Fall 2019

Qipao and Female Fashion in Republican China and Shanghai (1912-1937): the Discovery and Expression of Individuality

Qingxuan Han
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2019

Part of the Asian Art and Architecture Commons, Fashion Design Commons, and the Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
Han, Qingxuan, "Qipao and Female Fashion in Republican China and Shanghai (1912-1937): the Discovery and Expression of Individuality" (2019). Senior Projects Fall 2019. 37.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2019/37

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.
Qipao and Female Fashion in Republican China and Shanghai (1912-1937): the Discovery and Expression of Individuality

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

by
Qingxuan Han

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
December 2019
Acknowledgements

“No man is an island”. I would not have achieved many things in life without a network of people who have consistently supported me, amongst whom I owe the most to my mother, who has always gone out of her way to help me realize my most ambitious dreams -- I am forever grateful. I would like to thank my Advisor, Prof. Tom Wolf, whose support over the year has been crucial in shaping this project into the way it is now. My mid-way meeting with Prof. Patricia Karetzky and Prof. Susan Aberth has also been very helpful in rethinking the mission and goal of my project, for which I am truly thankful.

I am also grateful to the online community of historical qipao and Republican fashion enthusiasts on weibo, because this project would not have been possible without taking initial inspirations from some of the discussions there. I have truly come a long way since first becoming interested in the subject some five or six years ago, but I consider myself forever in debt to a couple of fashion historians on weibo who have opened up a whole new world to me, where I am still dwelling and making new discoveries. From there, I have acquainted like-minded collectors and qipao-revivalists, and my discussions with them have made significant impacts on me when I first started this project, not really knowing where this could go. I want to express my sincere gratitude to people who have been so kind and generous to grant me the access to use pictures of their collections in this project. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, which is especially true in my case.

Finally, to my close friends, your encouragements have given me so much strength and courage along this journey, and I will always carry them with me as I go on.
Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1

From Imperial to Republican: Shanghai’s Fashion Evolution into Modernity .................6
 I. A Modern Metropolis ...................................................................................................................7
 II. Quest for the West ....................................................................................................................8
 III. Styling the New Era .................................................................................................................9
 IV. Qipao in an Evolution of Fashion ..........................................................................................14

Chapter 2

Qipao Textiles and Designs: A Survey of Techniques and Aesthetics ...............................20
 I. Qipao and Qipao Textile .............................................................................................................20
 II. Textile Production ..................................................................................................................21
 III. Context of Modern Textile Design .......................................................................................25
 IV. Examples of Style ..................................................................................................................29

Chapter 3

Fashion and Individuality ............................................................................................................40
 I. Expressing Individual Identity through Fashion .....................................................................41
 II. Fashion’s Symbolism ..............................................................................................................51

Figures ........................................................................................................................................55

Bibliography ...............................................................................................................................92
Introduction

Fashion represents the popular, accepted, prevailing style at any given time...characterized by its cyclical nature, i.e., the gradual rise, culmination, and eventual decline in the popular acceptance of a style...The forces that give vent to the rise and fall of fashion are identical with the tensions that exist between conformity and distinction in dress.  

-- Marilyn J. Horn

This project is an attempt to understand the Chinese dress qipao in Republican China, with a primary concentration in Shanghai, and its associations with body politics, urbanscape, modernity, personal and national identity, and sociocultural practices. In particular, I argue that qipao, amongst other fashions of Republican China, had been one of the earliest examples of the modern expression of individuality through fashion in China; I strive to discover how this practice was enabled by its contemporary social environment as well as technological advancements. Despite that the Republican era of mainland China lasted till the late 1940s, I chose to focus on a period from the founding of the Republic to the year of 1937, when the entire country was officially at war with Japan and Shanghai invaded and occupied by Japanese military. This project is fueled by a long-time personal interest in qipao and the modern Shanghai, as well as an everlasting curiosity towards the sociocultural dynamics in Republican China’s golden time of 1920s-1930s.

I mainly focus my discussion of this topic on the cosmopolitan city Shanghai at the time, because it was the center of different fashions and harbour for novelties, from which new waves of styles gradually radiated to other parts of the country. As a saying from the Republican time goes:

人人都学上海样，学来学去学不象；等到学了三分象，上海又变新花样。

All of the people long for the Shanghai style, but trying after trying no one gets it right; when they finally made a tentative parody, the Shanghai style has long changed.

Shanghai’s unique status in modern Chinese fashion history makes it an indispensable part in such a study.

In mainland China, the fate of qipao was in sync with the rise and fall of the Republic of China (1912-1949), governed by the Nationalist Party. Qipao did not come into being until the 1920s; its form changing as years went by, qipao came to an almost extinct after the 1950s when various movements started to take over the PRC and overthrow practices associated with its predecessor, the Republic of China. Many major historical events happened during the 1910s-1940s, most of which left tremendous impacts on the transformation of modern Chinese society. The changes in the design of qipao reflected and recorded these currents in Chinese history. Despite being conceived by some as “traditional” in present day, qipao has in fact always been in tune with its time as a response to the new modern life.

By studying qipao’s origin, development, and decline, all of which happened in a condensed and rather short period of time, I strive to reveal how it was perceived by its contemporary society and how it responded to the latter. By studying rapid changes in its style, I argue how fashion was intertwined with advocations of individuality, freedom, equality, and national identity. The goal of my project is, through surveying the objects that survived time, to understand them in their original context in my best efforts.

Qipao, when discussed in the context of Republican China (1912-1949), is not an easily defined entity. The name and notion of qipao had a robust existence and enjoyed national recognition, but different stages of qipao stood in strong contrast to one another; its
techniques and practices evolved over time, and so did its performances and significance. The more I dive into the subject, the less certain I am about what it is. In fact, I believe such to be the case with historical studies. We could always confide in a final judgement and seal it with stamp, but that kind of verdict seems to deviate from the point. For people living contemporary to the fashion we study in this project, it is certain that they did not understand their world in the vocabularies we employ to discuss it today. These kinds, categories, and concepts we come up with are hindsights, and they only tell part of the story. After all, the name is always invented after the named has been around for a while. Amid the fog of the Present, we live out our realities not by constructing it, but simply by being. The goal of my project is, through surveying the objects that survived time, to understand them in their original context. Admittedly, part of my efforts would inevitably be in vain, but I hope some of my striving would lead up to perspectives that inspire the reader.

In this project, I do not take the styles and fashions I refer to as self-contained entities; instead, I acknowledge that names and categories are shorthands for much more complex realities. Holding on to that premise, my approach to the objects studied in this paper is to see them not merely as things, beings and independent existences, but more in terms of events, becomings, and relations.

I would like to point out that in this project, in Chapter 2 in particular, I introduce the reader to some of the more technical aspects of qipao, as the study of objects has provided primary data for this project. Only in very recent years, as more and more scholars and people of interest started to notice, collect, and develop an appetite for antique clothings from the Republican era and fell into a rabbit hole of fantastic designs, did a small amount of research specifically dedicated to Republican textile design and production start to come out. Therefore, a great portion of my understanding of qipao’s textile design is in debt to an
extensive amount of first-hand experience and research, including studying authentic
clothings and their photographs that survived time both in museums and on today’s market,
and examining old archives and artistic depictions. In the process of forming my
understanding, I seek confirmation in available literature whenever possible, but it would be
helpful for the reader to realize the shortage of academic sources that occasionally occurred
in the research and understand the gravity towards material evidence that is inherent in the
methodology I employ.

In recent years, the Chinese government has started to give more and more
recognition to Chinese traditional arts and crafts, establishing a set of standards for the
Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)\(^2\) and promoting the tremendous variety of arts and culture
in the country that is geographically vast, historically rich, and ethnically diverse. Behind the
turn towards China’s unique cultural heritage is a sentiment echoed by the general public.
More and more people have cultivated an interest in Chinese traditional music, tea culture, as
well as a variety of different arts and crafts.

Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, a leading institute in China for fashion
design, teamed up with the government in 2012 to establish the BIFT Park, with diverse
venues dedicated to various innovative initiatives. A portion of this space is dedicated to
traditional Chinese arts and crafts as well. In summer 2019, I took a month-long immersive
class there with Ms. Shi Liping to study the techniques involved in making Republican-style
qipao, while the ultimate mission of the class was to finish a handmade qipao by the end of
the course. It was truly a magical and transformative experience for me, and I will always

---

\(^2\) In December 2004, China ratified UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural
Heritage, and in 2005, under the coordination of the Ministry of Culture, the Office of Ministry Level Joint
Conference was established to undertake the work of making the guidelines and policies for Chinese intangible
cultural protection, and to examine, approve, and coordinate protection programs for Chinese intangible cultural
heritage.
remember the days working twelve to fifteen hours each day attending to the smallest details but feeling happier than ever before. I found *zen* in engaging in such a direct relationship with objects. This experience has deepened my understanding of the structure of qipao in a profound way, and has shifted some of my perspectives from an outsider’s point of view to an insider’s. Chapter 2 is tremendously illuminated by the process of attending to fabrics, as I examine some examples of historical qipao, highlight the details involved in their making, and discuss the significance of these details.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that Mr. Gong Jianpei’s research has inspired me the most amongst other sources I studied for this project. In Spring 2019, a collector I knew sent me the link to a cloud drive of an extensive amount of pictures taken at Gong’s exhibition on qipao and qipao textiles\(^3\) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University at the time; after reading everything in the exhibition, I realized that Gong was one of the leading scholars in this area. I found out that this exhibition was a side-project in his research for an upcoming book, which, unfortunately, had not come out during the past year. Instead, I was able to find his doctoral dissertation from 2018 on similar subjects towards the end of this project and discovered new approaches to my thesis and incorporate these ideas in the final weeks. His research has left significant impact on me particularly in writing my second chapter of the project.

---

\(^3\) 春华映美-龚建培民国旗袍及织物研究展 Research of Qipao and Textiles in Republic of China by Gong Jianpei, January 18th to March 14th 2019.
Chapter 1
From Imperial to Republican: Shanghai’s Fashion Evolution into Modernity

Shanghai did not play a significant role in Chinese history prior to mid 19th century, when, upon defeat by the British in the First Opium War (1839-42), China signed the infamous Treaty of Nanjing, paying an indemnity to Britain, ceding the territory of Hong Kong, and opening up five portal cities across its sea border to trade, including Shanghai. In the next few years, Britain, France, and the U.S. established their concessions in Shanghai; the British concession and the U.S. concession merged into the international settlement in 1863, where foreign residents enjoyed political autonomy under the Shanghai Municipal Council, while the French concession remained largely accountable to the French government. The Treaty of Nanjing transformed China into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and for many decades to come, Shanghai was subjected to powerful colonial influences, negotiating a sino-foreign coexistence that was unparalleled in the rest of China.

Indeed, despite how these concessions overrode the Chinese government, the population in foreign concessions was largely Chinese. In 1933, in a total city population of 3 million, only 70 thousand were foreigners. Shanghai was never really dominated by a Western presence but this coexistence set the tone for Shanghai’s unique urban culture, one that was cosmopolitan, inclusive, and adventurous.

Because of the city’s close proximity to the Jiangnan area, which had been the traditional intellectual elitist center for centuries, its geographical advantages made it possible for Shanghai to influence and attract the intellectual elites nearby as well as for the latter to transform and elevate Shanghai to more than just an economic success. Shanghai became a cultural center as well, where many modern intellectuals, artists and writers from other parts

---

of China gathered. In Shanghai, a portion of the Chinese crème-de-la-crème encountered what the world had brought there, and this mixture has always defined this city’s personality.

A Modern Metropolis

In order to understand the psyche of Shanghai in the first half of the 20th century, one ought to be introduced to the keyword in the city’s development, “modeng”, a Chinese transliteration of the English word “modern”. The word first appeared in the city of Shanghai, which soon became the ultimate goal of the city’s advancement in the Republican era. As often with words in translation, “modeng” carried a somewhat different connotation from its origin “modern”. Unlike how modern has been used in the English world, modeng designated not just what was new, but also what was fashionable -- for something to be modeng, it had to be both; meanwhile, modeng was usually used with a strong commendatory undertone, implying cool, hip, sought-after, etc., and often associated with the West.

With all these attractive qualities, “modeng” became quite the buzzword for the city dwellers of Shanghai, printed everywhere describing just about anything. Under such context, it was applied not merely to where urban infrastructures and new technologies were concerned, but more importantly, to a particular lifestyle, covering various intellectual and artistic facets in life. As a result, the notion of modeng was also extremely relevant in the fashion world.

As a treaty port, Shanghai was the largest one of a dozen on the coastline. Between 1920 and 1930, Shanghai was handling 40% to 50% of all China’s external trade, and it is salient what a significant role Shanghai played in channeling the inland and the outside

---

6 Bergère, Gateway, 148.
world, materially, but also intellectually. Both merchandise and new thinking from the West were filtered through Shanghai first, and the lifestyle of Shanghai was transmitted to other parts of the inland with the help of Shanghai’s blooming publishing industry, as the city became the hub for book and magazine publishing in China, the literature of which was circulated to the country at large.\(^7\)

In modern China and Shanghai in particular, a belief in accessible gratification began to spread out, as people came to realize that they enjoyed access to a broad range of opportunities and commodities in their daily lives that satisfy a variety of needs and desires. People were encouraged to believe that money was to be consumed and enjoyed. Acceptance of the social and economical limitations of one’s immediate family and community was less common than previous eras. Participation in the culture of consumption was considered not just possible but even proper. An urban culture emerged and continued to develop, and in Shanghai in particular, a culture of aestheticism and decadence prevailed.\(^8\) Calendar posters depicting images of the fashionable modern life promoted not only commercial products but also a certain hedonist lifestyle that was unparalleled in history.

**Quest for the West**

Since late Qing, Shanghai had developed a taste for Western customs and fashions. Shanghainese lived side by side with foreigners in the city, observing their lifestyles and having learned to mimic. After several decades from the 1840s, Shanghai had accepted and even started to eagerly pursue the Western lifestyle. By 1920s to 1930s, Shanghai had became the most “Westernized” city in China and arguably the Far East.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, xi.


\(^9\) Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 197.
The emergence of Chinese modern culture was not a result of an autonomous development destined in China’s social evolution, but a passive choice made in the aftermath of strong Western cultural impacts, in a manner that was “drifting in the current, stopping at the superficial”\textsuperscript{10}. In its initial encounters with the West, Chinese went from shock, to fascination, to envy, and eventually to imitation. The logic went that if the West took China to its knees, it must means that China was underdeveloped in its centuries-old rotting traditions and ought to copy the Western ways in a great urgency; to many people, the West represented an ideal of well-off lifestyle and progressive ideas. People chased after Western merchandise with great zeal, while stores picked on this need, selling various foreign-imported products. Foreign textiles, shoes, stockings, parasols, purses, perfumes, powders, jewelries...won Shanghai ladies’ hearts and became common gifts of exchange in society\textsuperscript{11}.

Styling the New Era

Since the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), the Han-Chinese women’s clothing has followed a pattern of \textit{liang jie chuan yi}, namely, a style that follows a two-part top-bottom structure. This tradition has been carried on throughout centuries, all the way into early 1920s. The forms of the top part and the bottom part went through drastic changes during some two thousand years, but the division between the two remained, and it became one of the signifiers of the Han-Chinese female identity. Along with its corresponding term, \textit{san lv shu tou} (dividing one’s hair into three divisions and styling them accordingly), \textit{liang jie chuan yi} was used less often to merely discuss a particular way of dressing, but more frequently as a description of, or even metaphor for, the Han-Chinese woman.

\textsuperscript{11} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 198.
Having been a Han-Chinese tradition for so long, the top-bottom style was not always necessarily reflected in other ethnicities, such as the Manchus. The Manchus invaded late Ming dynasty and overthrew the former to establish the last empire China was to witness, the Qing Empire (1644-1912). Upon their arrival in Beijing, the Manchus launched the law of *ti fa yi fu*, which demanded all Han-Chinese males to dress and shave their head in the Manchu manner, ordering them to abandon the Han practices. The law faced a strong resistance in Han society and had to be carried out violently, but it is noteworthy that Han women were excluded from this violence, due to their lower social status in society that made them less of a threat in the eyes of the ruling Manchus. As a result, throughout Qing dynasty, Han women were able to preserve their practices of *san lv shu tou* and *liang jie chuan yi*, both of which stood as contrast to the Manchu women’s hairstyle and clothing, as the latter divided their hair into two sections instead of three; unlike the top-bottom clothing style seen on Han women, they wore a one-piece robe-like garment, known as *qi zhuang* (fig. 1). Zhuang is translated as clothing; *qi*, literally meaning “banner”, is a colloquial Chinese term for “Manchu”, referring to the “eight banners” military and administrative organization of the Manchus.12 Thus, an unknown woman on the streets could be recognized as Manchu or Han based on her clothing or hairstyle, but one could not tell if a man was Manchu or Han in the same manner, as Han males were essentially assimilated by force. One of the popular theories about qipao’s origin attributes qipao to be inspired by the Manchu women’s informal dress (*chang fu*), *chenyi*, because qipao’s structure was reminiscent of this similar one-piece structure, although *chenyi* had no slit on either side (fig. 2), while qipao had one on the wearer’s left side.

---

Qing dynasty was demolished in 1912 and replaced by the first democratic regime in China, the Republic of China, governed by the Nationalist Party. Clothing as a reflection of time has truthfully reflected this transitional period in Chinese history, as we witness an unprecedented era of openness, activeness, and prosperity in fashion. People were both excited and confused about the immense possibilities that the new era entailed. Almost on every issue of various magazines published in Shanghai, one could find articles discussing fashion trends and what the appropriate new style befitting the new era should look like. These heated discussions occurred because clothing always carried ideological meanings in China, symbolizing the structure of the society, and naturally, the uncertainty and often lack of commonly-accepted standards for dressing oneself really troubled a lot of people. The earlier years of the Republic put on a truly grand mix-and-match fashion show, with radically different dressing concepts and aesthetic preferences exhibited alongside each other: men in suits and men in the traditional chang shan were both seen on the street, while some women appeared in foreign clothes and others still practicing foot-binding walked in tiny shoes; some men wore Western hats with an uncut Qing-style braid underneath, and some men opted for a suit jacket while wearing Chinese trousers. Different classes, sexes, ethnicities imitated each other, and it was unclear to all what the future might look like. Meanwhile, illustrated magazines and newspapers, photo studios, calendar posters, and fashion shows hosted by large department stores and major textile manufacture companies helped popularize fashion trends and expedited the evolution of female fashion.

From 1910s to early 1920s, the Han women’s clothing still consisted of the essential ao and qun (fig. 3). The popular silhouette during the early years of the Republic was a

---

letter-A shape, with both a flared skirt and a top with flared sleeves, somewhat reminiscent of beams radiating from the center of a light source. In 1920s, some variations of this two-piece clothing style started to emerge, and one common characteristic they shared was a development towards a one-piece style. For example, in earlier times, the top blouse ao could be paired with a vest (majia) of the same length, but into the 1920s, we started to see on some women a really long vest that substituted the qun (fig. 4). The earliest versions were also in coordination with the A-shaped silhouette of ao and qun (fig. 5). Gradually, more and more variations of early qipao came into being, and these variations were indeed countless in number and uncategorizable in style: some had slit sides, some did not have any, and some even had accordion pleats in the middle of the slit; some had the mandarin collar enclosed by buttons, supporting the neck with its stiff structure, and some only had a “tube collar”, called tongzi ling, a drastically simplified version of the mandarin collar (fig. 6). The decorative elements varied greatly from one qipao to another, and Western Art Deco elements, such as radial patterns and geometrical patterns, were adeptly used and appropriated (fig. 7-9). The 1920s was an interesting and dynamic time when one could witness so many possibilities of the modern dress all at the same time and place (fig. 10). The fast-paced modern life required more visual stimulations, prompting people to always chase for something more original as various fashions come and go.

Despite the wide spectrum of their quirky creative achievements, what these early qipaos had in common was a consciousness to combine traditional Chinese elements with ones borrowed from Western fashion, and that the wearers were primarily urban with a
modern mind set. Qipao was part of the modern girl kit, along with short bob or permed hair, stockings, high heels, and makeup not so different as seen on the Western flappers.

Since qipao appeared as a fashion novelty, and its wearers were mostly women of younger age and higher social class, admittedly, a delay in style would occur in cities in central China due to their lack of exposure to foreign fashion influences compared to harbour cities like Shanghai; it would also occur among women of older generations who were not keen on keeping up with the trends. Qipao opted for a more rectangular H shape in later 1920s which replaced the A shape, and evolved into a closer-fitting shape in the 1930s when each qipao was customized to accommodate the measurements of its wearer. Still, even as qipao became more and more popular and standardized into the 1930s, it was obviously not an appointed uniform that everybody was supposed to wear. The diversity was especially blatant in the early years of the 1930s.

Qipao would eventually end its period of blossoming differences and enter into an era of standardization in the 1930s, when it became accepted by more and more women, and even appointed by the government as the “national dress” for women in later 1930s. A typical 1930s qipao would look as such: its main body of fabric cut out as a complete entity, without stitching individual pieces together as seen in clothes with more complicated structure. It has a mandarin collar that was starched to maintain the stiff structure that emphasized the elegant shape of an elongated neck, completed by sets of handmade buttons made out of silk fabric in various forms (geometric shapes, floral shapes, traditional motifs…), which leads to the front opening jin, also secured by sets of buttons, going all the way across the side opening as well until they reach the slit. The collar and all border lines of qipao (including sleeve hems,

---

bottom hem, and the front and side openings) were stitched with thin strips of silk fabric, a technique called *xiang* or *gun*. The technique was used in both Manchu women’s clothing and Han women’s clothing for decorative purpose, which was recreated in a modern aesthetic that was much more simplistic. There could be one or two strips of different colors depending on the design of qipao, but the matching buttons were always made out of the same fabric. The design of the buttons and the choice of the border strips are always in coordination with the pattern and color of the textile used to make qipao. It may or may not have a lining, and the length of its sleeves depend on the season. Overall, it maintained a somewhat rectangular shape when laid flat, but when being worn, the natural shape of the body would still be accentuated because of its flowing shape.

Qipao’s length varied alongside different trends going in and out of fashion, almost reaching floor length around 1935. When the War of Resistance Against Japan broke on a national scale in 1937, the rich possibilities of qipao faced a grave shrinkage, due to the shortage of fabrics and other materials, and a common anxiety regarding to the nation’s fate that took people’s attention away from fashion, among many other less immediate needs in wartime. From late 1930s onwards, qipao became shorter and shorter, elevated to near knee-length in 1940s. The exquisite border strips and ornate silk buttons became almost extinct (fig. 11).

**Qipao in an Evolution of Fashion**

Earlier in this chapter, we briefly compared qipao with *chenyi*, the traditional clothing worn by Manchu women throughout Qing dynasty and earlier years of the Republic. The male equivalent of qipao is *changshan*, or *changpao*, meaning long shirt or long gown. It is important to note that the Cantonese term for qipao, *cheongsam*, is the equivalent of the
Mandarin word changshan. This interesting divergence between terms gives away the two most popular theories on qipao’s attributed origins - one is the Manchu dress and another is the male gown chang shan. From the different names purporting to the same garment, we could tell that even people to whom qipao was a contemporary creation were uncertain of its origin. Changshan, in regards to its degree of formality, was the alternative to Western morning suit\textsuperscript{17}. It was originally modeled after the equivalent Manchu male clothing, with some alterations in design, and worn by non-laboring men throughout Qing dynasty. It continued to play a significant part in most of the Republican years, preferred by intellectuals and students (fig. 12).

However, in both academic writings and popular culture, qi zhuang has been acknowledged as the origin of qipao with an overwhelming popularity. In books such as The History of Chinese Qipao Culture by Liu Yu, they incorporate the history of qi zhuang into the history of qipao, claiming qipao to be an adaptation of qi zhuang\textsuperscript{18}, without conducting an investigation on how qi zhuang might have influenced qipao’s coming into being. It was likely that multiple sources inspired the creation of qipao, but drawing on my research on the subject, I would like to argue against this popular view and state that qi zhuang might have had the least impact on the creation of qipao.

First of all, a qi zhuang chenyi\textsuperscript{19} during the last decades of Qing dynasty was at the peak of complex decorations. This aesthetic tendency was not particular to Manchu women, but shared amongst Han women as well. The style seen on female clothing at the twilight of late Qing dynasty can be described as extremely elaborate and flamboyant -- all kinds of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Finnane, Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation, 96.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Again, qi zhuang only means “Manchu dress”, which includes a whole system of attires for different occasions with varying degrees of formality. Many people involved in this discussion use the word qi zhuang as the counterpart for qipao, while a system of many types of attires does not really correspond to a singular type of clothing that qipao has been. The informal wear chenyi is what they actually refer to.
\end{itemize}
clothing were adorned with heavily embroidered \textit{xiang bian} and \textit{gun bian} as trims, which came in multitude as well. As \textit{xiang bian} and \textit{gun bian} came in pairs, some clothing had three pairs of them around the borders for decoration, some had five… some even had as many as eighteen!\textsuperscript{20} Meanwhile, we have seen that the earliest examples of qipao were all designed with very minimal decorations\textsuperscript{21}. I see this contrast as the wearers (who also functioned as designers) of qipao consciously breaking away from the traditional clothing and placing themselves in a position opposite to the old practices, by dressing themselves in a strikingly different manner. Indeed, the earliest qipaos were seen only on young women who had received higher education, who were in need of a new type of clothing to assert they new identity that was different from the majority of common women. It is due to this reason that I believe that they were not looking back at old styles for inspirations.

Secondly, as reflected in literature, many women of the time believed that qipao was a claim for equivalence with the opposite sex, a dress that allowed them to traverse the bridge between feminine and masculine. Like short hair, qipao liberated the female body and allowed it to participate in activities that used to be exclusive to males. The celebrated writer during Japanese-occupied Shanghai Eileen Chang\textsuperscript{22} reflected upon the origin of qipao:

\begin{quote}
\textit{After the founding of the ‘Republic of five nationalities’, women across the country suddenly all adopted qipao. This was by no means showing loyalty to the Manchus and advocating for restoration, but rather, because the women intended to imitate men… For the first time, they were influenced by the West and infatuated with the}\n\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{21} We will examine more elaborate examples from the 1930s later in Chapter 2, where some elements seem to draw inspirations from the imperial time. But it is important to keep in mind that those styles did not directly pass down from late Qing, but actually made its comeback after the more avant-garde 1920s.

\textsuperscript{22} Also known as Ailing Zhang, in contemporary Mandarin spelling (1920-1995).
idea of gender equality -- but the reality was too far from their ideal. In their rage, they condemned everything that was feminine, and wished they could annihilate the female nature. This is why when qipao first appeared, it was angular and puritanical.  

As a contemporary, Chang believed that qipao was modeled after the male chang shan, under the influence of new waves of thinking and movements from the West. If we inhabit a Western perspective, we immediately pick up on things we see in qipao that are unparalleled to what have been available in the West: the high collar, the side slits, the elaborate buttons… to name a few. There is a tendency to call those “folk” and “traditional”, but it is under a presumption that only the West claims the hegemony of “modernity”. But even in the West, fashion is not something that bursts out of nowhere -- it has its roots in previous times. In fact, the very definition of “new” would fall apart if there was not something “old” for reference. Every state of things is but an ephemeral slice taken from the whole evolution. It is regretful that even within China, many people have adopted the Western gaze. China has gone through great turbulence from 1960s to 1970s, when the Cultural Revolution strived to cut the cord between the new People’s Republic and its cultural heritages from the past, during which many relics were destroyed and traditions banned. During this time, China did not just break away from its imperial past, but also its Republican past, as it was under a different capitalist regime and then the new People’s Republic of China identified as socialist. Since the 1980s, China has been on a bumpy road of self-rediscovery. It still needs many more years before it can understand its own past, as it

---

24 In fact, this project faces some important challenges due to this reason, as many clothes from the Republican era were cut or burned because they were too “politically right”.
takes much more efforts to rebuild than to destroy. Just like how a cultural outsider would perceive them, most Chinese people and designers today recognize the high collars and the elaborate handmade buttons as their “long-time cultural traditions”, while in fact they only existed for around a hundred years. For the most part of Qing dynasty, the collars on Han female clothing was almost unnoticeable; it was not until the very last years of Qing that, amongst some fashionable prostitutes in Shanghai, a bizarre high-collar design that could cover their jaws appeared on their tops. Similarly, the elaborate silk buttons were inventions of the Republic, while previous examples of silk buttons during Qing had but a horizontal line shape. Thus, when we take a closer look, we see that a lot we take for granted as “traditional” is in fact relatively recent and has been fairly modern within its own context.

It is also worth noting that even the traditional elements were reformed and reassembled when put into use -- people were actively appropriating old ways of life as a response to the needs and thinking of the modern life, sometimes transforming them completely, instead of passively passing down “traditions”. Behind new practices, there were always new ideologies supporting them. These practices imply the different attitude people took on traditional elements, that they were actively and consciously reinventing their world, realizing that the world around them was a changing one.

On fashion palettes and advertisements targeting towards people attracted to the modern life ideal from this time, the earlier examples of qipao often incorporated Western decorative elements. In fact, in larger cosmopolitan cities in China, Western clothes themselves, such as dresses, blouses, skirts and coats, were eagerly pursued by upper-class women and socialites, as well as those who were politically-conscious and feminist. In existing photos of one of the most famous actresses in Shanghai, Butterfly Hu, we often see

---

25 Chang, “A Recollection of the Changing Clothes (Geng Yi Ji)”.
her posing in completely Western ensembles (fig. 13); while on some other equally popular actresses, such as Ruan Lingyu, qipao was almost always preferred (fig. 14). However, we notice that their jewelries, shoes, and other accessories in these photos were usually of similar styles; such is also the case in photos of socialites and other in-style figures at the time. We can tell that qipao and Western apparels were interchangeable within most of the Republican social context, and personal preferences contributed to the differences amongst individual decisions.

By examining the occasions where qipao appeared, the bodies that wore qipao, the activities that qipao and its wearer were involved in, and the other kinds of clothing and accessories that qipao was styled with, we are able to situate qipao in its context. It was the Chinese equivalent of the Western dress. Despite the misleading similarity between the names of qipao and qi zhuang, we can see that although qipao’s one-piece structure coincided with that of qi zhuang, it was perhaps unlikely for qi zhuang to be the source of inspiration for the invention of qipao, at least not the singular nor the most prominent one. Many overlook the similar one-piece structure of the Western female dress in the 1920s, and I believe that fashions from the West had a more important and direct influence than the Manchu dress on the emergence of qipao.
Chapter 2
Qipao Textiles and Designs: A Survey of Techniques and Aesthetics

Qipao and Qipao Textile

The subject of Chinese textile production from late 19th century to mid 20th century has long been understudied, both within China and internationally, despite the existence of a blossoming market as well as artistic excellence during this time. It is not uncommon anywhere in the world that this particular genre of art history has traditionally been deemed as unworthy of scholarly treatment, and even though most part of Chinese textile history has been taken very seriously by the academia, little attention has been paid towards the Republican era until recent years. This phenomenon is a result of China’s political currents in the past, as we take into consideration the Communist government’s many attempts at positioning itself in contrast to the previous Nationalist government, including both ideological and material purges, resulting in a lack of scholarly attention as well as surviving objects in the “bourgeois” aspects of the Republican life. Meanwhile, the transitional nature of qipao also results in an ambiguous impression that sabotages researchers from forming solid concepts around the subject.

I would like to underline and explain the emphasis on qipao textile in this study, as the connection might not be evident to all. As we have examined in the previous chapter, despite numerous variations, for the most part from 1920s to 1940s, qipao had a rather unified essential structure: the front piece and the back piece axisymmetric at the shoulder line, the left side and right side symmetrical to each other at the central axis, with slits on two sides, front opening on one or both sides (or shuang jin, popular from 1930s to later), and a collar attached. Fig. 15 is a graph I drew to explain how a qipao is cut from a piece of fabric, and we can see that qipao as a unique style of clothing possesses an inherent structural
continuity -- because there is no shoulder seam nor armhole seam, the length and width of the textile are often used to the maximum (the textile length usually ranges from 2.5 meters to 3 meters, and the width less than 1 meter due to technological circumstances at the time). In fact, there was no pattern used in qipao-making. The tailor would mark measurements and draw the shape of qipao on the fabric before cutting it out directly from the fabric, instead of according to a pre-created pattern as practiced in the West (it goes without saying that this practice requires great expertise gained from experience, and it was indeed common for trainees to assist and observe more experienced and established tailors for years before being allowed to even pick up scissors). Qipao carries a somewhat traditional attitude towards the textiles at hand\footnote{Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 21.}, in a way that the structure of qipao always accommodates the available textile, not the other way around. Historically, Chinese people had a tradition of making the most out of the silk textiles when they were used in clothes-making, as textile production often involved a lot time, money, and effort, and frugality was valued as one of the most praisable moral attributes. Later in this chapter, we shall see examples that illustrate how qipao textiles determined not only structural but also stylistic designs of qipao. In a quite literal way, qipao textile is where the design of the qipao begins and ends.

Textile Production

China’s silk production, known by the world since around the Common Era and reaching its peak in Ming dynasty (1368-1644), was an enduring feature and distinctive aspect of China's interaction with foreign cultures. However, even within China, silk remained a luxury that did not fulfill the everyday needs of people not well-to-do enough. Under the rule of Ming, cotton cultivation and production became a major part of Chinese
textile production as well as the economy at large. Both largely affordable and significantly more comfortable and warmer than other plant-based fabrics and materials that Chinese people had known, cotton production in China helped people with less means survive and thrive under challenging conditions. It is no wonder that cotton-woven-fabric, tubu, soon became the most popular fabric amongst Chinese people. Tubu was also sold internationally and received rising popularity since the 1760s, reaching as far as countries in Europe and the Americas. However, under the reign of Qianlong emperor (1735-1796) and Jiaqing emperor (1796-1820), China’s silk sales began to go down a path of rapid decline, both nationally and internationally, while in contrast, the West was undergoing an industrial revolution, and many advanced textile production centers in the West, such as Lyon, had adapted to machines by mid-nineteenth century.

Starting from 1840, when the First Opium War broke out, Chinese ports were opened one after another like dominoes by the force of foreign cannons; exports of machine-produced foreign textiles shoved in the Chinese market and left the local primitive cottage industry crumbling. By 1913, imports of cotton products made up one third of the overall imports in China; the dumping of rayon-blend “foreign silks” shook the market and severely shrunk the Chinese manual silk production due to its low price and excellent quality; various wool fabrics, which China, with a predominantly agriculture-based economy, had never come close to invent, easily swept people off their feet. Textile and fabric industries in China at large, which had been relying primarily on manual labor, suffered a huge blow when encountering the West.

29 Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 84.
31 Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 84.
Aside from the lower price and more consistent and better quality that come with machine-woven textiles, they also offer greater variety of choices and more width. Traditionally, the silk fiber was collected from silkworm cocoons and then woven on the loom, a process that is entirely manual. Therefore, the maximum of textile width was ultimately limited by the of the arm-stretch of the person who sits and weaves in front of the loom, which, until the end of nineteenth century, was restrained around 1 *chi* (33.33cm). Around 1896, technical innovations of the loom allowed the width to reach 1.5 *chi* to 2 *chi* (50-66.67cm), and later around 1900, the introduction of a semi-auto Japanese loom that ran on an iron wheel increased the production speed by 50%-100%, enabled the textile width to exceed, and eventually, Chinese factories caught up with the world and adopted machines that allowed yarns to be woven into pre-designed patterns\(^{32}\). More and more factories emerged to replace small family workshops. From 1912 onward, a machine-based silk production industry sharply rose in the *Jiangnan* area, in the cosmopolitan city Shanghai as well as centuries-old traditional silk production centers like Hangzhou and Suzhou. From 1915 to 1927, more than 20 machine-ran silk factories were registered in Shanghai alone, amongst which were some large-sized factories with more than 100 machines in use\(^{33}\). Although having learned the hard way, China took about 15 years to catch up with its international competitors and complete the industrial transformation, which took the West almost a century\(^{34}\).

Due to the sole source of fiber in silk production acquired from silk worms, by early twentieth century, a lot of Chinese silk production centers did not offer many variations in

\(^{32}\) Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 74.
\(^{34}\) Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 103.
products, mostly producing silk in the main categories such as duan, chou, ling, juan, luo and sha. After replacing the man-made silk yarns (tusi) with factory-produced ones (changsi) of higher and more consistent quality, the industry was able to overcome technical challenges that handicapped the innovative potentials, producing new kinds of silk textiles such as georgette, habotai, and various types of crepe. The introduction of rayon in China in 1924 also prompted more radical changes and innovations. Because rayon comes in a wide range of denier values, available in glossy, semi-glossy, and matte textures, when it is woven with factory-made silk fibers, new textiles with different characteristics could be created. Glossy rayon fibers are shinier but less soft than silk fibers, so they exhibit effects different from those of silk fibers, and as regenerated fibers in contrast to natural fibers like silk, they absorb colors differently too. These physical and chemical differences allowed silk-rayon-blend textiles to exhibit dual-color or multi-color effects, creating space for more diverse and ambitious artistic expressions.

Textile varieties in China changed drastically during 1920s and 1930s as they adjusted to the new consumption structure and social demands. Some traditional varieties were given up by factories as they developed new ones that better catered to the modern needs and tastes. Shanghai was the pioneer in bringing in technical and stylistic renovations to Chinese market, and to a great extent, Shanghai’s textile production at this time followed and copied the West: factories studied trends seen on Western market, reproducing new textiles invented in the West and copying popular designs. It is not surprising that Shanghai found itself responsible for translating and appropriating foreign fashions, because of its unique role as a port city where foreign textile imports would land first before entering into the inland, a convenient

---

35 Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 86.
position that allowed Shanghai’s agency in such transactions. But it is also worth noting that despite the original imitations, autonomous innovations were happening in Shanghai and the Jiangnan area and local factories were able to independently achieve important successes. The Suzhou-based silk production company Zhenya, one of the most successful at the time, won the first prize in the 1926 Sesquicentennial Exposition hosted in Philadelphia with nine varieties of independently-developed silk textiles. Machine-woven silk varieties started to climb up a high peak of development in 1922-1928, reaching some hundreds of different types in 1931. Throughout the history of the most successful Shanghai-based silk textile company Meiya, 1246 varieties of textiles were registered; the company enjoyed such creative prosperity that it even developed an unprecedented marketing strategy, launching a new product every Monday in major newspapers.

Context of Modern Textile Design

The Chinese word for pattern, wen, was the ancient form of the word text. In history, the meanings of pattern and text had been expressed by the same word. As a hieroglyphic language, Chinese had a very visually expressive written system, and in return, Chinese patterns, often carried iconographic values as well. In imperial China, textile patterns usually appeared in pairs or even numbers, conveying symmetry and continuity, and reflecting the ideal of harmony, order, and eternity. One can see them as a Chinese cosmology embodied in

---

39 振亚丝织厂 or 苏州振亚织物公司, founded in 1917.
42 美亚织绸厂, co-founded in 1917 by Chinese and American silk merchants. In 1912, one of the founders Mo Shangqing (1871-1932) founded a new factory using the same name of Meiya, hiring his American-graduated son-in-law Cai Shengbai (1894-1977) as the manager.
objects, as some make the connection between them and the Confucius idea of “impartiality” and the Taoist aesthetic pursuit for *jing* -- stillness or quietness\(^\text{44}\). In Qing, two types of pattern layouts were widely used on clothing: one was *mandi*, a filling-in of the same or similar patterns on textiles (fig. 16), and the other was *batuan*, or eight balls, referring to a layout of eight round-shaped patterns distributed at eight designated places around the body (fig. 17).

_Batuan_ was the epitome of standardized forms in Qing decorations. It originated from the _tuanlong_ pattern of a highly formalized dragon motif representing the royal power, which was widely used and normalized in embroideries on Ming and Qing emperors’ dragon robes. The basic layout was later appropriated for other motifs that were more secular to be used by the public, such as flowers, plants, animals, mundane objects, and even people and allegories. The two patterns on the shoulder and the two on the knees (sometimes elevated when applied on a female jacket) make up a square, along with their individual round shapes, they represent the two most ideal and commonly seen shapes in imperial China, symbolizing heaven (round) and earth (square). But _batuan_ carried more than just iconographic meanings. This layout helps exhibiting the patterns without interruption, as the places where they are located on the fabric (shoulders, chest, back, waist, and knees) are usually exposed regardless whether the wearer is walking or sitting, and hence these patterns reveal themselves uninfluenced by movements or drapes, showing the viewer both the wearer’s status and the uninterrupted beauty of the patterns\(^\text{45}\). This format was preserved after 1912 only for more formal attires such as the bride’s wedding ensemble (fig. 18-20), and gradually became seen as old-fashioned due to its rigid form and association with the imperial orders.


From mid-1920s on, the new silhouette in female clothing became significantly more body-conscious, and naturally, the taste for patterns had to change too. When the clothing had a one-fits-all size, the wearer “disappeared” under the textile, a condition that allowed the display of visual elements that did not accentuate the body; but as the focus shifted to the wearer’s body and the design evolved to be more fitting, the once-used formalized patterns would not go well with the new look, as they were designed to bring attention to themselves and required enough blank space around to raise that attention. Hence, the popular pattern layouts in the 1920s and 1930s were often more scattered and balanced, with smaller pattern units in less detail\(^46\).

Before modernity, people lived at a slower pace that allowed them to generate enough appreciation for quiet and complicated details, but modern society left little time for people to ponder on them and get lost in thoughts. Visual elements evolved to be much more upfront in order to still leave a lasting impression; the additional decorations gave their once elevated status to the indispensable essential designs\(^47\).

In 1926, writer Yu Jianhua wrote, “the word ‘pattern/design’\(^48\) emerged in our country recently; yet very few people know what it means or how to execute it”\(^49\), showing that modern city dwellers had started to pay attention to “design” but it remained still a very new concept to them. Designs of qipao and qipao textiles had a much shorter-lived life in Republican China in comparison to their predecessors, as people became sensitive to designs and grew tired of the recurring ones very easily. The life cycle of a popular pattern in the

---


\(^{48}\) Yu used the Chinese word that is usually translated as “pattern” but included the English word “design” in parenthesis.

\(^{49}\) Yu, Jianhua, Mingzhi He, and Bingzhen Jiao. 最新图案法 / Zui xin tu an fa. Shanghai: The Commercial Press. 1926.
1920s was about or even less than three to five years, before it was deemed out of style\textsuperscript{50}, an insatiable fashion hunger that stimulated the development and innovation of textile designs. Amongst all the changes happening to the textile industry, a new profession of \textit{pattern designer} emerged. The first generation of pattern designers were predominately students who had studied abroad in Japan and Europe. Throughout early modern history in China, both under the Qing rule and the Republican government, the Ministry of Education as well as local governments selected and sponsored young students to study the subjects that the country “needed”, in which the arts only took up a small portion\textsuperscript{51}. Upon arrival back to their home country, some of these young artists took up the profession of pattern design, joining pattern studios that were just starting to appear, or working part-time for their consignments. Studios dedicated to pattern design were established in all major textile factories such as Meiya in Shanghai and Zhenya in Suzhou, responsible for the entire research and design process involved in the production cycle. Other independent workshops like the Fengshao Textile Pattern House\textsuperscript{52}, founded by Zhenya’s major shareholder and entrepreneur Lou Fengshao (1882-1955), and the Shangmei Pattern House\textsuperscript{53}, founded by Tokyo Fine Arts School\textsuperscript{54} graduate Chen Zhifo (1896-1962), supplied various factories with design samples\textsuperscript{55}. Institutions dedicated to textile research and education were also founded, notably the prestigious Zhejiang Jiazhong Technical School\textsuperscript{56} led by the Tokyo Higher Technical School\textsuperscript{57} graduate principal Xu Bingkun (1878-1965), using pattern textbooks written by industry

\textsuperscript{50} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 199.
\textsuperscript{51} Li, Shengju, and Yueyue. 五彩彰施：民国织物彩绘图案/ Wu cai zhang shi: Minguo zhi wu cai hui tu an. Shanghai : Shanghai shu hua chu ban she, 2019: 4.
\textsuperscript{52} 凤韶织物图案馆
\textsuperscript{53} 尚美图案馆
\textsuperscript{54} Later merged with the Tokyo Music School to form Tokyo University of the Arts.
\textsuperscript{55} Li, Shengju, and Yueyue. 五彩彰施: 民国织物彩绘图案/ Wu cai zhang shi: Minguo zhi wu cai hui tu an. Shanghai : Shanghai shu hua chu ban she, 2019: 5-10.
\textsuperscript{56} 浙江甲种工业学校
\textsuperscript{57} Predecessor of the Tokyo Institute of Technology.
pioneers like the groundbreaking *Pattern Fundamentum ABC* by Shangmei’s founder Mr. Chen Zhifo, and teaming up with factories in the Jiangnan area to provide students with substantial trainings as well as exporting young professionals equipped with knowledge of modern technologies and designs to these factories in return.

Examples of Style

Traditionally, Chinese decorative arts laid emphasis on the iconographic or the poetic values of images, often neglecting the truthfulness of artistic representations, while artists in Europe indulged in a long-time obsession with advancing their techniques to reproduce the reality through art, a pursuit that fundamentally contradicted Chinese aesthetic traditions. At the beginning of the 1920s, female fashions in China started to show significant traces of a powerful Western influence through various visual expressions such as styles, colors and patterns, when the most “progressive” group of the society, including intellectuals and students alike, tended to discard everything “Chinese” and copy everything “Western” -- to many who looked up to the “West”, it was an emblem of advanced civilization and modern society. This phenomenon happened in all aspects of society, which is also truthfully reflected in textiles from this time, amongst many other examples in architecture, interior design, print arts, etc..

If we take floral patterns for instance, we see that throughout 1920s many of them began to exhibit traits inspired by the Art Nouveau movement in the West, appropriated in highly stylized and abstract forms that originally came from a traditional perspective (fig. 21-25). Professor Gong Jianpei at Nanjing University of the Arts also argues that many designs of the time showed a Japanese influence, particularly imitating the *Yuzen* technique.

---

employed in Kimono-textiles, a resist dyeing method that used starch as boundary for ink colors to be add layer by layer (fig. 26), creating a unique style that is painting-like and hence extremely detailed. Gong points out that these patterns were usually combination of floral and geometric shapes, appearing in repeated exaggerated and distorted forms, conveying a sense of rhythm\textsuperscript{60}. In examples of pattern designs by companies like Zhenya and Yunlin (fig. 27-32), we can observe their strong association to the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century Art Nouveau movement, as well as potentially hinting at the style of Japanese motifs. Plants and flowers were often the main objects of depiction on Chinese modern textiles from the 1920s, overlapped with each other in undulating, curving, slender, and extending forms that are characteristic of the Art Nouveau style, inspired by natural forms (fig. 33). Still, in spite of all the foreign sources of inspiration, the result of this Chinese modernist reimagination was a quite unique one, unparalleled to any other style found elsewhere. The Art Nouveau was digested so well in China partially because of how people could pick up on familiar aesthetic preferences, which is not surprising considering how in debt modern Western arts was to Japanese arts, while the later shared artistic similarities with Chinese arts. Those curvy, organic shapes of Art Nouveau evoked similar Chinese motifs such as the auspicious clouds, flower branches, and floral scrolls, and the poetic and spiritual undertone commonly found in this style deeply resonated with Chinese tastes\textsuperscript{61}. Curvy, wavy lines played a major role in these hybrid Chinese-modernist designs, representing a variety of natural subjects like river, vortex, clouds, petals, grass, leaves, branches, feathers...conveying a strong sense of movement and flow. Meanwhile, the imbalance and grotesque of Art Nouveau style inspired modern Chinese patterns to break the

\textsuperscript{60} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 234
\textsuperscript{61} Wen, “A Study on the Chinese Silk Pattern of the 20th Century”, 105-106.
traditional pursuit for symmetry and completeness\textsuperscript{62}, introducing unusual patterns that were non-iconographic and highly stylized like geometrical shapes and decorative lines.

In late 1920s, as Art Nouveau gradually shifted towards the more cubist and industrial Art Deco style, China eagerly embraced the trend too and had accepted most popular motifs in the West by then. This openness helped introduce foreign motifs and enrich the artistic repertoire; we start to see floral motifs like roses and tulips that were far less popular historically playing major roles in artistic representations. Art Deco represented the excitement and elegance of modern life and triumphed in all major cosmopolitan cities around the world. It was accepted with great enthusiasm in Shanghai, a city that built itself with the second-largest Art Deco architectures in the world, ranked right after New York city. The style of Art Deco tapped deeply into Shanghai’s psyche, reminding the city of everything it was crazy about: electricity, urbanscape, functionality, structure, speed, and optimism\textsuperscript{63}. Eventually the passion receded around mid-1930s, when patterns and designs became significantly more simplified, and the use of color more subdued\textsuperscript{64}.

This ao (fig. 34-35) is an example of early 1930s fashion. Although at the time, qipao had begun to claim its dominance over the fashion scene in urban cities, throughout the Republican era, the top-skirt ensemble remained an available option for women. Up until the early 1930s, the coexistence of the two clothing styles was common even among the most fashion-minded women, to one of whom this article might have belonged. This ao is made of zhijinduan, jacquard brocade silk fabric, with rose patterns, and has buttons and thin bindings on the borders made of charmeuse silk. The silhouette of this ao gives away the time it lived in, as fashion tastes changed drastically during these years. In comparison to its predecessors

\textsuperscript{62} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 226.
\textsuperscript{63} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 112.
\textsuperscript{64} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 165-166.
from 1920s, which were made in a fat-A-shape, this ao only has a mere glimpse of that flare, with a shape much more fitting to the body. The sleeves are half arm length, revealing the elbows, and in a fitted shape -- we see the fabric near the shoulders is slightly wider than the fabric near the elbows, as the top needs to accommodate movements around the shoulder joints and hence allow more space in that area; but since that allowed space would be very controlled, as the tailor would avoid making the garment appear baggy, and the width of the arms are still noticeably narrower than the shoulders, we can deduce that the arms must be very fitting to the body. The exposure of the elbows and the close-fitting style were both deviations from 1920s trends, a tendency towards both revealing more parts of the body and fitting the parts that were still covered.

The collar on this ao goes significantly high on the neck, as we can tell from the buttons - aside from the one that is on the base, there are three more of them climbing up to reach the top. The collar is also fitting and stiff, the former from careful measurements and the latter from starching - collars were all stiffened with starch to help consistently support an elegant shape of the neck, and many of them were detachable from the body of the clothing, as there were times when these clothes needed to be washed and the collars were not suitable for these occasions.

The brocade silk fabric has an extremely exquisite and flamboyant pattern of large-sized Art-Deco-style roses with minute abstract floral motifs scattered in the empty space. The design captures the subtle color gradation seen in roses in nature, but abstracts and stylizes its reference in an artistic manner. The subject matter is a sweet one, and the color scheme conveys a romantic and sensual feeling, but interestingly, the design of these roses actually contrasts these features - they have rather sharp edges and an almost sketch-like simplified structure - they have an almost industrial look that is particular to Art Deco; it is a look that deals with romantic subjects but at the same time does not simply dwell upon soft sentimental feelings. There are
man y ways to depict floral subjects, as they are natural subjects with endless details: if one wishes to capture the complex side of them, one has the option of making extremely painstaking efforts to give an authentic representation. Flowers have been one of the favorite subjects of Rococo artists, and in order to convey a romantic and playful sense through flowers, they have always depicted flowers in a vivid and organic manner that evokes the joyful feelings human beings experience when seeing healthy flowers in nature. However, the design we see here takes the rose outside its natural context, depicting only the essential flower with its petals, omitting all other parts such as stems and leaves. Moreover, each rose represents itself as an independent entity, all identical but does not acknowledge or relate to each other in any way, and finally, they are repeatedly placed with an equal distance to each other, in a somewhat stoic emotionless manner. Each row of roses is also somewhat randomly arranged facing different directions -- one row is somewhat horizontal, the next somewhat vertical, and then back to horizontal; but these rotations are not in perfect degrees either, which accumulates even more to the randomness. Each block of pattern is isolated but emphasized, in an irrational arrangement -- such are examples of the Art Deco aesthetic in textile design, the first reflecting a modern mentality that is selective about details, and the second reflecting an attitude that is hedonistic and quixotic. It is clear that the rose is not in the sense of *rosa rugosa*, not in any ways a truthful reflection of the natural rose, but a symbol picked out from its natural habitat, distilled from a cluster of meanings and reconstructed according to a modern temperament. Additionally, this rose design seems to evoke rouged lips. Aside from the red color itself, the center petals almost resemble a sketch of female lips. This might not have been a conscious stylistic choice made by the textile designer, but cultures across the globe have established the association between flowers, female body, and sex, and this association might have just sneaked in the designer’s subconscious, as they paid homage to female features in giving the roses a sexy appeal.
When we look at a piece of textile in clothing, we not only see what textile is employed in its making, but also how it is employed; such is the case with this ao. When we take a closer look at it, we notice something that is both potentially significant and easily overlooked - the tailor of this ao did not care much about the matter of symmetry in the use of the fabric: we see that the number of roses on the left arm is different from the number on the right arm, and those roses on the edges are just cut off right on the spot without a second thought. It looks as if the tailor just cropped the needed shapes for the ao from the fabric, without cutting them in a thoughtful way that accommodates the pattern. Those of us living some ninety years after this ao was created have become so used to this way of cutting fabrics, but I would argue that this was indeed a very modern practice that was relatively novel to people. In earlier garments from late Qing dynasty, we see that motifs, either inherent in the fabric or embroidered afterward, often appear in perfect symmetry on each side of the central axis. Traditionally, if the fabric used was expensive, involved a lot of manual labor in its making, and had its own aesthetic value, then the fabric itself would play the undoubted role of a protagonist, as the design of the clothing accommodates the design of the fabric, in order to bring out the best of its inherent aesthetic characteristics. In that sense, the fabric was the utmost important component of a piece of clothing, and the design of the clothing always evolves around it and honors its own agency. By no means am I saying that this practice became extinct as China transitioned into modernity, as that would be a false claim, but I would argue that modernity enabled the rise of another way of manipulating and interpreting the fabric in the fashion world. Before, the fabric was much more like an ultimate end to which all the tailoring and adornment served as mere setoffs, but now there were occasions when the fabric was taken away from its original context as a means to achieve a scheme bigger than itself, and as it became acceptable to appropriate the fabric into something else, it gave away its once elevated position to the whole composition of the clothing.
and accepted its new destiny as a tool that did not have much of a purpose of its own, even when
the fabric was actually rich in details. The industrial developments happening since later part of
19th century in China enabled such a turn in fashion, as more and more intricately designed
fabrics were made in factories and made available in larger quantities, so much that people
learned to take it for granted.

The buttons and border bindings are made out of the same Mulberry charmeuse silk
fabric, with a red color almost exactly the same as the color used in the rose patterns. Moreover,
the buttons were made in a rose-bud shape, echoing the theme of the fabric. It was intended for
the buttons and bindings to both set off the beauty in the fabric and together transform into a
congruent whole. Overall, despite the intricate design, this ao only consists of two colors: a
vibrant wild red manipulated into all kinds of performances and a beige serving as the silent
background. Thanks to the choice of a simple color scheme, this ao is able to host a carnival of
details but at the same time does not come off as too busy to deal with for the eye.

This lilac qipao (fig. 36-40) is an example from the early 1930s that bears a great
resemblance to the red-beige colored ao we have just examined. The pattern on this qipao is
similar to that on the ao: those small branch patterns on these garments are almost identical,
and the theme on the qipao is a floral one as well, which we can recognize as the peony.
However, the stylization of the peony is different from that of the rose. Both textiles
employed in their designs the method of using parallel lines to represent the color gradation
and shadowing, but the peony depicts many more details: the motif includes the stem and
leaves of the flower, and has a more natural and complex form compared to the rose motif.
Another slight difference lies in the alignment of these flowers, as peonies in every two rows
next to each other are positioned in an axial symmetry. Although the alignment of patterns is
somewhat stoic, it is quite contrary to the traditional style and actually a good example of the
Art Deco influence. Traditionally, Chinese people were always a big fan of block repeat patterns, which were used in both jacquard silks and embroideries on plain silks. There are two factors that contributed to the preference China has developed in silks with intricately woven or embroidered patterns instead over plain ones -- one is the simple design of traditional clothing that allowed the fabrics to show off their details, another is the highly developed silk weaving technology in China that allowed such a taste to form. The taste in block repeat patterns is shared by both Chinese people and people designing Art Deco textiles in the West, and I would argue that this coincidence made it easier for people in China to adapt Western styles in design of the time. What differentiates the patterns on this qipao from those traditional patterns is the asymmetry in the design of each block pattern, despite the somewhat traditional tendency in the style. Admittedly, peony is one of the most beloved motifs of Chinese people -- it is both an ornately beautiful flower that is largely available in China and a symbol that embodies prosperity. Despite the change in style of its design on textiles throughout history, its high-profile presence as both a decorative and iconic motif remains timeless. This textile design provides us with insight into how people in Republican era paved a smooth path between the traditional and the modern, with a cultural saviness that appropriated novelties but did not assimilate and give in.

Comparing this qipao with the ao we just studied, we notice some differences in the cutting of garments. Firstly, the qipao had a shape that subtly narrows towards the waist. This reflects the natural shape of the wearer’s body. If we look at the measurements of these qipao, specifically those of the bust and the waist, we see that the individual difference between these numbers was small -- in most cases, the measurement of the bust is only a few to a dozen centimeters greater than the measurement of the waist (in the case of this qipao, 79 cm to 76 cm). Women’s necks were quite thin as well, measuring to only 32 cm to 34 cm in
many cases (34.2 cm on this qipao). Secondly, we notice that this qipao does not have any ornate borders or buttons made from silk stripes. Silk borders always existed throughout the development of qipao, but they did not become so popular until the mid-1930s. Finally, we also notice that parts of the sleeves are added to the main body, as in early decades of qipao, sleeves were not cut out and added at the shoulder, but the width of the fabric would be used to its fullest and additional fabrics would be added to complete the length of a sleeve if needed.

The 1930s was a time when the form of qipao became standardized and nationwide, but within that standard, there were still interesting possibilities that a tailor could play with. The popular fabrics came in great variety, including jacquard silk, printed silk, brocade, velvet, georgette, cotton, etc.; the buttons and borders, although mostly made from charmeuse silk fabric, can also be substituted by gemstones and lace trims in some very fashionable examples. The buttons are handmade by experienced craftspersons in forms that reflect the design of the fabric - for example if the fabric has a floral design, the buttons would be made into floral shapes; and there are many other options, as simple as a diamond shape or round shape, as elaborate as a goldfish, a butterfly, or even stylized auspicious Chinese characters. But it was also very common to use the most basic design, among both plain and elaborate fabrics -- those buttons are made into a horizontal line shape, called yizi kou, a name inspired by the button’s resemblance of the Chinese character one, which is essentially a horizontal line. Some people even found a middle ground between complexity and simplicity, as they chose to have elaborate versions on the neck, and simple line-shaped ones on the side. The colors of the border stripes would either match or contrast the colors on the fabric, and the designs of the borders (xiang bian and gun bian) varied greatly too. Some simple designs had one border, gun bian, which was usually made very narrow if its purpose was more
functional (protecting the fabric) and wide if it was for decorative effects. Some had both xiang bian and gun bian, which means the border stripes would have two colors - not to mention that very rarely, we come across those with three border stripes - providing a larger playground for the tailor’s artistic creativity; some had a narrow gun bian and a wide xiang bian, some had the two with the same width. Another technique is called dang tiao (fig. 41-42), sewing one (very rarely, two) extra stripes in parallel with the gun bian, but not right next to them like xiang bian, maintaining a certain distance instead. Dang tiao never appears alone and is always paired only with gun bian, in the same color of the latter as well. Dang tiao adds more dimension to the dress: although dang tiao and gun bian are always of the same color, even if not the same width, the gap between them is in fact a meaning space showing the fabric beneath; Unlike gun bian and xiang bian, one or two stripes of color on the very edges of the fabric, which serve more like a frame to a painting, dang tiao functions like drawing lines on the actual painting, which interferes the latter’s performance. The landscape is interrupted by this extra line, and unlike gun bian and xiang bian that perform passively on the same plane as the fabric, this extra line of dang tiao gives us another surface on top of the fabric that adds a new dimension. As we have surveyed thus far, these details, although trivial compared to the main fabric used in qipao, could transform the fabric into something completely different.

This rose-patterned velvet qipao (fig. 43-45) can be dated to the twilight of the 1930s, still holding onto some of the sentiments of the 1930s, but already heading towards a different path that will never lead back to the romanticism and optimism of the old time. The most prominent changes we see here are a much shortened collar and the disappearance of side buttons -- which means the change took place in the closure method that transitioned from handmade buttons on the outside to invisible clip buttons hidden underneath. The textile
design too, much simpler and more organic in its form, has taken a different turn from the 1920s and early 1930s aesthetic preference. The rose design is extremely abstract and stylized, looking like mere circles and spirals from the first glance. Such simplicity is coherent with the simplicity in the design of the dress. Short sleeves of this length had been common throughout the later half of 1930s, but they became more and more popular as China entered into the 1940s, and a trend of sleeveless qipao even started towards the very last years of the 1930s. This tendency towards simplicity echoes the war-time needs and sentiments, as a shortage of products including fabrics occurred during the time, and even for people with the resources to invest in new clothes, making expensive new clothes was frowned upon by the society at large.
Chapter 3
Fashion and Individuality

The backdrop of a blooming fashion scene was a mature market economy. Prior to modernity, the production level of small-scale peasant economy in China was not able to cultivate a pleasure-seeking and fashion-conscious lifestyle, a prerequisite that limited clothing and textile consumption. The intervention of a capitalist market economy and industrialization helped lower the prices and enrich the product types on the textile market, and urban educated professionals such as teachers, office workers and lawyers appeared as a new consumer group with needs and means to purchase -- these factors challenged the traditional economy and provided the conditions needed for cultivating modern consumption habits. The democratic society made equal consumption possible, replacing the old hierarchical consumption; the traditional relationship between consumption and social status became more obscure. Modern consumption habits promoting individuality paved ways for the emergence of new social identities and new lifestyles, all of which were proved to be essential in the secularization of fashion.\(^65\)

Simultaneously, Shanghai’s textile manufacture industry grew with leaps and bounds, benefiting from abundant electric power supply, convenient access to raw materials, as well as advanced marketing channels.\(^66\) Shanghai absorbed local technologies developed in the Jiangnan area and kept in step with Western innovations, while compiling and transforming them into its own repertoire,\(^67\) eventually leading the entire country’s textile innovations, sales, and circulations.\(^68\) The huge success of Shanghai’s textile manufacture industry was

\(^{65}\) Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 32-33.
\(^{67}\) Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 114-115.
also in debt to its sharp sensibility to the ever-changing mass culture in its efforts towards popularization and commercialization. In this epochal consumption revolution, men and women were willing to spend a considerably more amount of money on their wardrobe. Numerous styles appeared each season, in varieties of daywears, evening gowns, sportswears, dancewears, and so on; well-to-do women and young female students would change five or six times a day for different activities to stay in style. We see a great diversity as well as a pattern of rapid changes happening in the Chinese fashion arena, which was unparalleled in earlier times. These activities mirrored the western fashion world of the time. This kind of diversity, dynamic, and vitality put qipao on the center stage of fashion. Qipao owes its thanks to the political and social environment of the time, with the backdrop of a democratic government tolerating fashion as a tool for self-expression to develop.

Expressing Individual Identity through Fashion

Throughout Chinese imperial history until the collapse of Qing, the imperial court had always made very specific regulations on how individuals dressed. In Qing dynasty, nobles and bureaucrats dressed according to their titles in court, with extremely elaborate laws regulating the exact designs, materials, colors, and motifs used in their costumes and equipages. The title of Mingfu, a title appointed by the emperor and given to the wife or mother of a bureaucrat, came in seven levels; according to historical documents, each level corresponded to a set of precious stones that were allowed to be used in the making of their formal hat, as well as a set of colors and motifs of auspicious animals considered appropriate for use in their formal costumes in court. Similar regulations applied to noble women of the

---

royal family as well, restricting the types of fabrics and furs they could use according to the level of their title, the materials they could use in their various jewelries and formal hats, and the motifs as well as the number of which that could be embroidered onto their costumes\textsuperscript{71}.

Thus, in an imperial context, these artistic elements in a piece of clothing embodied class and were meant to signify the differences between classes, which were made especially visible through these visual cues. But the establishment of the democratic Republican government allowed a more diverse and individualistic expression of style. By removing the previous political obstacles in the past, the Republican government cleared way for a more democratic use of patterns and motifs in Chinese modern society\textsuperscript{72}. To consumers of the Republic, decorative elements in clothing no longer served the primary function of signifying the wearer’s social status, and the consumption of different fashions started to carry more personal agendas meaningful to each different individual.

This is not to say that there were no expressions of oneself through fashion at all prior to the Republic, but to a great extent, those expressions were limited. Moreover, self-expressions through fashion mostly involved a display of wealth -- for example, rich merchants would have the means to purchase expensive fabrics to wear, although this phenomenon was always suppressed by the imperial government as merchants were traditionally seen as the lowest class despite their wealth. Fashion often comes with a price tag, even to this day, but fashion serving as a tool only to display one’s wealth or social status is not something that the greater mass of a society could relate to. However, during the Republic of China, we start to witness some practices that did not necessarily associate fashion with wealth: in 1920s, young female students developed a taste for simple top-skirt ensembles in simple colors, mostly white, blue, gray and black, with little to no adornments.

\textsuperscript{71} 清史稿, 輿服志, Vol. 102-105.
\textsuperscript{72} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 29.
Many of them accessorized their simple apparels with a fountain pen pinned to the opening of their ao73. This style became so fashionable that women who were not attending schools, including prostitutes, started to dress like students -- knowledge became the new chic. Admittedly, it still takes a middle-class family to pay for the expenses of school, but even amongst families with means, only the more open-minded parents would really consider education an option for their young daughters.

In books from earlier centuries depicting their contemporary social scenes, such as the famous novel *Hong Lou Meng (Dream of the Red Chamber)*74 that gives an extremely detailed representation of aristocratic families, we read plots where female masters give away their half-old clothes to their favorite maids. Clothes were made for recycles, from upper class to lower class, from an older generation to a younger generation. It was convenient for this practice that from the seventeenth to nineteenth century, female clothes had always been made loose on the body. Accordingly, the ideal body type for women includes “slipped shoulders”, flat chest, and narrow waist -- on which Eileen Chang comments, “These standard beauties were so small and slim that they disappear under layers and layers of clothes. She herself does not exist -- she is but a mannequin for clothes”75.

Chang teases out the idea of one’s agency in relation to her clothes, and points out the absence of such agency in women throughout most part of Chinese history. While in Chang’s era, such was no longer the case. In Zhang Henshui’s 1926 novel *Jin Fen Shi Jia (Story of a Noble Family)*76, a dialogue between a maid and the male protagonist gives us some insights into the world of female fashion of the time. From a prestigious household whose father worked as the Premier of the State Council, the young master complimented on the young

74 Cao, Xueqin. *Hong Lou Meng*, originally published in 1791.
75 Chang, "A Recollection of the Changing Clothes (Geng Yi Ji)", 1943.
76 Zhang, Henshui. *Jin Fen Shi Jia*, 1926.
maid’s half-old silk vest, saying that “it’s pretty”, while the maid replied with sarcasm, “pretty how? Miss Sixth gave me this. It was in style a couple of years ago, but now it’s become antique.” We see here a strong sensibility of fashion as well as an urge to present oneself as fashionable, embodied even in a maid working for an affluent household in mid-1920s Beijing. She was not satisfied with a piece of clothing that she did not identify with, even though it was given to her as a gift and was way beyond her ability to purchase.

The search for individual style was amongst many new waves of thinking at this time. A graduate of the Nation School of Fine Arts in Paris, Huang Juesi was both a painter and an art critic, who published many articles on aesthetics on the magazine Yong An Monthly during early 1940s, advocating that the person and body should be the concern of clothes, not the other way around. He was not the only person holding such a view. The study of how to choose colors and patterns that accommodate one’s figure was thoroughly surveyed, as articles proposing various views were published regularly on different magazines. All of these articles were built upon a humanistic view that a harmony between the body and clothes should be achieved, through understanding different body types and complexions, as well as the function of different styles and decorative elements. Colors used to bear more symbolic values in China, as primary colors (zheng se: blue, red, yellow, white and black) were considered “noble” and secondary or tertiary ones (jian se) “cheap”; but in twentieth century, more and more artistic values of colors were discovered and liberated from their iconography, and people started to appreciate them regardless of their hue, brightness, or purity. As some people argued, all colors contain the potential of beauty, and it is the human use of them that

77 The protagonist Jin Yanxi’s sixth sister.
80 Zhang and Xu, Studies of new waves of thinking in modern clothing, 80-81.
81 Zhang and Xu, Studies of new waves of thinking in modern clothing, 75.
decides the fate of that potential. The color palette found in Republican textile designs show that the society had adopted Western color theories and developed the same aesthetic sensibilities, to the extent that Eileen Chang, who spent most of her earlier life in Shanghai, would complain as she reflected upon modern fashions:

> Modern Chinese often say that people before did not know how to coordinate colors. To ancient people, the contrast between colors was not an absolute one; colors contrasted to one another in a staggered way, such as cobalt blue to apple green, pine-cone-yellow to true red, or scallion-green to peach-blossom-red. We have forgotten what we used to know.

The most epochal shift in female fashion was marked by how the individual person became the measure and ends for dressing in China. In an 1921 article published on *The Ladies Journal*, the writer argues that if one person’s body is different from another’s, then the clothes they wear should not be put on another’s body either, pointing out each individual’s unique relationship to the clothes they wear. In communicating her opinions on how to reform the existing female fashions in society, she goes on to advocate a feminist view on women and how they should dress for themselves:

> If women were mere playthings for men, possessing no independent personhood, then such meaningless clothing and accessories would have a purpose -- serving men’s

---


85 妇女杂志, Issue 9, Volume 7, September 1921, 39.
interest, to which I would have no objection. But the woman is in fact a person, with an independent personhood! Hence I realize that in order to keep a woman’s personhood, we ought to reform her clothing and accessories -- those that are insentient.  

Chinese people started to bid farewell to the loose structure seen in old styles. This aesthetic turn was in tune with global fashion, as in the 1930s, Madeleine Vionnet’s bias cut won the hearts of Western women (Fig. 46-47). From the 1920s, female fashion in the West went through tremendous changes in the silhouette. The female body was no longer constructed by bones and paddings to fit into a pre-designed shape, but allowed to present itself in a more natural and personal way.

Shanghainese adored everything “new”, and nothing could highlight the excitement of the “now” better than the ever-changing fashion itself. In an extensive book on different regions and their customs in China published in 1922, Hu Pu’an commented on Shanghainese’ outstanding emotional investment in novelties, describing how Shanghainese love to use the word “new”, and whenever anything is titled as “new”, they are immediately triggered. The characteristic of “new” promised the potential of modern and fashionable, something irresistible to the hedonist tide players of Shanghai. Thus, people began to experiment with more colors, fabrics, and styles, in order to accommodate individual needs and accentuate personal tastes, under a somewhat Western influence led by aesthetic pioneers who were mostly educated in the West or in a Western tradition. Eager to catch with their Western contemporaries, people in Shanghai and other urban cities, many women followed

---

86 妇女杂志, Issue 9, Volume 7, September 1921, 48.
Western fashion trends religiously. Costume companies in Shanghai like Hongxiang\(^88\) worked hard to meet the needs of the women of Shanghai, subscribing to Western fashion magazines and even hiring Western designers\(^89\) to help realize their ambitious fashion fantasies. The success of Hongxiang and companies alike can not be separated from their endeavors in the originality of design and a focus on individual customization. A wide range of options were provided to the general public, who had acquired the notion of individuality in fashion, as magazine articles contributed by fashion lovers discussed various aspects on how to find one’s personal style, informing the public that different colors and patterns of the fabric should accommodate different skin tones, body types, and personalities\(^90\).

Fashion is one of the most effective means of expressing individuality, as it involves exact approaches of displaying of oneself in the eyes of the world. However, the codependent relationship between fashion and the expression of individuality would not have been possible if the production level of goods had not been advanced enough, or the tailoring techniques had not been improved from two-dimensional cutting to a three-dimensional construction. In previous times, Chinese clothes had a low requirement for tailoring techniques, as they were made to be worn loose on the body, where a few centimeters would not have made any difference, and their simple structures were easy to construct\(^91\). But modern fashion changed the game, as measurements of the body were of central importance to cater to an individual wearer. The introduction of Western fashions and tailoring techniques allowed Chinese women to focus on the natural shapes of their bodies, making clothes that were fitting but not constraining, a standard that accorded with health concerns.

\(^{88}\) The first Western-style women’s costume business ever founded in Shanghai by Jin Hongxiang (born 1894) in 1917.

\(^{89}\) Zhang and Xu, *Studies of new waves of thinking in modern clothing*, 158.

\(^{90}\) Zhang and Xu, *Studies of new waves of thinking in modern clothing*, 162-163.

\(^{91}\) Zhang and Xu, *Studies of new waves of thinking in modern clothing*, 85.
for blood flows, temperature maintenance, and body growth. While patterns were not used, tailors took measurements of their female clients to make bespoke garments directly from the fabric, and during the high peak of qipao in the 1930s the number of measurements a tailor had to take reached as many as thirty.

In qipao designs of mid-1930s, a phenomenon of “bo (thin), tou (transparent), lu (revealing)”92 started to appear, particularly amongst the ones worn during summertime (fig. 48-49). Georgette fabrics that were “as thin as the cellophane”93 enjoyed great popularity because of its extraordinary finesse and sheerness, hugging and hinting at the shape of the female body. Another fabric that satisfied this implicit desire to expose the body was burnout velvet, with the hollowed-out base fabric completely revealing but also covering some parts of the skin with its delicate velvet patterns. Because of the audacious sheerness of some of these fabrics in use, slips were worn underneath as an essential part of the look; the irony lies in that these “undergarments”, when worn underneath a piece of transparent or semi-transparent fabric, were actually meant to be “seen”. The female body in China was liberated from an aesthetic of clothing to embrace an aesthetic of the body itself94. Never had the body been more present, alive, mobile, and celebrated, with a presence in its surrounding environment no longer to be neglected.

Meanwhile, the popularization of certain patterns in the Republican era also proved the society’s newly-developed interest in the body itself. In surviving clothing and photos from this time, we notice patterns of plaids and stripes were used more than ever before (fig. 50-52). Although these patterns were the epitome of modernism and minimalism, waiving most elaborate decorative effects, the twist of the story lies in this: when these patterns were

printed on fabrics made to closely fit to a female body, their simple straight lines became somewhat disrupted and distorted by the natural curves of the body\textsuperscript{95}. Ironically, the most simplistic lines bring out the three-dimensionality most strikingly. Therefore, quite counter-intuitively, although plaids and stripes seem to evoke order and discipline, lacking an air of beguiling femininity\textsuperscript{96}, they were actually most flattering on the body and suitable for the 1930s natural silhouette, emphasizing the curves and flows beneath the fabric through a quiet contrast, while not stealing the show for themselves.

As the speed of the Republican life accelerated, female clothing in general became more modernized and simplified, serving a wider range of functional purposes. Patterns towards the more elaborate side of the spectrum were reserved for special occasions, as they started to seem too ornate and out of place in day-to-day life. Simplified patterns and subdued colors, along with sophisticated designs, better suited the “modern woman” image, and truly brought out their quiet confidence and smart elegance\textsuperscript{97}.

Meanwhile, as the ornamental aspects of qipao slowly declined in an overall trend of qipao design, diversity and personal eclecticism are found in individual examples. Chinese socialite Madame Wellington Koo\textsuperscript{98}’s was photographed and documented for owning many qipaos in the 1930s, and her collection showcases unique personal preferences. For instance, this embroidered qipao from the 1930s\textsuperscript{99} (Fig. 53-54), an astonishingly elaborate couture piece, contained extremely detailed embroideries of the Chinese traditional motifs of children engaging in various outdoors activities. However, in usual qipao designs of the time, the use

\textsuperscript{95} Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 238.
\textsuperscript{98} Oei Hui-lan (1893-1993), known as Madame Wellington Koo, was a Chinese-Indonesian international socialite and style icon, wife to Republican statesman Wellington Koo, featured several times by Vogue Magazine on lists of best-dressed women from the 1920s to 1940s.
\textsuperscript{99} It is dated on the Met website as from 1932, while it was also seen on Madame Koo on her 1937 Vogue coverage.
of such elaborate embroidery had become very uncommon, as embroidery decorative styles developed in sync with clothing styles, moving towards the more minimal end of the spectrum. In examples of Republican qipao, we witness that the embroidery had become much less detailed than previous times, with less use of vibrant colors, mostly applied on the collars or near the openings for simple decorations, achieving an overall sophisticated effect, while this qipao is completely covered in traditional Su-style embroideries. This might have to do with Madame Koo’s international lifestyle as wife to an ambassador, taking in a somewhat Western gaze upon the Chinese artistic repertoire and deliberately picking out what would make her stand out. This practice is an eclectic one, showing how different individuals could adeptly make personal appropriations to exercise their individuality through choices of fashion. Chinese American actress Anna May Wong, upon her trip in China, also discovered her unique taste in qipao -- photographs of her wearing qipao from that time on often show her in a consistently similar-looking design with the double-jin as well as fake-high-slits (fig. 55-59). Eileen Chang was also known for wearing “bizarre” clothes. In recollections of her friends, she wore antique or antique-style jackets on top of qipao to the premier of her play and proofreading at the printery, and would purchase folk textiles from the countryside to make her qipaos more unusual. Similar tendency of personal preferences can be seen in photographs of famous Shanghai actresses too, like Butterfly Hu, Ruan Lingyu, Xu Lai, etc..

Indeed, as we have discussed in Chapter 1, different styles coexisted as never before, because different individualities were being expressed simultaneously. As clothing was liberated from heavy symbolism and social hierarchy, it soon celebrated an era of visual orgy: fashion existed for fashion’s sake, and decorations for decorations’ sake. Ye Qianyu observed

\[100\] Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 162-163.

\[101\] 苏绣
the phenomenon of coexisting very different trends, and discussed it in the 10th issue of *The Shanghai Sketch*\(^{102}\) published in 1928:

*The clothes on Chinese women have progressed rapidly, at a tremendous speed.*

Those large loose sleeves from years ago took at least some years and months to be created, popularized, and eventually modified to a narrower shape, and women regardless of age all wore those sleeves for a time. *This is the custom.* Even the skinny sleeves prior to the era of loose sleeves dominated its own era. *But the time we live in now is truly different.* Let us take a look at these nineteen girls and their sleeves here -- almost everyone has a unique style different from anyone else. *We can’t tell which style represents this era of ours.*

**Fashion’s Symbolism**

In qipao and other Republican female fashions, we have seen that women in China rarely took Western trends for granted, often cherry-picking elements that spoke to them and appropriating them according to a Chinese standard. The common sentiment was that Western fashions were too showy but Chinese customs were too rigid, so that one should be eclectic and combine the two, both trendy and classy\(^{103}\). Incorporating Western designs or mix-matching qipao with Western fashion items, they always inhabited a world in between, a world consisted of active appropriations and eclecticism. The challenge posted to Chinese women was that they had to carry Chinese values as well embracing Western influences\(^{104}\), constantly on the search for a peaceful balance. They longed for the modern convenience and

---

\(^{102}\) 上海漫画 (1928-1930).


\(^{104}\) Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 49.
material prosperity, but were also faced with social pressures, such as the launching of the New Life Movement in 1934 that reinvented the traditional Confucian vision of the “ideal woman”, announcing a series of prohibitions and regulations on female looks, banishing breast-binding but also forbidding the revelation of throats, arms and legs.

Humbled, and even somewhat humiliated, by Western influences, but still clinging to their national identity, modern Chinese shared a common ideal of *xi xue zhong yong*, “applying Western ways to a Chinese life”, which set the tone for all aspects of life in modern Chinese society’s development. Qipao’s popularity was not accidental, because it provided a basic template for fashion renovations; qipao’s designs and functions were so versatile that it is not surprising that it ended up to be the perfect place to anchor this ideal. Qipao embodied and visualized *xi xue zhong yong*, as it engaged practices involving both Chinese and Western techniques and products. Examples like qipao from the “trim movement”, decorated with Western imported trims all around, perfectly served to illustrate the ideal of complementing an essentially Chinese model with Western advancements in practice. Gender is often a stage for debates in national politics, and this phenomenon is often reflected in clothing cultures. A nation often upholds itself against social struggles by defining the female gender and designing their roles, and clothing often reveals a great deal of what was at stake and what action was taken in defense. While heated debates on social reformations went on, qipao was exhibited on the center stage. Unlike lofty ideas that pondered on politics and sociology, the culture of qipao functioned as an explicit symbol that was easy to pick up on by the general public. Any average woman could participate in the fashion of qipao, without engaging in profound critical thinking. To a certain extent, the culture of qipao was superficial and

---

105 Gong, “JiangZheHu”, 177.
unrefined, but we can see how qipao functioned as a metaphor for women in the republican China, as well as a metaphor for modern Shanghai and China at large.

It is true that the way a person dresses is influenced, or even decided, by the emotions and expectations of the viewer -- especially in terms of how a woman’s look is often molded by society into a certain aesthetic and moral criteria\textsuperscript{108}, but the wearer is never really completely oppressed and forbidden to exercise her agency; instead, she weaves her aspirations into her clothing, and communicates with the world by the way she dresses. The world is made of objects, used by individuals to construct their identities and realities around them. The very notion of individual freedom itself is conceptualized in terms of consumer choice\textsuperscript{109}. Clothing, amongst many kinds of objects, is used for forms of display and expression of the self. All physical objects have a relationship with the body, but these relationships are often less intimate than the one clothing has with the body: clothing is special because unlike houses or cars, it is always perceived in the context of the body and makes very little sense when appearing on its own. Marilyn J. Horn argues in \textit{The Second Skin} that the body is almost never naked in a society, and it is not the skin but the clothes that mark the distinction between one’s self and the environment\textsuperscript{110}. In practice, clothing functions as an extension of the body, and we form our concepts of people in a way that does not separate their clothing and jewelry from their bodies. Clothing is employed by the subject as a necessary “prop” in the establishment and maintenance of identities, conveying what one “is, does, and believes”\textsuperscript{111}.

\textsuperscript{111} Horn, Marilyn J., \textit{The Second Skin}, 138.
The wearer of a clothing expresses and conveys the impression and expectation of herself through the practice of dressing. The subject and its identity are not only contained and constrained in the entity of the body, but also constituted by how that body is displayed -- how it is covered and what is covered; how it is exposed and what is exposed; how it is adorned and what is used to adorn it. Clothing, as a language of the body, renders the idea of individuality into a material existence, just as we see in the case of qipao and other fashions in the Republic of China at the frontier of modern feminine transformations, negotiating a personal space in a nation that kept on moving forward into an unforeseen but exciting future.
Fig. 1 While the Manchu woman (on the right) wore the single garment “pao”, the Han woman (on the left) wears a full jacket (ao) and a pleated skirt (qun), by John Thomson (1871).
Fig. 2 An example of chenyi under Guangxu Emperor’s reign (1875-1908).

Fig. 3 A typical ao-qun ensemble from mid-1920s.
Fig. 4 Cigarette advertisement showing woman wearing ao and qun with short majia on the left, and woman wearing ao and long majia on the right.
Fig. 5 Woman wearing one of the earliest versions of qipao with lace trims, paired with cloche hat and western style shoes.
Fig. 6 Qipao with tube collar, made of Art Deco style fabric with patterns of modern urban buildings.
Fig. 7 Photograph of actress Helen Wang from 1920s wearing a long majia over ao or a fake-two-piece qipao, embellished with Art Deco style beadings. Her bob haircut, leather shoes, and ostrich feather fan are in sync with contemporary Western trends.
Fig. 8-9 Palettes of fashion designs in 1920s (by Ye Qianyu), the silhouette of which correspond to contemporary Western fashion.
Fig. 10 Advertisement showing women dancing in various forms of qipao (front) and a woman in Western flapper dress (back).
Fig. 11 Photograph of women in 1940s wearing qipaos just below knee-length.

Fig. 12 Intellectuals from Republican era (Cha Liangzhao, Hu Shi, Mei Yiqi, and Huang Yusheng), dressed in changshan (two of them wore a jacket magua on top) or the Western suit.
Fig. 13 Actress Butterfly Hu posing in a fashionable Western style dress in 1930s, paying homage to glamorous Hollywood stars.
Fig. 14 Actress Ruan Lingyu in her qipao, wearing leather heels, watch, and art deco earrings as accessories (1930s).
Fig. 15 Left: how qipao looks like when it is done; 
Right: how a qipao is cut from the fabric before being sewn.
Fig. 16 Chenyi embroidered with nine different types of chrysanthemum (品月色缎平金银团寿菊花棉衬衣). The Palace Museum.
Fig. 17 Female pao circa.1800 showing embroidery of eight identical “xi xiang feng” pattern depicting butterflies and flowers (香色纳纱八团喜相逢单袍). The Palace Museum.
Fig. 18-20 Top jacket from a 1920s wedding ensemble.
Fig 21. Patterns on qipao, from late 1920s to early 1930s. Courtesy of Mr. Lian Ziju.
Fig. 22-25 Top jacket *ao* from the 1920s showing various textile designs. From the TheLightHouse collection (1), Victoria and Albert Museum (2-3), and Clothing Costume Museum in Beijing (4).
Fig. 26 Yuzen-painted kimono.
Fig. 27-32 Pattern design drawings from 五彩彰施：民国织物彩绘图案 / Wu cai zhang shi: Minguo zhi wu cai hui tu an. Shanghai : Shanghai shu hua chu ban she. 2019.
Fig. 33 1900 color lithograph from Album De La Décoration. Paris: Librairie des arts décoratifs.
Fig. 34 Courtesy of Mr. Lian Ziju.
Fig. 35 Courtesy of Mr. Lian Ziju.
Fig. 36 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.
Fig. 37 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.
Fig. 38 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.
Fig. 39 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.
Fig. 40 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.

Fig. 41
Fig. 43 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.
Fig. 44 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.
Fig. 45 Courtesy of TaoHuaGe.

Fig. 46-47 Wedding ensemble by Madame Vionnet (1929). Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 48-49 Coca-Cola Advertisement on calendar poster and magazine cover depicting women in fashionable see-through qipaos.
Fig. 50-52
Fig. 53-54 Mme. Koo’s embroidered qipao. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 55-56 Anna May Wong’s favorite double-jin design (the horizontal double front openings under the collar, fastened by buttons).
Fig. 57-59 The fake high side opening achieved by using extended trims reaching the hips, creating the illusion of longer lower body.
Bibliography


Cao, Xueqin, Guoling Huo, and Jun Zi. 2006. 脂砚斋全评石头记 / Zhi yan zhai quan ping Shi tou ji. Beijing: Dong fang chu ban she.


Chen, Zhifo. 1932. 图案法ABC / Tu an fa ABC. Shanghai: ABC cong shu she.


Liu, Yu, and Min Shao. 2016. 旗袍图案 / Qi pao tu an = Qipao patterns. Shanghai: Shang hai wen hua chu ban she.


Tang, Yulin. 2010. 苏州百年丝绸纹样 / *Su zhou bai nian si chou wen yang*. Ji nan: Shan dong hua bao chu ban she.


Wu, Guozhong. 2007. *《良友》画报与上海都市文化* / "Liang you" hua bao yu Shanghai du shi wen hua = Liangyou magazine and Shanghai modern culture. Changsha Shi: Hunan shi fan da xue chu ban she.


Zhou, Songfang. 2014. 民国衣裳：旧制度与新时尚 / Minguo yi shang: jiu zhi du yu xin shi shang.


Historical Magazines:

良友 / Liang you = The Young Companion. 1926-1945. Shanghai: Liang you yin shua gong si.

妇人画报 / Furen huabao = The Women Pictorial. 1933-1937. Shanghai.


玲珑 / Ling lung. 1931-1937. Shanghai: Hua shang san he gong si chu ban bu.

上海漫画 / Shanghai Manhua = The Shanghai Sketch. 1928-1931. Shanghai: Shanghai man hua hui