

Weaving history: the transformation of Chinese women's clothing and social status from the 1950s to today

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Abstract. Women's clothing is an effective carrier for expressing women's inner needs and showcasing their charm. The clothing of women in different periods not only reflects the aesthetic changes of women in different periods, but also reflects the changes in women's social status in a specific period. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the changes in Chinese women's clothing have been closely related to the changes in Chinese society at that time, and new changes have emerged after the reform and opening up. It has been proven that women's clothing in different periods can accurately reflect the changes in China's socio-economic, political, and cultural development, as well as demonstrate the recognition of women's status and acceptance of free and open thinking in Chinese society at different times. This article focuses on the changes in Chinese women's clothing during three periods: from the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the reform and opening up in 1978 after the reform and opening up in 1978, and the present. The changes in women's clothing can accurately reflect the ideological changes in Chinese society and the different social statuses of Chinese women.

1 Introduction

The transformation of women's clothing has always been an important reflection of women's social status and the degree of social acceptance of women's freedom.

Fashion is often described as a 'language', 'code,' or 'system' because, like words, clothing may convey thoughts and meanings. However, the symbolic connotations associated with fashion are mutable and can alter over time, occasionally reacting to social and political developments as well as seasonal changes [1]. With the progress of Chinese society and the deepening of globalization, the social status of Chinese women has become completely equal to that of men, and women's freedom of dressing has also been fully accepted and recognized by society. The diverse range of clothing options for women highlights the empowerment of women's identities, autonomy, and lifestyle choices. It is not the place of men to dictate these decisions, and social involvement is not necessary. A new chapter in the history of women's freedom is heralded by the diversity of clothing alternatives available to them, as well as their independence and spontaneity in dressing [2].

Although the current society has reached an unprecedented level of openness in the free acceptance of women's clothing compared to before, and women have the right to fully showcase their charm, people are not familiar with the changes and specific characteristics of women's clothing from the founding of New China to the 1990s. Research on this period in society is also very limited,

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and people cannot fully understand the research results of women's clothing and women's status during this period from the literature. Understanding past history plays an extremely important role in future development.

This article is based on different literature materials on the changes in Chinese women's clothing, attempting to supplement and expand the information on the changes and characteristics of Chinese women's clothing since 1949, as well as the changes in the status and social openness of Chinese women. This study subdivides the time period from 1949 to the present, with China's reform and opening up as the turning point, dividing it into two historical stages: 1948 to 1978 and 1978 to the present. In each time period, a decade is used as the measurement unit to describe in detail the changes in Chinese women's clothing every ten years, as well as the social status and acceptance of openness by women in society.

2 Before 1978 (1980s)

2.1 In 1950s

In 1948, New China was established. Everything is completely new, including women's equal status and dressing style. In the 1950s, the People's Republic of China had just been established, and women had transformed from being subordinate to men in the past to independent individuals, possessing freedom and equal rights with men, and their social status had significantly improved. Women can also work independently like men. Clothing is the basic identity of people in society and reflects social status. Fashion changes based on social culture, economy, and religion [3]. At that time, Chinese society lacked labor force, and work occupied the vast majority of people's time. In this social context, women's dual-use shirts that were easy to carry and suitable for work and life emerged. They were one of the main clothing for Chinese working women in the 1950s and even the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, women's dual-use shirts were also known as "welcoming attire". They did not have a waistband and had a small suit collar in the shape of a straight line. They were mainly long-sleeved and concise. In addition, at that time, camisole overalls were also very popular among women and were considered a symbol of independence and self-improvement. The only clothing that can relatively highlight women's characteristics is the dress "Blaji" imported from the Soviet Union. The "Brajii" dress had short sleeves and a tight waist and was mainly decorated with floral and grid decorations. It was practical and aesthetic and could reflect the friendship between China and the Soviet Union. It was the preferred clothing for young women at that time. However, during this period, most women's clothing was dominated by work clothes, with a basic form similar to that of men. The colors were also predominantly dark, and even patching clothes became a fashion trend. At that time, the catchphrase was: "New three years, old three years, sewing and patching for another three years" [4]. This also reflects the spiritual attributes and sustenance of working women who can withstand half of the workforce.

2.2 1960s to 1970s

With the changes in China's diplomacy in the 1960s, the previously imported "Brajii" and Soviet-style clothing gradually faded out of the sight of the Chinese people, resulting in a new type of women's clothing. Women's clothing has also added a strong class color on the basis of its original simplicity. In the 1960s, especially during the Cultural Revolution, the revolutionization, militarization, and class consciousness of women's clothing became more severe. Women's clothing has become increasingly rigid in terms of style and even color. Only blue, gray, white, and green can be used as the main colors, and the use of bright colors and patterns in women's clothing was extremely taboo during this period [5]. It became the main feature of women's clothing at that time.

During the decade from 1967 to 1977, Chinese society entered a stage of class revolution, with many things suspended from development, and women's clothing was no exception. All things revolve around "class struggle", and young people, regardless of gender, are popular with military

attire as their beauty. During this period, the most typical and favored clothing among women were military uniforms and educated youth attire. The predecessor of military uniforms was Zhongshan attire, but the visible patch bag of Zhongshan attire was changed to a hidden bag. At that time, people took pride in wearing military uniforms, believing that they represented authority and justice. The next popularity was the military green attire worn by Chairman Mao Zedong when he was at Tiananmen Square. After being fervently admired and promoted, it even became the daily attire of the middle class at that time. "It is agreed that celebrities tend to have more knowledge about fashion trends than common people. Clothing or fashion is one of the easiest ways to follow when it comes to ceremonial and trends." [6] Previously, there were various military green military uniforms with Chairman Mao's badges.

Due to the impact of natural disasters and in response to government calls, a large number of intellectuals have gone to the countryside to become educated youth. Among them, the floral and plaid shirts worn by educated female youth are seen by rural women as symbols of the city and knowledge. "Their clothing appears fashionable, novel, and somewhat unique compared to the local people and has a greater impact on the local people, especially women. They are very envious of the students who come to these big cities. They envy them all for being cultural figures, and then envy their clothing." [7] They refer to the novel clothing worn by these educated youth as "educated youth clothing" and promote and gradually become popular. During this historical period, women's clothing was influenced by the social background and had a strong sense of class consciousness. However, it still lacked its own characteristics and personality, and rigidity, singularity, and class became the main theme of women's clothing at that time.

3 After 1978

In 1978, the implementation of reform and opening up renewed China's appearance. Women's clothing is also gradually finding its own style in the rapid social progress and innovation, and women are also pursuing and expressing their charm more. The clothing of men and women has become increasingly clear in distinguishing their own characteristics and differences, and the era of gender dilution in men's and women's clothing is gone forever. However, in the early stages of the reform and opening up, people's ideological concepts were still relatively conservative and backward, and their clothing and attire continued the style before the reform and opening up, including women who were still full of strong colors of workers, peasants, and soldiers.

3.1 In 1980s

In the 1980s, with the deepening progress and development of reform and opening up, young women had a brand new pursuit in clothing and attire. Among them, bell-bottomed pants, jeans, casual pants, and suits and trousers are typical representatives of this modern style of clothing. Bell bottoms originated in England in the 17th and 18th centuries, when maritime trade was developed and numerous merchant ships sailed on the sea all year round. In order to facilitate the rescue of drowning personnel, the British designed the legs of the pants to be relatively enlarged, presenting a trumpet shape. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, bell-bottomed pants became widely popular in mainland China with the trend of popular songs in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Jeans originated in the western regions of the United States, and this clothing was mainly worn by cowboys, representing the spirit of exploration and adventure. With the development of China's reform and opening up, jeans have gradually been introduced into the country and are loved by young people who are unconventional and enjoy pursuing excitement, such as young students and workers. From the beginning to the present, jeans have become increasingly diverse in fabric and style. Casual pants have also been introduced from abroad to China. Due to its convenience and comfort for women's travel and daily life, young women particularly love this type of clothing.

With the opening of China's borders, suits and trousers have once again entered the sight of the Chinese people, and suits have regained vitality in China. "Even farmers carrying hoes are wearing

suits.” [8] Under such a great social trend, women also wear suits and dresses. Skirts were a clothing style that excited Chinese women who had been suppressed by traditional thinking for many years in that era, and it best reflected the curves of women's bodies.

Dresses are convenient to wear, cool and comfortable, and save fabric, which was an excellent choice for Chinese women who had just entered the era of openness and restraint. The dresses popular in the 1980s were mostly collarless and had a simple design. There were also straight skirts, shirt skirts, spring and autumn outfits, tank skirts, and so on.

In addition, with the popularity of suits and the gradual increase in people's purchasing power at that time, woolen sweaters became popular nationwide, and the trend of woolen sweaters becoming outerwear-oriented and fashionable became increasingly apparent. The fashionable woolen sweater design is based on loose and elongated designs, highlighting the characteristics of the outer garment. There are also many innovations in the production process, mainly using twisted patterns, squares, jacquard, embroidery, and other decorative methods. In the 1980s in China, with the deepening development of reform and opening up and social progress, clothing that downplayed the female gender had become a thing of the past. The charm and unique characteristics of women were becoming more and more prominent, and there was more and more novel clothing available for women to wear and choose from.

3.2 In 1990s

In the 1990s, a socialist market economy system with Chinese characteristics was gradually established, and China's reform and opening up entered a new stage. The people's lives were also gradually approaching a moderately prosperous society. The rapid development of the clothing processing and manufacturing industry, as well as the advancement of manufacturing technology, have made clothing manufacturing more exquisite and freed people from the era of hand-sewn clothing. Women also pay more attention to lifestyle taste, and their love for beauty is once again thoroughly stimulated. Women not only consider clothing as a necessity of life, but also as a personalized and idolized symbol. Women's clothing tends to be more fashionable, high-quality, and high-end. In addition, during this period, the concept of "returning to nature" was warmly welcomed by people, and diversified elements were reflected in clothing design. "The raw materials of clothing are mostly natural materials such as cotton, hemp, and raw silk. Clothing emphasizes ecological materials. Popular colors are all taken from nature, such as earth, bark, and rock." [9] In addition, the concept of thrift was re-advocated, emphasizing conservation and waste utilization. In design elements, unusual shapes such as worn-out and intentional wear and tear were also introduced, especially in the denim series of women's clothing at that time, this technique was often used. From this, it can be seen that in the 1990s, China's socio-economic development was more rapid. Although women's clothing was similar in variety to the 1980s, the social value and charm that clothing brought to women were far greater than before. The quality and popularity of women's clothing further improved, and fashionable clothing also entered more and more women's wardrobes.

4 The 21st century

After entering a new century, China's reform and opening up continued to deepen and develop, and the social economy further improved. In addition, with the rise of the Internet, more and more Chinese traditional clothing has been known and popularized by the Chinese people, such as Nanjing Yunjin, which has a 1500-year history. "Applying the traditional elements of Yunjin clothing to modern clothing, giving the characteristics of the times, making Yunjin clothing integrate traditional and modern, endowing tradition with new ideas, becoming the new favorite of the people and going to the world, is the focus of the current opening of Yunjin." [10] It lets the traditional dress be integrated into people's lives, especially women's lives.

In addition, due to the rapid development of society and the fast-paced pressure of life, women tend to choose comfortable and less physically constrained casual clothing and fashion. With people's

pursuit of quality of life, clothing has also begun to be differentiated by function. Taking women's clothing as an example, yoga pants, home clothes, work clothes, bikinis, and other clothing can meet the clothing choices of women in different situations, providing women with more refined clothing choices. Women are also influenced by Western elements to become confident and cheerful, wearing more open and free styles, and more able to showcase women's charm. The publicity of the Internet has promoted the revival of Chinese traditional clothing. Women's clothing is more open, free, and refined. At the same time, fashion and life elements are taken into account. The clothing styles available for women are also more diverse, and women can more freely show their charm.

5 Conclusion

This study found that the changes in Chinese women's clothing are a concrete manifestation of a certain period of politics, economy, and culture, and are also influenced by them. From 1949 to 1978, the clothing of Chinese women mostly downplayed the gender of women, and the characteristics of clothing were almost non-existent. People's thinking was still influenced by feudal conservative ideas, and the charm of women could not be displayed during this period. Although the social status of women is legally equal to that of men, in terms of the degree of acceptance of women's freedom in society, women still have not been fully treated equally. After the reform and opening up in 1979, this phenomenon was improved by the improvement of economic conditions, tolerance of the social environment, and gradual openness of people's thinking. Women's clothing began to diversify, and their gender characteristics can also be reflected through clothing. Women's charm can be amplified by clothing rather than confined. This study provides a certain supplement to the areas that have been relatively lacking in previous research. By subdividing periods and providing specific examples of the changes in women's clothing, the improvement of women's social status, and the openness of social thinking, it can lay a certain foundation for future scholars to conduct deeper research.

Finally, as stated in this research literature, women's clothing is influenced by various social factors and becomes more diverse, with different clothing changes occurring in different historical periods. In the future, further refinement and expansion can be made in the above conclusions to facilitate in-depth research on this topic.

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