

**Conference Paper for Fashion: Exploring Critical Issues, Mansfield College,
Oxford, 25-27 Sept 2009.**

Dr Sarah Cheang

London College of Fashion

A Chinese Dressing Jacket: China and Japan in British Modernity

Slide – ‘A Chinese Dressing Jacket’, *Ladies’ Field*, 14 November 1903

The title of my paper – A Chinese Dressing Jacket – refers to this image here – a suggested garment for women to make at home, and contains an intriguing mixture of Chinese, Japanese and British elements. In this paper, I’d like to explore the historically specific and geographically situated cultural resonances of this particular design and others like it, and also examine the ways in which femininity intersected with chinoiserie, japonaiserie, fashion and modernity in early twentieth-century Britain through cultural cross-dressing. I will refer to Japanese dress and to Western fashion design, but my main focus is on the wearing of Chinese garments and the articulation of British femininities.

Museum collections and images from paintings, literature and magazines show that both China and Japan had a presence in Western fashion in the early twentieth century. Japanese elements had been appearing in European design from the late 1860s (Watanabe 1991), whilst the first three decades of the twentieth century saw a resurgence of chinoiserie in the West (Cheang 2008); so this image stands at a watershed moment between these two phases. And this is the case pretty much across

Europe and in America and Australia, with, of course, important local variations (which this paper cannot address today).

Slide – Théodore Roussel *The Reading Girl* (1886-7), George Hendrik Breitner *Girl in a White Kimono* (1894), Claude Monet *La Japonaise* (1876)

Just to set the scene and give you a sense of what this all looked like in terms of fashion and femininity, from the 1870s, artists began depicting young women wearing Japanese kimono, as artistic dress, and as part of visual compositions in what is termed japonisme. Kimono also began to be worn in the West as dressing gowns and as tea gowns, performing in Britain a similar kind of function as aesthetic dress, with an engagement with particular notions of beauty and a loosening of clothing that we can perhaps associate with late-Victorian dress reform.

Slide – James McNeill Whistler *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864), James McNeill Whistler *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* (1863-4)

In the work of Whistler we see confusion between Chinese and Japanese clothing (also ceramics), however, the emphasis during the nineteenth century was largely on the Japanese. In other words, Chinese things co-existed with Japanese things but were somewhat in their shadow within certain dominant Victorian taste cultures.

Slide – Paquin (1925) V&A T.50-1948, Reville (c.1923) Brighton Museum CT004062

The first three decades of the twentieth century saw a renewed fashion for *chinoiserie* and for objects from China, peaking in the 1920s. Butterflies, flowers, dragons and

Comment [SC1]: I don't think chinoiserie should be in italics. I don't know about in North America, but in UK dictionaries and UK publishing there's no italics.

'Chinese' landscapes appeared on wallpapers, upholstery and clothing. Furniture was draped with Chinese robes, and cushions were created from Chinese garments and embroidered sleeve bands. For women, the Chinese trend included the wearing of dresses, robes, coats and capes incorporating Chinese motifs, traditional Chinese garment shapes, and also actual pieces of Chinese embroidery (Cheang 2010).

So I'm showing you on the left a very well known dress by Paquin that uses a Chinese dragon and also a Chinese cloud motif on the skirt. In the middle, an evening coat by Reville in black silk embroidered with an 'oriental design' – dragons and cranes – could be Chinese or Japanese (design generally has a more Japanese feel), but the side fastening (too buttons on the left) and the stand up collar points to a more Chinese influence. It's a good example of what fashion scholars have dubbed 'sino-japanese' fashions (see for example Kim and DeLong 1992) – of course, part of what I want to do in this paper is unpick the relationship between the sino and the Japanese in fashion.

Slide – Liberty's gift catalogue, 1898

This page from Liberty's Yule-Tide Gifts catalogue of 1898 shows a woman wearing a Japanese kimono, and on the right an empty 'Chinese Mandarin's robe' that looks to have had its sleeves and hem shortened. The Kimono is described as a charming tea gown as well as fancy dress – a garment that you would wear at home for intimate social occasions or as a Japanese costume – and the image shows a woman who is play-acting Japaneseness, with her Japanese hairstyle and fan. The Chinese robe, depicted empty and I would suggest not quite ready for a new wearer, is also described as suitable for fancy dress, or to be adapted for tea gowns and evening

wear. So the suggestion is that a Western woman can slip into kimono a home, but that a Chinese robe, with some alteration, could be worn in the home or outside the home.

Slide - Liberty's gift catalogue, 1898

Whereas the kimono was understood as a loose garment that could make an artistic and comfortable dressing gown just as it was, Chinese skirts, jackets and robes were still in a strange process of integration into Western wardrobes. This image shows a Chinese women's skirt that has been gathered in at the waist and a collar added to create a cape for Western uses.

Slide – 'A Chinese Dressing Jacket', *Ladies' Field*, 14 November 1903

So here we come to our Chinese Dressing Jacket, the garment from 1903, that looks to me more Japanese than Chinese, but is very significantly being thought of as Chinese. Chinese robes and Japanese kimono share many common elements of construction in any case. The text that accompanies the image explains that a Chinese coat is as good as a Japanese kimono for comfort (in other words they're loose fitting) but that Chinese coats are harder to get hold of, so you should get sewing and try and copy one at home. In this image, gathered lace sleeves have been added to preserve modesty, but we can easily imagine that without these additional sleeves, the jacket would be exposing the woman's arms, and we would see her body or maybe an S-shaped corset judging by the bend in her back there. The sewing instructions refer to the 'special smart "sackiness" of the garment' – smartness here inferring cutting edge fashion and perhaps a frisson of sex. [It is important to remember that this is only an

image – a suggested design – and readers were free to make the garment to suit their own needs, and would not necessarily have added the lacy sleeves]

The construction of Japanese and Chinese garments enabled their assimilation into Western women's lives, in particular and I would to argue highly symbolic ways. The masthead of this magazine's needlecraft page used an image of a woman lounging against a cushion and indulging in the sensual idleness of the East instead of busily plying her needle. She is dressed, or one could say undressed, in a kimono which has fallen open to reveal a breast. Japanese clothing, it seemed, was strongly linked to modern states of undress and harem-like interiors. In addition to these Orientalist associations, this may have been a corollary of the difficulty that many Westerners faced in knowing how to fasten and wear a kimono correctly. Thus a kimono, by its very lack of in-built fastenings, belonged to the category of very private oriental garments that could fall open to expose the body. [aside – in fact, a kimono worn correctly is quite a tight and constricting garment due to the layers of wrapping]

Slide – 'Mandarin Motor coat' *Ladies' Field*, 30 Jan 1904

Chinese styles, could be worn outside the home more easily, and offered a practicality that matched some new modern pursuits for women. A design for a fur-lined Mandarin Motor Coat of 1904 was described as 'absolutely Chinese in cut', having very long sleeves, a stand up collar and a side-fastening characteristic of robes from China. In 1907, purple fur-lined coats from Bradley's sported 'Chinese' sleeves, and were advertised as having 'a roomy armhole extending downwards almost to the waist-line, [making] the whole wrap an ideal one for almost every purpose – motoring, driving, travelling and evening wear'. Thus, the physical emancipation of

the kimono - that oriental looseness - was taken outdoors in the idea of the Chinese coat, which was easily fastened and perhaps seemed less 'bedroomy' than the kimono.

Slide – Clara Kimball Young, US actress, c.1920

During the 1910s, 20s and 30s, Western women were also wearing Chinese gowns themselves as fashionable items. This slide shows the American actress Clara Kimball Young at home, relaxing and drinking tea, wearing a Chinese robe. It is said to be a private image from her photo album, but it seems likely that it is a general publicity photograph.

Slide – Chinese hairstyle examples, *Hairdressers' Weekly Journal*, Oct. 1920

A 'Chinese hairstyle' also emerged at the cutting edge of French fashion around 1920 (Zdatny 1999: 183-5). The 'Chinese hairstyle' was pulled straight back from the face and fixed in a chignon, sometimes using an ornate comb, and could be combined with pendent earrings. This slicked-back look was dramatically different from other more fluffy feminine styles – and I think a powerful 'drama' was an important component of the style's attraction. Hair is a highly visible part of the 'social body', an important signifier of identity and difference, and a sign of corporeal authenticity that has been powerful mobilised in debates around racial identity (Cheang and Biddle-Perry 2008).

It seems that because the Chinese hairstyle was so plain, flat and simple to do, it was perceived as a threat to the livelihood of hairdressers. As it did not use false hair in its creation, the hairpiece weaving trade was also disadvantaged. Using the terminology of warfare, hairdresser Emile Long described 'this accursed Chinese mode' as an

invasion that needed to be driven back by the ‘energetic counter-attack of the closely allied master hairdressers’ (Long cited in Zdatny 1999: 183-5). The rhetoric and sentiments of the Yellow Peril were also mobilised in popular culture of the time, such as in the stories of Sax Rohmer, who depicted the involvement of drug-addicted white women in London’s Chinatown and their fashionable interest for all things Chinese; a topic of recurrent fascination in connection with many overseas Chinese communities. Young white women were constructed as peculiarly susceptible to Chinese bad influence, becoming the agents of ruin for Western society as a whole.

Slide – Silver earrings made from Chinese hair ornaments, Liberty & Co., *Yuletide Gifts* (London: Liberty, 1912). Cartier earrings, 1920s made from old Chinese jades

These new modern bodies could also be adorned with Chinese earrings and Chinese carved jade pendants available through retailers such as Liberty’s.

In modern literature of the 1920s too, an element of Chinese corporeality was appearing in association with new femininities. In *Antic Hay*, published 1923, Aldous Huxley presented a satire on artistic youth of the early 1920s, in which neglected yet ambitious suburban wife Rose becomes progressively more ‘Chinese’ with each new sexual adventure, as she searches for a fashionable and avant garde lover. Her seduction by the artistic and literary Mr Mercaptan takes place after an education in a gendered East/West aesthetic and sexual dichotomy, in which Mercaptan shows Rose an African mask and a Chinese crystal phallus deliberately juxtaposed with Chelsea china and a carved Madonna. Thus enlightened, she then arrives at the home of her most violently dissolute and deliberately immoral lover, Coleman, who opens his door

to see a woman with 'slanting Chinese eyes'. In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), young painter and New Woman Lily Briscoe is given charming 'Chinese eyes, aslant in her white puckered little face' (Woolf 2000 [1927]: 37).

Slide – Evoc, 'The Mantel of Wu', Illustrated by E H Shepherd, *Punch's Almanack*, 1924 (detail)

In a study of the cross-fertilisation between Chinese and British modernisms in the early twentieth century, Patricia Laurence suggests that the Chinese eyes Woolf gave to Lily Briscoe constituted a 'new aesthetic voyaging in the East during the modernist period' (Laurence 2003: 10), where China was a source of inspiration for English modernists, as Africa had been for primitivism. Chinese aesthetics were incorporated into "English" art, as part of European modernism's 'questioning of cultural and aesthetic place' (Laurence 2003: 10)

There are of course many distinctions to be made between the role and conceptualisation of Africa and that of China in modernism and modernity, where I would suggest 'sinophilia' as an as-yet under-theorised parallel discourse to the early twentieth century phenomenon of negrophilia. The question of a differentiated range of 'imperialist modes of looking' is important here. In terms of this paper, whilst Chinese civilization had once been held in high regard, by 1900 China existed firmly within a continuum of Western imperialism. China had become a serious imperial concern, with foreign settler colonies creating pockets of what has been termed, for the British at least, a Chinese Raj (Bickers 1999). However, when the idea of China in British culture functioned as a way of making strange - when seeing through 'Chinese eyes' was a way of making strange that which was familiar as a strategy of modern

looking - this was also overlaid with the concept of topsy-turvy as well as otherness that was certainly applied equally to Japan as to China around the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. China was to Britain as chalk is to cheese, but China also appeared as a back to front reflection in a mirror – recognisable but different. Normality is disordered.

The Chinese-eyed New Women of Modernism were not merely contemplative, but engaged in an artistic and social struggle (Lawrence 2003: 346, 357), but I am wondering if the same can be said for the Chinese-clothed New Women inhabiting the world of fashion?

As Patricia Laurence has also noted, a gender analysis of British engagements with China points towards the existence of domestic undercurrents in British modernism.

The use of Chinese clothing in the 1920s was part of the production of a new fashionable body shape, created in conjunction with a loosening of clothing that is often seen as a metaphor for freedom, as women consolidated their access to higher education, to professional training, to public spaces and to the vote.

Slide – Evoe, ‘The Mantel of Wu’, Illustrated by E H Shepherd, *Punch’s Almanack*, 1924

This image is an illustration by Ernest Shepherd to a poem by Evoe (E V Knox), published in *Punch’s Almanack* for 1924. The poem and images depict the transition of a Chinese robe from the body of Chinese mandarin Wu, to young fashionable white, British, woman Joan. In a system of opposites, Wu is portrayed as studious and

upright, while Joan lounges lazily. Joan's Chinese robe emphasises the physical body of modern youthful femininity and a new corporeality, underlined by a juxtaposition with the corpulent, upright body of Wu the mandarin, and presented to the readers of *Punch* as a recognisable and droll phenomenon. Here we see modern femininity and its perceived investment in Chineseness, where young women wrapped in Chinese textiles betray a new corporeality and promise a new future for Western society. Such images betray a fascination and a degree of anxiety over the New Woman and the Flapper.

It is important to realise that from 1912, China was a westernising Republic in which mandarins and robes were to become outmoded. The figure of Wu was much more relevant to nineteenth than twentieth century China, invoking differences in time as well as space between the wearing of the robe by Wu and by Joan. Concepts of the 'mandarin robe' in Western fashion thus place China in stasis and deny China's capacity for modernity. However, this Saidian reading (Said 1995 [1978]; Wilson 1999) needs to be elaborated with the key issues of nostalgia, anxiety and Simmel's 'tigersprung' of fashion.

Slide – Mrs Oliver Locker-Lampson, *Vogue* 24 July 1929. We could also consider this photograph, taken by Cecil Beaton, which appeared in British *Vogue* in July 1929. The image shows the first Mrs Oliver Locker-Lampson (born Bianca Jacqueline Paget) wearing a Chinese robe (and some form of headdress), sitting cross-legged. The caption reads 'Mrs Oliver Locker-Lampson, the wife of Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson, is a brunette who always looks well in vivid colours, and is here seen photographed in a mandarin's coat and oriental headdress.'

Slide – John Mansfield Crealock – *The Yellow Sofa, 1912 and The Red Sofa, 1912.*

Of course, we should be aware that women who wear Chinese clothing in studio settings might be wearing studio props. However, the meaning remains important – we’re dealing with representations of women and Chinese things, and maybe it is enough to note that a Chinese robe was thought an appropriate garment for a modern fashionable woman to be immortalised in, in a photograph or on canvas.

Slide – Locker Lampson /Paul Morand, *Vogue*

The fashionable modernity of these women is continually of relevance and complexity at issue. In the pages of *Vogue*, the Locker-Lampson image appeared opposite a feature on the speed of modern life by the French modernist writer Paul Morand, creating a juxtaposition of old China and new Europe, but also positioning old China on the back of New Woman, perhaps underlining the problematic relationship between femininity/the Orient, and modernity/the West as a masculinist concepts, the very binary tendencies we have been steadily unpicking over the last 30 years or so (Felski 1995).

The location of this juxtaposition within a fashion journal also relates to fashion’s ‘dialectical configuration of modernity and antiquity’ in which the spirit of modernity derives its meaning, its foundation and its vitality with reference to the spirit of antiquity. Here, old Chinese clothing functions as a sign of authenticity and of antiquity. [(Lehmann 2000: 294 – thinking about fashion in relation to Benjamin and to Simmel) In other words, substituting China for ancient Greece.]

Slide – *Rosalinde*. Fashion plate drawn by George Barbier for a gown by Worth, *Gazette du Bon Ton* (1922)

In this fashion plate by George Barbier, illustrating a gown by Worth (1922) in the elite fashion magazine *Gazette du Bon Ton* which was an haute couture marriage of art and fashion, a woman positioned against a lacquered commode turns her back upon a classical statuette of a naked woman (the Occident) in order to gaze at a blue bowl on a black wood stand containing a lotus flower (the Orient).

Marcia Pointon (1990: 11-34, 20-21) has argued that the female nude in art has symbolised male creative genius, and that depictions of women in combination with the female nude as an artefact play upon ‘the relationship between the construction of woman as nude in art and the construction of woman as social ...’ Warwick and Cavallero (1998: 104-108) have discussed the problem that in dress discourse, women are seen to change with fashion, so that a new fashion creates a New Woman under the direction of male creative genius. In Barbier’s images, the fashionable woman is shown to be in a spiritual and physical synthesis with Oriental things, and although a feminine embracing of the Orient might seem to threaten the masculine order of classical art genius, these women were in fact recaptured by the male genius of fashion and reinscribed as object.

Slide – Mantel of Wu/Locker Lampson

The potential for corporeal displays of fashionable Chineseness to slide into notions of white women who are trying to be Chinese, who might desire to be Chinese, or who might have absorbed some Chinese qualities into themselves, provided a focus

for social anxieties around modern femininity. But, as I have already suggested, fashionable Chineseness was not the same as pretending to be Chinese, and pretending to be Chinese is clearly not the same as becoming Chinese. This is a mimesis of Chinese otherness that may appear to threaten white British hegemony and to splinter colonial and racial boundaries; yet, this white mimesis of Chineseness operates around an Orientalist construct of Otherness that is dislocated from Chinese subjectivities and is focused on a Chinese past – in other words it is mimesis of the Other as a construct that authenticates white hegemony and reinforces white identities.

Young women wrapped in Chinese textiles promised a new future for Western society. But just as the short hair of modernity – the bob that became derigeur by the mid-20s –suggested rather than represented the ‘collapse of the socio-sexual order’ (Zdatny 1997: 380), these Chinese-eyed, Chinese-haired and Chinese-clothed New Women suggest the collapse of the socio-racial order whilst reinforcing that order. This is what Sanjay Sharma and Ashwani Sharma (2003: 314) have termed a white Orientalist desire for the Other that contains a craving to always be more than the other in a “pathological compulsion to integrate and stratify all Others within Whiteness”.

In the reification of discourse through material culture, Japaneseness, Chineseness, femininity and modernity operated in tension with each other and within certain hierarchies of cultural value in a highly sexist, racist and imperialistic society.

The mixing of east and west, a conceptual paradox to say the least, is carefully negotiated in a play of temporal and geographical distance, and in the alteration and uses of Chinese and Japanese clothing – that ultimately reinstates white hegemony through the negation of all other modern subjectivities. The everyday performance of white skin/yellow mask Chineseness becomes a very necessary part of white modernity, that, as a consequence of its location in the realm of the feminine/Orient, is trivialised and sometimes used as a foil for more unambiguous, full-blooded European modalities of modernity.

Here, women are portrayed as the highly embodied producers and consumers of modernity, and hence its progenitors in a very complete sense. They may be seen to be seeing through Chinese eyes, or seen to see nothing at all (to think nothing at all), whilst using their bodies as a site of display for modernity's aesthetic voyaging.

References

- Bickers, R. 1999. *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900-1949*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Cheang, S. 2008. 'What's in a Chinese Room?: 20th Century Chinoiserie, Modernity and Femininity.' In D. Beevers (ed) *Chinese Whispers: Chinoiserie in Britain 1650-1930*. Brighton: The Royal Pavilion & Museums. Pp. 74-81.
- Cheang, S. 2010 (forthcoming, July). 'Chinese robes in western interiors: transitionality and transformation.' In A. Myzelev and J. Potvin (eds). *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*. Ashgate.
- Cheang, S and Biddle-Perry, G. 2008. 'Conclusion: Hair and Human Identity' in G. Biddle-Perry and S. Cheang (eds) *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*. Oxford: Berg.
- Felski, R. 1995. *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Kim, H. J. and DeLong, M. R. 1992. 'Sino-Japanism In Western Women's Fashionable Dress in Harper's Bazar, 1890-1927.' *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. 11.1: 24-30.
- Huxley, A. 1948 [1923]. *Antic Hay*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Laurence, P. 2003. *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China*. Univ. of South Carolina Press.
- Lehmann, U. 2000. *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Pointon, M. 1990. *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830-1908*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Said, E. 1995 [1978]. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin.
- Sharma, S. and Sharma, A. 2003, 'White Paranoia: Orientalism in the Age of Empire' *Fashion Theory*, 7.3/4.
- Warwick, A. and Cavallero, D. 1998. *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body*. Oxford: Berg.
- Watanabe, T. 1991. *High-Victorian Japonism*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Wilson, V. 1999. 'Studio and Soirée: Chinese Textiles in Europe and America, 1850 to the Present', in R. Phillips and C. Steiner (eds), *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Woolf, V. 2000 [1927], *To the Lighthouse*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.
- Zdatny, S. 1997. 'The Boyish Look and the Liberated Woman: The Politics and Aesthetics of Women's Hairstyles', *Fashion Theory* 1.4: 367-398.
- Zdatny, S. ed. 1999. *Hairstyles and Fashion: A Hairdresser's History of Paris, 1910-1920*. Oxford: Berg 1999.