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Tailors in 1950s Beijing: Private Enterprise, Career Trajectories, and Historical Turning Points in the Early PRC

Abstract  How new was the New China? This article explores the experience of Beijing tailors in the early years of the PRC in light of this question. After 1949, many long-established tailors simply continued to ply their trade in their old business premises, giving a strong impression of continuity in the social fabric of the city. They were increasingly challenged, however, by newcomers to the industry, including petty entrepreneurs who chose to invest in a socially useful trade, and the graduates of newly established sewing schools, usually women. Policy shifts from the New Democracy period through the “three anti” and “five anti” campaigns to the eve of the socialist transformation in 1956 affected old and new businesses, men and women, in different ways. Overall, the reduction in entrepreneurial freedoms that characterizes this period of Chinese business history was, in this sector of industry and commerce, most strikingly manifest in limitations on what tailors were licensed to make, which had effects on what Beijing people wore. From these various perspectives, 1949 can be seen to be a rather clear dividing line in the history of Beijing, but it was possibly a rather faint line at first, becoming darker and thicker as the 1950s progressed—or should that be “regressed?”

Keywords  1950s Beijing, tailors, “five anti” campaign, socialist transformation

The year 1949 has been scrutinized from a number of perspectives, usually with the question of “change and continuity” hovering in the background somewhere.
The effect has been to render the idea of 1949 rather complex. This was a year of change, constituting a dividing line between two governments, marking ends and beginnings. Yet in some respects the line was permeable. Certainly the impact of developments in the first half of the century can be seen everywhere in the second half, and in some respects it could be argued that even if threads of continuity were broken in 1949, they were picked up again in the Reform Era. A case in point is consumption in contemporary China, which is sometimes analyzed as a Reform Era “revolution” but arguably has deep roots in Republican-era consumer culture.

History has many subjects, and points made about a society considered over a long time-span are not necessarily germane to the historical experience of particular cohorts of people. For those who fled the PRC at its inception, and also for many who came back from overseas to participate in the creation of New China, 1949 was a year of no return. Yet it took a while for this to become apparent. During the New Democracy period, or at least until 1952, it seemed possible that China would have a gentler, more gradualist government than proved to be the case. The onset of the “three anti” and the “five anti” campaigns dashed such hopes, sending China off on the Stalinist road in the view of Jia Xiumei  among others. Or were those campaigns necessary for the New Democracy to work, as Party historian Zhang Hao  has recently argued? If so, the great divide might be found in the slightly later “socialist transformation” of China, rather than in the Communist victory in 1949 or the “five anti” campaign in 1952.

This debate, part of an ongoing discussion over where China went off the rails in the 1950s, identifies the temporal and policy frameworks within which hundreds of millions of people in China adjusted to life in the early years of the PRC. In the present article, a pilot study of chengyipu 成衣铺 (tailor shops) in

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