

# Research on Contemporary “Chinese Theme” Fashion Design based on Aesthetic Distance Theory

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## Abstract

Chinese theme or style has a long history in international fashion design; it is a common theme for Chinese and western designers to pursue Oriental sentiment and express Oriental aesthetics. However, for contemporary Chinese theme fashion design, Chinese and western designers have different understanding and interpretation, and there are many differences in design techniques and effects. In this paper, we propose to research on contemporary Chinese theme fashion design based on the theory of aesthetic distance, and interpret the essence of Chinese theme fashion design from different aesthetic distances. In addition, the basic principles of contemporary Chinese theme clothing design are summarized through the analysis and comparison of Chinese and western design cases. The results show that Chinese theme design, to the West, represents “the other” and “exotic theme” in a modern way; while in the eyes of Chinese people, it is a contemporary embodiment of “retro theme”. The clothing design in modern Chinese fashion should, based on the design elements collected in an expansive and deep way, pursue the balance and integration of “conservative” and “avant-garde” elements and the harmony of “form” and “spirit”, abiding by the fundamental principle of “absorbing tradition” to “create the present”.

**Keywords:** clothing design, aesthetic distance, contemporary Chinese fashion, western

## 1. Introduction

Theme refers to the fundamental concept implied in literary and artistic works, which is center of work and restraint of artistic invention (Bian, 2006, p. 120). Chinese theme design, or Chinese style design, refers to artistic creation that is aimed to reflect Chinese implication and sentiment. Chinese theme design also known as Chinoiserie, is originated in European artistic creation featured by Chinese culture and lifestyle admiration and Chinese artistic style imitation in the 17th and 18th century, a period of time that witnessed the prosperity of Sino-Western trade and adventures of curious travelers. In the area of clothing, Westerns have never ceased their exploration of Chinoiserie design over the past centuries, especially in recent years when the prominent position of Chinese style in globalization is re-acknowledged by the Western fashion world due to China's steadily growing power. By virtue of their “superficial knowledge” of Chinese culture, a number of Western fashion designers' creations are based on an integration of Chinese tradition and modern concepts. Their works are not only relaxing and cheerful but also of Chinese characteristics with a sense of modernization incorporated, and they are thus well-received. In addition to excellent and classic works that can be collected and inherited, there are also works that are acknowledged overseas while appear weird to Chinese people. Meanwhile, as China encourages national confidence, the demand for Chinese style clothing is growing and a large number of Chinese designers have begun to focus on Chinese theme design. Some even get the chance to display their clothing at international events such as Olympic Games and APEC and hailed as classics. Some, however, are criticized for being “unfashionable” and “unpractical”. The above drives the author to reflect on the following questions: what is the difference between China and Western countries in Chinese theme design? How do we understand the difference between China and Western countries in the interpretation of Chinese theme design? What are the guidelines for Chinese theme design in modern times?

At present, academic research regarding Chinese-theme design focuses on the exploration of Western designers' application and imagery (Bao, 1987, pp. 91-97; Steele, 1999, pp. 78-82), Chinese designers' methods (Wu, 2011, pp. 37-39; Chen, 2015) and differences in Chinese elements application between Chinese designers and their

Western peers (Sun, 2005, pp. 44-47). The above questions put forward by the author, however, are rarely addressed. In this regard, this paper introduces “aesthetic distance” theory and studies specific cases. It is aimed to provide Chinese and Western designers and societies with aesthetic contemplation regarding modern Chinese theme design as well as some reference for future Chinese theme design.

**2. Various Distance and Perspectives of Chinese theme Fashion Design**

Aesthetic distance refers to the distance between aesthetic subject and aesthetic object, including psychological distance and physical distance. The former refers to psychological distance between two parties, including distance of knowledge and experience, concepts, emotions, attitudes, etc., while the latter refers to physical distance between two parties in reality (Lin, 2004, p. 1095). Psychological distance, first proposed by British aesthetician Edward Bullough (1880-1934) in 1912, is a psychological research method and theory in the field of aesthetics and art. Psychological distance brings about distinct aesthetic experience to aesthetic subject. An artist or connoisseur shall keep a proper distance from himself to aesthetic object so as to inspire his aesthetic emotion and sense of beauty. Physical distance is under the influence of environment, geography, history and culture. The above two types of distance are deeply interpenetrated with one another. Psychological distance between aesthetic subject and aesthetic object is affected by physical distance, which further results in different aesthetic perspectives.

*2.1 Contemporary Interpretation of “Exotic Theme” with Chinese Theme as “the Other”*

To the West or western designers, Chinese theme design stands for artistic re-creation of traditions and cultures of other nations. Nation refers in particular to a community that is gradually developed in history with shared language, region, economic life and psychology in perspective of culture (Ruan, 2000, p. 2421). Exotic theme in artistic creation refers to adoption of artistic techniques featured by other nationalization. According to *Ci Hai (An Ocean of Words)*, “nationalization” is interpreted as: to reflect real life and to reveal thoughts and feelings of a nation through its own artistic concepts, artistic forms and artistic techniques, which provides literary and artistic works national style and ethnic characteristic (Xia, 1990, p. 2032). The social function of clothing is to draw distinctions amid a group or even a nation. National costume refers to traditional clothing with special regional characteristics that are developed slowly in history. Since different nations have distinct history and traditions, cultures and beliefs, aesthetic habits, fabrics and materials, etc., their national costume is also different in style, texture, color and pattern, processing technique, etc. Therefore, Contemporary fashion design with strong other ethnic characteristics is equivalent to “Exotic theme” design.

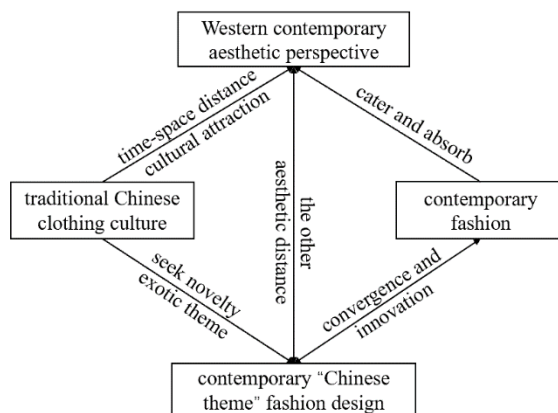


Figure 1. Process of “Exotic Theme” Design with Chinese theme as “the Other”

Fashion may have become more open and international in modern times, the current fashion world is still dominated by Westerners centered on cities such as Milan, Paris, London and New York. As a representative of oriental clothing, Chinese clothing is other ethnic clothing in the eyes of Western-dominated fashion world, and thus foreign designers follow the “exotic theme” method when it comes to Chinese theme design. Space distance between ethnic groups and time distance resulting from possible adoption of Chinese elements from earlier times creates aesthetic distance between exotic theme clothing design and aesthetic subject and thus brings about a sense of beauty. They stir up the aesthetic sentiment of the consumers through novelty and unusualness, which therefore grants them recognition and popularity. Whether the aesthetic distance is appropriate or not is determined by the balance between the traditional elements used in the creation and modern aesthetics standards (Note 1). For westerners who are not Chinese, Chinese theme clothing design is, in essence, identity misappropriation of “the other”. Figure 1 shows the process of “exotic theme” creation with Chinese theme as

“the other”. Chinese culture of traditional dress is attractive to westerners due to the existence of time-space distance. Western designers explore Chinese clothing elements and endue them with new international fashion styles, which stirs up waves of Chinese theme mania. For example, upon the return of Hong Kong in 1997, John Galliano launched Dior Spring/Summer 1997 couture collection with Chinese cheongsam as his inspiration. While appreciating westerners’ modern “Chinese theme” clothing, we shall view them from the perspectives of contemporary aesthetics, instead of equating modern interpretation of “Chinese theme” clothing with traditional Chinese costume.

2.2 Contemporary Exhibition of “Retro Theme” with Chinese Theme as “the Self”

From the perspective of Chinese people or Chinese designers, Chinese theme design represents the return to and re-creation of history, tradition and culture of China, the essence of which is “retro theme” design. According to *Ci Hai*, “retro” is interpreted as: restoration of old system, old style, etc (Xia, 1990, p. 231). Generally speaking, retro is re-production of things from the past or things that have not been used for a long time. Everything has its time of generation, development and its own footprints. Inheritance and reproduction of the history of one’s own nation certainly requires the guidance of retro. There are usually two types of retro. One can be referred to as restoration or replication, which means adhering completely to the ancient style and simply reproducing ancient objects such as costume. The other, with the creator’s subjective judgment and characteristics of the time, is to view the past critically. Retro theme fashion design focuses on the latter. An aesthetic distance comes into being due to the space-time difference between retro theme and the time when clothing was originally produced. Whether the aesthetic distance is appropriate or not is determined by the public appeal of the theme and the relevance between the interpretation and expression of traditional elements and modern fashion (Bian, 2006, p. 131).

Chinese clothing is with a long history and rich culture, which can be proved by curving-front robe of the Qin and Han dynasties and gorgeous *ru* skirt of the Tang Dynasty, graceful *beizi* of the Song Dynasty and splendid phoenix coronet and shawl of the Ming Dynasty, beautiful robe of the Qing Dynasty and sexy cheongsam of the Republic of China as well as Mao suit of the modern times. Given the time distance between such traditional clothing and the modern society, a majority of them are collected by and stored in museums or used merely in films, TV series and dramas. High-quality traditional clothing is a combination of beautiful fabrics, exquisite textile techniques and magnificent colors. It is generally a reflection of the production and daily life at that time and the artistic creativity of laboring people. When appreciating traditional clothing, viewers are immersed into corresponding historical circumstances, which shortens the psychological distance between viewers and clothing and thus results in special aesthetics. Nonetheless, if today’s people walk out into the street or office in such traditional clothing that is without any modification, results may be just opposite to what we wished. This is due to the fact that when the time distance between people and traditional clothing is suddenly removed, their psychological distance abruptly increases, which stirs up no sense of beauty for people nearby.

Contemporary Chinese theme clothing design lays an emphasis on the inheritance, reproduction and development of national traditional clothing while keeping certain aesthetic distance, the essence of which is identity construction of “the self” within the range of traditional Chinese clothing culture. Figure 2 shows the process of “retro theme” creation with Chinese theme as “the self”. It should be mentioned that traditional clothing culture here does not necessarily refer to specific clothing styles or patterns. Rather, the way of dressing, humanistic connotations and philosophy of clothing shall also be included.

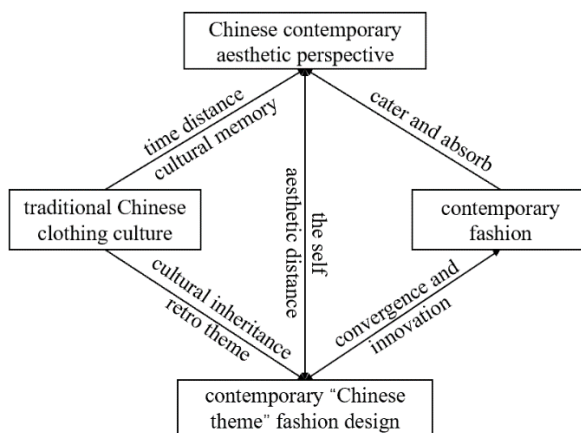


Figure 2. Process of “Retro Theme” Design with Chinese theme as “the Self”

### 3. Guidelines of Contemporary Chinese Theme Fashion Design

For the fashion in modern times, Chinese theme design may adopt creation methods of “exotic theme” and “retro theme”. Also, it should be noted that we shall learn from advantages of Chinese and Western fashion design while avoid their flaws and develop our own characteristics and guidelines.

#### 3.1 Extensiveness and Thoroughness of Material Selection

Design Materials can also be referred to as design elements. China is a nation with a long history and profound culture, making it rich in specific materials. Materials in Chinese theme clothing design can mainly be divided into two types. One is tangible materialized materials that are visible, visualized, specific and perceptible. They are symbols that have stood the test of time or reflect contemporary Chinese life. In addition to traditional Chinese clothing, traditional handicrafts, traditional landscape architecture and modern objects are included as well. Since great space-time distance makes it difficult for most Western designers to truly understand China, it is simple and straightforward for them to choose tangible materialized materials. As Chinese, we may think that their selection and application of Chinese materials can be superficial and shallow. Such a foreign perspective, however, sometimes permits Chinese designers to discover Chinese local materials that are often overlooked. Those newly discovered materials can then be re-interpreted in new ways. For example, while most designers' contemporary design works of Qing Dynasty clothing adopt elements such as mandarin jacket, edge piping, Chinese frog and slanting lapel. But Valentino drew on Qing Dynasty's women mitpachoth in its Pre-Fall 2016 Collection that was rarely noticed. The mitpachoth was designed with decorative patterns with a vivid shade, making it the finishing touch in that black lace dress.

The other is intangible non-materialized materials, which refer to Chinese unique spiritual connotation and cultural implication that have stood the test of time and passed on from generation to generation, such as traditional clothing philosophy, the way of dressing, humanistic concepts, etc. This type of materials is well received among contemporary Chinese designers. Such designers are required to have an in-depth understanding of Chinese history and local culture as well as the capability of transforming them into creative works. The brand *Useless* built by designer Ke Ma is committed to showing the world spirit of China through her clothing. In her 2017 “Useless Land”-Theme Clothing Collection, for example, instead of using specific and tangible Chinese materials, she chose traditional Chinese method of dying fabrics with plants and purely hand-made production. By doing so, her works managed to reshape traditional Chinese cloth culture and pass on traditional Chinese philosophy of harmony between man and land as well as harmony between man and nature. See Figure 4.

Tangible materials are not superior to intangible materials, and vice versa. Five thousand years of Chinese clothing culture is so heavy that it sometimes restricts people from understanding it in a deeper way. Therefore, designers shall expose themselves to extensive knowledge and broaden their horizon. Based on their profound cultural deposits, they shall then select suitable materials and design methods to achieve a perfect display.



Figure 3. Valentino Pre-Fall 2016 Collection with “Mitpachoth”



Figure 4. Ke Ma 2017 “Useless Land”-Theme Collection

### 3.2 Design Form: Balance between “Conservative” and “Avant-garde”

Traditional Chinese clothing is complete in itself and various elements have developed a stable system in the course of history, which allows it to be different in style and characteristics from clothing of other nations. Such “fixed collocation”, however, leads to stereotypes of Chinese local designers, who tend to follow the inherent sequence and make clothing confined to traditional styles. For example, a frog is merely used for clothing opening and closing; embroidery frequently chooses traditional patterns; slit is only used for the side edge. Clothing designed in this way is often conservative and short of fresh ideas or sense of modernization. Compared with Chinese local designers, Western designers are better at getting rid of fixed collocation and coming up with new disruptive creations. Some use one element to its full potential. Some replace certain parts via new technologies or new materials. Such designs come as refreshing changes. It shall also be noted that anything remotely avant-garde, too exaggerated or detached from contemporary aesthetics should be avoided, so that clothing won’t appear to be confusing. Therefore, contemporary Chinese-theme clothing design should adopt a variety of materials and design techniques, break traditional form, and strike a balance between “conservative” and “avant-garde”.

Louis Vuitton Spring 2011 Cheongsam Collection succeeds in striking a balance between “conservative” and “avant-garde”. See figure 5. The dress keeps cheongsam’s overall structure and shape, but designer chose to the front side of thigh to be slit up, instead of the original straight side. Traditional cloth-covered Chinese frog is also replaced by modern buttons. The use of contrast colors further highlights modernization of the dress. For decorative patterns, non-Chinese iris flowers are vividly displayed with the help of digital printing, draping embroidery and tassels. This design, keeping up with the latest trends, not only breaks the fixed collocation of traditional cheongsam elements, but also keep Chinese implication.



Figure 5. Louis Vuitton Spring 2011 Cheongsam Collection

### 3.3 Design Conformation: Interaction between “Form” and “Spirit”

The form of contemporary Chinese theme clothing design should learn from strengths of both Western and Eastern clothing to realize positive interaction between “form” and “implication”. Chinese and Western clothing are basically opposite to each other when it comes to form and clothing philosophy. Under the long-term

influence of Confucianism and its social ethics, Chinese clothing philosophy lays stress on wrapping and hiding human body. It emphasizes maintaining reserved through hiding curve and skin. Such concepts therefore bring about the feature of “loose garment with a large girdle” and adoption of implicit colors and texture of traditional Chinese costume. Coupled with symbolic expression of surface decoration and patterns, the cultural atmosphere of “harmony between human and nature” gradually takes shape.

Westerners believe that human is the control of everything, and thus human shall be placed at the center. This concept results in their slim-fit clothing culture featured by revealing curve and skin. Therefore, with the help of draping cutting technique, traditional Western costume reduces or increases space to strengthen the characteristics of the human body. Traditional Western women’s wear, for example, uses corsets and bustles to accentuate highlight their slender waist and plump chest and hip. Man’s wear, on the other hand, shows their strong body through wedging cutting and addition of fillings in the shoulder and the chest. Li Dangqi commented that, (Western clothing), similar to their oil paintings, is “focus perspective”, “precise” and “specific” ... “reproduction” of human body (Li, 2008, pp. 150-154). Given that today’s fashion world is dominated by the West, their aesthetics stands for the international attitude toward aesthetics. Hence, contemporary Chinese theme clothing design shall locate the intersection of Chinese civilization and international fashion aesthetics. Then, guided by the Westerners’ emphasis on “form”, it shall convey the simple and detached Chinese “spirit” in a subtle and metaphorical way so as to realize “unity of form and spirit”.

A comparative study of the similar works by Chinese and Western designers based on the same theme is conducted for illustration. A “dragon gown” in Yves Saint Laurent Autumn/Winter 2004 collection adopts a realistic depiction of Chinese dragon gown’s dragon patterns, twelve ornaments, seawater/waterfront patterns at the lower hem by using the technique of bead embroidery. Slim-fit cutting and tailoring highlight woman’s graceful curve. Although the dress highlights the sex appeal, passion and charisma of modern female, it misses the artistic conception and spirit of Chinese culture. See Figure 6. Compared with Yves Saint Laurent’s “Dragon Gown”, Chinese designer Zhang Huishan’s “dragon gown” in Autumn/Winter 2011 collection achieves the perfect integration of “form” and “spirit”. See Figure 7. Referring to Western draping cutting technique, he reconstructed traditional Chinese dragon gown and create a new shape that is simple and flexible. Traditional Chinese symbols such as “dragon” and “auspicious cloud” adopt lace knitting, rather than being printed directly on the dress. We may say that he manages to convey the aesthetics of Chinese clothing in an indirect, subtle and implicit manner. The dress as a whole is not only artistically modern with excellent wearability, but also rich in typical Chinese simplicity and elegance that corresponds to traditional Chinese philosophy.



Figure 6. Yves Saint Laurent Autumn/Winter 2004 “Dragon Gown”-Inspired Dress



Figure 7. Zhang Huishan Autumn/Winter 2011 “Dragon Gown”-Inspired Dress

### 3.4 Design Motivation: Absorb the “Traditional” to Create the “Present”

In Chinese theme clothing design, artistic integration of elements is merely a different approach to be popular. Popularity is fundamental, while commercialization is the ultimate goal of design (Bian, 2006, p. 197). Most designers’ Chinese theme clothing design is, in fact, a self-branding mechanism, first, to distinguish them from the Western fashion and to gain rapid recognition from the global market (Tsui, 2015, p. 594). Second, motivated by the confidence in Chinese culture and a strong sense of national identity, they aim to inherit traditional culture and carry forward Chinese spirit. Perhaps due to the pressure of the strong sense of mission and commitment to preserve our culture and bring it to a greater height, some designers focus on Chinese style just for Chinese style

itself and put undue stress on tradition, while overlooking the present generation, their lifestyles and current fashion trends. Their works are far from works with commercial value.

Design refers to creation with a purpose in a planned way, which emphasizes innovation instead of inheritance and has serving the people as its essence. Traditional Chinese clothing changes with the development of Chinese society. Each generation of clothing is consistent with the daily labor and living habits of common people at that time and is a reflection of the social productivity, culture and aesthetics of each period. Therefore, contemporary Chinese theme clothing design should follow the guidance of current aesthetics and fashion trends, and constantly draw on the essence of five thousand years of traditional culture. Meanwhile it is necessary to grant Chinese clothing with features of our new era and bring Chinese classics back to contemporary life.

China born designer Vivienne Tam is one the representative figures of those who are committed to presenting modern Chinese fashion through traditional Chinese culture. During the New York Fashion Week in 2016, she said in an official interview that,

*“I want to share what I’m doing and inject “Chinese-ness” into my work, and I can share my culture to the world through my work... It’s my passion, my culture and the mix of the east and the west, the modern and the old history, constantly trying to balance: The Yin and Yang philosophy...I have to think about art and also commerce at the same time; it’s very, very important.”* (Note1)

Inspired by traditional Chinese culture of Yin Yang philosophy and five elements, she abstracted the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth into different shapes and makes them nested with each other in a balanced manner in her Spring/Summer 2013 Ready-to-Wear Collection. As for color, representative Chinese colors of black and red were selected. Their simple styles not only intensify the practicality of clothing and sense of modernization but also show the world China’s Yin Yang and five elements and our harmony-oriented view of the universe. See Figure 8.



Figure 8. Vivienne Tam Spring/Summer 2013 “Five Elements”-Inspired Collection



ZUCZUG /

Figure 9. ZUCZUG 2012 “Food Market” Collection Posters

As a local high-end leisure fashion brand, ZUCZUG focuses on the reflection of both the lifestyle more Chinese people and Chinese culture. Its 2012 Food Market Collection is inspired by the most common scenes of life in China. This interesting collection originates from food market elements such as fish, fruit and vegetable and groceries. Models in the collection are also ordinary people, rather than professional fashion models. See Figure 9. This collection adheres to its reflection of China's street culture that is unique and long-lasting and chooses to portray a modern Chinese character that is young and self-focused through a straightforward and humorous design method.

#### 4. Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese theme clothing design has distinct definitions and interpretations of different aesthetic distances. For Westerners or foreign designers, Chinese theme clothing design represents "exotic theme" design as "the other" and artistic re-creation of traditions and cultures from other nations, while for Chinese and Chinese designers, Chinese theme clothing design is "retro theme" design as "the self" and contemporary interpretation and reconstruction of our own traditions and cultures. Considering that contemporary Chinese fashion design is a significant means to display China's cultural confidence and strength of socialist culture, Chinese designers shall keep improving their cultural accomplishment and exploring Chinese materials. A diversity of creation methods shall be adopted and the balance between "conservative" and "avant-garde" shall be maintained. The intersection of Chinese civilization and international fashion aesthetics shall be located to achieve "unity of form and spirit". At last, traditions shall be brought back to people's life at present and contribute to the establishment of core values of contemporary Chinese fashion.

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#### Note

Note 1. <https://fashionweekonline.com/interview-with-vivienne-tam-at-new-york-fashion-week>

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