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The Development of Academic Dress in China

By Charles Ko, Ka Shing

Abstract

This article includes a series of pieces on the themes of Chinese academic dress and on the topics of design, history and practice. It covers the motives leading to the development of academic regalia of modern Chinese tertiary institutions, the history and development of academic regalia in China, and how and why the design of academic regalia has changed from ancient China to today.

China is a valuable research target as it has had periods of economic reform, a change of its political attitudes, and the establishment of Westernized and modernized degree system.

Introduction to Chinese academic dress

Imperial civil service examinations as early as AD 605 allowed any male citizen of China, regardless of background, to qualify for government service. The successful literati and scholars became civil servants and, along with their roles, achieved higher social status. They were also entitled to wear the impressive ancient Chinese academic gown and cap, showing that the wearer held a respectable position in the civilian hierarchy. The design of modern academic dress in China, while retaining its link to the past, is influenced by that of Western academic dress, especially those of the United States and Europe.

What we could call modern Chinese academic dress has existed for about one hundred years. However, social and political factors in the last century had kept the central government from focusing on its development until recently. Western degree systems were introduced in twentieth century¹ and were followed by the introduction of a variety of Western academic dress designs, such as at the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (南京航空航天大学). Peking University (北京大学) had gradually introduced modern academic dress since its founding in 1898. More recently universities turned to the Hanfu (汉服) (or Han) clothing (worn from around 2698 BC to AD 1750)² as inspiration for a series of the university-based Chinese academicals in 2007.³ (See Figs 1 and 2.)

Meanwhile, research into traditional and modern academic dress in China had been underway.⁴ In the twenty-first century, the two main varieties of academicals, international and traditional, co-exist.

1 <http://www.chinadegrees.cn/xwyyjsjyxx/xwbl/xgzl/xwf/259608.shtml> 學位服. 教育部學位與研究生教育發展中心, '中国的学位服出现在本世纪二十年代中期, 或更早一些。' (Academic dress-Education Degree and Graduate Research Development Community, 'China's academic dress emerged from the mid-1920s or slightly earlier'), 13 Sept. 2011.

2 Zhou Xibao (1984), 【中國古代服飾史】 *Zhongguo Gudai Fushi Shi* (History of Ancient Chinese Costume), Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju.

3 See <http://big5.china.com/gate/big5/mdtt.blog.china.com/200707/645473.html>.

4 Cf. 沈從文 Shen Congwen, 【中國古代服飾研究】 *Zhongguo Gudai Fushi Yanjiu* (Researches on Ancient Chinese Costumes), Shanghai: Shanghai Century Publishing Group, 2006.

The Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council (國務院學位委員會) is the highest authority responsible for regulations of the degree system in China. It also takes a close and deliberate role in observing academic dress. In 1992, the committee decided to expand research into academic dress. The central government has decided to allow the committee to take part in creating modern Chinese academic dress.

The original Chinese academic dress has been modified by individual academies, leading to the diverse academic dress seen in China today.

History of ancient and modern Chinese academic dress

Academic Dress in Ancient China

In ancient China, academic dress was essentially official dress, reflecting the close relationship between academia and officialdom. The outfit of academics and officials consisted of a long, red, round-collar robe with long sleeves, called a *panling lanshan* (盤領襴衫). It was worn with a black cap called a *putou* (幘頭) from 618 to 907 (Tang Dynasty). (See Fig. 3.)

Using brocade, the *putou* has a curved brim, which was typical of the Tang Dynasty (18 June 618–1 June 907).

The academic dress styles of succeeding dynasties were drawn from the Tang Dynasty. (See Fig. 4.) Historians agree that the general brocade of all Chinese ancient dynasties was distinctive from common dress, although the dress of each dynasty is still found to have some stylistic differences.

In the Ming Dynasty (also referred to the Empire of the Great Ming, 1368 to 1644⁵), hats distinctively indicated the status of scholars and literati (scholar-bureaucrats or scholar-officials (士大夫)). For instance, a specific genre of the hats *si-fang pingding jin* (四方平定巾) and *fangjin* (方巾), whose appearance is similar to that of the mortarboard of modern academic dress in black (covered in ‘Mortarboard’, below).

There had not been a distinct hat that was specifically used as an academic in China, and therefore we may say there had not truly been an academic hat or headgear before the 1911 revolution of Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese revolutionary and founder of the People’s Republic of China.⁶ However, civilian officials were definitely similar to Western academics in that they held positions of rank akin to bachelors, masters and doctors. Hence, the above introductory passages of official (or academic) dress can be references to the succeeding developments of the modern academical.

Academic Dress in Modern China

Modern Chinese academic dress can be dated to the middle-1920s. It usually included a long gown and a mandarin jacket, which was introduced in about 1925.⁷ For instance, the academic dress of the MD was a mandarin jacket, which was popular and fashionable especially in the 1920s and 30s, worn with a gown. The gown hangs to the anklebone and the broad sleeves almost cover the hands. The length and breadth are merely for show, flourishes that indicate successful candidates’ academic status after the hard struggle of

5 Edwin Oldfather Reischauer, John King Fairbank, Albert M. Craig. *A History of East Asian Civilization*, 2 vols (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin: 1960), Vol. 1. *East Asia: The Great Tradition*.

6 Derek Benjamin Heater. *Our World this Century* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

7 See 北京世纪九成校园礼仪服饰有限公司-学位服的历史 - (Beijing Century Jiucheng Campus Ceremony, Costume and Accessory Company: History of Academic Dress), <www.bjhongdan.com/index.php?id=105> [accessed 27 Dec. 2011].



FIG. 1 Chinese university students trying the newly designed Han-fu-style Chinese academicals.



FIG. 2 A fashion show of the new series of Chinese academicals of Peking University.



FIG. 3 The curved brim of the cap, the *putou*.



FIG. 4 Emperor Tang Xuanzong (reigned 712–756) and officials in official/academic dress.



FIG. 5 Gowns of the bachelor (left), master (middle) and doctor (right) after 1994.



FIG. 7 (Above) Good luck 'buttons' on a modern bachelor's hood, and worn with gown (right), FIG. 6.

their studies. It is found that the conspicuous style of the doctors' broad sleeves is similar to the appearance of the gown worn with the *panling lanshan*.

The underlying design of modern Chinese academic dress was borrowed from the American Code in the early twentieth century.⁸ The main difference between the two nations' styles is the sleeve, which on Chinese gowns is the same for each degree. On the other hand, the Chinese doctoral gown includes the velvet panels down the front of the gown.

No matter whether a graduate's gown is based on European or American traditions, freshly pressed Western-style clothes should be worn underneath. Unkempt clothes worn under academic dress would be seen as 'improper' and/or 'unsuitable' to certain Chinese cultural views on the mixture or fusion of cultures worldwide.⁹ However, some doctoral graduates in China, including foreigners who graduate from Chinese universities, choose to wear Chinese-style school-uniform-like shirts. The shirt has also become an indispensable part of the Chinese academic robe since the early twentieth century.

Chinese students have worn school uniforms for a thousand years. Originally they were a kind of Chinese-style jacket with buttons down the front, but the jacket was Westernized in the early twentieth century, and is now called *xi yang dong jian* (西洋東漸).

Because the majority of schoolboys wore Western-style clothes in school, Western dress gradually became the uniform. This phenomenon is similar for schoolgirls, who liked to wear a close-fitting Chinese dress with side vents in school until the *cheongsam* became their school uniform.

Chinese bachelors' and masters' dress were reformed in 1930s and 1940s, when the neckband of the hood became deeper and V-shaped. When mortarboards are not worn, the design of these two academic costumes will look almost the same as the long gowns with hoods in late-Qing Dynasty style.¹⁰

These developments demonstrate that the revolution in Chinese academic dress and innovation started in the early twentieth century. Although we can never know who made the transformation, they and their successors' work provide us with much to explore, investigate and research with respect to Chinese academic regalia.

Motivations leading to the birth of modern academic dress in China

Chinese academic dress of nineteenth century, with its square cap and long gown, was borrowed completely from the West.¹¹ At first, foreign academic dress was imported by

8 Ibid.

9 See <www.bjhongdan.com/index.php?id=105>, “按常理, 无论“欧派”还是“美派”学位服, 在其里面男士通常穿笔挺的西装方才“合理”、“恰当”, 而这几位中国的博士连同那位外籍博士却偏偏内穿对襟式立领的学生装。” (“Usually, whether the academic dress is of the European or American tradition, men tend to wear Western business suits as it is “reasonable” or “proper” and for some of these Chinese doctors they would borrow from other doctors double breasted mandarin-style school uniforms to wear underneath their gowns.”)

10 Ibid., “学士服和硕士服在三、四十年代则大多是改良式的, [1]领口开得很深, [2]呈V字形, 若没有头上的方帽, 其服装和清末的男子长衫几乎完全相同。” (“The gowns of bachelors and masters from the 30s/40s are mostly in a modified form; deep neckline and a V-shaped opening with no square cap. Such a costume is very much similar to the *cheongsam* of men at the end of the Qing Dynasty.”)

11 <www.bjhongdan.com/index.php?id=105>, “到 1877 年, 全国基督教学校有约 350 所, 学生 5975 人。到 1889 年, 教会学校的学生已达 16836 人, 而至 1906 年, 更猛增到 57683 人。” (“Up until there were around 350 Christian teaching schools amounting to 5,975 pupils. In 1889, the number of pupils reached 16,836 and then in 1906 it soared to 57,683.”)

missionaries of the Society of Jesus and other Catholic orders, for whom academic dress had been their costume during the initial stages of building missionary schools.¹²

P. Matthoeus Ricci was the first Jesuit to preach during the Ming Dynasty the Gospel in China. His academic subjects, natural science and education, were of great interest to Chinese students, and became a crucial measure the government used to grant approval for missionaries' presence in China.

The period after the Opium War (1840–42) further blended Chinese and Western cultures. Not only did it bring Western academic dress on the backs of missionaries, it also saw Chinese scholars who had studied overseas return with photographs of themselves in Western academic dress at their graduation ceremonies. The design of academic dress at that time immediately aroused an interest in the clothing in China.

Missionary schools in nineteenth-century China saw remarkable growth. Until 1877, the total number of the Christian schools in China was about 350, with a student population of 5,975. By 1889, the number of students of the missionary schools was approximately 16,836, and by 1906 the number increased to 57,683.¹²

In many parts of the world in the early twentieth century, academic dress followed one of two paths: European and the UK's style¹³ or that of the US. During the early twentieth century, the majority of missionaries in China were from the Americas. As a result, the majority of academic outfits found in China were American.

When the importance of academic regalia was recognized and people tried to better understand it, students appreciated it and took an interest in it too. For instance, in 2006 shops such as the Beijing Century Jiu Cheng Campus Ceremony Costume & Accessory¹⁴ and the Jianniu Academical Company¹⁵ opened, selling a variety of academic dress in styles from around the world. Students are allowed to make personal adjustments to their own academic dress.

From the perspective of Chinese academia, scholars should have their own academic dress that includes decoration reflecting the individual who wears it, meaning students should be allowed to choose how they want to wear their academic dress.

Special gowns reflect the graduate's wish to create a better image and brighter future. As a result, the modelling, patterning and wearing of academic dress were largely modified in 2007, when Chinese university students participated in a design show of fashionable academic dress;¹⁶ regalia with a slight differences to big changes was created, with references to its Chinese beginnings. No longer was Chinese academic dress uniform.

Academic dress was gradually becoming one of China's own unique costume cultures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹⁷ Market researchers came up with ways to make the gowns, as well as hoods and caps, more varied.

Description of Modern Chinese academic dress

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council (國務院學位委員會) sought to standardize academic dress. (See Fig. 5.) Except

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 See <www.bjhongdan.com/index.php?id=106>.

15 See <www.jianniu.cn/show.asp?tid=1>.

16 More at <big5.cri.cn/gate/big5/gb.cri.cn/14714/2007/07/10/107@1670679.htm>.

17 <www.bjhongdan.com/index.php?id=105>, “新中国自己的学位服在萌动了。” (‘New China's own academic dress is blossoming.’)

for the lace-up mortarboard, other parts of Chinese academic dress differed greatly from their ancient¹⁸ antecedents by the late twentieth century. After extensive research and wide public consultation,¹⁹ the committee approved the regulations on 10 May 1994.²⁰

在深入研究和广泛征询意见的基础上，1994年，国务院学位委员会审定通过了新中国自己的学位服样式，并作出决定：作为统一规范的学位服，向全国学位授予单位推荐使用，其他样式的学位服一律废止。²¹

The design and production of academic dress were intended to demonstrate Chinese character while conforming to customs from around the world. The committee sought to express the unifying principles of academic dress, which means designers will have to make academic dress relevant to different degrees, academic subjects and the characteristics of individual schools and academies.

The committee decided to encourage tertiary institutions to make use of its design. In fact, the regulations became an excuse to unify academic dress. Under the new regulations other forms of academic dress were slowly—even gradually—abolished.

The regulations include dress for doctors, masters and academy presidents, but excludes bachelors' robes. The committee decided against promoting the unified design of bachelors' robes from the 1990s.

Hats

All mortarboards are black, including those for university presidents, so at first glance, they appear identical to those of many universities around the world. But on the back of the skull a series of grommets allows the cap to be tightened to fit the wearer's head. The style is widely used in Chinese and many other Asian universities.

Gowns

The gown plays the chief role in the costume because it is a symbol of the degree, it includes distinctive national features, and at the same time must also show the objectives of the academy it represents.

National regulations determine that the doctoral gown is in black with red trim; the master's gown is in blue with deep blue trim; a presidential gown is red and black.

Within these rules is room for individuality. One way to differentiate a gown is through embroidery. The Chinese approach is much more elaborate than examples such as Harvard's crow's feet. The challenge is using traditional Chinese embroidery motifs—dragon, phoenix, and peony flowers—would dramatically increase the cost of the robe, and

18 国务院学位委员会学位办〔1994〕22号《关于推荐使用学位服的通知》(Office of the Committee of Academic Degrees of the State Council (1994), No. 22, *Regarding Notice of Recommendations on Academic Dress*).

19 Ibid.

20 At <www.huaue.com/xueweifu.htm>, “学位服着装规范（本规范由国务院学位委员会办公室于一九九四年五月十日制定）”. (“Academic Dress Code (these regulations were set on 10 May 1994 by the Office of the Committee of Academic Degrees of the State Council).”)

21 “On the basis of in-depth research and extensive consultation, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council in 1994 examined and approved a new code for China's own academic dress and made the following decision: as a standardized system, degree-granting institutions nationwide are recommended to adopt one style, other styles of academic dress will cease to be used.” 学位服_相关资料_学位博览_中国学位与研究生教育信息网 (Academic Dress - Relating Information - Academic Exposition - Chinese Degree and Graduate Research Information Network).

therefore increase the financial burdens of academies and graduates. As a result, these designs, which were used on the academic dress of imperial dynasties, are seldom used today.

Instead, designers include simpler Chinese elements, which cost less, to satisfy the growing demand of graduates.

Satisfying this need is the institution's logo, stitched on the left front side of gowns. Another way to accomplish the same goal is to use a decorative button and loop (*ruyikou*, 如意扣) in their designs. These decorative features are also used in traditional Chinese costumes.

This kind of button is not expensive and represents modern Chinese cultures and customs. For example, Chinese academic gowns chiefly show national and ethnic features through distinctive patterns on the buttons and loops at the cuffs of sleeves and the front of the academic gowns.

Another way to make a gown personal is by adding printed fabric to it. For example, the cuff of a sleeve can be edged with fabric with a print of the Great Wall of China. Because the sleeve is wide, rich, intricate designs work well. (See Fig. 6.)

Hoods

In China, each degree's hood is worn very low in the front.

As mentioned before, Chinese hoods have cowls but no liripipe. Hoods, which in Chinese are called shawls, have been modified from riding-hoods in the course of their evolution.²² Some are particularly decorative, making the entire academic outfit richer. (See Fig. 7.)

A print of the peony flower, a symbol of wealth and optimism, adorns the shell.

Any colours can be selected by individual academies, if they so choose. Otherwise, the hoods are grey according to the Chinese regulations.

The colour of the hood edging is determined according to the division of academic units. China currently confers specialized degrees in twelve areas: philosophy, economics, law, education, literature, history, science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, military science and administration. Within these twelve are hundreds of sub-categories. It would be difficult to use a variety of colours to represent all the sub-categories. Even if schools used twelve colours on the hoods to represent twelve specific academic areas, there may still be confusion with the color representation. For this reason, only six colours are used into the design of various hoods' borders to represent six major academic units: arts (pink), science (grey), engineering (yellow), agriculture (green), medicine (white) and military science (red) (文、理、工、农、医、军事).²³

Conclusion

The presence of modern academic dress in China has gradually made the whole society respect the spirit of truth, knowledge and talents. The tendency towards educational development in turn pushes the central government to improve the current degree system,

22 垂布，又称披肩，是由连颈帽演化而来。Translated from <<http://www.bjhongdan.com/index.php?id=106>>. ('The hood [literally, 'hanging cloth'], also called a cape, evolved from a chaperon.')

23 学位服_相关资料_学位博览_中国学位与研究生教育信息网. (Academic Dress - Relating Information - Academic Exposition - Chinese Degree and Graduate Research Information Network.)

which will lead to better management by the central government.²⁴ As awareness of higher education grows, we must be sure to include academic dress in the discussions, and should even promote it in international academic exchanges.

If I were to forecast the future of academic dress development in China, I would suggest that it will become more diverse as it shows greater individual characteristics of different academies and wearers.

As any such changes will happen amidst the trends of globalization and multiculturalism, it is imperative that ancient Chinese academic dress adapt to the modern world; even such change, however, does not mean that there will be a loss of valuable and traditional cultures, including historical colours of imperial dynasties.

Chinese antecedents have been included in the modern set of academic robes, fusing ancient Chinese traditions with modern styles in small and, sometimes, large ways.

We see examples in modern universities, which have made their greatest efforts in designing unique academic dress with their own academic style on one hand, while on the other, consciously trying to protect ancient Chinese academic dress culture and traditions.

In the future, there will be surely more distinctive academic dress, blending the iconic designs of individual schools and the academic dress styles of ancient Chinese dynasties.

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24 From <www.bjhongdan.com/index.php?id=106>.