

# From Tradition to Fashion: The Historical Evolution, Cultural Symbolism and Contemporary Expression of the Cheongsam

Mingxuan Ouyang

The Broadcasting and Hosting Art Program of the School of E-sports Academy, Communication  
University of China, Jiangsu, China

mengqing@asu.edu.pl

**Abstract.** As one of the traditional costumes of China, the evolution process of cheongsam vividly reflects the changes in social history and the transformation of women's identity consciousness. This article focuses on the theme of the historical evolution, cultural symbolism, and revival of the cheongsam, discussing the social significance carried by it in different historical periods and the contemporary ways of its expression. The research adopts a method combining literature analysis and case study. Through the review of the changes in the style and form of cheongsam in each stage from the late Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China to the post-liberation era of New China, and by integrating the images of cheongsam in films and television works, fashion shows and social practices, it reveals the multiple symbolic functions and dissemination paths of cheongsam at the cultural level. The research findings indicate that the cheongsam not only records the evolution of the social roles of Chinese women but also achieves the re-exploration of its cultural value in the contemporary context of globalization. The final conclusion holds that the cheongsam is a cultural symbol that is constantly being redefined. Its vitality lies in the continuous dialogue between "tradition" and "modernity", and it has opened up broader spaces for cultural dissemination and fashion innovation in the context of the new era.

**Keywords:** Cheongsam; Clothing Culture; Female Image; Cultural Symbol; Modern Communication.

## 1. Introduction

The cheongsam, as an important representative of traditional Chinese women's clothing, not only embodies the profound cultural heritage of Chinese costume but also carries the historical memory of the evolution of women's identities and social concepts. From the origin of the Manchu women's cheongsam in the Qing Dynasty, to the fashion symbol of urban women in the Republic of China era, and to the cultural symbol on the international stage in the contemporary era, cheongsam has demonstrated rich and complex social significance and aesthetic value in different historical periods. As the tide of modernization washes over traditions, the cheongsam has not been forgotten. Instead, it has returned to the public eye in a more diverse form, serving as an expression of cultural confidence through clothing. This research is based on the historical evolution, cultural symbolism, and contemporary dissemination of cheongsam. Its aim is to explore how this traditional garment has been repeatedly defined and given new meanings over the passage of time. The article will conduct a detailed observation of the aesthetic evolution and social function transformation of cheongsam through literature review and case analysis at the intersection of history and reality. Its aim is to address a seemingly simple yet richly profound core issue: Why has the cheongsam been able to remain fashionable and charming through the long course of social changes over the past century, and continue to exude cultural charm and gender symbolism? The ultimate goal of this research is to explore how cheongsam constructs cultural identity between tradition and modernity, between ethnicity and the world, and thereby to reveal its unique role and significance in the construction of the contemporary Chinese female image.

## **2. The Historical Evolution of the Cheongsam**

### **2.1. From the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China**

The origin of cheongsam can be traced back to the "flag dress" worn by the Manchu women in the Qing Dynasty. The clothing of the Manchu women is mainly characterized by long gowns. At this time, the Manchu-style cheongsam embodies the characteristics of the integration of Manchu and Han cultures: high stand-up collars, wide horse-shoe sleeves, elaborate "eighteen-embroidered" fringes, and auspicious patterned embroidery. The thick silk fabric and the rich colors (such as navy blue and dark green) highlight the noble status, while the low-cut design strictly adheres to the requirements of traditional etiquette for the concealment of women's bodies. This kind of clothing was widely popular in the imperial court and among the common people during the Qing Dynasty. However, at that time, it was still mainly characterized by its broadness and did not show the female curves.

By the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, Western culture gradually spread into China, and women's consciousness began to awaken. As a result, the style of women's clothing was also influenced. Especially after the May Fourth Movement, the social status of women gradually improved, and traditional clothing began to evolve towards modernization. At this time, the cheongsam still maintained the traditional style of the Manchu people in terms of form, but began to make adjustments in details, such as the waist cinching and the fit design, to make it more in line with modern aesthetic standards. The cultural exchange between the Manchu and Han ethnic groups, the Manchu women, while inheriting the traditional Manchu clothing style, absorbed elements from Han clothing and thus formed the classic style of the women's casual robe - the women's blouse [1].

### **2.2. The Republic of China era**

After the Xinhai Revolution, the hierarchical dress code system collapsed and cheongsam gradually became a common choice for women of all ethnic groups. At this time, the cheongsam was not merely an article of clothing but also a symbol of status, and it was especially favored by educated women, women in the literary and artistic circles, and women in the political circles. In the 1920s, influenced by the New Culture Movement and the "Flapper" trend from the West, the style of cheongsam underwent a revolutionary transformation. Its cutting became more in line with the female figure, emphasizing the feminine curvaceousness and featuring the aesthetic characteristics of modern clothing. The materials and techniques used are also more diverse, with the adoption of high-end fabrics such as silk and brocade, making the cheongsam more valuable in terms of art. Meanwhile, the diversity of details design, such as high-necked, sleeveless, short-sleeved and long-sleeved styles, enables the cheongsam to be more suitable for different occasions. Furthermore, the styles of the Manchu-style dresses in the Republic of China era were mostly characterized by changes centered around the collar. Even if the body shape of the dress was relatively loose, the collar had to be well-fitted. This phenomenon reflects the constraints imposed by traditional Chinese thought and dress concepts on the behavior and conduct of the wearers. Dressing has been elevated to the level of ritual through the form of the collar [2].

### **2.3. After the founding of People's Republic of China**

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, due to changes in social environment and concepts of clothing, the cheongsam was regarded as a symbol of "bourgeois sentiment" at that time, and it declined for a while. Simple and practical clothing such as workwear and military uniforms have replaced cheongsam as the mainstream clothing. After the reform and opening up, with the enhancement of cultural confidence, cheongsam has returned in a "neo-Chinese style". The modern cheongsam adopts the design and color schemes, as well as the fabric of the traditional cheongsam as the basis for further innovation. It showcases the beauty of Eastern women through the application of cheongsam aesthetics [3].

### **3. The Cultural Symbolism of Clothing**

#### **3.1. The Mirror Image of Women in Different Eras**

During the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, the awakening of women's identity promoted the evolution of the cheongsam. From the exclusive dress of Manchu noblewomen in the early days to the widespread adoption by modern educated and urban women, the cheongsam has witnessed the transformation of women from traditional family roles to independent individuals.

The loose silhouette and strict coverage of the cheongsam in the late Qing Dynasty reflected the traditional society's discipline of women to be "virtuous and chaste". In contrast, the fitted cut and slit design of the cheongsam in the Republic of China period echoed the liberation demands of women to step out of their chambers and participate in society. The "tight and narrow cheongsam" described by Eileen Chang in the 1940s was a declaration by educated women to challenge the traditional gender order through their dress. Many women hope to be on an equal footing with men and have begun to dress in men's clothes and cut their hair short. The behavior of the progressive young women wearing plain cheongsam reflects their psychological demands for personality independence and their desire to break away from traditional feminine traits both in thought and appearance [4]. In contemporary times, the cheongsam has become a carrier of diverse identities for women: The embroidered long cheongsam worn on the red carpet at film festivals showcases cultural confidence and spreads the excellent traditional Chinese culture to foreign countries; the simple short cheongsam worn in the workplace conveys a professional and capable demeanor; the modified styles for daily wear, by combining tradition and modernity, cater to current trends and meet the aesthetic preferences of young people. Whether in literary works, films or in real life, the cheongsam has been endowed with the image of modern women as independent, elegant and intelligent.

#### **3.2. The Core Code of Aesthetic Value**

The aesthetic value of cheongsam lies in its "subtle sensuality". The stand-up collar and the side fastening buttons uphold the dignity of Eastern women. Meanwhile, the side slits and the close-fitting cut blend the three-dimensional cutting techniques of Western clothing, highlighting the curves of women's bodies and hinting at the flowing lines of their figures. At the same time, it retains the subtle and elegant charm of Eastern women. This kind of "concealment and exposure" dialectic is in line with the concept of "harmony and beauty" in traditional Chinese aesthetics. Influenced by traditional Chinese concepts, the creation of patterns and motifs in cheongsam also attaches great importance to their implications. The range of themes involved is extremely broad, such as depicting scenes of the motherland's mountains and rivers, and various pictures of animals and plants, etc. [5]. All these reflect people's yearning and pursuit of a better life.

In terms of fabric, the use of various materials such as silk, brocade, embroidery, and lace gives the cheongsam different styles. Silk has a gentle luster and is soft and skin-friendly, making it the preferred fabric for high-end cheongsam. Cotton fabric is absorbent, breathable, soft, and comfortable. It is suitable for daily wear, especially in summer. The linen fabric has a rough texture and is highly breathable, creating a simple and natural style. Different fabrics offer people more diversified choices and also increase the diversity of cheongsam. In terms of craftsmanship, the detailed treatments such as hand-embroidered buttons, embroidery, and fringes make the cheongsam not only practical but also an artistic piece. Among them, the production technique of the Dangzha Yixing Cheongsam is particularly exquisite and outstanding. Its craftsmanship features are mainly reflected in the production of the damask strips. Usually, the contrasty silk fabrics are cut into long strips and sewn along the edges of the cheongsam to make the lines of the cheongsam more lively and dynamic [6]. Furthermore, the rhythmic lines, symbolic patterns, tactile texture and craftsmanship design of cheongsam jointly constitute its distinctive visual language.

### 3.3. The Construction of Symbolic Identity of a Nation

The process by which the cheongsam evolved from Manchu clothing to the "national dress" of China reflects the cultural strategies adopted by modern China. The prototype of cheongsam, "Qilao", was an official dress code imposed by the Manchu people after their conquest of the Han Chinese. It was designed with features such as the horse-shoe sleeves and arrow sleeves to enhance the image of military conquest. It represents the special status of the Eight Banners descendants and the traditional culture of the Manchu people, and is also an important target of the costume-change movement [7]. After the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, some intellectuals attempted to remove the political symbolism of the Manchu-style dress. For instance, they combined the straight-cut of the Manchu-style dress with the upper garments of Han Chinese women to create a more universal "New Manchu-style Dress", making it a symbol of multi-ethnic republicanism. In the 1920s, tailors in Shanghai introduced Western-style three-dimensional cutting techniques into cheongsam. The designs such as the waist cinching and the slit at the hem broke through the flat structure of traditional cheongsam. This kind of "syncretic" innovation in architectural form not only retains traditional elements such as "standing collar" and "pendant buttons" but also conforms to modern ergonomic principles, thus becoming an identity marker during the cultural transformation period. In the 1930s, as Japanese aggression against China intensified, the cheongsam was endowed with the political metaphor of "wartime cheongsam". Social celebrities such as Soong Mei-ling promoted the cheongsam by wearing it openly, thereby shaping it into a symbol embodying the "resilient spirit of Chinese women". Meanwhile, media such as "Liangyou" magazine and pictorial albums linked the cheongsam to the image of "modern lady", making it a synonym for urban fashion. This kind of cultural reconstruction has eliminated the original ethnic attributes of the culture and transformed it into a cultural symbol shared by all the citizens. In the 1940s, scholars demonstrated through textual research the connection between cheongsam and the clothing of the Ming Dynasty, incorporating cheongsam into the mainstream of Chinese culture and providing historical legitimacy for it to become the "national costume". After 1949, the cheongsam gradually declined in mainland China, but it continued to thrive in Taiwan, Hong Kong and other places. After the reform and opening-up policy was implemented in the mainland in the 1980s, the cheongsam was redefined as a symbol of "the feminine temperament of the Chinese nation". Its body narrative shifted from "individual liberation" to "national image", and it became a Chinese symbol on the international stage.

## 4. Propagation and Revival

### 4.1. Reinterpretation of Film and Television and Fashion

The design of the cheongsam in the film *"Eternal Love"* was handled by Zhang Shuping. The inspiration was drawn from the cheongsam style in Hong Kong in the 1960s, integrating the exquisite craftsmanship of Shanghai tailors with the charm of Southeast Asia. Drawing inspiration from the styles of the cheongsam in old photos and old films, but deliberately enhancing the saturation of colors and the tightness of the cut, it forms a visual metaphor of "repressed desires". Different colors also represent different emotions. The red color in the film highlights the emotional disputes and inner struggles among the characters, and also symbolizes the passion of life. Meanwhile, the green color contrasts with the red one, symbolizing freedom and hope [8]. Western audiences regard Zhang Mianyu's cheongsam as a typical symbol of "the mysterious Eastern woman", but director Wong Kar-wai avoids the cheap consumption of stereotypes through restrained cinematographic language. The aesthetic of cheongsam has been elevated to the level of philosophy, becoming the carrier of "unutterable emotions". The plain-colored cheongsam in *"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"* implies the complexity of the characters' identities. In the fashion field, designer Marco's "Useless" collection reinterprets cheongsam with rough fabric, exploring the relationship between tradition and sustainability.

## **4.2. Cultural Dialogue on the International Stage**

In recent years, the influence of cheongsam has gradually expanded in the international fashion circle. Many international brands and designers have incorporated cheongsam elements into their clothing designs, making it part of global fashion. At the beginning of the 20th century, the slim-cutting and the V-shaped collar design of the cheongsam inspired Western designers. In 1937, Elsa Schiaparelli launched the "Chinese Style" collection, incorporating stand-up collars and cinched necklines into evening gowns. John Galliano (for Dior in the 1997 autumn/winter collection), Tom Ford (for Gucci in 2004), and others have deconstructed the cheongsam into backless and high-slit styles. Ralph Lauren's 2011 autumn collection paid tribute to Eastern aesthetics with brocade cheongsams. Brands like Zara and H&M have launched modified cheongsam-style dresses, simplifying the collar design while retaining the stand-up collar. They have also incorporated printed patterns and elastic fabrics, making them trendy new Chinese-style fast fashion items. When Chinese elements encounter those from other cultures that belong to the same Eastern world, although they originate from cultures with certain similarities, they also produce different sparks, adding an extra touch of regional and foreign characteristics to Chinese elements [9]. Meanwhile, the cheongsam also became a soft power tool in diplomatic occasions. In 1943, Soong Ching-ling's visit to the United States and her speech in a cheongsam broke the Western stereotype of China's backwardness. In 2021, Yang Jiechi, during the high-level dialogue between China and the United States, had Zhang Jing translate in a dark green cheongsam to convey cultural confidence. Overseas Chinese wear cheongsam at graduation ceremonies and weddings to resist cultural homogenization.

## **4.3. Attitudes of Modern Women towards Cheongsam**

Nowadays, many young women are beginning to re-examine the cheongsam and incorporate elements of both traditional and modern styles into their daily outfits. The cheongsam is paired with a denim jacket, sneakers, or layered with metal accessories to break away from its "ceremonial" label, making it retain the traditional charm while also meeting modern aesthetic standards. The improved cheongsam features stretch fabric and invisible zippers to enhance comfort. However, the phenomenon of wearing cheongsam while engaging in inappropriate behavior cannot be ignored either. Some internet celebrities, in short videos or live-streaming sessions, deliberately expose or distort the cut of the Qipao or adopt provocative poses to transform it into a sexy tool, in order to attract male viewers and gain popularity. The cheongsam, as a cultural symbol of traditional Chinese clothing, carries the historical memory of women's liberation in the Republic of China era. Its modern interpretation should have been a dialogue between tradition and innovation. The borderline behavior has reduced the cheongsam to a vehicle for expressing eroticism, pushing this dialogue into a complex ethical and aesthetic controversy. In essence, it has undermined the cultural significance. The phenomenon that the content of the dissemination of cheongsam culture leans towards commercialization, on the one hand, does indeed help promote the development of the cheongsam industry and market expansion, but on the other hand, it may also lead to a one-sided and superficial understanding of cheongsam by the public [10]. When it becomes the "digital crutch" of the algorithmic era, what we lose is not only the dignity of a piece of clothing, but also the ability to have a dialogue with our history as a civilization. Only by maintaining the cultural integrity in the midst of the torrent of fashion trends can the cheongsam truly become a "time-traveling messenger", rather than a fragmented symbol that has been dismembered.

## **5. Conclusion**

The cheongsam, as a representative of traditional Chinese women's clothing, has undergone a historical evolution that not only reflects the changes in aesthetic standards of the times but also profoundly reveals the reconstruction of women's social roles and cultural identities. Through the review and analysis of this research, the following conclusion is drawn: The development of cheongsam has gone through a process from the traditional Manchu-style dress in the late Qing Dynasty to the modified version in the Republic of China era, and then to the modern fashion

reinterpretation. Behind the changes in its form and style lies the multi-level evolution of social structure, female consciousness and cultural identity. Meanwhile, through channels such as film and television, fashion, design and new media, cheongsam has achieved cross-cultural re-expression in contemporary times, and has become an important symbol for the "activation" and "export" of Chinese traditional culture.

The significance of this research lies not only in reconstructing the historical trajectory of the cheongsam as a material culture, but also in revealing its contemporary expressive value as a cultural symbol and a carrier of female narratives. It provides a model path for the modern inheritance of traditional culture and offers a multi-dimensional perspective for understanding the shaping of the image of Chinese women.

Future research can further expand on the dissemination mechanism of cheongsam in the international context, the cross-cultural acceptance situation, as well as the cognitive differences among different social strata and groups regarding cheongsam. Meanwhile, as the integration of technology and fashion deepens, cheongsam may also demonstrate richer expressiveness in new materials and new media, and continue to serve as an important bridge for cultural and contemporary dialogue.

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