



FINNANE, Antonia. 2023.
How to Make a Mao Suit: Clothing the People of Communist China, 1949-1976.

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This book is a historical monograph that examines how the clothing system of Mao's China came into being; specifically, it is concerned with "what the clothes were, who made them, how they were made, and what they meant to the people who wore them" (p. 2). It takes a materialist approach to examine the socio-technological apparatus – for example, the tools, pattern books, and institutional settings – through which a clothing system dominated by the Zhongshan suit or the Mao suit emerged. At the core of this clothing system or clothing regime is the value of simplicity, frugality, and neatness. The book centres on the Mao era (1949-1976), but also explores the years before the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded.

The book consists of nine substantive chapters. Chapter One tells the history of the Red Group Tailors (*hongbang caifeng* 紅幫裁縫), who mastered the skills of Western dress-making in the late Qing and Nationalist period (1912-1949), and who supposedly invented the Zhongshan (for Sun Zhongshan or Sun Yat-sen) suit and later the Mao suit, a modified version of the Zhongshan suit. By sieving through the facts and fictions regarding the Red Group Tailors, Finnane brings to light the linkage between the West and the East, China and Japan, and the Nationalists and Communists from the standpoint of tailoring techniques. Chapter Two looks at the assemblage of sewing tools and notions such as buttons, safety pins, and tape measures. The sewing tools are not only essential for dress-making, but also provide the most direct evidence of the changes and continuities of sewing technology and techniques before and during the Mao era.

Chapter Three examines the forms and concept of the uniform (*zhifu* 制服). Even though the Mao era did not issue official regulations or laws pertaining to dress, Finnane argues that the prevalence of work dress or *zhifu* constituted a de facto regulatory system. The degree of uniformity in dress in the Mao era has been a point of contention for many China scholars, who tend to emphasise the creative possibilities for the Chinese to wear their clothes and adornments. Finnane departs from such revisionist accounts. Chapter Four focuses

on the sewing schools that became popular in the 1950s. The sewing schools contributed to the training of the workforce in China's garment industry and taught women the skills to make clothes at home with new tools such as the sewing machine, reproducing a pattern of gendered division of labour not too different from that in the past. The reason that homemade clothing was a major part of the Chinese wardrobe in the Mao years was in part because of cloth rationing, which is the topic of Chapter Five. Cloth rationing was instituted by the Chinese government in 1954 and lasted three decades because of the shortage of materials on the one hand and exportation of fabric on the other.

Chapter Six covers sewing machines and homemade clothes. This chapter weaves together archival materials and personal stories in memoirs, and offers a nicely textured account of homemade clothes. However, I wonder why this chapter is not placed earlier, say, before Chapter Four. Moreover, sewing machines were first imported into China in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it would be interesting if the author had contrasted the meaning of sewing machines before the PRC versus during the Mao era. Chapters Seven and Eight deal with pattern books. Pattern books provide instructional guidelines on how to make clothes, but also contain a wealth of information regarding the Mao era, as Finnane demonstrates. Chapter Seven illustrates the process through which pattern books gained increasing popularity, and the Zhongshan suit displayed centrality in these books. Chapter Eight focuses on one particular aspect of garment-making: measuring the body, and specifically how pattern books dealt with the issue of male tailors measuring the female body in a sex-avoidance social and political environment. As fascinating as they are, the presentation of the illustrations in pattern books perhaps has to do with censorship (or self-censorship) of publications in general during this period. The reader cannot help but consider how actual body measurement took place during that time. Personal accounts such as those included in the previous chapter would be an extremely welcome supplement. Chapter Nine features a category of clothing called "strange clothes and outlandish dress." While this type of clothing did exist, it also served as a discourse to help maintain the dominance of the *zhifu* regime.

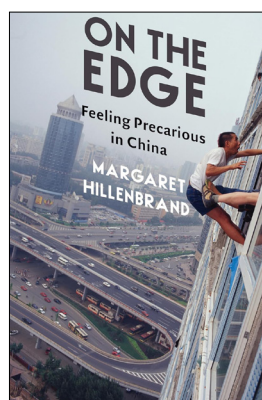
Using archives and original data (such as pattern books) as primary sources, the book offers an authoritative account that addresses the question of how Communist China managed to dress its citizens. In so doing, Finnane resolves an apparent contradiction: clothing styles in the Mao era are seen as highly homogenous to untrained observers, and yet they are often described as full of innovation, creativity, diversity, and resistance in scholarly accounts (e.g., Chen 2001; Sun 2016). While such revisionist and interpretative scholarly accounts of the sartorial culture of the Mao era may be in fashion, I find it refreshing to read Finnane's *How to Make a Mao Suit*, which is laser-focused on the material production of clothing and tells things as they are. Through close analysis of the sewing tools, sewing schools, and pattern books, the book illustrates how a highly uniform clothing culture centred on the *zhifu* emerged, all the while giving space to "strange clothes and outlandish dress," which did not displace but served to maintain the centrality and prevalence of the *zhifu*. Personal stories included in the book make it a much more interesting and enjoyable read than

it otherwise would be. The book will be of interest to scholars and a general audience who share an interest in clothing, the Mao period, and Chinese society in general.

References

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**HILLENBRAND, Margaret.
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***On the Edge: Feeling Precarious
in China.***

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During my 2024 summer fieldwork in a rural Chinese village, I heard a harrowing story about two local truck drivers who tragically died in separate accidents after being forced to drive nearly nonstop for 36 hours. Long-distance trucking, a common profession for undereducated rural men since the 1990s, has become defined by brutal competition and inhumane demands. These deaths underscored the relentless pressure in the industry, where refusing a job only leads to someone more desperate taking the role. The story was a grim reflection of the ruthless exploitation of China's underclass labour. Precarity, however, is not limited to the working class. In 2023, I learned of a wealthy couple in Wuhan who employed more than six private tutors for their sixth-grade son to ensure his academic success and guarantee his ascent into an elite middle school. This starkly different scenario nonetheless reveals the same underlying anxiety: the pervasive fear of losing one's social or economic position in an intensely competitive society.

These two stories, though class-distinctive, embody the pervasive sense of precariousness that Margaret Hillenbrand explores in her recent book, *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China*. Hillenbrand's work probes deeply into the sociocultural landscapes of precarity in contemporary China, offering an interdisciplinary examination of the aesthetic expressions born from these conditions. Her study encompasses avant-garde artists, migrant workers, microcelebrities, and marginalised individuals who grapple with existential threats while using culture to express and confront their realities. Hillenbrand's analysis moves across cultural forms, blending art history, digital media, literature, and performance studies to articulate the various ways precarity is felt and represented in contemporary Chinese society.

Hillenbrand frames "zombie citizenship" as a central concept in her analysis, describing the dehumanised and legally excluded state in which vast numbers of Chinese workers exist. These individuals inhabit a liminal space, denied the rights and protections typically afforded by citizenship. Yet, precariousness extends far beyond