

# *The Research on the Changing Image of Suits in Chinese Films after China's Reform and Opening Up*

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**Abstract:** Suits have undergone tremendous changes, from their introduction into the Chinese market to their current popularity. Changes can be shown in various aspects, such as suit sales, market profits, frequency of appearance of suits in Chinese films, etc. This study will study the changing meanings of suits in Chinese films. Through this particular aspect, people can have a different understanding of Chinese history and obvious the growth of the Chinese economy. The study will study the suits in particular Chinese films after China's reform and opening up. This research believes that suits can stand for different meanings in different eras. The suits from the middle of the 1980s stand for capitalism and entrepreneurship. Characters in movies with a nationalistic and global theme—which often include portrayals of historical figures and everyday people in society—were what the 90s suits were describing. Following the 2000s, new prosperity was ushered in by Chinese cinema and social openness due to policy opening up and social and cultural development. The shifting function of suits in the movie can also be interpreted as the personification of power for individuals, which is also connected to the explosive growth of China's economy.

**Keywords:** Dynamic meaning of suits, Chinese movies, China's reform, Opening up

## 1. Introduction

In the 1840s, suits began to enter the Chinese market. At that time, the only people who wore suits were expatriates who came to China and Chinese people who studied abroad. The first suit store opened by the Chinese was Li Shunchang, a custom-made suit store founded by Ningbo native Li Laiyi. 1911, the Republican government affirmed the suit as one of the main dresses. After 1919, the May Fourth Movement broke out, and the suit, as a representative of the new culture, formed an antagonistic relationship with the traditional dress, robes, and coats. From then on, the Chinese suit industry was able to develop.

After the 1930s, China made small achievements in the suit industry. Shanghai, Harbin, and other cities began to specialize in several high-class suits and dresses in suit stores. For example, suit stores such as Peromont and Henson in Shanghai [1]. In 1936, Gu Tianyun, a student who had returned from Japan, published a book entitled "Introduction to Suit Cutting." He started a suit tailoring course and trained people. This contributed to the development of the suit industry in China. After the founding

of New China, that is, in 1949, the Zhongshan suit began to take over the status of the suit gradually. In 1978, after the reform and opening up, Chinese people's minds became more and more open, the Chinese economy began to develop, and China began to converge with the international community. Suits started to become popular in China again. Today, some of the more popular brands of suits in the Chinese market are YOUNGOR, SaintAngelo, FIRS, ROMON, and so on [2].

Since the reform and opening up in 1979, Chinese film managers have had a new creative philosophy and a deeper understanding of film creation. In the early 1980s, "Little Flower," "The Year of the Living," "Yellow Land," "Red Sorghum," and other films set off the creative climax of Chinese cinema [3]. These works reflect the national sentiment of the Chinese people, reflecting the Chinese people accepting the diluted Western culture while upholding the tradition and promoting the concept of innovation. In the 20 years between the 20th and 21st centuries, "Cocoanuts," "Nanjing! Nanjing!" and other films documented all kinds of human conditions and factual documentaries. [4]. This generation of directors pursued a sense of "aesthetics." In the context of the "people-centered" ideology of the times, directors used their own and the country's most concerned parts as film material. In the 40 years of reform and opening up, the film industry has released a series of films created around major event points. For example, "Founding Ceremony" and "Building the Army" aimed to celebrate the birthday of the new China; "Building the Party" was used to celebrate the birthday of the Party; the film "Loyalty and Betrayal" to welcome the 18th Party Congress, etc. .... These films are articulated around important events at different points in time to inspire national pride in the Chinese people.

In recent years, the film industry still adheres to patriotism as the central intention but also combines with popular entertainment accordingly. 2017's "War Wolf 2," sitting at over 5 billion box office, and 2018's "Operation Red Sea," with 3.29 billion box office, can be used as very representative examples. In the 13th China-US Film Festival, "War Wolf 2" won the Best Film Award; in the 12th Asian Film Awards, "War Wolf 2" won the title of the highest-grossing Asian film of 2017...in more than 20 film festivals.

## 2. Literature Review

After the reform and opening up, as China's society and economy and people's incomes rose, suits began to enter the Chinese market, and films took up a large part of people's entertainment lives. At the same time, the pursuit of style and fashion in dressing not only for women but also for men began to develop rapidly. With this in mind, scholars have conducted various studies on suits and films in China. According to Lu's research, suits can be divided into three categories: men's suits, women's suits, and children's suits, depending on who is wearing them. According to her research, suits can be divided into three types of suits: men's suits, women's suits, and children's suits, and three types of suits: three-piece suits, two-piece suits, and single suits [5]. For example, in the 1940s, suits exaggerated the masculine beauty of men with broad shoulders and rounded backs, giving them a sense of security and trustworthiness. In contrast, women's suits were waist-length and flat-shouldered, showing elegance and sensuality [5]. There are also descriptions of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and so on. More importantly, she mentions the rapid development of western clothing in China after the reform and opening up. The era of mass dressing has been waved away, and China has been the world's leading producer and exporter of clothing for many years. In recent years, the rapid development of Chinese suits, especially men's suits, has been evident to all; according to the annual report of the textile industry statistics, China's men's suit production is rising trend year after year. Sales revenue accounts for about 10% of garment revenue, a remarkable achievement [5]. This relates to the premise of the topic to be studied in this thesis.

Unlike Lv Zhiqin's presentation, which examines the origins and study of Chinese suits and describes in part the changes in men's suits, the study by Zheng Xue, Wang Xin, and Zhao Fangyuan

focuses on the changes in men's suits in China, examining in detail the differences in men's suits in terms of textiles and clothing design, for example, the study most typically describes the changes in men's suits in the 1990s from loose fitting to more fitted, with thinner padded shoulders and smaller sleeves. The hip circumference of the suit trousers became smaller, the mid-crotch was reduced, the leg opening became smaller, the standing crotch became shorter, and there was a greater focus on the shape with a lighter, straighter, and shapelier fit [6]. Such literature is beneficial to study and analyze suits in films and learn more about suits' expertise.

In addition to studies on Chinese suits, scholars have also conducted representative studies on the image of dress in the film. For example, Pan Yating and Gu Chunhua's survey on the cheongsam costume in *The Year of Flowers*, which, as a carrier of visual symbols, carries the function of driving the plot, conveying the emotions of the characters and sublimating the theme of the film [7]. There is also an in-depth analysis of the differences between Chinese and Western wedding customs and wedding costumes in the movie *The Wedding Banquet* to understand the reasons for the differences and to help the cultural exchange between China and the United States [8]. However, these studies focus only on the dress code in the film and can serve as an analytical reference method for this study. Warsaw's analysis is more pertinent in that it dissects the impact of fashion elements on social aesthetics in Chinese films after the reform and opening up, arguing that the extensive use of fashion elements in films of this period conveyed a new aesthetic and political reform connotation, illustrating the filmmakers' thorough understanding of the political intentions of the reform and opening up [9]. By analyzing the different suits worn by the male characters in the film, some of the classic suits in the film, including black suits, tuxedos, sports suits, suits, casual suits, and dressing gowns, are analyzed and interpreted in terms of occasion, style, color, and details. The relationship between the costume design and the character of the protagonist is studied, as well as how the storyline develops in accordance with the changes in the characters' attire [10]. Not just for *Kingsman*, but also for James Bond in the James Bond films, where a three-piece suit in smoky grey, with a black knitted tie and white shirt with a narrow collar, and a square scarf in the breast pocket above the suit, is the perfect way to show off Brioni's Italian elegance and Tom Ford's British style [11].

This study is characterized by the fact that most previous studies have focused on the rise and development of the suit in China alone, or the role of a particular representative costume in the film, without a detailed analysis of the two. Moreover, very little of the literature focuses directly on the changes in specific costumes in films of specific countries in particular times, especially those brought about by foreign cultures. This study will help to understand how the image of suits in films has changed since China's reform and opening up and to get a sense of the meaning behind the suits and their role in society.

### 3. Methodology

This study will explore in depth the changes in the image of suits in Chinese films after the reform and opening up. It will analyze the characters and their dress in representative films. At the beginning of the opening up, the costumes in movies and television became the essential reference point for people's clothing. The prominent symbol of China's reform and opening up is the suit fever. Information from film and television productions and the Internet will be obtained. This research will be qualitative. The study's methodology will be a combination of observation and content analysis. Observation is to make direct observations, such as the differences in how the characters of a particular film and the context of the era are reflected through costumes and the different meanings of costume suits in the current era of film and television.

## 4. Results

What the mid-80s suits represented were capitalism and entrepreneurship [12]. What the 90s suits described were characters under the central theme of nationalism and universality in films, which contain depictions of historical figures and ordinary people in society. In the 2000s, Chinese films had a breakthrough because of the laws and the opening of people's minds. Due to the opening up of policies and the development of social culture, Chinese films and social openness ushered in new prosperity after the 2000s. The changes in the role of suits in the film can also be seen as the embodiment of power for people, which is also related to the booming development of China's economy.

## 5. Discussion

The first result is that the existence of suits in the 1980s stands for capitalism and entrepreneurship. In the 1980s, China entered a period of modernism. After the reform and opening up, art began to be presented on the stage. In the 1980s, when China was in the early stage of reform and opening up, everything exuded vigor and vitality. In the 1980s, all industries in China saw rapid development. Life in this era left the impression of stability and transformation. As the opening to the outside world continued, people's horizons broadened, and their minds were enriched. Suits are also starting to enter the film and television industry. However, since it was the early stage of reform and opening up, people's acceptance of suits had not yet reached a certain level.

In this socialist country, suits were considered foreign clothes. At that time, the suit represented the capitalist entrepreneur. For example, the film "The Horse Herder" tells the story of Xu Lingjun, who was beaten as a "rightist" and came to work in the northwest pasture, where he was cared for by local herdsmen and married a rural girl. Xu Lingjun's father, Xu Jingyu, is wearing a suit in the movie. Xu Jingyu's identity is that of a Chinese American, a big entrepreneur. In light of this, this study believes that the presence of suits in the 1980s represents capitalism and entrepreneurship. However, in this era, people's minds were not yet completely open, and suits were considered clothes only for the rich and cultured, so they were not for everyone. That's the reason why suits are given to capitalism and entrepreneurs in movies. Suits gradually began to become popular, not only in people's lives but also in the film industry. Although, on the one hand, it popularized suits for people, it also made this stereotype exist for them. To improve, there should be someone to step out of the comfortable zone and break the stereotype.

The film culture of the 1990s was more nationalistic and universal in its portrayal of historical and minor figures in society. Like the Chinese society and culture of the time, it was not as rebellious as the culture of the 1980s, pursuing its path and being different. The pioneering and experimental nature of film culture, as China sought social "stability and unity" in the context of globalization and the gradual integration of politics and economy, made nationalist films the primary subject matter of films in the 1990s. In March 1987, the China Film Bureau solemnly put forward the theme of "highlighting the main theme and insisting on diversity" at the National Conference of Directors of Feature Film Studios. The films of this period appealed to the historical mission and social through the combination of heroes of the anti-Japanese War and the Liberation War and the image of "good people and good deeds" in the later period. The moral responsibility of the filmmakers and audiences conveyed positive social energy. The suit, as a costume where the old and the new collide, was used to portray the characters' mission, social, and historical real significance for the film in the 90s. For example, in the 1987 film "The Last Emperor," the Chinese emperor Puyi, dressed in a suit, conveys the historical context of change. The use of suits in the 1990s became commonplace with the rapid modernization of Chinese society, as the "good guys" and "family ethics" themes emerged. The suits

of the 1990s became less and less "new" and more common, but they also played a role in emphasizing a particular image.

The times continued to develop, and Chinese cinema entered a new era. The 00s of the 21st century (2000-2009) were a decade of rapid development and rise of mainland Chinese cinema, especially commercial cinema, and the gradual improvement and maturation of the film industry in mainland China. Firstly, the reform of the Chinese film industry system provided development opportunities. In 1998, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) promulgated the <Trial Measures for the Licensing of Feature Film Production>, further liberalizing the eligibility of film production as a market entity. These initiatives significantly changed China's film production system, attracting more talent and capital into the field of film production and opening up space for the development of commercial films [13]. At the same time, the sixth generation of directors created new trends. The Cultural Revolution did not substantially impact them, and their rise accompanied significant changes in China's social reform and opening [14]. At the same time, they also experienced the dislocation of cinema from art to everyday life and from art to cultural products. As a result, their generation of directors is characterized by "rebellion and contemplation," and their works have a specific documentary aesthetic [15]. *Infernal Affairs* is a classic film of the era, set in Hong Kong, where the main character is part of a police force. Most of the company's white-collar employees are required to adhere to a dress code, which means wearing official clothing. In *Infernal Affairs 2*, the most crucial suit comes at the end of the film, which is also the most colorful chapter. The fall of the Ned family, the largest gangster family in Hong Kong, marks the official handover of Hong Kong from China to Britain and the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China. Policeman Wong also removed Ni Yongxiao's picture from the office notice board and replaced it with Han Chen's picture. The plaque bears witness to the ups and downs of the struggle between the Hong Kong Police Force and the triad forces and is a metaphor for the ups and downs of Hong Kong people over the past century. At the moment, Han Chen, dressed in a snow-white suit, is at a slow-motion reunion party, accompanied by a welcoming choir and sipping champagne, symbolizing success. The dazzling white suit marks him not only as Ni Yongxiao's heir but also as having completed the 'bleaching' that Ni Yongxiao failed to do even after his death. In this case, the suit was more of an indicator of power and status, symbolizing the wearer's social standing and capacity.

## 6. Conclusion

After the reform and opening up, as China's social and economic development, national income increased, and the social and cultural background and ideology developed, suits began to enter the Chinese market and were produced, also used in large quantities. At the same time, the Chinese film industry continued to flourish as the country's soft power continued to advance in terms of culture and art. From the early days of reform and opening up, China gradually entered a modernist society, and films responded to class struggle with social reflection following the Cultural Revolution and the development of class division in Chinese society. By the middle period, China insisted that films appeal to the historical mission and social responsibility through a combination of heroic characters from the War of Resistance against Japan and the War of Liberation and the later images of "good people doing good". Films were used to portray characters with a sense of mission, a sense of community, and the true meaning of history. By the end of the twentieth century, Chinese film entered a new era. The mainland Chinese film industry, especially commercial cinema, developed and rose rapidly. The Mainland Chinese film industry gradually improved and matured. This paper concludes by arguing the changing image of suits in Chinese films since the reform and opening up of China, the meaning behind the suits, and their role in society. The suits of the mid-1980s represent capitalism and entrepreneurship. The suits of the 1990s depicted characters under the central themes of

nationalism and universality in films, including the depiction of historical figures and ordinary people in society. Chinese society at this time emphasized the search for social "stability and unity" in the context of globalization and the gradual integration of politics and economics. The changing role of suits in movies can also be seen as a reflection of people's power, which is related to the booming social-economic development of China at that time. The suit, as an imported costume, has been gradually "localized" as a carrier of characters in movies, leaving different historical development marks and cultural symbols in the context of decades of Chinese social and cultural development.

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