



INSIDE

- The birth of gourmet culture > p28
- Savoring smooth, silky porridge > p29

DRESSES TO THRILL

A new Shanghai exhibition highlights the *qipao*, evolution of women's fashion in the first half of the 20th century

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The *qipao* exhibition at the Shanghai History Museum offers a glimpse into the culture and fashion of Shanghai in the first half of the 1900s.

Wang Shuizhong from Taiwan is the director of the Taipei Chinese culture and fine arts association. He donated his collection of 338 *qipao* to the Shanghai History Museum, and the exhibition showcases 72 of these dresses.

Qipao — the traditional costume of Chinese women — originated in Shanghai, and went on to influence the whole world, Wang said at the exhibition's opening. "The curvy silhouette and charming design ... represents the gentle and yet strong mind of Chinese women."

Even today, the impact of *qipao* is still constantly found in the international fashion world, he said of the signature garment.

Since the reopening of Shanghai Historical Museum in the former clubhouse of the Shanghai Race Club back in March, "we have received quite a lot of donations from renowned people, and we feel greatly encouraged," said Hu Jiang, director of the museum.

He went on to say the mission of the museum was to "collect and display items that highlight Shanghai's culture, and Wang's donation is a brilliant contribution to the museum."

Wang has been collecting vintage *qipao* dresses for more than 30 years, he said of his fascination with the outfit. "As a young man I was obsessed with the feminine beauty in *qipao*, and began to collect these dresses."

It was a difficult decision to donate his whole collection to the Shanghai History Museum, he said, but "seeing the dresses in the exhibition hall, I feel very much fulfilled. I have found the best home for my lifelong collection."

"Here at the museum, they can play a part in teaching the history and culture of Shanghai, and their beauty is exhibited for everyone to enjoy."

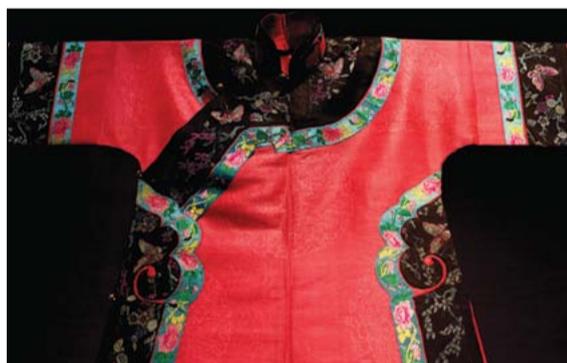
Wang declined to speak much about himself, though he has been an avid philanthropist who sponsors education, art and culture on both sides of the Taiwan Straits.

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The *qipao* was believed to have been adapted from the traditional robe worn by Manchu women during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

PHOTOS BY GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY



A Manchurian robe is the first thing to greet visitors at the Shanghai History Museum's *qipao* exhibition.



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Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) — in fact, a Manchurian robe is the first thing to greet visitors to the exhibition hall.

"Women used to wear pants under the robe," said Zhang Xia, a researcher with the Shanghai History Museum. "As pants were replaced with stockings, *qipao* gradually became the most recognized fashion style of women, starting in Shanghai, and then spreading all over the country."

At the beginning, *qipao* was just a simplified version of a Manchurian robe, according to Professor Bao Mingxin of Donghua University. It was in Shanghai that *qipao* gained a new lease of life with the influence of Western fashion, Bao said.

New details were added to the

dress, such as the wide cuff with the bell-shaped sleeves. Art Deco elements were introduced to Chinese fashion in the 1920s, and the Shanghai *qipao*, alongside architecture, furniture, daily utensils and book binding, became a unique branch of Art Deco, known as Shanghai Art Deco, Bao explained.

Zhang guided journalists through the exhibition, pointing out the changing collar designs, fine embroidery and various accessories.

Aside from the fine craftsmanship, she brought to attention how the weaving technology developed in the early 1900s, allowing new patterns and color combinations to appear on the fabrics of *qipao*.

A major breakthrough took place

when Indanthrene, a new dye, was introduced to China by the German chemical company Bayer. The pigment gave fabrics a vivid blue color that could endure repeated washing and longtime wearing.

"The introduction of Indanthrene dye is a bit like the creation of blue jeans," Zhang said. "It made *qipao* versatile for all social classes and adaptable for all kinds of circumstances."

Indanthrene dye immediately won great popularity, and women all over China began to wear *qipao* dresses of the bright blue cotton fabric. However, only a few of those *qipao* have survived. The majority of the *qipao* on show at the exhibition are made of fine silk or lace, and have been

well looked after because of their high value.

"Mr. Wang has acquired some of these rare Indanthrene *qipao*, so that we are able to present them in the exhibition," Zhang said. However, the museum being an institution of education and public service, "doesn't consider the price of the objects in our collection, so we can't tell how much money these dresses are worth."

She also pointed out that, as fashion developed in the 1930s and 40s, the cut of *qipao* became more three-dimensional, optimizing the feminine curves of the wearer's body. "This was also a process of liberation for Chinese women," she said.

Traditional aesthetics demanded Chinese women to hide their sexuality, but since the 1930s, new ideas emerged, encouraging women not to bind their breasts with heavy cloth as scientists of the day pronounced it was bad for women's health, and caused breast-feeding problems after giving birth.

Since then, *qipao* became more about celebrating the natural physical attributes of the wearer, and "Shanghai women became more confident," Zhang said.

The exhibition takes place at the South Exhibition Hall in the East Wing of the Shanghai History Museum until Oct 16.