

The *qipao*¹ and the Politics of Dress

Few scholars even regarded dress as part of "hard core" politics before the 1990s, let alone pay attention to how dress has been used to express a political identity. Mina Roces and Louise Edwards argue that when the concept of a nation first came to be imagined in Asia, national dress became one of the essential aspects of 'invented tradition'. Later, as the governments experimented with dictatorship and democracy, authoritarian rulers and democrats alike invoked dress as a symbol of their visions of the "nations" they claimed to represent. (Roces & Edwards, 2008: 3) Looking back on the long history of the *qipao*, I discovered that it has often served as an important signifier of ideological values and political aspirations as well as an essential way to distinguish social groups as they struggled for political dominance. The *Qipao* then was a crucial dress code to be investigated if we wish to build a more complete understanding of formal politics in Taiwan. When we observe

how the *qipao* was gradually transformed from a tool of social order to a cultural practice that eventually found itself “otherized” from popular fashion, we can see the material reasons for this change. As we observe the evolution of a cultural practice in any culture, we cannot ignore the political and economic issues that may be influencing this change. This article aims to explore how the *qipao* has been manipulated by the politics of dress, and how it has acted as a visual marker for status, identity, and legitimacy.

The Origin of the *qipao*

The Qing dynasty was the last ruling dynasty of China. It was founded by the Manchu people, who are descended from the Jurchen people². The previous dynasty of China, the Ming dynasty, was the last empire ruled by the Han³ (the ethnic majority in China) in Chinese history. The Manchu ruled China as a minority, and the Han Chinese regarded them as foreign invaders. In the early 1620s, Nurhaci’s⁴ successors incorporated allied and conquered Mongol tribes under eight “banners⁵, and

they grew to become the core elite of the Qing Empire. The Manchu were called the “Banner people” after this unique social hierarchy, the Eight Banner system. The one-piece dress traditionally worn by Manchu women thus came to be called the “banner-quilt”, known in Mandarin as the *qipao*. Han women traditionally wore an open cross-collar shirt as an upper garment and a kind of skirt as a lower garment in the Ming dynasty, and most Han women maintained this style of dress during the early Qing. In the Qing dynasty, the *qipao* had two symbolic implications. Firstly, it represented the subservient relationship between the commoner and the aristocracy. Any common banner⁶ woman would wear the *qipao* casually, while the nobility wore only formal court dress. Secondly, the *qipao* also displayed the cultural and ethnic distinctions between Han⁷ and Manchu⁸ women. The *qipao* essentially represented the authoritarian rule of the Manchu minority in the Qing Empire, and early on showed an ability to symbolize the segregation of different social groups.

The *qipao* as an instrument of disintergration

China experienced a 50-year period of extreme upheaval in the first half of the 20th Century, from the invasion of the eight-nation alliance⁹ through the fall of the Qing Empire and the founding of the Republic of China, throughout the Chinese Civil War, and up until the defeat of the Kuomintang (KMT)¹⁰ by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)¹¹. Awakened modern Chinese women with unbound feet, leather high heels and tight-fitting *qipaos* rushed from their boudoirs to schools or movie theaters. The *qipao* became the typical female student's uniform toward the end of Qing Dynasty, and gradually began to symbolize national identity and also serve to differentiate between educated and uneducated women, becoming an icon of the initial stages of modern Chinese fashion. The establishment of the Republic of China resulted in a distinction between modern and feudal China as well a certain animosity to Western Imperialism, and as a result the *qipao* was transformed a Qing-era student's uniform to

a contemporary national dress. As the *qipao* grew in significance and became a symbol of patriotism, intelligence and modernity, it became very fashionable among women.

The *qipao* in the reorganization of social order

In 1949, Chiang Kai-shek¹² was defeated in the Chinese civil war, and fleeing to Taiwan, consolidated what was left of his regime. Before the KMT's withdrawal to Taiwan, however, the island had experienced a significantly different political history as a colony of the Empire of Japan. The nationalists held that the Taiwanese had been slaves of the Japanese and needed a period of moral and ideological reshaping before they could enjoy full rights as citizens of the Republic of China. All things Japanese were totally prohibited and the KMT believed it necessary to promote a "traditional Chinese spirit" to increase a sense of Chinese nationalism in society. (The Chinese Cultural Renaissance Committee, 1971: 67) The KMT attempted to sinicize the Taiwanese by propagating its version of Chinese culture in order to create a Chinese identity in Taiwan. The

Chinese Cultural Renaissance Committee built facilities for intellectual and physical recreation and also universalized the Mandarin dialect in public education. Chinese culture was promoted as the mainstream, national culture. As for clothing, the *qipao* was declared the official gown for women. The *qipao* was both promoted and authorized as the national dress and the representation of Chinese identity, yet it seemed to have been worn by only by well-known socialites, upper-class women and the general *waishengren*¹³ community. This fashion was apparently unable to prevail over popular culture and influence the clothing of the common Taiwanese woman. Despite the government's effort to promote a unified Chinese identity with the *qipao*, the effects were rather incomplete. All in all, the *qipao* was means to rearrange and consolidate a new social order for Taiwanese society in the authoritarian period of KMT rule from 1950s to the 1970s.

From alienating to being alienated

The 1980s were a period of expansion for this consumer society, consumption grew exponentially with the flourishing economy.

Consumption was also becoming more expensive in transportation, for example. The nation's liberalization and the formation of a consumer society allowed for different expressions of culture to become possible. The over-manipulation of politics and culture seen previously turned out to be distant from the lives of the common people. Cultural practices like the *qipao* that were promoted by the KMT did not manage to overcome the cultural preferences of ordinary people. Through the gradual liberalization of Taiwanese politics, Taiwanization, and economic localization, a consumer society was formed and consumers began to have a greater range of choices. Accustomed to “othering” other social groups, the upper class of Taiwan found themselves instead “otherized” from society.

After researching the complex history of the *qipao*, I discovered the *qipao*'s central role in the politics of dress, and became aware of its continually changing symbolism. It began as a

symbol of the ruling authorities, of elites who possessed political and economic power and used it for the “othering” of different social groups. After the logic of capitalist marketization altered the political, economic and material base of society, people who used to be the dominant class now faced the calamity of being themselves “otherized”. It is thought-provoking, therefore, to explore the *qipao* as an element of dress politics.

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Notes

¹ The *qipao* (旗袍), also known as the cheongsam, is a one-piece Chinese dress for women.

² The Jurchens (nüzhen 女真) were a Tungusic people who inhabited the region at the Northeast China until the 17th century, when they adopted the name “Manchu”.

³ The Han is the ethnic majority in China. The Ming dynasty was preceded the Qing dynasty and was also the last empire ruled by the Han in Chinese history.

⁴ Nurhaci is considered to be the founding father of the Manchu state. He is also credited with ordering the creation of a written script for the Manchu language.

⁵ The Eight-Banner system was a social institution of the Qing Dynasty. In the peacetime, the Eight Banner were farming and hunting as common people while in the wartime, they were fighting as soldiers.

⁶ The Eight-Banner system was a social institution of the Qing Dynasty. In peacetime the Eight Banner Clans farmed and hunted as common people and in wartime fought as soldiers.

⁷ The Han is the ethnic majority in China. The Ming dynasty was preceded the Qing dynasty and was also the last empire ruled by the Han in Chinese history.

⁸ The Qing dynasty was founded by the Manchu people, who are descended from the Jurchen People. The Manchu ruled China as a minority, and the Han Chinese regarded them as foreign invaders.

⁹ The Eight-nation alliance was made up of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, whose armies invaded China in August 1900.

¹⁰ The Kuomintang or KMT (國民黨), also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party, is the ruling political party of the Republic of China. The headquarters of the KMT is now located in Taiwan.

¹¹ The Communist Party of China is also known as the Chinese Communist Party. It was founded in 1921, and came to rule China after defeating its rival the KMT in the Chinese Civil War.

¹² Chiang Kai-shek (October 31, 1887 – April 5, 1975) served as Generalissimo of the national government of the Republic of China (ROC) from 1928 until 1975, taking control of the Kuomintang (KMT), after the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925.

¹³ The term *Waishengren* (外省人) refers to the people who emigrated to Taiwan from China with the Kuomintang (KMT) around the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949.