

The Clothes Changing in China from the 19th Century to the Middle 20th Century

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## Introduction

Sarah Covington explicitly noted that clothing or the mode of dressing signifies or illustrates understanding of modernity as an extension of ancestral tradition (Covington 2004). Over 100 years ago, the people of China clothed in outfits that were very different from those dressed nowadays. Chinese men normally robed in a short coat and long free moving garment. The upper-class females, that were hardly ever seen in public, dressed in a long coat over a pleated skirt. It is not always simple to differentiate between ordinary clothes and stylish clothes. Particularly, these days, couturiers repeatedly use cheap and well-designed clothing materials for creativity.

This paper will concentrate on the features of qualitative changes in Chinese clothing and their connection with Imperial, Socialist and Republican Eras. Afterwards, the paper will discuss how clothes connect with important cultural matters like the edge between custom and transformational mode of dressing. Narrative report on the past events in China illustrated that clothes served as a symbol in social relationship to denote social class, political loyalty, and, ironically, individual personality.

The paper will further address aspects of transformation and persistence in Chinese mode of dressing from Imperial to Republican China. In what follows, the paper will discuss how dress expresses important cultural matters like the line between folklore and transformation, East and West, global and local.

Clothing conveys a certain message, different from that in verbal communication or writing; what it expresses has, as a rule, to do with the self, primarily social identity, as it is shaped by assessments of cultural attitude to sexual category, social ranking, age, etc. (Finnane 1996). Clothing historiographers outline the history of clothes by

examining various sources. These sources signify that though daily outfits do not transform as fast as trendy dresses, they do constantly change.

### Brief History of China

In Chinese history, clothes act as a sign of social grading, class, political commitment, and personal identity as well. From the 19th to the middle of 20th century, China experienced social structure transformation from the feudal society to the democratic society. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) was the last imperial dynasty in China (Hucker 1995). Established by the Manchus, it was the succeeding non-Han Chinese empire. It kept its unique minority life style (Perkins 662). During the 19th century, the territory was changed from within and posed to danger by imperialism. The earliest Opium battle (1840) led to the Treaty of Nanjing (1842) that forced China to open doors to the rest of the world (Polachek, 1992). Before the revolution in 1911 that overthrew Qing's imperial rule, the empire had faced the challenges not only from the west world, but also from the violent movements within the empire, such as Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864), Self-Strengthening movement, and Hundred Day's Reform (1899).

### Traditional Chinese Clothing

The mode of clothing in China could not merely change over a long period of time, but it regularly changed drastically due to Dynastic occurrences or the Imperial ruling of a new sovereign. In prehistoric feudal culture, the Chinese social status could simply be discerned from their every day dressing code, particularly for the common people and the highborn. Among the people with the high status, only the monarch was allowed to wear the yellow color of dress with the dragon badge.

## The Roles of Clothing

Since the ancient period, the clothing style of Chinese people has changed beyond recognition. Many questions have been raised as to why humans began to wear clothes. One of the primary theories is called supposed diffidence or infamy theory. This hypothesis is based on the biblical story of the beginning of human existence. In the first book of the Bible, the first inhabitants of the earth, Adam and Eve, found out they were unclothed after the serpent had tricked them to eat an apple from the tree of knowledge (Ashelford, 1983). Embarrassed of their nudity, they made clothes using fig leaves to cover themselves. During the nineteenth century, the majority of the Westerners supposed that humans wear cloth mostly because of decency. With the advancement of a profane broad analysis of the human history and development, scientists started proposing other theories. Some presented reasons that the origin of dressing was practical as people had to shield the body from challenging environment conditions. The others stated that some clothing was made for sexual appeal in order to show beauty of the body.

Modern researchers suppose that clothes represent distinctiveness and that it is a way of nonverbal communication. In conventional societies, clothes act as a means of pointing out an individual's age, gender, status, native land, religion, social rank, and profession. In contemporary developed societies, the dressing style is not as strictly controlled as it was in the past, and people have a choice to decide what they want to pass on through dressing. On the other hand, clothes can even present substantial information about the person, as well as personal traits and financial status.

Even in modern political system, clothes may symbolize social status. Brand clothes symbolize an apparent mark of an individual's economic status. Clothes most observably describe a social position (e.g., uniforms and robes worn by the clergy). Clothes also deduce meaning from the society occasion or event, by indicating involvement in social activities.

The contemporary societies consist of diverse people sharing various social characteristics, and each group has its own way of life and actions. Therefore, unlike style of dressing reveals people's mode of conduct and beliefs. This distinction can show which group an individual fits in.

#### Local Differences in Textiles

The textiles used for manufacturing clothes differ from one culture to the other. Some are suitable only for a particular type of weather. For example, woven wool is often used for warm clothes, and slim threaded yarn is worn in humid weather. In the olden days, the fabric makers relied on the raw materials which were obtainable in the surrounding area, like flax which is made in Egypt, yarn from India, as well as silk from China. In addition to the utility and ease of use, the society is likely to get local or public uniqueness from their most distinctive dresses (Finnane 2008). For example, 100 years ago, the Chinese people who were dressed in silk looked down on wool with disdain, which they regarded as the cloth of uncultured people.

In the present day, such thoughts of distinctiveness have changed due to international commercial exchange and cultural globalization.

Asia which has the biggest territory with sixty percent of the earth's inhabitants can be generally separated into Chinese and Indian geographic regions. Chinese mode

of dressing has changed the Japanese and the Asian peninsula mode of dressing, as well as that of the bordering countries, while Indian mode of dressing has shaped or transformed that of its neighboring countries. China is the most densely populated nation in the world with fifty six distinctly different cultural groups, primarily separated by religious beliefs and language. Due to China's land mass and diverse populace, several designs of cloths have been worn by the Chinese, irrespective of class or social status (Finnane 2008). However, a lot of Westerners believe that the mode of dressing in China has remained the same for about five thousand years. In fact, fashion has changed to a great extent over a period of 100 years. Though, the primary mode of dressing has remained a stretched, wide-sleeved dress that is joined with a band of fabric around the waistline that supports a kilt or trousers by wearing it over the skirt or the trousers.

#### History of Chinese Clothing

Research on the Chinese mode of dressing shows that dressing style of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries can easily be differentiated. A common women's mode of dressing in south-central part of China was a dressing gown of decorative silk, which was tied around the waist. Territorial Army of the same era was dressed in armor made from small metal plates, over free fitting clothes covering both the hips or lap and trousers.



(China's Traditional Dress 2010)

From the late 6th century throughout the 7th century, for example, Chinese women wore long dresses hanging from the waist and undersized coats. This mode of dressing created the modern fashion for Korean women. In the 8th century, women from the royal clan of China regularly wore colorful clothing, with lengthy, flowing coverings with wide sleeves.

When the Manchus invaded China in 1644, they changed Chinese men's official mode of dressing to make it similar to theirs. “The dress of the defeated Ming dynasty could only be assumed at death” (Finnane, 2008, p. 26). However, women were exempt from this rule; they still wore lengthy loose flowing garments and could be easily differentiated from women from the Manchu region.

The mode of dressing in China was determined by gender, an individual's position in a social hierarchy, and particular social event (Finnane, 2008). A Chinese position in the society was clearly revealed by his/her mode of dressing and by emblems of social class that signified his/her precise status in the social power structure. The class of people occupying the highest position in the social hierarchy had

to wear stretched robes. Both men and women peasants dressed in short coats (Finnane, 2008). The dragon robe (a lengthy robe decorated with dragon sign needlework) was worn by the members of the royal court. This mode of dressing was established in 1000.

The set of laws regarding the clothing seems to change from time to time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese traditionalists expressed discontentment with the fast pace at which their mode of dressing was changing and that the people from the lowest social class were taking over the modes of dressing of their masters. Although the design of outfits changes according to social ranking, it seems that a specific tailored manner has existed in China and most Asian countries in different centuries (Finnane, 2008).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional mode of dressing started to change to designs that joined a part of Asian and a part of European styles. For example, in the 1920s, Chinese women started putting on the *Qi pao* (or in Cantonese, the *cheongsam*), a fashionable slender wear with a high neckline and a split skirt that is traditional for Chinese, Manchu, and European designs (Finnane, 2008). “In the 1930s, clearly, China was a place where women could be categorized as modern or not modern, and clothing was a major signifier of the position a woman occupied on the spectrum of modernity” (Finnane 2008, p.5).



(China's Traditional Dress 2010)



(Qipao 2010)

After a socialist government of Mao Zedong had taken over power in China in 1949, the so-called Mao outfit (a short coat and trousers of deep, dark blue yarn) gained the popularity in China. The clothing, which appears like a uniform, was dressed by Mao Zedong.

The whole country from top to bottom presented a spectacle of blue, green and grey. Styles and varieties for the mail part were all attempted imitations of army, navy, and airforce uniforms (Finnane 2008, p.229).

Soon after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Chinese started to select individual mode of dressing.

#### Data on Customary Chinese Clothing

In the Chinese manner of distinguishing life essential needs, clothes stand out at the top. In China, with the highest population and traditional record of clothing and decoration on silks, there have been made several archeological discoveries proving the change in clothing style, as well as their characterizations in the olden tradition. The

difference in the mode of dressing not only existed between people in the same family, but also to a certain extent, was easily noticeable even in different regions within the Empire.

The general uniqueness of the Chinese decoration of clothes can be summed up having the following unique features, such as brilliant colors, improved craftsmanship, and rich and elaborate patterns (Jones and Peter 2000).

From the moment clothing first became one of the necessities in people's lives, it began symbolizing differences in position in social hierarchy, particular way of life, philosophical views and ethnicity. The history of clothing can as a result present clear and deep perception into the growth of civilization (Jones and Peter 2000).

To the Chinese people the mode of dressing is highly rated among life's needs. In addition, Chinese design or style of clothes can be traced back to the late succeeding part of the first identified period of human culture, distinguished by the use of stone equipment which started about 750,000 to 500,000 years BC, continued until the last part of the last ice age, and thus ended in about 8,500 years BC. Archeological discoveries have exposed that about 20,000 years ago the people who inhabited what is now known as the Zhoukoudian area of Beijing wore accessories, in the shape of meticulously engraved tiny white stone beads, olive-colored pebbles, animal teeth, clam shells and bones. Outward or visible feature of a person was most likely not the main worry of the people putting on accessories at that time, for accessories were also used as means of defense against morally unacceptable behavior. The Chinese had also developed the skill of stitching together animal skins.

Over a thousand archeological sites dating to the Neolithic age (6,000-2,000 BC) have been discovered in China in almost all parts of the country. The most important method of food manufacturing during this age has changed from prehistoric hunting and fishing to more established agriculture. There is also early proof of weaving and pottery making. Very old decorated pottery from 5,000 years ago was found in Qinghai Province of Western China, ornamented with dancing figures. Some of the figures have attractive hair accessories, while others have decorative waist bands. Some wear skirts which are more reminiscent of European and American styles than of conventional Chinese dressing.

In the bordering province of Gansu, comparable items were recovered through digging, designed with visual representation of people dressed in what was later called the guankoushan. This was a distinctive mode of historical clothing in China and it comprised of a piece of fabric with a hole in the middle for the head and a rope joined at the waist, giving the garment a dress-like outward show. A different piece of ceramic ware made of clay and baked in an oven depicts a young girl with long hair, dressed in outfit with complicated patterns, which gives the outward show of beautiful dressing. In addition to the clay pots, images of early Chinese clothing were found in rock paintings, which show people putting on earrings. Historical items have also been found in the Daxi Neolithic site of Wushan, Sichuan, including earrings made of jade, ivory and turquoise in a variety of shapes and sizes.

#### Archaic rules and regulations guiding attires in China

With the establishment of different socio-economic classes came the passing of rules and regulations on every day mode of dressing, in order to differentiate the rich

from the poor. The Zhou Dynasty (1,046-256 BC) brought about national laws on clothing and individual accessories, differentiating various categories of clothing together with court gown and dresses for wedding ceremony. This custom was out of order during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), when strict rules on mode of dressing, cloth and accessories production were abolished, and the unrestrained privileged class holding hereditary mode of dressing was developed (Perkins 2000).

The rulers of the Han Dynasty (206-220 AD) adopted the Zhou Dynasty traditions in passing laws on clothing and accessories.

The Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties (220-589) represented a period of ideological noticeable heterogeneity, cultural success and important scientific development, in spite of recurrent wars and shift in power. During this era, the Wei and Jin developed a distinct upper-class style. The traditional Han culture was changed by northern nomadic ethnic groups when they migrated into central China and settled down with the Han people, influencing and being influenced by the Han mode of dressing.

As soon as China was reunified at some point in the Sui Empire, the traditional mode of dressing of Han people became popular again. Throughout the Tang Dynasty (618-907) that came after, a well-built national power and a more comfortable social order led to a new style in a mode of dressing. For example, women started to wear a low-cut, undersized dress or even narrow-sleeved men's clothing.

#### Twentieth century clothing in China

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modern cloths progressively substituted materials prepared or created in the long-established ways. Stylish and elaborately made ready-made

cloths of western styles found their way into Chinese world of commercial activity, and large-scale machine controlled fashion designing became more popular than the time consuming long-established techniques of hand-rolling, bordering, engraving and embroidery (Perkins 2000).

Looking back at the twentieth century's Chinese clothing, we observe a broad range of designs of *cheongsam*, the Sun Yixian clothing of unique design worn by members of the Sun Yat-sen as a means of recognition, *Qipao*, and several other brought from the Western world all differentiating different periods in history. The *Qipao*, now considered as the usual Chinese dress, became fashionable only in the 1920s. Originating as Manchurian women's clothing, incorporating Han clothing traditions and the designs of the twentieth century's western dresses, it has now advanced into a foremost trend item within the international fashion industry.

In 1978, China began to change their old mode of dressing and chose the free access policy. From that time, Western mode of dressing and the culture have come into ordinary Chinese people's way of life. As a part of the dressing code copied from the western world, a chain of trendy western clothing, resembling the incessant twist, is slowly changing the Chinese style of dressing (Perkins 2000).



(Qi'pao 2010)

From the late 1970s, in addition to requesting fashion designers to sew their dresses, the Chinese have started to buy factory-made and immediate use clothes. Clothes manufacturing industry sprang up and quickly developed together with the free access policy. "The influence of the new trends was already obvious on the streets, mainly due to the appearance of skirts and dresses" (Finnane, 2008). A variety of shapes and colors appeared in the Chinese dressing style. Looking at the patterns of several kinds of fashionable outfits, it is not hard to distinguish Chinese accepted and recognized dressing from the western mode of dressing.

Chinese people started to wear jeans in the late 1970s, and afterward, they have become more and more popular, not only among teenagers, but among people of all the social statuses and ages.

In the year 1990, different kinds of jeans were created as well as miniskirts, undersized jeans, sleeveless garment worn underneath a coat, caps, shoulder bags, and rucksacks (Weiditz 1994). Besides, the colors were not restricted to blue. Furthermore, toward the end of 1990, new types of fabric or textiles, for example, water washing slim textiles, were introduced into the Chinese market.

At the beginning of 1980, bat-like design or type of clothes was in fashion. With different kinds of necklines, bat slipover sleeves covering the whole body combined into one design. There was no hemming on the sleeves of the cloth. The lower border of the sweater was pulled or drawn tight. Soon after that, more styles were created such as the bat jackets. It is rather remarkable that this fashion of clothing design re-emerged in the year 2004 (Perkins 2000).

Until the mid 1980s, there were different styles and designs of cloth despite the fact that the recognition circle became less important. New designs and textiles were continuously brought into the market. As for the topmost external clothing, there were all brands of tops, coats of different colors, shirts and yarn sweaters patterned with alternating squares of color.

The Western traditional mode of dressing (putting on jacket and trousers or shirts with ties) became a social mode of fashion for official events in China, acknowledged by most of the office professionals, though the design constantly varied in style. "Around the country, millions of men must have been learning how to knot a tie" (Finnane, 2008, p.266). Though short skirt was popular in the European market in the 1960s, it was not widely accepted in the Chinese world until the 1980s when it was embraced in China. "In 1985 black leather mini-skirts were to be seen, short till they could not be shorter" (Finnane, 2008, p. 267).

With this acceptance of modern way of dressing, China was classified as a country which has maintained the same pace with the international world of fashion.

### Conclusion

China, as a country comprising of fifty-six cultural groups that have continually interacted, has gone through constant changes in mode of dressing and customs. Style differences are not only apparent between diverse dynasties, but are also quite distinct even in different periods within the same dynasty (Perkins 2000). The important characteristics of Chinese clothing are bright colors, skilled craftsmanship and flamboyant feature or design. Noticeable heterogeneity in Chinese style or design can be found between diverse ethnic groups, environments, traditions and customs, way of

living that reveals an individual's beliefs and attitudes as well as tastes or choice of style. Chinese historical mode of dressing is deeply rooted in the daily life and activities of the citizens, and many traditional folk styles and accessories are still in fashion today; for example, red silky densely piled material with a plain back flower hair accessories, embroidered keepsakes, coil hats and raincoats made of natural fiber, hand-crafted children's clothing.

The development and transformation of the Chinese mode of dressing affected the cultural nature of clothing design. On the other hand, in the rural areas, outside cities and towns, a broad selection of beautiful dresses and knick-knacks are still in vogue and constitute a part of the traditional way of life.

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