



# A Comparative Study of the Political Culture Behind the Republic of China's Clothing Ordinance

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**Abstract.** The robe and waistcoat is one of the representative costumes for men in the Republic of China (R.O.C.) period, and the robe and waistcoat are used as men's dress in the three basic dress laws promulgated by the R.O.C. government. Based on the historical documents and the pictures of the surviving objects, the study analyzes the legal provisions about men's robes and coats in the three decrees of the dress system, and explores the three aspects of the background of the era, the political system, and the ideological and cultural changes behind it. The study concludes that although the robe and waistcoat is a remnant of the former dynasty, it represents the unity of "breaking" and "establishing" in the modern transitional government of the Republic of China, and the powers-that-be in the Republic of China discarded the feudal rites and laws embedded in the robe and waistcoat, and gave it a new meaning and new ideological and cultural concepts. Ideology and cultural concepts. Until now, the robe and waistcoat also represent the "Republic of China style", representing men's elegant and introverted temperament.

**Keywords:** Republic of China, dress code, robes and coats, politics, culture.

## 1 Introduction

The Xinhai Revolution, as a historic change, put an end to more than 2,000 years of monarchical rule in China, and the hierarchical system of dress, which had lasted for thousands of years, was dismantled as well. In China's long history, the change of dynasties is often accompanied by a renewal of the ceremonial system, in which the "change of dynasty" and the "change of dress" as a significant symbol, reflecting the cultural and political changes of different eras. The Republic of China (ROC), as an important chapter in China's modern history, marked the last era of a regime that formally enacted a national dress code, a move that left a deep imprint on cultural heritage and social change. It lasted for 37 years, and through the promulgation of a series of laws and regulations, such as the Dress System, the Regulations on the Dress System, and the Draft Amendment to the Regulations on the Dress System, new standards and norms were established for the dress culture of the time. Among them, the robe and waistcoat, as the dress of the upper class in Qing Dynasty, was preserved during the

Republic of China and was not absent for three times, the significance of which had to be pondered over.

## 2 Basic Content of the Three-Service Regulations

### 2.1 Dress Code 1912 - Law on Robes and Coats

In May 1912, President Yuan ordered the Republic of China's clothing system: the Legal Affairs Bureau to study the Chinese and foreign clothing system, review the selection of national materials, taking into account the habits of the people as well as the social situation, and to draw up the Republic of China's public clothing, casual clothing system .....<sup>1</sup> After discussion, it was decided that the style of clothing would be divided into two categories: Chinese and Western. Western-style dresses choose tweed, feathers and other high-level materials, its style design from the country's top leaders to the general public are consistent. In July, the Senate responded to President Yuan's initiative and set the tone of "following international trends and adopting Western elements".

In October, the Beiyang government formally issued the first official regulations on dress in the Republic of China - the "Dress System", which clearly divided male dress into two categories: the large dress and the regular dress. Among them, category B gowns were specifically designated as the style of robes and coats. The gown style (as shown in Figure 1): lapel, collar, sleeves aligned with the veins of the hands, left, right, and lower back;<sup>2</sup> robe style (as shown in Figure 2): sleeves aligned with the sleeves of the gown, collar, left, right, and lower back'.<sup>2</sup> The material was made of silk, cotton or linen from this country, and the colour was black.<sup>2</sup> The results of this service decree were basically the same as the tone of the previous discussion, the men's dresses were almost western style, and the regulations for the robes and coats were not as detailed as those of the last two service decrees, so it can be seen that the promulgation of the time was hasty.



Fig. 1. 1912 "The Dress System" Type B Regular Gown Coat Style



Fig. 2. 1912 "The Dress System" Type B Regular Dress Gown Style.

## 2.2 Service Regulations 1929 - Law on Robes and Coats

After the Nanjing National Government secured power in 1927, in April 1929, it again introduced a new Regulation on the Dress System. The dress system contained regulations on the styles, materials, and colors of male and female gowns. In particular, unlike the other two dress regulations, this time the male gowns were uniformly simplified to robes and waistcoats, and specific norms were set on the colors of the garments, buttons, and other details. The gown style (as shown in Figure 3): flush collar with opposite lapels, long to the abdomen, sleeves long to the veins of the hands, left, right, and lower rear openings, black in colour, and buttons five; the robe style (as shown in Figure 4): flush collar, front lapel covered on the right, two inches above the ankle, sleeves aligned with the sleeves of the gown, left, right, and lower openings, blue in colour, and buttons six.<sup>3</sup>

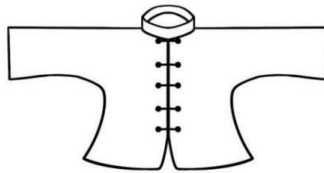


Fig. 3. Dress Coat Style, Service Regulations 1929.

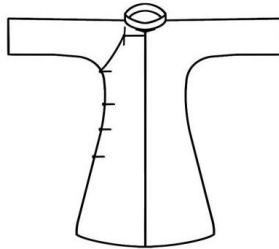


Fig. 4. Dress Gown Style, Service Regulations 1929.

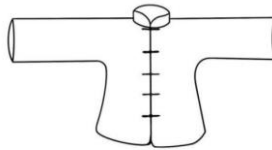
## 2.3 Draft Amendments to the Clothing Regulations, 1939 - Law on Robes and Coats

The uniform regulations promulgated by the Republican Government in 1939 were further revised and improved on the basis of the 1929 version. The revision of the regulations took four years, during which three schools of thought emerged on the issue of whether or not to pass on the traditional culture of the Chinese nation and retain the long robe and waistcoat. Those who agreed were the "Retro Faction", which advocated "the use of robes and coats as regular dress"; those who disagreed were the "International Faction", which advocated the use of Western-style short clothes; and one faction was the "Eclectic Faction". There is also the "eclectic school", which advocates internationalization while retaining Chinese characteristics.

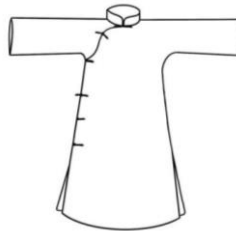
After a number of discussions, the draft finalist the three major categories of dresses, uniforms and regular clothes. The robe and waistcoat was the B type of regular dress,

and the coat style (as in Figure 5): flush collar, with concealed buttons, lapel, continuous sleeves, long to the abdomen, sleeve length flush with the hand veins, left, right and lower rear openings, black in colour, and five set of buttons; <sup>4</sup>The robe style (as in Figure 6): flush collar, with the front lapel concealed on the right side, long to the ankles, sleeve length flush with the sleeves of the coat, left, right and lower openings, and blue in colour. <sup>4</sup>

In this draft, the gown and coat were classified as Category B Regular Gowns, a categorical that maintains continuity with the 1912 Dress Code. However, there were significant differences in the stylistic tendencies of the two: the 1912 system was clearly inclined towards Westernized designs; the 1939 system adopted a more inclusive strategy of combining East and West, not only at the level of dresses and uniforms, but also at the level of regular clothes for daily wear, which subtly incorporated traditional elements of Chinese clothing.



**Fig. 5.** Regular Dress Coat Style B of the Revised Service Regulations Bill, 1939



**Fig. 6.** Regular Dress Gown Style B of the Revised Service Regulations Bill, 1939.

### 3 The Politics and Culture Behind the Robe

The social role of dress has led rulers throughout the ages to establish dress codes to regulate etiquette and maintain their rule. In the early years of the Republic of China (ROC), faced with a complex political situation and conflict, the Beiyang government quickly introduced a number of laws, such as the iconic Provisional Covenant Law of the Republic of China (ROC) and a series of dress-related laws and regulations, to address the challenges of the current situation. The enactment of the dress law represented the beginning of the loosening of the traditional Chinese dress hierarchy, and the promulgation of the Provisional Covenant Law of the Republic of China also signaled to the nation that the feudal system that had lasted for thousands of years in China had been dismantled, and that it had begun to advocate for democracy, freedom, and equality

among the people. These political systems and ideological concepts are also fully reflected in the clothing system.

As the Republic of China men's dress, both its form and connotation are different from that of the previous dynasty; in the Republic of China, robe and shirt became the general term for long clothes, and waistcoat became the general term for coat.<sup>5</sup> The release of the three uniforms gradually raised the status of the robe and coat in the minds of the people, which mapped out the firm direction and determination of the new regime of the Republic of China in promoting cultural identity and national image building.

### 3.1 Historical Choices

The rise of a generation, there must be a generation of the crown and costume system. The nascent Republican government, the rulers, in addition to the constitution, training to achieve the ideal of republicanism, but also from the dress system on the discipline, so that we can achieve the purpose of not only out of ancient China's feudal rites, but also not lost in the world's torrent.

The 1912 Dress Code was a "fetishistic" attempt to abolish traditional dress. However, the traditional culture of China was deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, and the senators, after considering the actual situation of Chinese society and the mentality of the people at that time, decided to keep the long robe and waistcoat. 1929 was the eve of the War of Resistance when the dress law was written. Considering the realities of the country at that time, the Republican government needed to stabilize the people's mind and enhance the image of the country through external physical discipline, i.e. the dress system, and therefore the 1929 dress code discarded Western-style clothing and made the long robe and waistcoat the men's dress only.

If the 1912 and 1929 uniforms were predominantly Western and Chinese respectively, the 1939 uniform was a combination of Chinese and Western. Prior to the promulgation of this draft uniform system, the Ministry of the Interior held five meetings, the first two of which discussed the substance of the draft.<sup>6</sup> The following guiding principles were clearly defined: clothing styles should be simple and dignified, preserving national characteristics and cultural essence; materials should be domestic and flexible; economy and practicality should be the key, and style unity and consistency should be maintained among all types of clothing. Finally, in this dress code, the men's gowns were student uniforms, the regular dresses were A type student uniforms and B type robes and coats, and the uniforms were a combination of student uniforms, Zhongshan uniforms, and suits. Compared to the previous two service regulations, this one was more detailed, more mature, and more applicable to the national situation at the time.

In modern China, due to the impact of Western culture, the evolution of male Chinese dresses has gone through twists and turns, and the regulations of the dress system are constantly changing, and Western styles are seeking to merge in the collision, so as to realize the true meaning of East meets West.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, a number of works in the West have made extensive and systematic studies of modern men's dresses, both in terms of historical accounts and photographic collections, Example: FINNANE A<sup>8</sup>, Combined with the society and people's livelihood, it restores the costumes of the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, elaborates on the development of men's robes and

waistcoats, and analyses the differences in the industry from a regional perspective, showing the changes in the Republic of China's costumes; MORRISON H<sup>9</sup>, Focusing on the social landscape of old Beijing from 1933-1946, it focuses on regional and historical image records.

### 3.2 Political System

The Republic of China was first established, the Provisional Covenant of the Republic of China clearly stipulates that "the sovereignty of the Republic of China belongs to all the people of the Republic of China"<sup>10</sup>, "the people of the Republic of China are equal, without distinction as to race, class, religion".<sup>10</sup> The concept of democratic republic fundamentally subverted the feudal dictatorship, "the supremacy of the monarch" and "imperial power" stereotypes, firmly established the principle of people's sovereignty, so as to provide a solid guarantee for the rights and freedoms of the people.

The concepts of human rights and equality in the Provisional Covenant Law were reflected in the formulation and implementation of the dress code. Before formulating the Republican dress code, Yuan Shikai proposed that the dress code should not be limited to high-ranking officials, but should be popularized to all officials and even civilians. This idea broke the boundaries between officials and civilians in ancient dress, and the Republican dress system did not clearly distinguish between the dress code of officials and the public, while the colour and pattern of clothing also abolished the previous taboos, showing a more equal and open dress culture. From the picture data in the Fact Book of Men's Clothing in Modern China, we can see the great difference between the Qing Dynasty robe (as shown in Fig. 7) and the Republic of China robe (as shown in Fig. 8), and the Qing Dynasty coat (as shown in Fig. 9) and the Republic of China waistcoat (as shown in Fig. 10). The dress decrees of the Republic of China were guided by the premise of full respect and re-established the equality and freedom of the individual in terms of clothing in terms of jurisprudence, which was different from the concept of hierarchy and restrictions on the human body under the feudal rites, and embodied a kind of advancement that transcended the times.



**Fig. 7.** Golden python robe in brown satin with flowers, Late Qing dynasty.



**Fig. 8.** Grey Flower Tunic, Republic of China.



**Fig. 9.** Stone green dragon coat with dragon motif Late Qing.



**Fig. 10.** Black dark floral satin lapel coat Republic of China.

### 3.3 Ideological and Cultural Changes

In ancient times, the basic function of clothing was to protect the body from the cold, but with the development of human society, clothing is no longer just a means of protecting the body, it is beginning to be endowed with more connotations, more functionality, and has evolved into a culture. Clothing is an important part of the cultural system, is the external expression of culture, behind the dress contains the background of the times and cultural characteristics.<sup>11</sup> Costume culture combines multiple attributes such as region, art, era, ethnicity and customs, and becomes a vivid historical picture scroll, visually reflecting the ideology, political orientation, belief system, economic situation and customs of different historical periods. After the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the feudal rule of the Qing Dynasty, the hierarchical system of clothing came to an end, and Western learning gradually penetrated into many aspects of social life,<sup>12</sup> and the national mindset was profoundly influenced by Western learning.

Ideological and cultural changes were first reflected in the political system, with the Provisional Covenant of the Republic of China establishing the centrality of people's

sovereignty, guaranteeing the basic human rights of citizens, and distinctly highlighting the core ideas of equality and freedom.

In January 1912, Sun Yat-sen put forward the political slogan of "five-ethnic republic", which gave birth to the ideology of the five-ethnic republic of Han, Manchuria, Mongolia, Hui and Tibet. He actively advocated the unity of the people of the five ethnic groups, jointly promoting nationalism, and was committed to building a strong and unified nation-state. With a vision of peace and cosmopolitanism, Sun expected China to contribute to global well-being, create brilliant achievements, and safeguard the common interests of all mankind. Under the idea of the five-ethnic republic, those in power began to pay attention to the extension and development of traditional culture, and the robe and coat became the representative of traditional dress at that time, its irreplaceability confirmed in the service system again and again, and its value deepened again and again.

The New Culture Movement also had a great impact on the thinking of the people of the Republic of China. Chen Duxiu, the leading figure of the New Culture Movement, emphasizes human rights as the core of civil rights, advocated the elimination of the gap between the rich and the poor, the breaking down of class barriers, the abandonment of the concept of inequality, and the commitment to the realization of true equality of personality. The New Culture Movement injected the concepts of equality and freedom into the Chinese people, and awakened the self-consciousness of individuals. Chen Duxiu believed that "dressing" was the "knowledge and skill" of human beings, and that "the New Culture Movement is a movement of human beings", so it should take the "human beings" with physical and mental needs, self-pursuits and spiritual independence as its target. Therefore, it is the "human being" who has physical and mental needs, self-pursuits, and spiritual independence that should be the object of service. It is this "human being" that sets a new benchmark for the humanistic spirit of modern Chinese clothing.<sup>13</sup> The New Culture Movement promotes the liberation of the body, personality and people. The appearance of the Chinese robe and coat is simple and applicable, but very ethnic, giving people the feeling of leisurely, wisdom, not arrogant, not impatient, with the concept of the great way to simplicity, showing the calm, elegant spiritual connotation, has a rich cultural heritage.

These new ideas greatly contributed to the emancipation of the people, and the quest for democracy and freedom became deeply rooted in people's hearts and became a broad consensus. The long robe and waistcoat served as a legacy during this period, signaling the cultural prosperity of the Chinese nation.

## 4 Conclusion

In addition to its external practical and aesthetic functions, clothing has a strong political, cultural and ideological significance. Republic of China promulgated the Republic of China Provisional Covenant Law, the concept of the five republics, the rise of the New Culture Movement, and the formulation of three dress decree, can be seen in the government's attitude towards traditional culture, robes and coats appeared three times in the dress decree, which is the political symbols of the Republic of China regime, but



also the embodiment of the ideological concepts of freedom, equality, and democracy. All these political decisions and cultural changes had a great effect on awakening the national spirit of independence and pursuit, and the freedom, equality, body and mind of human beings were put in the first place, and everyone could be free from the constraints of "law" and "rites". The transformation and fusion of Chinese dress from traditional to modern has had a far-reaching influence on modern dress culture.

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