**Fashion and Freedom**

**A Textual Analysis of Chinese Women from 1911 to 2011**

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Critical understanding of self takes place […] through a struggle of political “hegemonies” and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality. Consciousness of being a part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one [praxis] –from The Prison Notebooks (Gramsci 2005: 333).

# Introduction

From 1600 to 2010, Chinese women have transitioned from a traditional feudalist society to a modern social structure. The change in fashion can be likened to drama or fiction; we can come to understand social history and culture through its changes.

**History of Women’s Liberation and Change in Fashion**

**Before 1900**

Women in China have suffered from feudalist traditions, which originated in the philosophy of “filial piety” of Confucius. The three principle of “filial piety” stipulated that women must obey men, citizens must obey their ruler, and the young must obey the elderly, which successfully helped to maintain the patriarchal social order in China. Women were oppressed by strict ethical codes prohibiting them from social activities. Women were expected to be good daughters, good wives, good mothers, and good mothers-in-law. All rights, such as owning property, seeking divorce, working, receiving an education and participating in politics were actually men’s rights. Chinese women suffered much from male-dominated culture under this patriarchal structure. Fashion in the traditional society reflected women’s powerless status. For over a thousand years, foot binding had been practiced among Chinese upper class women. According to the legend, the small feet of a dancer fascinated the Emperor so, since then, small feet were considered to be an element of female beauty. Started from the 10th century, this brutal and long-lasting ritual in human history was considered “fashionable” until the early 19th century. The foot binding culture oppressed and confined women physically in domestic spheres. The “flat chest aesthetics” was another fashion in traditional Chinese culture. Women with larger breasts were seen as aggressive, desirable, and licentious, so they would wear a tight-fitting vest or corset to cover female secondary sex characteristics and erase gender difference. Women strived to flatten their chests to convey the image of purity, innocence, and chastity. (Wu[[1]](#endnote-1), 2008) Both foot binding and flat chests were morbid aesthetics hindering women’s physical development in terms of their feet and breasts and to control women’s status. [Figure 1 & 2] Although some writers and influential scholars, including Kang Youwei (1959-1927) and Liang Quichao (1873-1929), advocates women’s right in education and marriages, even put women’s liberation in the nationalist context during the Hundred-Day Reform Movement (1898), the status of Chinese women had not been changed at all.

**From 1900 to 1949**

Starting from 1900, women’s liberation moved a big step, started from liberating their feet in 1902. In 1902, foot binding was outlawed by the imperial edicts of the Qing Dynasty. Sooner after, in 1911, the Chinese revolution had finally overthrown the last Chinese emperor in Qing Dynasty, which collapsed the symbol of feudal system and bring China into the new era of republic. However, the first great cultural movement of modern China was started in 1919, the May Fourth Movement. During the May Fourth Movement, by attacking traditional culture and Confucian ethical codes, Chinese women began raising their own voices, and increasing Chinese women began raising their own voices, and increasing numbers of Chinese women devoted themselves to the women’s movement.

The establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912 was a significant step toward women’s liberation. The Chinese government made some efforts in improving women’s status. In 1921, Chinese women were granted legal right to vote. In 1925, women could serve on some lower government positions. In 1930s, the new government established legislation to grant women properties and marriage rights. With all these institutional reforms, however, the exact practices were hard to reach most rural areas. Chinese feminists at that time only followed the steps of the western feminists to promote women’s movement. They didn’t establish their own feminism. The fundamental change in removing the deepest root of women’s oppression from the patriarchal system was not yet success in most regions. (Zhou[[2]](#endnote-2), 2003: 68)

However, women’s liberation had crossed over a big gap from liberating their feet to their hair, and their body. Starting from the May Fourth Movement, women were encouraged to stop foot binding, wear high heals, change hair style, and liberate their breasts without tight them up. Shanghai was an important trading port in China since 1843 because of its geographic proximity. And it sooner became the leading city in receiving western culture and fashion. After the May Fourth Movement, Shanghai women abandoned the traditional fashion of exquisite lotus, and chose to wear the imported western fashion of “high heels” with their natural feet. From some early paintings and art works, it became fashionable among Shanghai women to wear high heels while attending important events and formal occasions. [Figure 1 & 2]

Starting from 1920, the modern version of *qipao* was developed in Shanghai. Compared with the traditional *qipao[[3]](#footnote-1)*, a body-hugging one-piece dress fitted loosely for the body, the modern version is noted for accentuating the figures of women. The new design is slender and form fitting with high cut, which is very different from the traditional *qipao.* As western fashions changed, the basic design changed with different styles, including high-neck sleeveless dresses, bell-like sleeves, and the black lace fronting at the hem of a ball gown. The modern version of *qipao* was popular and welcomed among high-class courtesans and celebrities in the city. By the 1940s, *qipao* came in a wide variety of fabrics with an equal variety of accessories. [Figure 3 & 4]

In addition, western cosmetic products, such as facial powder, Pond’s cream, perfume, Liz soup, colon, cigarette, etc. were popular in Shanghai during that time. Using these items from the western countries became indicators of “modern” and “fashion”. Western wedding dress was first introduced to Shanghai among high-class elites in early 1920s. In 1926, the popular middle-class magazine, *Liang-Yo,* started to elect actress or aristocratic women to be the cover girls. The term of “lady” was brought in from the western culture, which became a new social identity for actress or aristocratic women. Quickly, in 1930, the first Beauty Contest—“ The Lady from Shanghai” election was held in Shanghai, which shows the quick change in Chinese women’s fashion influenced by the West.

In 1937, the Anti-Japanese War began. Women became more active in participating social movement and contribute to the country. On one hand, they actively involved in political activities, held a forum on constitutional issues, and even run for Office activities to get seats from the national political Council. On the other hand, women's human rights movement during the war is different from that previously. The older women’s movement with conservative ideology in the past, which focused mostly at the individual level of men against women, was considerable changed during the war. Women’s vision and knowledge were improved, they learned how to utilize the power of groups or organizations to better improve women’s abilities and skills, so to bring more women to the war forces. During the Anti-Japanese War, a serious of feminist movements which led by Song Meiling was sprout over the country. Totally, 819 women organizations were formed and active in 1945 when the war ended. Overall, this is the “first awakening Period” for women’s liberation. Because of the war, women took on the same responsibility of saving the country as men did. They stepped out of the kitchen, and contributed to different works in the society (Hu[[4]](#endnote-3), 2005). The eight years war accelerated the progress of women’s liberation in China.

**From 1949 to 1960s in Taiwan**

In 1949, the People Republic of China (PRC) was established and the government of Republic of China (ROC) retreated to Taiwan. In times when the Chinese Nationalist Party (KuoMingTang, the KMT) took over Taiwan from Japan’s 51 years of occupation in 1945, the principle of “gender equality” had already listed in the ROC Constitution to express that women have rights in inherit property and in political participation. Learned from the mistakes, KMT actively established two women organizations in 1950 and 1953 to enlist women in various type of social and community services and launched various campaigns to raise awareness to public health, public safety, family education, and social behavior.

In 1940s, Taiwan was in a period of martial law, the material life of most families was limited. Taiwan often needed aid from the U.S. because of material deprivation. Most women wore western-style dress or remained the same wear as during the Japanese occupation. In that less wealthy generation, women would make costumes only attending wedding or important events. Women’s dress emphasis on natural compact shoulder line, the chest line and the waistline. Started from the 1950 's, the economic condition of many families began to improve. The Beatles and A-Go-Go dance were popular mainstream. After mid-50s, hippie clothes and jeans became the fashion.

**The “New Feminism” in 1970s**

In 1971, Annette Lu challenge patriarchal system and women organizations and advocated the “New Feminism”. The “New Feminism” adopted Betty Fridan’s arguments of the second wave feminist movement in the United States in observing the liberation of white middle class female. Some important advocates of Annette Lu’s “New Feminism”, include "legalized abortion ", examine civil law on discrimination against women, insist the neutral principle of “employing without asking gender”, and abandon the myth of "men the bread winning and women the home maker”. She also established the "Pioneer Press" in 1976, to well use the media to advocate her ideas. The “Pioneer Press” was set up in Taipei by six female writers, including Annette Lu, Shi Shu-qing, Cao You-fang, Huang Hui-ying, Wang Zhong-ping and Chen Yun-ying. They are the pioneers in wielding the sword of words. The publishing company is the first cultural landmark combined women right activism and publishing and became the inspiration for wide scale feminist movement in Taiwan.

With the development of the new feminist movement and the improvement of economy, women’s fashion style in the 70’s is varied and affected by the western culture. High heels, high waist princess dress, miniskirt, hippie outfit, speaker pants, and low waist short dress were popular.

**The “New Awakening” in the 1980s and 1990s**

In 1982, Li Yuanzhen, combines the power of a dozen female intellectuals, founded the Awakening Journal in 1982. Different from Annette Lu's aggressive acts in advocating her feminist ideas, Li Yuanzhen kept distance with politics and political party to maintain a good image from removing the images of “the women's movement” or “feminist” as much as possible. In addition to deliver their feminist messages through the journal, they held large events in university campuses to train future personnel.

The 1987 was the year of great change in Taiwan history. President Chiang Ching-kuo announced on July 16 to remove Martial Law. The restrictions on press and political parties have also lifted in 1987. Before and after the martial law, a variety of self-help action even more turbulent. In January 1987, women's groups joined with the other social groups (include the Presbyterian Church, aboriginal groups, human rights groups) to launch the "against human trafficking” and “against child prostitutes" actions to call for social attention. Their actions gain media attention and widespread repercussions. Of course, these problems are not resolved, but the women's movement began to get more attention.

With economic stability in 1980s and the active feminist activities, young women in this generation were encouraged to show independence and autonomy which reflected on the fashion of 80s. Women, especially professional women, prefer wear suit with shoulder pads, rigid lines, and neutral colors to show masculine, authority, and expertise. In 1990s, the end of the century makes people feel insecure. People started aware of the environmental damages caused by the centuries length of industrial revolution. The “retro” is the 20th century’s reflection. Comes from reflection of the damaged environment, people advocate “retro” style, “low-key luxury”, and “respect for nature”.

**The 21st Century of Technology**

The 21st century is a cyber generation. Fashion in the 21st century become way more exciting because of Internet connection. The information can easily be achieved within a few seconds, and all over the world. In this new generation, “virtual fashion design” is a new construction over the network platform. Through a combination of animation and web page, it is easy to use virtual cloth for online design. A 3D virtual model simulation allows you to test different style of fashion in a most efficient and effective way. Without going to the physical stores, you can now choose your favorite clothes to “try on the internet”.

## What’s Fashion Got to Do with It? A Note on Methodology

Social and cultural analysts realized from the very beginning of sociology as a discipline that we live, not in a world that is given or “natural,” but in a deeply symbolic world of our own making. Structural anthropology and linguistics focused on culture as a language and the language of culture existing independently of the “natural” world. The Pragmatists and later Symbolic Interactionism focused on cultural interpretation of significant symbols and gestures as being the key not just to understanding culture but, in a more general sense, to function as a member of any social group. These precursors have led to the claim “all is text” in Poststructuralism (Derrida 1978; Lyotard 1984). In other words, we enter into constant conversations with one another and ourselves on issues of identity (cultural, political, national, regional, gendered, racial, sexual, class, *ad infinitum* identity). In this sense, the analysis of cultural artifacts (such as fashion) we use to present our perceived self-images is well established in the discipline.

In this article, we will employ textual analysis to test whether there is a link between Western cultural influence, women’s fashion and women’s liberation movements in Mainland China and Taiwan. Textual analysis is a well-established methodology in the field of Cultural Studies; the foundations of this approach are found in semiotics. Semiotics is the process by which salient signs are deconstructed to their constituent parts in order to better understand how meaning is symbolically constructed. Any sign can be broken down to two basic parts: the signifier and the signified (Barthes 1972). The signifier is the artifact independent of cultural interpretation whereas the signified is the meaning or significance of the object. The sign then as a whole is a reification of cultural meaning. Women’s fashion, in this sense, exists contingently with the socio-cultural and political stratification of women since fashion, in a patriarchal society, stands as a metonymic textualization of female bodies and sexualities from a masculine gaze.

# Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism and Third Wave Feminist Theory

The operating theories behind this article are problematic. Not in the sense that they are not well established or lack some interpretive power, but because they are Western. While poststructural, postcolonial and third wave feminist theories have been influential in Chinese scholarship regarding women’s liberation and history in China, the theories have been developed out of Western experiences and Western intellectual history (Wang 2006: 320). In this regard then these theories are inherently problematic. That being stated, these models are, however, useful in understanding how fashions can be read as socio-cultural texts representative of the relative statuses of their wearers. Judith Butler (2007) has famously argued that gender is a verb; it is something we do or *perform*. While there may be no corresponding term “gender” in Mandarin Chinese (Wang 2006), the concept of performing “maleness” or “femaleness” is still culturally present. Moreover, while imposing an interpretive model from the West onto Chinese women in history could be justly charged with being anachronistic and ethnocentric, current geo-political cultural realities (particularly as informed from postcolonialism) stand as a fundamental shift in historical context. In other words, since the re-opening of China to Western influence in the 1980s, social theory dealing with cultural imperialism, globalization (and subsequent glocalization as seen in “neat capitalism” (Featherstone 1995; Rojek 2007)) and intertextuality are increasingly relevant to understanding situated and contingent presentations of self.

Poststructuralism, while borrowing much from structural anthropology and linguistics, argues against clear hierarchical interpretations of power relations. Instead of expressions of power and domination being located within the organizations and processes of powerful groups, this power is active (not a noun but a verb) and fluid. Power, in this sense, is seen to coalesce in the resulting activity coming from dominant socio-cultural discourses. These discourses are organized historically in nonlinear collections, or epistemes, acting within which, people can demand others to internalize largely “arbitrary” and dependent modes of thought and action.

Under the larger theoretical rubric of “Poststructuralism” is Third Wave Feminism (TWF). In TWF, bodies and their presentations are always already political and any search for the prediscursive body is seen as futile. Gender, in this sense, is a performance already constructing individuals in established, normative patterns. Butler (2007) has argued that bodies be seen in terms of the original Latin sense of the word “matter.” Matter refers to matrices of potentialities. Dominant discourses act upon bodies to create miniature reifications of socio-historical expectations. In patriarchal societies, this construction maintains broader, formalized social power in masculine behaviors but does not leave feminine constructs powerless. As Jean Baudrillard (1994) has argued, the power of consumerist models is in their seductive sway; feminine behaviors, historically conditioned to commodified forms (objectification), are reformulated in terms of exchange value. In this sense, the self becomes secondary to the primary object (the body) and the consumerist accoutrements to the body become the “true” expression of self (not that this is necessarily a good thing but a particular cultural interpretation of the present). In this reconstitution of the self, the seductive power of consumerism becomes also the potential power of femininity. This power, however, is dependent upon misogynist discourses that privilege masculine gazes and use fashion (among other things) to maintain women as sexualized commodities where power is only granted in so far as heteronormative masculine assumptions are affirmed.

Post-colonialism also a theoretical kin to Poststructuralism is concerned with emergent global discourses after the fall of the colonial empires.

# Analysis/Discussion

The disparate routes along which women’s fashion evolved between Mainland China and Taiwan reflect not only the differing emplacement of women in local social structures but also changing national locations in much larger geo-political structures.

This space of localization opened up with Galileo, for the real scandal of Galileo’s work was not so much in having discovered, or rather rediscovered, that the Earth revolves around the sun, but in having constituted a space that was infinite, and infinitely open—so that the medieval place [the Great Chain of Being as the social and cosmological structure of the day] was dissolved in it, as it were. A things place was no longer anything but a point in its motion, just as a thing’s rest was nothing more than its motion indefinitely slowed down. To put it differently, starting from Galileo, from the seventeenth century [the start of the Enlightenment Project], extension supplanted localization. In our day, emplacement is supplanting extension which itself replaced localization. Emplacement is defined by the relations of proximity between points or elements. In formal terms these can be described as series, trees, lattices (Foucault 1998: 176).

**Conclusion**

The intertextuality of women’s fashion and status in Taiwan and Mainland China as well as the states’ complex relations and histories with the West raise important questions about the location of culture and power in global capitalism.

1. Wu, Hao. (吳昊) 2008. 都會雲裳：細說中國婦女服飾與身體革命 (1911-1935). 三聯書店. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Zhou, Jinghao. 2003. Keys to Women’s Liberation in Communist China: An Historical Overview. *Journal of International Women’s Studies* Vol. 5 (1), Nov., P. 67-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Qipao* (or *Cheongsam*) was a normal outfit in China since 17th century. Traditionally, it is a body-hugging one-piece Chinese dress. So, it is also called “banner gown”, a generic term for both male and female. The *qipao* fitted loosely and hung straight down the body, or flared slightly in an A-line. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Hu, Airo. (胡藹若) 2005. 我國婦女人權運動的脈絡，復興崗學報 85期，211-230. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)