# Gender Dress Codes in Different Social Settings of 21-Century China

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**Abstract.** As society progresses and the internet becomes more convenient for people to communicate, the idea of feminism and the issue of gender equality has been widely discussed on the internet. As the living standard is improving, people tend to use varied ways to convey their attitudes and message to others, including their outfits. This research analyzes three distinct occasions, the campus, workplace, and public places, including clothing designs from luxury designers nowadays. The study aims to explore how gender dress codes in these social settings represent gender equality and deliberate on the causation of these dress codes, shedding light on the connection between gender equality and outfits and promoting gender equality in Chinese society, which makes this research meaningful. The study also fills in the blank of the former research study in which the connection between equality and dress codes is more evident and comprehensive than before.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, dress codes, social settings.

## 1. Introduction

Gender equality means that anyone, regardless of the person's gender, can enjoy equal conditions for the full realization of their human rights and are equally able to participate in and benefit from political, economic, cultural, and social development activities. It is essential since it measures the degree of social development. Women, which account for half of the population, are participants and beneficiaries of a society in an all-around way; the equal and coordinated development for women and men is essential to build a well-off society. Human beings are composed of men and women, and the relationship between men and women is one of society's most standard social relations. Therefore, to establish a scientifically developed framework, it is necessary to highlight gender equality when focusing on overall growth. A society with comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development is bound to be one in which men and women are equal and develop collaboratively. Hence, gender equality is essential in society. Fashion is people's temporary admiration for something in the community, representing a community's popular culture and showing people's manners; it expresses people's feelings. Fashion is the most direct way to establish gender equality in a society since it integrates societal ideologies into everyday life. Many people use their outfits to convey messages explicitly and show their attitudes, thus representing people's attitudes toward gender in society.

Relying on people's attitudes and openness, outfits can promote a sense of gender equality in a society with its fashion trends. Fashion trends might vary from one society to another, and a way to analyze the trend is by reading a fashion magazine. In October 2005, Vogue published its first "Vogue China" fashion magazine: a blonde hair female model wearing a fur coat. At that time, China was still led by western aesthetics, and Chinese people imitated foreigners' outfits and appreciated "yanghuo," meaning "foreign products." Appreciation for male praise also existed. In "Vogue China" in December 2010, Lara Stone is the cover model, and one of the subtitles is "From party leftover girl to party saint girl." Implying the appreciation of male praise and willingness to get married, the subtitle written by the editor confirms a conventional view in Chinese society that women have to get married; otherwise, they would become "leftover." Until this point, Chinese men could not have a "connection" with fashion officially since no male model was on the front cover of Vogue magazine. However, there was a turning point in 2015. Influenced by Korean pop culture, in "Vogue China" in July 2015, Kris Wu and Kendall Jenner shot the cover together. Kris Wu is the first male on the

"Vogue China" front cover after ten years of the first issue of "Vogue China." In "Vogue China" in January 2020, five Chinese celebrities, including singers, actors, and models, shot the front cover. The subtitles are "Now for Tomorrow" and "Vogue Values: environmental protection, diversity, creativity, optimism, and respect," showing a more modern view of fashion and an increase in Chinese fashion influence. Thus, these changes in front covers of "Vogue China" reflect changes in Chinese people's attitudes toward fashion and standard views of gender in Chinese society over time.

Even though these changes occurred, a handful of studies were done on the differences and connections between fashion, specifically dress codes of gender in different social settings, and gender equality in China. Through analyzing three distinct occasions, the campus, workplace, and public places, this research will explore how gender dress codes in these social settings represent gender equality, shedding light on the connection between gender equality and outfits and promoting gender equality in Chinese society.

## 2. Gendered Dress Code in Social Contexts

### 2.1 Gender Dress Code on Campus

The school uniform represents the specific dress codes or the expectations of the dressing style of students. People commonly view the school uniform could promote a sense of equality and reducing the mind of rivalry. However, school uniforms have limitations on their path to reaching gender equality in some aspects. In China, people commonly view students as "the flower of the country," a well-known metaphor comparing students to the hope of the future of China since they are growing up with cares of Chinese identity and having the responsibility to build this great nation. In comparison, the main themes of the typical school uniform design are "youth, beauty, and intelligence"[1], the design for Chinese school uniforms displays distinctive characteristics according to different historical stages in China. After forming a new government in China, society paid attention to the youth, the student group. However, the community was promoting the figures of workers, peasants, and soldiers. The students' uniforms were not showing the stage of youth but were full of political and hierarchal attributes since students were transforming into future workers, peasants, and soldiers. For example, many Chinese school uniforms are colorless, but only with the color grey of typical uniforms of farmers since the grey fabric is cheap and the soldier green of the Liberation Army. Hence, except for children who could wear colorful clothes and students in the Young Pioneers who could wear white shirts and red scarf for their school uniform, other students' uniforms do not have to convey a sense of youth but conform to figures of the representative group, especially the Liberation Army. After the government reform and opening to the outside world, more trade with cultural exchange occurred, leading to increased fashion communication between China and the world, but this had little effect on the school uniform. The school uniform still evaded a sense of youth and novelty while conforming with comfort and practicability; this is the typical Chinese school uniform in today's society.

The formation of the school uniform style was affected by the long-lasting conventional views of the students and the education system. In Chinese public schools, students usually have two sets of uniforms: one is sportswear, and the other is formal uniform. The sportswear uniform is consistent with 20th-century China-styled uniforms, as mentioned in the last paragraph, representing workers, peasants, and soldiers. The sportswear uniforms between genders have little difference: only the sizes fitting male and female students' body shapes differ. In contrast, society set the formal uniforms of Chinese republic schools with more stereotypes of genders: male students would wear white shirts and long pants while female students would wear white shirts and short skirts. This style of formal uniform does not consist of conventional views, which are the "workers, peasants, and soldiers" style, and is more of a western style. Since the ceremonial uniform of female students is usually only shirts and skirts, female students who do not like to wear dresses have no freedom to choose. Furthermore, schools require female students to wear stockings with the formal uniform, covering their lower legs with white fabric. This requirement for stocking evolved from the traditional aesthetics of China, in

which a woman's legs are prettier when they are whiter and with fewer "flaws." This aesthetics, with male criticisms of the "ugly," promoted unhealthy competition among women, called the female race, leading to body shame and the appearance of anxiety. However, as globalization takes its role in conforming to the world, society becomes more diverse, and the sense of being white and flawless as the aesthetics should no longer exist in official materials like school uniforms. Also, school uniform makers should consider producing a new set of formal female uniforms similar to the male ones to diminish the gender inequality of school uniforms and provide greater freedom of dressing comfortably for the female group.

### 2.2 Gender Dress Code in the Workplace

Before the 1970s, female in the workplace was rare since the Chinese traditional cultural belief treats females as inferior to males and persuades women to take care of the family instead of working. In the white-collar class, women faced pressures from many aspects, including the low educational background due to the lack of educational opportunities provided for women, forces from their families, and gender segregation in the workplace [2]. Gender segregation was the most significant pressure for women since it included salary inequality, fewer promotion opportunities than men, and working jobs with a lack of vision. As Chinese society is progressing and becoming more "open-minded," the conditions of women in the workplace are improving. Nowadays, women in the workplace learn how to express themselves and show their strength by using different styles of outfits, Thus, clothing symbols play an essential role in women showing their attitudes in the workplace.

The Chinese white-collar class, representing the female group in the workplace of China, has eight crucial factors when determining their outfit attitudes, including fashionability, equality, environmental suitability, conservatism, economy, practicability, comfort and efficiency, and egocentricity [3]. Their business suits can be determined by two types: soft and stiff. The soft, called "rou" in Chinese conforms to the fur women worn throughout history and represents the feminine characteristic of conventional Chinese views. Since women might need to handle complex work and challenges in their jobs that require brainpower, mental exhaustion might appear to them afterward. Women then need comfortable suits with soft fabrics to make them feel better physically, not to wear suits that add more pressure to their bodies. Regardless of the physical comfort brought by soft suits, some women wear soft suits to show their feminine characteristics, conveying that they, as women, can work in the same position as men, which promotes the sense of gender equality in work. On the other hand, the stiff suit is trendy for women nowadays since it conforms to the roughness of men, which shows the "strength" from both the inner and outside appearance of women. Leather was a common material used to make men's clothing, mainly in the 20th century, and it sets a common understanding of men's stiff clothing that represents masculinity [4]. The rigid suit women wear in the workplace conforms to men's stiff clothing and tells that women can be tough and robust just like men. Sometimes, women might use colors to show their attitudes in the workplace [2]. For instance, a woman wearing a blue suit, which the paint is conveying that she is calm and unhurried, but at the same time, the color is unconsciously pulling her away from others, creating a distance between the woman and the community.

Luxury brands always take the lead in fashion trends worldwide; starting from Coco Chanel in the 20th century, more luxury brands focus on expressing the power of women and using clothing designs to reduce gender inequality. One old luxury brand, Balenciaga, gained fame worldwide due to its unique clipping. In Balenciaga's 2020 Spring/Summer ready-to-wear collection shows, designer Demna Gvasalia designed a runway similar to the European Union in which the ground runway is paved with the color blue from the flag of the European Union and the shape of the runway is swirling, correspond to the Congress of EU. Different from the splendid lights of other brands, lighting on the ceiling in this show is the same as the incandescent lamp in the workplace. These settings of the runway emphasize the reality within the expression of clothing. Furthermore, some models in this show were not professionals but lawyers, doctors, and managers, which further conveys a sense of

reality and workplace on the runway. Referring to the increasing number of female politicians who appeared in the EU, Demna aims to underscore the potential role of women in politics. The clothing design of Demna for females in this show also reflected Demna's feminist ideas supporting women's rights in the workplace. The overly underscoring of the shoulder line and the oversized model of clothes provide women with "powers." The straight shoulder line is a typical male attribute that emphasizes men's advanced muscles over women's. The oversize model weakens the illustration of women's body shapes; whether the woman is fat or skinny, her body shape is all under the clothes [5]. These designs of power dressing of Demna diminish the body differences between genders. The "powers" represent physical capability and mental strength over the patriarchy, where men take the lead. Many women in China follow this power-dressing trend; the tag "Workplace Power Dressing" on a Chinese social medium called "Xiaohongshu" has over ten thousand posts, showing a popular trend in female outfits in China. However, there are some controversies over "power dressing" and gender equality. One famous British designer Lee Alexander Mcqueen once said, "If you have no chest, I can help you shape it," connecting the shape of clothing with the symbols that women are willing to represent. Inversely, one of the most outstanding feminist designers, Coco Chanel, argued, "Do not lengthen the width of the shoulders, and do not deliberately highlight the outline of the chest. A beautiful coat should try to fit the body perfectly," conveying that women do not have to shape their body consciously [6]. Coco Chanel's argument might represent a point closer to achieving gender equality: men and women can wear what they want without real "restrictions" about their body shapes. At the same time, Alexander Mcqueen is trying to help women to achieve greater gender equality by shaping women's body shapes into individually perceived "perfect" shapes. Hence, both designs contribute to gender equality through women's clothing designs. Hence, women in the workplace nowadays use distinct clothing designs and symbols to convey their attitudes.

### 2.3 Gender Dress Code in Public Space

Gender dress codes in public areas are more diverse, and people have more options for outfits. However, in China, the freedom of dress codes varies depending on the development of that specific area. For instance, in these first-tier and new first-tier cities, including Chengdu, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and more, women have more options when choosing their outfits [7]. When a woman is wearing a lolita, a Japanese-styled skirt, on the street in one of these cities, people might compliment her; contrastingly, when the same girl walking on the road in a less developed city with the same skirt, she might be criticized as unpatriotic to her country, China, even on a normal day [8]. Some Chinese people criticize people wearing lolita or other Japanese-style clothing during the national holiday or other days with a solid Chinese nationalism; this is understandable since China is famous for its national pride and culture. However, a woman wearing revealing clothing does not directly reflect her manner as a human being but simply chooses to express herself by wearing what she likes, especially on days without patriotism demonstrations. Similarly, many Chinese people who live in rural areas criticize women wearing revealing clothing as "whore" and "not keeping women folk." This sort of ideology comes from conventional thinking, which connects the exposure of women's bodies with the message of "sex," limiting women's freedom of clothing [9]. Ironically, men's upper part of their bodies could be naked in a public area without criticizing their "clothing" as being inappropriate. Another standard limitation on dress codes, but for men, is the dress or skirt in Chinese public spaces. According to history, many countries in the past had the custom of men wearing a dress since it is comfortable and fits the male body's biological structure. This custom has gone as time passes, and significant changes to its opposite aspect appear, claiming a man should never wear a dress to represent his "feminine" characteristic. This change also results from a Chinese convention, claiming "a strong youth makes a strong country," reflecting praises to typical masculine attributes, limiting men's outfits. Online criticism of "sissies" stems from "gender stereotypes," according to gender experts. However, several Chinese state media outlets have weighed in. From "tender" to "beautiful" and then "niang," or sissy, relevant vocabularies promote the progression of morbid aesthetics, Xinhua said [10]. The famous "feminine style" is a deliberately strengthened and

distorted presentation of "human design.". Hence, the gender equality of public dress codes for men and women varies in different aspects.

## 3. Suggestions

In order to reduce these gender inequality, the most crucial factor is to wait for these conventions to subside, but that is the progress of the whole society, so the gender dress codes in the workplace and public space are hard to be changed in a way to improve gender equality from perspectives of the society. However, a simple way to reduce gender inequality in school uniforms is that school uniform makers should consider producing a new set of formal female uniforms similar to the male ones to diminish the gender inequality of school uniforms and provide greater freedom of dressing comfortably for the female group. Moreover, more creative and rebelling designers, such as Demna Gvasalia, can be on the stage to present clothing designs against the conventional gender dress codes, promoting further gender equality, not only for simple men and women but the gender of the minority.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, gender equality in dress codes in schools, workplaces, and public spaces varies. While reflecting women's attitudes through workplace outfits, the female group faces a distinct gender inequality on campus and in public, depending on different aspects. At the same time, men also have dress codes consistent with gender inequality in public caused by the conservative ideology of society. However, there are only three social settings in this research, and gender stereotypes represented by dress codes might exist in diverse social contexts with variations in different regions of China, which makes the research have limitations. Future studies should deliberate on the effects of clothing designs or the formation of the community's traditional culture in China compared with that of other countries.

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