

March 11, 2012, 1:41 am | Communist Bling: It's All the Rage in China | International Herald Tribune

HONG KONG — They arrived at the annual meetings in Beijing — and these were card-carrying Communist Party members, mind you — as if they had just descended from Cleopatra's barge, or at least had maxed out their other cards, the platinum ones, at Dior, Vuitton and Hermès.

It's not as if we expected them to wear their dowdy hand-me-downs and leftovers from the Cultural Revolution — the grim Mao tunics and the collective-farm-girl get-ups. But delegates to the so-called Two Meetings last week showed off some serious bling and couture, which naturally drove the Sinosphere crazy.

Photos circulated all week of party members wearing Hermès belts, Armani jackets, Chanel boots and Dior glasses. Many were spotted carrying high-end designer bags — Burberry, Marc Jacobs, Céline. Many descended from gleaming black Audi A6's, the conveyance of choice for the well-heeled and the well-connected.

"Audi is still the de facto car for government officials," Wang Zhi, a veteran Beijing taxi driver, told my colleagues Andrew Jacobs and Adam Century. "It's always best to yield to an Audi — you never know who you're messing with, but chances are it's someone self-important."

Before the gatherings, Chinese media outlets had received an instruction from the Central Propaganda commissars, saying, "Don't hype the Two Sessions' 'gourmet food' and the clothing and accessories of representatives!"

Another message, directed at the delegates, reminded them: "After you eat, remember to go to the Great Hall to clap! Raise your hands! Clap! Raise your hands! Clap! Raise your hands!"

Most delegates followed those postprandial orders and dutifully clapped at all manner of nitwit legislative proposals, from the nomination of the peony as the national flower to the issuing of nationwide shopping vouchers to stimulate consumption.

But some delegates, of course, nodded off, and photo galleries of the deep-sleepers were quickly curated online. (They were helped this year by an interactive "billion-pixel photograph" of the joint opening assembly.)

One snarky and popular blog site, the Ministry of Tofu, said the fashion parade "created a backlash among Chinese netizens, who usually show zero tolerance for public display of luxury goods and wealth, and sneer ruthlessly at knockoffs."

One commenter on the site called the joint meetings "Beijing Fashion Week." Another wrote: "Our country has grown strong! Those people's delegates have been leading a decent life on our behalf!"

Li Xiaolin, a ranking member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, drew particular scorn for wearing what appeared to be a pink number from Emilio Pucci that reportedly retails for nearly \$2,000.

Danwei, another widely followed blog, posted a photo of Ms. Li (wearing the Pucci) next to a scrum of muddy, shabbily dressed Chinese children.

Ms. Li, 50, is the daughter of a former premier, Li Peng, whose résumé includes declaring martial law in Beijing and green-lighting the violent army crackdown on students and pro-democracy protesters around Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Ms. Li is the head of China Power International Development, a major power producer. So she can certainly afford the Pucci.

A proposal made by Ms. Li last week suggested that her hardline roots run deep and daughterly. It seems she wants the government to start keeping Stasi-like records — what she calls “morality files” — on each citizen in order to “discipline everyone and make sure everyone has a sense of shame.”

“The most terrifying proposal we have heard over the last few days is the one by Li Xiaolin to establish a morality file on each citizen,” said the poet and critic Ye Kuangzheng, quoted on the blog Seeing Red in China. “The next step would then be issuing a ‘Good Citizen Certificate.’

“The government doesn’t have to worry about the morality of the people; it is the people who need to be concerned with the ethics of the government.”

Peter Marino, the New York architect who designed a store in Shanghai for Chanel, tells my colleague Andrew Goldman in an interview in the Times’ Magazine that urban Chinese women “take this fashion thing seriously.”

“The rice-paddy farmers are not buying Louis Vuitton bags,” Mr. Marino said, “but the upwardly mobile ones in Shanghai, who are all working in Wall Street-type firms, are infinitely better-dressed than people in the West.”

Another object of some attention at the Two Meetings was Mao Xinyu, 42, a grandson of Mao Zedong. He is an army general, a longtime academic and a part-time professor at Guangzhou University’s Songtian College where he teaches history courses in — get this — Mao Zedong Thought.

General Mao, apparently a patron not of Armani but the Big-and-Tall Generals Shop, was mobbed by reporters and photographers upon his arrival for the C.P.P.C.C. meeting. He seemed surprised (and more than a little bothered) at all the fuss. He waved off the journalists, saying repeatedly, “No comment.” (A video of his run to daylight is embedded below.)

In comments to The Beijing Times, the general said he was supporting anti-corruption legislation, noting that his political outlook had been informed by the genetic legacy of the Great Helmsman:

“Chairman was very strict with his descendants, and he himself was also very incorruptible. Look at our family, among all those descendants of Chairman, can you find anyone who is an official or does business? You can find none! Why? Because Chairman had set a good example.”