CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harmony and Concealment:

How Chinese Women Fashioned the Qipao in 1930s China

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In the vain hope of overturning authority, certain social behavior by ordinary people can reclaim autonomy from pervasive forces, and at times challenge the legitimate power.¹ This chapter considers women’s consumption as a way to negotiate the tensions between political power and individual identities. Through Chinese women’s adaptation of the qipao in 1930s China, it demonstrates how modernity and traditional Chinese culture intervene through which a new set of Chinese aesthetics emerged for Chinese clothes.

From a background of political chaos, the qipao² rose in an effort to survive and negotiate with uneven power and desire. Following its emergence in mid-1920s China, the qipao gained immediate currency as standard wear for Chinese women until the early 1940s. Despite numerous regulations on dress and women’s bodily appearance in the Republican Era (1911–1949), the qipao has been constantly revamped through new styles and cuts. Its most feminine form in the 1930s was as a fashionable dress favored by women of the emerging middle class in modernizing and booming cities. Then, from the 1930s, the qipao’s hemlines, collar, patterns, colors, and cut varied from season to season, but retained its Chinese sartorial tradition.

At a time when nationalism conflicted with the influx of imported goods and Western-style garments, wearing Chinese clothes like the qipao was often seen as cultural resistance to Westernization. However, the widespread adaptation of the qipao in the 1930s cannot be reduced to a result of nationalism. Rather, its adaptation reveals Chinese women’s resistance to the Nationalist agenda for their bodies and appearance. Fashioning the qipao became a silent tool for
Chinese women to struggle against state regulation of their bodies. Through changes in style and responses to Western fashion trends, Chinese women tactically intervened, in Certeau’s term, using the *qipao* to rebel against the nation’s authority, challenging the dominant Western aesthetic standards. The social practice involved in wearing and developing the *qipao* manifested a set of aesthetic judgments that was unique to Chinese clothes at that time.

This chapter examines how the *qipao* was employed in order to resist and negotiate with institutional repression through the study of *Linglong*, a popular women’s magazine in 1930s China. Chinese women’s attitudes towards Western-style fashion and aesthetic judgment, mediated through resistance and negotiation, will be analyzed.

**Linglong**

A weekly women’s magazine, *Linglong* was published in Shanghai from 1931–1937. It was primarily concerned with women’s matters and represented women’s voice in the nation. The first half of the magazine contained sections on personal hygiene, sex, marriage, contemporary women’s life, and practical knowledge, such as modern interiors, world news on women, and legal issues. The second half reviewed films and reported on Hollywood gossip, local movie news, and home-grown and Hollywood film stars. *Linglong*’s readers were female students and urban women in major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, and Hong Kong. Apart from wide coverage in China, its distribution stretched to other parts of Asia such as Singapore and Indonesia, where Chinese populations were concentrated.

The study of *Linglong* in this discussion of the *qipao* is twofold. Firstly, *Linglong* is fairly representative of Chinese women of the time, and offers a realistic account of the *qipao* in the 1930s. The most eye-catching *qipao* in the Republican Era was perhaps in *Yuefenpai* (calendar posters), which is primarily illustrative and does not represent how the *qipao* was worn in reality.
While celebrity- or dress-oriented magazines showed only exquisite qipao and fashions that were worn either in showbusiness or by the decadent “Modern Girl”.³ *Linglong* was down to earth, presenting real-life Chinese women wearing real qipao. Unlike other women’s magazines of the same period where male writers were dominant, women’s voices were prevalent in *Linglong*, largely because of its female editor and interactivity with its readers. Chen Zhenling was the chief editor who contributed to commentaries on women’s issues and advice. The magazine’s disproportionate popularity has much to do with its interactivity. Famous illustrator Ye Qianyu also contributed fashion drawings, and a substantial portion of each issue comprised readers” articles and photos. Almost every front cover was a reader’s photo, while the back cover was of a Hollywood star. The magazine provided a platform for readers to launch their views on everyday life, beauty, sport, and children. *Linglong* was critical of yet sympathetic to the “Modern Girl.”⁴ It demonstrates women’s rational views on the nation’s restrictions on their body and their anger and resistance to the New Life Movement.⁵ It reflects New Women’s attitudes towards gender relationships in 1930s China and Shanghai moviegoers” taste in films at home and aboard.⁶ Not only are its views and published photos fairly representative of literate young women in China’s cities, but it also presents a realistic representation of the clothes worn by Chinese women in 1930s China.

Secondly, the short life span of *Linglong* coincided with the widespread adaptation of the qipao. During the 1930s, the qipao was developing, with Western-style fashion blossoming into many different styles, all influenced by the modernity and nationalism of the time. How was the qipao worn? How did Western-style fashion influence the qipao? Through studying Ye’s fashion illustrations, readers” photos, and readers” views on Chinese women’s body and clothes,
*Linglong* helps us to understand Chinese women’s attitudes towards the *qipao* and their relationship with Western-style fashion.

I begin by discussing the emergence of the *qipao* alongside Chinese women’s fight for gender equality and nationalism. This is followed by discussion of the various restrictions upon women’s bodily behavior and the *qipao*. How Chinese women intervened with their *qipao* under institutional repression will also be discussed with the aid of *Linglong*. Through the materials in the magazine, I will demonstrate how a set of aesthetic judgments about Chinese clothes gradually emerged to equate the *qipao* with Western-style clothing.

**Gender Equality and Nationalism**

The origin of the *qipao* is closely associated with the Chinese menswear of the time. The early-1920s *qipao* had a wide, “angular and puritanical” cut, resembling the men’s *changpao* and worn by women advocating gender equality. At the peak of women’s emancipation in the early 1920s, women’s cross-dressing reflected their desire for equal rights and respect for their individuality. Chinese women began to wear the *changpao* “because they wanted to look like men.” Dressing in men’s clothes gave the impression that they could perform male duties in society, including saving the nation, which had much to do with nation building at that time. However, China’s reformist intellectuals in the modern metropolis were engaged in a discourse on gender issues that was almost entirely dominated by men, with the majority more concerned with advancing their political power than advocating women’s role in politics. In the fight for equality, Chinese women were increasingly repressed and politically marginalized. Their disillusionment turned to cross-dressing in order to obscure their womanhood. However, those that wore the 1920s angular *qipao* were not limited to women activists and students who had returned from studies abroad, but also trendy women who followed new ideas. Despite many
suggested names to differentiate the dress from Manchu ladies” wear of the Qing dynasty – for instance, *changsan, changyi, changpao, zhonghua pao* – none were adopted. The name *qipao* was eventually accepted, but its style bore little resemblance to the indigenous Manchurian costume.\(^\text{14}\)

At a time when Chinese women were the subjects of social progress, their bodies became symbols of the nation. The angular and puritanical *qipao* led the transition towards the adoption of women’s national dress. As part of the New Women discourse, external manifestations of modernity such as clothing, hairstyles, and footwear were frequently discussed in women’s magazine columns and forums in newspapers.\(^\text{15}\) Male writers dominated the press during that time, and their criticism of women’s appearance in many publications resulted in more confusion than useful advice for Chinese women. Some men complained about women wearing men’s clothing, while some preferred the *qipao* for Chinese women. The turning point for the *qipao* came with the May Thirtieth Movement in 1925 when anti-Western demonstrations raged across the nation.\(^\text{16}\) Nationalism was fuelled all over the country, and Chinese clothes were called for to replace Western garments.\(^\text{17}\) Given that the *qipao* was already worn by some women who were seen as open-minded reformers and advocates of strengthening the nation, its adoption seemed to answer the Nationalist cry.

Nationalism hastened the *qipao*’s popularity, but not as a distinct factor in its widespread adaptation. Chinese women who refused to totally submit to Western culture saw the *qipao* as an alternative to the country’s intensified nationalism. Those who were attracted to Western-style garments but found the sizing and styling a poor fit chose the *qipao* as a comparable fashionable dress. The *qipao* accompanied Chinese women under political and social hardship, and its early adaptation filled the yawning gap between the genders. It marked an end to “hair in three tufts,
clothes in two pieces, \(^{18}\) by which traditional Chinese women had been identified for dynasties. Its acceptance signaled a farewell to the past.

**National Dress vs. Everyday Dress**

An official declaration in the Clothing Regulations of 1929\(^{19}\) finally announced the *qipao* as the accepted formal dress for women. The Nationalist government declaration was not an attempt to force its adoption, but partly to address the chaos of women’s cross-dressing,\(^{20}\) and partly to encourage the *qipao* in order to strengthen the nation’s integrity. Despite the inclusion of regulations on length, the use of materials and matching accessories for the *qipao*, none of these regulations were followed. Not only did Chinese women not wear pants beneath their *qipao*,\(^{21}\) which was one of the requirements in the regulations, but silk stockings were worn or bare legs were revealed under the slits, and high heels replaced flat-sole cotton shoes.\(^{22}\) Chinese women made no distinction between the *qipao* as a national and an everyday dress. The dress as a national symbol clashed with its everyday usage. Chinese women did not respect the 1929 Clothing Regulations, nor did they accept a unifying style for the *qipao*. The *qipao* of *Linglong*’s readers was not uniform, and variations in style, length, and material flourished. The style of the *qipao* changed based on the season and function.

When the *qipao* became women’s standard wear, it began branching out into a diverse range of styles. Most of Ye’s illustrations in *Linglong* featured dresses, seldom tops and bottoms. Almost every new style in the illustrations revolved around the *qipao*. No matter whether the dress was flared, slit-less, or waist-joint, it was still considered a *qipao*. The “collarless *qipao*” ‘symmetric-yoke *qipao*” and “puff-sleeve *qipao*” all included non-standard features.\(^{23}\) Although the dresses were not restricted to the *qipao*’s “usual” features, their form and silhouette had a resemblance, allowing comprehension of how the new style of dress could be made. The
drawings included instructive details such as “adding one-inch of black fur along the hem and slits”, and “the dress to be three-inches below the knee with trumpet-style sleeves.” Apart from the use of Western-inspired clothing features, none of the drawings proposed distinctive Western-style garments. The dress illustrations in *Linglong* included the *qipao* with matching coats and accessories. Far from uniformity, the *qipao* illustrations in *Linglong* varied greatly, with timely styles. Adjacent to one drawing, the instructions read:

For the sake of convenience in dancing, why not apply pleats on the bottom part of the *qipao* making it flare like in Western-style, that would make it easier to walk. This year’s trend includes light colored satin. Moon white, light blue, pale yellow satin can be used for the *qipao*. 

Such instructions gave Chinese women immediate access to dressmaking knowledge. Following the abolition of foot- (1911) and breast-binding (1928), Chinese women’s bodies experienced a transformation that required a new wardrobe. Besides these changes, variations in the size and form of Chinese women across the country were another issue. The sizing and fitting of most ready-made and Western-style garments remained a problem for many Chinese women. The *qipao* emerged at the right time in order to address the problem of bodily change and size variations, and the dilemma that many fashion-trend followers were unable to fit into ready-made or Western-style garments. The *qipao* was a custom-made dress, which required fitting to an individual body. Chinese women played an active role in fashioning their *qipao*. At a time of political and social upheaval, where visiting the tailor remained an occasional treat for many, it was not uncommon for Chinese women to hand-sew their *qipao*.

The *qipao* in its most basic form comprised two pieces (front and back) of fabric, with no darts or complicated fastenings, which made it economical to make and easy to sew. Choices of cut, fit, materials, colors, and trimmings were often based on the wearer’s personal preferences. Chinese women made their *qipao* according to the taste of the time, their needs, and “their own
judgment on color matching.” An illustration on an “early summer new style” in Linglong reads:

It would be rather dull to wear the same style of qipao for four seasons; heavy coat was the past when only long qipao filled the streets, came and went. Some ladies may want to have a change, now please pay attention to this style: Upper top to be made looser, the rest of the dress remained tight. Small white Pokka dots as pattern would be nice. The complete look would appear dynamic. (Figure 2)

The illustration, together with the instructive details, generated imagination among Chinese women, who were both consumers and producers of their own qipao. The qipao became the foundation for both a new style of dress and for Chinese women to implement stylistic changes in their clothing. Irrespective of its national status, Chinese women embraced its stylistic changes that made it part and parcel of the fashion cycle, in tune with Western trends and influences. The adaptability and versatility of the qipao made it ideal for style changes. Authenticity was never called into question thanks to the dress’s hybrid origins and the failure for it to be used in its intended national symbolic role. The dynamic of the qipao saw it in tune with Western fashion. The 1930s qipao was a fashionable dress that had already experienced “numerous stylistic changes, from loose to tight, tight to short, short to long.”

Modernity and Consumer Culture

After the 1930s, the qipao became tighter fitting year after year, emphasizing Chinese women’s demure curves and gradually becoming a dress symbolizing Chinese femininity. Its silhouette was in line with the trendy H-line Western-style clothes of the time. The materials (fabric, color, pattern), key to the stylistic character of the dress, were in the hands of the wearers, who were then able to determine their choice of Chinese or Western style. Yet, the qipao had an indissoluble link with the capitalist drive for Western modernity and commercialization. Its Chinese sartorial tradition can hardly be considered distinct. Reformers in
the Republic period sought to combine the strengths of both Chinese and Western cultures, promoting the co-existence of both worlds. Modernity became one of the nation’s goals, along with the desire to pursue the new and progressive in building a stronger nation. At the same time, Western powers had long imposed modernity on China via an ever-widening and interactive network of communication and exchange with the capitalist West.

Western and Chinese merchants co-operated in the move towards capitalism, promoting a leisure and consumer culture in Shanghai. The movement towards modernization fostered acknowledgement of the significance of Western cultures and ideas, underscoring the hybridity of Chinese modernity. 31 Both the qipao and its wearers were stitched into the rubric of such modernity. The 1930s qipao expressed a newness in response to the Republican search for the New Woman, the growing industrial complex, and consumer culture. The qipao’s perceived Chinese sartorial tradition, materiality, and wild partnership with Western-style accessories prevailed. Its wearers in the 1920s and 1930s represented an emerging middle class with some education, financial independence, and social and cultural awareness: they are the signifiers of the hegemony of the modern. Those women wearing their qipaos were significant in the creation of a progressive China and were co-opted by the state as Republican icons. 32

The Republican endorsement of the qipao underlined the dress’s iconic status. Although the growing consumer culture slowed down the consumption of Western imports, Western influence upon Chinese women’s dress continued. Opinions about women’s consumption of imports and the pursuit of Western fashion reflected nothing more than the anxiety to open up the nation’s economy. Fearful for the nation’s wealth and of competition from Western goods, Chinese merchants accelerated the rapid growth of nationalism by promoting national products. However, Chinese manufactured goods were encouraged, not Chinese-styled products. 33 Imports
from the West had already spread like wildfire as Shanghai opened up more and more trade routes after the 1920s. Cosmopolitan Shanghai was marked by the influx of Western cultures, where people appropriated Western ideas and lifestyles. While Western goods were not foreign to Chinese women, they were customized to suit their lifestyle.

**Qipao with Western-inspired Features to Progress and Improve**

At a time when Paris fashion arrived in Shanghai 3–5 months after its release, getting rid of Western garments and accessories was a hard task for Nationalism. For those in major cities, the visibility of Western products spread from consumer magazines to department stores. When discarding Western imports was a target for the nationalist, wearing the qipao became a desirable choice.\(^3^4\) The influx of Western fashion soon saw the incorporation of Western-style clothing features into the *qipao*. The use of Western elements (such as fabrics and accessories) in the *qipao* became a prevailing trend in 1930s China. Chinese women embraced their new-found democracy in the *qipao*, making it a tool for a fashionable look; tailors merely followed the masses leading the trend.\(^3^5\) The *qipao* provided Chinese women with an autonomous territory from which to silently rebel against the nation’s betrayal of their body. Hence, Western puffed sleeves, slits split higher to the thigh, the collar modified or removed, matching scarves, long fur coats, and leather heels – the *qipao* held hands with Western fashion (Figure 3). Those keeping up with the fashion trends – movie stars, students, and prostitutes – determined new styles for the *qipao*, which were quickly circulated among, and adopted by, the masses. It is debatable how far the dress departed from Chinese sartorial tradition; the whole point was to be desirable in the new-style *qipao*.

The practice through which Chinese women incorporated Western-inspired clothing features into their *qipao* was paralleled by the nation’s desire for modernization. To *Linglong*
readers, including Western influences in the dress was born out of the nation’s drive for progression and improvement rather than a submission to Western cultures and ideas. The pursuit of the new was the result of the nation’s drive to modernity. Western-style garments were new to Chinese women, so were adapted through the qipao. One article in Linglong reminded readers that “not everything from Europe and the States is new…[and] everything Chinese is old”, as “new” and “old” were based on Chinese people’s “thoughts, action and speech.”

In its puritanical form, the qipao could hardly be considered new vis-à-vis Western style garments in 1930s China. However, its style-changing nature was the manifestation of newness to Chinese women’s wardrobes. Overwhelmed by the visibility of Western imports, Chinese women took inspiration from features of Western-style clothing. The trend of ankle-length H-line dresses in the West coincided with the popularity of the qipao, which further facilitated the adoption of Western-inspired elements in qipao-making. The qipao shortened with the trend for short skirts in Europe (Ng 2006: 279), then in later years the length dropped to the ankle, corresponding with the trend in European fashion. Many photographs of Linglong readers in their qipao reveal a great deal of innovation and creativity (Figure 4).

However, not all fashionable qipao received praise. Those worn by the “Modern Girl” were criticized by Linglong readers. One Linglong writer considered the inconvenient “maxi-length qipao” with “high and stiff collar” in “high heels” to be a decadent look for the “Modern Girl.” The widespread adaptation and versatility of the qipao flourished in numerous styles for a diverse range of women in society, ranging from prostitutes to teachers, students to housewives. The question was not about wearing or not wearing the qipao, but about what made it acceptable yet pretty, stylish, and trendy.
Harmony and Concealment amid Style Change

What were the criteria for a decent qipao? These criteria constituted many commentaries in Linglong. Functionality and appropriateness were the starting point for the dress. Functionality referred to its practicality for different occasions such as work, parties, dancing, and shopping. Its appropriateness pointed to women of different ages, occupations, roles in society, and bodily features. Individuality was taken into account so much that the dress had no standard style. One article in Linglong categorized Chinese women into nine different styles: posh, sporty, cute, motherly, comical, household, boyish, elegant, and mysterious. Under each was a proposed appropriate style of clothing and accessories. Harmony was key to embrace women’s new-found individuality. According to Linglong writers, what constituted a desirable women’s dress was the use of harmonic colors, materials, patterns, and accessories, all based on the style, figure, and role of the wearer.

It appears that Western-inspiration did not feature so prominently in the new-style qipao, neither did Western-style garment for Chinese women, but rather emphasized Chinese quality. Wang observed that the harmony embedded in Chinese clothing had an intrinsic link to Chinese people’s relationship with the nature. The Chinese, explained Wang, believed that wo/men and nature were inseparable, they were a single entity; same interpretation went to clothes and wo/men. To translate the oneness of clothes and wo/men is the use of patterns and colors that are inspired by the nature, such as colors of different seasons, birds, flowers, moon, mountain and so on. So much as wo/men and the nature are one, so do the patterns, colors and materials of clothes. Materiality and the dress are expected to live in harmony that made harmony a deliberate character for Chinese clothes.
The commentaries on women’s dress style in *Linglong* were based on the assumption that women’s clothing was custom-made. Thus, materials, colors, and patterns were the ingredients for harmony when designing their *qipao*. Chinese women exercised their full capacity to adjust these elements to their own standard, which ready-made and imported Western-style garments could not reach. The fact that many Western-style garments did not comply with Chinese’s standard of harmony meant that they became unappealing in terms of Chinese women’s taste and aesthetics.

Another function of clothing for Chinese women, according to *Linglong*’s commentary, was concealment. One article pointed out that clothes were used to hide bodily weaknesses such as a flat or full chest, or a disproportionate figure, and to avoid the exaggeration of nice bodily features, adopting a posture of modesty instead. The characteristics of Chinese clothing outlined in *Linglong* echoed those proposed by Chinese scholar Lin Yutang (1895–1976). Lin encouraged Chinese people to wear Chinese clothes, and stressed the dichotomous aesthetic of Chinese and Western clothing – the former served to conceal, the latter to reveal the body. Accordingly, Western clothes suited only the young and beautiful; it would be cruel to those old and fat. In contrast, Chinese clothes offered equality to wearers: beauty could be revealed and ugliness could be concealed. Lin’s point about the concealing nature of Chinese clothes is their ability to accommodate varied bodily features, whether desirable or undesirable. While Western-style garments present the body only in a flattering light, Chinese clothing remains neutral to all bodily shapes and forms. The concealing nature of Chinese clothes encompasses a duality that implies hiding defects and revealing appealing features. The beauty of Chinese clothes lies in its adaptability and inclusiveness.
Although Lin’s article was published in the heat of nationalism, these features of Chinese clothing were picked up by *Linglong* writers, not as a resistance to Western culture and ideas, but as a point of departure in perceptions of clothing and beauty. The question of whether Western-style garments could be worn by Chinese women was asked repeatedly in *Linglong*. The differences in bodily features and aesthetic standard between Western and Chinese women discriminated against Chinese women wearing Western-style garments. The common notion that the “chest-exposed style of clothes was not suitable for Chinese women due to their bodily development” acutely pointed to the inadaptability and exclusiveness of imported Western-style garments.

**Body Liberation in the New-style Qipao**

The discussion of women’s wardrobes in *Linglong* further emphasized the presence of harmony and concealment in Chinese clothes. They became prime considerations when a new *qipao* was made. When style change became the norm for the *qipao*, any new style was meant to “enhance natural beauty” hence the “collarless *qipao*” was proposed as a result of the popularity of physical exercise that led to *jianmei* (healthy beauty). Chinese women could finally show off their chest in this new style of *qipao*, as suggested alongside one *Linglong* dress illustration. Sports and swimming were enthusiastically promoted under the State’s New Life Movement in 1932, which aimed to replace Chinese women’s weak and fragile image with one of strong and healthy beauty. *Linglong*’s women readers welcomed this image of healthy beauty as a move towards personal achievement. Tanned skin, a strong and robust body, and a tall and sporty figure were all considered healthy and beautiful. Special sports issues and photos of women’s nudity were seen from *Linglong*. Chinese women felt increasingly confident with their strong and healthy figure. *Linglong* readers were not ashamed to publish their photos in
swimsuits, T-shirts, and shorts, and many bare legs were displayed in sporty outfits. Shapely figures were eventually shown through the tighter-fitting qipao, with a longer slit to reveal bare legs (Figure 5).

Given the result of the abolition of foot- and breast-binding and the goal to acquire healthy beauty, Chinese women found a new form of femininity. The qipao provided a means for them to celebrate their bodies. It was a natural progression for the “revealing of the legs” to be the focus of the qipao.\(^{49}\) The figure-hugging qipao underwent an inevitable evolution from Chinese modernity and the immersion of Western cultures, overshadowed by political movement.

A ban on qizhuang yifu (strange and outlandish clothes) in 1934 including restrictions on qipao’s length and measurement\(^{50}\) only highlighted social oppression of women and the double standard of male authority on women’s bodily appearance and behavior: on one hand, Chinese women were encouraged to wear the qipao; on the other hand, unreasonable impositions kept placing on their qipao and appearance. No discussion on the regulations of the qipao was found in Linglong though resistance to the ban on other items such as hairstyle and accessories was widely recorded.\(^{51}\) The 1934’s regulation on the qipao was unlikely to have been in full force as Linglong reader’s photos only demonstrated its varied and unaffected styles.

**Conclusion**

In the wake of the collapse of imperial power, Chinese women underwent clothing reforms in the Republican Era, during which the qipao emerged out of women’s emancipation. Adaptability, versatility, and inclusiveness were the backbone of the qipao, whose popularity was facilitated by nationalism and the growing consumer culture. At the same time, the Nationalist government crusade for national salvation made Chinese women’s bodies a target for
social progress. Their bodily appearance and the *qipao* were at top of the agenda of the Nationalist government. Despite various attempts to nationalize their bodies and the *qipao*, Chinese women defeated the authorities by tactically intervening through adopting prevailing trends in the design of their *qipao*. The *qipao* became an autonomous territory from which to discard the label of women as weak and bearers of the tradition. Style change and the inclusion of Western-inspired elements characterized the 1930s *qipao*. Irrespective of the national symbolic role and restrictions upon the dress, Chinese women fashioned the *qipao* according to their will.

Modernity engineered both the nationalization of women’s bodily appearance and the rise of the *qipao*. However, a divided view of modernity set the Nationalist government apart from *Linglong*’s female readers. Both sides demonstrated progression and improvement: the conservative government fostered the outcome of nation building; *Linglong* female readers adopted individuality, the incorporation of Western ideas, and emancipation from the ills of tradition. The inevitable clash between the two further marginalized Chinese women in society. At the same time, women’s bodily reform saw the birth of a new form of femininity. The Nationalist government failed to accommodate their liberated body, while the figure-hugging *qipao* with its Western-inspired elements succeeded. Chinese women increasingly turned to fashioning their *qipao*, their imagined space for freedom and individuality.

In the great lap from dynasty to contemporary clothes, Chinese women faced a double challenge: firstly, they were exposed to uncompromising Western aesthetic standards. Secondly, they were challenged by the changing function of clothes from concealment to form-revealing. Harmony and concealment set the benchmark for a trendy *qipao* that *Linglong* readers could wear rather than Western-style garments. Concealment of their *qipao* performs a dual
function: hiding bodily weaknesses yet highlighting Chinese women’s new form of femininity. The 1930s qipao gently outlined Chinese women’s slender figure. It digested Western aesthetic standards in its making. The embedded Chinese standard of harmony and concealment that outlined the characteristics of Chinese clothes resonated with a strong proportion of Chinese women.
Notes


2 Commonly known as the Chinese dress, the *qipao* is a one-piece characterized by an asymmetric yoke and stand-up collar. The term is often associated with the Manchu who are from today’s Northeast China. They overthrew the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644) and founded the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1911). *Qi* refers to the Banner system of the Manchu; *qi* people refer to the Manchu. *Pao* is the gown worn by the Manchu.

3 It is not the aim of this chapter to discuss the *qipao* or fashion worn by the “Modern Girl” or trend-followers. This chapter aims to discuss how Chinese women negotiated their bodily appearance through the *qipao* under institutional repression from which a set of aesthetic judgment on clothes was established. The Modern Girl’s look, appearance and aesthetic standard were rather different from that of ordinary Chinese women.


8 Chang, 435.


11 Soong Ching-ling, wife of Revolutionist Sun Yatsen, was believed to popularize the angular qipao in mid-1920s. One of the most photographed women of the time, she was spotted wearing the qipao but not any other kinds of dress since then to after the liberation. In the early 1920s, women’s cross-dressing, bound breast and short hair were apparent particular with those who took part in the army. Ng noted that during the time, women with short hair, bound breast and in men’s clothes was a strong trend. It was rather difficult to differentiate them as women or men, reserved or provocative (101).


13 Minguo ribao (27/2/1926), cited in Ng, 274, pointed out the fact that mid-1920s” qipao was different from that worn by the Manchu and proposed to call it “zhonghua pao” instead of qipao.

14 The assured survive and popularity of Manchu wear in the social and political turmoil in the early Republic Era was slim against the anti-Manchu tenor of the time. Instead, Chinese women were seen in a jacket and skirt; see Verity Wilson, Chinese Dress (London: The Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), Valery M. Garrett, Chinese Clothing: An illustrated Guide (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Mingxin Bao, “Chinese Lady’s Daily Wear in Late Qing Dynasty and Early Republic Period,” Journal of China Textile University (Eng. Ed.) 8. 3 (1991): 9-21. Finnnane noted that no hint of the qipao was mentioned in the Chinese press in 1925 but in 1926, it was featured massively. She argued that its rise had much to do with the national crisis of the May Thirtieth Movement. Bian further noted that only a small proportion of Shanghai women wore the qipao in 1923; see Xiangyang Bian, “Origin of Qipao Fashion in Early Republic Period,” Journal of Donghua University (Eng. Ed.) 20. 4 (2003): 21-6. Newspapers showed no sign of it before March 1925, and only in the second half of the year did they mention its appearance. Also see Ng (2006).
Amongst these publications, *Funü zazhi* [The Ladies’ Journal], the most influential and widely circulated mainstream women’s magazine following the New Culture fad, was staid in fashion choices and women social outlook. Another magazine, *New Youth* anticipated radical challenge to notions of “traditional women.” *Liangyou Huabao* [The Young Companion] derided outlandish clothing for flappers and prostitutes. Writers for these magazines were predominantly men; see Kristine Harris, “The New Woman: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture,” *Republican China* 20. 2 (1995): 55-79.


Intense Nationalist feeling during that time saw men wearing *Sun Yatsen suit* (commonly known as the *Mao suit* outside China) and women wearing the *qipao* (Ng, 268).

Announcement of the Nationalist Government: “1. Clothes: Matched collar, right yoke covers front bodice, dress length falls on the mid-point between knee and ankle, inner-pants” length matches that of dress, sleeves below the elbow, to the mid-point of the wrist; in silk, linen, cotton, blue in color; six buttons on the side.

2. Shoes: In cotton, silk or black leather.” See *Clothing Regulations*, 16th April 1929 (cited in Ng 2006: 270-1).

Translation is author’s own. Regulations for the *Sun Yatsen Suit* were also included as it was declared to be men’s formal wear. (“Announcement of the Nationalist Government” 1929: 3, cited in ibid: 270-1). At about the same time, the Education Department established the *qipao* nationwide as the girls’ uniform for primary, and secondary schools and tertiary institutes (ibid: 271).

Both Ng (274) and Laing (101-2) documented that in 1926 General Sun Chuanfan called for banning women from wearing the *qipao*. Finnane discussed its clause as a strong belief that clothing for men and women should differentiate the sexes (110-5). Also see: *Liangyou huabao* (1926).

Bian noted that traditionally Chinese women wore pants underneath the garment and argued that bare-legs or silk stockings under a *qipao* were not Chinese tradition but a Western influence (23). Ng documented that the *qipao*’s length became shorter under the influence of the Western fashion for short skirts in 1928 and noted that women had already abandoned the pants underneath for silk stockings before the government released the *Clothing Regulations of 1929* (279).
22 High heels were widespread in 1925 and became worn by the majority of women (Ng, 132).


26 Finnane observed that only one in four used a tailor while one in five bought ready-to-wear. Unaffordable and problem of fit were the major obstacles to market international fashion which also explained the predominance of home- and tailor-made over imported ready-made clothes (2008, 115).


29 Wessie Ling, *Fusionable Cheongsam* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2007).

30 *Linglong* 75 (1932): 1172.


32 Chinese women featured as Republican icons in a desirable and exquisite *qipao* was typified in *Yuefenpai* [Calendar posters]. These posters were first produced by foreign and Chinese companies in 1900s” Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong. They depicted elegant Chinese women in latest *qipao* fashion promoting an array of consumer products (including tobacco, wine, cosmetics, etc.) and were also known as *meinu yuefenpai* [Beautiful lady calendar posters] (Cheuk 1996: 9). They were circulated within and outside China where Chinese populations were present.


34 It was recorded that an unofficial gang, *Modeng pohuai tuan* (Modern destructive gang) attacked and destroyed women’s clothes in Western-style in public. Those worn Chinese-style clothes were not the targets (*Linglong* 11 (1934): 643.

35 Chang noted the “unaccountable waves of communal fancy that become apparent from time to time” and considered that Chinese fashions during the Republican period could be “read as representing the will of the people” (439).
36 Linglong 43 (1936): 3329.
37 Linglong 30 (1933): 1593.
41 Wang, 18-22.
43 Yutang Lin, 351–4.
44 Linglong 03, (1936): 169.
46 Linglong 09 (1937): 683.
48 Linglong 71 (1932): 1006.
49 Scott, 84.
50 “The length of the qipao was not to be shorter than one Chinese inch above the ankle; the sleeves were not to be above the elbow; the slits of the qipao were not to be more than three inches above the knee; hair was not to be below the collar line unless it was tied in a knot; and no feet and legs were to be exposed except when engaging in manual labor” (Zhongyang ribao, (9 June 1934); Spence, 357; cited in Yen, 173).
51 Yen, 173-4; Spence, 357.