



The Cheongsam—the Treasure of Chinese National Apparel

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Abstract

The cheongsam, the typical national apparel of the internal and external harmonious unity, is known as the representative of the Chinese clothing culture. It has expressed the virtuous, elegant, and gentle temperament of the Chinese women through flowing melody, rakish picturesque conception, and strong poetic emotion. The paper studies several aspects of the origin, evolution, techniques and communication to let China and the world know better about cheongsam, the national apparel of China.

Keywords: Cheongsam, Nation, Garments

Cheongsams, the traditional national apparel, are owned and cherished by all Chinese of all regions. A cheongsam is a special garment favored by people all over the world. Its elegance is known by the Chinese people, and appreciated by the world.

The cheongsam, as the Chinese name suggests, refers to the gown that women of Eight Banners wore before Manchu rulers went across Shanhaiguan, the important pass in north part of China. It was actually the daily dress mainly for women of Manchu and Mongolia. Its basic style is loose with standing collar, bottoms on the right chest, long sleeves, and spacious downswing without side vents by linear tailoring. Usually there is decorative embroidery or other colors of lace in the front collar or at the downswing or the mouth of the sleeves.

A Chinese Cheongsam, with the oriental artistic aesthetics as the cultural heritage, has displayed various beauties, youthful beauty of young ladies and the maturity of women grow-ups. As far as its function and wearers are concerned, there is a large span of adaptability. For any occasions or for any season, no matter who is a social famous woman or an ordinary family woman, an adult, or an elderly lady or a young girl, it is no difficult for her to find a piece of suitable Cheongsam. Because Cheongsam has its unique national style and artistic charm, the undoubted characteristics and advantages, it has been loved by people from China and the other parts of the world.

1. The origin of the cheongsams

The cheongsam takes the gown of the Manchurian women of Qing Dynasty as the original version. Nurhachu had spent 30 years of efforts in completing the reunification of the Nuzhen tribes. In the process of the reunification, he had established the Eight Banners system, the fundamental system of Manchu society. Since then, the Manchu nationality has been called as “Eight Banners” or “Banner People (or Qiren in Chinese). Therefore, their clothes are referred to be “Qi garments”, or “Yijie” in Manchu language. The daily garments of Qiren are usually gowns and the style has been inherited generations by generations. Affected by the long dresses of the Mongolian women in Yuan Dynasty, it has taken a simple straight style as a basic modeling, all of which are named to be the cheongsam.

Gown-type garments have a long history. The Chinese nation had used a gown as a garment since Shang Dynasty to the late Ming Dynasty. After a long development, although the gown-type garments had their unique features in different historical times, there still existed some relationships among generations with a few changes in the basic form. The cheongsam of Manchu Nationality has some distinct differences with the gown-type garments of the pre-Ming Dynasty, which is relaxed and loose with bands in front part to close the garment. As for cheongsam of Manchu Nationality, there is a closed state with small space between the garment itself and the human body. It completed the traditional way of replacing the bands with buttons. In short, compared with the gown-type garments of different dynasties in history, the cheongsam is very simplified, cloth-saving and convenient. However, the high and face-covering stand-collar, the solemn close-fitting dress have reflected the conservative aesthetic sense of several- thousand-year feudal ethics.

2. The evolution of the cheongsams

2.1 The late Qing Dynasty

As the corrupted Qing government implemented policies of non-resistance against the invasion of the world powerful countries; its close door policy was broken by the open door agreement. International exchanges began and the Western

culture went eastwardly. After the Opium War, the European-style suits entered China first, which has a certain impact on Chinese cheongsam. The wide and loose body had gradually become short and narrow. Chinese people have gradually accepted the infiltration of Western culture, but the due status of cheongsam had not been affected. In 1929, the Ordinance about garments was announced by the National Government and cheongsam was established officially to be the national garments. A kind of collar with high front and low back like Chinese Yuanbao in shape, became fashionable with comparatively looser sleeve and trouser cuffs.

2.2 In 1920s

During this period the popular costumes had blurred over the boundary of Manchu and Han nationalities. In the early Republic of China, it was more popular for a woman to wear a blouse and a skirt while the cheongsam wearers were not so many. But by the middle of 1920s, the cheongsam began to be popular again. The body became gradually shortened. There were some with six to eight centimeters below knees. The waist was narrowed, the downswing was contracted with low vents and long trousers were discarded. The collar was lowered with 1.5 centimeters low in front and 2.6 centimeters high in back. Later there was a new change that style of collar was highlighted to be fashionable to show feminine appearance.

2.3 In the 1930s to 1940s

1930s and 1940s saw the cheongsam in its peak fashion. The reformed cheongsam in structure adopted the Western-style cutting method to make it fitter. Although the cheongsam evolved from the woman dresses of Qi garments of Qing Dynasty, it was quite different from that in the past and had become the standard apparel of the modern Chinese women with both Chinese and Western characteristics. Affected by the styles of the Europe and America, a step forward was made in exposing the female figure. The close-fitting cheongsam obviously exposed the curves of the human body, and made the room between the garment and the body small to the minimum extent to display the external streamline. The cheongsam in 1930s was shortened with the length to the knees, and the cuffs were also narrowed. But in the middle of 1930s, the body was increased longer even to the ground with the high open vents in the downswing of both sides. In 1940s, the collar was omitted in a cheongsam.

2.4 In the 1950s and 1960s.

In the East Asia, the founding of the People's Republic of China marks the end of the old life and the beginning of a new one. Due to the early period of the country and the stage of economic recovery and rectification, the cheongsam, which has been cherished by people for quite a long time was not practical and was set aside. But in 1950s and 1960s, the cheongsam began to show up again in the people's lives.

3. The techniques and making process of cheongsam

After decades of evolution, the various basic characteristics of composition elements of the cheongsam have gradually become stable. The cheongsam has become a classic garment for women. It highlights the women's beauty of line, so the modern cheongsam is tight to demonstrate the figure of a woman. Especially in the past ten years, the re-emergence of the cheongsam as a fashionable dress has been shown frequently at the international fashion stage, more beautiful than in the past. It has been regarded as formal dress with a representative national sense on various ritual occasions of international community. Wherever you go in the world, as long as you see a cheongsam, noble, elegant and exquisite, you will be able to confirm that it is a Chinese woman there. This is the Chinese cheongsam with distinctive national characteristics.

The making process of the cheongsam is similar to that of the other garments. First, guests are asked to be measured and then to select the cloth and style. The making process has mainly three parts, cutting, drawing the sample and embroidering. The traditional cheongsam is usually longer to ankle. But there is also short one with one inch above the knees.

The modern cheongsam has entered the three-dimensional modeling era. And there is dart in the garment pieces, the suitable waist, and the Western-style sleeves. The length of the cheongsam and the sleeves is greatly shortened with slender waist. The line structure of concise style replaces the exquisite hand fabrication. Various edging, edge rolling, embedded edge and other special techniques such as monochrome edging, monochrome edge rolling, embed edge, mixed rolling and edging, and three-color edging, have been widely used to decorate a cheongsam.

Besides, the cheongsam has very unique flower-button ornaments, which can not be compared by those buttons in other clothes. It is not just a button but an exquisite ornament of the cheongsam itself. The flower buttons were set in the collar, the front part of the cheongsam, adding more beauty to it. The patterns adopted are the traditional ones such as dragon, phoenix, peacock, wealth, longevity, happiness, luckiness, etc., all of which echo the traditional Chinese culture. In addition, embroidery or hand painting, the traditional Chinese art, is the technique widely used in decorating a cheongsam. To dot the national garment with national culture quintessence makes a cheongsam more beautiful.

4. The spread of the cheongsam in the world

Since 221 BC, the famous "Silk Road" was opened up and silk entered Europe through trading. Since then, the oriental culture has given greatly influence on the people's costumes of medieval Europe. Particularly in the 13th century, Trade between the West and the East was continuously increased, which aroused the enthusiastic pursuit of Europeans for the

Eastern clothing. There are many reasons why the cheongsam can be spread in the world. Firstly, China had busy trading activities and exchanges of textile clothing with the USA, Australia and many Asian countries. Secondly, more and more Chinese people in the recent centuries went abroad for settlement or to pay a visit. But no matter how many years past or how many dynasties were transformed, the overseas Chinese were still unique with their clothing. The oriental charm won people's admiration and love. In the international friendly communications, the cheongsam has stood for the identity of Chinese women.

In particular, in recent several decades, Chinese cheongsam has become the national apparel for female officials and the wives of male officials. For each of the government groups that go abroad, a cheongsam is one of the necessary garments. And as a garment to display the social status, the cheongsam plays an obvious role in media in international activities.

In recent years, fashion shows and beauty contests have been surging increasingly. The cheongsam, the national essence of classical culture, has a unique charm with unconventional style in the fashion. Therefore, the international cultural and artistic exchanges are also one of the important reasons for cheongsams to spread. Furthermore, there has been a wind of China in the world fashion industry. The traditional Chinese clothing culture has provided unlimited creative inspiration for the designers around the world.

5. Concluding remarks

The cheongsam, as a dazzling exotic flower in China's national apparel, will not only exist in the future but also continue to be in full bloom together with the wonderful garments in the world because the unique beauty, demeanor, disposition and nice feelings for life it has brought to wearers can not be replaced by any other garments. I believe that the cheongsams, the Chinese national garments, will develop well and stand in the peak of the world clothing in the future.

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