

Eye on China: It's all in the Bag

by Li Tie



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It's All in the Bag**



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Preface

Since 1949, the Chinese people have taken active part in creating their own history, seeking glory through ideals and dreams. History has chronicled a string of luminous stories, as highlighted reflections on 60 years of social changes captured as snapshots. When the stories are sorted through and packed into various "containers," it is marvelous to discover captivating bags roomy enough to fit all the mirrors and snapshots through which everyone can see the panorama of China.

The magical containers actually refer to those familiar bags we find on our own backs, shoulders or in our hands. Starting 60 years ago, the simple and plain military satchels were considered as a token of honor and fashion over a long period of time; 30 years ago, the bags that Chinese people began to carry with them became diversified and newfangled in style and material, as well as with a greater variety of contents, when the opening-up reforms unlocked the gates of our nation

after decades or even centuries of self-isolation; and today, the latest bags have been taking the fashion lead in the ever-changing lives of the Chinese people.

What has been changing about bags in China is not only their appearance but also the contents found inside them. Do you still remember the books of Quotations from Chairman Mao carried by everyone in their military satchels? Or candy wrappers in schoolbags? And then those faddish big first-generation mobile phones? ... These things were all whizzed away from us with the swiftness of the passing years, until bags in the present are brimming full with new cell-phones, laptops, MP3 players, digital cameras, car keys and dazzling name-brand cosmetics...., ordinary luxuries we never dared to dream of 60 or even 30 years ago.

The things we have carried in our bags may pile up far beyond our limited memories, but they often become cultural signs or markers of social, economic and historic changes. Bags and their contents in different periods depict both the living standards and spiritual vision of our people, while revealing the economic and cultural development of society, and also reflecting historical and life changes in our vast country.

Bags entangle themselves with complex stretches of history, producing a stream of stories reflecting a dynamically changing country.

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1950s:

In a golden age of idealism, hazy memories of inspiring lives linger from a time of people's striving for a better future.

1960s:

The expression of fashion of the time became unified by a highly promoted sense of collective consciousness.

Late 1970s:

Great changes through awoken individuality and diversified self-expression gradually became the leading fashion style.

In the 1950s, China witnessed great and profound social changes in all aspects. In the New China founded in 1949, which had just shaken off great tribulation and oppression, people were in a celebratory mood as exhilarating as the clear skies. The country experienced vigorous development and the people were in high spirits.

People at that time channeled all their energy, including for aesthetic and fashion pursuits, into selfless passion for work. The bags they carried were as simple and plain as their basic garb. Whether they had military satchels, old-fashioned travel bags, homemade satchels or schoolbags, all were in an androgynous style and multipurpose.

Cotton suits and cross-body or sling green military satchels were the most common style during the 1950s and 1970s in China. Military satchels, caps, uniforms and padded coats developed into a fad among city youths, with green as the most fashionable color of the time.



• People enjoying breakfast in Dongdan, Beijing, in the 1950s

Military Satchels: Honor and Fashion

When: 1950s - early 1980s

Who: people of all ages

Occasions: work, leisure, school

Features: green, cotton, durable





Military satchels are made of coarse cloth or refined canvas with white cloth partition and canvas strap. There were two main forms of military satchels: one with a locking buckle on the flap, and the other with a hidden locking buckle.

In China, there have so far been no bags that have remained in vogue longer, as influential or popular as military satchels. During the 1950s and early 1980s, Chinese people of different ages were all using military satchels.

In those years, people were living a simple life with similar income and had basic preferences for clothes that were mainly green, blue and gray. The green military satchels thus catered to their consensual tastes. Government officials, workers and students all wore military satchels over their shoulders as a badge of honor.

Teenagers in the 1960s and 1970s were still particular about fashion colors. Green military suits were the biggest trend, especially those with four pockets. Khaki military suits had also been once in vogue, before olive achieved greater popularity. Workers, farmers, teachers, cadres and some intellectuals all wore casual military suits and carried military satchels. Grass green jackets and trousers began to take over China's garment market.

★
★
**Liu Xiangfu, male,
61 years old,
architect in Jinan, Shandong**

I got my first military satchel in 1965, with the help of my high-school classmate. I remember the things we used to carry in the satchels were all for daily use. In the 1960s and 1970s in China, there was one daily necessity for almost everybody—the “Little Red Book.”

Link: The Little Red Book



The “Little Red Book” refers to *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, once the most popular book in China. From its first publication in May 1964 up to 1976, the total official printing reached 1.055 billion copies. In those years, people took the “Little Red Book” along with them every day. It seemed that reading the book topped all daily needs including meals and sleep.