

My Love Affair with Qi Pao

By Pauline Ong

The National Museum of Singapore's exhibition *In the Mood for Cheongsam* inspired FOM member Pauline Ong to share some family photos. The exhibition continues through 28 June.



◀ *Soldiers of the Blue Banner during the reign of Emperor Qianlong*

Qi Pao versus Cheongsam

From 1644 to 1912, the ruling Manchurian families were subdivided into a system of 8 'banners', each identified with a colour. In times of war, the Manchu military clothing and banners also reflected these colours. Their garments were thus known as *qi pao*; *qi* means 'banner' and *pao* means 'gown/robes'. On 1 October 1949, China became the People's Republic of China, under the Chinese Communist Party. Amongst those who fled China for Hong Kong were tailors from Shanghai. Eventually, as *qi pao* disappeared from the mainland, the term *cheongsam* (long garment), as it is known in the Cantonese dialect of Hong Kong, took its place.



▶ *My Maternal Grandparents (circa 1912)*
Grandma, who was the home-tutored daughter of a wealthy rice merchant of Suzhou, is wearing a *qi pao* (an early, loose-fitting version) with a well-fitted collar that has contrasting binding with two buttons. She is wearing a black silk skirt, hiding her delicate, bound feet.



▶ *My mother (1940)*
Happy days in a garden. Mamee is in her favourite beige *qi pao* with triple trimming in brown silk and very high-heeled shoes. Off perhaps, to dance the evening away at the Peace Hotel?



▶ *My grandparents surrounded by five of their children (circa 1913)*. It must have been autumn as everyone is wearing light, silk padded clothes. While my grandpa was wearing a western, winged-collar, tie and jacket, grandma was wearing a short *ao* (a short jacket or coat) over a black skirt. My Third Uncle, in the centre, is wearing a short-sleeved *pao sin* jacket, over his long silk *chang san*. My two aunts, around 12 and five years old, were also wearing short *ao* with very high collars to show off their 'oval' faces. Being unmarried, they were wearing light-coloured silk trousers.

▶ *My parents in Shanghai (1950)*
My parents saying goodbye just before leaving Shanghai for Hong Kong. They moved to Singapore in 1953. Note that Mamee is still wearing a *qi pao* under her winter jacket; Daddy is carrying his trilby hat.



▶ *My mother (Mamee) (1937)*
She is wearing a long, dark-brown *qi pao* with a jacket and 3-inch high-heeled shoes. Notice the white wool 'flower' in her hair. She was in mourning over the passing of her mother.



▶ *Our family at the Botanic Gardens, Singapore (around 1954)*
Even in the hot weather, my mother is still in *qi pao*. Daddy is wearing the 'tropical outfit' of white shirt, white shorts and white leather shoes.

▶ *My mother revisits China (1980), here she is with some former classmates*
Notice how no-one is wearing *qi pao* or any semblance of one. All wore grey Mao jackets or blouses over simple trousers and skirts.





◀ *Students at St Stephen's Girls' College*
Even as a 5-year-old Grade 1 pupil at St Stephen's Girls' College Hong Kong, I wore a light blue *qi pao* in summer and dark blue padded *qi pao* in winter.



◀ *In a long qi pao dancing with my favourite partner, my husband (July 2005)*

▶ *My husband, Dr Ong Beng Hock, and I (September 1967)*
I have always loved to wear the *qi pao*. Here I am carrying my mother's fur coat and wearing *qi pao*, en route to brave a London winter with my husband.



▶ *Me with Mamee (1994)*
My mother had an eye for fabric and its designs and was a consummate storyteller about the *qi paos* of the old days – she was my *qi pao* inspiration.



▶ *My daughter and I wearing – yes, qi pao!*



▶ I have been guiding since 1998 and have always presented myself in *qi paos*, except when I had to dress up in character as a Samsui Woman. My *qi paos* are all hand-tailored for me from batik, *ikat*-weave, Thai and Indian silk, even cotton wraps from Jim Thompson.



Pauline Ong has been an FOM Volunteer Museum guide since 1998. She is a member of the Cheongsam exhibition's Research Team at NMS.

Don't miss the Monday Morning Lecture on 4 June, *My Love Affair with Qi Pao*, presented by Pauline Ong and Chin Siat Mui at the National Museum of Singapore. This lecture will be followed by a free guided tour of the special exhibition, *In the Mood for Cheongsam*, by members of the Research Team.

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