

## **The Qipao: The Carrier of Chinese Cultural and Philosophical Symbols**

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### **Abstract**

The qipao has become the symbol of identity for Chinese women. It is a tight-fitting dress with a standing collar, an asymmetric left-over-right opening and two-side slits. Chinese knot buttons are also an essential part of the qipao. While the garment serves to express Chinese values and has philosophical connotations, its colour, fabric pattern and Chinese knot buttons express wishes for happiness, luck, fortune, longevity as well as a yearning for peaceful interpersonal relationships and harmony with nature. The qipao was developed not only from a traditional gown used by the Han (the majority Chinese ethnic group), but also integrated minority cultural elements and has recently added Western sartorial patterns. This has resulted in a national dress that is more harmonious with contemporary aesthetics, manifesting the adaptability, versatility and inclusiveness of Chinese culture.

*Keywords:* aesthetics, Chinese knot button, material culture, traditional costume, yin-yang principle

Apparel not only acts as a visible cue to represent an individual or a specific group of people, but also as non-verbal communication (Lennon & Davis, 1989a) between self, insiders and outsiders. It has personal and social significance, playing a distinct role in material culture (Rabolt & Forney, 1989).

Clothing is an integral part of the self (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013) and a tool for self-expression, be it in a form that hides the self or otherwise displays it (Winterhalter, 2011), conceals weaknesses or shows off strengths. As a means of image modification, it indicates how much a person is willing to display their true self (what one truly perceives, feels and responds to) (Sloan, 2007), their desired self (a more attractive self) (Augustinova et al., 2011) or their social self (for better integration into the surrounding community) (Mead, 1913). It also exhibits self-aesthetics, including creativity, a sense of beauty, taste, appropriate use of colour, body image and clothing style. This self disclosure reflects part of a person's material self world (Watson, 2004) and reinforces the concept of self related to personality, preferences, values, identity and social class (Lennon & Davis, 1989b), which is to say that clothing reflects psychological needs (Barthes, 2013) and intrinsic attributes (Presley & Campassi, 2013).

In particular, apparel is very important for women, giving them physical and emotional satisfaction (Kwon, 1987) and aiding them in building self-confidence. It performs practical, sexual and social functions (Perrot, 1981); hence, it provides distinctive perspectives through which women can identify themselves and be observed. Additionally, seeing their ideal self (Ridgway et al., 2017) through clothing allows them to construct life-meaning and highlights the dynamic between subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Winterhalter, 2011).

### **Clothing and Culture**

Equally significant, in creating “a visible manifestation of the civilised state of being, of cultural superiority” (Baizerman et al., 2008, p. 124), and as a second skin, clothing expresses a collective second self (Basile, 2011). Reflecting social identity (Batten, 2010), it distinguishes between *us* and *others*, as is evident in the case of a school uniform (Johnson et al., 2014). It is also a sign of social class (F.Ma et al., 2012), used to announce social status, authority, and wealth. Dress can even have political implications (Carroll, 2003), as in the case of military and royal clothing. People also develop traditional folk clothing to showcase nationalism, cultural identity and pride (vanOrman, 2013). Moreover, a process of evolution is involved, fuelled by the interaction with the costumes of other countries (Hansen, 2004).

Chinese traditional apparel has undergone a long period of development; as a consequence, it has established strong connections with the nation's values and its cultural heritage. The garments' symbolic presentation of these values and heritage (Lin & Khuen, 2012), is prominently influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, as can be seen in their aesthetics and styles (J. Y. Yuan, 2002). The qipao has been deemed a national dress that conveys Chinese culture.

### **The Qipao: Traditional Chinese Cultural and Philosophical Representation**

The qipao, also called *cheongsam* or *changshan*, is recognised as a formal dress and an icon of ethnicity, as well as an identity symbol for Chinese women all over the world (Ling, 2009). Supported by the Clothing Regulations of 1929 (Ling, 2013), it not only represents Chinese values (Lin & Khuen, 2012), but also symbolises the unity of the country (Finnane, 2008). Its continuing development lasted centuries until the 1920s, when stipulations for the prototype of

the modern qipao were introduced in an effort to provide guided continuity to both the Han people and ethnic minorities. In addition to being a one-piece long garment, the qipao has a standing collar, an asymmetrical left-over-right opening, and two side slits, and it buttons (always using Chinese knot buttons) from the bottom of the collar downward to the right-hand seam and along the right contour line to the slit. This aesthetics has cultural and philosophical connotations.

The long gown is one of the traditional Chinese forms of apparel, which catered to the conservative norm of covering body from neck to feet to prevent erotic flights of the imagination as well as any type of body contact between different sexes. It can be traced back to the Yangshao culture (5000-3000 BC) (Wang, 1975) and to the period of Emperor Shun (2287-2067 BC) (J. Y. 袁杰英 Yuan, 2003). Additionally, archaeological evidence reveals the use of long gowns in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC).

Wearing long gowns had been prevalent in the Qin (221-206 BC) and Han (202 BC-220 AD) dynasties (Sheng, 2010); it was worn as an interior garment in the former and on the outside in the latter (Gao, 2005). In the early East Han dynasty (25-220 AD), the long gown was a ceremonial dress (Wang, 1975). Indeed, wearing a long gown among noble ladies was popular from the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC) to the West Han dynasty (202 BC-9 AD) (Wang, 1975). Until the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD), it was fashionable for ladies to wear long gowns (G. 楊桂梅 Yang & Zhang, 2002). In the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD), the long gown was common for both men's and women's clothing (Shen & Wang, 2004).

The qipao inherits features from the long gown and reflects aesthetic tastes and styles from diverse periods. For instance, its length keeps changing. A floor-length hemline was the form for long gowns in the Qing dynasty. In the 1920s, a qipao was usually straight and loose-fitting in an A-shaped cut, with wide sleeves and down to the lower calf in length, whereas it varied from mid-calf to ankle in the 1930s and 1940s. The length then trended towards below-the-knee and on-the-knee afterwards. In the 1960s, an above-the-knee qipao length was popular, and the body-hugging mini-qipao attracted Western designers (Clark, 2000). This length implies female liberation through the acceptance of a drastic shift from a garment that covers the whole body to one that has sex appeal (Hua, 2004).

### **The Standing Collar**

Standing collars have been discovered among archaeological relics. The right-angle standing collar was developed during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), and continually evolved into various forms of standing collar during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 AD) (Zhang, 2016). This type of collar was subsequently used in the qipao. An unfolded, non-overlapping, round edged collar on a qipao is always attached with knot buttons to ensure a neat presentation. A well-tailored standing collar is not only comfortable for people even with shorter necks, but also enables the neck to look longer. This is a skilful implementation of Chinese aesthetics.

### **The Right-Hand Opening**

The right-hand opening was adopted beginning in the Warring States period (475-221 BC) (Shen, 2002). It hints at the yin-yang principle, where right represents yin and left yang (Smith, 1978). The yin-yang is a dualistic concept: the moon and water are yin, and in contrast the sun and fire are yang. Likewise, right and death are yin while left and life are yang; therefore, left-over-right in Chinese apparel implies life over death (S. 馬舒舒 Ma, 2015), meaning that life

is stronger than death, referencing longevity. This asymmetrical opening connotes a bright and lively spirit, which also applies to many other traditional Asian costumes such as the kimono (Japanese), hanbok (Korean) and ao dai (Vietnamese).

Wearing trousers underneath a long robe was a traditional style of female costume. This conservative form lasted centuries, until the modern qipao gave up the accompanying long trousers and began to allow for two-side slits in the 1930s. The slits are from mid-thigh (even up to 11 inches above the knee) to two inches above the knee. The silhouette between partial thigh and calf is veiled and unveiled when walking with a long qipao and provides a way of peeping at the legs through slits. Such ambiguity satisfies the desire for body concealment (Ling, 2013) and disclosure simultaneously. It ascertains autonomy for women to express themselves.

### **The Chinese Knot-Button**

Chinese knotting is a traditional art that has been used in daily life for decoration and blessing since the Tang and Song dynasties; it was rapidly popularised in the Ming and Qing dynasties (Y. Yang, 2015). In fact, the Chinese knot button has been widely utilised in apparel from the prehistoric era. It is made of cords of cloth, with or without a metal wire to fix the shape. It consists of a knot and a loop, which form a straight line across both sides of the garment. This is the basic type, and a pearl or a ball made of various materials can replace the knot. Furthermore, it appears in a wide variety of designs such as flowers, geometrical patterns and symbols. Popular knots include the cloverleaf knot (dragonfly knot) symbolising fortune and good luck; the round brocade knot (six-flower knot) representing good fortune, wholesomeness, completeness and balance; the double coin knot picturing the cycle of life; the sauvastika (swastika) knot displaying a Buddhist blessing; the square knot (good luck knot) and mystic knot (chrysanthemum knot), both of which bring good fortune; and the good luck knot. These knot buttons illustrate Chinese philosophy regarding a harmonious relationship with nature (Ling, 2009), and have what are accepted Buddhist symbols in daily life. Usually, Chinese female apparel has an odd number of buttons because of the yin-yang principle: the female belongs to the yin category, and odd numbers are yang, so the woman and the garment form a yin-yang harmony (Huang, 2018).

### **The Fabric Patterns**

The fabric patterns used involve an extensive scope of flowers, plants, insects, birds, animals, geometrical patterns or auspicious designs representing fortune, happiness and longevity. In short, the pattern chosen expresses good wishes that integrate internal and external harmony (Ip, 2011).

### **Colour**

Colour in Chinese culture likewise sends a message, with red being luck, joy and happiness, yellow is power, dignity and prosperity, green is growth, wealth and harmony, purple stands for divinity and elegance, blue indicates immortality and black denotes power (Kim & DeLong, 1992). These colours are popularly used in qipao construction, with each particular combination showing what Chinese expect or hope for in their daily lives.

## Hybrid Features

Chinese apparel has been developed through mixing Han clothing styles with those of ethnic minorities. This fusion has occurred in five specific periods since the 6th century (Lingley, 2014), as a function of the integration of Chinese taste for the exotic. The qipao has attained a hybrid feature set (Ling, 2007), which has not only absorbed Manchurian and Mongolian styles (Liu, 2011), but also integrates tradition with modern aesthetics. In fact, it has subsumed Western influences (N. Y. 司徒嫫然 Szeto, 1992) and today displays a Chinese-Western fusion (Lu, 2003) that includes Western sartorial practises (Ng, 2015; Xu, 2010) (such as darts, cut-and-sewn sleeves) and accessories (Clark, 2000; DeLong et al., 2005; Ling, 2011). It is now commonly worn with silk stockings, high-heeled shoes, hats, gloves and purses. Since the 1940s and in many cases a zipper replaces Chinese knot buttons from the right armpit to the slit (Siu, 2013), offering a convenient way to wear a qipao. Such amalgamation manifests the inclusiveness and the multi-cultural attributes of Chinese culture.

Scholars mostly agree that the qipao originated in the Manchu robe (旗袍) (Brasó-Broggi, 2015) which was a long and loose-fitting gown. However, some scholars are convinced that the modern qipao evolved from ancient Chinese apparel, as articulated earlier. The syllable *qi* in the name means happiness, that is, a robe of well-being or good luck (祺袍) (Wang, 1975; Zhao, 2017). Wellness is a common expectation in Chinese society.

Recently, ladies have complained that the qipao is difficult and inconvenient to wear on a daily basis (Xie, 2017), which may reflect a limited regard for cultural heritage in sectors of the population. Perhaps as a response to these grievances, a zipper at the back plus a pseudo-opening in the front now replace the Chinese knot buttons for the right-hand opening in some qipaos. This kind of para-qipao ignores the yin-yang culture, and it also loses the vividness of the dress in its traditional asymmetric opening; these changes extinguish the wholeness and aesthetics of the qipao. Moreover, a tight-fitting qipao is mistakenly considered to be suitable only for slim figures. In reality, the qipao is not only able to mask defects, but can also showcase appealing features (Ling, 2009), as it is neutral to different body types, as most figures can be catered to through skilful tailoring. Furthermore, this complaisance makes it suitable for all phases of life (N. Y. Szeto, 1997). These properties reveal the adaptability, versatility and popular acceptability of the qipao (Ling, 2009).

## Conclusion

The long gown is one of the most widespread Chinese apparel forms, originating in and worn by both Han Chinese and domestic ethnic minorities. The qipao comprises a standing collar, an asymmetric left-over-right opening (usually with Chinese knot buttons), and two-side slits. Its elements symbolise Chinese cultural and philosophical principles. Its colour, fabric pattern and Chinese knot buttons manifest wishes for luck, fortune, happiness and longevity, coupled with intrinsic and external harmony. Its current form has become a mixture of traditional and modern ideas and Chinese and Western sartorial techniques, illustrating versatility, adaptability and inclusiveness.

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