

The Qipao: Defining Modern Women in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

by

Adrienne Cox

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Approved by:

Dr. Megan Greene, Thesis Coordinator

Dr. Hui Faye Xiao, Committee Member

Dr. Marie Brown, Committee Member

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## Introduction

In 1923 Soong Ching-ling—the wife of Sun Yat-sen—took a trip from Guangzhou to Beijing, stopping in various urban centers along the way. When she left Guangzhou in November, she was dressed in the standard clothes of a revolutionary Chinese woman, which consisted of a blouse paired with either a skirt or a pair of loose trousers. However, when she reached Beijing in December, her wardrobe had completely changed. She was photographed



Figure 1: Soong Ching-ling wearing a simple black qipao in 1925

wearing a simple black *qipao*, with loose elbow length sleeves. From that moment on, Soong nearly always was seen in a *qipao*, especially when out in political settings with her husband.

Historian Antonia Finnane attributes the rise in the popularity of *qipao* as the symbol of modern Nationalist Chinese women to Soong's change in wardrobe in 1923.<sup>1</sup> However, she also downplays the direct Manchu influence on the development of the dress, stating that the *qipao* was really a modification of the *changsheng*<sup>2</sup>—the dress of elite and educated men in China. She argues that women adopted the *changsheng* style in much the same way as women in the west adopted pants as a way to express their modernity and independence, and the *qipao* merely is a reference to the Manchu fashion<sup>3</sup>. Finnane's analysis of the *qipao*, however, ignores the Manchu

<sup>1</sup> Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation*, 2008. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Finnane. *Changing Clothes in China*. 147.

<sup>3</sup> Finnane. *Changing Clothes in China*. 142.

influence on men's fashion during the Qing Dynasty. Divorcing the *qipao* from its Manchu predecessor can cause confusion when trying to understand the development of the *qipao* into the garment we know today. The garment became a representation of women's liberation, but not because of its relation to men's fashion. Rather, it became a representation of liberation due to the many ways in which women used the garment to express their political and social ideologies.

What are the origins of the *qipao* and how did it develop into the dress we know today? Most historians argue that the modern *qipao*—an ankle to knee length dress, with an asymmetric closure that crosses over the chest and a high mandarin collar—evolved out of the traditional ethnic dress of the Manchu people, who ruled over China from 1636 to 1912. The Manchu were a nomadic group that came from the Northeastern most point of what is modern day China. However, when they overthrew the Ming emperors, the people of China—primarily of the Han ethnic group—saw the Manchu as foreigners and barbarians. This sentiment was maintained throughout the rule of the Qing Dynasty, and the ethnic tensions that arose out of Manchu rule were still prominent at the end of the dynasty.

Qing rulers tried to force the Han people to show their loyalty in various ways. Most prominently, however, was the Manchu tonsure and queue. Han men were forced to shave their foreheads and wear their hair in a long braid worn down the back. This helped the Manchu rulers visually identify rebels as those who had cut their queue or failed to keep their tonsure. Han men who worked within the imperial hierarchy also wore Manchu style clothing. While there was emphasis on male appearance, Han women were allowed to wear their traditional clothing and hair styles without much interference. This means that despite Manchu rule, Han women still wore the traditional style of a blouse paired with a skirt or a pair of trousers. At the end of the Qing dynasty women would not need to necessarily find new ways to express ethnic identity.

Instead new concerns relating to modernity and political ideology drove women to seek new ways of expressing themselves through clothes. The origins of the *qipao* are therefore more complex than just the adaptation of Manchu ethnic wear or men's wear.

The modern *qipao* has evolved almost directly from the Manchu garment into a more modern style dress. Modern *qipao* maintain the asymmetric closure across the chest, frog clasps—though some no longer include these as a functional feature for securing the dress closed—and side slits in the skirts. More modern examples of the dress also integrate stylistic features from Han traditional dress—the high Mandarin collar—and western fashion—the tighter fit, more dramatic sleeves, and raised hemlines. Despite the *qipao*'s popularity in urban areas traditional Han styles remained prevalent through the Republican Era, but by the middle to end of the 1920s, the *qipao* gained popularity among urban women including political figures like Soong Ching-Ling. Han women began to adopt the *qipao* as if it had nothing to do with the Manchu ethnic identity, and everything to do with what it meant to be a modern woman in urban China. This transition in interpretation culminated in the Nationalist government declaring the *qipao* to be the national dress of Chinese women in 1927. Traditional Han styles were slowly pushed out of mainstream urban fashion as the meaning of the *qipao* changed over several decades and urban women began to support a variety of social and political movements involving women. Through these changes the *qipao* became a cultural symbol for Chinese women both domestically and abroad.

The forming of this new image of what a modern woman looked like coincided with many other social changes that were happening at the time. First and foremost, at the end of the 1910s women were moving away from the traditional gender roles they had been ascribed in the past. This means women were getting educations, finding jobs, and entering the public sphere.

This allowed women to form identities beyond their roles in the home. By the late 1920s early 1930s, the image of the wife and mother had shifted considerably along with the social restructuring of the family unit. Though there was no law against polygamy, the practice was on the decline in urban areas, especially after the New Life Movement in 1930s China. At this time there was more social emphasis on the nuclear family instead of the large extended family structure. Marriages began to reflect more western traditions, though they were generally simpler than those we can see in America today. Political women—such as Soong Ching-ling and Madam Wellington Koo—gained significant social power in areas such as fashion, feminism, and family structuring by acting as the models for what modern women should strive to be. Overall, women’s roles in Chinese urban society changed drastically, and the definition of what it meant to be a modern woman changed along with the definitions of what it meant to be a modern Chinese citizen.

I argue that the *qipao* was therefore born out of the circumstances of the era, and the development of the *qipao* was led by the desire to modernize by the government and urban women alike. In a time when many wide sweeping changes were occurring within Chinese society, women used the *qipao* as a symbol of their identity—an identity that was built not as a continuation of past allegiances, but rather as a new interpretation of what it meant to be Chinese in the modern era, where the blending of Chinese and Western culture was at the forefront of thought for many political leaders and social activists in urban settings. It was



Figure 2: Linglong was known for accepting and publishing images sent in by readers. Here is a Linglong reader in a qipao from Linglong Issue 95, 1933.

only later, as the *qipao* entered the world stage on the bodies of famous and influential women, that the *qipao* was used to identify a woman's ethnic heritage more than her political standing.

To better understand how early twentieth century social movements influenced *qipao* fashion, this paper will divide the history of the *qipao* into four major themes: Manchu garments; Republican Era modernization; *qipao* in advertising calendar posters; and Shanghai movie culture and international audiences. For each theme the *qipao* will be placed in the context of various social movements and interpretations. First, I will look at the traditional Manchu garment and early stylistic exchange between Manchu and Han women, as well as how fashion began to change in the middle to late 1910s. Next, I will look at how western influence began to change both society and the fashion world within China in the late 1910s through the 1920s as feminist movements began to flourish. Finally, I will look at how Shanghai urbanism and film culture of the 1930s and 1940s pushed the *qipao* onto the world stage and solidified the *qipao* as a representative of Chinese culture.

This thesis will use a variety of primary sources to follow fashion trends and changes in sociopolitical movements. This will include the women's magazine *Linglong* from the 1930s, calendar posters from the 1920s and 1930s, and silent films. I will also bring in photographic and pictorial examples from



Figure 3: Another *Linglong* reader in a *qipao* whose photo was published. *Linglong* Issue 241, 1935.

advertisements, Shanghai films, Hollywood films, and

personal photo collections, which will serve to provide a visual progression of *qipao* styles from 1900-1949. All of these primary sources will help to place *qipao* back into their original context, which will allow me to identify trends that encouraged stylistic changes over time.

Through the use of secondary literature, this thesis will complicate previous scholars' works by digging deeper into the meanings of *qipao* fashion as it changed over time. While much of the secondary literature focuses on the physical changes in the dress in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several scholars, such as Antonia Finnane, Ellen Liang, and Chui Yang have tried to define the deeper meanings of *qipao* fashion. These scholars tend to focus on the Manchu origins of the dress, while highlighting a few key examples of hybridity in the garment. I will use these key moments of hybridity along with my other sources to discuss how the changes in *qipao* fashion actually developed over a long period of time, with different levels of hybridity available at all times. I will also include sources on political movements, feminist movements, and popular culture movements throughout the 50-year span. These sources will serve to provide a better understanding of the complex social situation in China after the end of the Qing Dynasty, as well as provide a roadmap of the movements that drove the changes in *qipao* fashion

Now it is time to jump back to the early 1900s, within the red walls of the Forbidden City, where royal Manchu women were confined within the strict rules of the palace, and even the color of your garment could say more about your status than any other obvious outward feature could. It was here that the *qipao*'s predecessor met Chinese culture head on, despite Manchu efforts to avoid the collision.

### ***Manchu Court Robes***

The Manchu dress is best known as the lavish imperial robes of the Qing dynasty, however the *qipao*'s direct predecessor has more humble origins with the Manchu people long before they overthrew the Ming Dynasty in the 1600s. This group was primarily nomadic, and as such their clothing developed to fit that lifestyle. Both men and women wore similar gowns

consisting of loose cotton robes with asymmetric closures and slits in the sides that usually went up to the hip to provide unrestricted movement while on horseback. They would also wear loose trousers or leggings under the gown to cover and protect the legs. Padding was easily added to provide warmth in the cold northern winters<sup>4</sup>, and the loose fit provided breathability in the hotter summer months. This Manchu dress was originally a garment worn by both men and women, a few key differences in sleeve styles and hem lines were the only distinguishing features. Women's robes were identified by the standard asymmetric closure which is buttoned at an angle across the chest and then down the side, frog clasps, and slits up the sides that allow for better movement. The women's dress was also made with a very loose fit, and the sleeves ended in an even seam, unlike the men's style.

When the Manchu people overthrew the Ming and established their own dynasty, they remained steadfastly dedicated to emulating the nomadic culture of their ancestors. Each summer, the imperial court would retreat back to Manchuria to practice their hunting, archery, horseback riding, and other skills associated with their ethnic past. Along with their efforts to remain Manchu and avoid sinicization—the process of becoming Chinese—the Manchu also implanted their culture into court life. Palace names were displayed in both Chinese and Manchu, and the court was primarily made up of men from the Eight Manchu Banners—political families that formed out of military groupings from the conquest of the Ming Dynasty—and imperial fashion changed by placing traditional Chinese symbols of imperial rule onto the structure of Manchu garments.

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<sup>4</sup> Finnane. *Changing Clothes in China*. 151.



While the imperial family had informal robes that closely resembled the traditional Manchu style, men and women within the imperial household dressed in some of the most luxurious materials of the time in formal settings. With fabrics ranging from brocade silks to heavily embroidered gauze, lavishly dyed cottons to expensive furs, these garments were used as a way to show off the imperial wealth. But this luxury did not come without rules. Women dressed according to rank, and this shows in the complex designs and styles of the many garments present in the palace museum collections. For example, a yellow court robes embroidered with a coiled dragon at the center of the chest and back would be reserved for the emperor and empress<sup>5</sup>, whereas a purple *qipao* embroidered with peonies could be worn by women of lower rank in the royal household [figure 4].<sup>6</sup> While some designs were reserved for women of specific status, the general style of the clothing was fairly universal. Almost every gown, formal to everyday wear, included the key features of the modern *qipao*, such as the frog clasps and the asymmetrical closure.

When looking at court robes from the Qing dynasty, it's important to note that they were not yet called *qipao*. Many of these garments were referred to as *nügua*, *jifupao* or

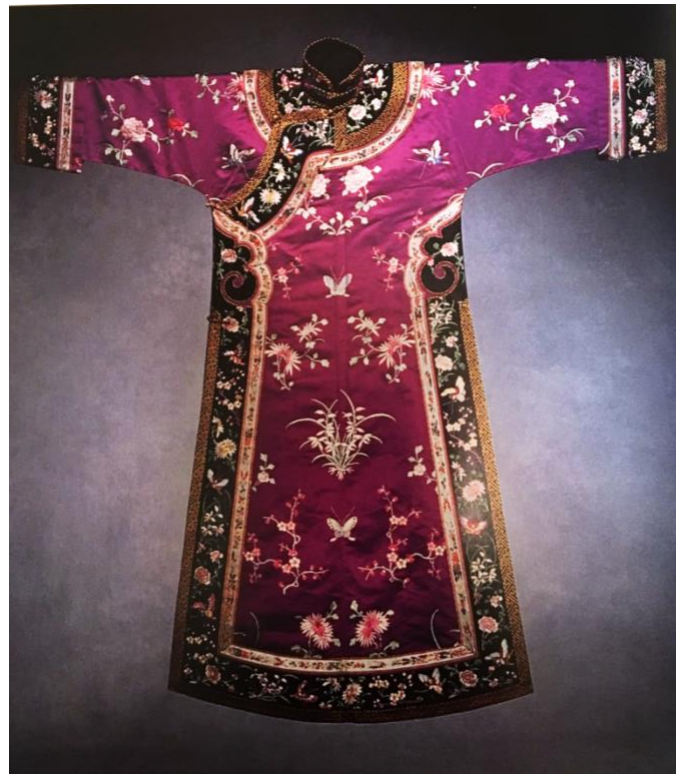


Figure 4: Manchu woman's robe, purple silk satin with silk thread embroidery. Early 1900s. From Powerhouse Museum Collection, Sydney.

<sup>5</sup> Fengying Zong, *Heavenly Splendor: The Edrina Collection of Ming and Qing Imperial Costumes*.

<sup>6</sup> Jinhua Wang, *Illustrated Lady's Dress of the Qing Dynasty*, 2013.

*changyi*.<sup>7</sup> The term *qipao* itself was not widely used until the late 1910s or early 1920s, at which point the modern garment had already diverged from its Manchu predecessor<sup>8</sup>. While this causes some confusion about which garment specifically influenced later fashion trends, several of the more common names for the traditional garment were applied after the fact and simply describe the physical garment and which gender wore it. For example, *nügua* simply means “women’s gown”. For simplicity’s sake, from now on the traditional Manchu garment will be referred to as the Manchu gown, whereas *qipao* will be used for the modern garment.

Manchu clothing in the Qing dynasty, however, did not escape cultural exchange with Han Chinese styles. First and foremost, imperial Manchu clothing adopted variations of the traditional iconography of a Chinese emperor, which were known as the Twelve symbols including the sun and moon, dragons, fire, mountains and more.<sup>9</sup> While the full combination of the twelve symbols was worn exclusively by the emperor, imperial women’s robes were also adorned with several of the traditional icons which represented the dominion of the ruling family over the Chinese populace. These symbols contained many auspicious meanings, such as health and long life for the emperor. The use of these symbols was used as a way to emphasize the legitimacy Manchu rule over the Han people.

Manchu robes also began to adopt stylistic features traditionally associated with Han clothing, which provides us with clear evidence of hybridity in fashion before the end of the Qing dynasty. For example, the high mandarin collar was adopted from Han blouse styles. Manchu women also sometimes wore skirt and blouse combinations that resembled Han

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<sup>7</sup> Zong. 19-30.

<sup>8</sup> Sally Leung, “THE LAST EMPRESS IN QIPAO: FROM MANCHU TO CHINA CHIC,” *Ornament* 35, no. 5 (2012): 59.

<sup>9</sup> *Imperial Chinese Robes: From the Forbidden City* (London: V&A Pub, 2010). 17-19.

traditional style.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Han women began to adopt the asymmetric closure on some garments, and some began to adopt the single robe style. By the end of the Qing dynasty women of both ethnicities had adopted various stylistic features from each other while still preserving the basic form of their ethnic clothing.

At the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 and through the late 1910s, women were beginning to take their first steps into the modern world, where feudal Confucian values no longer commanded every aspect of life. They began to move away from traditional female roles that bound them to the house and into positions that allowed them to move beyond their homes. As schools were slowly being opened specifically to teach young women, women began to fill



Figure 5: Men's changpao, made of simple grey/blue cotton. From Powerhouse Museum Collection, Sydney.

more roles outside the home. For example, some upper-class women like He Zhen—who wrote many texts on early feminism in China—were beginning to gain an education and enter the public sphere. To mark their entrance into higher education, some Han women began to adopt clothes similar to the traditional *changpao* or long gown that was associated with the male literati class [figure 5]. This represented the movement of women into higher education, and a defiance against gender stereotypes that defined women as meek and obedient wives that existed solely within the home.<sup>11</sup> This trend,

<sup>10</sup> Wang. 145-153.

<sup>11</sup> Finnane. *Changing Clothes in China*. 147.

however, was not picked up by a majority of Han women. Many women during this period instead adopted what would become known as the female students' style, which consisted of a blouse and skirt. The blouses were generally more closely tailored than traditional Han clothing, and skirt hems were raised from just below the ankle to mid-calf. Some women chose to wear trousers instead. Both trends ultimately represented women moving into the public sphere by means of new work and educational opportunities and provided women with various options when putting together their wardrobes.

Manchu women at this time could be seen wearing not only the traditional Manchu gown, but also more simple styled *qipao* made from fabrics with simpler designs. Gobulo Wanrong, the wife of the last emperor of China, Emperor Puyi, became well known for wearing both the traditional and symbolic Manchu imperial robes of the empress for ritual events, as well as more plain and elegant *qipao* for more everyday wear in the late 1910s.<sup>12</sup> Though she did not marry Puyi until after his abdication in 1912, she remained with him in the Forbidden City until they were chased out in 1924, where they had retained their official titles and roles as the ritual leaders of family worship and other ritual roles the emperor and empress had been in charge of for centuries. This allowed the imperial family to retain a type of lavish lifestyle similar to that of



Figure 6: Emperor Puyi and Empress Wanrong in the 1930s. Picture by Professor Wang Qingxiang, Jilin Social Science Institute

<sup>12</sup> Sally Leung, "The Last Empress in Qipao: From Manchu To China Chic," *Ornament* 35, no. 5 (2012): 61.

their ancestors. Empress Wanrong was often photographed wearing Manchu robes while in the palace, along with the traditional platform shoes and extravagant hair styles. However, her wardrobe also included simple *qipao* with a slightly closer fit than her Manchu robes, paired with western style shoes and accessories.<sup>13</sup> Empress Wanrong's choice in fashion accurately depicts the wide range of stylistic choices women were making at the time to keep up with China's modernization while still retaining some aspects of their traditional culture.

While the trend of wearing *changpao* became more popular among Han women toward the early 1920s, the first handful of women to don the male robes did so as a way to present themselves as equal to their male counterparts. This fashion movement would quickly collide with more modern Manchu styles to create what is now known as the *qipao*, which represented liberation without giving up or hiding their womanhood. These women were the early feminists in China who sought to stake their claim to the benefits of education, and as clothing styles converged to form the modern *qipao*, some women began to use the *qipao* as a political statement that was easily read by any and all who saw them on the streets. Women who wore the new *qipao* styles were publicly saying that they demanded liberation from the gender norms of the past.

### ***Modernization After the End of the Qing***

*Qipao* styles of the late 1910s and 1920s are defined by the various political and social movements that brought women into the public sphere. Through most of Chinese history, women had been bound to their homes, both figuratively and literally. When looking at early Chinese

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<sup>13</sup> Leung. 62-63.

feminism, the anti-foot binding movement is often the most well-known, as it sought to bring an end to the practice of binding women's feet throughout all of China. Foot-binding was seen as the physical means by which women were confined to their homes. However, the reality of foot binding was not a uniform experience for all women, as women in urban areas tended to abandon the practice long before some women in rural areas. And in much the same way, the reality of feminism was not uniform for all women either. The late 1910s and early 1920s was a time when social and political movements pulled in many different directions, and the *qipao* came under fire as conservative groups like the Nationalist government came into conflict with the advances of the feminist movement. The *qipao* that had changed to fit with women's desire to outwardly express their political ideologies had to change again in the face of Nationalist regulations on women's dress.

The changes in *qipao* fashion began with the trend of breast binding in the early 1910s. Often tied in with anti-foot binding rhetoric, activists for women's rights considered breast binding to be an old Chinese custom that harmed women's health, and therefore it had to be stopped. While this was the prevailing rhetoric on the issue, there is little evidence to show that breast binding was an old Chinese custom at all. This rhetoric may have grown out of a misunderstanding of historical undergarments. In her article on the 'natural curves' movement, historian Lei Jun discusses the history of women's *xiongyi* (or breast clothes) in China from the dynastic period and covers the many different styles and names for garments worn over the chest. She concludes that women's historical undergarments provided more coverage than they

did binding, and some garments worn over the torso were even unisex in nature.<sup>14</sup> Breast binding became more popular toward the end of the Qing dynasty, especially among young female students, who sought to hide their feminine figures by binding their breasts and wearing the early *qipao* that was stylistically similar to their male counterpart's *changpao* style.

Breast binding provided young women with a slim boyish figure and allowed them to show off a more androgynous body as they began to move into the public sphere, which allowed them to preserve a sense of modesty. By hiding their feminine figures, they were able to enter the

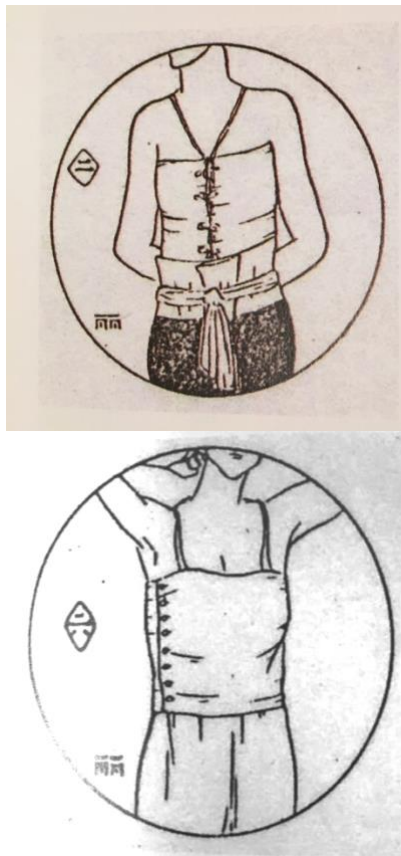


Figure 7: Two examples of breast binding garments from the 1920s. Found in *Changing Clothes in China* by Finnane.

public sphere without drawing the attention of the male gaze as sexually promiscuous women. In the late 1910s, the trend of breast binding for political reasons quickly spread around urban China, and by the 1920s women of each province sported their own versions of breast binding devices. In the north near Beijing, the *laoshi moxiong* or old-style breast cover was popular and bound the breasts tight to the chest. In the south the *xinshi moxiong* or new-style breast cover was more popular and provided a slightly looser fit.<sup>15</sup> From this trend of breast binding, we can also understand how women's outer clothing changed to fit the new style of feminine form, as *qipao* styles became tighter to conform to the boyish figures.

<sup>14</sup> Lei Jun, "'Natural' Curves: Breast-Binding and Changing Aesthetics of the Female Body in China of the Early Twentieth Century," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 27, no. 1 (2015): 171-172.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 173-174.

Following along with the trend of breast binding, by the 1920s the modern *qipao* style became a distinct garment formed from the merging of the straight silhouetted *changpao* and the looser Manchu gown. Zhang Ailing, a prominent feminist writer in China, places the advent of first modern *qipao* styles in 1921, though it's hard to distinguish the exact moment when *qipao* were widely differentiated from the *changpao* and Manchu dress.<sup>16</sup> At this time *qipao* could still retain some stylistic features of either Manchu or Han garments depending on the preferences of the woman wearing it, but by the mid 1920s the prevailing style was one that highlighted the slim boyish figure of women wearing the dress, which was tighter and more form fitting than the *changpao* and Manchu robes women had worn previously. These dresses were still loose enough that they hid curves that couldn't be hidden through binding. At this point, the *qipao* could be identified by an ankle to mid-calf length skirts, elbow length sleeves, and more breathable fabrics. These stylistic features point toward the emphasis on physical mobility both literally and figuratively, which ties back to the feminist notion of bringing women into the public sphere. And in fact, Jun argues that the general practice of breast binding also points toward women's desire to take control of their bodies as they are increasingly visible in the public eye.<sup>17</sup> Women chose to bind their breasts as a way to make their body more suitable to the public eye, which then allowed them to take advantage of education and job opportunities that would bring them directly within the gaze of a society that had functioned by hiding female bodies for centuries. During this time period, who was in control of women's bodies was the serious question. The changes in both breast binding and *qipao* styles provided women the opportunity to enter the

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<sup>16</sup> Finnane. *Changing Clothes in China*. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Jun. 186.



public sphere without drawing the criticism of conservatives who felt women should stay within their traditional gender roles at home.

By the early to mid-1920s, another movement was beginning to gain traction that completely changed the way that women would display their bodies in public, as well as how the Nationalist government would respond to women's political needs and demands. This movement began as some urban women sought to free their bodies from the constraints of their clothing as well as the constraints of traditional gender norms. These women sought to literally free their bodies from the historical bindings that had deformed women's bodies. In this movement, breast binding became closely linked with rhetoric surrounding foot binding, which linked it to the feudal and restrictive past. Feminists across China called this the 'natural curves' movement, and it sought to completely eradicate breast binding and focused on women's physical health. The movement was later supported by the Nationalist government after 1927, and women's health was encouraged for the benefit of the state—healthy women could produce healthy children—but the way women dressed and presented their healthy bodies came under attack from the Nationalist government for being too provocative.

When the 'natural curves' movement began, the women involved focused primarily on celebrating women's 'natural' curves and bringing the 'natural' female form more fully into the public eye. This would both literally free women from



Figure 8: Image of a woman showing off her healthy body by doing gymnastics, with emphasis on her legs. From Linglong 114. 1933.

hiding their figures using harmful tactics such as breast binding, as well as figuratively freeing women from the traditional expectations that drove women to hide themselves from men. In the past, women had either been in the home or so overburdened by loose layered clothing that the physical form was ultimately hidden away from sight. The focus of the natural curves movement quickly became the breasts, hips, and legs of women, and women's magazines such as *Linglong* devoted centerspreads and articles to showing off and celebrating the physical health of athletic women. In 1933, the



Figure 9: Photo montage from *Linglong* issue 114 depicting female athletes engaging in various sports.

editors of *Linglong* even published an entire issue dedicated to showing healthy and athletic women.<sup>18</sup> *Linglong* was largely influenced by the readers, and it wasn't uncommon for a reader's letter or personal article to be published in the magazine. This is important to note, because the 1933 sports issue that showed women engaged in sports [figure 9] also included images of healthy young children and mothers holding their babies, which shows that women around China supported the movement for a variety of reasons.

The emphasis on healthy and robust bodies became the forefront of the natural curves movement, and this focus was embodied in the two keywords of the movement, *ziran mei* and

<sup>18</sup> Xia, "Woguo funu bingruo de yuanyin," *Linglong* 114, (1933): 1851–56.

*jian mei* which mean ‘natural beauty’ and ‘healthy beauty.’ Under the principles of *ziran mei* and *jian mei*, Chinese women began to abandon their *xiongyi* entirely to show off the full shape of their breasts. Others began to adopt the western style brassieres, which would cover the breasts without pushing them into the chest.<sup>19</sup> Politically active women throughout urban China could decide how they wanted to express their liberation simply by how they chose to present their bodies, and *qipao* styles were changed once again, this time to show off women’s full figures. Once again, the *qipao* was used as a way to show the political stance of the women wearing them.

In the late 1920s the Nationalist government, as well as some conservative civilians supported ‘natural breasts’ and fashion that followed not out of a desire to liberate women, but out of concern for their reproductive health and creating a clear divide between genders. A popular magazine called *The Women’s Monthly* published an article that openly admonished young women who still bound their breasts, and other women’s magazines published articles encouraging women to abandon their old binders in favor of the western bra, that would support the breasts without constraining them.<sup>20</sup> Breast binding was said to be a major detriment to a woman’s ability to raise her child, as it was widely accepted that breast binding caused women to be unable to produce milk.<sup>21</sup> These groups linked what was supposed to be a form of female liberation back to the traditional gender roles that many women were trying to escape. In 1928, a citizen named Lu Yuyi wrote the following piece condemning previous trends in breast binding in favor of women returning to what it means to be feminine:

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<sup>19</sup> Finnane. *Changing Clothes in China*. 151-153

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 164-166.

<sup>21</sup> Jun. 192.

Women's clothing in recent times has been modeled on men's. To the eye they look just like males, their womanly loveliness submerged. The style is especially unsuited to their physique. The woman's robe (commonly known as the qipao) seems the same as the man's, but actually there is a difference between the two. It should not be large in style—long and wide at the waist—but cut to the shape of the body, showing the curvaceous beauty of the female and in this way displaying the woman's sex, what it is about a woman that makes her a woman.<sup>22</sup>

However, by linking the 'natural breast' movement back to breast feeding and traditional ideas of femininity, they also added a new layer of controversy to women's new-found freedom, that is, how do free breasts and open femininity reflect on the morality of the woman. If free breasts are a sign of motherhood, was it really appropriate for young unmarried women to leave their breasts unbound?

The social implication of liberating women's breasts and *qipao* styles that showed off women's full figures came under the attack of the Nationalist Government and various political leaders. As early as 1926, General Sun Chuangfang—a warlord in Hubei province—called for an outright ban of the garment.<sup>23</sup> While the dress was never banned in Republican Era China, by the mid-1930s some local government officials went so far as to strictly regulate women's dress, which shows that these government officials were aware of the political and social importance

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<sup>22</sup> Antonia Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?: A National Problem," *Modern China* 22, no. 2 (1996): 115-16.

<sup>23</sup> Chuanfang Sun, "Sun Chuanfang jinzhi nüzi chuan qipao" 孫傳芳禁止女子穿旗袍, *Liangyou huabao* 良友畫報 (March 1926), 7. As found in Ellen Johnston Laing, "Visual Evidence for the Evolution of 'Politically Correct' Dress for Women in Early Twentieth Century Shanghai," 101.

that the *qipao* held. Government regulations forced the *qipao* to once again change to fit the political climate of the time.

An example of local regulatory measures was created in Jiangxi in 1934, and they were an attack on what the government called strange and outlandish clothing (*qizhuang yifu*). This specific round of regulations included statements on women's hair, clothing, accessories, and makeup. For example, "the length of the *qipao* was not to be shorter than one Chinese inch above the ankle; the sleeves were not to be above the elbow; the slits of the *qipao* were not to be more than three inches above the knee; hair was not to be below the collar line unless it was tied in a knot; and no feet and legs were to be exposed except when engaging in manual labor."<sup>24</sup> Some cities also went so far as to comment on particular hair styles and accessories that were more closely associated with courtesans and prostitutes, marking a clear division between these types of women and the more respectable modern women.

The social and political discussion surrounding women's bodies during this time period caused many stylistic changes for the *qipao*. While there was a certain amount of freedom for women to choose their personal styles, the prominence of the *qipao* began by following the trends set by powerful women such as Soong Ching-ling, and developed into a political battle ground between



Figure 10: This is an example of the type of *qipao* that was considered to be too revealing, due to the fact that you can see the model's nipples. From *The Arts and Life* pictorial magazine 1937.

<sup>24</sup> Hsiao-Pei Yen, "Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement," *Asian Studies Review* 29, no. 2 (2005): 173.

women who wanted to freely express themselves through clothing and a Government that sought to regulate women's public appearances. The politics of women's bodies in this time period caused fluctuations in *qipao* styles that wavered between upholding modest fashion senses and providing women with free reign over the way they presented their bodies. This fluctuation was nearly brought to an end by the Nationalist Government in the mid 1930s through clothing regulations. However, this did not stop women from finding ways to express themselves through fashion or even by blatantly ignoring the poorly enforced regulations. By looking at *qipao* fashion in the media, women were able to use a variety of new styles and accessories to create their personal wardrobes.

### *Calendar Posters and Qipao Fashion*

Calendar posters were by far one of the earliest direct points of contact between companies and the consumer class. Early calendar posters differ significantly from the ones found from the 1920s through the 1940s in the fact that they depict either classical Chinese or European scenes as opposed to beautiful women in modern scenarios. Though pictorial advertisement in China has a history dating as far back as the Song Dynasty, the trend of advertisement calendar posters can in fact be traced back to the mid 1800s.<sup>2526</sup> The rise in popularity can partially be attributed to the changes in the Chinese economy, as large cities developed an economic culture focused on everyday consumers. By the 1920s, calendar posters almost exclusively featured beautiful women in the latest fashions, and in many cases, there was

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<sup>25</sup> Ellen Johnston Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

little connection between the scenes depicted and the product being advertised. Due to the trend of depicting fashionable women, the calendar posters serve as a testament to fashion around the time they were produced.

The poster maker Zheng Mantuo was popular in the 1920s, and he created a reputation of poster making that depicted women in everyday scenes, sporting modern and sometimes even scandalous outfits. One of his posters, titled “Two Girls” [Figure 11] from 1928 depicts one of his more conservative depictions of young women<sup>27</sup>. The two women are both shown wearing

loose *qipao*, with three-quarter length sleeves and modified hemlines. Both women are also sporting western style bobs, their hair angling down their faces to end in sharp points below the ears. The woman on the left wears a darker *qipao* with contrasting sleeves, and the skirt of her dress is modified to ruffle around the waist. This seam is not normally seen on *qipao* at this time, which makes this particular dress a great example of how women chose to incorporate western styles into their *qipao* using features like waistlines.

The woman on the right is wearing a more classic style of *qipao*, with no waistline, however her dress has incorporated a zig-zagging hemline in contrasting fabric colors. These two women, standing serenely in a garden or park, would have



Figure 11: Zhen Mantuo's "Two Girls" advertisement calendar. 1928.

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<sup>27</sup> Laing, 133.



provided women with an image of modern fashion, and they could take the poster to their tailors as a reference if they wanted to wear something similar.

Another of Zheng's posters, titled "Tango" [Figure 12] is another example of how posters used fashionable women as the main focus for advertisement.<sup>28</sup> This poster, created for Wuxi Maolun Silk and Satin Factory around 1927, shows two women dancing together at a jazz hall. Once again both women are dressed in loose *qipao*, however these dresses differ in the fact that they have much shorter skirts that end just below the knees. The woman on the left is dressed in a dazzling orange dress with cream colored flowers and a geometric design along the hem. The other woman is dressed in a white dress with a green floral pattern. It's interesting to note that the white and green dress includes a panel insert in the slit, which was a popular option for women who wanted a more modest style *qipao* that still allowed the free movement of the skirt slits.



Figure 12: Zheng Mantuo "Tango" 1927.

Styles of *qipao* represented in advertisement calendar posters also follow more controversial styles. Around the same time as the anti-breast binding movement, some calendar posters used fashion that highlighted women's full figures or even depicted semi-nude women. For example, Zhiying Studio produced an advertisement poster in the 1930s that showed off the breasts and curves of the woman depicted. "Woman with

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Plate 16.



Mosquito Repellent Incense Coil” shows a woman in a tight fitted modified *qipao*.<sup>29</sup> This *qipao* has an asymmetrical drop-waist with a leaf pattern around the gathered fabric [Figure 13]. The dress is pulled taught across the woman’s hips, waist, and chest to the point that one can make out the shape of the woman’s nipples under her dress. The fabric is sheer enough that one can see the outline of an undergarment, however it is clearly not the *xiongyi* that were used to bind and flatten the breasts. A slightly less controversial example of a calendar poster following the Natural Curves movement comes from Kwan Wai-nung, who designed posters for the Gande, Price & Co., Ltd in Hong Kong<sup>30</sup>. This image shows a woman in a white, grey, and black striped *qipao* made of a sheer fabric with a slip underneath [Figure 14]. While this *qipao* does not show



Figure 13: Zhiying Studio "Girl with Mosquito Repellent Incense Coil" 1930s.



Figure 13: Kwan Cho Mau, advertisement calendar poster for Grande, Price & Co., Ltd., 1934.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 217

<sup>30</sup> Hazel Clark, *The Cheongsam*, Images of Asia (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Plate 8.

off the distinct detail of the woman's breasts, she sports a clear hourglass figure free from bindings or shaped by a western style bra. The dress also has a very risqué slit that goes almost all the way up the woman's thigh in the seated position. These depictions of women who had moved past the trend of breast binding would have shown women examples of elegant styles that were available to fit fuller figures.

The large variety of calendar posters available from the 1920s through the 1940s provided women with examples of popular fashion. Though there are examples of women depicted in calendar posters wearing older fashion styles such as the traditional Han blouse and skirt combination, by the 1930s it was very common to see the women depicted in advertisements wearing *qipao* of various styles. Women who saw these posters could use them as inspiration. As the calendar poster became more popular for a wide variety of brands, some poster makers took to copying images of famous women, especially Shanghai movie stars and political women. One example of how calendar posters used influential women wearing fashionable *qipao* as their main subject comes from the Zhiying Studio advertisement for Scott's Emulsion cod liver oil. The woman on their poster is sitting on a chair, wearing a tight fitted *qipao* made of white or cream fabric and decorated with red and black flowers. The image of this woman is strikingly similar to a professional photo of Madame Wellington Koo, the First lady of the Republic of China from 1926-1927.<sup>31</sup> When one compares the photo of Madame Wellington Koo and the advertisement, the two women are seated in the same pose, their shoes are the same style, and their *qipao* are the same cut [Figure 15]. The only major differences between the two women are the fabric of their *qipao*, their hair, and the accessories they are wearing.

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<sup>31</sup> Finanne. *Changing Clothes in China*, 153.

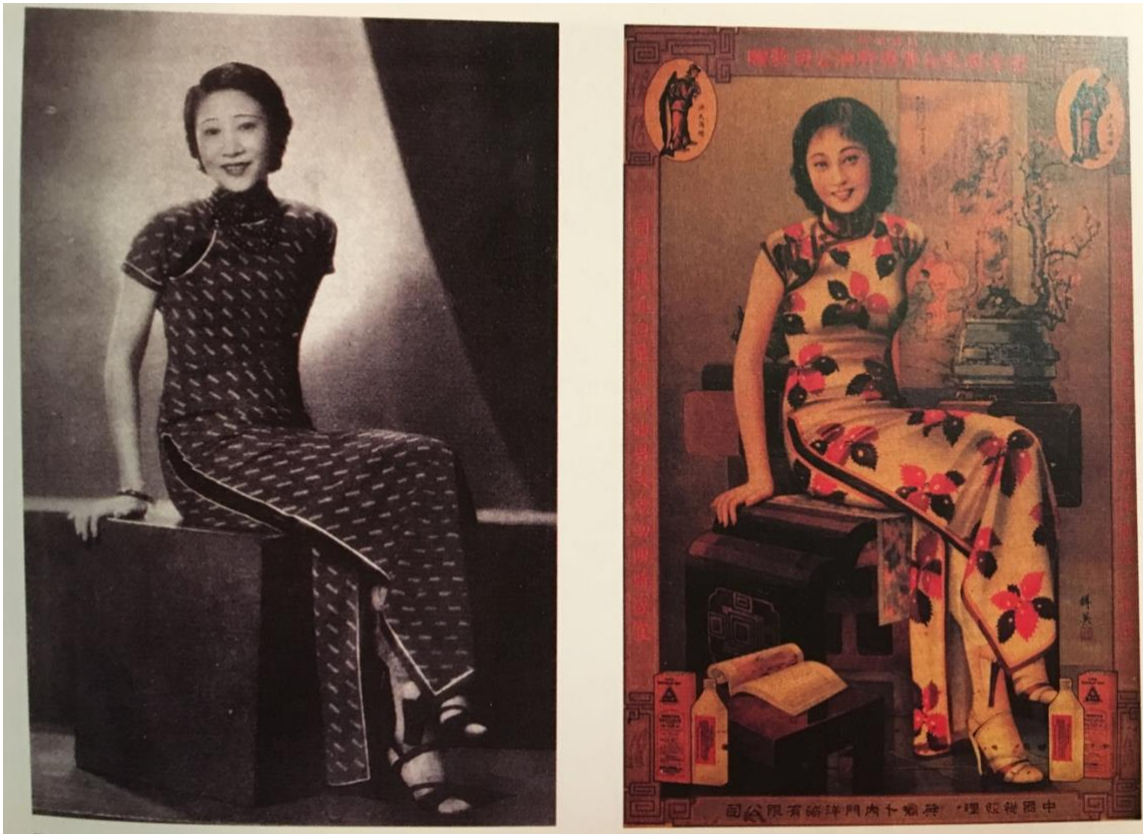


Figure 14: Side by Side comparison of Madame Wellington Koo's formal portrait and Zhiying Studio's advertisement poster.

Madame Wellington Koo is one of the most notable figures as someone copied in advertisement posters, because she takes personal responsibility for how *qipao* fashion developed in China in two of her autobiographies. In 1940 she discusses how she was “impressed by the chic of Shanghai modern young women” and even states that as she was building her Chinese wardrobe, she “accidentally made several adaptations which, because they were widely copied, set me up as a fashion leader.”<sup>32</sup> She was also a large supporter of using domestic textiles in her wardrobe, which she remarks as being “upsetting to Shanghai fashion

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<sup>32</sup> Mme. Koo Wellington, *Hui-Lan Koo an Autobiography as Told to Mary Van Rensselaer Thayer* (Dial press, 1943), 182.

plates, who thought anything foreign desirable and considered imported materials the ultimate chic.”<sup>33</sup> Madame Wellington Koo is also an important figure when discussing *qipao* on an international stage. She was often seen at diplomatic functions wearing *qipao*, such as a meeting she had in 1932, where she met representatives from the United States of America and Italy.

The use of images that reference such large names as Madame Wellington Koo further increased the influence these posters had on fashion in cities, where women had access to the latest trends, movies, and economic culture that allowed them to make their own fashion choices. As Madame Wellington Koo mentions in her autobiographies, Shanghai quickly became the center of urban fashion in China during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it wasn't only due to the influences exchanged between political women and the fashion industry.

### *Shanghai Culture and International Reception*

Even today, Shanghai is known as both the Paris of the East and the Hollywood of the East. For many years Shanghai acted as an open port under control of the British, French, and Americans, and as such Shanghai was the conduit for western culture entering China. By the 1930s, Shanghai was the center of fashion and film in China, consuming Hollywood films and western fashion trends alongside Chinese productions. It was in this hybrid culture of Shanghai that the *qipao* became the dress that we recognize today. Made out of expensive textiles with lavish decoration, and conforming to the body, the *qipao* came to represent the extravagant life

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<sup>33</sup> Hui-lan Oei Koo, *No Feast Lasts Forever* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co, 1975), 255-256.



Figure 15: Linglong Issue 131 [left] compared to a western Fashion advertisement

of the rich Shanghai elite, especially the elegant actresses and socialites of the time, while also drawing on western fashion influences as Chinese-ness became a commodity to the world.

Shanghai's multinational

urban culture begins with the end

of the Opium War in 1843. Under the treaty of Nanking, the British were allowed to build a settlement in Shanghai, and then later the French and Americans signed similar treaties, dividing the city into several concessions. Over the years Shanghai gained the features of a modern western city, with large multi-story buildings, cars, and a police force led by the British. The city became the home of powerful American, British, and French businessmen, as well as Japanese, Russian, and Jewish immigrants. By the 1930s, Shanghai had come into contact with a large variety of foreign culture, and many foreign nations had come into contact with Chinese culture as it was developing out of the Qing Dynasty.

Influences of western fashion in China can be dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Shanghai was an epicenter of adoption and hybridization with western fashion trends from early on. Women in Shanghai wore a variety of styles, however for the first decade after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, fashion trends tended to focus on Han traditional styles and western fashion. Hybridization was more prominent during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Shanghai than in other places in China, and women could be seen wearing Han blouses with tailored trousers that merged

western silhouettes with Chinese textiles.<sup>34</sup> For the first decade of the Republican Era, fashion in Shanghai was directed by women who saw and integrated foreign fashion styles as they saw fit. Several examples of foreign influence on *qipao* fashion specifically can be seen in various issues of *Linglong*. For example, Issue 131 includes an image of three women dressed in *qipao* and western style accessories.<sup>35</sup> One woman is wearing a jacket with puffed sleeves that appear in a variety of western fashion ads and patterns for the time [Figure 16]. Issue 81 has a similar image as well.

By the middle to late 1930s this began to change, and fashion trends were being set by Chinese actresses and fashion companies in Shanghai. Films serve multiple purposes when one is trying to understand the social and political history of *qipao*. As discussed above, films provide a detailed record of the contemporary social and political interpretations of *qipao* in a variety of settings. It's also important to note, though, that films from Shanghai at this time also greatly influenced how westerners viewed the *qipao* and "Chinese-ness" as a whole.

The Shanghai film culture provides insight into how the Chinese people interpreted the *qipao* in a variety of settings, and Chinese actresses wore *qipao* to express a variety of different identities held by the characters they portrayed. According to Patricia Mears, a well-known fashion historian, Chinese actresses in the 1930s were not dressed by studio costume departments.<sup>36</sup> This allowed Chinese actresses to highlight personal style, which women could then easily follow. More importantly, however, it allowed the actresses to provide the style for the character they were playing. This freedom provides insight into the Chinese perception of

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<sup>34</sup> Laing, 70-71.

<sup>35</sup> 玲瓏/*Ling long*, Issue 131 (Shanghai : Hua shang san he gong si chu ban bu, 1934), 355.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Mears editor and G. Bruce Boyer editor, *Elegance in an Age of Crisis: Fashions of the 1930s*, 2014. 132.



fashion at the time. When looking at the way that actresses dressed on and off screen, it is clear that the *qipao* had a variety of meanings depending on the circumstances of the woman wearing it.

One example of the clear social insight provided by films is seen in *Shennü* or *The Goddess*, which was produced in 1934. This silent film tells the story of a young mother who has to turn to prostitution to support herself and her young son. At one point in the film, the woman sends her son to school with the money she has saved up, but when the women in the neighborhood discover that she's a prostitute, they submit a petition to the school demanding that the main character's son be kicked out for disrupting the learning environment of his peers. The principal decides to look into the situation himself and decides to visit the main character's apartment to talk with her. The moment he walks into the apartment, the screen zooms in on one



Figure 16: Main Character of *New Women*, when she meets with Dr. Wang on her first night as a prostitute.

of the main character's *qipao* hanging on the wall.<sup>37</sup> By this point in the film it has been established that the *qipao* hanging on the wall, which has a tighter silhouette and patterned fabric, is the dress that the main character wears when she goes out at night. This scene makes very clear the association with this type of *qipao* and the prostitutes of Shanghai, and it is as if this is all the principal needs to see to know the truth of the neighborhood women's accusation.

This clear interpretation of the *qipao* can also be seen in other films from the time. In *Xin Nixing* or *New Women* (1935), the main character, Wei Ming, is the embodiment of the "new woman" described earlier.<sup>38</sup> She is an aspiring writer, who is pursued by the antagonist Dr. Wang. When her daughter returns to the city due to illness, Wei is forced to resort to prostitution to make ends meet. In the first scene, Wei is traveling home via bus and runs into several old acquaintances. Here she is depicted wearing a simple cotton *qipao* with a slit that goes up to her knee, which is slim fitting but still loose enough to provide easy motion without accentuating her figure. This kind of *qipao* would be acceptable for everyday wear. In a later scene where she goes to a dance hall with Dr. Wang, she is shown in an elegant *qipao* made of floral silk, with a high collar. This *qipao* has the same silhouette with the slit going only slightly higher, however this scene highlights the glamour of the Shanghai dance hall, where all the women are in equally extravagant clothing and the men are all in tuxedos. However, later in the movie, after Wei began her first night as a prostitute, the *qipao* that she is seen in is slightly different. This *qipao* is made from a geometric patterned fabric, with dark trim, looser sleeves, and slightly tighter silhouette that accentuates her waist and hips more. This clearly shows how the *qipao* is interpreted based on design, the way it is worn, and the woman wearing it. In this movie, it is

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<sup>37</sup> Yonggang Wu, *The Goddess*, (Lianhua Film Company, 1934).

<sup>38</sup> Chusheng Cai, *New Women* (Lianhua Film Company, 1935).



clear that simple *qipao* and soft elegant *qipao* are very different than the bold and accentuating *qipao*. Shanghai film culture not only acted as a means by which women could grapple with the various political and social interpretations of the *qipao* based on style, fabric, situation, and accessories, but films also provided women with access to a variety of new styles and the type of reception a particular *qipao* may have in any given situation.

Shanghai film culture also had a large influence on the *qipao*'s international reception as well. By the late 1930s to early 1940s, the western world had come into contact with the *qipao* in various facets. The *qipao* had been easily accepted as the traditional dress of Chinese women, and many Hollywood films, such as *Limehouse Blues* and *Shanghai Express* use the *qipao* as one of the key identifiers for Chinese women even if the actress was not of Chinese descent. Leading actresses in American films were purposefully dressed in *qipao* as a way to highlight their "Chinese-ness" as well as the racial stereotypes that equated Chinese women to dangerous and sexual temptresses. Fashion designers from around the world were taking influence from the Chinese dress, and further hybridizing the garment to include newer, high fashion elements that followed along with western fashion trends. The dresses produced in western high fashion left a lasting mark on how people in the west view *qipao* fashion.



Figure 17: Travis Banton's "Evening Dress" From the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



One example of how *qipao* styles were adopted in the west to represent “Chinese-ness” can be seen in *Limehouse Blues*, where actress Anna May Wong is depicted wearing a *qipao* inspired evening gown designed by Travis Banton in 1934 [Figure 18]. The dress is currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is labeled as follows:

While the dress may evoke the "cheongsam" [*qipao*], a form-fitting traditional Chinese dress style, its construction is along the lines of high-necked form-fitting Western gowns from the Belle-Époque period, but the dragon motif adds a distinct Asian influence, dazzling in its execution in gold and silver sequins on luxurious satin.<sup>39</sup>

This description clearly explains the way that western designers handled the *qipao* fashion in their own works. The west associated the tight silhouette, high collar, and motifs such as the dragon to be the key representations of what it means to dress like a Chinese woman.

The reception of *qipao* in the west in the 1930s and 1940s has left lasting impressions on how westerners understand what it means to be Chinese. Fashion designers in America and Europe have continuously returned to the *qipao* for inspiration, including large fashion houses like Dior, Ralph Lauren, Yves Saint Laurent, and Chanel. The fascination with Chinese styles isn't exclusive to high fashion though. If one were to go to any major tourist area in China, it would be no surprise to find a vendor selling *qipao* in a wide variety of fabrics and styles. It is also easy to find *qipao* inspired objects such as the Golden *Qipao* Barbie from 1998. The *qipao*'s influence has spread beyond the borders of China, and the *qipao* is still sparking political debate

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<sup>39</sup> Travis Banton, “Evening Dress,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

even today, which once again centers around how to define one's identity and who owns that identity.

### *Conclusion*

The continuous change of *qipao* fashion during the Republican Period in China does not just provide insight into the changing fashion scene within China at the time. It also provides historians with a helpful focus when navigating the social and political landscape of urban Chinese culture. From Manchu court apparel to Chinese high fashion, the *qipao* has adapted with the times and provided women with a versatile and practical dress to wear that could express a large range of ideological points. The many forms of the modern *qipao* that we see today is a continuation of the highly adaptable garment.

Fashion trends continued to change in China following the 1949 Communist Revolution, and by the end of the 1950s the *qipao* had fallen out of style in mainland China. Due to the association with urban consumer culture, the *qipao* became a dangerous symbol of capitalist sympathy, and it wasn't until the late 1970s early 1980s that the *qipao* would make a comeback. This does not mean that the *qipao* ceased to exist from the beginning of the communist controlled government to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The *qipao* remained a prominent representation of Chinese culture in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and fashion designers around the world continued to take influence from the *qipao*. Madam Chiang, the wife of the Chiang Kai-shek, used the *qipao* as a political statement when the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan. By wearing what had been widely accepted as the traditional dress of Chinese women, she was making a statement on the legitimacy of Taiwan as the "true China." Though the *qipao* is one of the most common examples of Chinese clothing that can be found at markets for

tourists, it seems to have lost much of the original social and political meaning that accompanied the development of the dress. Discussion surrounding the *qipao* today still relate to Chinese identity and outward expression of that identity, however there is more focus on issues such as western appropriation of Chinese culture, not the original notions of feminism and modernization.

The fashion trend that developed out of the push for more functional and practical clothing for women as they began to enter the public sphere transitioned into one of the most recognizably Chinese dresses in the world today. From Qing Dynasty court robes, to everyday clothing, and then to high fashion, the *qipao* developed quickly to keep up with the changing social and political climate of China. From the development of the *qipao* over time, we are provided with a medium for understanding how the modern woman was defined in urban China from the end of the Qing Dynasty throughout the Republican Era. As women actively participated in defining their roles in society and outwardly representing these roles, the image of the modern woman changed to fit the trends of the times. From the movement of women into the public sphere to the liberation from breast binding, the *qipao* changed and adapted to the needs and desires of the women who wore them.

Government pushback against changing fashion within China in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also provides us with a prime example of how the developing Chinese government chose to define the modern citizen in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Chinese government created a line between the proper modern woman and the promiscuous seductress or the backwards country bumpkin by creating political movements that tried to use the female body to show the development of Chinese society by banning harmful practices such as foot binding and by regulating the ways women could dress while in public. In this process one dressed became a

defining factor of a woman's identity in the developing and modernizing society of China. This dressed also became intertwined with national and cultural identity as well. Not only were women wearing *qipao* to be more modern, they were also wearing *qipao* to show their personal political identity along with their Chinese identity. As the *qipao* became more and more popular, both the Chinese people and foreigners began to interpret the *qipao* as a quintessential expression of Chinese cultural identity, one that has created debated both domestically and abroad on how people define Chinese culture through fashion.

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