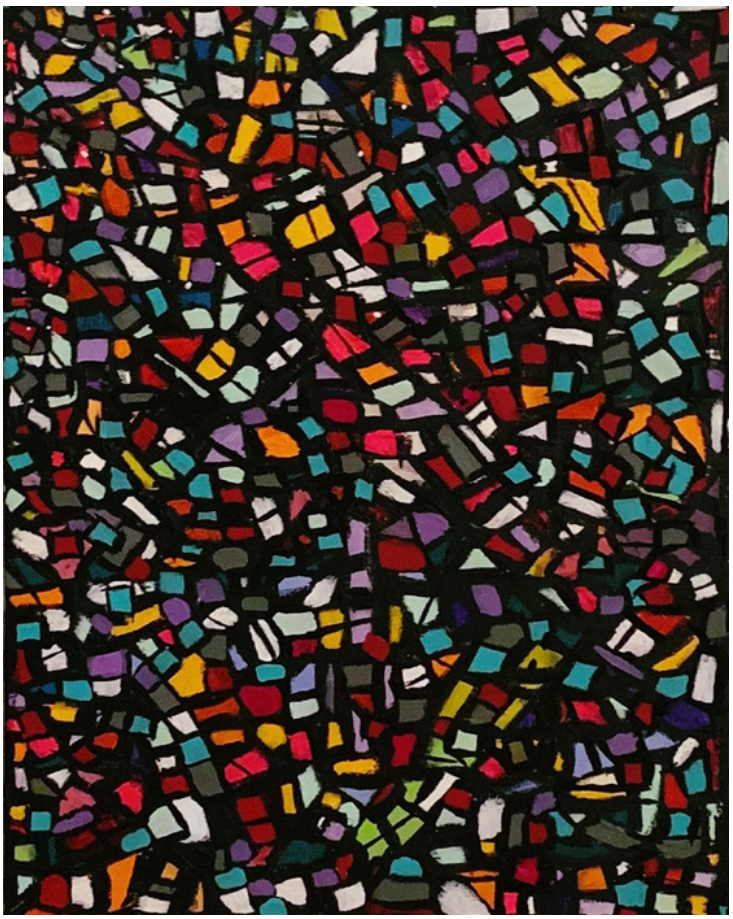
ESSAY

Mandarin Suits

by Catherine C. Con



"A version of order in particles" by Desiree Dufresne

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I only wore that bright yellow mandarin suit once, as a flower girl, for my youngest aunt's wedding. She was married late, so they said. She was the first one in the whole family that obtained a degree and a license in pharmacy. She opened a pharmacy in our neighborhood: the new development by an old village. Her wedding was quite extravagant.

I took a picture in that yellow mandarin suit standing next to her holding a basket of rose petals. In the fuzzy sallow black-and-white photo you can see that the suit was too short for me. The pant legs didn't even reach my ankles. It was 1961 on the island of Taiwan and I was five years old. That suit had been passed down from my oldest cousin to her younger sisters and then to me, so it was used in several Chinese New Year celebrations, moon festivals, and weddings. My youngest aunt boarded with us to attend her pharmacy school, she wanted to thank my parents for their generosity; so she gave me the gift of having a new mandarin suit tailor-made just for me. A mandarin suit made of brocade silk was an investment for a child and a precious gift.

Her wedding was in June, and for the rest of the summer my mother was busy implementing music programs in the kindergartens in Taichung county. Finally, in August, school started and all the music programs were well underway. My mother took a day off from her job as a kindergarten administrator to take me to the tailor in the town center. On the day of our appointment, I woke up early and got ready without any help from the maid. My mother and the maid prepared hard-boiled eggs, sausages, and fried bread for breakfast. I ate everything they put on my plate and drank the whole glass of soy milk without any fuss. My mother also packed a lunch of braised chicken breasts and white bread. She bundled everything in her Furoshiki wrapping cloth and slung the package over her left shoulder. She then called out to me to put on my shoes and get going. Holding my left hand firmly with her right hand, she gently reprimanded me to keep up with her pace on the sidewalk as we rushed to the bus stop.

Our neighborhood was the first and last stop of the new bus route. There was no one on the bus. The windows were open, the lazy morning breeze gently ruffled my hair. I dozed off in the soothing swaying of the bus, dipped in the faint aroma of anise from the chicken. The bus got to the town center. By then, passengers were packed like sardines in a can. My mother scooped me up from my seat, held me in her arms, snaked through walls of people, and wobbled off the bus. She settled me down on the crowded sidewalk, stood me up, smoothed out my clothes, held my left hand tightly in her right hand again, and bid me to stay close to her.

The town center had been booming and expanding with the reconstruction after the war. We zigzagged among fruit and vegetable vendors, small eateries, shoe stores, and pharmacies to

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get to the tailor. Rolls and rolls of fabric lined the three walls of the shop. All the colors and designs imaginable for traditional Chinese attire. The tailor was a short, rotund man with horn spectacles. A measuring tape hung around his neck. He came out from behind the counter where scissors, rulers, and fragments of fabric were strewn about. A couple of sewing machines sat at the back of the counter and two young women were sewing away.

“Oh, *Ni-Hau*, *Chang taitai*, how was your qipao? Did it fit you well?” My mother was wearing an indigo cotton qipao made at his store. The tailor smiled a big grin, showing his gold front tooth. He wore a gold ring with a square jade stone on the pinky of his left hand.

“Yes, Master Lee, it fits quite comfortably.”

“Oh, I see, your clasps are a little bit worn, I will give you a couple of new sets. The girls can repair them for you when you come next time,” he said, while he took the lunch package off my mother’s shoulder and put it on the counter.

My mother nodded. The tailor eyed a young girl on the side sweeping the threads and strips of fabric on the floor. The girl swiftly dropped her broom and pulled up two chairs for my mother and me. She then brought out a cup of cold herbal tea for my mother, and a cup of guava juice with ice for me. We sat down, drank our drinks, and wiped the sweat from our faces with my mother’s white handkerchief.

“It’s already September, but it’s still so hot. Let me turn on the fan for you.” The tailor said. The fans started spinning slowly, a cool breeze circling around us.

“Yes, it’s still hot, but it cools down a little bit after the afternoon rain storms. I’d like to have a mandarin suit made for my daughter. You have something sturdy and reasonably priced?” My mother fanned herself with a magazine she picked up from the counter.

“Oh, I have some new fabrics that just came in from Hong Kong. I know you always want quality products. These are new designs, new patterns, and new materials. Very durable. Here.”

He climbed up a short ladder and pulled down four, five rolls of fabric. The tailor unrolled the fabrics; the colors poured forth like a vibrant waterfall splashing down. My mother felt the corners of each piece of fabric, looking at the patterns. She dabbed her nose gently with her white handkerchief, deep in thought.

“How much is the eternity symbol one? This child suffers from severe allergies. Maybe the long-life symbols will bring her some good health.” The fabric was an orange red with golden eternity symbols intertwined with half bloom orchids.

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The tailor unrolled a large section of the orange red and smiled with wrinkles around his nose. “Oh, *Chang taitai*, you have such exquisite taste. This is top of the line. I will make the suit bigger for your daughter, and the luster of the fabric will never fade.”

The shop girl brought a paper fan for my mother.

“I’ll give you a twenty percent discount. Let me measure her,” said the tailor. He hopped over to me and asked me to stand up for him. The sleeve length covered my whole hand. The pant legs were a couple of inches longer than my legs. The bodice was enough to fill another one of me. He briskly wrote down all the measurements and calculated the numbers with an abacus.

“Oh, and the clasps, choose your clasps.” He jogged to the back of the counter and pulled out a flat tray with a sample of six different style clasps.

“Hello, little princess, which kind of design do you like for your clasps?” I looked at my mother and then I pointed to a pair. His stub pencil ran up and down the creased notepad, those short plump fingers flew on the abacus.

“Ok, those clasps are twenty dollars each set…” He ginned fawningly, eyeballing both of us.

“Why so expensive? You get those clasps ready made from the factories nowadays. They are mass produced and inexpensive.” My mother retorted in shock.

“Oh, *Chang taitai*, you know my shop, we make everything by hand for these silk mandarin suits. Only the cotton clasps are from the factories and they are the best quality too.”

My mother stood up and held her lunch parcel under her arm, ready to walk out of the store.

“Oh, okay, I’ll give you two sets of clasps for free. And you don’t have to put any down payment.”

He came over to grab my hand and pulled me to the back of the shop. I scrambled to my feet to follow him, careful not to drop my empty guava juice cup.

“Come, I’ll warm your lunch for you. Eat here. My wife made seaweed fish ball soup this morning. Have some of that soup with your lunch.”

I didn’t realize how hungry I was. My mother sighed, frowned slightly, walked to the back of the shop. A small kitchen was set up with a square dining table. Some white pepper, sesame oil canisters, and a flask of chopsticks were placed at the center of the square table. His wife put our bread and chicken on a plate and into a steamer and brought out two bowls of steaming seaweed and fish ball soup.

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The tailor patted my hand. “Go ahead, little princess. Have some lunch. You like fish balls and seaweed?”

My mouth watered with the smell of seaweed, but I wasn’t sure if I could have the soup. I looked at my mother. She nodded. I sat down and started blowing on the hot soup and sipping it. It so happened that it was one of my favorite soups. My mother put the warmed chicken in between the bread slices for me when they came out of the steamer. I gobbled them down fast.

When we were done eating, my mother dabbed her mouth with her white handkerchief and wiped my mouth with it too. She then packed up her empty lunch box in her cloth wrapper and walked to the front of the shop. I followed her, looking down at the floor.

“One more set of clasps free, that’s the bottom price, three hundred eighty. I only break even, I don’t make any money, *Chang taitai*.” Beads of sweat on the tailor’s forehead now.

“Ok, three hundred eighty. When will it be ready?” My mother asked, waving her hand in the air. I leaned to her and hugged her thigh.

“Two weeks. Before the moon festival. She can use it for the festival to ask the Moon Lady to bring her a good husband.” He displayed such a big smile that his eyes disappeared behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon by the time we got out of the tailor’s; the sun was blaring white heat onto the sidewalk. The hot air was heavy with moisture. It made waves on people, trees, flowers, and shop windows. Afternoon thunderstorms would come around three or four o’clock to cool the island down. My mother took me to have shaved ice with condensed milk and red beans before we took the bus home. Savoring the shaved ice, I told my mother I wanted to work in that tailor shop when I grew up, I liked the fish ball soup and the smell of the fabric.

“Nonsense, you are going to study and go to university. You are going far, you are not going to be stuck in that little shop.” Dropping her spoon, my mother gripped my arm resolutely. Her grip was so firm and sudden that it made me gulp a mouthful of icy cold air. It hurt so badly that I started twitching my body to get out of her grasp. My arm ached from her tight clutch, tears filled my eyes. I looked up at her, my mouth trembled.

“Silly girl!” She sighed and let go of me. “Eat your shaved ice.”

She calmed down after a couple of minutes and patted my head.

“Don’t ever talk nonsense like that. That kind of life is not for my daughter.”

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Yes, I made it to the university. I did go far, just as my mother wished; I crossed the Pacific Ocean and came to America to further my studies. After I had my own home and settled down, my mother came to visit and brought me my old things from Taiwan, including my mandarin suits. Except for the smell of moth balls, these child-size suits looked practically brand new. When my girl was five, I put one of my old mandarin suits on her for Chinese New Year. I had to ask her to stay still for me to hook the clasps. These handmade clasps from the old world were so dainty, delicate, sophisticated, and sturdy. They reminded me of my mother's hope for me to acquire knowledge and to see the world; not unlike that of mine for my daughter.

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