

Discipline and Expression: Historical Divergence, Driving Forces, and Future Trends of Dress Codes in China and the West

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Abstract. Clothing is one of the most primitive and complicated symbolic systems in human civilization. In addition to being an adornment for the body and a manifestation of personal preference, it is also a medium for expressing ethnic culture and social ideas. In this article, Author will attempt to compare and discuss the different development paths of dress codes in the East and West, explore the current challenges and prospects. This paper combines comparative historical analysis and politics of the body, analyzes the process of the development of dress code from antiquity to modernity to present, as well as the current impact of globalization and Internet technology. Within the background of Confucian ethics, in China, with the politically dominant “ritual propriety” model, clothing was regarded as a means to control the body and keep social order. After the Renaissance and Industrial Revolution, under the influence of economy, technology, social movement, etc., in the West, clothing has been turned into an expression and declaration of personal identity, and an “individual driven” paradigm has been born. Meanwhile, contemporary dress codes in the East and West are also challenged by the traditional logic brought by digital technology and new fashion concepts.

Keywords: dress codes, China-West comparison, cultural identity, social norms, digital fashion

1. Introduction

Clothing is a highly sophisticated form of non-verbal communication, which encodes social meanings for human beings. Obviously, clothing does not merely serve its basic functions of covering and beautifying in human life; it is even more so considered as a basic means to express social power and cultural identity nowadays [1]. In the process of constructing global civilization, it is beyond doubt that dress systems of Eastern and Western society both initially served social hierarchy and imperial power (as in ancient China, ceremonial dress system; as in Western society, sumptuary laws). However, their essences and evolutionary paths were gradually separated. This historical fact leads to one of the most interesting questions for this paper: What are the basic driving forces for the two different dress logics of these two civilizations? What challenges and

transformations are brought by this old logic in today's cultural globalization period when digital technology influences everything?

Although there are many studies on the history of Chinese and Western clothing, there is a lack of a framework that can directly compare their different development tracks. In addition, with the continuous development of digital technology, the expression methods of identity norms are also constantly changing. At the same time, under the impetus of the globalization trend, the phenomenon of cultural regression is more and more prominent. This article believes that the differences in clothing norms between China and West are actually the specific manifestations of the two cultural models: “ceremonial management of the body” and “self-assertion”.

The evolution of China's clothing system has always been revolving around the core of ritual system and Confucian thought. In addition, political power plays an absolutely dominant role. Therefore, clothing became a tool for reinforcing collective order, regulating social behavior and maintaining imperial power naturally. While, after a long process of ideological and social shock, dress codes of Western society successfully broke out from “visualizing hierarchical status” to “individual expression”, which brought about a liberation of personal autonomy. In addition, economic capital, technological innovation and intellectual revolution jointly promoted this process, and personal value and free expression were emphasized.

In order to analyze this historical fact in depth, this study uses comparative historical analysis and theoretical construction. This paper attempts to track the evolution of ancient dress codes of both culture in a systematic way firstly and finds their similarities and differences. Then, this paper finds out some key historical moments in the process of evolution of dress codes of each culture and compared and analyzed their driving forces.

Furthermore, this study intends to reveal the challenges brought by digital technology to “body” as the basis for exercising power and constructing identity and forecast the future. This study believes that the micro-history of dress codes is actually the macro politics of the body. Power exerts its influence on every social member in an extremely powerful way through such subtle means as fabric and needlework, which people can analyze. In addition, people can also clearly see the tension between “discipline and expression” existing in both Chinese and Western culture, and technology is reshaping the relationship between body and identity and brought impacts on people.

2. Civilizational differentiation in philosophical foundations and sources of power

2.1. China: bodily discipline and ethical symbolism under the ritual order

Every element within a culture embodies the principles of its unique ethical system, and this is also applicable to the study of the clothing code system. The original philosophical concept of China's traditional dressing system comes from the ethical view constructed by Confucianism. Within this framework, the body is not an independent entity but an ethical vessel that gains social significance only after being integrated into the order of “Li” (ritual propriety) [2]. Only when Confucianism believes that “cultivating oneself is the basis for governing the state and bringing peace to the world”, can clothing become the most immediate tangible form of this “self-cultivation”. The difference in dress codes between China and the West appears when the two civilizations were in their initial stages. It is rooted in completely different understandings of the relationship between individuals and society as well as different philosophical backgrounds. Since the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, China has been profoundly influenced by Confucian thought. All Confucianism advocates is maintaining social order. Its basic teachings can be summarized in two maxims: ritual propriety and self-restraint and restoration of propriety.

Ritual propriety tells clearly that man cannot be more important than the society; the individual has to follow social orders and moral principles. The value of an individual could be displayed in his surroundings. Book of Rites, an ancient book about rites, specified dress requirements and therefore highlighted the importance of clothes in forming social orders and moral principles. It was stipulated that “by wearing ceremonial attire, the sovereign governs the realm” since the Zhou Dynasty. The dress system was highly correlated with feudal system and clan system. It was an extension of political ruling. Spring Officials, one of the chapters of Zhou Li, prescribed what the Son of Heaven, feudal lords and high officials should wear in different ceremonies. The regulations were designed to set forth an order from the outside by establishing a symbolic system. The dress code system was codified and implemented by law. The development of silk weaving brought opulence and attached even more significance to clothes in identifying people.

2.2. The west: a long revolution from sacred order to individual awakening

Conversely, the development of Western dress codes can be seen as a process of shifting from religious and feudal power to individual power, this was a process of transferring the source of power from “sky” to feudal lords and then to individuals. Since Roman times, the toga had been the most obvious example of this in terms of civic identity; each class of Roman citizens, senators, equites and common citizens, had distinctive patterns or decorations. Ancient Roman dress regulations were as strict as those of China’s “ritual system” and were concerned with issues of civic right rather than ancestral morality. In the Middle Ages, the Western Church was powerful. In terms of an overall ideological model for understanding society, the Anglo-Saxon monk Aelfric’s tripartite schema of oratores (those who pray), bellatores (those who fight) and laboratores (those who labor) was one of the most widely accepted models in the high Middle Age [3]. Their clothes were the most direct expression of the hierarchy. In Western society, the oratores were allowed to wear rich and expensive materials such as satin and silk, and decorate with expensive jewels and diamonds. At the same time, the clothes that peasants could wear were only coarse wool or linen clothes. In this case, the Church had exercised an important influence and played a driving role. The Church had enforced sumptuary laws that not only restricted people from showing off their wealth but also added moral and religious admonitions. In this period, the Western dress codes still played the role of solidifying social hierarchy and their source of power came from feudal lords and religion instead of Son of Heaven and rites as in China.

During that period, Western dress codes, similar to those in China, played important roles in solidifying social hierarchy and preserving ruling power. The difference was that the authority of came from feudal lords and God in the West and that of focused on the tradition of Son of Heaven and ancestors in China.

When mentioning the Western historical progress and the process of intellect development, the Renaissance became one of the most typical historical events. It was one of the three major movements of intellectual liberation in modern Western Europe. The humanist movement, by reestablishing the value system of humanity through the revaluation of classic culture, broke the theological constraint and liberated people. Liberated from theological connotation by reinterpreting and rediscovering the classic culture, human beings established a new value system from the perspective of anthropocentrism through the reinterpretation and rediscovery of the classic culture. In fact, it was a typical intellectual revolution that redefined the meaning of human existence and the standard of value [4]. In this typical revolution of ideas, the individual was promoted from a subordinate position in the theological discourse to an intrinsically significant subject of existence.

This transformation was not only reflected in the thought but also in the concrete actions in daily life, especially in the concrete practice of clothing.

During this process, the status of the body was reconstructed thoroughly. The body was viewed as a sin container that needed to be controlled and sublimated. The body was worth living for because it could connect with the afterlife as seen by medieval theology.

In contrast, during the Renaissance, sartorial behaviors experienced a fundamental turning point. People changed from being passive subjects who submitted to divine power or feudal order to active ones who needed to control themselves. This active subject controlled and shaped the status quo by consciously modeling, expressing, and managing their personal identity through clothing material, according to Foucault. He found that people are not only objects of power but also active subjects who can control and shape themselves by restraining themselves [5]. Instead of passively accepting power from others, scholars now emphasize that people are active in using sartorial behaviors for controlling themselves and expressing themselves for social achievement, which is called the “aesthetic self-fashioning” process in contemporary sociological literature today [6].

The philosophical revolution in dress codes of body regulations was rooted in modern philosophy. The self was placed in the first place in modern philosophy. In addition, Locke argued in *The Second Treatise of Government* that the body was property. It provided a political-philosophical background for people’s right of controlling their own body. Locke believed that people owned themselves and enjoyed corresponding ownership rights. Guided by natural laws, people could control and manage themselves and their own properties as they wanted, free from others’ control. The emphasis on personal sovereignty was completely different from the Confucian family ethics in which the body is regarded as “a gift from one’s parents, not to be harmed”—the philosophical anthropology about the property of the body.

2.3. The divergence of philosophy: the disciplinary body and the expressive body

This opposition was not only in theory but also in dress codes. Author believe that the process of Western dress codes was “centrifugal”. That is, with the process of Western individualization, clothing gradually changed from displaying identity, wealth, and social status to expressing self-identity and personal freedom.

While the process of China’s dress codes tends to be “centripetal”. That is, people usually aim at how to integrate themselves into the whole of collectivist culture. Except for the change of ruling elites and dominant ideology, changes in dress codes of China were seldom about individual freedom of expression.

On the whole, there is more than a question of styles at issue in the distance between Eastern and Western dress principles, and in many ways, it starts with ontological differences. For Confucian ethics and ritual regimes, China employs very symbolic sartorial language to put people in social order. The objective was social order, bodily standardization. The objective was social order, bodily standardization. On the other hand, after the humanist awakening, it took Western society a while to get clothing, along with its exercise of power, to the level where they could use it as a right of self-expression. That is, self-positioning and uniqueness, bodily expression, centrifugally from each of people outwards. Philosophically speaking, it’s as if two civilizations chose to express themselves with very different “modes of bodily management,” which set the stage for radically different intellectual trajectories over the ensuing couple of centuries of historical evolution.

3. Identity reconstruction amidst revolutionary and reformist tides

3.1. The politics of the national body in passive modernization

The 19th century is often considered one of the most turbulent, as the nation was in a state of great flux under the impact of revolution, war, and new ideas. As Eastern and Western societies became more modern, they experienced significant and dramatic changes. Dress codes were no longer limited to serving material purposes but became essential symbols for nations, expressing their political will, social movements, and identity. They became significant cultural texts that reshaped identity, inscribed political will, and responded to social change [7].

Since the mid-nineteenth century, China has been confronted with the challenge from Western powers and pushed into a national crisis. People in China engaged in various modernization practices and explorations in an attempt to “save the country.” In such a context, dressing reform was not simply a question of design innovation but also part of a great transformation of body politics. By changing the appearance of citizens, this reform intended to shape the overall identity of modern nation-states through vision. The movement of “Cut the Ponytail, Change the Clothes” at the end of Qing dynasty and the beginning of Republic of China period is the beginning of this “project of modernity in vision.” Through changing the appearance of the people, this movement intended to break the hierarchical meaning symbolized by traditional clothes and create a new “New China” image that could “stand out” in the modern international community.

New archival research reveals how the Zhongshan suit's design philosophy integrated Eastern and Western tailoring traditions, creating sartorial vocabulary for modern Chinese masculinity, it precisely revealed the political nature of evolving dress codes [8]. Wearing a Zhongshan suit was not simply a matter of changing garment but a political uniform with nationalist consciousness: its stand-up collar inherited sartorial tradition of China, four outer pockets represented the “Four Cardinal Virtues of Nation”—propriety, righteousness, integrity, and honor; the five buttons represented “Five Powers Constitution,” and the three buttons on the cuffs represented “Three Principles of People.” This dress fuses the practicality of Western military uniforms and the symbolic meaning of Chinese elements, changing clothing into a visual political discourse. Its function is to display national unity and ethnic consciousness rather than individual expression. Similarly, the evolution of cheongsam in 1920s and 1930s—although also embodied with modernity in combination with Western tailoring to create an image of “New Citizen” and Westernness—remained a process of forging “New Citizen” consciousness and building collective identity.

With the establishment of New China, the political function of dress codes rose to an unprecedented level. This was the beginning of a rare “The revolution to eliminate individualization” in the history of clothing in modern times. The system of uniforms—the Lenin suit, military casual wear and “work clothes”—were not simply questions of style but were well-considered visual ideological systems. By means of strict color management (gray, blue and green) and very uniform styling, this system blurred individuals’ differences in gender, region and class, forming an image of “equality, uniformity and combat readiness” [9]. At that time, “proper conduct” also underwent an ideological reform. The core of the ideological system was not classical ethics based on Confucianism but a revolutionary ideological system. Any form of personalized expression, such as a bright red scarf or tight pants, was a violation of the spirit of collectivism and was seen as an infiltration of ideas from a capitalist system and was thus strictly regulated and punished.

This was an extreme manifestation of the application of Foucault’s “disciplinary power” in modern China. Through this highly uniform system of symbolic clothing, the power of the state

successfully integrated every individual's body into the framework of the nation and integrated them completely from the outside (dress) to the inside (thought). Under the supreme collective goal of "revolution," individuals' subjectivity totally withdrew, and the body expressed political discourse. It is important to note that when women in the West were struggling for their bodies with the arrival of the second wave of feminism (jeans and miniskirts signify the second wave of feminism), China was enrolling its people in an unprecedentedly highly comprehensive system of clothing that regulated bodies, reaching the historical peak of dress code on bodies East and West alike [7].

3.2. The west: a socially driven "declaration of liberation" and the emergence of individual identity

The process of modern Western dress codes is quite different from China's experience, and the reasons for this merit close study. That Western transition was a product of spontaneous social change induced by the growth of urban and industry, and by the social movements that accompanied them, was then characterized by its principles of bodily liberation and self-assertion. And unlike in the Chinese experience, scholars now view the modernization of dress codes understood as a transition system promoted by industrial technology, urban consumer culture, and grassroots social movements [10].

During the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, the West improved production efficiency significantly. The breakthrough in sewing machine technology, synthetic dye chemistry and the establishment of rationalized production systems not only improved manufacturing efficiency, but also greatly improved sartorial mobility for the first time. Working-class consumers could join the fashion cycle through mass-produced ready-to-wear clothes, thus breaking the monopoly of sartorial distinction by aristocrats [11]. The popularity of men's suits marked the social role transition from court nobility to commercial bourgeoisie. This shows that the Western "revolution of fashion" was closely related to the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalism. In addition, the women's movement also promoted the changes in clothing norms. The two world wars promoted women's employment in the workforce on a large scale. The cumbersome clothes such as corsets could not be worn due to the inconvenience of work. In recent years, feminist studies of material culture have found that the kind of clothing designed by designers like Chanel is fundamentally a kind of bodily political liberation in people's daily dressing [12]. Short hair, short skirts and smoking clothes in the "lady" style of the 1920s have been redescribed as an important way for women to participate in the construction of public space through consumption behavior [8]. All these changes show that the modernization of Western dress codes came from the change in the economy and the emergence of rights consciousness. That is, the standard of Western dress was based on individual agency. At this time, Western and Eastern dress codes were already very different. Every society has its own historical background and cultural tradition and thus gives birth to different clothing norms. Modernization is not a single and linear process, but multiple developmental paths. The process of change in dress codes is like a prism, reflecting the different results of cultural exchange and the different choices made by different societies in their process of modernization.

3.3. The crossroads of modernity: path dependency of collective discipline and individual liberation

To put it simply, China's sartorial tradition can be likened to an "onion." While its outer layers shifted with dynastic changes and political upheavals, its core—Confucian ideology, ritual systems, and collectivism—remained constant. This evolution manifests more as succession and adaptation

than radical upheaval. Western dress standards, by contrast, resemble a continuously growing “bamboo shoot.” Since the Renaissance and Industrial Revolution, new forces—individualism, capitalism, and social movements—have emerged organically from within, gradually supplanting older systems. Their transformation primarily unfolds through breakthroughs and disruptions.

4. Contemporary challenges and future directions: global hybridization and digital technology reshaping traditional logic

4.1. China's “national trend”: when tradition becomes the coolest trend

Entering the 21st century, with the fast development of digital technology and Internet, Western and Eastern dress codes are being reformed again. Compared with the ontological shock of digital technology, media forms are only the superficial hybridization, but the physical foundations of sartorial codes are shaken in the deepest level [13].

people are not totally free from old-fashioned spirit; Eastern and Western have to go to multicultural and virtual places for sartorial dress codes. It is better but also a hard way.

In the last few years, Chinese youth started to follow the national trend not only due to nostalgia, but this time it is new cultural strategies and even new cultural pride. It is a story about local flavor but with global vision.

Confronted with the empty provided by international brands, the young Chinese consumers started to cleverly add some traditional cultural elements and even some Western cultural symbols in their apparel and sneakers.

National trends are provocative. It is top-down cultural confidence and also bottom-up market choices and identity affirmation. It is an alarm that traditional “unified China” quietly disappears. People are not following political instructions from the past but openly pursue cultural distinctiveness.

This “national trend” phenomenon is provocative. It is not only top-down cultural confidence but also bottom-up market choices and identity affirmation. It is an alarm that the forces who shape China’s fashion are no longer single but diverse, and the traditional concept of “conforming to propriety” has quietly changed: moving from past single-minded political obedience but now more openly pursue and accept “cultural distinctiveness”.

4.2. Western reflection and transformation: when self-expression meets social responsibility

In the West, after several decades of unimpeded choice in fashion, people are beginning to consider the environmental and social impacts of their consumption. This consideration has resulted in the emergence of slow fashion, antique style, and sustainable fashion. This represents a new chapter in the history of Western individualism. It is no longer simply a case of “simply being” “uniqueness” and “dress - wear freedom”, but rather “distinctiveness with ethical curbs”. Customers tend to select products developed from eco - friendly materials based on fair trade and by ethical manufacturing. This suggests that dress codes are no longer merely a representation of personal freedom and individualism but now have new social and ethical responsibilities to bear. It reflects a deep - seated critique of the capitalist transformations caused by consumer culture. Simply put, the development of social platforms is quietly re - working norms. In modern social settings, as if Instagram were used, the focus of the platform lies in an increased emphasis on “fashion coordination”, and people tend to be very deliberate about crafting their personal image. Superficially, this makes one believe that one enjoys an unhampered chance to make full disclosure. However, many more people tend to

follow trends and consumption ways to attract attentions and likes. This exposure-seeking often leads to a conforming cycle, where users often subconsciously accept the tastes of the algorithm and their peers, which leads to a continuous “algorithm self - regulation” mode [14].

Generally speaking, contemporary dress codes are experiencing a one - of - a - kind paradigm shift. China’s “national trend” phenomenon and the Western “sustainable fashion” movement are both examples of the adaptive evolution of Eastern and Western traditional logics in the context of globalization. The former transform’s collective identity into a market - driven, stylish cultural arrangement, whereas the latter endows individualism with new dimensions of ethics and responsibility.

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4.3. The blurring of gender boundaries and the heightening of social responsibility

On the other hand, the influence of gender roles on dress codes is also worthy of mention. The redefinition of gender roles profoundly impacts dress codes while simultaneously revealing society's re-examination of identity. In antiquity, dress codes demonstrated social status and gender identity through strict gender divisions and specific styles of attire; men's and women's clothing often reflected their roles and power structures within society. However, with the advancement of gender equality movements, modern society's understanding of gender boundaries has become more flexible and diverse, blurring the lines between men's and women's attire. Furthermore, gender-neutral dress codes have gained widespread acceptance in the fashion industry, with numerous brands breaking away from traditional gender divisions. This shift not only reflects respect for individual identity but also challenges conventional notions, fostering broader societal discussions on gender roles. For instance, numerous brands now incorporate gender-neutral garments within their product lines, emphasising functionality and comfort over reliance on conventional gender labels. This trend has now become mainstream, successfully capturing the interest of the vast majority of young consumers.

Overall, this blurring of gender boundaries and emphasis on social responsibility not only aligns dress codes more closely with contemporary societal values but also catalyses broader social change. The fashion industry has played a pivotal role in this process, emerging as a force driving social progress and reshaping cultural identity. This trend has not only transformed individual sartorial choices but also subtly fostered a renewed understanding of gender, identity, and social responsibility, heralding a new era.

4.4. Moving towards hybridization and beyond: new dressing ethics under technological reconstruction

In other words, today’s fashions not only reveal our desires for self-expression and belonging, but also re-examination of gender and social responsibility.

China’s “national fashion trends” and the Western sustainable fashion movement are two examples of the two Eastern and Western traditions being adaptive and evolving in a globalised world. The former celebrates collective identity and pride in home-grown culture, while the latter endows individualism with a new set of ethics. At the same time, the dissolution of gender roles has

led to greater diversity in clothing design that celebrates individual identity and choice. This series of events not only raise clothes to a means of expressing personal style but also advance social progress and identity reformation.

The fashion industry has driven and facilitated this entire process. people are heading into an open, inclusive and responsible era of fashion.

5. Conclusion

This study uses comparative method to discuss development process, current change and challenge of dress code in China and West. Eastern dress code and Western dress code have different difference, Eastern and Western civilization have deep connotation and Eastern and Western dress code built on Confucian moral teaching and form a model of body management of “conforming to propriety” reflect collectivism and having impact for thousands of years while Western built on the storm of humanism which form a model of body management of stressing individualism and freedom of identity in the progress of modernization and this difference appear in two different way: “Politically impelled” and “socially impelled”.

However, the research mainly focused on the Han ethnicity, which still has certain limitations. It is necessary to clearly define its future development direction. The main issue lies in the fact that the research on ethnic minorities should be further expanded, which will help broaden the perspective of the study on clothing norms. Finally, the process of evolution of dress code not only become a historical process of body politics but also become a mirror to reflect the process of human civilization development. While sewing way and fabric interaction not only let people see the process of evolution of aesthetics but also let people see that human keep exploring on the eternal question. While in this era where technology constantly change human lifestyle, this research reminds people that maybe true freedom of fashion not lie in the variety of choice but lie in that people can spend more time to think about the human value and through reflecting on the past and embrace the convenience brought by technology in the future can make responsible for the dress code of the future.

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