

Calendar

Middle Kingdom Couture

Chinese Ethnic Costume Exhibit

Mao Zedong was not a fan of fashion. Besides his *Little Red Book*, there was his famous blue jacket. He wore it — and so did everybody else in the People's Republic of China — after the revolution in 1949. Mao banned ethnic costumes because he hoped to create a unified population. He achieved at least its illusion. The plain, high-collared, shirtlike uniform — the Chairman Mao jacket — has been worn by more people than any other article of clothing in the history of human dress.

In China, as elsewhere, fashions come and go. Mao's *Little Red Book* was denounced in 1978. The Cultural Palace of the National Minorities in Beijing installed an exhibit of costumes in recent years. And China today has its own neo-Ralph Laurens, who design

Western-type clothing for the world's most populous country.

Some of those designers helped bring a gift of eight ethnic costumes to the San Diego Chinese Historical Society and Museum last summer. The costumes have been on display there since last Sunday.

The donor, Annie Hsu Carrillo of Phoenix, works in her family's textile business in Arizona. "Designer friends of hers in the Far East helped her collect the costumes, and they continue to do so," says Peggy Cheong, a historical society member who has been a friend of Carrillo's since they went to junior high school together 38 years ago in Taipei.

Collecting these costumes was not an easy task. "They're not something you readily come by," says Cheong. "They have to be sought."

The pieces — China's vintage clothing — are old, but not "old-old," says Cheong, who dates them from the last century. All are meant to be worn by women on festive occasions. All, in fact, have been worn by members of Carrillo's Phoenix-based, Chinese ethnic dance company, which has performed in San Diego.

The Tibetan dress has long, full sleeves that extend past the fingertips. "When the wearer dances, the sleeves slip back to reveal the graceful arms," says Alexander Chuang, executive director of the historical society. The matching headpiece is adorned with chunks of amber and two long black braids made of yarn.

The traditional Han costume is two pieces made of embroidered silk. Its yellow color is significant, says Chuang. "In ancient days, yellow was reserved for the emperor's use. At the end of the last

dynasty of the Chinese empire, in 1911, anyone could wear it, and many women chose to do so, because they believed it attracted men."

The costume worn by people who are known as Miao is a short jacket and pants; both shimmer with sewn-in bits of silver jewelry. When the wearer moves, the jewelry makes a tinkling sound, says Chuang.

The Mongolian outfit is a long, loose gown that is worn with an elaborate metal headpiece topped by two bell shapes, one on each side. Watch out: in an irreverent mood, you'll be able to think only of Mouseketeers.

The costume of the Uygur, who are the Muslim people of China, has a geometric pattern that may not look "Chinese" to some people, says Chuang. "The Uygur culture is a mixture of those to the west of China, including Iran and Afghanistan. And the Chinese who live there don't always look like what you normally think of as 'Chinese,' either. They may look Middle Eastern or Russian."

Nancy Lo, a past member of the historical society's board, describes the Manchurian outfit in the exhibit. "It's what everybody thinks of when they think of a Chinese ethnic costume, but it represents only a tiny portion of what the Chinese traditionally wore." The dress is long and fits snugly, with a slit up each side. The collar is erect and the cloth buttons are curled into the shapes of flowers. It's called a *qipao* (pronounced *chee-pow*).

Like ethnic food, ethnic clothing brings back memories. When Lo is asked what kind of shoes women wore with these costumes, she forgets to answer. Instead, she reminisces about the shoes she wore as a child in pre-Maoist, mainland China.

"In the old days," says Lo, who was born in 1943, "we wore shoes made of cloth. My mother made them. I

remember vividly how she did it, even though I didn't do it myself. She used scraps left over from sewing our clothes. She even made the shoes' soles. To do this, she brushed the cloth with paste made of flour and water. She painted layer after layer. Then she let it dry in the sun. After many days, she traced the soles on that hardened material."

When Lo was five, she and her family fled to Taiwan. ("We were Nationalists. My father was in the Air Force.") In 1965, she moved to the United States.

Lo sometimes still dresses ethnically, on holidays like Chinese New Year. Although she is of Miao descent, she wears a *qipao*.



Tibetan dress



Han dress



Miao dress



Mongolian dress



Uygur dress



Manchurian dress

Where did she get it?
One does not have to search all over China for a contemporary one, she says. She bought hers at Macy's.
— Jeanne Schinto

"Wear to Be Seen in China"
Chinese Ethnic Costume Exhibit
San Diego Chinese Historical Society and Museum
404 Third Avenue, downtown,
Tuesday-Saturday,
10:30 a.m.—4:00 p.m.
Sunday, noon-4:00 p.m.
Closed Monday
Through July 31
Free
Info: 619-338-9888

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