

A Chronicle of Changing Clothes

Eileen Chang

Translator's Introduction

Appearing for the first time in the January 1943 issue of the *XXth Century*, an English-language journal published in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, Eileen Chang's "Chinese Life and Fashions" has become an inevitable touchstone for scholars of modern Chinese fashion and a key text in modern Chinese cultural studies by one of the most celebrated of all modern Chinese writers. A brief introductory note for the piece, penned by the journal's editor in chief, Axis apologist Klaus Mehnert, somewhat unwittingly suggests both the compelling scope of this particular essay and the ambiguities and ambivalence of Chang's position as a cultural mediator, woman writer, and translingual critic: "This article needs no recommendation to the ladies among our readers; for them, the word 'fashions' speaks for itself. But perhaps we should mention for the benefit of our male readers that the following pages contain more than just an essay on fashions. Indeed,

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they offer an amusing psychoanalysis of modern China.”¹ Less than a year later, Chang translated, revised, and expanded the piece for publication in a Chinese-language journal, *Gujin* [Past and present], retitling it “Gengyi ji” [A chronicle of changing clothes].² While much of the material remained the same, this retooling of the essay involved a subtle reconfiguration of Chang’s authorial voice and self-positioning vis-à-vis her Chinese readers, who are addressed less as psychiatric subjects than as collaborators in a troubled cultural history that extends through the largely unspoken (but ever present) privations of life during wartime. It was this version of the article that was ultimately included in Chang’s 1945 collection of essays and cultural criticism, *Liuyan* [Written on water].³

The text presented here, along with original illustrations by Chang herself, is a triangulated translation into English of Chang’s translation into Chinese, which attempts to mediate Chang’s successive mediations between different languages, audiences, genders, and positions. What emerges from these textual complexities is a layered and finely grained articulation of the relation between history (intellectual, social, and political) and fashion in modern China. This is materialist history that takes a palpable delight in fabrics, in colors, in textures, and in what Chang terms the “pointless” yet crucially significant accumulation of details that compose the language of fashion. It also represents the rigorous application of a set of theoretical hypotheses concerning the homology between the social body and its apparel to the study of historical process. Thus Chang forges not only an expansive theory of the “fashion system” in modern China but also a strikingly novel mode for the writing of cultural history and social theory in modern Chinese.

A Chronicle of Changing Clothes

If all the clothing handed down for generations had never been sold to dealers in secondhand goods, their annual sunning in June would be a brilliant and lively affair. You would move down the path between bamboo poles, flanked by walls of silk and satin—an excavated corridor within an ancient underground palace buried deep under the ground. You could press your forehead against brocades shot through with gold thread. When the sun was still here, this thread was warmed by the light, but now it is cold.

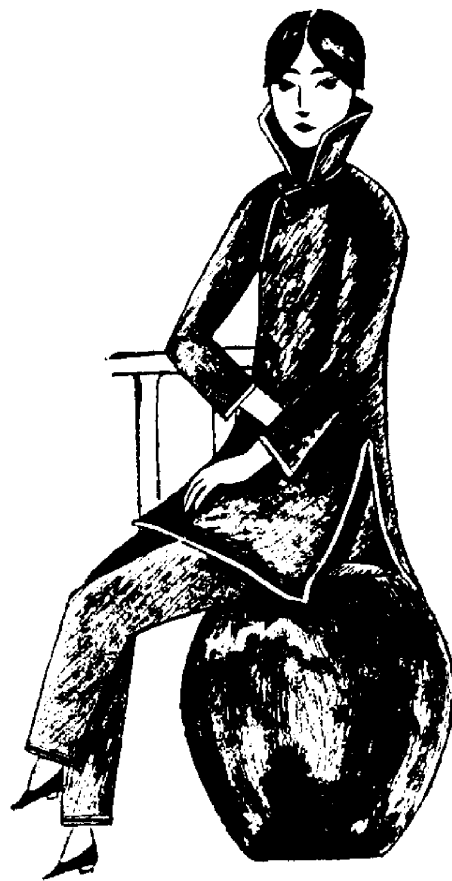
People in the past went laboriously about their lives, but all their deeds end up coated in a thick layer of dust. When their descendants air these old clothes, that dust is shaken out and set dancing in the yellow sunlight. If memory has a smell, it is the scent of camphor, sweet and cozy like remembered happiness, sweet and forlorn like forgotten sorrow.

We cannot really imagine the world of the past—so dilatory, so quiet, and so orderly that over the course of three hundred years of Manchu rule, women lacked anything that might be referred to as fashion. Generation after generation of women wore the same sorts of clothes without feeling in the least perturbed. At the beginning of the dynasty, because men were forced to show submission to the conquerors but women were not, women's clothing still retained the clear imprint of Ming dynasty styles. From the middle of the seventeenth century all the way until the end of the nineteenth, jackets with huge sleeves were perennially popular, giving their wearers an air of statuesque repose. The jacket collar was very low, nearly nonexistent. One wore a "great jacket" on the outside. On informal occasions, the great jacket would be removed to reveal the "middle jacket." Beneath the middle jacket was a form-fitting "little jacket," which would be worn to bed and was usually of some enticing shade like peach or "liquid red." Atop this ensemble of three jackets, finally, would be the "Cloud Shoulder Vest coat" of black silk, with broad edging patterned with stylized "coiled clouds."

The sloping shoulders, narrow waist, and flat chest of the ideal beauty, who was to be both petite and slender, would disappear under the weight of these layers upon layers of clothing. She herself would cease to exist, save as a frame upon which clothing could be hung. The Chinese do not approve of women who are overly obtrusive to the eye. Even the most spectacular virtues recorded by history—for example, a woman hacking off her own arm after having been touched by a strange man—however admired by the common people, always produced a vague sense of regretful unease among the educated class, who believed women should not draw attention to themselves, no matter the circumstances. The most spotless of reputations can be tarnished by exposure to the steamy breath of the multitudes. If even women who sought to gain distinction for themselves by such honorable means had their detractors, what of those who, in deviating from sartorial norms, did even greater violence to accepted modes and customs?



1650-1890



1890-1910

Figures 1 and 2

The strictest formalization prevailed in the matter of the skirt worn outside the trousers upon leaving the house. Usually it was black, but on festive occasions a wife might wear red, and a concubine, peach pink. Widows were restricted to black, but if the husband had already been gone more than a few years and the in-laws were still in the house, lake blue or lilac was

permissible. The tiny pleats in the skirt were the strictest test of a woman's grace and comportment. Ladies of good family walked with such mincing steps on their tiny feet that, although the pleats could not be prevented from moving a little, this motion was restricted to an almost imperceptible quaver of the fabric. A pretty maiden of humble origins, unused to such attire, would almost inevitably create the unfortunate impression of being wind-blown and wave-buffed. Even more trying were the red skirts worn by brides, which were festooned with innumerable sashes, each half an inch wide and tied at the end with a little bell. The bride was to emit no more than a faint chime as she moved, like the sound of bells coming on the wind from a distant pagoda. It was not until the 1920s, when gathered skirts with a freer and more billowy effect came into style, that these sorts of skirts were done away with entirely.

The slightest deviation in the wearing of furs was also seen as the mark of the parvenue. Each sort of fur had its own season, and the distinctions were extremely precise. In the event of an unseasonably cold October, it was permissible to wear three fur-lined jackets, but in choosing just what sort of fur to wear, one had to consider not the weather itself, but the season. In early winter, one wore short-haired furs, starting with Persian lamb, purple lamb shearling, and pearly lamb shearling. Then one went on to "intermediate furs" such as silver squirrel, gray squirrel, "grayback," "foxleg," "sweet-shoulder," and "Japanese sword." Finally came the long-haired furs: white fox, blue fox, Western fox, darkling fox, and purple sable. Purple sable could be worn only by those with official titles. Middle- to lower-class people were much more prosperous in those days than they are now, for most were able to own a sheepskin coat or a "gold and silver" robe patched together from the cheaper white and yellow fur from the belly and back of a fox.

Young ladies lent a spot of brightness to the gloom of winter months with their "Zhaojun" hoods.⁴ In historical illustrations, the hood Zhaojun is wearing as she is sent off on horseback to marry the king of the Huns is of the simple, generous Eskimo type made so popular by Hollywood starlets in recent years. But the nineteenth-century version of the Zhaojun hood was absurdly colorful and gay: a black satin cap of the sort worn by men, but rimmed with fur and decorated with a large red pompom on top and a pair of pink satin ribbons streaming from the back, at the ends of which were

sewn two little gold seals that chimed when they came into contact with each other.

An excessive attention to detail characterized the costume of that era. In modern Western fashion, various unnecessary details cannot be said to have been eliminated, but they always have a purpose: to bring out the blue of one's eyes, to create the illusion of a larger bosom for those who are deficient in that regard, to make someone look a little taller or a little more petite, to focus attention on the waist, or to conceal the curve of the hips. The details of ancient Chinese clothes, however, were completely pointless. You might say that they were purely ornamental, but then why were even the soles of cotton shoes inscribed with intricate patterns? There was seldom an opportunity for the shoe itself to be revealed to view, much less the sole. Even the slightly raised edges of the heels were covered with elaborate designs.

Quilted coats came with either "three pipings and three trimmings," "five pipings and five trimmings," or "seven pipings and seven trimmings," and besides all the pipings and trimmings, the front and the hems were studded with sparkling sequins describing plum and chrysanthemum flowers. The sleeves were finished with embroidered silk borders called railings, which came in seven-inch strips and were cut out to form the characters for "fortune" and "longevity."

This amassing of countless little points of interest; this continual digression, reckless and unreasonable; this dissipation of energy on irrelevant matter, marked the attitude toward life of the leisure class in China. Only the most leisured people in the most leisurely country in the world could appreciate the wonder of these details. It took tremendous amounts of time to create fine distinctions between a hundred lineal designs that were similar but not the same, and just as much effort to appreciate the difference between them.

Chinese fashion designers of old seemed not to have understood that a woman is not a Prospect Garden.⁵ The heaping together of details will inevitably diffuse interest and result in a loss of focus. The history of Chinese fashion consists almost exclusively of the steady elimination of those details.

Things were not so simple as all that, of course. There was also the wax and wane of waistlines. The first important change came around the thirty-second or thirty-third year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu.⁶ The railways,

no longer such a novelty, began to assume an important place in Chinese life, and the fashions and fancies of the great commercial ports were swiftly introduced into the interior. The size of robes gradually dwindled, and wide trimmings and railings went out of date, replaced by extremely narrow strips of fabric. Flat piping was called “chive edges” and round piping was called “lamp wicking” or “incense stick trim.” In times of political turmoil and social unrest—the Renaissance in Europe, for instance—there will always be a preference for tight-fitting clothes, light and supple, allowing for quickness of movement. In fifteenth-century Italy, clothes were so tight that they had to be slit at the elbows, knees, and any other joints. During the days when the revolution in China was brewing, Chinese clothes were nearly bursting at the seams. During the short reign of the “Little Emperor” Puyi, the jacket clung like a sheath to the body. And such were the wonders of the Chinese corset that even then the image of the body beneath the clothing was not realistic, but rather that of a pre-Raphaelite poetic muse. A slim, straight robe would fall to the knees, from whence two tiny trouser legs dropped a timorous hint of even tinier shoes attached apologetically to the ground. There was something infinitely pathetic about those pencil-slim trouser legs. In Chinese poetry, “pitiful” is just another way of saying “lovely.” The instinct to protect the opposite sex, always a part of the masculine makeup, was perhaps given additional impetus by a difficult and transitional era in which the old was giving way to the new. Women, formerly self-possessed in their wide robes and large sleeves, found that it would no longer do to look complacently fortunate. Instead, it was to their advantage to act the “damsel in distress.”

It was, moreover, an age of extremes. The evils of both our system of government and our system of family life were suddenly exposed. Young intellectuals condemned all that was traditional, even all that was Chinese. Conservatives, shocked out of their complacency, redoubled their efforts to suppress them. Wild controversies raged day in and day out, at home, in the newspapers, and in the entertainment quarters. Even the perfumed and powdered actors of the so-called civilization plays of whom wealthy concubines were enamored discoursed ad lib on contemporary politics to their onstage lovers, to the accompaniment of gushing tears.⁷

It was a commotion unprecedented in the long history of a land of moderation and harmony. This atmosphere of hysterical excess gave rise to the

Sycee collar, a tall, stiff affair that reached nearly as far as the nose and, like the Burmese neck rings made of gold that are piled one atop the other until they are almost a foot tall, forced women to stretch and distend their necks. This frightening and formidable collar was altogether disproportionate to the willowy limbs and delicate torso underneath. The top-heavy, unbalanced effect thus created was one of the signs of that time.

With the founding of the Republic, there was a period in which the superficial signs of enlightenment began to appear all around. It was a time when Rousseau's idealistic notions about human rights were taken very seriously. Students enthusiastically rallied around the right to universal suffrage, demonstrated against filial piety, and advocated the promotion of free love. Experiments were even made in the practice of a purely spiritual, Platonic love, seemingly without much success.

Fashion also exhibited an unprecedented innocence, lightness, and delight in itself. "Trumpet sleeves" fluttered fairylike, affording a view of the pale jade of a woman's wrists. Abbreviated jackets fit prettily around tiny waists. Ladies of the upper classes went out in gathered skirts, but at home they were clad in plus fours ending at the knee. And because their silk stockings ended at the knee as well, there were inevitably moments of danger when a bit of flesh happened to be revealed at the juncture. Women of a rather risqué temperament would even allow the tasselled ends of the long, pale-colored silk sash used to belt the pants to dangle provocatively from underneath their short jackets.

Much of the inspiration for fashions in the early years of the Republic derived from the West. The collar was first reduced in height and then practically eliminated altogether. Necklines became round, square, heart-shaped, diamond-shaped; white silk scarves became suitable for all seasons, as were white silk stockings with embroidered designs that crawled up the legs like insects. Social flowers and prostitutes wore spectacles just for the way they looked, since spectacles were a sign of modernity. Such was the extent of the indiscriminate importation of things foreign.

Warlords came and went, each trailing his own dusty wake of officials, government agencies, and legal codes. Fashion tripped behind, trying to catch up, undergoing a thousand transformations. The hem of the jacket, once square, suddenly went round, then just as suddenly became V-shaped,

before changing once again into a hexagon. In the past, women's clothes, like jewelry, could always be sold for ready cash, but in the Republican era, pawnshops no longer accepted them, because once they went out of fashion, they were worthless.

Quick alterations in style do not necessarily indicate mental fluidity or a readiness to adopt new ideas. On the contrary. They may reveal instead a generalized apathy, for frustration in other fields may lead to the forced flow of intellectual and artistic energy into the domain of fashion. In a time of political chaos, people were powerless to improve the external conditions governing their lives. But they could create the environment immediately surrounding them, that is, their clothes. Each of us lives inside our own clothes.

In 1921 women first began to wear the long gown. This garment, called a *qipao* or "banner gown" after the eight military banners under which the Manchus had invaded China in the seventeenth century, had always existed alongside Chinese fashions but remained unnoticed until the twentieth century. Manchu women, disliking the gown's lack of feminine grace, had once shown an inclination to switch to the more alluring Chinese-style jacket and trousers but were severely reprimanded by an imperial edict that banned this practice. With the establishment of unity between the various nationalities by the new republic, women all over the country suddenly began to wear the *qipao*—not because they wanted to show their loyalty to the Manchu Qing dynasty or their support for its restoration, but because they wanted to look like men. From time immemorial, women in China have been identified by the phrase, "hair in three tufts, clothes in two pieces," while men's clothes since the Manchu dynasty have had no break at the waist. The difference between one piece or two pieces seems slight, even inconsequential, but women in the 1920s were quite sensitive to differentiation of this sort. They had been immersed in Western cultural influence and were intoxicated by its calls for equality between men and women, but the yawning gap between these ideals and the reality that surrounded them was a constant humiliation. Soured and angry, they sought to discard everything that smacked of femininity, even to the point of rejecting womanhood altogether. This was why the first *qipao* were angular and puritanical.



1910-1920



1921



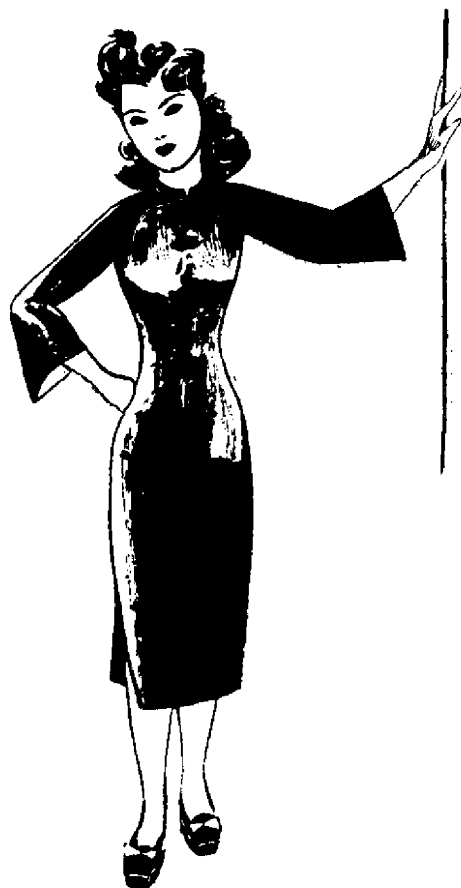
Late 1920s

Figures 3-5

The political misfortunes that befell the nation one after another, within and without its borders, could not help but leave the people disillusioned. There came a day when youthful idealism could no longer maintain itself in the face of unremitting disaster. Fashions began to retract, taking on a curt, tightened look. Trumpet sleeves narrowed into cylinders. By 1930 they



1930s



1942

Figures 6 and 7

had come up to the elbow, while at the same time the high collar began to make a comeback. Unlike the old Sycee collar, which had at least the virtue of cutting across the cheekbones diagonally in order to give even the most recalcitrant of faces a pleasing, melon-seed shape, the new collar was like a

tube pressing under the neck, providing even young women whose skin had yet to sag with a double chin. Such a collar is simply unforgivable. But it did serve quite adequately as a symbol of the deliberate, reasoned sensuality so prevalent in the atmosphere ten years earlier: an upright collar separating a goddesslike head from the voluptuous and sensual body far below. This was parody; this was the mad laughter that comes on the heels of despair.

The double-breasted and belted military-style greatcoat so popular in the West at the time was perfectly suited to the sad, shrill mood in China. Chinese women, moderate to the last, softened this gallant look by wearing it over a floor-length gown of sleek velveteen, with scandalously long slits up the thighs revealing long, loose pants of the same fabric, edged with shiny silver lace. Perhaps the person inside the outfit also represented a similarly strange combination: aggressively idealistic on the outside but a thoroughgoing materialist when it came to the point.

In recent years, the most important alteration in fashion has been the elimination of sleeves (a gradual and apparently quite dangerous procedure, undertaken with the utmost of caution over the course of twenty years). At the same time, collars became much shorter, hemlines rose, and any ornamental features such as pipings and trimmings were done away with entirely, replaced first by cloth-covered “butterfly buttons” and then by hidden metal clasps. In short, the end result was subtraction—the stripping away of all ornaments, whether necessary or unnecessary. What remained was a tight, sleeveless sheath showing the neck, the arms, and the part of the leg beneath the knee.

What is important now is the person: the *qipao* became nothing more than a foil setting off the curvilinear contours of the figure. The garments of the era before the revolution were altogether different. The individual was of secondary concern; what mattered was the creation of a poetic sense of line, an abstract form. Thus it was that the female form was conventionalized. It was only when women took off their clothes that one could become aware of any differences among them.

Fashion in China is not an organized, planned business venture. There are no great fashion houses like Lelong’s and Schiaparelli’s in Paris that monopolize the market and exert influence throughout the world of white

people. Our tailors take no initiative and can only follow the vast, unaccountable waves of communal fancy that become apparent from time to time. And it is for this reason that Chinese fashions can be more reliably read as representing the will of the people.

It is impossible to verify who really starts these fashions, because the Chinese have very little respect for copyrights, and the originators do not appear to mind so very much anyway, imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. Shanghai attributes the recent arrival of medium-length sleeves—sometimes called three-quarter sleeves—to Hong Kong, and Hong Kong people, just as eager to shift responsibility onto someone else, insist that they came from Shanghai.

The billowy return of sleeves heralds a revival of formalism. These latest developments are moving in the direction of tradition. Traditional detail can never be reclaimed, but to the extent possible, traditional lines most certainly may. Utilized in a suitably dynamic manner, they can be adapted to the demands of modern environments. Those who would stretch the front of the *qipao* to apronlike proportions, for example, effectively suggest the hidden allure of spending time in the kitchen.

The modern history of men's clothing has been less eventful. There was only a very brief period—between 1915 and 1919 or 1920—when men's clothes paid a modicum of attention to foppish adornment, edging robes with little “as-you-wish” patterns and allowing the use of fabrics usually reserved for women's clothes. The people of that era, however, felt this to be a strange and rather unsettling phenomenon. Today, Western-style men's suits are cautious and colorless, adhering as closely and as conservatively as possible to the established image of a foreign gentleman. This is notwithstanding the fact that even Chinese-style garments have been trapped for many years within a limited palette of gray, coffee brown, and dark blue and restricted as well by extremely monotonous fabrics and patterns. Men enjoy far more freedom than women, but purely on account of this single and all too conspicuous sort of unfreedom, I would not want to be a man.

Clothes seem to be quite inconsequential. The ancient hero Liu Bei had this to say on the matter of clothes: “Brothers are like one's hands and feet; wives and children are like clothes that can be put on and taken off.”⁸ It will be very difficult indeed for women to reach the point when husbands are

like clothes. One Western author (was it Bernard Shaw?) once complained, "Most women put more careful thought and consideration into the choice of their hats than their choice of husbands." Even the most heartless of women will wax passionate when she starts to speak of "last year's quilted silk gown."

Until the eighteenth century, men both in China and abroad were still able to wear bright colors such as red and green. The proscription of color in men's clothing seems to be a signal characteristic of modern civilization. Putting aside the question of whether or not this proscription has negative psychological effects, one can declare at the very least that this is an unnecessary privation. Life in civilized society has many different kinds of necessary privations, and it seems to me that we should relent a little when it comes to these smaller items, as compensation. There is another argument one might make as well: If men were more interested in clothing, perhaps they would become a bit more complacent, a bit less inclined to use various schemes and stratagems to attract the attention and admiration of society and sacrifice the well-being of the nation and the people in the process of securing their own prestige. Of course, to argue that the task of bringing peace to the world could depend on men dressing up in gaudy splendor would obviously be somewhat ludicrous. An official who happens to be wearing a bright red feather boa with a brocade cummerbund can still play havoc with court protocols. It should be noted by way of reference, however, that in the rational Utopia of the great prognosticator H. G. Wells, male and female citizens alike wear sheer, brightly colored clothes and cloaks made of a gauzy material.

By force of habit, a man dressed even slightly out of the mold inevitably strikes one as strange. Wearing an overcoat over a Chinese-style robe is one example—it would be better simply to add another quilted jacket or a fur robe on top, despite the added bulk. Once when I was on the streetcar, I saw a young man, perhaps a student or perhaps a clerk, who had tailored himself a rather tight mohair robe with green checks over a rice-colored background. He was wearing women's stockings, striped red and green, and an exquisitely carved fake ivory pipe hung from his mouth, although there was no tobacco inside the bowl. He sucked on the pipe for a moment, removed it from his mouth, took it apart piece by piece, put it back together, and then placed it back in his mouth to continue sucking, his face radiant with satisfaction. At

first I found him ridiculous, but then I thought to myself, Why not, if this was what gave him pleasure? . . .

. . . An autumnal chill as dusk approaches and vendors at a vegetable market prepare to pack up and go home. Fish scraps and pale green husks of sweet-kernel corn litter the ground. A child on a bicycle dashes down the street just to show off. He lets out a shout, lets go of the handlebars, and effortlessly shoots past, swaying atop the seat. And in that split second, everyone in the street watches him pass, transfixed by an indefinable sort of admiration. Might it be that in this life that moment of letting go is the very loveliest?

Translated by Andrew F. Jones

Notes

- 1 See Eileen Chang, "Chinese Life and Fashions," *XXth Century* 4, no. 1 (January 1943): 54.
- 2 See Zhang Ailing [Eileen Chang], "Gengyi ji," *Gujin* 34 (December 1943).
- 3 Zhang Ailing [Eileen Chang], *Liuyuan* (Shanghai: Zhongguo kexue gongsi, 1945).
- 4 Wang Zhaojun was a legendary second-century A.D. handmaiden who was dispatched by the emperor to the Huns as a means of pacification.
- 5 Prospect Garden (Daguan yuan) is the large, idyllic, and elaborately wrought fictional space that serves as the principal setting of Cao Xueqin's masterpiece of eighteenth-century fiction, *The Story of the Stone*.
- 6 1907 or 1908.
- 7 An early form of modern drama that incorporated aspects of Chinese opera with Western dramaturgy and flourished in the years after the turn of the century.
- 8 Liu Bei (161–223), a warlord and military strategist of the third century, is most famously depicted in the beloved Ming dynasty adventure *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [*Sanguo yanyi*].

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