Dress as Symbolic Resistance in Asia (Editorial)
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Editorial

Mina Roces

During the past decades, Asian Studies scholars have made outstanding contributions on the topic of how political elites have promoted changes in clothing in their projects of modernising their citizens or creating new nationalist identities (such as by inventing national dress).[1] But the visual power of the politics of appearances allows also marginal and oppressed groups to send powerful messages. This special issue proposes to shift the analytical lens from the way sartorial changes have come from above – i.e., from political elites in power – to examining instead how resistance movements, including women's movements, social movements, minorities and marginalised groups, utilise the semiotics of dress to advance their agendas from below. Thus, this issue underscores the importance of dress, bodily deportment, fashion and etiquette, analysing how these have been intrinsic to the performance of social, political, cultural, religious and gendered identities, and in challenging the status quo. The focus here is on how dress and fashion are marshalled for the performance of collective action, socio-political dissent, alternative politics and identity politics. In addition, we also give special attention to gender, because dress is one important way of performing gender. We examine how especially women's movements and women consumers have capitalised on the potential of fashion and accessories to challenge not just the political status quo, but also the hegemonic cultural constructions of the feminine. The political and social contexts for the advocacy that our case studies discuss range from democracies to strict authoritarian regimes.

Our contributors reflect on the following research questions: How has dress been used by those in activist movements, marginal groups and citizens living in authoritarian regimes to fashion new gender/ethnic identities and/or to advance political agendas? How have dress, bodily adornment, fashion and etiquette been intrinsic to the performance of social, political, cultural, religious and/or gendered identities, and in challenging the status quo or participating in "contentious

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politics" (Tarrow / Tilly 2009)? And finally, how might the semiotic power of dress to communicate symbolic resistance serve as a strategy for empowerment?

The words "dress" and "fashion" are used interchangeably (see the explanation in our interview with Valerie Steele in this special issue) although usually "dress" is the preferred vocabulary to mean "clothing, accessories and bodily practices", whereas "fashion" is the term used to refer to the clothing styles that change with the seasons. Our time period is the contemporary era from the late 20th century to 2019. We have deliberately chosen to focus on the more contemporary era, because while the late-19th century and early 20th century can boast of some outstanding work on the politics of dress, the contemporary period from the late 20th century to the present is only beginning to attract attention from Asian Studies specialists. We hope that this special issue will inspire more scholars to help fill in the gaps in the body of work on the topic.

Dress and Fashion Studies in the Asian context

Although anthropologists and museum curators have long been studying dress and material culture, the field of Dress Studies that mushroomed in the last 25 years examines the topic by focusing on the connections between dress and identity – whether gender identity, religious identity, political/ethnic identity or national identity.[2] In addition, since the research has been strong on intersectionality, the use of dress, deportment and consumption to demonstrate class and status identities has also been explored in the oeuvre.[3] Scholars in dress studies have placed their analysis in cultural, political and historical contexts. The nature of the sources – especially visual photographs and paintings, many of them commissioned and approved by the subjects – means that the study of the semiotics of the many meanings of dress favours the analysis of individual subjects' self-representation or the group's official collective identities. The scholarship is important in demonstrating the ways that dress has been used to communicate specific messages, including fashioning the identities of both individuals and groups.

Now, how have Asian specialists contributed to debates in the field? For one thing, Asian specialists have ensured that the field has moved beyond its Eurocentric origins. Asian specialists have alerted us to the unique meaning of cloth in contexts such as India (Bayly 1986) and the new textiles produced in the region, such as pineapple fibre cloth (Roces 2013). Historians have analysed

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1   See for example Bean 1989, Tarlo 1996, Nordholt 1997, Steele / Major 1999, Edwards 2001, Chakrabarty 2002, Peleggi 2002, Niessen et al. 2003, Trivedi 2003, Finnane 2007, Roces / Edwards 2007, Pyun / Wong 2018.
2   Cf. Taylor 2002 on the study of dress history pioneered this field.
3   Cf. Parkins 2002, McNeil / Karaminas 2009, Lynch / Medvedev 2018.

the changes in dress over time (Nordholt 1997, Steele / Major 1999, Finnane 2007, Roces / Edwards 2007, Pyun / Wong 2018, Coo 2019). The colonial period has also provided many rich examples of the way colonial conflict was expressed through disputes over dress practices. In British Burma and British India, conflict arose over shoes, with the British refusing to remove their footwear when visiting the Burmese King or Buddhist temples, and Indians forced to remove their shoes when appearing in juridical courts (Edwards 2007). Scholars also document the ways in which Asian colonial subjects adopted European clothing to receive better treatment and to abolish the stylised formal etiquette required of them by their native aristocracy (Van der Meer 2020). When the Ethical Policy of the Dutch East Indies eased sumptuary laws that required everyone to dress according to their official ethnic attire, from 1913 onwards, Javanese men increasingly wore Dutch dress. The adoption of European dress went beyond the mere physical alteration as it bestowed more confidence on the wearer. As Sukarno aptly put it: "The minute an Indonesian dons trousers he walks erect like any white man" (ibid.: 143).

Since in the age of empire modernisation was equated with Westernisation, the rich context of the Asian region produced case studies of how political elites introduced sartorial transformations to suit their national or anti-colonial policies. Asian political elites adopted Western dress to prove their nations were modern. Both the Meiji Emperor and the Thai King Chulalongkorn advocated the use of Western dress as part of a strategy for sending the message that their nations were "civilised" and should be treated as equals by Western powers (Peleggi 2002, Molony 2007, Malitz 2017, Oksakabe 2018). In the nationalist era, the invention of national dress was accompanied by a rejection of Western dress and Western civilisation for some Asian countries. India and China are the supreme examples to illustrate this. Mohandas K. Gandhi proposed *khadi* (homespun cloth) as the solution to India's poverty, and rejecting foreign goods became fundamental in the struggle for home rule. The expression of Indian nationalist agendas was visibly expressed through the rejection of Western dress (Bean 1989, Tarlo 1996: 80–81). Similarly, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976) launched a "sartorial revolution" (Steele / Major 1999: 55) where Western fashion was targeted as "foreign", "feudal", fatally "bourgeois" (Steele / Major 1999: 59–61), "shameful" and "sinful" (Wu 2009: 2).

The scholarship on Asian fashion has largely focused on Japanese, Chinese, Indian and Indonesian fashion, though Korea and Vietnam also have smaller studies.[4] Japanese designers such as Kenzo, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, the founder of the fashion label Comme des Garçons, did not simply demonstrate an equal status to the top fashion designers in the world – their work revolutionised Western fashion. Japanese street fashion brought

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4   See Niessen et al. 2003, Slade 2009, Wu 2009, Moden 2015, Sandhu 2015, Lee et al. 2019, Lopez 2020.

in a new type of highly gendered "cute fashion" that expressed the contemporary Japanese "cult of cuteness" (*kawaii*; Tidwell 2006: 398, Steele 2010: 48). Such self-representations contrasted with the idealised reductionist images of Western women in fashionable clothes as "sexy" or authoritative.

The globalisation of fashion, which included the rise of luxury brand names that reached its zenith in the 1980s, influenced the dress histories of this wide region. From about the 1970s onwards, I argue that Asian nations used couture to claim that they were "Third World No More", to borrow from Brent Luvaas, and therefore deserved to move up in the global hierarchy of nations (Luvaas 2013: 203–227). Western fashion, especially couture, became the symbol of modernity and luxury and thus the ultimate marker demonstrating a nation's wealthy status and cosmopolitan identity. From the mid-1980s Western fashion, particularly haute couture, was intrinsic to the image of the new socialist China (Wu 2009: 65). In India, the government effectively welcomed consumer capitalism in the 1990s and the result was "a flood of brand-label clothing, accessories and beauty products and services", eventually including high-end brands such as Christian Dior, Hermes and Salvatore Ferragamo (Wilkinson-Weber 2013: 49).

Arguably the biggest challenge to Western global fashion is Islamic fashion. The rise of Islamic fashion in the wake of the Islamic revivalist movement of the 1970s had an impact in Asian countries with Muslim majorities, most especially in Indonesia, the world's largest Islamic country, as well as in Malaysia and Brunei. Given the increasing Islamisation of Southeast Asia (especially Indonesia and Malaysia) and the rising popularity of Islamic dress, particularly the veil for women, the topic has inspired scholars in this field to produce insightful cutting-edge work, thus setting the scene for the project of de-centring Western fashion.

Elizabeth Bucar has coined the term "pious fashion" to describe the clothing choices of many Muslim women who wish to dress modestly, expressing their Islamic identities and piety, but at the same time want to publicly express their good taste: "pious fashion is extremely popular now; it is considered to demonstrate cosmopolitanism, sophistication, Muslim femininity and good taste" (Bucar 2017: 81). Pious fashion is gendered feminine because "men's clothing does not have to be 'pious' in the same way" (Bucar 2017: 22). In the gendering of fashion and nation in Indonesia, "men's clothing is the marker of the nation's power and modernity; women's clothing is the marker of its morality, honor, and ethnic identity" (Bucar 2017: 22).

Dress and gender

Dress is one way to perform gender, and women's dress is usually visually the "Other" of men's dress. Feminist scholars have given us insightful analyses of the specific ways that dress expresses cultural constructions of gender. For example, foot-binding in China in the Qing dynasty spoke volumes about the way elite women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere (Edwards 2007, Ko 2005, Finnane 2007).

Historians of the colonial period in Southeast Asia have revealed how men who embraced Western dress as part of the nationalist project sent the message that they were modern and equal to the Western coloniser[5] – yet for women, Western dress raised anxieties about the "modern girl", so that the ideal woman continued to be represented as the bearer and wearer of tradition, attired in national or ethnic dress (Ikeya 2011; Roces 2003, 2007; Taylor 2007). Hence, the invention of national dress in Asia had gendered implications. Male political elites donned the Western garb of power and progress, leaving women in traditional garments – reflecting their position in the nation-state where until the 1930s they remained disenfranchised.

Political regimes that launched policies that claimed to promote gender equality also endorsed a policy of de-gendering dress. In Communist China until the end of the Cultural Revolution, both men and women wore simple peasant clothing with few distinguishing features, and during the Cultural Revolution, both genders wore military uniforms (Finnane 2007). During the Vietnam War and until the 1989 Renovation Era, men and women wore similar black or plain pyjamas, and representations of both sexes showed very few differences in dress (Lowe 1994, Ungar 1994). Given that women's dress was the "Other" of men's dress, and in light of the close links between dress and gender ideals, feminist movements also challenged constructions of the feminine through revolutionary dress. For example, the suffragists in China were part of the anti-footbinding movement, which became a symbol for women's liberation (Edwards 2007).

In this special issue, Barbara Molony analyses the way feminist movements in Japan used the accoutrements of dress in the theatre of protest – tapping on a wooden spoon as a metaphor for housewives-as-consumers and wearing a pink helmet when advocating for reproductive rights. Mary Austin analyses the way the domestic workers' movement in Indonesia, led by prominent Indonesian feminists (given that most domestic workers are women), used the everyday working accessories of the apron and the *serbet* (bandana) as costume in street demonstrations that advocated for their visibility as workers in the private domain and their rights as working women.

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5   See Peleggi 2002 and 2007, Molony 2007, Taylor 2007, Van der Meer 2020.

Dress as symbolic resistance in Asia

A major challenge faced by activists and the marginalised is to make themselves visible, to call attention to their advocacy, or to challenge and resist the status quo. Often in authoritarian regimes or in places where spaces for resistance are severely limited, dress becomes even more important, in what Mary Austin has termed "the politics of presence" (Austin this issue, and Austin forthcoming). Juanjuan Wu's contribution for this special issue is an excellent example of how the ordinary T-shirt communicated messages that went against the official ideology of the Chinese Communist party in the 1990s. Although some of the messages were humorous, such as "I couldn't even be seduced by a woman sitting on my lap", or "I am ugly but I am gentle", others were more explicit, such as "Getting rich is all there is" or "Leave me alone, I am fed up" – which could be interpreted as dissatisfaction with the status quo (see Wu this issue). However subtle the messages might appear to be, it was not lost on the authoritarian state, which responded by banning this fashion style. This example shows how dress can be used to elude political censorship, since fashion was generally not subject to political surveillance.

The final two articles in the special issue analyse the way women use fashion as a strategy for symbolic resistance and empowerment. Kyungja Kim and Bronwen Dalton propose the theory that women in North Korea use Western fashion and couture to challenge the socialist regime's feminine ideal. Everyday working fashion is deployed by professional middle-class women to demonstrate their own desire to embrace Western couture and project a cosmopolitan identity. Finally, the last contribution, by myself, analyses the way in which Filipino domestic workers in Singapore use fashionable dress on their day off to resist their employer's attempts to make them dowdy and unfeminine. The "Sunday Cinderella" transformations, which include beauty contests, challenge the house rules enforced by Singaporean employers that forbid their domestic workers to wear make-up, jewellery or nail polish, and require them to dress in modest simple clothing. Although these transformations are only for one day a week, photographs of the beauty contests and Facebook pages document the women's transformation from *provincianas* ("provincials", since many of them hail from the rural provinces in the Philippines) to fashionistas – modern, cosmopolitan women working in a First World country.

What all these articles clearly show is that dress is used as costume for the politics of presence – as "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) – and to render the wearers and their demands visible. Resistance voiced through dress and fashion may appear subtle, and the experiences of empowerment may also be ephemeral, but the activists have learned how to express their agency through sartorial change. They use dress and fashion for dramatic effect – as part of the costume in the theatre of protest and/or to challenge cultural constructions of gender.

Future research

Dress Studies is a relatively young field in general, and in Asian Studies in particular, so there is much room for more scholarship in all aspects of dress and identity – whether politics, religion, gender, class or ethnicity. In dress and gender studies, there is still a gap on the topic of non-heteronormative dress. But given the blossoming of gender and sexuality studies in recent years, one can assume that this gap will soon be filled. Since the Asian region boasts a plurality and diversity of sexualities and gender categories, especially in comparison with the Atlantic world (with one Indonesian language having terms for five genders, for example), there are fantastic possibilities for making original contributions to the topic of dress, gender and sexuality.

James C. Scott's theoretical book *The Art of Not Being Governed* discusses the way that groups living in the borderlands of the mainland Southeast Asian highlands (which he called "Zomia") who wanted to escape the strong arm of the state changed dress practices as part of the project of changing their identities as they moved across borders (Scott 2009). The way groups altered their appearances in the project of changing ethnic identities is also another potential angle that suits the interests of Asian Studies specialists, particularly those in border studies.

The role of the uniform in defining collective identities has been analysed in the context of the military uniform and the school uniform (Abler 1999, Parkins 2002, Craik 2005, Tynan / Godson 2019). In Asian Studies, while there is work on the introduction of Western military uniforms in Japan and Korea (Li 2010, Lee 2018, Nomura 2018) and the meaning of girls' school uniforms in contemporary Japan (McVeigh 2000, Kinsella 2002, Namba 2018), this topic is still largely neglected.

Here I am only touching on a few areas where there are glaring gaps in the field. For my final words, I want to suggest a way that Asian specialists can also contribute to the theoretical literature on dress, because I believe the Asian region to be a particular rich site for suggesting possible approaches for de-centring Western fashion or "provincializing Europe", to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty 2000). It is always assumed that the West, particularly Europe, is the centre of fashion, as it is home to three of the five capital cities of fashion. But Europe is not the only inspiration or the only model of fashion for some populations in Asia. Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia look towards the Middle East as the centre of Islamic fashion, for example. Japan and Korea, as the centre of youth popular culture (J-Pop, K-Pop, anime, manga, television serials) are new trend-setters for the younger generation: J-Pop and K-Pop idols have now become celebrity role models for youth in China, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as in some parts of the West. By 2000, Vietnam had the largest market per capita for cosmetics, especially skin care, with Korean brands dominating the market (Tu 2019). The women who bought

these skin care products aim to be "white like Koreans", not white like Europeans: with South Korea's rise in economic power, it has become the epitome of modernity for Vietnamese (Tu 2019). In other words, the West is no longer the only barometer signifying modernity. The Asian context therefore has tremendous potential for scholars to analyse and interpret the histories of dress and the modernities that challenge the hegemony of Western-inspired global fashion.

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