Fashioning Modernity and Qipao in Republican Shanghai (1910s-1930s)

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This thesis titled
Fashioning Modernity and *Qipao* in Republican Shanghai (1910s-1930s)

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ABSTRACT

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In 1912, the founding of the Republic of China (1912-1949) signaled the end of the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty (1644-1912) and the Chinese imperial system. During the Republic era, the semi-colonial city Shanghai represented the complexity of Chinese modernity, which was about the tension between traditional Chinese and modern Western cultures. In urban Shanghai, the changing clothing demonstrated the changing society in the new state as well as individuals’ experience with modernity in the new era. Emerging from the 1920s, the one-piece *qipao*旗袍 became the exemplary dress for modern women in the 1930s. The characteristics of *qipao* include a high neck, a fitted waistline, and side slits. The significance of *qipao* lies in the combination between Chinese and Western styles. The current thesis focuses on the different, and even contradictory, meanings of *qipao* in the form of myths between the 1920s and 1930s. By interpreting the myths about *qipao*, I will examine how fashion and modernity were linked.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Changing Women’s Clothes between the 1910s and 1930s--the Precedents of Qipao</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing and Dress before the 1930s—the Ao Garment and the Civilized Dress</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qipao and the Manchu Gown</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Qipao: Relationship with Males’ Clothes</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About Western Influence</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About Reform</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About Military Culture</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Qipao and Mass Media</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Manifestations and Identities of Women in Qipao</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Icon: Women’s Images in Qipao</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Modern” Lifestyle</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles of Qipao: Representation of Women and Representation of Nation</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Different Interpretations of Qipao</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Bound Feet to High Heels</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradictions on Women’s Dress</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict between New Woman and Modern Girl</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Body, Fitness, Sexuality, and Morality</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The Afterlife of Qipao</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qipao in the Era of Mao Zedong (1949-1976)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qipao in the Post-Mao Era (1976-1989)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Conclusion</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Old and New Ao Garment, <em>Minlibao</em>, 1912</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Old-style Ao Garment, n.d.</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Illustration from the <em>Dianshizhai Pictorial</em>, 1884.</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Cut-fitting Ao Garment, <em>Minlibao</em>, 1912</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The New Civilized Dress, <em>Liangyou</em>, 1926</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Photograph of the Last Empress Wanrong in Her Manchu Robe, Photographer Unknown, n.d.</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Photograph of Sun Yat-sen and Song Qingling, Photographer Unknown, 1917</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>“Intoxicated Shanghai,” <em>Liangyou</em>, 1934</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Work of Ye Qianyu as a Fashion Designer, <em>Linglong</em>, 1933</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Shanghai Street Culture, <em>Liangyou</em>, 1935</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>“Two Girls,” Calendar Poster, 1937</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Untitled, Calendar Poster, 1931</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>“Beauty” Brand Cigarette Advertisement, <em>Shanghai shenghuo</em>, 1939</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Advertisement for Domestic Made Threads, <em>Shanghai shenghuo</em>, 1939</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Indanthrene Color Cloth, Calendar Poster, mid-1930s</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Bound Feet and High Heels, <em>Liangyou</em>, 1929</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Fashion Cycle, <em>Linglong</em>, 1935</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 19: The Length of *Qipao*, *Liangyou* magazine, 1940 82

Figure 20: Untitled, Calendar Poster, late 1930s 84

Figure 21: Illustration by Feng Zikai, n.d 85

Figure 22: Untitled, Calendar Poster, 1934 86
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

From the late years of Qing dynasty (1644-1912) to the Republican era (1912-1949), the changing women’s clothing, as a symbol of evolving modernity, was visible in Shanghai, the most modernized port. The Revolution of 1911, also called the Xinhai 辛亥 Revolution, overturned the Qing dynasty, the last imperial system in Chinese history. On January 1, 1912, editors of the Shenbao 申报 (Shanghai Daily, 1872-1949), an influential modern Chinese newspaper, expressed New Year wishes for the new Republic that marked a sense of rebirth for the new national state: “We four million fellow Chinese all are new born babies fresh out of our mother’s womb. From now on, we are new citizens. It is our responsibility to embrace new morality, new scholarship, new clothing.”1

Indeed, creating a new national state in such a historical country brought confusions and uncertainties. The once-stable dress codes were collapsed; however, the new dress codes remained to be established. In Shanghai, things foreign were now turning to Chinese. The material changes were restructuring people’s daily life and their concepts of life. The traditional norms and values were challenged in the modern era. Among the new atmosphere, there was an uncertainty about what to wear, which shows the tension between modernization and nationalism. For different reasons, some tended to imitate the Western styles for modern experience, and the others kept wearing the traditional styles for patriotism or for their own comfort. Meanwhile, hybrid styles that

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featured a combination of Western and Chinese tastes were created and became very popular among another set of people.

From the 1910s to the 1930s, women’s clothing specifically underwent significant and constant changes, especially in Shanghai, the exemplary modernized city during that time. In general, the changes in women’s clothing corresponded to three important periods in the history of the Republic: the early Republican era (in the 1910s), the May Fourth era, (during the 1920s, the May Fourth movement of 1919 was one of the most influential movements for literary and cultural reform) and the Nanjing decade (from 1927-1937) held by the Nationalist Party. In the 1910s, women wore the cut-fitting ao 袄 garment (a full jacket, a pleated skirt, and trousers) with a high collar. In the early and middle 1920s, women were characterized by the so-called New Civilized Dress (the new-style ao garment). In the 1930s, women preferred to wear qipao 旗袍 (a single-piece dress).

The one-piece dress qipao emerged in the 1920s and became popular in the 1930s. The characteristics of qipao include “a high neck,” “a slim waistline,” and side slits. As the peak of women’s fashion in the 1930s, qipao played a role in the social and cultural construction of the Republic. As a symbol of modern material life, qipao concerned modern women’s look and subjectivity; like other forms of fashion, it dealt with social differentiation and integration. I will discuss how modernity and qipao were linked with each other in the Republic of China (1912-1949). The current thesis focuses

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on the myths surrounding qipao. I will apply the following argument to explain the emergence of myths: “Rather than recreate ancient structures, these [modern] myths aimed to transform the chaos of the past and the undecidability of the future into a legible (or visible) present.” The era of modernity made a distinction between past, present, and future. The shift from the past to the promising future made the present become meaningful. According to Wendy Doniger, one defining quality of a myth is that “it is capable of being interpreted from any number of different points of view.” I will explore how the myths about qipao constructed and reflected modernity in Republican Shanghai between the 1920s and 1930s.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the changes in women’s clothing between the 1910s and the 1920s, which were well observed in Shanghai. During the National Product Movement, between the 1910s and 1930s, Chinese merchants promoted China-made products for economic nationalism, which was also supported by the government. In terms of clothing, Chinese fabrics and Chinese styles were promoted against the dissemination of Western fashion. With the formation of the Republic, the government used symbols like clothing as a way to show the identity of its citizens and to represent the whole country. In 1929, qipao was accepted as women’s formal dress in the clothing law released by the government. In the late 1920s, the trend of qipao resisted becoming entirely Westernized. Under the influence of Western fashion, its hybrid style showed how Chinese elements could be positively incorporated into the design of qipao.

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Chapter 3, I will mention how *qipao* became an integral symbol of modern life in urban Shanghai in the 1930s. With the rise of mass media, the advertisers dealt with the relationship between the product, the people, and the nation. Through the mass media, the representation of *qipao* became mythicized, which may refer to Western modernity as well as national modernity. In Chapter 4, I will examine the different interpretations of *qipao* in the form of myths between the 1920s and 1930s. As one of the anti-imperialist movements, the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s led to a debate on the identities of Chinese people. During the 1920s and 1930s, the debate on women’s dress demonstrated the interaction between feminine modernity and national modernity. In Chapter 5, I will pay attention to the fate of *qipao* after the Republic of China, which, as a clue, may help connect the late Qing period, the Republic era, and the People’s Republic of China (1949-present). In Chapter 6, I will offer concluding thoughts on how *qipao*, linked with modernity, played an integral role in the Republic era.
CHAPTER 2: CHANGING WOMEN’S CLOTHES BETWEEN THE 1910S
AND 1930S--THE PRECEDENTS OF QIPAO

The national building was linked with the building of women’s images. Since the late Qing dynasty, women had become the concern of society, as women’s liberation signified social change as well as modernization. Likewise, the changes in women’s fashion had already started during the same period. In the late Qing period, women began to wear novel clothes on the street. In the early years of the Republic, fashionable women appeared in the press and magazines. In the 1920s and 1930s, fashion became a feature of women’s daily life.

Clothing and Dress before the 1930s—the Ao Garment and the Civilized Dress

The Qing Empire had strict rules on clothing emphasizing distinct social status as well as gender identity. In the late Qing period, one of the leaders of the Hundred Day’s Reform (June 11 to September 21, 1898), Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927) petitioned the Guangxu 光绪 emperor (1871-1908) suggesting that changing clothing as well as changing industries and government systems would help to bring national salvation and modernization to China:

Today’s is a mechanized world. With many machines, there is strength; with few machines, there is weakness...But to be bound by the thousands of years of the Chinese large-sleeved and broad-sashed Confucian scholar’s robe, and with a long robe and elegant gait to enter the world of competition with the ten thousand nations, this would be like wearing tinkling jade pendants to go put out a fire, and truly is not appropriate.6

6 Wang Ermin, “Duanfa yifu gaiyuan: bianfu lun zhi xiangzheng zhi qu,” [Renewal through queue-cutting and change of dress—the emblematic objective of the political reform debate] in Zhongguo jindai de weixin yundong—bianfu yu lixian taolun hui [Modern Chinese reformation movements—a discussion of political reform and constitutionalism] (Taipei: Academic Sinica, 1982), 61, translated and quoted in
However, at this time, the changes of clothes were no longer enforced by the
government to the people. The *Qing Historical Anecdotes Arranged by Categories*
(Qingbai leichao 清稗类钞) offered a glimpse of courtesan fashion in Shanghai at the
beginning of the twentieth century, which could be viewed as evidence for what once was
considered to be “bizarre clothes:”

During the transition from the Guangxu to the Xuantong reigns [early 1900s],
their [the courtesans’] clothes became ever more strange and exotic, with a
countless variety of styles. The jacket is now so short as to reach only to the waist,
and their bodies are tightly wrapped like firewood, with sleeves reaching only to
the elbows. With their fanciful and original clothing, the courtesans set out to lead
in fashion in order to entice and please their potential customers. Driven by these
fashions, women from respectable families without exception all imitate the
courtesans as they earlier imitated the women living in the [emperor’s] inner
quarters. The Shanghai courtesans also began the fashion of wearing the Western
hunter’s hat and the Western overcoat, all of which belong to the clothes worn by
Western men. [Wearing these men’s outfits, the courtesans] would move about on
foot. Among the throngs of people on the street, one can hardly tell that they are
women.7

These cut-fitting clothes were the early version of the modified *ao* garment
(jacket-blouse and skirt), which was popular in the early years of the Republic. First worn
by the Shanghai courtesans, they were later accepted by other women in and outside
Shanghai (Fig.1). In the late nineteenth century, the *ao* garment referred to a Han
woman’s clothing, which was concerned with a full jacket (*ao*) and trousers (*ku*) under a
pleated skirt (*qun*). Like the trouser itself, the jacket was long and loose with its wide

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sleeves. In the eyes of later generations, this bulky garment seemed to encase the whole body (Fig.2, Fig.3).

The emergence of the new-style clothes simultaneously inflected and presented challenges to the old customs. On the one side, the trend of courtesan fashion was greatly developed because of social changes. On the other side, the innovative clothing style also brought about changes. In the Shanghai International Settlement, courtesans did not need to follow the strict clothing regulations of Qing dynasty, and they gained “freedom of movement in the public realm.” Based on the modern and revolutionary atmosphere, the courtesan’s pursuits for being novel and fashionable were echoed by both males and females. The cut-fitting ao garment changed its wearers’ movement and gestures. A sense of energy and vitality was infused into their new clothes and bodies. The jacket now became well-fitting with a narrow waist, and the skirt became shorter. At the same time, the trouser became more tightly fitted around the hip with the newly slim legs. This courtesan-led fashion instantly aroused attention from the press, where the fashion of “honest” women was thought to be vulnerable to moral corruption (Fig.4). At this juncture, it became difficult to identify either an “honest” or “dishonest” woman through the clothes they wore. This shows that the fashion had already changed and changed rapidly rather than slowly in the late Qing era.

While the changes of clothes did not merely happen as a Republican development, a repository of fashion elements, based on the new combinations (color,  

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, 60
cut, fabric, and decorations) developed quickly after the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. The diversification of clothes on the street of Shanghai was witnessed as follows: “petty urbanites in Shanghai wore silk gowns, fur coats and caps; clerks in the big cities often had foreign suits; and women abandoned traditional coats and trousers for long gowns or a mixture of garments in old and new styles.”\textsuperscript{12} In 1913, when males’ Western suits were worn improperly, lacking collar or necktie, Shanghai women had already been wearing the latest fashion, characterized with the high collar reaching the ears, and decorated with a ribboned foreign cap on top and a pair of westernized leather shoes on the feet.\textsuperscript{13}

The close-fitting clothes gradually replaced women’s original \textit{ao} garment, probably because its predecessors became inappropriate in the new context of the Republic, which marked a turning point in the “consciousness of time and history.”\textsuperscript{14} In this unprecedented moment, present and past were divided into two contrasting campaigns, and this new age was given with great expectations “as the pivotal point marking a rupture with the past and forming a progressive continuum toward a glorious future,”\textsuperscript{15} since the beginning of the Republic was traced to the origin of new business, career, and engagement.\textsuperscript{16} The burgeoning new fashions matched rightly with the theme of effecting “New Man” and “New Woman” into the Republic. However, if adopting the new clothes could symbolize the identity of the new Republic, then it doubts whether the political and cultural innovations of the Republic between nationality and ethnicity were

\textsuperscript{13} Dorothy Fox, \textit{My Nightmare Journey} (London: Bedlow, 1927), 13, quoted in Frank Dikötter, \textit{Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China}, 197.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
as “fleeting” and “superficial” as the nature of fashion.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, the uncertainty about what to wear could have been observed since the early years of the Republic, as a frequently cited report in the \textit{Shenbao} (Shanghai Daily) in 1912 illustrated: “Chinese are wearing foreign clothes, while foreigners wear Chinese clothes, men are adorned like women and women like men, prostitutes imitate girl students, and girl students look like prostitutes.”\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed, the new atmosphere of the society began early in the Revolution period before the Republic. After the Wuchang 武昌 Uprising (in October 10, 1911), within ten days, the contents of the advertisements in the \textit{Shenbao} (Shanghai Daily) changed greatly from the foreign daily necessities like electric lights to the Western-style clothing.\textsuperscript{19} These advertisements were originally directed to the foreign customers who lived in China, but now they welcomed Chinese customers in this transitional period. It was during this period, at the end of 1911, that the National Products Preservation Association (NPPA) was set up in order to maintain the benefits of the domestic merchants and the clothing industry in response to political and social changes. Although the main goal of the National Products movement was to persuade the compatriots to buy locally made clothing and fabrics, it played an important role in helping save the traditional Chinese style as well. For example, in one petition to the new government, the Chinese merchants


tried to sever the link between the long gown and the Manchu dynasty. In 1912, their efforts made a difference in the clothing law released by the new Republic government: even if the Western suit was chosen as males’ formal dress, the long gown remained as their informal dress. In the second Republic (1929-1949), held by the Nationalist Party as the continuity of the first Republic (1912-1915), the clothing law in 1929 changed its attitude: the long gown became the formal dress for male citizens, and the Zhongshan suit was required for the officials. In the case of women’s clothes, the women were supposed to wear the ao garment and later the trendy qipao. (Although other synthetic fabrics were newly introduced, the silk was still the main fabric of the qipao)

Under the threat of the Western and Japanese imperialist powers, the anti-imperialism movement in the 1920s was highly supported by the Nationalist government by means of promoting China-made goods. In 1928, before enacting the new clothing law, the government accepted the request from the silk industry in advocating the traditional styles such as long gown rather than the less popular Western styles. In order to support the silk industry, Western suits should not be advocated because they were made of imported wool, and even the Zhongshan suit, named after Sun Yan-sen 孙中山 (1866-1925), who was considered to be the founding father of the Republic, was implicated for the same reason. Thus, for the government leaders, the formal dress code

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20 Karl Gerth, China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 94.
changed again, from the military uniform, the Zhongshan suit to the long gown. But even for long gown, it turned out to be “more traditionalist than simply traditional” because it was newly featured as a narrower profile. In fact, readopting long gowns was never “a statement of conservatism” but “the determination in national symbolism.”

During the May Fourth era, similar to males, women found “student dress both sufficiently modern and martially severe to serve as a Republican uniform.” Characteristically worn by the female students, the new ao garment changed its appearance again. It was now called the New Civilized Dress (wenming xinzhuang 文明新装) (Fig.5). Paired with a black skirt, a female student would wear a bright jacket, with which decorative high collar and complex embroidery disappeared. The entire garment looked plain but elegant. Influenced by the Western styles, the skirts gradually became shorter instead of covering the whole leg, and the sleeves became elbow-length.

By the 1930s, qipao, as a common dress type, became an icon of modern females for both formal and casual occasions. Compared with the two-piece garments discussed earlier, this single dress has more flexibility on merging different elements in new ways. It was often worn with modern accessories, such as a Western-style overcoat or a long

26 Ibid., 461.
flowing scarf. In 1931, in the Linglong 玲珑 women’s magazine (1931-1937), an essay was entitled as “why did women today look better than those in the past decades.” The answer centers around the issues connecting the changes of women’s clothes. It argues that after qipao replaced its predecessors, for example, large sleeves and huge leg pants, the current Chinese dresses no longer looked stiff or conservative. In the past, the old clothing style changed because of a seasonal shift; at present, the new styles increased in every season, and the clothing types were made available for different occasions and in varying colors. Even as a single dress, qipao was rich in variations, and it was fit for four seasons. Creatively, its styles experienced many changes. The great part of qipao lied on the length, since qipao hugged the whole body and at the same time, it helped identify the body curve of wearers. Besides, its popularity was based on diverse choices of textiles. For instance, as suggested in one article from the Linglong magazine in 1936, slim women would be wearing the striped cottons; short women could wear the ones with checks; and some other fashionable ladies preferred the delicate printed fabrics. Although silk was the favored fabric, other new fabrics, synthetic or imported, were also desired. They were cheaper and thus more available, offering fabric designs like contemporary patterns.

As shown in everyday clothing, Dorothy Ko once described the experience of modernity during the whole period as “mimetic,” which means there is an tendency to

28 Linglong 1, 25 (1931): 901.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Linglong 6, 40 (1936): 3128-3129.
look up to “the West” as the “desirable Other,” and looking down upon its own past. At the same time, hybrid styles were embodied in women’s stylish clothing. As Ko suggested, “the women—like the Chinese nation—had to work within pre-existing material realities and with available fabrics. Fashion in the land of the catching-up worked by mangling disparate schemes of time or mashing incongruous mediums.”

This is not to say, however, that Chinese women were neither inventive nor creative in the course of dealing with the old and new. Although qipao was a product of such a growingly polarized society, it could be the best example of hybrid styles. More than the “surface” of modernity, qipao made the compromises between traditional and modern, domestic and foreign.

Qipao and the Manchu Gown

In the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty, Manchu 滿 women and Han 漢 women differentiated themselves by wearing distinctive dress. Manchu women usually wore a long robe, while Han women continued to wear their jackets, skirts, and trousers and to practice bound feet. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the case of women’s clothes, Manchu and Han were gradually assimilated with each other.

The origin of qipao was still doubtful. Literally, the character qi 旗 specifically refers to the Manchu people, who conquered Han China with the Eight Banners military and administrative system in the seventeenth century. Besides, as qipao and the Manchu robe are both characteristic of a single-piece dress, their relationship is often discussed.

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34 Ibid., 144.
35 Leo Lee argued that “modernity is both idea and imaginary, both essence and surface.” See Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, 63.
Worn by Manchu females, the banner gown was richly and extensively patterned, especially on the necktie, cuff, and hemline, as the traditional craft laid emphasis on piping, embellishment, and embroidery (Fig.6). For the part of qipao, such ostentation had disappeared even though the traditional craft still remained in the details. As a product of modern society, qipao was by no means considered as a return to the Manchu robes, neither in its styles nor in the meanings that it held. It shows “how far sensitivities in the 1930s had departed from the early Republican years, when ‘Chinese’ nationalism took the form of an anti-Manchu fervor.”

Early Qipao: Relationship with Males’ Clothes

About Western Influence

The Western clothes did not turn out to be the “universal” one in the 1910s, and became almost marginalized in the 1930s, even though they were the rage at the early years of the Republic. In comparison with other aesthetic and practical reasons, the popularity of the Western clothes among revolutionaries and other overseas students was largely due to the understanding about what the clothes symbolized. Being stiff and tight, European clothes were considered as less comfortable to wear. For men’s suits, it was too expensive to be consumed by the masses. Likewise, women’s European dress was not the mainstream garments. One female revolutionary named Jin Tianyu once ascribed the cut-fitting clothing style to Western influence, but she did doubt whether the widespread adoption of Western dress was necessary for modernization, as she commented in 1903:

36 Dorothy Ko, “Jazzing into Modernity,” 152.
37 Henrietta Harrison, The Making of the Republican Citizen, 54.
38 Ibid.
How can the harm caused by Chinese women’s garb not provoke sympathy? Yet, European women cinch their waist in order to lift up their bosom…I don’t know whether this promotes health or not, but as a mark of [superior] civilization it seems suspect. Therefore, I don’t endorse the recent trend of Chinese women emulating Western fashion.39

It was until the appearance of fitting *qipao* that brought attention to a woman’s waist and bosom. Before that, the new-style *ao* garment might look streamlined but flattened. The radical writer Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), in his essay “The Decline of Western Clothing,” noted that in 1934, “one only sees the remaining traces of Western clothing on Modern Men and Women, just as one occasionally sees a queue or bound feet on ultraconservative men and women.”40 While the Western dress was left out by the people, the Western influence on the changing clothing did come into play. The narrow fitting style replaced the loose fitting one and reached its peak during the golden era of *qipao*.

*About Reform*

It is always believed that the clothing needed to be reformed. Even as male and female garment were both featured as modern clothing, unlike the “stability” and “semiotics” of male garment, the “changeability” of female clothes was thought to be the opposite to patriarchal social order.41 Yet, it is worth noting that male and female clothes did cooperate with each other every time when the dress code, the fashion, and its attached value began to change. Let us take the revolutionary couple Sun Yat-sen and Song Qingling 宋庆龄 (1893-1981) as example. In their wedding ceremony in 1915 in

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41 Peter Carroll, “Refashioning Suzhou,” 457.
Tokyo, neither of them wore the traditional Chinese style.\textsuperscript{42} Two years later, at home, they were photographed wearing Chinese dress. Sun wore the long gown, and Song wore the patterned jacket-blouse and skirt (Fig.7). It is said that Sun began to wear the Zhongshan suit in 1923 as the photographs showed. In the early 1920s, Song typically wore the New Civilized Dress, and later she mainly wore qipao. The couple’s dressing strategy, respectively, towards the Zhongshan suit and qipao added the political connotations to the two clothes, whereas it also catered to the rise of nationalism. The suit and qipao remained as the national garments approved by the Republican government.

\textit{About Military Culture}

The complex decoration of the Han women’s ao garment, especially in the aspects of color, detail, and auspicious motifs, were attributed to the preference of the literati taste.\textsuperscript{43} From the late Qing to the Republic period, under the social reforms and the threat of imperialism, special emphasis returned to military culture. Among this atmosphere, even the civilian dress could be more or less influenced by military culture. Antonia Finnane once made connections between the growth of militarism and women’s clothes. Using pictorial representations as visual evidence, she found that the stand-up collar prevailed since 1905, corresponding to the time period when the military schools became popular, and males’ uniform became the latest fashion. At this time, women’s cut-fitting jacket was often featured with a high collar, called the ingot collar (\textit{yuanbaoling} 元宝领), which might have resonance on the high-collared military


uniforms for the army and police. Characteristically, in the case of women’s clothes, the high collar, albeit stiffened and uncomfortable, were added as a fashion element. Even as high collar disappeared from qipao, the revealing legs of women donning qipao were in harmony with males’ straight legs in the Western suit or military uniforms. Just few decades ago, elite women in the bulky ao garment still had their legs and feet hidden under trousers and skirts.

Gender Identity

Early before the founding of the Republic, the reformers had already characterized themselves by dressing differently. The male reformers learned from the foreigners donning a Western suit. The female reformers, like Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907), preferred to wear men’s clothes. Qiu Jin was known for her dressing in a male’s Western suit or the long gown with jacket (changshan magua 长衫马褂). As she claimed, “My aim is to dress like a man! I want somehow to have a mind as strong as a man’s. If I first take on the form of a man, then I think my mind too will eventually become that of a man.”

The debate was also stirred in Shanghai about whether females should wear the long gown like males. In Shanghai Minguo Ribao (Shanghai Republican Daily, March, 1920), the good side of women’s wearing the long gown was concluded by Zhu Rongquan 朱荣泉 (1898-1969), an intellectual from Shanghai College. He argues that if a woman had her hair cut short and began to wear the long gown, she would look like a

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man rather than the object of erotic gaze; in this way, women would probably have higher social status.\textsuperscript{46}

One of modern female writers of the Republic, Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (1920-1995) was noted for her obsessive fascination with clothes. In her literature, particular attention was paid to describing the clothes of female characters, the details of which were revealing the wearers’ identities or psychology. In the article “A Chronicle of Changing Clothing,” Zhang mentioned that similar to the case of the European dress, the bulky and loose Chinese dress turned to be “tight-fitting”, “light” and “supple” for the movement of the body in turbulent political and social times.\textsuperscript{47} In the chaotic times of Republican China, women’s clothes were cut tight but easy for movement between the 1910s and the 1920s. It is worth mentioning that the “angular” and “puritanical” look of the early qipao in the 1920s did not have any feminine features.\textsuperscript{48} Zhang argued that the masculinity of the early qipao was associated with women’s intention to look like men.\textsuperscript{49} This intention was probably caused by the limited liberation of women under the May Fourth movement. In the 1930s, the rise of qipao seemed to be more motivated by aesthetic preferences than by practicality and simplicity. For example, the once-popular floor-length qipao, usually worn with high heels, tended to hinder movement. During this period, the diverse styles of qipao matched different aesthetic values and tastes.

\textsuperscript{46} Zhu Rongquan, “Nüzi zhuo changshan de haochu,” in \textit{Minguo ribao} (Shanghai) 30 March 1920, quoted in Wu Hao, \textit{Zhongguo funü fushi yu shenti geming}, 97.


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 435.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
CHAPTER 3: QIPAO AND MASS MEDIA

By the 1930s, qipao became the exemplary dress for modern women in urban Shanghai. Shanghai’s development in fashion industry showed its urban modernity. Published in the pictorial magazines, fashion designs enriched clothing styles. The fetish for appearance and fashion occurred in the cinema together with the female-featured advertisement calendar posters (yuefenpai 月份牌). In this chapter, I will discuss the representation of qipao with a focus on the calendar posters and other pictorial advertisements. In fact, these pictorial narratives constituted the myths about qipao, which signified Western modernity as well as national modernity.

Since the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 after the First Opium war (1839-1842), Shanghai became one of the treaty ports representing modern China’s transformation. It also became the engine of development in art, publishing, business, entertainment, and education. In the Republic period, Shanghai embraced rising nationalism as well as leftist ideology. Inside the Shanghai International Settlement, in the 1920s, Nanjing Road contained the big four department stores: Sincere 先施, Wing On 永安, Sun Sun 新新, and the Sun 大新. This prosperous shopping area was a reflection of how Shanghai kept pace with the latest styles throughout the world. In tune with the West, fashion trends that rose to popularity in Shanghai were soon found popularity in other cities around China.

In 1930, the article “Impressions of Shanghai” in the magazine Shanghai shenghuo 上海生活 (Shanghai guide, 1937-1941) expressed mixed feelings towards the marked transition in Shanghai:
Shanghai was merely an unknown land less than one hundred years ago. It had nothing except a stretch of water which included the Huangpu River and Suzhou River. After the Opium War, with the arrival of the foreigners and industrial and commercial development, Shanghai rose to be the most urbanized city in China. This transition could evoke a sense of humiliation but at the same time may be a fluke.50

Such a feeling was paired with the complexity of Shanghai itself. As concluded by Wen-hsin Yeh, “over the course of the twentieth century, the city has been alternately branded as China’s pride and shame, a place of infinite glamour and unequalled squalor.”51

Published in Shanghai, the Liangyou (The Young Companion, 1926-1945) is an influential comprehensive pictorial magazine, which provided a distinct perspective to the discovery of Shanghai life in modern China. The Liangyou magazine once proudly introduced to the public the metropolitan Shanghai in different aspects. Titled as “Intoxicated Shanghai” (in February, 1934), the images of modernity were displayed through a photograph collage about the “excitements” in Shanghai (Fig. 8). “The dominant figure of a young woman wearing a fashionable qipao is surrounded by clips of (clockwise) a jazz band, a new 22-story skyscraper, racetrack and viewing stand, and a movie poster for King Kong.”52 As a modern element, her qipao has high slits extended to thigh. In the same year, partly out of self-reflection, the Liangyou magazine published an article posing city women in sharp contrast to rural women based on their appearance and daily life activities.53 The city woman clad in the silk qipao was known for her chic

50 Shanghai shenghuo 3, 10 (1930): 17.
52 Leo Ou-fan Lee, Shanghai Modern, n.p.
appearance, delicate hands, and modern lifestyle, while the rural woman, in her coarse
clothes, was busy in her labor work. Although *qipao* had become the everyday wear for
modern women, it only existed in large cities, especially Shanghai. Similarly, for the
Chinese people living in the rural area, modern consumption in cosmopolitan Shanghai
was “nothing short of a ‘wonderland’—a brave new world stuffed with foreign goods and
foreign names.”54

The dynamics between women’s fashion and Shanghai’s “excitements” was
depicted vividly in the novel of *Zi Ye* 子夜 (Midnight), published in 1933. Subtitled *A
Romance of China in 1930*, the novel was written by Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981) who
joined the Chinese Communist Party in its founding year of 1921. In *Zi Ye*, Mr. Old Wu,
who symbolized the legacy of the old society, used his personal experience showing the
other side of “excitements” in Shanghai—a nightmare in his mind. In the eyes of Mr. Old
Wu, the urban culture of Shanghai was composed of the “sinner’s paradise”: the streams
of lights of the skyscrapers were compared to “the eyes of devils,”55 the flows of cars
looked like “a snake-like stream of black monsters,”56 and the fashionable citizens were
thought of as “demons” and “evil spirits.”57 Mr. Old Wu was shocked when he heard the
talk about women’s catching up with the latest fashion: “But my dear, you do make me
laugh with your get-up. Your dress might have been in fashion ten years ago but now
you’re in Shanghai you must follow the fashion. You must get yourself a new outfit first

54 Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Shanghai Modern: Reflections on Urban Culture in China in the 1930s,” *Public
56 Ibid., 16.
57 Ibid., 20.
thing tomorrow morning.” In the end, the flickering light of Mr. Old Wu’s life was
devoured by the lights of Shanghai. These descriptions were not created out of fantasy.
Like what had happened in reality in Shanghai, the descriptions of Mr. Old Wu’s
experiences in the novel portray some truth about modern Shanghai. Here, the word
“modern” sometimes directly equaled to “fashionable,” as observed by the writer Lu
Xun: “if you live in Shanghai, it pays better to be smart than dowdy. If your clothes are
old, bus-conductors may not stop when you ask them, park attendants may inspect your
ticket with special care and the gate keepers of big houses or hotels may not admit you by
the main door.”

Different Manifestations and Identities of Women in Qipao

There is no wonder that the rise of Shanghai urban culture gave citizens a unique
experience about modernity. Accordingly, women’s new appearances became one of
attractions in the public arena. Well-to-do women, courtesans, dance hostesses, actresses,
girl students, and female workers almost all accepted the characteristic style of qipao.
The disparity lied in fabrics, textures, cuts, and matching accessories, which identified
different social groups and tastes. Recalling the stories of Shanghai, a woman narrated
how delicate qipao was worn by her mother in the 1930s:

Most mothers tell their children fairy tales, mine described the dresses she wore in
Shanghai…She had owned cupboards of cheongsams [qipao] of varying lengths,
depending on the fashion, some with inserts of French lace, others embroidered
over the shoulders and down one side with dragons or flowers. Her shoes were

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58 Ibid., 16.
Languages Press, 1980), 332, quoted in Frank Dikötter, Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and
Everyday Life in China, 191.
60 Yuan Ze, Bainian yishang: ershi shiji zhongguo fuzhuang liubian [Chinese dress in the twentieth century]
(Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2010), 154.
embroidered to match. She liked lots and lots of embroidery. The more embroidery, the more expensive they looked. Under the cheongsam she wore a corset to coax her waist down to eighteen inches and padding around the bosom. With the cheongsams [qipao], she wore a long silk jacket, or fur in winter, with jade jewelry and small, beaded bags.61

These descriptions were invested with fashion consciousness. Keeping up with fashion fads was becoming a facet of Shanghai life. For most of Shanghai women, even if qipao was available in the department stores, they preferred to have the clothing made by tailors or by themselves for economic reasons.62 Women also took pleasure in making clothes at home through selecting the fabric in fabric shops and consulting the fashion models in the pictorial magazines.63 Thus, innovations in clothes were achieved by fashion designers, skilled tailors as well as women themselves.64

Moreover, the fancy-dress qipao also signified Chinese identity on the international stage. For example, as the spouse of Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887-1975), the leader of the second Republic, Song Meiling 宋美龄 (1898-2003) not only helped her husband make an alliance with Sun Yat-sen and the rich, powerful Song family, but she also became the best ambassador of the second Republic. Song Meiling still wore the Western-style dress,65 when she returned to Shanghai in 1917 after finishing her studies in the United States. In their wedding ceremony in 1927, Song Meiling and Chiang Kai-shek dressed in Western styles: Song wore a white georgette dress rather than the

61 Harriet Sergeant, Shanghai: Collision Point of Cultures, 1918-1939 (New York: Crown, 1990), 273-274.
62 Lu Hanchao, Beyond the Neon Light: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century, 256.
63 Shen Weibing and Jiang Ming, Ala Shanghai ren [We are Shanghainese] (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1993), 22, quoted in Lu Hanchao, Beyond the Neon Light: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century, 259.
64 Lu, Beyond the Neon Light, 259.
traditional red Chinese dress. In general, as discussed in Chapter 2, the situation looked similar to another revolutionary couple, Sun Yat-sen and Song Meiling’s sister Song Qingling. In the 1930s and 1940s, Song Meiling, clad in qipao, successfully represented the image of China. Wearing the qipao, she looked more oriental, modest, and elegant.

In general, the qipao fashion was associated with popular culture as well as mass culture. On one hand, choosing what to wear seemed to be personal interest; on the other hand, the popularity of qipao, along with women’s visibility, helped create a unique image about modern women in the Republic. In Shanghai, some influential pictorial magazines often combined the works of women’s fashion design by a group of local artists. Fashion design, as a new form of art from the West, was now practiced in China. For example, in the Liangyou magazine, the column named “Xinzhuang manhua” 新装漫话 (Discussion of Dress) once invited the painters to design women’s clothes for their new choices (Fig.9). The painter Ye Qianyu 叶浅予 (1907-1995), as the leading figure in this field, contributed to the dress trends in varying ways. Ye worked in the fashion industry by joining the Yunshang 云裳 Fashion Company, holding the fashion show for certain clothing company, and establishing the Shanghai Dress Study Society.

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66 Ibid.
67 Li Meng and Wang Bin, “Minguo shiqi Shanghai diqu huajia qunti de fuzhuang sheji huodong yanjiu,” [Studies on fashion design by Shanghai painters in the Republic of China] Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Fine Arts & Design) 4, (2010): 70. These magazines include Mingxing huabao (Star Pictorial), Shidai huabao (Modern Miscellany), Liangyou (The Young Companion), Linglong (Elegance), Furen huabao (Women’s Pictorial), Tuhua chenbao (Picture Morning News), Shanghai manhua (Shanghai Sketch) and so forth.
68 Ibid., 72.
69 It is worth mentioning that during the Anti-Japanese war period, Ye Qianyu was the leader of “Shanghai Cartoonist Association for National Salvation.” See Lü Peng, A History of Art in 20th-Century China (Milano: Charta, 2010), 396.
70 Li Meng and Wang Bin, “Minguo shiqi Shanghai diqu huajia qunti de fuzhuang sheji huodong yanjiu,” 71.
This Society was responsible for providing fashion design works and fashion advice to the *Linglong* magazine. Together with other Shanghai painters, Ye Qianyu used his cartoon drawing skills to make the modern Chinese woman come alive on paper.\(^71\) Apart from Western dress and other different kinds of clothes, the design of *qipao* was in the majority, which possessed the characteristics of changeability, creativity, as well as a combination between Chinese and Western styles (Fig.10).

In Ye’s cartoons, he preferred to find the theme on the relationship between women and the dance hall. Interestingly, the dancing scene was featured with a man, with variations in his age and clothes (long gown or Western suit), and a woman with variations in her *qipao* styles. Leo Lee suggested that these portraits, drawn from the archetype of Shanghai dance hostess, were supposed to reveal “a gendered differentiation of the woman as a fixed object for the desires of men of various classes.”\(^72\) The implication was further confirmed by her body-revealing *qipao*, and the attached articles criticizing the dance hostess as an object.\(^73\) Ironically, there is no denying that the dance halls had already become a symbol of a Shanghai urbanite’s modern life as well as the “backdrop for the emergence of a new public persona for women.”\(^74\)

**Cultural Icon: Women’s Images in *Qipao***

*Qipao* also became part and parcel of constructing women’s identities both in the cultural forms and visual representations. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Zhang Ailing relied on the description of her characters’ clothes, which were associated with

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\(^{71}\) Ibid., 72.  
\(^{72}\) Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Shanghai Modern: Reflections on Urban Culture in China in the 1930s,” 89.  
\(^{73}\) Ibid.  
\(^{74}\) Ibid., 90.
their inner parts and fates. For instance, in the novel Banshengyuan 半生缘 (A half-life destiny, set in Shanghai in the 1930s), the prostitute Manlu 曼璐 was depicted as “wearing an apple-green soft silk cheongsam, which was about eighty percent new, marked only by the dark impression of a palm on the waist, which was probably imprinted by the dancing other.”75 As mentioned in the preceding chapter, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the upper-class prostitutes, featured with exotic tastes and lifestyles, led the fashion trends inside and outside the foreign settlements. As the visual harbinger of Chinese modernity, their position was shaken between the 1920s and 1930s, probably because of their presence involving the complex nature of urbanity.76 The portrait of courtesans and their romance in the elite discourse were once appreciated; but by the 1930s, they became the negative side of this metropolitan city, as their roles took on meanings of the “victimized” and the “disorderly.”77

In 1934 film Shennü 神女 (The Goddess), the well-known actress Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 (1910-1935) played a prostitute, standing on the night street with her long qipao. However, she was not fashioned as sexy in the traditional sense. While the film tells a story about a prostitute, it did not focus on the “erotic implications” of prostitution, not to mention the connection with moral decline.78 Both of the two examples are concerned with the image of prostitutes, but they demonstrate different associations with qipao, a tool for self-representation.

77 Ibid., 9.
78 Harriet Sergeant, Shanghai: Collision Point of Cultures, 1918-1939, 288.
In the *Liangyou* magazine, one article named “On the Side-Walks of Shanghai” listed the collected images about Shanghai street culture, one of which shows the Shanghai urbanite standing and watching the hanging female-featured calendar posters (Fig.11), with the description “pictures of popular interest displayed on the wall like a free charge exhibition.”

Introduced from the West, advertisement calendar posters were the carrier and landmark of Shanghai commercial culture. Widely used in the Shanghai-oriented printing industry, the new technology of lithography, brought from the West, made it possible that the calendar posters flow from city to countryside. By the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese calendar poster had grown to be mature owning to the innovation of calendar painters. Combined with woodblock printing traditions, traditional ink art, and Western techniques (such as chiaroscuro and texturing), the calendar posters shared aestheticism with other forms of art; and at the same time, they were designed for a wide circulation beyond Shanghai. Some of them were the gift-giving from the magazines, and some were hung on the wall as interior decorations. Featured with different perspectives and modern combinations, the calendar poster expressed a new way of observing things in everyday life.

As W. J. T. Mitchell suggested, an image is more a concept than a specific sign. He mentions that “the culture is not the same thing as the society: society consists in the relations among people, culture the whole set of mediations that makes those relations

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79 *Liangyou* 103 (1935): 34.
81 Ibid., 3.
possible—or (equally important) impossible. Visual culture is what makes possible a society of people with eyes.83 Through studying the visual images during this period, one could better understand the meanings contained in the culture and shared by the society. Discussed in the following parts, the pictorial advertisements or magazines were more about selling a concept.

At this time, the advertisement calendar poster usually took fashionable women as its subjects, not just because of visual pleasures derived from depicted female figures, but also because women themselves had become the focus of society. Women’s increasing visibility in the public, no matter through presentations or representations, had already been an important sign for Chinese modernity.84 Also important in these advertisement posters is the association of new commodities with up-to-date concepts, which were subtly influenced by science and the military.85 For the female figures, even though their faces looked similar to each other, their clothing, fashion, and surrounding environments (furniture and architecture) were full of variations.86

If we say that the new concept of fashion was led by courtesans in the Shanghai international settlements, then the female representations displayed in the calendar posters were more likely to contribute to the continuing fashion trends in the 1930s.87 The depicted clothes usually interacted with the fashion in real life and in the pictorials. In the shops, the ready-made clothes were few and expensive, thus, the clothing

83 Ibid., 57.
86 Wen-Hsin Yeh, Shanghai Splendor, 68.
87 Pang, The Distorting Mirror, 124.
advertisements were few. Yet, the calendar posters represented the changing clothing, which indicated involving modernity. Besides, the calendar posters were expressive of modern lifestyles through manifestations of material culture, such as never-repeated dress, curly bob hair, high heels and Westernized furniture.

“Modern” Lifestyle

The advertisers knew clearly what their consumers wanted, meticulously presenting them with fashionable clothes and modern interior designs. While the contents of the advertisements or the pictorial magazines did not truly reflect the real life in the society, they may express consumers’ desires or ideals and new possibilities in modern lifestyle. By the 1930s, the Art Deco buildings became “universal” in Shanghai like other Western countries. The famous cinemas and dance halls were all identified with this style. Not surprisingly, the innovation of hybrid elements drives the development of Art Deco styles. In Shanghai, one could see the combination of different elements, for example, in the Western-style dance hall, women may invariably dress in qipao, and men sometimes wore the long gowns. The trend of Art Deco style also left its imprint on the design of calendar posters and qipao. The example is a poster painted for the Guangshenghang  Company (Fig. 12), whose recognizable brand logo was featured with the two girls in the long coat and trouser, the new-style ao garment in the early Republic. Through the Two-Girl calendars, one can observe the evolving modernity represented by women’s changing clothing in each period of the Republic. Painted in 1937 by the Zhiying Studio, the Two Girls, against the outdoor setting, looked

elongated with curves by wearing the long qipao. Compared with their predecessors, they were more fashionable in the Art Deco style qipao, featured with floral patterns in bold use of bright colors. It is worth mentioning that the floral reliefs here, influenced by the Art-deco geometric styles, were no more like the traditional patterns. These floral reliefs on qipao echoed the flowers held on their hands and the surrounding. The cosmetics, as the commodities, were depicted and displayed in a way of floating on the both sides and bottom of the poster.

As the public image of women was idealized to be consumed, the domestic interior became publicized. One calendar poster, painted by Xie Zhiguang 谢之光 (1899-1976), displayed a modern woman in the wide-sleeve qipao against a background of Western-style interior design (Fig.13). The Western planning became favored as evidenced by the descriptions in the Linglong magazine in 1931, titled “The Arrangement of Modern Rooms,” “Reform for the Modern House Furnishings” and so forth.90 Dated to 1931, this poster had the Western solar calendar at the front side. (Since the founding of the Republic in 1912, a new consciousness of time and history was marked by the adoption of the solar calendar) One thing we should notice is that compared with the female figure in the prominent position, the commodity and its information in the bottom merely occupied a small space. Contrary to the effects of Western imitation, the commodity they promoted was Ken-I-Kochojo Tablets (for digestive disorders), which was associated with traditional Chinese medicine. This calendar poster served as an example that the pictorial advertisements were less about selling products and more about

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selling concepts, which represented the social desire for Western lifestyle in that time. For the representation of Modern Girl, even if her facial appearance signaled Chinese identity, her posture was totally Westernized. Likewise, qipao became the only Chinese element in contrast with a foreign-style setting.

In this calendar poster, the Art Deco style influenced women’s fashion, accessories, and the furniture. The hemline of her long-sleeve qipao, as well as her upper jacket, was highlighted with geometric patterns, which echoed the diamond shape of her conspicuous jewelry. Similarly, the chairs and the table behind her were characterized with Art Deco style because of the modernized floral relief and dynamic geometric designs. Moreover, the design of the Chinese characters was impacted by the Art Deco as well, as shown in the two calendar posters analyzed. The originally kaishu 楷书 style was transformed to the one with geometric features. It informed the viewers a change of time together with the advancement in technology. (Here refers to the modern printing skills)⁹¹

There is no wonder that the Art Deco style was a part of daily life in Shanghai, which reached all levels of the society. For the upper-and-middle class, they could live in the house and wear the dresses, both of which were decorated with Art Deco design. For the ordinary people, their appreciation of this style may come from a profusion of calendar posters identified with the Art Deco style.

In addition, it is said that Xie Zhiguang referenced these furniture settings to the contemporary Western interior design from the pictorials, since similar ones could be seen in one furniture advertisement that appeared in Ladies’ Home Journal (in October, 1925).

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Like Xie Zhiguang, many other calendar poster painters often referred to fashion and interior design from other visual materials. The appropriation of available visual materials was considered as the continuity of Chinese painting tradition of copying models from available works and resources. Likewise, in the calendar poster, one may sometimes find the similarity between the depicted female figures and movie actresses. The changes in clothing styles can be found throughout the calendar posters when the dress silhouette became slimmer and more curved with narrower sleeves and a tighter waist. The creation or representation of clothes in the calendar poster may more or less contain the effect of exaggeration. It is worth mentioning that in real life, not every woman would have chosen the tight-fitting or very revealing qipao portrayed in the posters.

Observing the calendar poster, we could find that it is a highly ritualized art form, including the bright colors, the frame, and the presence of modern women in the latest fashions. Ironically, calendar posters, with their excess of modernity, could reach the rest of China; but unlike the fashionable women in qipao as represented in the posters, wearing qipao was never a ritual for women in the less prosperous areas. Judging from the calendar posters, selling products was featured along with selling modernity, which means “consumption went beyond pleasure to become an act informed by an understanding of material progress and advancement, or an enlightened and scientific appreciation of well-being.”

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93 Ibid., 154.
94 Wen-Hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor*, 69.
Roles of Qipao: Representation of Women and Representation of Nation

From picture to picture, even though it shows qipao was worn by individuals of different characters, on different occasions and for different purposes, it still situated the audience in a community. This sense of community can be fostered by advertising certain products to its potential consumers. Thus, using women’s images became an important strategy in conveying concepts to the potential consumers. The visual representations of women in qipao not only displayed the embodiments of modernity but also provided the imaginations about modernity. In Shu-mei Shih’s essay, the roles of women engaging in modernity could be divided, by and large, into two categories: one centers on “feminine modernity”, and the other focuses on “national modernity.” The examples in the essay were collected from the pictorial advertisements of 1939 in the magazine Shanghai shenghuo (Shanghai Guide), whose readership mainly included modern housewives, workers, and other young women. In the magazine, the themes concerned “how to be ‘modern’ within the feminine realm,” such as “how to look beautiful, how to exercise feminine seductiveness, how to be a good wife and mother.”

In the first category of women’s roles that appear in the advertisements (i.e., feminine modernity), a modern Chinese woman was usually depicted smoking a cigarette with her male companion in a Western suit. In this image (Fig.14), the woman is holding a cigarette in her hand, sporting a charming smile, sitting cross-legged, a Westernized posture, gazing at and talking to her male counterpart. Modernity was embedded into the elements of modern women, such as the image of a female smoker and of gender

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96 Ibid.
relations. Such elements can easily allow readers to establish the relationship between experiencing the modern and consuming the cigarettes. In the picture, the caption on the left side bears characters of the brand name *Meili* 美丽 (Beauty) in the form of a couple, saying “With Beauty, you are complete; without Beauty, you are incomplete.” This caption emphasizes the importance of beauty. Together with modernity, the beauty of the woman became a selling point. Her *qipao* became a symbol of feminine modernity, which was associated with sexuality and compatible with the Western lifestyle. It echoes the link to Westernization as shown in the calendar posters mentioned above.

In the second category of advertisement, women were playing their new role as modern housewives, who were in charge of the consumption of the family. During the National Product Movement, consuming the national product became associated with national salvation, as a way to “resist” foreigners economically. As mentioned in the section about the influence of military culture on civilian dress in Chapter 2, in that time, the whole society was affected by the social climate for militarization and nationalism. Housewives, as modern women’s new roles, were endowed with the responsibility for national salvation as well, which was indicated in the slogans such as “Women! Sacrifice a bit of beauty! Thereby save the country and save the people! This is even a greater way to act!” and “A woman who absolutely refuses to purchase foreign products is the equivalent of a warrior recovering lost territory.”

Through using Chinese products rather than foreign ones, the women were considered as participants in nationalism.

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97 Ibid., 205.
In the *Shanghai shenghuo*, the example of national modernity depicts a modern housewife promoting Chinese products. Unlike the first category, the feature of Westernization was not as obvious as that of nationalism. In addition to the Chinese model, *qipao* is the only Chinese element that connects these two categories of advertisements, while *qipao* here may be a supplement to national modernity because of its Chinese identity (Fig.15).

In the advertisements, consuming national products was promoted as a concept. With the rise of economic nationalism, the Chinese Hongxiang 鴻翔 Company (founded in 1917), known as the female clothing company in Western styles, specially made an announcement in the *Shenbao* (Shanghai Daily) in 1934 claiming to promote national products and stressing the nature of the company—being domestic-invested and domestic-manufactured.\(^99\) However, the complexity of national products during this period made them hard to define. As Wen-Hsin Yeh suggested, “a product could be either ‘domestic’ or ‘imported,’ and ‘native’ or ‘foreign,’ when classified temporally with an eye on the differences between China’s past and present.”\(^100\) As shown in the advertisements, the modern products, for example, cigarettes, could also be transformed into national products by introducing a new lifestyle, which was concerned with the combination between “foreign and modern” and “Chinese and domestic.”\(^101\)

The similar situation also happened in *qipao* made of the fabric of Indanthrene. Although the dye for the fabric was originally made by Germans, the Indanthrene-dyed

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99 *Shenbao* 1 December 1934, quoted in Yuan Ze, *Bainian yishang: ershi shiji zhongguo fuzhuang liubian* [Chinese dress in the twentieth century] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2010), 203.

100 Wen-Hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor*, 72.

101 Ibid.
fabrics traded in China were woven in China. There are many examples about advertisers’ promoting Indanthrene fabrics as represented in the calendar posters. As Ellen Johnston Laing commented, “Perhaps, the height of the pretty woman, sometimes actually a movie star, as a fashionable model, is found in the Zhiying Studio’s pictures for Indanthrene fabric.” In one poster, made in the mid-1930s, on the flank sides, it claimed clearly the colorfastness of Indanthrene fabric no matter under the sun or rain, as suggested by the brand logo of shining sun and raining cloud (Fig.16). A modern elegant female student was seated against outdoor landscape with an open book on her lap. Her dark blue Indanthrene-colored qipao renders vertically with an illusionist effect at the bottom. A nearby umbrella implies the practical use of the Indanthrene fabric. In general, there is little about sexuality but about severity. Unlike other fashionable models, the woman did not wear any jewelry accessories. Notably, decorated with the narrow olive green piping, the diamond-shape buttons of qipao still had a touch of Art Deco style, which reinforced the current mode (shimao 时髦) of the dress. The Indanthrene-dyed qipao did not have any pattern but identifiable solid colors. As claimed by the slogan on the left side, “frugal and modest schoolgirls please consider wearing Indanthrene dress.” The qipao, made of Indanthrene fabric, as a plain style, was understood as a proper dress for its relation with national products. Writing in 1932, one article in the Linglong magazine, entitled “Fashion and National Products,” called on its female readers, for the

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benefit of the country, to choose national products rather than imported ones, the latter of which seemed like an appeal to fashionable women.\textsuperscript{104}

To sum up, the explosive development of visual materials, either pictorials or calendar posters, helped changed the ways of seeing. The once-closed inner chamber of women now became audience-involved attractions; the ordinary people could see things they may not be able to reach in real life; and housewives and prostitutes learned from each other: the former observed the images of the latter, and the latter looked inside the upper-middle-class household.\textsuperscript{105} Wen-Hsin Yeh commented that “when seeing and being seen was the basis of a whole way of life, the city [Shanghai] became at once a place for fashion and self-fashioning.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104} Linglong 2, 57 (1932): 293.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 337.
CHAPTER 4: DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF QIPAO

Different from other forms of narratives, a myth “allows paradoxical meanings to be held in a charged tension.”107 This is why a myth could be shared by a group of people with different points of view and to be recreated “through different generations with different points of view.”108 Likewise, the myths about qipao are characteristic with the construction of meaning. In this chapter, I will discuss the different interpretations of qipao between the 1920s and 1930s.

As one hallmark event of the 1920s, the May Fourth Movement began with student demonstrations against the Chinese government’s signing the Treaty of Versailles in Beijing on May 4, 1919. Shanghai later became the battlefield of the May Fourth Movement with the workers’ and merchants’ strikes. The Movement signaled the period when radical thinkers tended to reject tradition, embraced Western ideas, and promoted anti-imperial nationalism. During this period, there were different ideas emerging about what modern China should be. How people dressed was one of the things under scrutiny, since clothing was associated with personal identity as well as country identity. As an exemplary dress for modern women, qipao became the target of intellectuals and reformers in search of Chinese modernity.

By the late 1920s, modern women clad in qipao had become more visible. At the same time, “hybridity”, “materiality”, and “speed” were three characteristics manifested in the up-to-date women’s clothes.109 Dorothy Ko attributed this marked change as a sign

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108 Ibid.
of “self-confidence in the return of the native and an overt critique of the West,” for it overshadowed the wave of “mimetic modernity” as mentioned in Chapter 2.\textsuperscript{110} High heels, as a fashionable and necessary adornment, were often worn with \textit{qipao}, especially for the floor-length \textit{qipao}. During this period, long \textit{qipao} and high heels attracted attention and incurred criticism, especially from some intellectuals and reformers, who found this expression of dress to be the negative side of modernity.

\textbf{From Bound Feet to High Heels}

In this part, I will first take the contradictions about foot binding as an example to trigger discussions on \textit{qipao}. Like the myths about foot binding, \textit{qipao}, as a highly debated topic, has different layers of meaning. I will use Dorothy Ko’s argument on foot binding to demonstrate the complex meaning of \textit{qipao}. As she mentioned, “Foot binding is not one monolithic, unchanging experience that all unfortunate women in each succeeding dynasty went through, but is rather an amorphous practice that meant different things to different people…It is, in other words, a situated practice.”\textsuperscript{111} It is worth mentioning that foot binding became the target of reformers at the beginning of the Republic of China and that the practice eventually disappeared with the formation of People’s Republic of China (1949-present). For reformers in the late nineteenth century, bound feet symbolized China’s backwardness, and natural feet represented a modern nation, notwithstanding the traditional ideal feminine beauty and women’s eager

\textsuperscript{110} Dorothy Ko, “Jazzing into Modernity: High Heels, Platforms, and Lotus Shoes,” 148. Dorothy Ko further stresses that “the return of the native is not a conservative restoration, nor a circular motion of history repeating itself.”

participation in foot binding. Similarly, in the eyes of reformers, like bound feet, qipao was problematic.

Published in Shanghai from 1931 to 1937, the Linglong (Elegance) magazine was directed to female readers by showing photographs of fashionable women and offering descriptions about modern life. The magazine itself also presented the female voice. In 1934, the Linglong magazine published an article, written by a female reader, who metaphored the tight and long qipao with high heels as shackles—the writer argued there was no difference between binding the feet and wearing high heels because these practices aimed to please males at the cost of hindering movement.112

From bound feet to high heels, with the ever-changing length of qipao, there seemed to be a fashion cycle (Fig.17, Fig.18). Were high heels really a substitute for bound feet? As for the writer Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895-1976), “they [high heels] enhanced the female figure, imitating the gait of bound feet by throwing the hips backward and making the body shimmy: high heels created the illusion that the feet were smaller than they were in reality.”113 Lin’s point was that even if wearing high heels had similar functions with foot binding, high heels still functioned to represent the progressive development of fashion. This fashion cycle is just the reflection of the constant changes in the current clothes (shizhuang 时装). In the case of the changing length of qipao, there was an article in 1940 from the Liangyou magazine, showing pictures about the styling changes in qipao from 1925 to 1939. It declared that “Chinese

112 Linglong 4, 26 (1934): 1654-1656.
feminine styles do change as quickly and as often as foreign fashions.”114 At the end of
the article, qipao was commented as “a new army” in the fashion world.115 We can see
how much women themselves were proud of the frequent changes in styles of qipao
(Fig.19).

Contradictions on Women’s Dress

During the May Fourth period, it was positioned that the modern was equated
with the West, and thus the “new” equaled to “a desirable future.”116 Meanwhile,
traditional values were not easily to be discarded because they were connected with
nationalism. Best known as a cartoonist, Feng Zikai 丰子恺 (1898-1975), a resident in
Shanghai, was good at commenting upon social problems by using traditional Chinese
brush-and-ink technique.117 One of his cartoons observed certain characteristics and
psychology of intellectuals in the May Fourth era. (Fig.20) In this work, he made a
distinction between two types of Chinese intellectuals: one who wears the long gown and
immerses in the Chinese classics, and the other who wears the Western suit and delves
into the Western literature. During the May Fourth era, the intellectuals showed anxiety
about modernity and their own identities. Like these intellectuals, most of people “found
identities to be negotiated in everyday life.”118

114 Liangyou 150, 1940.
115 Ibid.
116 Lydia H. Liu, Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China,
1900-1937 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 81.
117 The concept of the cartoon (manhua) was introduced by Feng Zikai after publishing his works in the
magazine We (Women) in 1924. See Lü Peng, A History of Art in 20th-Century China (Milano: Charta,
2010), 395.
118 Peter Zarrow, “Introduction: New Discourses and Everyday Life in Modern China,” in Creating Chinese
Conflict between New Woman and Modern Girl

The May Fourth Movement played an important role in advocating women’s liberation. Since the May Fourth era, the “woman problem” has become “publicized” and “popularized.”\textsuperscript{119} The semiotics of women’s fashion was closely linked with women’s new image during social changes. As Peter Carroll suggested, “special sensitivity toward women’s fashion in the press denotes the special importance of the New Woman as the most significant creation and synecdoche of New China.”\textsuperscript{120} In the May Fourth era, the New Woman (\textit{Xin nüxing 新女性}) was the one who participated in the cultural and social changes, fighting for class and gender equality. By the end of the 1920s, featured with masculinity (in some ways) and a sense of social consciousness, the concept of the New Woman still existed, but it was intertwined and challenged with the materialistic Modern Girl (\textit{Modeng gou’er 摩登女}).

Despite the overlapped aspects, both of the New Woman and the Modern Girl were the divergent parts of modernity, which was proved not to be of linear progressive development. Composed for the Chinese film \textit{Xin nüxing} (The New Woman, 1933), the theme song conveyed what was expected of being a New Woman: they were the ones who shared men’s responsibility for constructing the new society; representing the positive side of modernity, they were brave and independent with high ideals. As the other side of modernity, the Modern Girl was fascinated with material life and fashion. Opposite to the New Woman, the Modern Girl was typically the one who lost social

\textsuperscript{120} Peter Carroll, “Refashioning Suzhou,” 458.
consciousness and thus degenerated to an object of male desire. In other words, “she eloquently illustrates how potentially socially disruptive concepts such as sexual emancipation can be skillfully displaced into obsessions of what to wear and how to accentuate one’s erotic allure.”

Titled “Women’s Dress,” an essay of 1920 by the writer Xu Dishan 许地山 (1893-1941) embodies the anxiety about women’s clothes and appearance. In this essay, Xu claimed that “if women want to be active in new society, they must first reform their clothing.” With reference to the traditional women’s dress, Xu thought “bound feet, corseted waists, bound breasts and pierced ears are naturally unhygienic,” and that “skirts and long hair inhibit movement.” With reference to current women fashions, Xu thought they were less progressive than provocative: “Women’s dress today [1920] has a direct connection to sex. Many girls deliberately dress very seductively, which is no more than treating oneself as a plaything.”

In 1926, two years before government’s endorsing the qipao as formal dress, Sun Chuanfang 孙传芳 (1885-1935), one of the military governors, during the Warlord Era of the Republic (1916-1928), once claimed the dress prohibition for wearing the revealing qipao was a harmful custom. In response to Sun’s view about the moral corruption of women’s qipao, one article in the Liangyou magazine argued that the male authorities

122 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 138.
125 Ibid.
misunderstood the less-covered style as inappropriate, and that they could not truly appreciate the beauty of the bare female limbs.\footnote{Liangyou 2 (1926): 7.}

Noticing the controversy surrounding women’s fashion, the May Fourth writer Lu Xun in 1927 pointed out ironically that “I have not heard a single word against this type of woman [with long hair, bound breasts and half-bound feet].”\footnote{Lu Xun, “Anxious Thoughts on ‘Natural Breasts’” (1927) in Lu Xun, \textit{Selected Works}, vol. 2, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 353, quoted in Martha Huang, “A Woman Has So Many Parts to Her Body, Life is Very Hard Indeed,” in \textit{China Chic: East Meets West}, 133.} As one of leaders of the May Fourth movement, Lu Xun played an important role in modern Chinese literature. It is said that “when Lu Xun made his list of body parts, he was cataloguing an almost two-decade-long debate over what a New Woman was supposed to be and what she was supposed to look like.”\footnote{Martha Huang, “A Woman Has So Many Parts to Her Body, Life is Very Hard Indeed,” 133.}

In the novel \textit{Ziye} (Midnight, 1933), the author Mao Dun emphasized the tension between tradition and modernity. Through the eyes of the conservative Mr. Old Wu, if Shanghai in the 1930s was the city of the devil, then women’s latest fashion might have been the work of the devil. For Mr. Old Wu, women’s latest fashion became problematic:

Though it was still only May, the weather was unusually warm and she was already in the lightest of summer clothing. Her vital young body was sheathed in close-fitting light-blue chiffon, her full, firm breasts jutting out prominently, her snowy forearms bared. Old Mr. Wu felt his heart constricting with disgust and quickly averted his eyes, which, however, fell straight upon a half-naked young woman sitting up in a rickshaw, fashionably dressed in a transparent, sleeveless voile blouse, displaying her bare legs and thighs. The old man thought for one horrible moment that she had nothing else on. The text “Of all the vices sexual indulgence is the cardinal” drummed on his mind, and he shuddered. But the worst was yet to come, for he quickly withdrew his gaze, only to find his youngest son Ah-hsuan gaping with avid admiration at the same half-naked young woman…\footnote{Mao Dun, \textit{Midnight}, 17.}
Under a series of new life currents, Chinese traditions were challenged by Western ideas. The consciousness of ritual (li 礼), which used to influence behaviors and costumes, was now replaced by the new knowledge, which was diversified through new behaviors and costumes. Accordingly, there is an impulse that becoming modern was reduced to wearing modern clothes. The challenge to morality was embodied in the dimension of the qipao, relevant to the body-exposure problem. In the 1930s, influenced by the Western fashion, the bias-cut qipao became more tailored and waisted. In addition to fabric, cut, and decorations, the length of the side slits and the height of the collar made qipao always full of variations. With the popularity of the floor-length qipao, the slits gradually reached the thigh and revealed the whole leg. The example is from a calendar poster (Fig.21), dated 1934, which mirrored the fashion in the mid-1930s: the “strappy sandals,” “bare legs,” and “close-cut qipao.” In this calendar poster, one can clearly see the seated female figure clad in the floor-length qipao, unwittingly revealing the Western-style undergarment, decorated with lace, which highlighted her sexuality. Moreover, the semi-transparent qipao showed off her delicate underskirt as an extra layer. Resonating with her long earrings, the vertical stripes were adorned with black-and-white piping. All of these made her body look slim and tall. In addition to the traditional element of knotted buttons (pankou 盘扣), the whole dress looked unusual and contemporary. As a new form of fashion, the long-and-tight qipao was liable to incur criticism from conservatives.

130 Henrietta Harrison, The Making of the Republican Citizen, 61.
The Body, Fitness, Sexuality, and Morality

During the 1930s, the concept Jianmei 健美 (Robust Beauty), integral to new forms of modern physical culture, was introduced and reconstructed with the rising awareness of nationalism and militarization. Being physically strong became a priority for strengthening the whole country. As a way of body training, playing sports were introduced to women as a leisure activity. In addition to cinemas and dancing halls, swimming pools became the first choice for entertainment activities during the summer of Shanghai. After the Gaoqiao beach emerged in Pudong, Shanghai in 1934, swimming became a kind of fashionable activity which prompted the appearance of the latest swimming suits.132 This new type of clothing was also of interest to the fashion design artists (as mentioned in Chapter 3), whose participation helped the promotion of new suits and sports as an important part of leisure culture. The reception of increasing athletic activities and swimming suits was also captured by the calendar poster painters as new themes. For example, in one calendar poster for a tobacco company of Shanghai, the female figure looked healthy and strong in the swimming suit (Fig.19). Against the beach, she was carrying her little child on her back. As the writer Lin Yutang commented, “from bound feet to the one-piece bathing suit was indeed a far cry; the permanent wave, English high-heeled shoes, Parisian perfumes and American silk stockings, as well as the high-slit flowing gown and the brassiere in place of the former chest-binding jacket also became more fashionable among women in the 1920s and

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132 Li Meng and Wang Bin, “Minguo shiqi Shanghai diqu huajia quinti de fuzhuang sheji huodong yanjiu,” 71.
Meanwhile, the different attitudes towards a female’s body, whether correct or not, were involved with the different meanings attached to *qipao*, consciously or unconsciously.

In 1934, the New Life movement was led by the Nationalist government with an attempt to guide a disciplined life under the ideology of the combined Chinese neo-Confucian views and Western ideas. Chiang Kai-shek intended to present a set of criteria, especially in the aspect of moral ideals, for the citizens of the second Republic. The ideas he promoted included Chinese virtues of ritual, righteousness, integrity, and sense of shame (礼，义，廉，耻) as well as militarization, as described by Chiang himself:

Those [four] virtues must be applied to ordinary life in the matter of food, clothing, shelter, and action. The four virtues are the essential principles for the promotion of morality. They form the major rules for dealing with men and human affairs, for cultivating oneself, and for adjustment to one’s surroundings. Whoever violates these rules is bound to fail, and a nation that neglects them will not survive.134

In light of the New Life movement, wearing the Western-made clothes became a symbol of a lack of shame.135 Women’s bodies as well as women’s fashion were susceptible to criticism based on “the Confucian standards of *fenghua* 风化 (morality).”136 Here, the concept of *jianmei* made a shift: the female body not only represented modernity but also involved morality. The *jianmei* female bodies still

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135 Ibid.
represented beauty and health, but the bare legs were considered as potentially dangerous to public morality.

The jianmei beauty contributed to a fad of athletic clothes (bobbed hair, T-shirts, and gym shorts), coexisting with “slender beauty” (permed hair, qipao, and high heels).\(^{137}\) During the process, engagement in tiyu 体育 activities (sport and physical education) was promoted as a civic obligation, especially for females.\(^{138}\) The new emphasis was put on women’s body rather than their up-to-date clothes, as suggested by a photograph of a less-covered woman with the caption—“It is not about new clothes; she is just showing you her jianmei legs.”\(^{139}\) Under another caption “masculine among women” displayed a female athlete Qian Xingshu (1915-1968) 钱行素 clad in a qipao with bobbed hair.\(^{140}\) Modern women were thought as “more beautiful than those in the past because of ‘progress in clothing,’ lively facial expressions influenced by Western films and, most important, ‘tender figures with even-proportioned muscles’ gained through tiyu.”\(^{141}\) In the pursuit of robust beauty, the once-popular floor-length qipao and high heels became out of favor. It shows that the fashion code of the qipao, like its smart styles, was changeable. Even the “backward” heels were appearing with sports such as swinging and miniature golf.\(^{142}\) The discovery of legs, linked with new ideals of female beauty, was flexibly involved with the images of New Woman and Modern Girl.

\(^{137}\) Ibid., 116.
\(^{138}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{139}\) Ibid., 111.
\(^{140}\) Ibid., 116.
\(^{141}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{142}\) Ibid., 122.
Underexposed to the state control, except the plain-style jianmei girls (associated with the figure of New Woman), the images of glamorously made-up Hollywood actresses still flooded the pictorial magazines, which also became the model of Modern Girl, clad in the high-split qipao with their exposed bare legs. Under the national crisis, the New Life Moment treated outlandish and provocative women’s clothes as excessive Westernization and as a representation of decline of morals. In terms of women’s clothes, those simple and practical were moral and thus favored by the regulations set by the government. Without any athletic elements, the bare legs revealed from side-slits of the qipao were only about sensuality. According to its innovative fabric, cut, and decorations, certain style of qipao fell into the group of “bizarre dress” and suffered the fate of being abolished.\textsuperscript{143} The regulations on qipao in Beijing included that “the hemlines were required to be within one inch of the top of the foot, the sleeves down to the elbow, the collar one-and-a-half inches high and the side splits no more than three inches above the knee.”\textsuperscript{144} The restrictions on the qipao hemlines and bare skin were also challenged. Concerning Beijing’s regulations on qipao, one female writer from the Linglong magazine claimed in 1934 that the regulations on “bizarre dress” should apply to males.\textsuperscript{145} In the same year, when Linglong’s editorial advocated for the young to embrace the bans on bare-skin fashions, the female writers, however, felt angry and shameful, asserting these bans were “hostile, insulting, and hysterical.”\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{145} Linglong 4, 33 (1934): 2101-2103.
\textsuperscript{146} Gao Yunxiang, “Nationalist and Feminist Discourses on Jianmei (Robust Beauty) during China’s ‘National Crisis’ in the 1930s,” 128.
As mentioned in the previous chapter, involved with *qipao*, the interaction between feminine modernity and national modernity did not only exist in consumer culture but also occurred in physical culture. In the Republic era, the attached values towards *qipao* were updated with marked changes: some voices grew greater while some just disappeared within decades. Early in 1926, published in the film magazine *Yinxing* (Silver Star), the article “Problem of Dressing Up” discussed the issues on the clothes worn by movie actresses. It states that albeit more progressive, compared with others, the fancy dresses of movie actresses were still requiring more creativity for they seemed to stress newness rather than beauty. It continues to caution the public against blindly following the fashion trends set by movie stars, since there were two possibilities about such fashionable clothes—one was considered as beautiful and the other was outlandish. Most importantly, it also points out that some critics, lacking in new knowledge and modern thinking, were too conservative to differentiate the beautiful from the outlandish and the seductive.\(^{147}\) To conclude, the discourse around women and *qipao* gathered different interpretations, the reasons of which may include the changing disruptive social values, and the distance and clash between the state regulations and women’s eager participation in keeping fashionable.

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\(^{147}\) *Yinxing* 1 October 1926, 28-30, quoted in Wu Hao, *Zhongguo funü fushi yu shenti geming*, 175.
CHAPTER 5: THE AFTERLIFE OF QIPAO

On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976), as the Chairman of Chinese Communist Party, announced the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. In this Chapter, I will analyze how the myths about qipao were reshaped in the Mao era (1949-1976) and the post-Mao era (1976-1989). In addition, I will trace how the interpretations of women’s appearance in the Republic era influenced the ideals of modern women in the People’s Republic of China (1949-present). The myths about qipao formed the impressions about the making of modernity as well as the nation.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), Shanghai women tended to dress in plain-style qipao. From the Anti-Japanese War to Mao’s Revolution, the power of Shanghai urban middle class, and Shanghai’s modernity, eroded. Qipao, as a modern icon in the Republic, touches on different spatiality and temporality. In the city of Shanghai, middle-class women frequented the dance halls and cinemas spending extra leisure hours dressing up. There was also a group of women at the bottom of society struggling for a living. When the Communist Party took power, qipao gradually fell out of favor largely because of its association with the urban middle-class taste, composed mainly of capitalists, the enemy of socialism.

Qipao in the Era of Mao Zedong (1949-1976)

In the 1960s, qipao was replaced by the nearly exclusive military uniforms throughout the entire country. Actually, Mao Zedong’s essay “The Women’s Revolutionary Army” in 1919 had already expressed his ideal about the new womanhood
in China, which may have influenced his political practice in rejecting women’s *qipao* and instituting military clothes. In this essay, he discusses the relationship between women’s clothing and women’s reform:

If a woman’s head and a man’s head are actually the same, and there is no real difference between a woman’s waist and a man’s, why must women have their hair piled up in those ostentatious and awkward buns? Why must they wear those messy skirts clinched tightly at their waist? I think women are regarded as criminals to start with, and tall buns and long skirts are the instruments of torture applied to them by men. There is also their facial makeup, which is the brand of a criminal; the jewelry on their hands, which constitutes shackles; and their pierced ears and bound feet, which represent corporal punishment. Schools and families are their prisons. They dare not voice their pain, nor step out from behind closed doors. If we ask, how can they escape this suffering, my answer is, only by raising a women’s revolutionary army.148

Under the rule of the People’s Republic of China, held by the Communist Party, women’s issues were given more attention, including “equality between men and women” and “women’s liberation.”149 Founded in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party originated in the May Fourth Movement, which helped promote Marxism. The May Fourth New Woman later became “an ancestor to the desexualized female communist cadre after 1949.”150 In the Maoist era, the *qipao* fashion declined, and the androgynous dress became popular. Antonia Finnane compares the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1979) to a marked time where “the militarization of Chinese society was visible in what people wore.”151 As she suggested, “the green and blue army and naval suits sported by Mao Zedong’s teenage fans during the years of the Cultural Revolution were thus not a

149 Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, introduction to *Translating Feminisms in China: A Special Issue of Gender and History*, 3.
quetic or aberrant fashion, but rather a logical product of a process of dress reform
which had its origins in new uniforms for the soldiers in the service of the Manchu
dynasty.”¹⁵² In the Cultural Revolution era, things that were once modern, and foreign,
transformed from “the new” to “the old,” which were to be smashed. Wang Guangmei 王
光美 (1921-2006), the wife of President Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (1898-1969), who wore a
qipao in 1963 in a visit to Indonesia, was humiliated in the struggle session for wearing
such a middle-class dress.¹⁵³

*Qipao in the Post-Mao Era (1976-1989)*

In the post-Mao era, as a symbol of Chineseness, *qipao* was worn on special
occasions. Since 1979, *qipao* have inspired the creation of various formal wear by
Chinese designers.¹⁵⁴ The style was borrowed as a uniform for women in the service
industry in mainland China, such as waitresses and hotel receptionists.

After China’s economic reforms in the 1990s, surrounded by a flow of foreign
goods, *qipao* resurged but it was no longer modern. The modified *qipao* was still
characterized by a tight-fitting design, a stand-up collar, and side slits. With a multitude
of mass-manufactured fashions available in the market, the hand-made *qipao* was less
competitive as it was time-and-money consuming. As in the 1910s, foreign styles, as a

¹⁵² Ibid., 130.
proper taste, became greatly appreciated, as they symbolized social progress. In the eyes of young generations, qipao might represent more nostalgia than modernity.

To conclude, the rise and fall of qipao was highly context-dependent. To a large extent, the Mao era (1949-1976) was more or less a “detour” in the history of modern China, which arguably begins with the founding of the Republic of China. Concerning the Western influence and facets of modernity in everyday life, the late Qing dynasty, the Republic era, and post-Mao era were easily to be linked together. Yet the obscure gender differentiation on clothes shown in the Mao era could find its precedents on the desexualized qipao favored in the New Life movement and imitation of males’ clothes during the revolutionary period in late Qing and early Republic. It is fair to say that the reformists and their thoughts in late Qing and the whole Republic period continued to inspire the revolutions (including the militarization of dress and women’s liberation) in Communist China in the course of the twentieth century.

156 Peter Zarrow, “Introduction: New Discourses and Everyday Life in Modern China,” 1.
157 Ibid.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In the history of modern China, women, with their increasingly high visibility, were becoming engaged in the wave of modernity, and at the same time, they were often considered as an instrument of Chinese modernity. The sensitivities towards women’s changing clothes were highly associated with their changing roles in the process of modernity. That is why women could interchangeably symbolize the New Woman, the modern woman, and the Modern Girl. During this period, Shanghai, as the most fashionable city in China, represented the heyday of modernity. Shanghai’s modernity also rendered complex identities. Even if the idea of modernity may appear in different discourses, it is still hard to define modernity precisely in the sense that it marked the present against antiquity.158 As the height of women’s fashion in the 1930s, qipao served as one prism through which one could observe how modernity evolved: on one hand, modernity was about material transformation in people’s daily life, like the changing of women’s clothing; on the other hand, modernity could also be about the ideas people held that represented the tensions between traditional and modern, Chinese and Western. While looking back, one cannot separate qipao from the traditional Chinese dress, of which shared the traditional craft, textiles, and decorations. As the signifier of Chineseness, qipao kept absorbing the Western influence on the cutting edge of modern women’s fashion. In this way, the significance of qipao itself could be understood as the compromises made between traditional and modern.

Moreover, the changing qipao played an important role in the development of visual culture. In Shanghai, in the 1930s, with the rise of urban culture and commercial culture, visual modernity constituted citizens’ everyday life. The advertisement calendar poster took hold of consumers’ imagination about Chinese modernity. Depicting one or two female figures, always in the latest fashion and lifestyle, the calendar poster was actually an emblem of the ephemeral and the eternal, the real and the imaginary, which also gave new features to the changing qipao. In the pictorial advertisements, qipao implies a modern material life: it could symbolize Western modernity as well as national modernity.

Considering everyday practice and disruptive social values, the contradictions on qipao and women’s body were also obvious, which were connected with the new discourses on feminine modernity and national modernity. The changes of the styles on qipao, as progressive modernity, endowed modern women with different identities. Meanwhile, the concerns about female bodies and new feminine beauty were voiced in the press and state restrictions. During this period, women’s identities became disputable and negotiable. The phenomenon shows the anxiety about modernity: modernity could bring positive changes as well as negative impacts.

After the Republic era, qipao was transformed from the favored to the discarded. With the changes in dress codes as well as ritual and behavior, the myths about qipao were recreated in different historical contexts. In dynamic China after the Republic, qipao was labeled as “nostalgia,” and it still marked off a positive transition from the past to the present.
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FIGURES

Figure 1: Old and new ao garment. From: Minlibao 4 August 1912. Reproduced from Wu Hao, Zhongguo funü fushi yu shenti geming (1911-1935) (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2008), 6.

Figure 2: The old-style ao garment was worn by the Han women in the late Qing. This upper-class woman had her feet bound. Reproduced from Xu Dong, Chi-Pao (Anhui: Huangshan shushe, 2011), 8.
Figure 3: Clothes make the man. In Shanghai’s foreign settlements, dress differentiated the foreigners from the domestic residents. From: Dianshizhai huabao (Dianshizhai Pictorial), June 1884.
Figure 4: The cut-fitting ao garment blurred the boundary between girl students and courtesans. From: Minlibao 24 July 1912. Reproduced from Wu Hao, Zhongguo funü fushi yu shenti geming (1911-1935) (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2008), 7.

Figure 5: The New Civilized Dress was often linked with girl students. From: the Liangyou magazine 4 (1926): 20.
Figure 6: The last empress Wanrong婉容 (1906-1946) in her Manchu robe. Reproduced from Sally Yu Leung, “The Last Empress in Qipao,” Ornament 35, no. 5 (2012): 59. Courtesy of Professor Wang, JSSI.
Figure 7: In the photograph taken in c. 1917, Sun Yat-sen was wearing the long gown, and Song Qingling was wearing the jacket-blouse and skirt. From: Song Qingling zai Shanghai (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1992), 35. Reproduced from Barbara Burman and Carole Turbin, eds., Material Strategies: Dress and Gender in Historical Perspective (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 243.
Figure 9: Autumn fashion design. From: the *Liangyou* magazine 50 (1930): 23.
Figure 10: The work of Ye Qianyu as a fashion designer. From: the *Linglong* magazine 3, 1 (1933): 20.
Figure 11: Shanghai street culture. From: the Liangyou magazine 103 (1935): 34.
Figure 12: “Two Girls,” painted by the Zhiying Studio, advertisement calendar poster for Kwong Sang Hong Ltd. (Guangshenghang), 1937, 52 cm x 76 cm. Reproduced from Ng Chun Bong, et al., comps., *Chinese Woman and Modernity* (Hong Kong: Joint Publisher Co., 1996), 44.
Figure 13: Untitled, painted by Xie Zhiguang, advertisement calendar poster for Ken-I-Kochojo Tablets (for digestive disorders), 1931, 54 cm x 78 cm. Reproduced from Ng Chun Bong, et al., comps., Chinese Woman and Modernity (Hong Kong: Joint Publisher Co., 1996), 79.
Figure 16: Indanthrene color cloth, artist unknown, mid-1930s, 53 cm x 76 cm. Reproduced from Ng Chun Bong, et al., comps., *Chinese Woman and Modernity* (Hong Kong: Joint Publisher Co., 1996), 96.
Figure 17: Bound feet and high heels. From: the Liangyou magazine 41 (1929): 34.

Figure 18: The fashion cycle. From: the Linglong magazine 5, 17 (1935): 995.
Figure 19.a: The length of *qipao*. From: the *Liangyou* magazine 150, 1940.
Figure 19.b: The length of *qipao*. From: the *Liangyou* magazine 150, 1940.
Figure 20: About athletic beauty, untitled, painted by the Zhiying Studio, advertisement calendar poster for Hwa Tung Tobacco Company, late 1930s, 54 cm x 78 cm. Reproduced from Ng Chun Bong, et al., comps., *Chinese Woman and Modernity* (Hong Kong: Joint Publisher Co., 1996), 108.
Figure 21: Illustration by Feng Zikai. *Zikai manhua xuan* [Collection of Feng Zikai’s Cartoons]. From: the Dacheng laojiukan database.
Figure 22: Untitled, painted by Kwan Cho Mau, advertisement calendar poster for Grande, Price & Co., Ltd., 1934, 51 cm x 76 cm. Reproduced from Ng Chun Bong, et al., comps., *Chinese Woman and Modernity* (Hong Kong: Joint Publisher Co., 1996), 135.