

# From the Rococo to Lolita: The Division of Feminism in China

Yahan Ao<sup>1, †</sup>, Heying Liu<sup>2, †</sup>, Yujiao Xi<sup>3, \*, †</sup>, Runqing You<sup>4, †</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom, S10 2TN, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup>Shanghai Ganquan Foreign Languages Middle School, Shanghai, 200061, China

<sup>3</sup>Fashion and Textiles, RMIT University, Melbourne, 3056, Australia

<sup>4</sup>Textile & Garment Institute, Changshu Institute of Technology, Jiangsu Changshu, 215500, China

\*Corresponding author email: s3560173@student.rmit.edu.au

†These authors contributed equally.

## ABSTRACT

From the Rococo style to the modern Lolita style, the style of women's costume can intuitively express the ideology they want to express or subconsciously want to express. The female consciousness also changes more and more strongly with time, from the autocratic power of father and husband to the equality of men and women at present, from the perspective of costume's style. From the late 17th century, the female because of patriarchy and masculine autocratic dictatorship, begin to have weak consciousness of women, to the 18th century leading ladies in polite society, and even now the consciousness of women is mature enough, now the ideology of Chinese women has gone through the baptism of the times, and women are more independent from consciousness to thought, with their own views and ideas. This paper uses the method of survey and comes to the conclusion that there has been a split in Chinese feminist thought. Through women's costume, now part of society women can completely regardless of others' opinions to dress, the other part is how much there is some concern; some people in their own feel wearing is free, no please, but in some people's eyes, they still see feel they have to attract the opposite sex in eye, curry favor with the opposite sex.

**Keywords:** Rococo, Lolita, consciousness, feminism, China

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lolita, a unique dress originated in Japan in the 1980s, integrates the elements of lace, exaggerated skirt and gorgeous sleeves of traditional Rococo dress. After more than 30 years of evolution, Lolita has finally formed a unique dressing style, which also has an important impact on the development of feminism. Thus, several questions have been brought under the spotlight. How traditional Rococo dress evolved into Lolita, what's the relationship between two kinds of dresses and female consciousness and others mentioned below. These questions all have their value to be discussed. From exploring them, people are able to come to realize the development of Rococo dress and find out the importance of how garments promote Feminism movement. In this paper, by analyzing the previous research literature and being supplemented by the research form of questionnaire, this paper explores the

division of feminism in East Asia in the process of the evolution of traditional Rococo clothing into modern Lolita.

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE TRADITIONAL ROCOCO DRESS AND WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS

The emergence of Rococo allowed women of the time to move away from the dignified style of the Baroque. Under Madame de Pompadour's promoting, more and more women are pursuing what they like.

### 2.1 The introduction of the Rococo style dress

Yang (2013) claimed that the emergence of the Rococo style is a necessary condition to promote Rococo style garments. When the Rococo style replaced the Baroque style in the eighteenth century in French palaces, it laid a foundation for the development of the

Rococo dress. Furthermore, the popularity of this kind of dress was championed by Marie Antoinette, and Madame de Pompadour. The former, who is known as the French Fashion Queen, promoted a pleated type, and the latter, as a fashion-leading celebrity, expanded the popularity of the Rococo style dress. There are several features of the Rococo style dress. First of all, it is about its fabrics people use. Chen and He (2010) demonstrated that Rococo fabrics are mostly made of warm and soft materials, such as satin, raw silk and lace, in order to strengthen the local characteristics of classical style. Secondly, the details of this dress are very delicate. The skirt and cuffs parts are often decorated with a variety of intricate, and exquisite floral patterns, which leaves a deep impression on people. All in all, the Rococo style dress has the characteristics of softness and romance, while highlighting the unique beauty of women.

## **2.2 Traditional Rococo garment and female consciousness in 18<sup>th</sup> century**

This chapter will show the origin and promotion of the traditional rococo garment from the historical aspect, including the meaning, origin, traditional style of the rococo garment as well as the rise of female consciousness.

Li (1998) illustrated that the expression "rococo" came from the French word called "Rocaille," which means small stone and small grain of sand, that used to describe the kind of plastic arts to make good use of curling lines and trival decorative style. The rococo style began in the late period of Louis XIV and became popular under Louis XV, which also known as the "Louis XV style".

As shown by He (2002), in the specific cultural background of France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the elegant salon atmosphere was brought together in the rococo style of women's garments. At that period, women were usually the center of the salon. Men always existed to serve women gallantly, and women proudly displayed their beauty in their clothes. There were two distinct features of women's wear in this era. One was the popularity of open robe, which was a long gown with folds at the back, which beautifully shaped from the shoulders to the floor. Moreover, another type of women's gown was the bell-shape. It was followed by the use of skirt braces, that were more commonly worn by women. In addition to the Hoop-Petticoat style that was round in shape, since 1740, "Pannier" began to come into fashion in Europe, which originated in Spain, that was presented "front and rear flat, left and right wide".

As demonstrated by Gao (1995), on the whole of women's garment, women at that period pursued a luxurious sense of majesty and elegant feminine breath. Inside women's clothing, the "straitjacket" was still in

vogue -the corset, the "V-shaped Breast trim" with ornate embroidery and bows. This V-shaped trim had an inverted triangle and its point should be pointed down, which not only made the waist appear slimmer, but also had a guiding effect on the audience's sight. Referring to its sleeve style, it continued to inherit half-cut "flounces ruffled sleeve" which was popular in the late 17th century, whose length to the elbow, and its cuff was with three layers of lace. The bodice was decorated with a bow of ribbons, and the magnificent petticoats and Robins (an overskirt over a petticoat) were embellished with zigzagging frills, lace, ribbons, bows as well as flowers, which gave full play to the feminine beauty and the ultimate romantic sentiment. Delicate outward-manifestation became the significant symbol of the female beauty of this era.

## **2.3 Female consciousness and change in the Rococo period**

From the end of the 17th century to the 18th century, with the rise of the Rococo style, the germination of female self-consciousness also constantly germinated at the same time, there was a preliminary female consciousness. This chapter will describe that what changes took place in feminist consciousness during the Rococo period.

In the early 17th century, Europe was in an era of patriarchy and patriarchal power, and male-dominated social relations permeated every aspect of social life. In a society built up by the traditional culture of male superiority, women are expected to recognize the absolute dominance of men in everything and express absolute obedience, complete reliance on him and respect his opinions and wills (Lin,2011). No matter royal family or common people, women have no status in the family and society. Women are faced with female abuse and injustice and are silenced and tolerated. The standard for women is obedience and submission. Therefore, in the social background of the absolute patriarchal and patriarchal systems, these women's self-consciousness has slowly germinated, and they need a focal point and a leader.

Lin (2016) claimed that the Rococo had a gorgeous artistic style, which focused on women's apparel, using exaggerated modelling, gorgeous color, and adornment of the complex method to pursue unique temperament, which gave women a great deal of freedom, and they no longer lived in a predominantly male like baroque era.

### **2.3.1 Female consciousness in high society**

Madame De Pompadour is a controversial historical figure. She was the mistress of The French emperor Louis XV and a famous socialite (Lin,2016). In upper class society, because of her status and social position, one of the most important promoters of Rococo is

Madame De Pompadour. She was a famous socialite in the 18th century and her Rococo clothing style was one of the most unique features. Under her huge influence, the Rococo style dress became popular in Europe at that time (Lin, 2016) and women at that time had a love of it. What's more, with showing women's values of clothing at that time were self-centered and focused on the self-expression, the dress possibly relates to feminism.

Marie Antoinette, also known as Queen Marie, is another celebrity who made contribution toward the popularity of Rococo dress. Being passionate about fashion and pleasure, she was called 'Fashion Queen'. Her fanatical pursuit of fashion led the trend of the upper class in Europe at that time and played a vital role in the rise and development of French fashion (Zhao, 2018). Thus, she increased the Rococo style dress's influence and let it become irreplaceable at that time.

The most obvious response, then it would have to refer to salon. Salons were the social centers of the Rococo period, where people only pursued happiness and enjoyment, thus forming the unique salon culture of the 18th century. Under the positive influence of these two aristocratic women, women were allowed to join salons with men. The social atmosphere became open and free, and women could wear whatever they liked. Avant-garde women dressed themselves at all costs, gathering in the women's costume of the Rococo period. Under the influence of such relaxed salon culture, the whole society has more and more high recognition of female consciousness, and the status of women in the Rococo period has also been improved, so that the men in the salon have to accept their thoughts and identify with their aesthetics.

### *2.3.2 Female consciousness in civilian women*

In addition, some women who are not noble enough to squeeze into their salon cultural activities, constantly learn new knowledge, strive to build their aristocratic temperament, develop their fashion acumen. This incident also greatly encouraged the women of the time, they began to devote more time to developing their profound knowledge, elegant speech and unique charm. In this atmosphere, a number of salon women artists were born in the Rococo period, and their rise further promoted the awakening of female consciousness at that time.

As women become more gender consciousness, they are no longer unconsciously objectifying themselves, no longer subservient to men and no longer proud of being loyal servants of happy families (Zhang, 2020). They start to break away from the mentality of following the tradition and start to be self-centered.

## **3. THE MODERN EVOLUTION OF ROCOCO DRESS – LOLITA DRESS AND ITS DEVELOPMENT**

As time went on, Rococo dress evolved into Lolita dress in the modern society. This kind dress absorbed a lot of design elements of Rococo style, originated in Japan, and gradually became popular in East Asia.

### ***3.1 The relationship between Lolita dress and Rococo dress***

#### *3.1.1 The origin and development of Lolita dress*

According to *Studies on Lolita costumes*, Lolita dress first appeared in Japan around the late 1970s to early 1980s (Ning, 2019). The influence of western culture has an indispensable influence on the rise of Lolita. As one of the most well-known places of Japanese fashion trend, Harajuku has gathered a group of fashion young people who have established western pop culture as the main guide since the 1970s. They integrate the gorgeous and exaggerated characteristics of Rococo dress into traditional Japanese garments, and thus be regarded as "the pioneer of Lolita fashion". At the same time, mainstream media in Japan also promoted Lolita. In the world, the "Kawaii" culture born in the 1980s has been considered to be spread by Japan and developed into a culture that exists in human life and entertainment (Ning, 2019). Through the propagation of famous animation and fashion magazines, characteristics like lace and decorative pattern in traditional Rococo dress are regarded as symbols of loveliness by the public. Because of this, Lolita, which integrates a large number of Rococo elements, becomes to be fond of people.

#### *3.1.2 The characteristics of Lolita dress and Rococo style elements it embodies*

Ning (2019) claimed that the original image of Lolita dress is a girls' clothing style with a large number of folds, saints and skirt supports with Rococo and Victorian garments' elements. Lolita dress attracts a lot of attention thanks to its mixture of contemporary women's clothing and traditional Rococo dress. Take the tea party style as an example. It is the most gorgeous style in Lolita dress. (Delinlos, 2020) With retaining and improving Rococo garments' elements, fluffy bustles and complicated lace are its most striking features and unlike the previous counterpart, it abandons tight corsets. As a modern product, Lolita dress shows a completely different magnificence from daily consumption and successfully creates a very unique style of dress adornment.

### ***3.2 The opinions of the Lolita dress wearer***

With the continuous development of modern society, the style of garments is also changing. Among styles, Lolita is no longer a mainstream style, like the Rococo in 18th century, or even a minority hobby. This also shows that with the progress of time and times, women have never stopped advancing in their pursuit of self and equality. Compared with the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women's self-consciousness has taken a qualitative leap. From the Rococo at the end of the 17th century to Lolita at present, there are still some disputes and opinions. Although Lolita originated from the western country, the style of Lolita dress was established by the eastern country (Wang,2010). In the development of Oriental history, the style of Lolita dress and Oriental thought can easily have a great difference.

Many of these opinions are given by Lolita wearers who watch Lolita, which is quite different from the thoughts of Lolita lovers and wearers. Although Lolita's youthful, cute, and seductive style really caters to the needs of nowadays society, it also confirms to varying degrees that the charm of Lolita's style. But modern people like Lolita style is not completely for the "dress tender" heart demand, more is the pursuit of a crowd of new dress attitude, emphasis on self, show personality, creativity and seek different from the general way of life. And the style of Lolita garments just to meet their psychological needs. As a result, the style of Lolita is ingrained in their hearts. And for those adult women and mature women, they just want to be frozen forever in the beautiful age of youth (Wang,2010). They don't care about other people's questioning views and opinions, and they have the courage to pursue what they like and actively pursue the lifestyle and attitude they like. In this sense, their sense of femininity is stronger than that of those who are afraid of worldly views.

The team responded to a questionnaire and received 272 valid responses. According to the questionnaire, we can find that the woman wearing Lolita is unafraid to express herself and they are confident. This is in stark contrast to what people thought when Lolita first emerged. At the time, it was widely believed that the woman wearing Lolita was dressing up as a doll in order to attract men and pandering to the patriarchy. However, with the development of the times and the change of feminist consciousness in people's hearts, it has become a normal thing for women to dress freely. To the wearer, Fifty percent of them want to show people they're confident when they wear it. They think they're queens, princesses, and they can't help but mind their manners and be elegant. They don't care if others say they are "strange," "don't understand," or "childish". 91.7% said others think they are beautiful when they wear Lolita, and that confidence and courage have been deeply engraved in their hearts. It is not hard to see that the dress is a thrust of contemporary feminist development.

Although Lolita originated from other countries, we can often see people wearing Lolita in China, and more and more people have gradually accepted this kind of "strange dress". Women's freedom of dress is a big development of the feminist movement in modern times. At the same time, wearers also play an important role in the development of contemporary women's rights. On the one hand, they accept other people's different views, and on the other hand, they are more assertive. In the questionnaire, we found that many wearers like Lolita because they are influenced by the people around them. They pass on their attitude of daring to express themselves to the people around them, which in fact also conveys the independent consciousness of women.

## **4. THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOLITA DRESS ON FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

### ***4.1 The feminine self-identity of the Lolita's wearers***

As shown by Guo (1995), Lolita culture, a symbol of loveliness and elegance, which carries people's fantasy of Victorian court life, and constructs a carefree fairy tale world, that makes people realize the idealized self of girls, and it is the beginning of the self-discovery of women by Lolita's wearers.

Wu (2018) illustrated that every Lolita lover has an idealized female self-imagination, but it is quite difficult for individuals to realize in real life. Therefore, they turn to the world of Lolita and shape an ideal self out of individual intention with their behaviors to meet their expectations for female self.

Whether online or offline, Lolita wearers aims to distinguish themselves from others through unique female personality expression and perform particular female self-presentation in the process of pursuing differences (Li & Wu, 2018).

Therefore, to some extent, Lolita culture has completed the presentation of group gender, since Lolita culture is mainly expressed through flamboyant and complicated garments, women are naturally become the main advocates and followers of the culture.

### ***4.2 The differentiation of viewers' evaluation of Lolita***

#### ***4.2.1 Supporting voices***

Zhang (2018) demonstrated that supportive voices included Lolita's wearers as well as its audiences who prefers to appreciate in it instead of wearing. These two groups of people believe that Lolita dress is a symbol of girls and wearing Lolita dress will bring happiness to people. The women who wear Lolita, appreciate and

participate in Lolita culture are choosing to portray themselves as young, super-feminine and lovely, and gain power from this choice, rather than the perception imposed on them, to some extent contributing to the infiltration of feminism in contemporary society.

#### 4.2.2 Dissenting voices

As argued by Huang and Wu (2018), influenced by the novel *Lolita* of the same name, a certain number of audiences have various stereotypes on the Lolita culture, such as equating it with erotic culture. They believe that wearing Lolita dress as a cosplay, which is no different from plus-size children's garments.

Xu (2008) mentioned in the research report that the style of Lolita dress in eastern countries used a large number of lace, gather, bow, ribbon, sponge shoes and other about European court baby elements, and the color commonly used pink and pink purple, they both show an immature style. This style of expression in the eyes of Oriental people, especially the eyes of Oriental men, which is a show of weakness. They dress up as a doll to catch the eye of adults, hoping to get others' attention and help. This is not an expression of feminism, or even run counter to. The majority of Lolita lovers are not only teenagers, but also adult women, even older women. When these people wear Lolita costumes, they feel uncomfortable, and many people even think that they are "pretending to be young" and do not want to grow up. The development of feminism up to now, women's consciousness is not only the pursuit of equality between men and women.

#### 4.3 Two directions of feminism

As illustrated by Wang (2018), and according to the questionnaire survey, it is obvious that viewers' evaluation of Lolita has two branches in contemporary society, and over 90 percent of viewers consider that in keeping with rococo, the Lolita dress shows femininity and personal style, which reflects women's independent decision-making and self-expression. On the contrary, a few people think the Lolita dress is a subservient aesthetic to men, the Lolita culture as a kind of imported culture, a certain number of viewers have different degrees of prejudice against the Lolita culture. Some of them are influenced by the novel *Lolita*, directly equate the Lolita with "pedophilia", "maid costume" as well as "erotic dress". The Lolita is regarded as a kind of "erotic culture".

### 5. CONCLUSION

Overall, for Lolita dress, there is a certain degree of contradiction between the wearers and the viewers. The wearer considers that she is expressing herself, which is the embodiment of women's freedom in garment, while a certain amount viewers saw Lolita's dress as a

patriarchal attempt to attract men.

There are some limitations in feminism research at present. First of all, the aim of the theoretical guidance is unclear, many thoughts in the ideological circle are intertwined, and the theories of women are colorful. Secondly, the opposing dichotomy research thinking makes the development of women's studies and women's studies separate from history and form opposition, which seriously affects the historicity and systematicness of women's studies.

The feminist trend of thought that began to rise in the west in the second half of the 19th century provided significant ideological resources for human beings to learn how to face up to themselves from a diversified perspective and to look at human development from a new perspective of gender development. With the constant change of women's issues, feminist theories have a deeper understanding of women and social issues. From a certain point of view, these issues are not only the feminist theory itself to overcome, but also the human beings in the process of liberation should constantly consider and face up to.

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