

Representation of Women, Representation of Nation: Qipao, Liberation and Identity

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ABSTRACT

As one of the most important types of garments in the Republic of China from the 1920s to the 1940s, the wearer of the qipao was undoubtedly woman whereas the construction of qipao's meaning was often derived from men. Although it is impossible to completely be isolated from the male gaze, this paper attempts to return the right to interpret the qipao to women. As a symbol of modernity influenced by Western values, the consumer of the qipao was mainly represented by the emerging urban middle-class women with dual cultural and economic status, and there was intertextuality between the qipao and these female elites. Divided into three main sections, the essay illustrates the identity, design and symbol of the qipao that women functioned to express modernity from their point of view. Taken together, the findings of the study suggest that through the qipao, the middle-class women consciously or unconsciously acquired political identity, and gained participation and recognition in public life. From the perspective of social history, the research may provide a deeper understanding of the social and cultural changes in the Republic of China from the historical phenomenon that the qipao has become synonymous with modern Chinese women.

Keywords: qipao, modern fashion, women liberation, consumer identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the representative garments of modern Chinese women, qipao originated from the robes of Manchu women in the Qing Dynasty. After nearly half a century of development, transition and finalization, qipao, as a vital part of Chinese dressing culture, is regarded as a symbol of Chinese national civilization even an embodiment of the "eastern charm", paralleling the Japanese kimono, the Korean hanbok, and the Indian sari[1]. The comparison, however, is not appropriate since qipao is not a piece of clothing with a long history but only appeared for a short period of one hundred years. In contrast, the qipao is significantly different from the other three traditional costumes regarding status and meaning.

Despite several studies on the qipao in the academic world, most of them elaborate on the origin and changes of the qipao from the perspective of clothing history[2], which is difficult to interpret why the qipao is popular premeditating the relationship between the garment and the political and social conditions at that time and the

cultural mentality of the people. Only a few studies break through the limitations of clothing history. Scholar Wu Hao discussed the qipao in several chapters in "Chinese Women's Clothing and Body Revolution", implying that the popularity of the qipao was closely related to the liberation of women during the Republic of China[3]. The thesis "What Should Chinese Women Wear?: A National Problem" dubbed by Finnane Antonia suggests that the qipao was not only a continuation of traditional Chinese clothing, but also shaped by modern national politics[4]. The two studies presented a general understanding of the political and social factors affecting the popularity of qipao. However, the interpretation of the two researches should be approached with caution due to the scarcity of materials resulting in a simple argumentation. Accordingly, the relationship between women's liberation, nationalism, and qipao's popularity is more of a macro explanation, being less able to enter the specific historical scene at that time, such as the social attitude towards Manchu being ignored. Therefore, the existing studies cannot provide a satisfactory answer, and there is still room for expansion.

When it comes to the definition of the qipao, academia has not reached a consensus. One of the widely held views, also serving as the broader definition, represented by Professor Yuan Yingjie from Tsinghua University, suggests that the qipao (literally: banner robe) is equivalent to the clothes that the Manchus wore since they were called Banner People (“Qi ren”), implying the inheritance of the qipao in the Qing Dynasty and during Republican-era[5]. On the flip side, as Professor Bao Mingxin of Donghua University proposed, the modern qipao evolved from the Manchu robes in the Qing Dynasty, and the term refers only to a popular garment in the Republic of China characterized by increasingly improved design, material and production techniques[6]. For the purposes of this research, qipao is defined as the clothes derived from the Manchu women but changed in terms of form and meaning in the Republican era, whose wearer also turned from the Manchu nobles to the emerged middle-class women in the urban area, particularly Shanghai, which is closer to the second definition as is mentioned.

Aiming to render the right to interpret the qipao to women as much as possible, the essay, therefore, illustrates the identity, design and symbol of the qipao that women functioned to express modernity in their point of view divided into three sections. As to the methodology, a number of newspaper materials from the Republic of China period are used, along with the pictures as the visible image.

It is noted that this research will take a women’s magazine, *Linglong*, as an example of the popularity of the qipao and women’s participation in the process of actively constructing modern value and acquiring political identity regarding domestic affairs, nation’s future and current fashion. Not only because the writer and reader of *Linglong* could be recognized as a microcosm of middle-class women in the cities, as suggested in the master thesis of Min Zhang at the Donghua University[7], but the behavior of women choosing to disclose the qipao on the cover or in the text discussion itself, just like purchasing or wearing a qipao, is a sort of participation in public life and the emphasis on the connotation of the qipao which was closely related to progressiveness and nationalism at that time.

Taken together, the findings of the study suggest that through the qipao, the middle-class women consciously or unconsciously acquired political identity and gained participation and recognition in public life. From the perspective of social history, the research may provide a deeper understanding of the social and cultural changes in the Republic of China from the historical phenomenon that the qipao has eventually become synonymous with modern women in that period of time.

2. QIPAO AS AN IDENTITY: FROM PROSTITUTE TO GIRL STUDENT

The 1920s and the 1930s witnessed the complicated connotations of the qipao. On the one hand, it was regarded as a symbol of demimondaine or the concubines who were intoxicated with money; on the other hand, the meaning of self-esteem and pursuit of progress was granted because of its role in the school uniform of girl students, representing modernity and civilization. It is hard, however, to distinguish whether these two opposing values have faded or returned over time. In fact, those who believed that the qipao was to cause women to indulge in luxury or to please men, and those who considered the qipao signified woman’s self-improvement, existed at the same time.

What seems to be certain is that the modern qipao emerged in Shanghai in the early 1920s[8]. Traditionally a Manchu costume, qipao disappeared for nearly ten years after the founding of the Republic of China (1912) with the rise of the anti-Manchu ideology[3], while it resurged in Shanghai, which was not left to chance. Since the late Qing Dynasty, Shanghai has been known for its prosperity of courtesan culture in Western literature. In this city, where the commercial culture was as well rising day by day, courtesans became the core figures of the commodity economy, frequently appearing in health and beauty advertisements[9]. Serving as the spokespersons of modern Shanghai’s urban culture, they were also fashion leaders. According to an article in *Saturday* in 1921, the popularity of the qipao was initially promoted by an old courtesan called Lin Daiyu, who turned out the Manchu qipao from the bottom of her wardrobe and put it on in order to attract customers, and soon wore the qipao became a fashion[10].

By 1923, the qipao had become all the rage in Shanghai[11]. According to a report in the *Shenbao* (Shanghai Newspaper) on February 11 of that year, those high-grade leather materials were mostly made into it, and even the imitation could make notable profits. It was said that all these clothing shops were “more than three times more profitable than others” [12], resulting in the growing favor of the garment around Shanghai[13].

However, qipao was not widespread in the whole country until after 1925. During the Northern Expedition (1926-1928), a number of girl students joined the revolution led by the National Army, where they cut their long hair and wore qipao, which was similar to men’s robes in the form for the purpose of the complete commitment, prompting women’s liberation and conveying qipao with the same revolutionary meaning to both sides of the Yangtze River. Between 1925 and 1926, wearing a plain qipao with capable short hair had become the standard image of the progressive female. In March 1926, the author of a one-act comedy in the *Jingbao Fukan* (Beijing News Supplement) described the

condition through the mouth of a character in the play: “I often come across groups of girl students on the street, cutting short hair, wearing qipao.” As for Liu Hezhen, a girl student as well as a leading figure in the Beijing student movement, who was killed in the March 18 Massacre in 1926, the portrait she left behind was “wearing a cloth qipao with a plain and simple atmosphere”, and quite students also wore qipao at the day of the event, reinforcing the qipao as a symbol of patriotism and anti-imperialism[14].

Backing in Shanghai, the May 30 Movement in 1925 was regarded as a turning point in the popularization of the qipao, since the number of girl students involved in this anti-foreign movement was way greater than in the May 4 demonstrations six years ago[4]. It is noted that the fashion leader Song Qingling, also an American-educated intellectual who actively participated in politics, began to wear qipao after this year, and it has become the classic dress of Song for formal occasions since then. In 1929, the Kuomintang (KMT) named the qipao the official dress of the nation in the newly-released *Fuzhuang tiaoli* (Clothing Regulations), acknowledging its undeniable popularity and influence.

Despite the growing recognition of the qipao in public due to a series of events, the limitation qipao’s popularization, along with the slowness and delay of modernization for a vast country cannot be ignored. According to Zhu Ziqing’s son’s description, he was frightened the first time he saw his stepmother because of the glasses, qipao and high heels she wore, which were hardly seen in Yangzhou at that time, although the city was not far from Shanghai. Even in modernizing cities including Tianjin, Shanghai and Guangzhou, the purchaser of the qipao was mainly limited to the newly-emerging middle-class women[4], notably the rich who were educated overseas and recipients of advanced degrees[15], abandoning some of the crucial Confucian creeds such as “A women who lack talent is virtuous” and “Men take care of the outside world, women take care of their home” while openly accepting new education with the new way to live.

It was the identity of these wearers, however, that rendered significance to the qipao. The westernized background, financial resources, and revolutionary devotion guaranteed their progress during that period. As a result, the clothes they wore presented a “transcendental importance, signifying the hegemony of the modern” [4]. Either the political or cultural events they got involved in added the social meanings on qipao in terms of participation in public life and public discussion.

3. QIPAO AS DESIGN: THE AWAKENING OF THE WOMEN MIND

As the new cultural concepts and women liberation movements were rising, women started seeking to fight

for their own rights and the concept of political participation, socialization, and equality. With the establishment of women’s schools, more and more women acquired knowledge and skills through education, obtained corresponding occupations and economic sources, got rid of their dependence on men in traditional life, and developed an independent and perfect human nature. This change was also reflected in the concept of dress; Gong Jianpei gives an example of a change from “how women should dress” under men’s aesthetic and moral standards to “how women want to dress” after the gradual awakening of independent aesthetic consciousness[16]. This section will discuss how women participate in the idea of modernization through the consumption of qipao and the way that how elite women consume through their choices of different designs of qipao. The trends in the changing mindset of female elites during the 1900s to 1940s will be elucidated.

The design of qipao could be influenced by many factors, women liberation social movement was a significant factor that directly affected the qipao’s silhouette. One of the most important women liberated movements took place in the late 1920s - the movement of the natural breast. At the beginning of the Republic of China, foot-binding was just banned by the government, but the trend of breast-binding became popular instead of feet-binding. This provided some effect on the design of qipao, especially on the breast part in the 1920s. The breast part of qipao became pretty tight in order to fit women’s banded breasts. But pretty soon, different groups of society began to notice that breast-binding was exactly the same as feet-binding for women. Just like the foot binding, binding their breast was also not good for their health Cui Miaomiao in her paper, said: “breast binding is a way that tightly wrapped around a woman’s chest, which is detrimental to her health and can even lead to chest and lung diseases”[17]. Therefore, public opinion started to oppose the corseting of women’s breasts based on different positions, and the government then issued a proposal to ban the corseting of women’s breasts, and a “Natural Breast Movement” was launched. Guangzhou City was the first government to propose a ban on the corseting of women. “All women in the province were forbidden to wear bras”[18]. Then, it spread throughout the country with the dual changes of “healthy beauty” and women’s undergarments. After this movement, the design of qipao most likely fitted women’s natural body shape and pursuit of comfort.

With the pace of Western industrialization, Western lifestyle and fashion gradually became the basic need for the construction of modern middle-class women’s consumer ideology. For example, instead of pants, modern women would prefer to wear socks or bare their calves. Instead of banding their feet, high heels became more popular. The main idea behind this strong pursuit

and expectation of the western ideology of modern civilization had deep relation to how middle-class women who live in the big city try to define what is modern life. They expressed their opinion by consuming products that had western elements. At that time qipao's design also began to chase the new "fashionable" outfit; many elements from western outfits were clearly seen in the design of qipao. Also, Jieni Tu had said: "The main features of European and American women's clothing in the 1920s were three factors: the emphasis on straight shape; the length of the skirt often worn to the knee; the dividing line between the body and the skirt lowered to the top of the belly 'low waist long skirt' was a major feature of women's clothing at this time. This was also reflected in the cheongsam at the time when the qipao was a flat and straight shape with almost no chest, waist, hip curve, waist section line lower. 1926 after the hem of the qipao rose again and again at the end of the 20s by the European and American short skirt popular trend of the hemline to the knee since the Chinese women calves were first exposed in front of the public view[18]." The consumption concept of the elite women in the big city not only indicates their pursuit of modernity but also had a strong exemplary effect on the self-expression of middle-class women in public voice and fashion trends of the whole society. Gong Jianpei has put forward that "the progressive cultural Ideology plays an important role in advancing the formation of the concept of consumption, and it breaks the long-standing confinement and bondage of the people's old ideas and customs. Second, without a sizeable group of consumers such as female students and professional women. If there is no sizeable consumer group like female students and elite women who would like to practice and try to lead the trend and who do not form the consumer demand, there will be no place to discuss new consumer forms such as qipao fabric design[16]." On the question of identity and identification, the choice of clothing consumption of middle-class women in metropolitan China from the 1920s to 1940s is a significant figure that worth to discussed. At this time period, middle-class women were eager to enjoy the pursuit of modernity while at the same time upholding the special value of traditional culture. Through their consumption, they preferred to use both east and west elements for their qipao, behind this choice shows how the middle-class women's attitude to the western culture. Indeed, the western element was considered the symbol of modernity and civilization, but the choice to combine the west and east demonstrated the desire of these middle-class women to build China into a modern nation.

4. QIPAO AS A SYMBOL: WOMEN'S VOICE

Not only did qipao as a garment imply women's body liberation in design, but it acted as a modern symbol in print media. This section will apply *Linglong* ("Elegant and Fine"), an influential women's magazine in 1930s Shanghai, to analyze how women actively participated in public life, either via wearing or writing qipao.

From editors to readers, participants involved in *Linglong* were like the epitome of urban middle-class women who had non-marginal status both in economy and culture. Intended to "enhance the beautiful lives of women" and to "improve the noble entertainment of society"[19], one of the editors, Chen Zhenling, was an educated feminist who called for women oppressed by patriarchal families to use their rights to fight for independence[20]. As for the targeted readers, in Eileen Chang's words, *Linglong* was "a handful for schoolgirls in 1930s Shanghai"[21], indicating that the majority of the readers were educated women. During the Republican era, most schools in Shanghai were girls' schools founded by missionaries from both sides of the Atlantic, suggesting that the students were, to a large extent, westernized in thought and clothes. Considering costume expression groups in *Linglong*, more than 60% of the women who appeared in the magazine were intellectuals[7], with students accounting for nearly half of them, all of whom were recipients of new-style education and were more likely to possess a wealth of knowledge and open-mindedness. In brief, it was almost a pure world for female elites to establish their own beliefs in modern Shanghai culturally.

When it comes to the magazine itself, although being predominantly text-based, pictures also played a role. In terms of form, *Linglong* spelled a growing consciousness of the self-presentation of women, fostering the development of the female public area. All photographs on the cover or among the magazine were women with newly-designed garments compared to the traditional clothes, including qipao, Western-style dress and fur coat, and above one out of three of its content was women's pictures. Through *Linglong*, women's body has no longer been an abstract image lurking within words, but a series of visible images exposed to the public, breaking the Confusion belief where women had to stay in private space as a private object restricted to her kinship roles. In *Linglong*, a woman did not merely appear as a good wife, a kind mother or a lovely daughter, but expressed herself or connected with a group of female partners sharing the same identity. Moreover, due to the core position women indicated in *Linglong*, it seemed to be a metaphor for the possibility of women becoming the focus of the society, against the tradition where men centralized the power and resources in public instead.

As to the content of these photographs, qipao, occurred most frequently in all clothes[22]. In articles expressing clothing aesthetics, qipao, which did not purely belong to the Chinese tradition or the newly Westernism but expressed a representative modern fashion in Shanghai, was often used as a medium to allow women to express their value orientation, which was encouraged by *Linglong* as well.

A scholar noticed that in the context of the New Life Movement launched by Kuomintang (KMT) in 1934, where clear requirements of clothing, including “cleaning and proper care”, “sewing and repairing broken” and “pulling up the heels” were put, there were many articles with varied opinions on the modern dress[22]. Based on the author’s position, the comments made by the female intellectuals can be divided into three categories. The complete admiration and love for Western-style clothing were relatively rare, while the neutral comments comparing the pros and cons of fashionable dress and the clear objection which usually came from patriotic and economical grounds were more common. The following will mainly analyze the reviews of the latter one, which referred to qipao and its significance.

According to the evident opponents to modern garments, a work named *Long Dress Style Qipao and High Heels* issued in 1937 affirmed the popularity of the long qipao at home and abroad at first and that the combination of qipao and high heels did add much charm to women. But the conversation changed, “ordinary women do not look good in long qipao and high heels”, because the arrangement in groups was not suitable for free movement and work. Moreover, since the country was in crisis, women should be producers who work hard, not be those who “hang their hands, sit and eat, and do nothing”. Finally, it is suggested that if women want to pursue modernity, they must develop a healthy body and work habits[23]. Another earlier work, *Modern Women’s Decoration* questioned the popular clothing of the 1930s, believing that the qipao’s high collar, long hem and high-heeled leather shoes that hindered walking were simply restraints on the female body, even if it was smeared and powdered, it looked weak. What the real beauty of women should be, in the author’s view, was a unity of fit body and plump muscles[24].

In the *Long Dress Style Qipao and High Heels*, the author started from simple patriotism and criticized only the practicality of qipao. Although she attributed the opposition to modern clothing to the labor of ordinary people required by national disasters, qipao itself did not become an opposition to nationalism. Also, it was found that although the qipao became the official dress in 1929 issued by KMT, its status was not unshakable.

It is not difficult to see that these writings against wearing a modern dress just reflect the prevalent trend of women wearing fashionable clothing as a social norm

during those times. Although there were attempts to ensure that throats, arms, and legs were decently covered under the New Life Movement[4], *Linglong* writers did not oppose the fashion by conservatively emphasizing or promoting what was actually a requirement to dress. Meanwhile, even though the fashionable western clothes were rejected to different degrees, they hardly directly required women to wear a conservative body-covering dress or promoted purely traditional clothing. Instead, only from the perspective of the political situation at that time and the importance of physical health development.

5. CONCLUSION

Since the Westernization Movement in the late Qing Dynasty, the idea of “Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application” has become the guiding theory for the reform, and a series of debates about “substance” and “application” has emerged in Chinese intellectual world. The proposal was an exploration attempting to construct the ideal relationship between Chinese and Western cultures. It affected all aspects of life at that time, closely related to the popularity of the qipao as well.

It is even said that the qipao was the embodiment of the idea of “Chinese Substance, Western Application”. On the one hand, the outlook of the qipao, “application”, was a product combining a sequence of Western elements and Western trends, including lace, polka dot patterns, etc. The classic images of modern women that matched it often bobbed curly hair and Hollywood-style gorgeous girl with makeup and high heels. In terms of design, the qipao undoubtedly took European and American fashion as one of the benchmarks. On the other hand, however, in terms of the connotation and spirit of the qipao, that is, the “substance”, since the Northern Expedition led by the KMT and the May 30 parade initiated by the students, a large number of female students have become qipao wearers. The patriotism and nationalism they represented have become the symbols of the qipao. Their frequent growing appearances in the news and newspapers were an important impetus for the popularization of the cheongsam, also being a gesture for women to gain exposure and step out of their private space, entering into public life.

Although the modernity that the qipao represented, including the liberation of the body, was regarded as progress to a certain extent, we must clarify that this modernity was the epitome of the powerful economy and industry represented by the west as the “other” in the clothing industry from the perspective of historicism. Correspondingly, those willing to and had the ability to accept and agree with this modernity were basically limited to the newly-emerged elites in the more mature industrialized port cities, China’s first urban middle class. Often possessing a dual-status in culture and economy, they constituted the majority of consumers of qipao.

Consumption is a choice and an identity. These urban middle-class women were in the process of emancipating their own clothing in the aesthetic choice, consciously or unintentionally seeking hybrid clothing that fitted their new liberated identities without straying too far from traditional China. Ultimately, in the mid-1920s, they opted for qipao, the basic dress style signifying the important values of this era, an outstanding and distinctive ethnic clothing, which was both fashionable and respectful of national characteristics, symbolizing the active and progressive way of life of Chinese women.

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