

# How and Why Has Appropriate Dressing Style Changed in China over the Past Century?

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examined the process of changes in Chinese appropriate dressing style over the past century and the reasons behind it. With the reforms in globalization policies, China is more tolerant of non-conforming clothing. There is more space for people to express individuality that deviates from gender and even social norms. A focus group on how people respond to non-binary clothes revealed the youths' and women's preferences for less-conforming in terms of clothing.*

**KEY WORD:** *gender, fashion, images, Chinese*

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## I. Introduction

Gender norms are the social standards and expectations that help to maintain the gender system. And in the larger social context, gender norms are reinforced (Cislaghi and Heise, 2019). "Appropriate clothing" is one aspect of gender norms – what people consider appropriate or acceptable for males and females. "Appropriate" is a social construction that comes out of social interactions. But in China and other countries, the government can play a major role in defining this. However, ideas on gender norms can be challenged and changed. In China's current situation, some people are challenging the norms of appropriate clothing. It seems that in China, globalization has had a significant role in giving people ideas that challenge norms, and the government does not approve and even tries to stop it.

In this paper, I will discuss what changes in clothing styles in China tell us about larger changes in Chinese society in the reform and opening period by using historical events and focus group interviews. I am interested in this topic because I realized I am a non-conformity type of person in this society. I am intrigued about why today's culture allows me and turns me into a deviant person. Also, Yohji Yamamoto, a Japanese designer, inspires me a lot. Yohji Yamamoto is a designer who can be gender-less in form and consciousness on his clothes. He broke the constraint of traditional aesthetics on gender and opened up such a style in the field of aesthetic sovereignty held by Europe during that era. He eliminated the gender norms on clothes by not deliberately outlining what women should look like to men and also not emphasizing the sexual identity of clothes.

## II. Hypothesis

I hypothesize that the changes in clothing styles, especially among Chinese youth, are tied to the effect of globalization, as Chinese young people are exposed to styles and tastes from around the world, and society is more tolerant of non-conformity. Chinese society is much more accepting of non-conformity than before; the reform through globalization makes it more acceptable. People are more willing to accept differences and not expect everyone to dress the same or be the same. People can conform or deviant from gender norms in presenting themselves.

## III. Research Methodology and Data Analysis

There have been many dynasties in China, and in each dynasty, people have slightly different dressing styles due to the cultural background and emperor. Around 1949, when China was founded, people's dressing style was limited by the policy during that era. Figure 1 depicts three different mainstream dressing styles during that period. People were encouraged to wear them as workers, farmers, and soldier. When people wear different clothes, they will usually be treated as bourgeois and punished by the red guard or the government. After the reform and opening-up policy was established in 1980, China put most of its attention on the economy. This era is when China provides citizens with new options and opportunities for their outfits.

**Figure 1: Clothing Style in the Culture Revolution**



In this day and age of globalization, Chinese people are wearing what people from other countries wear. However, a new question arises: How have gender norms changed so fast in the recent century? People tend to wear pants and skirts to distinguish a human's gender. Not only clothes but the length of the hair is also considered in gender norms. However, a century ago, the gender norms for men were the skirt and queue. The last dynasty in China was highly corrupted and vulnerable. In the Republic's early years, founded in 1912, the provisional central government ordered a nationwide ban on braids. In the era of significant change at the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic, cutting the queue was not a matter of personal preference and habit but an irreversible political trend. The cutting off of pigtails meant the end of Manchu alien rule and the abolition of feudal uniforms.

**Figure 2: Han Men Cannot Cut their Hair but with the Queue**



“Fashion” is mostly an urban phenomenon, closely related to improved standard of living and higher disposable incomes. Entering the era of the Republic of China, like the modernizers in Japan, people wanted to show the West that they could also be modern, so many people started wearing Western-style clothes. The **Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign happened in 1983**; a political campaign advocated curbing Western-inspired liberal ideas among the Chinese populace, including clothing style. Even though the government does not put gender norms in law, it is still a societal norm. People, especially young people, nevertheless dress in a particular way even though the government disapproves of it and criticises it in the media, at school, or even in a more generalised social setting. However, for young people who believe that "to rebel is justified," clothing is one method to question and challenge authority, even if only subtly—by demonstrating that they are capable of having an opinion.

The skirt was a component of traditional Chinese clothing for males. Men were also seen wearing skirts in many other nations, including Scotland, the Arab world, and Greece. The wearing of a skirt on the street is not prohibited. Nevertheless, once it turns to gender norms for women, men start to wear skirts less and less. Because sometimes wearing clothing that does not represent a specific gender may cause unnecessary damage.

Social life is a performance; people's outfits express their authentic selves or show a part of themselves that they want others to see. People are more inclined to wear what they like when they do not lose the benefit of showing their true selves and ignoring their gender identity. No one would accuse a person of wearing slippers to go grocery shopping instead of going to a formal business party.

**Figure 3: Examples of Scotland, Arab and Greece Men Wearing Skirts**



Gender norms are the principle that restricts people's behaviors and makes them consider whether or not their behaviors are appropriate due to their gender. Even though the government did not set laws or approve the gender norms officially, people still obey those unwritten rules in society. So gender norms are more like a social norms. We are in a time of rapid change. Identical to gender norms, males are challenging the norms of what is appropriate in China.

Moreover, one main characteristic of every unwritten rule in society is that people will try to break it when there is no severe outcome. For instance, gender norms also change due to different groups of people. When a Chinese teenager with a traditional family wants to grow his hair long, there may be opposition from her family. His friends might think it is unique and fashionable to do that.

Globalization has had a significant role in giving people ideas that challenge norms, and the government does not approve and tries to stop it. 1983-1984 China launched a campaign against spiritual pollution. Spiritual pollution during that era is the values that depart from Marxist principles, abstractly promoting human values, humanism, and the so-called socialist alienation. It is also a process against bourgeois liberalization. When this campaign started, many agency staff and even the citizens were not allowed to perm their hair, use lipstick, wearing heels and short skirts. However, it did not last long; only for four months, the Chinese government realized it had caused panic in the society and challenged to manipulate the boundaries of "Spiritual Pollution," so they stopped the campaign. Although it did not last long, it still significantly impacted social development and the future social norms for citizens about the appropriate dressing style for both men and women. Especially for the older generation during that time. With the impact of globalization on the younger generation, the change in gender norms is inevitable. The rebellious youth in China used clothing as a way to question authority, even though most of them did not think so. People continue to act in their way, despite pressure from their families or society. Their behaviors reflect the discontent of the younger generation with traditional Chinese society while subtly questioning the status quo.

#### **IV. Focus Group**

Norms have a moral component. People will try to break the norms if they find the norms are blocking them from being a better self. I made four focus groups via Zoom. Twenty-six employees from a private company based in Beijing were recruited. They are of different ages, seven of whom are younger than 30. They were asked about their views on unisex clothing and what men should look like by illustrating pictures from all generations and styles.

When I get to the part about what they think is the appropriate dress code for men, the answers are slightly different from each other. However, the majority of the older generation (older than 30) in the focus group will usually say decent and clean. For older people, clothes are a tool that helps them to fit in or integrate into society. Nevertheless, for the youth, the use of clothing is pretty different from their perspective. Especially young people are more likely to deviate from gender norms and show their individuality. A young man from the focus group is wearing a Cuba necklace and hip-hop-style clothing. His answer to the appropriate dress code for men is different from others. He sees clothes as a way to express himself. He thinks hip-hop is a way of living,

so he decided to bring the idea and tradition of hip-hop culture into his life. It is also helpful for his social and daily life, he said. People could strictly tell his interest and might have the chance to guess his characteristic.

Non-binary clothing style is a vague word to define accurately. In my opinion, it is a phrase that allows people to buy clothes without considering gender norms. When I asked interviewees the question, “would you consider wearing non-binary clothe” the answers I get are very different between females and males. I discovered that one main factor in males choosing clothes is whether it contradicts their gender. However, for women, the answer is that they would put on anything they like without considering their gender identity. Men apparently prefer to dress appropriately to comply with gender norms, whereas women are less concerned about conforming.

**Figure 4: Leslie Cheung**



**Figure 5: Fashion Show by Yohji Yamamoto in 1998 in Paris**



Wearing non-binary clothes could not only represent a person’s personality. It could also bring up many social issues that need to be fixed. It is also challenging social norms. Figure 4 I showed the focus group depicts a famous Hong Kong Chinese singer, Leslie Cheung (a non-binary name), who wears Jean Paul Gaultier’s clothes when performing. I asked them why they thought Leslie Cheung wanted to wear this and show up in public. Most of them said it might be because he wants to be unique during his performance. Their answer is partly correct. In the 1980s, China was very traditional compared to now. The reason why he always wears those unique clothing is the idea that he wants to show to society. His performances increasingly challenge the moral framework of conservative societies. His artistic pursuits of non-binary clothing styles were trying to break down the gender norms and people’s bias against homosexual love. Gender norms do not only apply to men.

Figure 5 is from the fashion show by Yohji Yamamoto in 1998 in Paris. In that period, the stereotype of a woman in Paris, especially on the fashion shows, is refinement and elegance. However, Mr. Yamamoto calls for women’s freedom to dress and not let social norms confine them. So he made women wear masculine

suits and leather shoes in this show instead of high heels, skirts, and heavy makeup. Even in Paris at the time, a country that was quite avant-garde and open to clothing, the show was quite controversial.

### **V. Summary and Conclusions**

The paper has analyzed changes in the Chinese appropriate dressing style over the past decades, which was majorly led by reforms such as modernization, open-door policy, and globalization. From the focus group discussions, it appears that people with different demographic characteristics have different attitudes toward the gender norms represented by “appropriate dressing style.” According to Erving Goffman (1999), when someone interacts with another person, he tries to influence or control the perception that person will have of him by changing his environment, appearance, and behavior. Thereby, dressing styles chosen by people are ways to manage their self-impressions of conformity or deviance. The focus group discussions reveal the following patterns: younger people are more willing to deviate from gender norms to show individualities than older ones, and females are less concerned about conformity regarding clothing than males. Undeniably, China has become more tolerant of differences, and people use clothing, in some cases, to express their individuality and manage what people think of them, even if it is non-conforming, like men wearing a skirt.

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