamic of change and its consequences in women’s dress were viewed as more pronounced—and in something of a universal misogynist cliché, disturbing.³³ Despite their common newness, male and female garments were understood as radically different: the stability and semiotics of male garments were identified with patriarchal social power, while the changeability of female dress made it antithetical to ideals of order.

This particular sensitivity toward women's fashion in the press denotes the special importance of the "New Woman" as the most significant creation and synecdoche of "New China." As in other countries, Republican awareness of women's fashion partly derived from focusing on women as the main consuming agents for households and anxiety about the latent potential of this great power to harm society. But such commentary also reflected the general fact that women's fashion *did* change with more frequency and magnitude. This volatility was partly due to the structure of textile and clothing manufacturers, proprietors of department stores, boutiques, and others who in the twentieth-century creation of the mass industrial economy promoted shopping as a popular, particularly female form of leisure.

The historian Gu Jiegang, a close observer of Suzhou society, noted in 1924, "Women's high-collar dresses [a reference to an early version of the *qipao*] have been popular for less than a year, yet one already sees them everywhere in Suzhou. . . . from this you can see the power of new women's fashions."³⁴ Gu's acute observation represents contemporary opinion that viewed fashion change as a largely female phenomenon. The pointedness of his comment emphasizes the appearance of "new powers" on the part of women's fashion, that is, the development and function of market and advertising forces, which propelled the stylistic shifts of contemporary fashion with increasing rapidity and extent. Zhang Ailing traced the earliest popularity of the *qipao* in Shanghai and other major centers to 1921. Gu, however, dated the garment's initial favor in Suzhou to 1923, when it had already become commonplace in many areas, if not nationally. Although fashion writers later described Suzhou women's fashion as closely following styles in Shanghai, there was a lag of perhaps a year or two between the *qipao*'s burgeoning popularity in Shanghai and the garment's Suzhou vogue.³⁵ While stylistically not on the cutting edge, Suzhou was very much affected by greater regional and national fashion trends and marketing. Indeed, Gu's observation of the relatively slow percolation of disarmingly novel clothes into Suzhou in the early 1920s may not have applied a few years later. By the late 1920s, fashion writers stressed that Suzhou women closely followed Shanghai fashions by wearing facial makeup and lipstick and preferring the more expensive, foreign, man-made silks, French brocades, and patterned Indian silks.³⁶ Journalism from the late 1920s suggests that Suzhou followed

the larger metropolis. During these years the lag time between the two places diminished due to the development of advertising and other foreign marketing arts. This shift demonstrates the “new,” though to many destabilizing and problematic, “powers” of women’s fashion.

Stylistically adventurous commentators decried that contemporary women’s raiment suffered from a surfeit of plainness; when compared with Western fashion, fabrics did not change quickly, and clothing showed little innovation in form and styling. Such opinions were, however, decidedly in the minority.³⁷ “Serious” women’s magazines such as *Funü zazhi* [The women’s journal], which was more staid in its fashion choices and social outlook than the flapper-oriented *Liangyou huabao* [The young companion], derided new-style “outlandish” clothing as suited for prostitutes. *Funü zazhi* chided that it was difficult to understand how seemingly “august, pure educated women” would settle for the cheap look emanating from the demimonde of prostitution—a remark that accurately describes the historical derivation of the term *shimao*. Or, as a different writer claimed in a survey of Jiangnan fashion, the operative definition of “strange-looking, truly fantastic” dress, a ubiquitous description for articles of clothing deemed especially flamboyant, was “women who dress exactly like foreign wealthy women.” In other words, one should have serious reservations about *shimao* dress as a criterion of contemporary Republican citizenship and modernity, lest the nature of the nation, as expressed by fashion, turn out to be antithetical to Chinese society and mores. Since the dress of these most fashionable of women was largely purchased in emporia replete with Western goods that fed their materialist desire, one should question whether women were reliable guardians of national and local values and interests.³⁸

Modern fashion had originally been adopted to augment China’s Republican character, yet as leading fashion writer Li Yuyi and others noted, contemporary *shimao* had forsaken its fundamental nationalist purpose and actually undermined Chinese national identity. By adopting so-called foreign color schemes of contrasting strong colors, one would suffer the humiliation of losing the “grand national style”: “A blue Western suit will be complemented by yellow leather shoes; light green pants are accompanied by snake-skin-color socks, while among women one finds a red top with green pants, a white shirt with a black skirt. Wherever one looks one sees barbarian color

schemes, which qualifies as a national disgrace.” Li and others inveighed that the pursuit of novelty had overrun the more basic purpose of clothing to *cover* the body and present a beautiful appearance. Despite lacking the requisite education and knowledge, women seemed to feel free to ignore proper beauty standards and wear odd garments of their own design in the craven pursuit of *shimao*. Li Yuyi argued that the proper remedy for “strange clothing” was public education, not state fiat.³⁹

Many, however, disagreed and found the eradication of odd clothes required state intervention. For instance, in 1926 Jiangsu military governor Sun Chuanfang banned the *qipao* in a fruitless attempt to eradicate “harmful customs.” Commenting on such failed efforts, *Liangyou* opined that the bureaucratic mind was unable to understand that change was the core of women’s fashion, the very essence of *shimao*. The logic of the general’s ban, like that of its many precedents, seemed to be that whatever was *shimao* would automatically be judged inappropriate, leading to the final conundrum, What would be appropriate? Were women intended to go about naked? asked *Liangyou*. Were nudity to ever become the height of fashion (a seeming possibility in light of the numerous state strictures disallowing different clothing items), the writer quipped, “I merely hope that leaders don’t ban that, too.”⁴⁰

As in many other locales, public discussions of women’s raiment in Suzhou during the 1920s and 1930s assumed a moralistic, censorious tone. For instance, a 1933 local newspaper editorial decried the deleterious effects of “outlandish, strange clothing overrunning the market,” that is, the *qipao*, which quite literally exposed hapless male youth to the corrupting influences of women’s bodies.⁴¹ However, for the most part, in Suzhou public anxieties about the influence of new-style clothing centered more on the market than on morals. Due to the local economic impact, discussions on Republican fashion changes tended to emphasize consumption, not morals; disapproved stylistic excesses usually involved the use of foreign textiles, not outlandishness. Foreign-style clothing was popularly recognized as costing several times that of Chinese dress. Nonetheless, economy-minded commentators bemoaned, for reform-oriented women, especially students, “Western” clothing was the rage. Like their male counterparts, women found student dress both sufficiently modern and martially severe to serve as a

Republican uniform. As style-watchers noted, the “pure, plain” female student look of white top and black skirt that originated in Suzhou did not signal a lack of indulgence. Despite its studied “severity,” the “student look” emerged as yet another mode of contemporary *shimao* that was identified with immoderate consumption of Western textiles and accessories.⁴² “In their dress, Suzhou female students share the wanton ‘materialist desire’ and luxurious proclivities of their Shanghai counterparts by sporting loose, disheveled hair, high-heeled shoes, short waist-length tight-fitting shirts, and extremely wide ankle-length skirts. Extremely slender and delicate, elegant, womanly beauty!” Instead of celebrating such femininity, the author concluded her survey of contemporary women’s fashions by decrying, “Things to admire were few while those to regret were many!” In their aspirations, outlook, and ideals, *shimao*-conscious Suzhou women ostensibly had little in common with the author or women in other countries. While foreign women were at the forefront of female suffrage, prohibition, anti-child labor, and poor-housing movements, this critic found Chinese women uninterested in social developments beyond the most recent fashion shifts. The diverting, ever quickening pace of *shimao* distracted fashion-conscious women from the different rhythms of progressive social movements and national progress.⁴³

Partisans of fashion argued that women’s participation in fashion testified to their central role in economic life and society as a whole. In the new China women had overthrown several thousand years of male oppression and taken important steps to liberate both themselves and their nation. Critics did not disagree. However, they maintained, contemporary women’s immoderate desire for prettiness and fashion, themselves natural and correct objects of female striving, had caused them to “fall into the trap of error.” Liberated from the yoke of male power, women became slaves to fashion, which was ultimately a foreign master. Despite being clothed in the latest popular Chinese dress, by equating *shimao* with the consumption of foreign textiles, women inadvertently made themselves handmaidens to “the outflow of national capital and rights, providing sustenance to foreign marauders of China’s national interest.”⁴⁴ Writers disparaged *shimao* as driven by stores, manufacturers, and advertising. As one misogynist jeremiad pronounced, “Women’s attire is increasingly enthusiastic in its orientation toward the

'New.' However, 'New' only concerns 'Novelty.' 'Beauty' is still something else. The trend is toward imitation. If people are wearing long [low hems] on the street, there'll be many of a certain type of 'Anna' who without regard to their figure will dumbly don the same. As soon as she wears it, she finds herself 'New' . . . despite the fact that it doesn't suit her figure." As such, fashion revealed that women largely had a herd mentality and were thus lacking the independent, patriotic character essential for Republican citizenship. Reflecting on how the reckless pursuit of novelty seemed to progress at an ever increasing pace, the same author broached the question of the actual timeliness of "contemporary clothing" (*shizhuang*) that followed "fashion" (*shimao*). Were *shimao* and *shizhuang* misnomers? Contemporary women's fashions, including those promoted by National Products advocates, "were too luxurious and expensive; certainly not 'contemporary' for common people worried about economic hardship." The referent for contemporary fashion was not time, but designs of domestic and foreign merchants, whose pursuit of consumption threatened to undercut the fabric of society.⁴⁵

Time, however, was precisely the problem preoccupying commercial interests. Within the discussions of national and local National Products associations and Suzhou textile and clothing interests, one can observe an increasing correlation between concern for women's market consumption and the instability of the developing mass economy. As Gu Jiegang noted, the alacrity with which women's fashions spread demonstrated a palpable power, yet the speed and influence of this commodification was unsettling to the local clothing industry. Chinese firms felt that the pace and unpredictability of fashion à la mode were becoming so volatile that they could not compete. An advocate of national products even admitted domestic textiles' "patterns don't change quickly," while those of foreign products did.⁴⁶ Women's rapacious and undisciplined desire for timely, stylish fashion drove an increasingly rapid cycle of yearly, if not seasonal, obsolescence and led to a more general acceleration of social time.

In a 1923 petition to the chamber of commerce, the two largest silk guilds argued, "Our young brothers are increasingly besotted with Western suits, for which the material is imported." However, the harm caused by young men's buying habits paled in comparison with women's consumption. "Our women are completely enamored with changing fashion in the pursuit of



。了用再塘不時趨不裙袍短些這：女
！麼用再長汝以可是不在現來起摺脚袍把話的我依若初當你：母

Figure 3 Wei Lanbang, cartoon, *Liangyou*, January 1930, 34. Woman: This short blouse is completely out of step with current trends and not worth wearing again. Mother: If you had listened to me at first and hemmed it up, you could now let it down and wear it again, couldn't you?!?

beauty. . . as a result, the changes in style in recent years have occurred with greater frequency. New spring fashions come fall are already obsolete.”

Suzhou businesses did not greet the accelerating pace of fashion as an opportunity to increase sales. As silk-satin makers ruefully noted in 1922, “There is no day without something new, or a month without change” in products. They had repeatedly attempted to meet demands for bright colors and patterns only to find that when the three-month lead time they required

to design, manufacture, and distribute new goods had elapsed, the “fresh” product was already passé. In contrast, local firms argued, their foreign competitors intimately understood the rapid shifts of consumer taste in mass consumption economies as a result of doing business in their own countries. Such experience, combined with superior methods for assessing consumer demand and the speed of contemporary transport and communications, they conceded, gave foreigners a distinct and somewhat shaming advantage in negotiating the increasingly rapid shifts of the Chinese domestic market.⁴⁷ Given the popular conception of foreign textiles and fashions as setting the pace for contemporary Chinese clothing, foreign firms could simply ship their existing stock to China with the confident expectation that it would be perceived as à la mode. Manufacturers from Britain or the east coast of the United States could often count on their products being on the shelves a month and a half before the goods of their Chinese competitors. Firms on the west coast of the United States enjoyed an advantage of two months, while those in India could expect a lead of two and a half months. In modern fashion, where “last year’s new product is this year discarded as passé and more recently [even] last month’s new product is not used this month,” the vitality of modern urban culture threatened to overwhelm the development of national capitalism.⁴⁸

To the extent that *shimao* clothing grew to be less a discrete object and more an interchangeable product of a regular, shifting seasonal cycle of production and obsolescence, fashion exemplified developing industrial capitalism and its social effects. Yet, *shimao* vestments were only partial commodities in the classical Marxist sense. The power of modern fashions as political and social fetish could not obscure the labor of people in Suzhou and other textile centers. Clothing styles and the discourse of *shimao* were haunted by the specter of unemployment and labor unrest, popular social and economic dislocation, and grave harm to local and national Peoples’ Livelihood. In Suzhou, the social and cultural valences of garments as Republican artifacts were overlaid by references to their political-economic effects.

Anxieties about the perceived economic and moral fluidity of Republican life were refracted through the volatility of women’s modernist fashion. In contrast, though men’s fashion remained relatively stable, such stability presented other problems reflecting the politicization of clothing and state

attempts to regulate its meanings as “national” dress and commodity. As in Europe and North America, despite important changes in the rubric of maleness, stylistic innovation in men’s clothing paled in comparison with change in women’s fashion. To the extent that normative elite male garments adopted a narrower profile and become more tailored through the influence of European dress, it may be more appropriate to speak of later Republican scholar’s gowns and mandarin jackets as more “traditionalist” than simply traditional.⁴⁹ Despite their demonstrably modern novel features, men’s long gowns, short jackets, and vests were often identified as “traditional” rather than “modern” clothing. Contemporary assessments of their social significance were, like the garments’ styling, somewhat more complex and divided between being “modern” and “progressive” or “traditional” and “feudal.” The stability of menswear was discussed as threatening by virtue of its ostensible dearth of modernity. Reportage by Guo Moruo and other leftist writers argued that the predominance of “local tough/scheming gentry” clothing, that is, “long scholar’s gowns, short overcoats, and black skullcaps,” on the streets marked Suzhou as a bastion of reaction where life was so ossified that the entire city seemed dead.⁵⁰ As a symbol of national time, traditional male dress was thus read as either feudal or forward thinking/revolutionary.

Despite the political and stylistically driven transformations of male garb, men’s dress did achieve a relative stability in which the *Zhongshan zhuang*, *changpao*, and Western suit, often in a palette of flat blues, grays, browns, and blacks, emerged as the narrow range of appropriate sartorial choices for professional Republican male citizens. These colors and forms of clothing may have partially owed their popularity to the fact that they had, at various times, been designated state regulation wear. The relative stability of male garb may reflect this, as well as the continuing identification between the state and male social identity, and the overwhelmingly male homosocial nature of public life.⁵¹

Regulating National Dress and the Market

Even if male garb achieved some stylistic stability, the market in men’s fashion did not. In March 1937, Suzhou’s Western Clothing Guild lodged a complaint with the local chamber of commerce and Guomindang (GMD)

office citing two rival clothing concerns for “nefariously infringing upon our concern’s [right to the exclusive] manufacture and marketing” of “Western” clothing in Suzhou. These upstarts threatened the livelihood of the one thousand or so people who, from among several thousand city garment workers, worked for guild businesses making and selling Western clothes for both the local and greater domestic market. “There are already so many shops. . . . although they can manage to get by, everyone already works until exhausted—words cannot express the bitterness.”⁵²

The complaint against the first culprit, the local Silk Piece-Goods Guild, revisited one of the Western clothing makers’ long-standing resentments. The Silk Piece-Goods Guild’s products, ornately embroidered garments and colorful small pouches and bags worn at the waist or on the lapel of Chinese-style garments, had formerly been integral components of everyday dress. Suzhou itself had been a major production center for these and other elements of traditional Chinese costume and supplied small embroidered goods to retailers throughout the empire. Local silk piece-goods and silk garment manufacturers had long been a major communal presence and offered employment to several thousand people, especially women. As one 1915 survey noted, embroidery constituted the second most common local employment for women after weaving.⁵³ However, in the wake of the sea change in popular fashions inaugurated by the Xinhai Revolution’s politically motivated clothing reform, over the course of two decades these finely embroidered silk bags and pockets had become outmoded anachronisms. New-style clothes often contained a full array of pockets or were complemented by foreign-style clutches or purses—so that by the early 1930s the trade was almost at a standstill.⁵⁴ The resultant plunge in the popular consumption of silk piece goods threatened local manufacturing and marketing concerns with bankruptcy and their workers with unemployment. Nonetheless, two to three thousand workers, most of whom were female, still depended on outwork from one hundred or so embroidery shops, which paid between fifty and sixty *wen* for an individual flower and two to three yuan for an entire blouse and skirt ensemble, to sustain their families.⁵⁵ Following demand, the silk piece guild established a new “Western clothing” subsidiary to capture a portion of the contemporary market in so-called Western fashions and provide desperately needed jobs for its members. The Western Clothing Guild

repeatedly pleaded that the new subsidiary arrogated their rightful trade and caused economic hardship. However, in light of the collapse of the silk piece-goods sector, Suzhou authorities disallowed the guild's complaints and sanctioned the silk piece-goods makers' trade in "Western" garb.

More recently, Silk Cord Clothes, the city's main used clothing company, began advertising that it was expanding its business. It would now manufacture and sell so-called regulation garb such as the *Zhongshan zhuang* and other state-mandated official wear and uniforms. In bringing its case, the Western Clothing Guild argued that this "illicit manufacture and illegal commerce has been used to consciously destroy our trade."⁵⁶ "Regulation" garb like the *Zhongshan zhuang*, which was based on Chinese student garb derived from British army tunics or German student/military wear via their incarnation as Japanese student wear, was "Western" and therefore fell under its ostensible monopoly over the local Suzhou manufacture and trade in Western clothing.

In adjudicating this dispute, the chamber of commerce supported the guild's complaint and warned Silk Cord Clothes to desist manufacturing and marketing "regulation" wear. Surviving records are unclear as to the exact reasoning behind the chamber's decision. Was the deciding issue the social identity of the *Zhongshan zhuang* and other nationalist regulation garb as Western, hence exclusive products under the Western Clothing Guild's would-be monopoly? Or was the decision meant to affirm the integrity of the revised Nationalist guild system's maintenance of discrete, mutually complementary areas of commerce? In adding operations to manufacture new suits, Silk Cord Clothes clearly exceeded the scope of its established trade in used clothing and infringed on the guild's core manufacturing business.⁵⁷

Yet, as we saw in the case of the silk piece-goods makers' expansion into the manufacture of Western clothes, the Nationalist-era guild system's maintenance of ostensibly exclusive, or at least highly regulated, rights to delineate areas of commerce was by no means absolute. The chamber's report to the local GMD suggests that the decision may have been motivated as much by expedience as by commercial principles. Placating the guild, which had more members, would prevent the conflict from developing to the point of threatening social order.⁵⁸ Indeed, the resolution may have been motivated by a combination of all three factors.

This dispute raises several questions about the shifting economic and cultural valences of modern dress in Republican Suzhou. With the popularization of the *Zhongshan zhuang*, what was the garment's social identity? Furthermore, could its manufacture and trade still be controlled by a particular guild, especially one dedicated to the manufacture of normatively Western wear, if the suit seemed to have passed into quotidian use as Chinese clothing? What were the nationalist implications of the paramount form of national dress, inextricably linked to the "Father of the Nation" himself, being typed as Western and not Chinese? Indeed, what type of a commodity was modern Chinese fashion? Could it be ascribed an unadulterated national character as unambiguously foreign, Western, or Chinese? If so, in what aspect—fabric, cut, workmanship, stylistic origin, cultural significance, and circulation—did the garment's social identity reside? What were the actual or proper relationships between so-called foreign and domestic elements in the creation of modern Chinese dress, or culture as a whole? To pose the question more broadly, By what processes were foreign-originated material culture and technics appropriated and domesticated to become components of Chinese national modernity?

In the case of the *Zhongshan zhuang*, the particular commodity that lay at the heart of the Silk Cord Clothes/Western Clothing Guild conflict, these questions were particularly thorny and significant. Since its creation by the Vietnamese Overseas Chinese businessman Huang Longsheng and 1914 introduction by Sun himself, the *Zhongshan zhuang* had become both an official state and popular symbol of the Republic. The carefully crafted semiotics of the garment—the five front buttons symbolizing five branches of the Republican state, the three sleeve buttons representing the Three Principles of the People, and the four front pockets standing for basic tenets of national ethics (propriety, righteousness, honesty, and shame)—were intended to make it so. Indeed, the *Zhongshan zhuang* was adopted as uniform dress for civilian officials in April 1929 as part of a general process of reaffirming the distinctively Republican nature of official garb.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, in terms of manufacturing, marketing, and business organization, at least, as a commodity the *Zhongshan zhuang* was locally marked in Suzhou as Western clothing, a designation with concrete commercial effects.⁶⁰

The difficulties of state regulation were compounded by the growing complexity and rapidity of change in commerce. Within days of the 21 March 1927 arrival of the Northern Expedition, the GMD began to organize local unions for discrete groups of workers, including the used clothing, clothing manufacturing, and Western clothing trades. After winning a series of wage concessions for workers, the state then attempted to finely tune manufacturing and commerce by establishing commercial guilds. These were set up in a flurry of activity in 1930–1931 after the promulgation of new Industrial and Commercial Guild laws and regulations in 1929 and 1931. This wholesale reorganization of commercial and trade groups was an essential part of the Nanjing government's ambitious attempt to infiltrate, supervise, and assert regulatory control over a broad range of cultural, social, and economic life. By requiring the creation of a discrete commercial guild if there were seven or more enterprises in the same line within a jurisdiction, this legislation provided the state with an unprecedented capacity to regulate commerce across different sectors of the economy in order to promote development and mitigate the turbulence of burgeoning capitalist competition, new modes of marketing, and the cycles of fashion. The proliferation of increasingly specialized craft guilds can be seen in the progress from a single comprehensive guild overseeing clothing (founded in 1930) to the creation of additional groups to regulate discrete aspects of the garment industry, Western Clothing (1932) and Clothing Makers (1934) (presumably makers of Chinese clothing).⁶¹

The state attempted to regulate the increasingly complex and rapidly shifting economy through compartmentalization. However, in the face of changes in popular taste and the increasingly fluid synergy between manufacturing and retail practices, the GMD guild system proved overly rigid. Similarly, state moves to define clothing as an expression of nationality and as a discrete commodity then faced the contradictions stemming from hybrid identity of garments. Even the *Zhongshan zhuang*, despite its eponymous connection to the Father of the Nation and designation as official regulation formal menswear, was not unambiguously Republican Chinese. For the purpose of local Suzhou regulation, at least, it was categorized as Western wear.

In light of a number of guild-initiated complaints, this state-imposed structure clearly thwarted those textile and clothing traders who welcomed

mass consumerism and hoped to adopt increasingly aggressive modern retail practices. Nonetheless, it is clear that in Suzhou, many, if not most, manufacturers and retailers actively sought protections through the guild system against the increasingly virulent competition within the fashion market. One 1935 agreement moved to ban a plethora of recently introduced yet already popular “big” marketing strategies, like the “big low price” (*da lianjia*), “big sacrifice” (*da xisheng*), and “big auction” (*da jingmai*). Such cutthroat discount pricing aimed to undersell competitors and was denounced for universally harming business by lowering everyone’s profits. Other contemporary agreements attempted to restrain competition and impose order on the market by limiting the right to sell cloth to locally registered concerns or forbidding the street display of brand-name cloth. One ruling even prohibited stores from employing marching bands in order to “stir up a spectacle” for advertising purposes.⁶² Per provincial law, the police were empowered to enforce chamber of commerce requests that such practices, deemed harmful to the licit conduct of commerce and proper business ethics, be forcibly suspended.

Local clothing concerns also effectively lobbied local leaders to maintain rigid product- and craft-based divisions within the clothing sector in order to limit consolidation and restructuring. In a 1935 dispute, local GMD authorities upheld the charge of the Wuxian clothing manufacturers against local silk retailers whom it accused of infringing on its rightful business by arranging for textile purchases to be made into clothing on-site. According to the textile sellers, this service was initiated in response to customer demands for convenience. Far from infringing on the proper commerce of clothing makers, the textile guild argued (unsuccessfully) that the new arrangement, already widespread in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and other cities, channeled more business to local tailors.⁶³ Regardless of their merit, these claims were rejected in deference to state political-economic goals of market and symbolic order, which, like the manufacture of clothing itself, had been redesigned by modern fashion.

Theorizing Fashion Change

In a 1943 article that has come to be the most celebrated Republican-era meditation on fashion, Zhang Ailing argued that the pace of fashion shifts

during imperial times was slow and slight. Fashion, that is, clothing styles à la mode (*shizhuang*), was a recent phenomenon. “We find it hard to realize that less than 50 years ago it [“the stability, the uniformity, the extreme conventionality of Chinese under the Manchus that generation after generation of women clung to the same dress style”] seemed a world without end.”⁶⁴ The stability and uniformity that Zhang attributed to Qing dress is rather suspect, a shibboleth of analyses that found that Chinese fashion (and architecture, painting, industry, etc.) lacked the dynamism of its Western analogues. The pace and structures of sartorial shifts during the imperial period do remain unclear, though it does seem that during the nineteenth century, newspapers, novels, *biji*, books available in mass editions, and as yet unrecognized mechanisms provided impetus for style shifts. Nonetheless, her wonderment attests to the profound remaking of Chinese garments and resonates with the disquiet expressed by Suzhou clothing makers and the approbation of many fashion writers and social commentators that style changes had accelerated to an unprecedented pace.

Criticizing the Republican fetishism of foreign material culture, by which the acquisition of foreign clothing or accessories such as eyeglasses were easily accepted as a sign of modernity, Zhang Ailing doubtfully wondered if swift changes of clothing style equaled mental activity. Her skepticism was highly warranted. For all their attributed power and symbolism, the bias-cut *qipao* and *Zhongshan zhuang* themselves were both indistinct and limited in their modernizing effects, not to mention ambiguous in their nationalist significance. However, the developing cultural and commercial nexus that produced and marketed them was not. Novel marketing and manufacturing structures, not to mention the new genre of fashion journalism appearing in women’s and general interest publications, created a joint cultural-marketing-industrial complex, modern fashion. The increasingly brief periodicity of *shimao* propelled the development of a mental and industrial nexus, the modern industrial complex of fashion, advertising, retailing, and manufacturing and its anxiety-provoking effects.

Despite the bravura assurance of her analysis, Zhang Ailing closed her essay by admitting that it was difficult, if not impossible, to trace the course of stylistic shifts in Chinese fashion. Unlike the “Caucasian world,” where elite Parisian firms like Schiaparelli affected the broader fashion market by

dictating haute couture to the rest of the clothing industry, “our tailors are helpless before the vast, unaccountable strange waves of communal fancies which make themselves manifest from time to time.” In China, no particular individuals or groups seemed responsible for stylistic innovation, except, perhaps, female consumers themselves. Thus, she concluded, Chinese fashions represented a somewhat organic expression of popular desires.⁶⁵ Her characterization attests to the masking effects of commercial and global industrial capitalist networks. In particular, Zhang’s characterization of fashion change as a multiheaded and therefore essentially anonymous hydra wonderfully captures the dominant popular perception of the ineffable power and process of *shimao*. Suzhou textile manufacturers, uncertain of the direction of stylistic innovation and their ability to meet it, would likely have agreed with her assessment that clothing change was an unruly, populist, and largely *female* phenomenon.

Conclusion

There is a great, though by no means unique, irony in the tension between the role of clothing as nationalist artifact, *shimao*, and Republican modernism. By anxiously rejecting *shimao* as a danger to Chinese economic and social integrity, nationalist-minded producers and consumers were in effect rejecting the consummate product of domestic capitalist development. The dislocations of capitalist development provoked unease, if not about the entire project, then about its particular trajectory or effects. The maelstrom of the market was so disquieting that partisans of both the GMD and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), not to mention nonaligned liberals and leftists, expressed profound unease with the deleterious effects of unbridled capitalist production exemplified by *shimao*. State regulation, initially imposed in the wake of the revolution to establish a new code of nationality, was soon extended to protect economic integrity. Both moves reaffirmed the significance of clothing as a fundamental national institution. However, the Nanjing government’s attempts to control *shimao* proved inadequate in the face of the transmogrifications of contemporary fashions. The state’s inability to successfully regulate fashion bespoke its limited capacity to order the Republic’s key modernist creation, industrial capitalism. It seems likely that

the cautionary example of the economic and social travails of *shimao* and the Nanjing regime's governmentalist failings influenced the CCP regulation of fashion and the economy as a whole during the early People's Republic.

By dressing the populace in new-style raiment, late Qing clothing reform was intended to refashion Suzhou people into modern Republican citizens. Yet this shift in national time had ambiguous political-economic and social effects. The centrality of textile, clothing, and auxiliary concerns to the local economy caused the fundamental instability of *shimao* to be perceived as a looming threat to social order. New-style fashions simultaneously effected and symbolized a heightened pace of social time that, like vestments themselves, were distinctive in terms of gender, albeit in novel, baffling ways that belied the indeterminate nature of the nascent "New Woman" and "New Man." The semiotics of women's *shimao* clothing were viewed as being as mercurial as the female character; unstable, it proved an untrustworthy repository for social and cultural values. The relative stability of men's fashions highlighted the transformations of *shimao*. The imbroglio regarding the identity and consequent manufacturing rights of the *Zhongshan zhuang* bespoke the difficulties of controlling the nationalist and commercial valences of even officially "regulated" clothing. This highlighted the limits of the Nanjing regime's capacity to administer society, as well as the transnational frame of Republican nationality. At the same time, the lack of change in Suzhou men's fashions represented the threat of reaction to stifle Republican society itself. Thus, in a significant reversal, modern fashions, those Republican accessories that one could not do without, donned in popular enthusiasm for the purpose of national modernization, came to be feared as a danger to the national and local interest.

Notes

I presented versions of this essay at the 1999 Association for Asian Studies (AAS) meeting and workshops at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Chicago. I am grateful to all participants and commentators. Special thanks to Tina Chen, Bonnie Cheng, Doris Garraway, Laura Hein, Carina Johnson, Melissa Macauley, and Jonathan Spence for their critical feedback, and to Krzysztof Kozubski for help in preparing the illustrations.

- 1 Tian, "Ziyou tan: Shimao pai" [Free talk: Fashion clique], *Shenbao*, 6 January 1912.

- 2 “Zhonghua guohuo weichihui zhangcheng huilu” [Record and regulations of the Association for the Preservation of Chinese National Products], Suzhou Chamber of Commerce Collection, Suzhou Municipal Archives (SMA), Yi 2-1, juan 404, 8a, 10a.
- 3 Tina Mai Chen, “Dressing for the Party: Clothing, Citizenship, and Gender-Formation in Mao’s China,” *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 2 (2001): 143–172.
- 4 Yue Zheng, *Jindai Shanghai ren shehui xintai, 1860–1910* [The social mentality of modern Shanghai people] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991), 111–113. The origins of *shimao* remain obscure. One theory holds that it was a transliteration of the English word *smart*, but I have not found convincing supporting evidence. It is not listed in Sogo Masaki and Hida Yoshifumi, *Meiji no kotoba jiten* [Meiji dictionaries of new terms] (Tokyo: Tokyodo, 1986), suggesting that it is not a recirculated Japanese coinage of a classical Chinese expression, but a novel, uniquely Chinese term.
- 5 Georg Simmel, “The Philosophy of Fashion,” in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), 187–206.
- 6 See, e.g., Karl Gerth, “Consumption As Resistance: The National Products Movement and Anti-Japanese Boycotts in Modern China,” in *The Japanese Empire in East Asia and Its Postwar Legacy*, ed. Harald Fuess (Munich: Iudicium, 1998), 119–142.
- 7 Bao Tianxiao, *Yishizhuxing de bainian bianqian* [Changes in clothing, food, housing, and transportation during the past one hundred years] (Hong Kong: Dahua chubanshe, 1974), 34–35; Qu Bannong, “Jin shu shinian lai Zhongguo nannü zhuangshi zhi yitong” [Change in Chinese men and women’s dress in the past few decades], in *Qingmo Minchu Zhongguo ge daduhui nannü zhuangshi lunji* [Articles on Chinese urban men and women’s dress during the late Qing and early Republic] (Hong Kong: Zhongshan tushugongsi, 1972), 38.
- 8 Ai ziyouzhe Jin Yi [Jin Tianyu], *Nüjie zhong* [The women’s bell], in *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* [History of the lives of Chinese women], by Chen Dongyuan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1990), 331.
- 9 Wu Tingfang, *America through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat* (Taipei: Cheng-wen, 1968), 131–143, 154–162.
- 10 Suzhoushi danganguan, ed., *Suzhou sichou dangan huibian* [Collection of archival materials on Suzhou silk] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1995), 2:757.
- 11 “Wuzhong xin jishi: Junren qiangpo jianbian” [Suzhou news: Soldiers force queue cutting], *Shenbao*, 1 January 1912; “Sutan jinshi pianpian: Qiangpo jianbian zhi qihuo” [Suzhou news: Result of forcibly cutting queues], *Shenbao*, 8 January 1912; “Jiangsu dudufu lingshi hui Su” [Jiangsu military governor returns to Suzhou], *Shenbao*, 4 January 1912; Shanghai tongshu, ed., *Jiu Shanghai shiliao huibian* [Collection of historical materials on old Shanghai] (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1998), 1:550–51.
- 12 Frank Smith, “Soochow, 1911,” in China, Maritime Customs, *Annual Reports* (1912), pt. 2, 520; “Zhonghua guohuo weichihui zhangcheng huilu,” 1a.

- 13 Lu Xun, “Yangfu de moluo” [The decline of Western clothing] in *Lu Xun quanji* [Complete works of Lu Xun] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), 5:454–456; Qu Bannong, “Jin shu shinian lai Zhongguo nannü zhuangshi zhi yitong,” 38; “Zhonghua guohuo weichihui zhangcheng huilu,” 1a.
- 14 Qu Bannong, “Jin shu shinian lai Zhongguo nannü zhuangshi zhi yitong,” 39.
- 15 I.e., 285 businesses in 1908, 256 in 1910. Additional nonmember businesses probably swelled the numbers. See Suzhoushi danganguan, *Suzhou sichou dangan huibian*, 2:1345–1357, 1361–1373; Yu Ming, “Jiangsu sizhiye jinkuang” [Recent condition of the Jiangsu silk industry], *Gongshang banyuekan* [Industry and commerce] 7, no. 12 (1936): 48, in “Minchu ‘fuzhi gaige’ dui Suzhou sizhiye de yingxiang” [The influence of early Republican “clothing reform” on the Suzhou silk industry], by Wang Xiang, *Lishi yanjiu* [Historical research] no. 4 (1986), 36.
- 16 Beijing Bureau of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce (Shangwuzonghui), XT2.11.14, SMA, Yi 2–1, juan 304, 5; Hangzhou shangwuzonghui, XT2.11.19, SMA, 9–10.
- 17 Wuchang shangwuzonghui, undated [late XT2], SMA, Yi 2–1, juan 304, 7.
- 18 I.e., “Zhonghua guohuo weichihui zhangcheng huilu.” Pawning clothing provided a means of storing the costly silks and furs of elite traditional garb in a protected environment. Modern clothing was viewed as requiring less care. Zhang Yipeng noted that the predicted negative effects came to pass: local pawnshops had not recovered from the change in clothing, diminishing the local store of investment capital and retarding commercial and industrial development. See Zhang Yipeng, “Xin Wuxian jianshe yu shangye fazhan” [The construction of a new Wuxian and commercial development], *Zaobao* [Morning journal], 10 October 1936, 8.
- 19 R. Kurosawa, “Soochow, 1912,” in Imperial and Republican Maritime Customs, *Annual Report*, pt. 2, 3:550; Suzhoushi danganguan, *Suzhou sichou dangan huibian*, 2:1082–1086.
- 20 “Lun Zhongguo jiyi gailiang fangzhi gong” [China must urgently improve textile industry], *Shibao*, 1–2 August 1912, in Kojima Yoshio, “Shimmatsu Minkoku shoki Soshūfu no kin-uoorigyō to kiko no dōkō” [The silk-weaving industry in Suzhoufu and trends among artisans during the late Qing and early Republican periods], *Shakai keizai shigaku* [Social economic history] 34, no. 5 (1969): 475.
- 21 R. Kurosawa, “Soochow, 1912,” 3:550; R. Kurosawa, “Soochow, 1913,” in China, Maritime Customs, *Annual Reports* (1915), pt. 2, 3:941; “Shaduanye zhi jingong” [Silk industry’s fight], *Minli bao* [Establish the people journal], 8 June 1911, 8.
- 22 Commercial activism was already well established. Starting with the 1905 anti-American boycott and continuing throughout the late Qing and the Republican Guohuo movement, Suzhou’s textile and clothing concerns, local government, and chamber of commerce were among the most active organizers of regional and national Guohuo activities.
- 23 Gongshipu, 1912.6.29, SMA, Yi 2–1, juan 261, 59; Zhonghua guohuo weichihui, 1912.8.9, SMA, juan 583, 1–2; “Zhonghua guohuo weichihui zhangcheng huilu,” 1a; “Canyiyuan

- erduhui xiuzheng fuzhi cao'an" [Senate second session draft of clothing regulations], *Shenbao*, 24 August 1912.
- 24 This was not necessarily the case during the Rokumeikan period of "excessive" Westernization. See "Zhonghua guohuo weichihui zhangcheng huilu," 9b-10a; R. Kurosawa, "Soochow, 1912," 3:550.
- 25 R. Kurosawa, "Soochow, 1912," 3:550.
- 26 Quan Bohua, "Jin ershiwu nianlai Zhongguo xibei ge daduhui zhi zhuangshi" [Dress in northwestern cities during the past twenty-five years], in *Qingmo Minchu*, 19-20.
- 27 T. A. M. Castle, "Soochow, 1912-21," in China, Maritime Customs, *Decennial Reports* (1912-21), 2:66; R. Kurosawa, "Soochow Trade Report," in China, Maritime Customs, *Annual Report* (1915), pt. 2, 3:849.
- 28 T. A. M. Castle, "Soochow Annual Trade Report, 1923" in China, Maritime Customs, *Soochow Annual Trade Report* (1924), 2.
- 29 Yunjin gongsuo, Tiejii gonghui, 1923.3.13, SMA, Yi 2-1, juan 855, 73; "Canyiyuan erduhui xiuzheng fuzhi cao'an"; Shangwu yinshuguan, ed., *Zuixin bianding Minguo faling daquan* [Compendium of laws, latest revision] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, [1924]), 1528.
- 30 Suzhou Yunjin gongsuo, 1929.1.2, SMA, Yi 2-2, juan 135; "Wuxian xian shanghui di'er jie daibiao nianhui" [Second session, annual meeting of the Wuxian chamber of commerce], 21 Dec. 1933, SMA, juan 1354, 8; Guomin zhengfu xingzhengyuan shiyebu, 16 November 1942, SMA, Yi 1-2, juan 135, 63b-64a.
- 31 Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Konan yūki" [Account of traveling through Jiangnan], *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshu* [Complete works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996), 8: 251; Xiayin, "Suzhou wenhua zhi qingbao" [Report on Suzhou culture], *Wenyi xinwen* [Literature and art news], 3 August 1931, 2.
- 32 Zhou Zhenhe, *Suzhou fengsu* [Suzhou customs], in *Zhongshan daxue minsu congshu* [Zhongshan University folk customs compendium], ed. Lou Zikuang and Yuan Changrui (Taipei: Fulu tushu gongsi, 1969), 14:74-77; Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji*, 5:454-456.
- 33 *Jiating zazhi, zhuangshi hao* [Home magazine], no. 7 (ca. mid- to late 1920s).
- 34 Gu Jiegang, *Suzhou shizhi biji* [Collected jottings on Suzhou historical records], ed. Wang Xuhua et al. (n.p.: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1987), 100.
- 35 Zhang Ailing, "Gengyi ji" [A chronicle of changing clothes], *Zhang Ailing wenji* [Collected works of Zhang Ailing] (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1992), 4:33; Xu Helin, "Hang-Hu-Su-Xi-Ning de funü" [Women in Hangzhou, Shanghai, Wuxi, and Nanjing], *Funü zazhi* 13, no. 5 (1927): 10; Jiyun, "Suzhou de funü shenghuo" [The life of Suzhou women], *Funü zazhi* 14, no. 1 (1928): 57-58.
- 36 Jiyun, "Suzhou de funü shenghuo"; Qu Bannong, "Jin shu shinian lai Zhongguo nannü zhuangshi zhi yitong," 38.
- 37 Qinghe, "Xinzhuang zatan" [On new dress], *Liangyou huabao*, April 1926, 15; Meng, "Xinzhuang manhua" [Discussion of new dress], *Liangyou*, September 1926, 18.

- 38 Xu Helin, “Hang-Hu-Su-Xi-Ning de funü,” 6–7; Yuqiao, “Guangguai luli de funü shizhuang” [Strange women’s fashions], *Funü zazhi* 12, no. 5 (1926): 79–80.
- 39 Li Yuyi, “Meizhuang xinzhuang yu qizhuang yi fu” [Beautiful, new, and odd clothing], *Funü zazhi* 14, no. 9 (1928): 25, 26–30.
- 40 “Sun Chuanfang jinzhi nüzi chuan qipao” [Sun Chuanfang forbids women to wear the qipao], *Liangyou*, 25 March 1926, 7; Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu dacidian* [Dictionary of Republican figures] (Yangzhou: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1991), 790–791.
- 41 Weilü, “Fengsu wenti guanxi shenda” [Problem with customs is extremely significant], *Suzhou mingbao* [Suzhou clarity journal], 13 July 1933.
- 42 Zhou Xuqi, *1910–1920 niandai duhui xin funu shenghuo fengmao: Yi “Funu zazhi” wei fenxi shili* [Lifestyle of urban new women, 1910–1920, through an analysis of “The Women’s Journal”] (Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue chuban weiyuanhui, 1996), 91–93; Qu Bannong, “Jin shu shinian lai Zhongguo nannü zhuangshi zhi yitong,” 40–41; Antonia Finnane, “Military Culture and Chinese Dress in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *China Chic: East Meets West*, ed. Valerie Steele and John S. Major (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 119–131.
- 43 Xu Helin, “Hang-Hu-Su-Xi-Ning de funü,” 7–8, 10–11.
- 44 *Ibid.*; Lu Zhu, “Funü de yiliao wenti” [The material question of women’s dress] *Funü zazhi* 15, no. 9 (1929): 21–22.
- 45 Meng, “Xinzhuang manhua,” 18; Zhonghua, “Xiandai funu de shizhuang re” [Cure for contemporary women’s fashion], *Funü Zazhi* 16, no. 2 (1930), 60–61.
- 46 Lu Zhu, “Funü de yiliao wenti,” 22.
- 47 Yunjin gongsuo, Tiejì gonghui, SMA, 73; Yunjin gongsuo, 1922.11.20, SMA, juan 847, 4.
- 48 Yunjin gongsuo, 1922.11.20, SMA, juan 847, 4. Special thanks to Kay Geary, librarian, Transportation Library, Northwestern University, for her assiduous research on transportation times. See Railroad Committee for the Study of Transportation, Association of American Railroads, *Transportation in America* (Washington, D.C.: AAR, 1947), 188–191; Hydrographic Office, U.S. Navy Department, *Table of Distances between Ports via the Shortest Navigable Routes* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931).
- 49 Huang Shilong, ed., *Zhongguo fushi shilue* [Brief history of Chinese dress] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 1994), 242.
- 50 Guo Moruo, *Geming chungqiu* [Annals of revolution] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), 174; Xiayin, “Suzhou wenhua zhi qingbao,” 2.
- 51 As John Harvey and others have commented, from the late eighteenth century, European and North American men increasingly rejected volatile stylistic invention and flamboyant color as feminine frippery (and thus tinged with suspect sodomitical desire); as such, male dress was increasingly dominated by monochromatic black, with the form of male attire stabilizing into the suit, redolent with bourgeois power and virility. See John R. Harvey, *Men in Black* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

- 52 Li Zengyong, Chair, Wuxian xifuye tongyegonghui, 1937.3.23, SMA, Yi 2-1, juan 1669, 4; Li Zengyong, Wuxian xiandangbu tepaiyuan Sun, 1937.3.24, SMA, 58; Zhongguo GMD Jiangsusheng Wuxian xiandangbu, 1935.7.22, SMA, juan 1446, 15-16.
- 53 Meng Yuan and Yu Wen, "Wuzhong nüzi shenghuo tan" [On the lives of Suzhou women] *Funü zazhi* 1, no. 6 (1915): 5-7.
- 54 Wong Haiu Sing, "Soochow, 1922-31," in China, Maritime Customs, *Decennial Report, 1922-31* (1931), 2:59.
- 55 From 1928 wage data. Industry shrinkage, presumably due to fashion change and consolidation, left only fifteen shops in 1945. See Suzhoushi danganguan, *Suzhou sichou dangan huibian*, 2:1388, 1399, 1435; Jiyun, "Suzhou de funü shenghuo," 77.
- 56 Li Zengyong, 24 March 1937, SMA, Yi 2-1, juan 1669, 58.
- 57 Wuxian chouduanye tongyegonghui, 1935.7.11, SMA, juan 1446, 1.
- 58 Wuxian xianshanghui, 1937.3.30, SMA, juan 1669, 55; "Xifu guyiye yingye jiufen shanghai jinri zhaoji tanhua" [Chamber of commerce discusses Western and used clothing industries' conflict today], *Suzhou mingbao*, 24 March 1937, 6.
- 59 The early *Zhongshan zhuang* changed form; this description refers to its classic stable design. See Huang Shilong, *Zhongguo fushi shilue*, 236-237; Neizhengbu, ed., *Neizheng nianjian* [Domestic affairs yearly] (Shanghai: Neizhengbu, [1936]), 4:F13.
- 60 It remains unclear when, how, or indeed whether the *Zhongshan zhuang* became unambiguously "Chinese." After Liberation, the suit continued to be widely worn as national dress. Yet, in Suzhou, Western and Chinese dress remained institutionally distinct, at the level of guild organization, through at least 1949, when the Western clothing makers guild counted 100 members and the Chinese 297. Presumably, the suit remained the province of the Western Clothing Guild. See Suzhoushi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Suzhou shizhi* [Suzhou city gazetteer] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1995), 3:375-376.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 3:371-372, 410-415; Shangwu yinshuguan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo xianxing fagui daquan* [Compendium of current laws, Republic of China] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1934), 804-805, 1342-1344.
- 62 Wuxian chouduanye tongyegonghui, 1935.7.20, SMA, Yi 2-1, juan 1427, 5-7; Wuxian xianshanghui diwuci daibiaonianhui, 1935.12, SMA, juan 1061, 37.
- 63 Wuxian chouduanye tongyegonghui, 1935.7.11, SMA, Yi 2-1, juan 1446, 1-6; Wuxian zhiyiye daibiao, 1935.7.24, SMA, 19-22.
- 64 Zhang Ailing, "Gengyi ji," 29; Zhang Ailing, "Chinese Life and Fashions," *Twentieth Century* 4, no. 1 (January 1943): 65.
- 65 Zhang Ailing, "Chinese Life and Fashions," 70-72; Zhang Ailing, "Gengyi ji," 34-35.