

The Relationship Between Social Transformation and Women's Clothing in the 20th Century in China

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Abstract: Women in China have achieved the freedom to choose what they wear and have the opportunity to make choices, thanks to the flourishing textile market. The changes in women's clothing have been greatly influenced by the social context. This paper examines the situation in the 20th century by reviewing current literature on the relationship between social transformation and women's clothing. It focuses on three aspects: First, the changes in women's clothing are largely related to the historical background. Second, traditional clothing styles and techniques have been inherited in different forms. Third, the clothing of ethnic minorities has also been influenced by social transformation, and some still maintain their traditions. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the development of women's clothing in China and lays the foundation for further research on material culture and women's rights.

Keywords: social transformation, gender studies, clothing, the 20th century, ethnic groups

1. Introduction

This paper examines the changes in women's clothing in China in the 20th century through three aspects: the historical background, the inheritance of tradition, and the clothing of ethnic minorities. The social transformation in China greatly influenced the changes in female clothing, particularly with the introduction of Western ideas and the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century. This led to the reform of traditional clothing and the preference for Western styles. Women activists also challenged gender norms by wearing traditionally male clothes.

During the period of China's foundation in 1949, women's clothing became simpler and more practical, reflecting political and social changes. The Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s further limited clothing options due to political reasons and shortages of supplies [1]. However, since the late 1970s, with the implementation of the Reform and Opening Up Policy, a variety of cloth materials, styles, and techniques have flooded into China, which has greatly opened the market for women's clothing [1-3].

2. Social Transformation

2.1. The Periodization of Social Transformation

Most scholars generally divide the social transformation of the 20th century into three main periods: the Republican era (1911-1949), the early period of China's foundation (1949-1976), and the period of Reform and Opening-Up (1978-now) [4,5].

Firstly, it is generally accepted that after the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, different cultures entered China and women's clothing began to shift towards Western styles [1]. Women began wearing Western clothes, such as long skirts and high heels, which made them more fashionable and modern. Women also began to cut their hair short, which was an important change. However, Chinese women's dress was still dominated by tradition. The garments, which consisted mainly of robes and skirts, were brightly colored and simple in style. Women usually wore loose skirts and robes, which were often long to facilitate modesty and cover trousers. The whole collection was simple and expensive, usually made of silk, satin, cotton, and linen [6,7]. Women also decorated their hair with hairpins, headscarves, etc. The design and materials of these garments reflected the prosperity and development of traditional Chinese culture.

Secondly, after the Foundation of China, the development of women's clothing was influenced by political and social changes. In the 1940s and 1950s, China underwent a massive social and political change. During this period, there were also some changes in women's dress [1,6]. Due to the influence of the Communist Party of China, women's clothing became simpler, with the main characteristics of popularity and practicality. Clothing usually consisted of simple and loose clothes and skirts to suit the new job requirements, making women's dress more comfortable and freer [8,9]. However, during the Cultural Revolution, fashion and clothing were seen as symbols of capitalism, so women usually wore overalls or blue cotton clothes. The clothes emphasized practicality and functionality without any other decoration [10,11].

Thirdly, with the implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, women's clothing was influenced by the economy and culture. Various popular cultures entered China, and the revival of fashion began. New clothing and design styles became popular in China, including Western fashion, Japanese and Korean styles, and retro styles of traditional Chinese clothing [4]. Modern women often wear jeans, dresses, high heels, and other fashion accessories. In addition, women who care more about individuality and freedom have started wearing printed T-shirts and sneakers. The introduction of these clothes has given women more variety and freedom in dressing [1].

2.2. The Change in Women's Clothing

2.2.1. The Development and Popularity of Cheongsam

With the surge of the bourgeois movement and the rise of the women's liberation movement, feminism flourished, and people began to demand costume reform. At this time, along with the Revolution of 1911, a clothing revolution took place in China [1]. The original function of clothing, which focused on politics and emphasized social hierarchy, disappeared. In terms of the shape, style, and craft of clothing, great changes occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, with an important symbol being the popularity of the cheongsam [12].

The cheongsam was originally the main garment of Manchu women. It absorbed some shapes and systems of Liao, Jin, and Mongolian costumes and formed the characteristic costume of the Manchu people [7,8]. After the Revolution of 1911, the cheongsam changed its original flat and wide modeling characteristics and absorbed western clothing cutting and technology [5]. With the formation of the middle waist on both sides of the slits, the female waist and legs' body beauty was revealed. The process of change was not smooth. The constant collision between traditional ideas and foreign

thoughts left a distinct mark on the change of the cheongsam, and the conflict between Chinese and Western culture was sewn into the cheongsam.

In 1926, a short jacket and long waistcoat were combined to form the first style of modern cheongsam. In the following years, some changes were made in the piping, cuffs, front, collar, and other places, and some new decorations were added [5], but it still maintained the flat and wide style of the old cheongsam with a waistcoat. The cutting method also inherited the traditional straight line, without showing the slender figure of a woman. In the late twenties and thirties, with the ebb and flow of cultural trends, the cheongsam underwent a series of changes in length, tightness, width, slit height, sleeve length, and collar height [8,13].

At the end of the twenties, influenced by the western skirt trend, the cheongsam became shorter, with the robe shrunk to the knee, and the cuff also became shorter and smaller. The sleeve structure also changed from traditional sleeves to western sleeves. These changes were widely criticized by conservatives. After 1931, it became longer again, with the hem sagging. In the mid-1930s, the length of the cheongsam reached the extreme, falling to the ground to cover the feet, which was called the “sweeping cheongsam.” The original wrist-length sleeves of the cheongsam were shortened to the elbows, and the sleeves became increasingly shorter until they shrank to two inches below the shoulders. After 1936, it was almost sleeveless [8].

2.3. The Influence of Western Ideas in the Early 20th Century

During the Republican era in China, the rising bourgeois and women’s liberation movements led to the flourishing of feminism and a demand for clothing reform. The original political function and emphasis on social hierarchy in clothing disappeared, leading to significant changes in clothing style and craft in the 1920s and 1930s, with the cheongsam becoming an important symbol of this transformation [1].

Originally the main garment of Manchu women, the cheongsam absorbed elements from Liao, Jin, and Mongolian costumes to form a distinctive style. After the Revolution of 1911, the cheongsam underwent changes, with the adoption of western cutting and technology, the formation of a middle waist, and slits on both sides that revealed the female waist and legs, resulting in a unique blend of traditional and foreign ideas.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, the cheongsam underwent various changes in length, tightness, width, slit height, sleeve length, and collar height, reflecting the ebb and flow of cultural trends. At the end of the 1920s, influenced by the western skirt trend, the cheongsam became shorter, with a shorter robe, smaller cuffs, and western sleeves. This change was criticized by conservatives, and the length of the cheongsam increased again after 1931. In the mid-1930s, the length reached an extreme with the “sweeping cheongsam” that fell to the ground to cover the feet, and the sleeves became shorter until they were almost sleeveless [1,8].

Feminism from western countries during the Republican era also influenced women’s clothing. Some women began to wear men’s clothes to achieve equal rights in dress. Western clothes became fashionable, with men’s clothes, shoes, and Oriental hairstyles among the most popular. At the same time, there were calls for clothes to be commensurate with occupation and status, and some knowledgeable people criticized the phenomenon of women dressing up like men or gangsters. Female students advocated for elegant and simple clothing, and “civilized new clothes” became popular in modern schools.

With the increasing cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, a large number of textile machines appeared, leading to rapid changes in women’s clothing. The popularity of narrow and thin clothing resulted in the emergence of personal items like gloves and hand cages [14].

3. Changes and Inheritance

3.1. The Reasons for Changes

Before the Revolution of 1911, Chinese traditional clothing served practical and aesthetic purposes, and it also represented social and political backgrounds. Although the decline of the Qing government led to the development of clothing being more influenced by various cultural collisions, politics still played a significant role in clothing [3]. For example, the emergence and popularity of the Zhongshan suit is a good example of how new political views can be perfectly reflected in clothing. Women often had limited clothing choices due to their different identities [5,8].

With the development of industry, significant changes have taken place in people's lives. Many women no longer live in seclusion but take part in social activities such as studying, working, and doing business. Traditional clothing has become inconvenient for many of their activities, and clothing has gradually become simple, comfortable, and practical.

In modern history, with the invasion of foreign powers, various foreign clothes and costumes entered China, opening the eyes of the Chinese people. Additionally, many young people went abroad to study for the purpose of strengthening the country. They brought back not only scientific knowledge but also exotic living habits and clothing, which greatly influenced traditional aesthetics and values [3,4].

3.2. The Importance of Inheritance

In the early 20th century, Chinese women's clothing was mainly made of traditional materials such as silk, cotton, and hemp, and paid attention to the combination of colors and patterns. Traditional elements, such as edging and embroidery techniques, were also widely used. During this period, women's wear mainly consisted of cheongsam, two-front jackets, and long skirts.

After the reform and opening up, more western popular elements entered China, leading to the rapid transformation of China's fashion industry. Chinese women's clothing gradually became westernized and modernized. Many new clothing styles appeared, such as suits, jeans, trench coats with wide necklines, wide sleeves, and folded hems, with strong European and American elements. However, traditional Chinese costumes were also incorporated into these new styles.

Since the 21st century, with the development of the Internet, women's clothing design has become more diverse and customized. Many designers are starting to combine traditional elements with modern elements to create unique styles. For example, designer Angel Chen combines traditional Chinese paper-cut patterns with modern three-dimensional tailoring to create a unique clothing line.

At the same time, sustainability and environmental protection are becoming more important considerations, influencing the choice of materials and techniques. More and more designers are using natural or recycled materials to promote the concept of environmental protection. For example, designer Guo Pei extensively uses natural silk, wool, and other materials in her works and is committed to promoting traditional Chinese handmade arts.

In general, Chinese women's clothing has shown a diverse development trend, integrating traditional and modern elements and showing unique styles and characteristics. Each era has its unique cultural background and fashion trend, which blend and collide with each other, bringing a colorful dressing experience to women in this country [1-5].

4. The Clothing of Different Ethnic Groups

Current research has also noted changes in the clothing of different ethnic groups in China. The Tibetan ethnic group has a unique costume culture that began to change in the last century due to a series of wars and the influence of Western culture. Traditional robes and trousers were gradually

replaced by Western clothes, but with cultural confidence, Tibetans began to incorporate Western elements into traditional clothes and made innovations in materials, colors, and other aspects, creating more fashionable Tibetan clothes.

The Uyghur ethnic group, a major group in Xinjiang, also underwent changes in its costume culture with the development of society and economy and the advent of modernization. The traditional black robe and headscarf evolved into a new type of clothing with brighter colors and richer patterns that are more in line with modern aesthetic standards. However, the Uyghur people still maintain their cultural characteristics of respecting tradition, with many men still preferring to wear traditional long swords and daggers [15,16].

The Zhuang ethnic group in China has a unique costume culture closely connected with the local environment. Traditional blue, dark green, and other colors of clothing have been gradually replaced by increasingly fashionable new clothes, and this has created great business opportunities in the Zhuang fashion industry.

In the early 20th century, the Hui ethnic group mainly wore traditional “brocade jackets,” “satin robes,” and “linen shoes” that were simple in material and style but contained profound folk cultural connotations. In the 1940s, with the development of the folk economy and the rise of the commodity economy, Hui people began to wear more gorgeous clothes. More silks and high-grade fabrics were used, and colors and patterns became more colorful. Western clothing also gradually entered the life of the Hui people and influenced their culture. By the 1960s, Hui clothing had become simple, practical, and comfortable, with materials mainly being light and comfortable cotton and hemp fabrics, and the colors and patterns were more elegant. New styles integrating non-Hui and Western cultures, such as the “mandarin jacket” and “cheongsam,” also began to appear. In the 1980s, with the deepening of China’s reform and opening up, Hui clothing gradually developed in the direction of diversification and individuation, with traditional robes, skirts, and other clothes constantly being innovated, and new styles emerging endlessly [15-17].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the transformation of women’s clothing in China can be divided into three main periods: the republican time (1911-1949), the early period of China’s foundation (1949-1976), and the period of Reform and Opening-Up (1978-now). During these periods, women’s clothing was influenced by political, social, economic, and cultural factors. Traditional Chinese clothing was gradually replaced by Western clothing, and then by a combination of various styles. The cheongsam, a traditional Chinese garment, also underwent significant changes in its length, tightness, width, slit height, sleeve length, and collar height, reflecting the collision between traditional Chinese culture and foreign ideas. Western ideas, such as feminism, also influenced women’s clothing, leading to the popularization of men’s clothing among some women. Overall, the transformation of women’s clothing in China reflects the development and changes in society and culture over the past century.

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