

Feature



Fashion According to Chairman Mao **Laura Liu**

A fashion student considers an iconic garment popularized by the revolutionary leader of China in the mid 20th century that still influences contemporary fashion.

Chairman Mao Zedong is so closely associated with the outfit that bears his name, that it is hard to believe it was not his creation. The Mao suit, also known as the Chinese tunic suit, is a western name for a style of male attire known in China as the Zhongshan suit.

Chinese leader Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) first introduced it shortly after the



Portraits of China's late Chairman Mao Zedong (right) and Sun Zhongshan (left), who is often spoken of as the father of modern China, wearing Zhongshan suits.

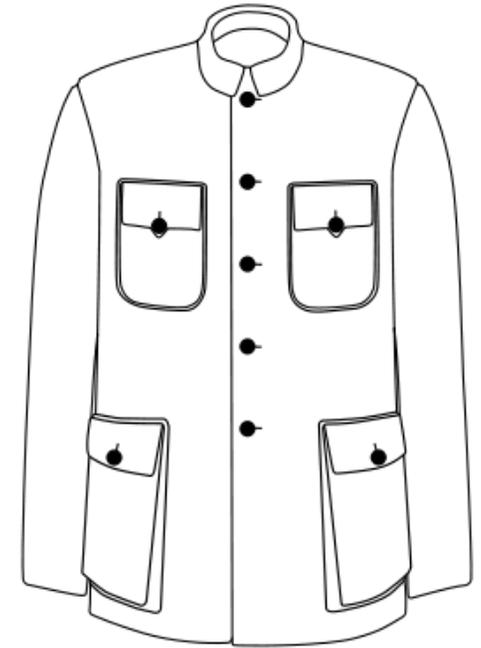
founding of the Republic of China as a national attire. In Hong Kong, where I was born, it is also called the People's Suit.

Since the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, the Qing Dynasty style of dress was imposed on the people as a way to ensure control over them. The Han Chinese who overthrew them acted on their ethnic resentment of the Qing by replacing what they considered to be a barbaric style of dress.

They created a form of attire based on one that was popular with everyday Chinese men in order to appeal to their modern tastes without seeming to adopt a Western style of dress. Sun Zhongshan lived in Japan for a while and directed the creation of the suit based on the Japanese cadet uniform, as well as on certain elements from German uniforms.

He introduced certain modifications, such as four outside pockets instead of three inside ones. This was done because of the established Chinese concept of balance and symmetry. Following his death in 1925, the Zhongshan suit took on a special patriotic significance.

For example, the “Four Cardinal Principles” cited in the [Book of Changes](#) were said to inspire the four pockets. Also, the five front buttons were to represent the five Yuans, or branches of government, cited



The Zhongshan jacket has four pockets, five front center buttons, and three cuff buttons, all said to be symbolic of the Chinese revolution..

in the Chinese constitution. Finally, the three cuff-buttons were to symbolize his [Three Principles of the People](#). It is interesting to note that clothes worn by heroes of the American revolution contain similar kinds of elements that symbolized revolutionary themes.

Civil servants in the Chinese government of the 1920s and 1930s had to wear the Zhongshan zhuang, and a version was adapted for military uniforms. It

became a symbol of proletarian unity in the Republic of China, and was regularly worn at official functions through the 1990s. It has only recently given way to Western style business suits.



General Jiāng Jièshí (Chiang Kai-shek) with Mao Zedong.

Now, in the early part of the 21st century, the Zhongshan suit is rarely seen, even on formal occasions. Older cadres wear pajama shirts but most younger ones wear polo shirts. Civilian party officials sometimes still wear a military-green version to demonstrate camaraderie with the military. It is also still worn among Chinese peasants as casual dress.

Zhongshan in Modern Fashion

Recently, there has been a renewed interest by young Chinese living overseas as formal business wear and to identify their

Chinese origin. It has also become popular among Chinese fashion designers as a foundation for imaginative new designs.

The one that Chinese President Hu Jintao wore as he stood at the rostrum in Tian'anmen Square for the 60th anniversary celebration of “New China” caused a stir! It had the slim cut of a Western style suit, but all the classic elements like pockets, buttons, and color.

“President Hu's suit was a redesigned one,” according to Xia Hua, chairperson of [Eve Enterprise Group](#), which was tasked with making Hu's clothes for the ceremony. “The modern Mao suit will become very popular for business occasions, and it looks formal and represents China.”

The modern Mao suit can have shiny copper buttons instead of gray plastic ones, and a slim-cut. The four pockets have been cut out. The suits are made from synthetic fibers and silk rather than just cotton. It can also be embroidered and accessorized with scarves, leather bags and boots.



Modern Mao suit. Photo courtesy of Eve Enterprise Group.

It's not just men who wear Mao suits, women want them as well. [The Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology](#) (BIFT) held a Mao suit show at China Fashion Week in

November, 2009 at which 50 suits of different styles were showcased, most of which were women's outfits that paired well with shirts and short skirts. They were embellished with feather and floral patterns, and in rich silver and gold tones.

Even Disney is getting into the act with Mao-inspired outfits for Micky and Minnie by fashion designer Vivienne Tam at Hong Kong Disneyland. It is part of their efforts to boost its appeal to Chinese tourists.



Mickey and Minnie in Mao-inspired costumes at Hong Kong Disneyland. Photo by Vincent Yu.

How can you use the Zhongshan suit in your next costume design?

Laura Liu is a fashion design student who lives in Los Angeles, California. Her interests are in incorporating traditional and historic Chinese design elements into contemporary Western fashions. She is a native of Hong Kong.