



## 70 Years of Fashion in the Chinese Dress—Exploring Sociocultural influences on Chinese Qipao's Hemline Height and Waistline Fit in 1920s-1980s

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The evolving dynasties and periods in Chinese history have always been accompanied with unique changes in its dress. Under the globalized society today, Chinese fashion has also left its footprint in the international fashion industry through which the world gains further understanding of the Chinese culture. The Chinese dress for woman, qipao or *cheongsam* in Cantonese, has evolved through a variety of silhouettes and styles under the quick changing cultural environment in the 1900s. Today, it has been accepted and internationally recognized as the distinctive national dress for the Chinese woman.

According to the principle of historical continuity, “each new fashion is an outgrowth or elaboration of the previously existing fashion” (Sproles, 1981, p.117). Qipao may be traced back as early as Shang dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.) in a form of long robe, and it has flourished through different cultures and dynasties and periods in China (Liu, 2009). Its most commonly known origin lies in Qing dynasty (1644-1911) in the Chinese feudal society. Elements of both Manchu and Han ethnic dresses contributed in shaping the original qipao style during this time. The Republican Era (1911-1949), a transitional time from the feudal to modern Chinese society, accompanied with revolutionary changes in qipao styles. During this period, qipao was the main site of woman's fashion and became “a stage for debates about sex, gender roles, aesthetics, the economy, and the nation” (Finanne, 2007, p.141). Under the dynamic external influences, qipao evolved in its fit, use of material, sleeve shape, collar height, button style, hemline height and style, and accessories.

The unique changes in qipao in the Chinese modern history have been frequently described in many studies. However, its reoccurring style changes are rarely discussed through the lens of social and cultural influences. This research focuses on a long run perspective of qipao fashion between period of 1920s to 1980s in Chinese mainland and Hong Kong. The aim is to explore the relationship between Chinese social-cultural influences and changes in qipao's style through examining its hemline height and waistline fit.

In this study, data were extracted using vintage painted Chinese advertisement and calendar poster images, as well as photographs of 1920s to 1980s from both Chinese mainland and Hong Kong. All images selected display the subject, qipao, on a standing female body form, showing full frontal, full back or  $\frac{3}{4}$  view with clear silhouette of the qipao. Further, the hemline height was visually estimated in centimeter and categorized into five lengths: floor, ankle, mid-calk, below-knee, and above-knee. The measurements were compared to a female body with

measurement of 100 cm from natural waistline to floor. In collecting data for waistline fit, visual estimation of the measurement in fitting and style ease were utilized for categorizing the fit: loose-fitting, semi-fitting, slim-fitting, and indent-fitting categories.

The data collected in this study has shown repeating bell curve in the change of hemline height and waistline fit during 1920s to 1980s for both. The results suggested western cultural imperialism, seeking gender equality and cultural identity to be the three main influences in the shifting of qipao's hemline height and waistline fit. Two models were proposed to explain the reoccurring changes. The first describes qipao as recognition of gender equality. Traditionally, a proper Chinese woman would stay home and take care of the family. As the western culture influences the modern Chinese society, more women began to receive more education. As they become more open-minded through education and western ideology, they also become more liberal in the idea of eroticism. Under this environment, qipao adopts shorter hemline with more form-fitting waistline to show off the natural curves in a woman. Women also gained gender equality through career and economic independence. When women choose this path, they may find practicality as an important necessity in garment; thus, qipao became shorter with loosely fitted waistline. Career and economic independence may also influence the open-mindedness that led women to wear qipao with shorter hemline and slim-fitting waistline.

In the second model, qipao was seen as an instrument to gain cultural identity. During the period of 1920s to 1980s, China went through WWII, Civil War, Cultural Revolution, and change in government leadership that brought drastic distress onto the society and its people. A strong sense of cultural identity was needed; thus, its people widely conformed to the act of patriotism or nationalism to gain international recognition and respect. As a result, women wore qipao with longer hemline to allowed appropriate formal display of Chinese surface design handcraft as a way to inherit tradition. On the other hand, the feminine beauty of the Chinese woman was promoted and celebrated through adopting slim-fitting qipao.

The results from this study may further aid the apparel and textile industry to better understand the social-cultural factors that influence the trend in the Chinese qipao. It is also important for designers to further reinvent qipao to allow consumer adoption under the current social context. In future studies, other elements of qipao, such as collar height, may be considered to refine the analysis of social cultural influences on evolution of qipao for an extended period of time.

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