

How Did the National Qipao Become the Hottest Fad During the Republic of China?

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Abstract:

When we are talking about “Non-Western Fashion” today, Qipao should be a very successful example in China during the first half part of 20th century. As the most typical traditional women’s wear of China, Qipao was always being adjusted and changed to keep the balance between tradition and fashion (Chinese elements and Western trends), during its popular times (from 1920s to 1940s).

In this paper, the popular times of Qipao is divided into four periods (1910s, 1920s, 1930s and 1940s) to trace its evolution and development. By analyzing on the styles, silhouettes, design details, typical elements and matched accessories of Qipao from these four periods, the reformations and innovations are obtained obviously. Especially by comparing with the main western trendy pieces of the given time, it is focused on what are the similarities and differences between Qipao and the most popular women’s fashion. The further research is trying to answer the key question ----how Qipao was adjusted over time to keep up with the steps of the western trends, while still maintain its national style and traditional taste. It is just because of these wise adjustments that wearing a national traditional dress could become the hottest trend among fashionable women at that time.

On the basis of attempting to find the reason why Qipao was so deeply and widely accepted by modern Chinese women during the Republic of China, and why wearing Qipao was not just national, but fashion as well at that time, it is finally aimed to discuss the advices on how to transfer the national to fashionable for today’s “non-western fashion”.

Keywords:

Women’s Wear, design, Qipao(Cheongsam), Western Trend, the Republic of China

It is so easy to check the term of Qipao or Cheongsam on different sources, and there did exist lots of definitions of it. For example, on the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, it is “a body-hugging one-piece Chinese dress for women, was created in the 1920s in Shanghai and was made fashionable by socialites and upper class women.” Another interpretation is “straight dress, usually of silk or cotton, with a stand-up collar and a slit in one side of the skirt, worn by Chinese women.” Maybe those are not authoritative definitions of Qipao, but from them we could get to know something distinctive which are regarded as the identities of Qipao by common people. Normally, these symbolic elements are one-piece tightly bodice, stand-up high neck collar, side slits and etc.

Although there was lots of traditional clothing wore by Chinese women through history, Qipao is always the first when we talk about the topic of national identity through wearing. As perhaps the best know traditional clothing of China, it has been prevalent for around 300 years. However the story of how it was created is usually told by legend. What is known is that it wasn't inspired by the Han Chinese, but rather by the Manchu. Manchu is one of the minority in China, who ruled China during the Qing Dynasty. So the custom of this special minority nationality actually influenced the whole country at that time. During the modern times, they refined the traditional clothes of the Manchu people and designed Qipao, which was known all over the world.



Figure 1: Blue brocade lined robe with concealing flowers from the late Qing Dynasty. The side-vents with cloud cluster (yun tou) at each top end are cut high to the armpit. The robe has loose-fitting bodice and sleeves, round neckline and right-opening, with white decorated wrist-bands at the sleeve-end. (preserved in the Chinese Costume Museum of Fashion and Art Design Institute, Donghua University.)

But the great change happened during the Republic of China. Actually it was always being adjusted and changed to keep the balance between tradition and fashion (Chinese elements and Western trends), during its popular times (from 1920s to 1940s). When we are talking about “Non-Western Fashion” today, it should be a very successful example in China during the

Republic of China.

Evolution of Qipao during the Republic of China

The Republic of China was founded in 1912, and ended in 1949. As an era of Chinese history, it was preceded by the Qing Dynasty and followed by the People's Republic of China. During that period, Qipao was becoming the most popular and common women's wear in China, and even the most well-known Chinese national identity clothing all over the world. As a matter of fact, it always changed and be adjusted through time.

1.1910s----Simplification

After the Manchu (Qing) rulers took control of China in 1644, Manchu Robes were mainly popular in Beijing area and can be recognized as a luxuriant fashion in Manchu noble classes. Walking through the whole 300 years history of Qing, women's robes are slightly changed, neither the silhouette of wide straight bodice. The style is conservative and strict in general, but with lots of delicate decorations to show how luxury and extravagant it was.

A republic was formally established on 1 January 1912 following the Xinhai Revolution, replacing Qing. Because of the collapse of Manchu emperor, Qipao were not the popular clothing in Beijing, and just worn by Manchu women acting as the national identity. Even the style and decoration details were simplified greatly.



Figure 2: Women's silk robe with concealing blue butterfly flowers of 1910s. This simple Qipao with tight sleeves and standing collar, was no longer as complicated as before, The main changes are that the sleeves became tighter, the traditional setting and bound trimmings became diminished or even disappeared. (Preserved in the Chinese Costume Museum of Fashion and Art Design Institute, Donghua University.)

Style and details

Straightly-cut Qipao was loose with wide waist and hem, covering the whole body. On the other hand, decoration details were no longer as complicated and delicate as they used to be in Qing Dynasty. It became very simple and was patterned with a few decorations, which were regarded

as the emblems of status and position before. The main changes were that the sleeves became a little tighter, the traditional setting and bound trimmings became diminished or even disappeared.

Matched pieces

Matched pieces were from Manchu's wardrobe, obviously showed national identity of the wearer. Sleeveless waistcoat or vest decorated with luxury embroidering and binding was one of the typical Manchu pieces, wearing on the top of Qipao. Da La Chi, or Liang Ba Tou was an unusual headdress of Manchu women, it looked like batwing-like shapes formed from false hair or black satin arranged over frame which was anchored with hairpins to the natural hair. Unlike the three-inch golden lotuses shoes of Han's, a special shoes named platform shoes was worn to fit with the unbound feet of Manchu women, exaggeratedly elevated with a concave heel in the center of the instep. Normally the vamp was made of silk and embroidered with designs of flowers, birds and fruit.

The inheritance and reformation

Nearly all design details were still existed, including the standing collar, side-opening and vents on each side, as well as the trimmings decorated at the collar, opening and hemline. Even the matching pieces were from Manchu's wardrobe, emphasizing the national identity of Manchu. Concerning the reformation, making it simple and plain was the key change of that period. Many decorative details of embroidery, binding, embedding and swirling were simplified or even not applied to avoid being more complicated and splendid.

2. 1920s——Sinicisation

After the May 4th (1919) Movement, political and mental revolutions in China aroused immense changes on women's thoughts, which finally lead to changes of women's wear. It is the beginning of the westernization of Chinese wearing.



Figure 3: An ocher-colored sheer Qipao with stripes of 1920s. The whole silhouette remains wide and loose with a little tight treatment at the armpit. The flare sleeves are typical in the late 1920s. (Preserved in the Chinese Costume Museum of Fashion and Art Design Institute, Donghua

University.)

Style and details

In 1920s, Qipao had A-line silhouette, wide hem and no dart at the waist. The whole shape remained wide and loose with a little tight treatment at the armpit. Although the bodice was not so wide as the past, it still looked loose because of the flat pattern cutting technology. Typical elements included the flare sleeves, standing collar, side-opening, ankle-length hem, and binding on the edges. The flare sleeves, which become wider from the arm-hole to the sleeve-end, were extremely common and popular in the late 1920s.

Matched pieces

Inherit to the wearing tradition of Chinese women, a kind of underwear called body-binding was still popular. They were mostly made of silk but less well-off families also used cloth. Unlike the sleeveless vest that women typically wore as an outer garment, the small vest was shorter, smaller and had a line of tight buttons that were meant to de-emphasize breasts. Body-binding hide the body curves to match with the flat bodice of loose-fitting Qipao of that time.

On the contrary, a novelty and sexy short top was invented and appeared. A few of the more daring Han's women wore Qipao and pair it with the thin grenadine top. It had standing collar, fitted bodice, side-opening, flare sleeves and short hem. Although being condemned for the practice of baring arms, these daring styles, initially only popular amongst prostitutes, soon became widespread and common among young girls.

Two kinds of hairstyle were popular among women. One was very traditional Han's hairstyle with all hair combed back and made into one round bun, this kind of chignon has been Han women's hairstyle for thousand years. The other was short hair extending to ears, which was original from the hottest western trend. The short boy-like hair together with the high-heel leather shoes constructed the modern look of new women in 1920s.

The inheritance and reformation

Typical design details were still inherited, like the standing collar, side-opening and trimming decorations, the flat pattern and cutting technology were used to make Qipao as well. Some traditional things like body-binding and chignon were matched with it. On the other hand, the bodice and the waist were slightly tightened. Shorted sleeves and hem made arm forearm and ankle bare. The whole look matching with short hair, leather high-heel shoes and even west watch are neat and modern.

As a matter of fact, wearing Qipap was a novel and vogue affair in 1920s. The wearers were not

Manchu women, but Han Chinese who was been taken as the fashion vanguards. The change of wearer could be regarded as the first important step. To some extent, it was even more significant than the later reformation happened in 1930s, which were mainly focused on the design details and cutting technology. After that, Qipao was no longer recognized as the minority clothing of Manchu, but the symbol of Chinese.

3.1930s——Westernization

1930s was the blossom time of Qipao. Actually nearly every Chinese women chose this kind of one-piece robe as daily wear, whatever where she lived in, and what age she was in. Nobody can deny that Qipao was the first choice among different styles for Chinese women during that time. Meanwhile, it was during that time that qipao changed greatly and become well-known all over the world.



Figure 4: Brocade Qipao from 1930s. It is a reformed one, which has a pair of waist darts placed respectively at front and back. Shoulder seaming (slanted shoulder slicing) is adopted and the armpit is slightly constricted. The reformed Qipao more outlines women's figure. (Preserved in the Chinese Costume Museum of Fashion and Art Design Institute, Donghua University.)

Style and details

The popular style had short sleeves, fitted bodice, very close and high standing collar, side-opening, and high side vents. Normally narrow trimmings were decorated at the collar, sleeve-end, opening, vents and hemline. Meanwhile, the reformed Qipao more outlined women's figure, which had a pair of waist darts placed respectively at front and back. Shoulder seaming (slanted shoulder slicing) was adopted and the armpit was slightly constricted to make it fit the body. It was the improved pattern and cutting techniques that could construct a new look for women. Some western design details were introduced as well, those details included flounces round the collar or hem, and even geometrical patterns like Floral, stripe from Art Deco.

Matched pieces

Matching and mixing pieces from China and West was such a common and fashionable thing.

Tops with western lapel were items that accompanied Qipao in a modern way in 1930s. They could be blouse, jacket, fur coat and even trench coat. Actually being topped with western coat was a very popular style of that time. High heel shoes and peel silk stockings were as popular in Shanghai as in Paris or London. Necessary accessories of gloves, hat and wallet-like handbag, which were the indispensable parts of the elegant image of western lady, were also fashionable items for Chinese ladies to accompany Qipao.

The inheritance and reformation

There were two main technology reformations, one was the introduction of dart, while the other was using western pattern skill to make and cut shoulder and armhole. The loose-fitting Qipao was reformed in a special way by adopting western tailoring techniques, to fully display women's curved body. The westernization not only made women's image very fashionable, but also reflected about the open and brave sartorial attitude of women at that time.

The tailoring and pattern-making techniques adopted in tailoring Qipao in the late 1930s were almost all westernized while the design details were partly changed. For example, all of the symbolic mandarin details such as the hand-made Chinese buttons, right-opening and the trimmings were almost unchanged, while some details from western clothing could be found also.

4. 1940s——modernization

During the period of the World War, simple and plain were the keywords of fashion around the world, and the trend also appeared in China. Qipao became much more simple and convenient. The popular details included long sleeveless with low vents, low collar, double-opening, narrow trimmings and a little bit loose silhouette.



Figure 5: Stripe green woolen Qipao with gauze lining of 1940s. It has short standing collar, round shoulders with no sleeve. Note the breast darts, stud set on the collar-band, and zipper placed at the opening. (Preserved in the Chinese Costume Museum of Fashion and Art Design Institute, Donghua University.)

Style and details

Qipao at that time took simple and plain as fashionable which in tune with the social background of war. Recognized details included low collar, short wide sleeves, calf-length and short side vents. The detailed decorations were simple, sometimes there was not any trimming at all. Although making Qipao was a complicated hand-made skill, new materials were used to make it more easy and quick than before. It was no unusual to find that stud was set on the collar-band, and zipper was placed at the opening.

Matched pieces

Hand-making sweaters became very popular in 1940s. Sweater was the most suitable item to wear on top of Qipao, for it has features of protecting the body, easy to wear and presenting an image of casual and solemnity. But knitting craft was a new thing from west, and so was sweater. Although the leather shoes with square toe and thick sole made the whole image a little bit mannish look, they were still chosen to match with it, perhaps for the reason that they were the fad from West. Perm with big curls extending to the shoulder was the most popular hair style in the West, as well as in China.

The inheritance and reformation

Some mandarin design details were still inherited, but obviously tended to be simple. Moreover, Some typical details like standing collar and side vents, which was been regarded as the permanent and eternal details, actually been changed and adjusted. Meanwhile using new materials made the hand-make process more simply, and brought much more comfortableness and convenient.

Reasons of Qipao's long-lasting and popularity during the Republic of China

The original Qipao of Manchu Women was wide and loose, covering and hiding most of the body. What could be seen is the luxury and delicate decoration, but hardly the figure of the wearer. At the beginning of the Republic, yet as the national identity of Manchu, its baggy nature was still kept, but the decoration details were more less. In 1920s, simplification made it more modern and accepted by young stylish girls and gradually being the identity of Han nationality. The great innovation appeared in 1930s, not just the Qipao were tailored to become more form fitting and revealing just like western clothing, the matching pieces were almost from the west as well. Modern women at that time sought a more modernized style of dress, and the old qipao was transformed to suit their tastes. Things continued in 1940s, more and more technology and accessories were introduced, and it was more and more globalization.

The evolution of Qipao must be seen in relation to a highly dynamic set of changes in Chinese

society during the Republic. It was within this context that the modern version of Qipao had great differences from the original. By analyzing on the styles, silhouettes, design details, typical elements and matched pieces and accessories of Qipao from different periods, the reformations and innovations are obtained obviously, while several typical elements are always maintained. The inheritance parts make it being Qipao, while on the other hand, the innovation always existed through the development. Simplification is aimed to improve the convenience for modern life, while westernization is aimed to attract more and more young fashionable lady. All changes widen the wearing, and the innovation parts make Qipao being fashionable and modern to attract more new fans.

Finally, it was deeply and widely accepted by modern Chinese women, thanks to the great balance between inheritance and innovation. Wearing Qipao was not just elegant and national, but modern and fashion as well. As a matter of fact, it eventually became the most popular dress wore by nearly every Chinese woman regardless of age and position during the Republic.

Advices for today's national identity design

Chasing back is aimed to going forward. The evolution of Qipao could provide a great example for us facing the contradiction between tradition and modernity. As Confucius said, "The trees desires stillness but the wind will not cease." To some extent, Keeping tradition as the same as the original is hardly possible, because the surroundings and conditions changed. Nearly one hundred years ago, Chinese Qipao was adjusted over time to keep up with the steps of the western trends, while still maintain its national style and traditional taste. It is just because of these wise adjustments that wearing a national traditional dress could become the hottest trend among fashionable women at that time.

From Chinese "I ching" (The book of changes), there is a famous sentence to describe what is change for----"Any circumstance hitting a limit will begin to change. Change will in turn lead to an unimpeded state, and then lead to continuity." It tells that changes in turn lead to finding a way. That means the real aim of changing is keeping and long-lasting. Without reformation, tradition will die out and disappear quickly. Maybe this sentence could be the best answer to finding a way for keeping the tradition and modernity in balance.

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