

Re-Creation and Misunderstanding of the Qipao from a Western Perspective

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Abstract. The qipao is an important symbol of Chinese traditional clothing culture, with its development process undergoing numerous evolutions from the late Qing Dynasty to the present. It not only reflects the changes in Chinese society but also illustrates the transformation of women's status and aesthetic concepts. In the era of globalization, the qipao has gradually become a source of inspiration for Western fashion design. However, during the process of re-creation, Western designers often adopt an "Orientalist" perspective, simplifying the profound cultural connotations of the qipao and transforming it into a symbol of mystery and sexuality. While this misunderstanding facilitates the international spread of Chinese culture, it also has negative impacts on the cultural symbolism of the qipao. This article reviews the historical background of the qipao, explores its re-creation and cultural misunderstandings within the Western fashion industry, and analyzes the positive and negative impacts of this phenomenon on the dissemination of Chinese culture and the global trend industry.

Keywords: Qipao; Chinese traditional culture; Western interpretation; misreading; fashion.

1. Introduction

The qipao is a highly representative female dress in Chinese national attire. It originated in Shanghai during the late Qing Dynasty and became a daily garment for Chinese women in the early 20th century. Typically crafted from silk, cotton, and other high-grade fabrics, the qipao is produced through cutting and sewing techniques, featuring soft lines and brilliant colors. With its unique Chinese style, the qipao not only embodies the essence of traditional culture but also carries the aura about modern fashion. It is an important part of Chinese traditional culture and plays a significant role in both Chinese culture and the fashion industry. Nowadays, the qipao is not only popular in China but also garners increasing attention and admiration worldwide.

As a crucial element of Chinese dress culture, the qipao has captured the attention of Western fashion circles, with many Western fashion practitioners attempting to adapt and transform its styles. While the re-creation of the qipao in Western countries aligns with certain aesthetic styles and fashion needs in Western culture, promoting the globalization of Chinese culture and enhancing global understanding of the qipao, this practice also simplifies the unique social and historical connotations behind the qipao. In the process of globalization, this can exert a reverse impact on local Chinese qipao culture. Therefore, the global dissemination of the qipao will lead to further reshaping of global fashion, with such reshaping having both favorable and unfavorable effects in various aspects.

This paper first traces the historical background of the development of the qipao, examining its series of reforms and evolutions from the late Qing Dynasty to modern China, which have formed its unique cultural symbol and function. Secondly, it analyzes the interpretation of the qipao under the backdrop of Western culture, focusing on its re-creation and the misunderstandings formed in this process. Lastly, this paper delves into the impact of the re-creation and misinterpretation of the qipao on the dissemination of international fashion industry and the Chinese culture, examining both positive and negative aspects.

2. Historical Background

2.1. The Evolution of Traditional Qipao

2.1.1. Late Qing Dynasty

The Opium War in 1840 broke the closed door of China during the Qing Dynasty, marking the beginning of modernization in ideological culture and social life. Under this social backdrop, modern Chinese women's dress began to evolve, and the origin of the qipao can be traced back to this time. Before the end of the Qing Dynasty, there was no specific mention of the term "qipao" in Manchu literature, and the Manchu people did not refer to their own robe or any female robe as "qipao". The term "qipao" was not used until after the establishment of the Republic of China [1].

In the late Qing Dynasty, the qipao featured a wide and loose body with a straight and sturdy silhouette. It was usually embroidered with various patterns, and the collar, sleeves, front placket, and hem were adorned with multiple wide rolled edges. The changyi (as shown in Figure 1) was a type of straight-cut robe worn for women in the Qing Dynasty. The top of the slits on both sides under the arms was decorated with ribbons and embroidered edges shaped like cloud-headed ruyi (a traditional Chinese symbol of good luck), forming a symmetrical design. The edges of the garment and the cuffs were adorned with multiple layers of exquisite, embroidered edges, ribbons, and rolled edges in various colors. As mentioned by Zhou Xibao in "History of Ancient Chinese Clothing," the long robes worn by Manchu women in their daily lives later evolved into the qipao worn by Han Chinese women. The long robes of Manchu women did not feature horseshoe-shaped sleeves; instead, they had flat and relatively large cuffs, and the skirt length was sufficient to cover the feet. The "undergarment" was such a robe, named as it was worn as an undergarment, as shown in Figure 2.



Fig 1. 19th century blue gauze butterfly flower pattern changyi, Bonhams auction House.



Fig 2. Late Qing Dynasty blue ground Tuanshou rattan embroidery shirt, 2013 spring sale at Christie's New York.

2.1.2. Qipao of the Republic of China Period

At this time, the silhouette of the qipao remained largely unchanged, still featuring the wide and loose style of the late Qing Dynasty. The collar evolved from the early style of no collar or low collar to the “yuanbao high collar,” which, at its highest point, was level with the nose. The sleeves were slightly tightened and shortened between the elbow and wrist. The length of the robe was reduced to between the knee and ankle. The lines were still relatively straight, and the colors were elegant. The collar, sleeves, and front placket were adorned with rolled edges, but they were much simpler than before, usually with only a few lines. The embroidery also trended towards simplicity, no longer used to signify status and identity but began to emphasize the feminine curves.

From 1926 to 1927, the hem of the qipao was still at a moderate height, and the sleeve cuffs adopted the characteristics of the “civilized new attire,” cut into an inverted large sleeve, which exposed more of the women's arms. During the Great Revolution, women flaunted their individuality in the trend of liberation and were influenced by social customs and the popularity of short skirts in Europe and America. The styles and decorations underwent more daring changes. The hem line of the qipao was raised to below the knee, and the sleeve cuffs also began to become smaller.

The 1930s were the heyday of the development of the qipao. At this time, the qipao featured a slender silhouette that coincided with the popular women's clothing silhouette in Europe. The qipao had transcended the single style of the previous Manchu women's robes and became more of a blend of Chinese and Western styles in terms of form (as shown in Figure 3). In the early 1930s, the length of qipao followed the style of the 1920s, with short qipaos being popular, and the hem length slightly below the knee. However, starting from 1932, the hem gradually became longer, reaching the ground when worn. As the qipao lengthened, the slits on the sides also rose higher, reaching almost up to the hips and legs by around 1934.



Fig 3. Black satin short sleeve (Metropolitan Museum Collection).

2.1.3. Contemporary Qipao

The mid-1950s to the mid-1960s were the golden era of the qipao in Hong Kong. On one hand, a large number of people from Shanghai migrated to Hong Kong, bringing with them the Shanghai “Hong Bang tailors” who had also relocated. These tailors introduced well-crafted Shanghai-style qipao to Hong Kong. On the other hand, Hong Kong qipao were also influenced by Western fashion trends, featuring tighter cuts that made the wearer appear sexier. “In the Mood for Love,” director named Wong Kar-wai who is a Hong Kong filmmaker, was released in Hong Kong in September 2000, with the story set in Hong Kong in the 1960s. The film showcased 21 unique qipao, which not only served as visual focal points but also became external expressions of the characters' emotions and inner worlds (Figures 4 and 5).

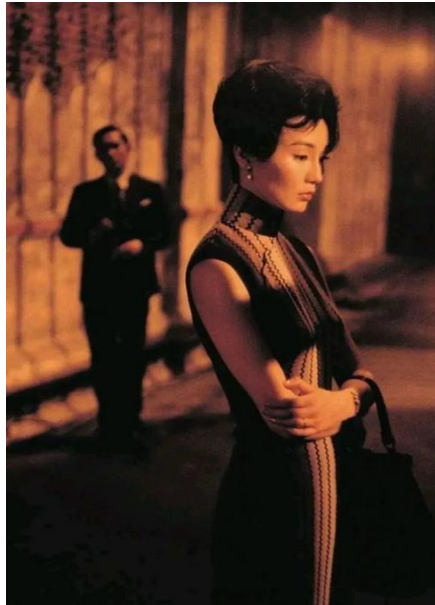


Fig 4. In the Mood for Love (1).

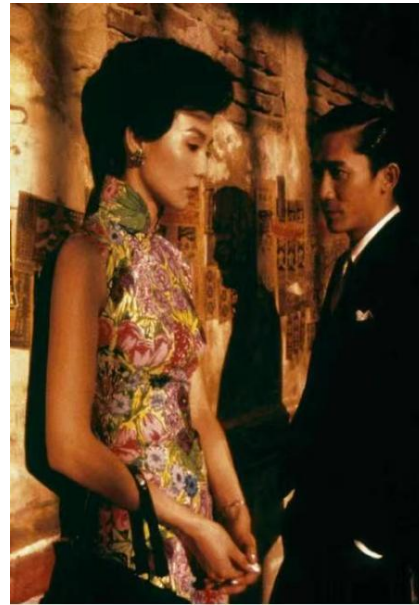


Fig 5. In the Mood for Love (2).

With the evolution of fashion trends, after decades of revisions and improvements, the qipao has transformed into a fashion that beautifully accentuates the curves of women in the 21st century today. Abroad, numerous renowned designers have been inspired by the qipao, launching versions with an international flair and even fusing the Chinese qipao with European-style nightwear. This iconic Chinese fashion, crafted from quintessential fabrics like silk and brocade, is worn by women with elegantly styled hair and graceful figures, exuding an Oriental charm that evokes a sense of tranquility (Figures 6, 8, and 9). In modern design, designers use the qipao as the foundation and design as the wings, adorning it with various celebratory elements from their hearts to create marvelous works. The following picture showcases the works from the 2019 Global Qipao Invitational Exhibition held by the China Silk Museum (Figure 7).



Fig 6. Xiangdai Gong Hangyu made a stunning appearance at the 2016 China International Fashion Week.



Fig 7. “The Suffering of Flowers Opens Again”
2019 Global Qipao Invitation Exhibition.



Fig 8. Yves Saint Laurent 1977.



Fig 9. Louis Vuitton Spring 2011.

2.2. Cultural Symbols and Functions of Qipao in Different Periods

The qipao is a traditional Chinese garment that carries profound cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. The rise and development of the qipao have witnessed the changes in modern Chinese society. From the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, its transformations also reflect the changes in the social status and lifestyle of Chinese women. It records the evolution of traditional Chinese culture in modern society.

During the Qing Dynasty, the qipao reflected the cultural implications bound to its era and the relatively unique aesthetic expressions of its wearers compared to those who wore different styles of qipao in later periods. It was popular among the Manchu aristocratic society and was characterized by luxury and exquisite materials. The Qing Dynasty qipao, to some extent, embodied the traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts regarding female beauty and was also used to demonstrate the political status, social status, and authority of the Manchu aristocratic class.

During the Republic of China period, many scholars and other individuals believed that the reason for the popularity of the qipao during this time was that women in the early Republic of China sought

independence in thought and the liberation of women's rights, emulating men by wearing long robes [2]. After the Han Dynasty, Han Chinese women gradually adopted the “upper garment and lower garment” style, commonly known as the “two-piece dress,” and wearing robes almost became a male prerogative. The practice of women wearing the “two-piece dress” also became a symbol of feudal ethics oppressing women. In the “Daughter’s Canon,” which is regarded as evidence of feudal ethics persecuting and discriminating against women, it is written: “Regarding the wearing of the two-piece dress, women are not equal to their husbands. In all matters, they must be humble and obedient, not like hens that crow at dawn” [2].

In the early period of the Republic of China, due to the country was flooded with Western culture and ideas, China suffered from the invasion of foreign powers and the wars between military governors. Progressive young people absorbed and promoted many Western cultures, and among them, young women actively engaged in the feminist movement targeting the current social situation, which had never occurred in the history of Chinese feudal society. Social movements dominated by young people, such as the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement, which emerged during this period, provided significant impetus for women to seek ideological emancipation and equal rights. Zhang Ailing expressed in her “A Change of Costume” the reason why women were enthusiastic about wearing qipaos during this period: they were not advocating the restoration of the Qing Dynasty, but because women wanted to imitate men. Under the influence of Western culture, women who devoted themselves to the idea of gender equality faced a huge gap between their ideals and reality. In shame and indignation, they rejected everything that was socially recognized as feminine [3]. Therefore, the qipaos in the early Republic of China were relatively austere. The qipaos of the Republic of China recorded social changes, embodied the rise of female power, and demonstrated the independent thinking of women.

In modern times, the cheongsam has become an important element of clothing. As a traditional Chinese garment, it has become an integral part of modern fashion. The contemporary improved cheongsam combines the different clothing characteristics of both Chinese and Western styles, radiating new vitality and charm, and better meets the aesthetic needs of modern women. It is not only popular in China but also increasingly attracting attention and admiration worldwide.

3. Western Interpretation of Qipao

As an important form of clothing in modern China, the shape of the qipao has continuously evolved in historical development. From the loose style at the beginning to the gradually slimming design, the qipao has always carried rich cultural connotations and social symbolic meanings. In recent years, with the deepening of globalization, qipao has gradually become an inspiration source for the Western fashion industry. However, when Western designers and brands reinterpret qipao, they often shown an “Orientalist” color in their designs. While this perspective promotes the internationalization of qipao, it also leads to a misunderstanding and simplification of Eastern culture.

3.1. Reinvention of Western Fashion Industry

In the mid-20th century, New York clothing manufacturer Bud Berman saw the potential of qipao in the Western market and established a garment factory called DYNASTY in Hong Kong in 1953. His designer Dora Sanders has improved traditional Chinese clothing and created qipao styles that are more in line with Western aesthetics and wearing habits, especially curved qipaos similar to Dior’s hourglass shape. These modified qipaos quickly became a fashionable choice for Western women for cocktail parties and evening wear (Figure 10). The key to this transformation is that under the influence of Western culture, the original loose Chinese qipao evolved into a garment that emphasizes female curves and mainly serves the aesthetic needs of Western women.



Fig 10. In 1960, model Marola Witt wore a piece designed by Americans and made in Hong Kong named for Suzy Perette's dress.

This improvement process revealed an interesting phenomenon: the curvy qipao that people are familiar with today was actually born in a Western cultural environment, and the original design goal was mainly to cater to the aesthetics of Western women. This phenomenon shows how the qipao has been transformed from a traditional Eastern garment into a symbol adapted to Western fashion needs in the process of reinvention in the Western fashion world.

In later fashion trends, famous designers and brands such as John Galliano and Gucci often drew inspiration from qipao and incorporated its elements into modern designs. This fusion of oriental and occidental cultures not only brings new creative inspiration to the fashion industry, but also promotes the exchange and collision of both cultures. The widespread application of qipao elements in Western fashion reflects the phenomenon of fashion trends and cultural mix-and-match in the context of globalization. In many Western fashion magazines and shows, qipao or its elements have become eye-catching highlights, which has further enhanced the popularity of qipao on the international fashion stage.

3.2. Misunderstanding from the Perspective of Orientalism

It should be noted that the cross-cultural reinvention of the qipao is not entirely positive. The traditional qipao is not only a form of clothing, but also a microcosm of historical, cultural and social changes. Its evolution is closely related to issues such as the women's liberation movement and national identity. In recent years, with the deepening of globalization, qipao has gradually become an inspiration source for the Western fashion industry. However, when Western designers and brands reinterpret qipao, they often have an "orientalist" color, which inevitably involves cultural misunderstandings.

"Orientalism" refers to a certain fixed way of thinking about Eastern culture in the Western world, which is usually romanticized, mystified, or even alienated. From this perspective, qipao is often simplified as a symbol of Eastern mystery and sexiness, while the complex cultural meaning behind it is ignored [4]. For them, it doesn't matter whether Orientalism represents which countries in Asia. As a result, they often incorporate Japanese styles into their Chinese style designs. For example, John Galliano made a skirt inspired by Peking opera in the Dior 2003 spring and summer haute couture series, but it used unique Japanese patterns (Figure 11). The same situation happened in the design of Heaven Gaia's 2017 spring and summer series with the theme of the Old Summer Palace again, and the flowers on it also used Japanese patterns [5].



Fig 11. Dior 2003 spring and summer advanced customization series.

For example, Galliano emphasizes the sexy nature of qipao in his design, further highlighting the female body curves through twill tailoring. This design caters to Western society's stereotypes of "oriental" female images, associating qipao with sexiness and exoticism, rather than its multiple social functions and historical significance in Chinese culture. This cultural misunderstanding has had a negative impact on the development of qipao. First, the traditional cultural connotation of qipao has been simplified, making it difficult for Western audiences to understand its deep historical and social background. Second, as a national costume, the uniqueness and complexity of the qipao have been misunderstood and blurred in cross-cultural re-creation, gradually losing its original cultural symbolic meaning.

4. The Impact of Qipao Recreation and Misinterpretation

4.1. Impacts to Chinese Culture

4.1.1. Positive Impacts

On the one hand, the recreation of the qipao contributes to the preservation and promotion of Chinese culture. This recreation not only retains its classic elements, such as leaping dragons and colorful moirés, but also integrates modern design concepts and materials, making it more aligned with contemporary aesthetic preferences [6]. Such innovation reinforces ethnic cultural confidence and, through the exhibition and popularization of the qipao, attracts more individuals both domestically and internationally. This may subsequently lead to a deeper interest in traditional Chinese culture, thereby enhancing cultural power.

On the other hand, the recreation of the qipao facilitates cultural innovation and integration. The process of recreating the qipao is inherently an act of cultural innovation, where new styles are created by fusing Eastern and Western design elements. This innovation not only enriches the forms of information expression through the qipao as a clothing medium but also promotes cultural exchange and integration between the East and the West.

4.1.2. Negative Impacts

However, the recreation of the qipao may also lead to misinterpretation and commercialization of Chinese culture. In the process of recreating the qipao, there are instances where misinterpretation or over-commercialization of traditional culture occurs. Some designers have chosen to recreate the qipao without sufficient understanding of it and other elements of Chinese culture [7], resulting in the qipao being unable to embody its original cultural connotations in their works.

Furthermore, in the process of excessive commercialization of the qipao, due to the strong influence of Western culture in the international fashion industry, qipao culture may become a passive element in the cultural consumption process for Westerners [8]. On the other hand, under the profound

impact of Western fashion culture in globalization, some individuals may be misled in their perception of the original form of traditional culture while pursuing fashion trends. If the recreation of the qipao fails to effectively convey its cultural implications, it may exacerbate the aforementioned crisis of cultural identity.

4.2. Impact on the International Fashion Industry

4.2.1. Positive Impacts

In international fashion industry, the qipao can drive the development of international fashion. The qipao has attracted the attention of the international fashion world with its unique “exotic” charm that is distinct to Western society. As more and more designers incorporate qipao elements into their design works, the qipao has now become a popular element in international fashion design. This cross-cultural expression not only enriches the design inspiration of the international fashion industry but also promotes the cultural diversification of global fashion trends.

On the other hand, the use of qipao elements can facilitate cross-cultural communication. The international spread of the qipao has built a bridge for communication between different cultures. Through the display and exchange of qipao, Western audiences can gain a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese culture and aesthetic concepts. At the same time, the internationalization of the qipao also provides a stage for Chinese designers to show their talents, which can be seen as a pathway for Chinese designers to access international resources to some extent.

4.2.2. Negative Impacts

However, the improper use of qipao elements may still lead to the distortion of cultural symbols. In the international fashion industry, the qipao is sometimes simplified into a cultural symbol or a specific decorative element, and its deep cultural connotations may be neglected or distorted in this process [9]. This phenomenon not only may trigger cultural misinterpretation but also further objectifies the Chinese culture behind the qipao within the power structure of the international fashion industry.

5. Conclusion

Through an analysis of the history of the qipao and its comprehensive impact on the international level, this paper finds that the recreation of the qipao on the international fashion stage has certain positive effects in promoting the inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese culture, driving the diversification of international fashion trends, and facilitating cross-cultural communication. However, there are also negative impacts such as cultural misinterpretation, excessive commercialization, crisis of cultural identity, and distortion of cultural symbols. The author believes that while acknowledging the aforementioned positive impacts, it is also important to actively understand and be aware of the non-negligible negative impacts and consider the potential consequences they may bring in the future.

Future research on the qipao should explore more innovative paths that align with contemporary aesthetic demands while preserving its original cultural connotations, enabling it to better integrate into modern life. By strengthening China’s exploration of international fashion, the international dissemination and cross-cultural communication of the qipao can be promoted, enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture that originates from China itself rather than through the lens of Westerners. At the same time, society should also pay attention to people’s cultural identity with the qipao and enhance their understanding of traditional culture by promoting the popularization of qipao history and other means.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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