



The Emergence of the Shanghai-Style Qipao in the 1920s: Consumerism, Cultural Integration, and Feminism

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Abstract. From 1927 to 1937, China went through a brief period of stability under the Kuomintang rule, and it was also a period of intense cultural collision between China and the West. During this period, the integration of the Shanghai local economy and culture with the West significantly developed women's clothing in the Shanghai area. At that exact moment, the feminist movement was gaining momentum. This paper focuses on the period in the 1920s and studies the economic and cultural development of Shanghai, the rise of Shanghai shopping stores behind the great expansion of Shanghai women's clothing, and the influence of clothing changes on the shaping of new female images. The popularity of Qipao in the Shanghai area as the primary research object, with the *Emancipation Pictorial* published in 1920 in the women's clothing image as a reference. From Shanghai's rise of consumerism, cultural integration, and feminist liberation, three aspects illustrate the emergence of Shanghai-style Qipao in the 1920s was not coincidental.

Keywords: Qipao, Shanghai, Consumerism, Cultural Integration, Feminism, Women's Liberation

1 Introduction

Shanghai, one of the earliest treaty ports in China as a result of the integration with the economy and culture of the West in the 1920s, had led to a significant development of local women's clothing. After the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, the women's movement was widely carried out in society. Chinese women, spearheaded by Shanghai, began to yearn for equality, freedom, and liberation. One outward expression of the women's defiant liberation is the popularity of Shanghai-style Qipao. Why did Qipao become popular among Shanghainese women in the 1920s? Was the popularity of Shanghai-style Qipao a coincidence? This article explains the historical necessity for Shanghai-style Qipao to flourish in the 1920s from three points of view: the rise of Shanghai consumerism, the integration of Chinese and Western culture, and the progress of feminism at that time.

Qipao, which means "banner gown," originated from the Manchurians and was later adopted by the Chinese in the 1920s [1]. The English term "cheongsam" comes from the Cantonese word which means a "long shirt," and refers to a kind of robe worn by

men [2]. As Sandy Ng introduced in her article, “the two terms were not meant to be interchangeable, though now they are used to refer to the same type of dress [1].” In this case, the term “Qipao” in this article refers explicitly to the “female cheongsam.” The meteoric rise of Qipao had three distinct phases, namely, Manchu gown in the Qing dynasty, the new Qipao in the Republic of China, and a fashionable contemporary Qipao [3]. In simple terms, it went from a straight cylindrical wide waist to a tight-fitting design. And no matter how the style of Qipao has changed, it represented a new era in which the role of women was redefined. Most ordinary people’s impressions of Qipao came from the Shanghai style, which is the focus of this article.

2 The Rise of Consumerism in Shanghai

2.1 The Geographical Location of Shanghai

No other city has a closely associated image of Qipao other than Shanghai. Shanghai was not born as one of the five Chinese port cities with the Nanjing Treaty in 1842; instead, it was already serving as a major port city for trade between inland provinces and other port cities through a network of rivers in China throughout time. According to Wen-Hsin Yeh’s book *Shanghai Splendor*, she mentioned that, “the arrival of the English in Shanghai nonetheless marked an important departure, for what used to be maritime activities had now been transformed into international trade [4].” Because of this, Shanghai proved to be uniquely esoteric among China’s foreign settlements. It was far more extensive and far more prosperous beyond expectations. All new developments, whether material or spiritual, were initiated in Shanghai and spread throughout China. Although the New Cultural Movement originated in Beijing, Shanghai was still the center of China’s economy, culture, and commerce.

Shanghai’s advantaged location has led to rapid commercial and financial development, and transportation-related industries. The headquarters of China’s most important banks were all located in Shanghai in the 1920s, which made Shanghai the financial center of China. In terms of transportation, Shanghai integrated water transportation, railway transportation, and air transportation. It deserved to be an important transportation hub. Shanghai was also the center of China’s cotton textile, flour processing, and other light industrial factories in the 1920s. Thus, Shanghai was a multi-functional economic center integrating shipping, foreign trade, industry, and commerce, and it laid the foundation for the popularity of Shanghai-style Qipao.

2.2 Shopping Became Entertainment: “Nanjing Road Phenomenon”

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a new commercial culture emerged in Shanghai, which historians defined as the “Nanjing Road Phenomenon.” This phenomenon refers to the combination of “new designs for shop fronts, new patterns of merchandise displays, new standards of quality assurance, and new attitudes in customer service [4].” Nanjing Road’s development has witnessed Shanghai’s historical transformation into an international metropolis. Most foreign stores paid attention to the

design of glass cabinets, and all goods were placed in beautifully designed glass cabinets to facilitate consumer selection. While in traditional Chinese shops, there were few windows, and the goods were primarily hidden in wooden cabinets. The business concepts of foreign stores influenced Chinese merchants, and many Chinese stores opened on Nanjing Road imitated foreign stores to attract consumers. Since then, shopping has been redefined in Shanghai. People were increasingly enjoying the fun and entertainment of window-shopping, which runs contrary to the previous ways of shopping for the sake of daily life needs.

In addition to the leading four department stores (Sincere, Wing On, the Sun, and Sun Sun), Nanjing Road was also home to a large number of manufacturers and retailers selling fine jewelry, satin, fabrics, dresses, suits, children's wear, glasses, cosmetics, etc. [4]. The expansion of shopping stores offered more places to sell Qipao. Shoppers also had more space for relaxation and entertainment. Therefore, the economic development in Shanghai not only provided more shopping and entertainment options for its residents but also contributed to the popularity of Qipao among a broader range of female consumers. The mature management system has created a wide range of civic culture and entertainment so that all kinds of shops have space to live in Shanghai.

2.3 The Publication of Calendar Paintings

The rapid development of industry and commerce needed corresponding promotional means, thus, new industrial and commercial art emerged. The appearance of the calendar painting was a specific product. The most typical and intuitive medium for the popularity of Shanghai-style Qipao came from the publication of calendar paintings in the Republic of China. Lv et al. described the calendar paintings in the article, "the beautiful ladies dressed in fashionable cheongsam between the 1920s and the 1940s, made the calendar pictures step into a period of great prosperity [3]." The calendar paintings were trendy among the people of Shanghai, and the companies and products that used the calendar paintings for publicity soon gained popularity, so other companies followed suit. Among many painters, Hang Zhiying's calendar paintings were the most innovative and commercial, and his creation opened the era of Qipao beauties. Hang's calendar paintings efforts clung to proven forms and idea [5], through his careful observation of fashionable women's hairstyles, clothes, and postures concerning the foreign pictorial image of female stars, Hang created a series of calendar paintings with unique portraits of Shanghai beauties wearing Qipao, and his works were immediately embraced by the market.

Wearing the Qipao was so fashionable that it spread from the epicenter of Shanghai to other cities via calendar paintings. The calendar paintings' popularity of women in beautiful Qipao then spread from Shanghai to other cities of China, causing women in different regions to see in a new light about traditional dresses.

2.4 The Celebrity Effect

Shanghai women were also trying to improve the city's image by inviting women from other places to try on the Qipao [6]. In the late 1920s, women wearing the Qipao were

considered to be vanguards of fashion. Furthermore, in 1927, the Republic of China even named the Qipao the official dress of the nation to show its undeniable clout and influence. Shanghai was the birthplace of Qipao and made it popular, gaining a wide following and adoration. The educated upper-class Shanghainese women led by example. Wearing the Qipao, they were soon imitated by more women of other classes.



Fig. 1. “Soong Ching-ling in her black Qipao, following the death of her husband Sun Yat-sen, Beijing, 1925. Courtesy of the Soong Ching-ling Memorial Residence, Shanghai [7].”

One of the most typical examples was Soong Ching-ling (1893-1981), wife of China’s first president Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925). Figure 1 was taken in 1925, Soong Ching-ling looked composed and elegant in her dark Qipao. Thus, the era of female roles being redefined opened up.

3 The Cultural Integration of Shanghai and The West

People from different countries went to Shanghai to settle down after the end of the Opium War. Due to the increasing number of western people, the market demand made more people start to engage in the production of western clothes. It promoted the improvement of traditional Chinese women’s clothes and the development of the modern fashion industry. There were various styles of Qipao during the Republic of China period, and the change of Qipao’s collar, opening, sleeves, and patterns reflected the popular style of the moment. These changes in Qipao styles reflected the subtle integration of Chinese and Western cultures. It can be seen that Qipao not only blended into the modern western aesthetic, but also inherited the traditional Manchu culture. As Qi et al. [8] said in the paper, the commercial and civil patterns used on Qipao had abandoned

the original appearance of traditional Chinese costumes with wide robes and oversized sleeves, and used Western aesthetic tastes for reference. The new 1910s Qipao was plain, often in a solid and tedious color, as most with a pattern in the fabric. During the middle of the 1920s influenced by the west, sleeves also began to creep higher on the arm.

Shanghai, “as the only fashion center in China since the late Qing dynasty, was the first place to encounter Western fashion styles [9].” Women in the western world were affected by the First World War, and their societal roles began to change. The women stayed at home and took over the men’s work. They began to wear shorter skirts and cut their hair to make it easier to work. Foreign women who came to settle in Shanghai brought this new female image to the city. This influence was incorporated into the improvement of the Qipao style because some people consider the Qipao fashion aesthetically identical to the Western style, focusing more on showing physical beauty [9].

4 Qipao Makes the Woman: Shanghai Women’s Emancipation

The Republican period of China was the golden age of Qipao. Because it related to the women’s liberation movement, Qipao rose to prominence. It became a symbol of promoting gender equality in China and provided a way to protest against social norms and the patriarchal society tacitly. The New Cultural Movement, headed by students and intellectuals in 1915, was grounded in democracy and science. Young people decried the oppression of women. Women cut their long hair rebelliously and refused to bind their feet in order to raise the cry for reform.

Wearing Qipao was another expression of their resistance to the traditional social system. In Antonia Finnane’s analysis, she pointed out that the Qipao was a modification of the long robe, which was worn only by the elites and educated men in China [2]. Finnane’s research echoes what Sandy Ng notes in her paper, “modern women in Shanghai seized upon fashionable clothing as a way to participate in social reform, encouraging strong and healthy bodies, which the fitted cheongsam showcased [10].” Another case of women’s liberation which relates to Qipao was shown in *Emancipation Pictorial*, it was a pictorial newspaper aimed at advocating “women’s liberation” founded by Jianyun Zhou, a pioneer of Chinese film industry in 1920, and it was also the first pictorial newspaper of women in the history of China known so far.



Fig. 2. The cover of the third issue of *Emancipation Pictorial*. Taken by Xu Yang on March 07, 2010 [11].

Figure 2 was a cover published in the third issue of *Emancipation Pictorial* in October 1920. The painter was unknown. In the news, reporter Xu Yang introduced the original publication collected by collector Zhan Hongge. In the Figure, a woman wearing the Qipao is looking back to break free from the fence pattern, which seems to be a metaphor for the dichotomy of two women in different periods. The big foot of a woman in the picture has a profound meaning, which clearly shows that women are breaking the bad habit of “foot binding.” This picture vividly symbolizes the beginning of the women’s liberation movement.

5 Conclusion

From the beginning of the 20th century, urban women were influenced by new ideas imported from western countries. They began to seek breakthroughs in clothing and demonstrated their determination to break free from traditional constraints. Qipao quickly became prevalent among Shanghainese women in the 1920s, and this iconic garment influenced the rise of modern Chinese women in the 20th century. As an important port city connecting the inland and international trades, Shanghai played its unique and remarkable role. The development of Shanghai’s commercial models and the unique “Nanjing Road phenomenon” changed the traditional way of shopping, making shopping more enjoyable and entertaining. All of these provided a better way of selling and proliferating the Qipao, thus further contributing to its popularity. In conclusion, based on the study of Shanghai’s rise in consumerism, the cultural integration with the West, and the contribution of Shanghai women to women’s liberation nationwide, the popularity of Qipao in the 1920s was not accidental but played a pivotal role in many aspects of women’s lives.

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