

# Exploring Contemporary Fashion Design from the Perspective of Design Ethics

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**Abstract**—From the perspective of design ethics, this paper discusses the contemporary fashion design and the embodiment of design ethics in contemporary fashion design. As a result, it is found that the design idea of contemporary fashion design is gradually changed to a deep thinking of the society and life status from pursuing formative creation. Based on theory of the discipline and existing cases, this paper expounds the form of embodiment of design ethics in contemporary fashion design.

**Keywords**—*design ethics; fashion design; embodiment*

## I. INTRODUCTION

American design theorist Victor Papanek is one of the representatives of postmodernism. In his most famous book "Design for the Real World", Papanek proposed three main issues in design: first, design should serve the broad masses of people instead of just a few wealthy countries; second, design should not only serve healthy people, but also consider serving the disabled people; third, design should carefully consider the use of limited resources on the earth and serve the limited resources. From those issues, Papanek's point of view clarifies the positive role of design ethics in design and is known as the practical theoretical guidance for design of the epochal character of art; its essence is to re-appeal the humanistic spirit of design art.

## II. STATUS QUO OF CLOTHING DESIGN

In recent years, many scholars in China have conducted some discussions on the issues of design ethics. As the leading figures in higher education in today's society, many scholars and designers such as Zhang Fuye, Li Yanzu, Zhao Jianghong, Lu Xiaobo, and Li Dangqi have ever expressed their views on this issue. In November 2007, "Decoration" magazine and Art Design College of Zhejiang Gongshang University jointly held a forum on the theme of "Issues in Design Ethics Education of Art Design Majors in Colleges and Universities" in Hangzhou, and published an initiative on design ethics "Hangzhou Declaration". Discussions on the issues of design ethics have also been common in various publications in recent years. Relevant discussions involve the relationship between design and people and society, between design and ecological environment, and between designer and social consumption, and designer's responsibility, etc. Some scholars also take the ethical factors in Chinese classical culture as the research direction, and try to integrate

it into the recognition on contemporary design; colleges and universities also list design ethics as one of the courses; those are of course very important work. Throughout the researches and discussions in China and foreign countries, it is not difficult to see the importance of design ethics in various design fields. As a design discipline closely related to people and life, fashion design surely needs more to reflect the design trend and cultural connotation embodiment of today's society.

## III. ETHICS IN CLOTHING

### A. Fabrics

Textile and clothing industry is one of the largest industries in the world. First of all, fabric is indispensable in the whole clothing manufacturing industry. However, the fabric dyeing not only may consume a large amount of water, but also may leave toxic chemicals in the dyed wastewater, which not only worsens the environment, but also consumes a lot of energy, leading to global warming and impossibility to beneficially recycle water energy. Therefore, in the process of manufacturing and using clothing, it is imperative to minimize or eliminate the pollution process to reduce the use of water. In order to avoid water pollution, a textile waterless dyeing system is used. Clothing dyed with vegetable dyes is close to nature, green and environment-friendly, and high value-added.

Secondly, the production of clothing is almost inevitable to produce remnants; with respect to this issue, many eco-friendly fashion artists may have the remnants produced in the design and manufacturing process used as the main body and get remnants spliced and overlapped delicately to show the artistic value and also take this method as a manner to change the living environment of fashion.

### B. Style

Clothing fabrics should follow the principle of ethics on the premise of protecting the nature and reducing consumption. Moreover, the design in layout and style of clothing can also follow this principle. It is feasible to optimize the layout and try the best to adjust the layout in the design process to reduce the waste of offcut. Saving raw material is not only equivalent to saving economic cost, but also saves natural resources. From the perspective of design ethics, minimalism is not only a design style, but more a

responsible act of reducing the demand for things from the environment. For example, the style of the garment can take the design with reduced cloth pieces; or blocked design can facilitate the wearer to disassemble the cloth. For example, when the garment is worn, there are always many parts that will be quickly stained (like neckline, cuffs, pants, etc.). The blocked design makes it available to only disassemble and clean the stained part, which can save the consumption of water.

### *C. Disadvantaged Groups*

Disadvantaged groups are ubiquitous in all countries, such as the elderly, children, the disabled and the sick. In recent years, the clothing industry has begun to focus on making special design considerations for such groups, such as fabric and health considerations for clothing of pregnant women, and improvements of postnatal clothing. However, those are not comprehensive. For the disadvantaged groups, they are generally not that rich in income. Disease and the limitations in clothing choices are the scopes to be considered to change. For the diseased, their clothing should be designed to prevent breeding of germs, easy to clean and wear. From the medical and physiological characteristics, it is a challenge that whether designer can apply some medical materials to design and make garments for the sick; for example, for people who have long-term skin disease, it is a challenge that whether it is feasible to add therapeutic effect in the selection of clothing fabric and clothing production to prevent applied medicine from sticking on cloth. For children and adults with disabilities, if they can dress and undress by themselves, their sense of inferiority may be weakened and their sense of pride and confidence may be built up. The clothing color should be somewhat soft instead of bright, thus reducing the excessive attention and strange eyes from the outside world.

### *D. Assimilation*

With the increasing development of globalization, the assimilation and plagiarism of clothing styles are widespread. The mainstream economic population and young people in the society are blindly pursuing branded, European, and luxury products. While people from all over the world wear suits and shoes, the clothing with regional characteristics is becoming less and less in the mainstream society. On the one hand, only by respecting history, culture, and improving aesthetic cultivation and design ability can designer create more vital works; this is also the responsibility of designer. On the other hand, how to change the consciousness of consumers is also the focus to be concerned. If consumers do not blindly pursue branded products, the imitations on the market will be greatly reduced. At present, personal customized design has also appeared in the clothing industry in a large amount, which has relatively broken the situation of assimilation. However, personal customization in the market is targeted to people with considerable economic consumption ability and has not yet been popularized generally.

based on the concept of taking itself as the noumenon and entity. The entity of culture is human's expanded reproduction taking the individuals from generation to generation as the main body to realize the expanded reproduction; it is the fundamental function of culture. Culture is only a product of practice, and its function is played in the way of the elements of activity. The free and comprehensive development of human beings is the highest value of culture. In this regard, it can be said that culture is the content that reveals human's self-creation, self-development and self-realization in the history as the subject of historical activities reveal the content of human beings as the main body of historical activities to further realize real freedom. To a large extent, things in physical form are human-designed material products that reflect specific political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic concepts, show a particular way of life, and construct a living world with cultural characteristics. Design as a means of materialized creation of human beings is also constantly practicing this process. Human's design practices are therefore culturally significant. From this perspective, the culture created by design behavior is the most profound reflection of human's ethical ideology. Design ethics has strict expression forms and rules and regulations in ancient Chinese costumes; in current society, it is wondered whether it is also necessary to consider the various "requirements and constraints" of design ethics.

### *A. A Way of Cultural Creation*

British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood ("Fig. 1") is a highly controversial designer whose early designs advertise Western youth genres and oppose the government and tradition. The work designed with the "Punk spirit" was bound into fame, and punk culture in his design works became popular in the world for a while. In the early 1980s, she launched underwear as outerwear, added women's petticoat outside trousers, and treated female liberation culture as the subject of creation. However, her most admirable act is that she extracted elements and materials from traditional historical Scottish costumes and changed them into modern style of design, brought the charm of Scottish plaid to the utmost and pushed the charm of traditional British culture to the highest point. After 2000, Vivienne's "use of cultural materials" turned to the third world countries and the world's environmental protection. While applying the characteristics of traditional costumes, she also added a slogan calling for protecting the earth's energy in her design, and at the same time donated the profits from the sales of clothing to poverty-stricken areas. Vivienne Westwood's controversy is that her design is sometimes against the mainstream, and sometimes is crowned with radical progressive ideas, and sometimes appeals for paying attention to the suffering group. However, as a designer who uses cultural creation and communication as a means, she uses it so well and successfully.

## IV. ETHICS IN CLOTHING CULTURE

Culture is neither an ontological nor physical existence, nor in independent mysterious movement produced by itself



Fig. 1. Vivienne Westwood (www.fashion.sina.cn).

Design as a means of materialized creation of human beings is also constantly practicing this process. Human's design practices are therefore culturally significant. From this perspective, the culture created by design behavior is the most profound reflection of human's ethical ideology. Clothing design is a branch of product design; the culture created by clothing is the most direct, concise, and close-to-life reflection of ethics.

### B. A Way to Reflect the Desire of Social Ethics

How to develop clothing design in the future and what is the purpose? What is the evaluation standard? What does it mean for social development? The highly developed industrial "civilization" created by mankind, while enchanting its brilliance, as mentioned in the paper, has created a large amount of garbage and loads on a global scale and seriously damaged the ecological balance. And the further deterioration of the damage is inevitable. The only thing people can do is to release the further deterioration under awareness. The crisis of modern industrial "civilization" has led people to doubt the correctness of modern design ethics. And modern fashion design always blindly seeks new ideas, differences, and variations to stimulate consumption to the utmost extent. This is the root of the so-called tragedy of modern civilization "civilization". In the future, fashion design should have new ethical norms to avoid and slow down the occurrence of such tragedies. Future fashion design should be created on the basis of the existence of human beings in broad sense. The focus of the design should be to try the best to save resources, slow down the rate of environmental degradation, reduce consumption, meet human needs instead of desires and enhance the spiritual culture of clothing.

To improve the spiritual culture of human's clothing is to present the public a correct understanding of the top designers and brands in clothing industry rather than blind desires and pursuits. It is also not to resist and eliminate desires and pursuits, but lead them to sensibly treat the position of fashion design in daily life. It should be admitted that every industry needs to be diversified to meet the needs of different groups, and each industry must have hierarchical differentiation; this is impossible to be replaced. For example high-level clothing workshops and designers, clothing artists, personally speaking, they represent disseminators culture and crafts, while clothing design and designers serving the public are more to provide services for life of various classifications and so on. This is the relationship between clothing and ethics to be recognized. It is not only the ethical relationship

of fashion design to be abided by designers but also the ethical awareness to be clearly recognized by the mass consumers.

### C. Conditional Ethical Constraints

Design is a creative activity carried out by human beings to meet their specific needs. It is also the most basic activity for human beings to survive and develop. The value judgment of human beings on themselves always reflects the level of human's productivity and the level of understanding of the nature in a certain period, which is reflected in different cultural existences and different historical development periods. The protection of intangible cultural heritage and the craftsmanship and so on currently promoted in China are all protecting human's spiritual culture and production processes. However, some people think that this is contrary to the organic and convenient design style currently promoted. Just as some scholars have said in the field of clothing, designers have long abandoned the Western Gothic, Baroque, Rococo and other series of design wasting resources. But what abandoned is just the wearing form of clothing; Europe has also got the production techniques of those periods inherited and applied in contemporary fashion design. So here it is thought that for fashion design or other industries, there should be ethical constraints with conditions and scope.

Chanel, the world-renowned clothing brand, is a luxury that many consumers pursue. In people's blind pursuit, how many people in the purchase really understand the value of this brand? And why is the product so expensive? From the beginning of creating the brand, it not only brought economic value to the clothing industry but more protected a batch of folk craft workshops ("Fig. 2") serving the French top-level custom workshops led by Chanel from the early liberated women's complicated wearing and the use of knitted fabrics. From 1984 to now, Chanel has had 12 companies, including Desrues, Lemarie, Michel, Lesage ("Fig. 3"), Massaro, Goossens and so on. Those workshops are not just Chanel's high-end customization craft workshops but more valuable is that they inherit the ancient craftsmanship of Europe. And should it be reasonable to review it with the current extensive design ethics, for the sake of minimalism and reducing consumption? No, it is not reasonable. High-end workshops like Chanel both in China and foreign countries should all be protected. It is advised to learn from them. The intangible cultural heritage protection and the craftsmanship spirit currently promoted in China are in the same conditions as in Europe. It is not only to protect but also needs to be inherited; and inevitably, inheritance must make it having economic value.





Fig. 2. Fabric styling in high-end workshop ([www.3g.sanwen.net](http://www.3g.sanwen.net)).



Fig. 3. High-end embroidery workshops ([www.3g.sanwen.net](http://www.3g.sanwen.net)).

There are also some other fashion designers and costume artists whose works are questioned by people in other industries. But they have made a greater contribution to fashion design and human clothing. Their clothing design works appear in exhibitions of many countries to participate in cultural exchanges. Many of such designers and artists work at the forefront of education. Their design may not be suitable for wearing in daily life but have so strong and rich research background, material research and development, and cultural expression. At the same time, education is the foundation of any social system. Spreading cultural awareness by education is more effective and can change the status quo fundamentally. The building of any cultural consciousness is not done overnight, but by long-term cultivation in a subtle way.

Li Wei, a professor of dyeing and weaving art design department of Academy of Arts & Design of Tsinghua University, is one of the designers, communicators and educators of clothing culture. Her design style ubiquitously reflects the profound deposits of Chinese culture. From the early "New Interpretation of Oracle (甲骨文新解)" to "The Day and Night (昼与夜)", the theme of each of her works is closely related to Chinese traditional culture. Taking water-like yarn as the carrier for clothing production (see "Fig. 4" and "Fig. 5"), a plenty of clothing works full of ink emotion and Chinese implication carries the Chinese mountains and rivers she ever visited and her research on Chinese culture and inheritance on Chinese tradition. From 2004 to now, her works have won many awards in the World Apparel and Fiber Art Exhibitions and been recognized by the world's clothing industry, and have brought Chinese culture to the world stage again and again. As an educator, her design philosophy and researches are affecting her students all the time. As fashion designers and artists like Professor Li Wei,

their ethical embodiment lies in the spread of culture and consciousness, and not in more need of extensive ethnical constraints.



Fig. 4. Li Wei's works on the International Fashion Week ([www.news.tsinghua.edu.cn](http://www.news.tsinghua.edu.cn)).



Fig. 5. Li Wei's works on the International Fashion Week ([www.news.tsinghua.edu.cn](http://www.news.tsinghua.edu.cn)).

## V. CONCLUSION

The embodiment of fashion design ethics includes: the clothing design meets the needs of aesthetic awareness and functionality; clothing reflects restriction, respects nature and serves others; moderate creativity; and the possibility to be recycled and recreated. While leading human to more environmentally friendly fashion approach, it should also raise human's awareness of clothing culture, correctly face consumption and correctly treat the role of fashion design in the society. And according to the industry development and industry demand, the ethical awareness of clothing industry cannot just has a single form; designers and consumers should build up a clear and correct sense of clothing ethics.

Only in this way can theories be truly put into daily life of human beings.

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