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Apparel and Fashion Design in Taiwan

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Taiwan has been the object of various phases of imperial and colonial exploitations throughout history. The development of clothing and fashion in Taiwan is entwined with its historical, political, and cultural changes. As a result of its complex political history, an identity crisis has developed since the 1960s, which has had a lasting impact on contemporary fashion creation. Since the seventeenth century, Taiwan has been handed over by one foreign power to another with no obvious claim to sovereignty: the Dutch colonized Taiwan between 1624 and 1662 followed by the conquest by the Qing dynasty in 1683, who turned it into a prefecture of Fujian province; the three “Great Rebellions” with which Taiwan revolted against the Qing dynasty from 1714 to 1833; Taiwan became Japan’s first colony following the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895); and in 1945 Japan formally retroceded Taiwan to the Kuomintang (KMT) government after fifty years of colonization (1895–1945).

Given its history of occupation and colonization, the historical changes in Taiwanese clothing and fashion can be understood in terms of four periods, which will be explored below: the Dutch rule during the Ming–Qing dynasties (1642–1895), the Japanese era (1895–1945), the authoritarian period (1945–1987), and the postmartial law period (1987–2000).

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

The Aborigines first settled an island off the southeastern coast of China, Taiwan. When the Dutch landed on the island in 1624, the indigenous peoples living in the coastal cities of China were encouraged to relocate to other parts of the island to raise crops including sugarcane. This resulted in an influx of Han Chinese, including Hakka immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong, across the Formosa Strait (now Taiwan Strait), who eventually outnumbered the Aboriginal people. As business was the major purpose of the Dutch occupation, cultural assimilation was neither planned nor encouraged. For their part, the Taiwanese despised the Dutch and did not accept their culture. Hence, the Dutch influence had no effect on the native clothes. The three main clothing cultures recorded during the period of Dutch rule were Dutch or European, Taiwanese Aborigines, and Han clothes from mainland China.

What the Taiwanese wore after Dutch occupation has much to do with the power struggle within China. After the defeat of the Dutch, Koxinga, a Ming general, established Taiwan as a base to recover mainland China, which was, at that time, occupied by the Manchurian-led Qing dynasty. The Han Chinese in Taiwan thus adopted the full Ming costume system between 1662 and 1683, distinct from the Manchurian clothes in

mainland China. Following the surrender of Koxinga in 1683, a gradual shift from Ming to Qing dynasty clothes was recorded. Because most inhabitants were Chinese migrants from south Fujian and southeast coastal cities in China, clothing customs and social conventions were similar to those of the mainlanders in Guangdong and Fujian. The island’s subtropical weather means that the clothes worn in Taiwan, compared to those of the Qing dynasty, were thinner, lighter, and less cumbersome. The physical distance from Qing central government also gave way to relatively liberal social mores and cultural values when it came to clothing choice for the Taiwanese.

INTRODUCING THE MODERN FASHION IN THE JAPANESE ERA

During the period of Japanese colonization, a gradual process of assimilation was enforced to inculcate Taiwan with a sense of “Japanese-ness.” The cultural and educational inheritance of Chinese imperial rule was systematically dismantled. The feudal system was abolished including women’s foot-binding, leading to wide acceptance of leather shoes. Japanese clogs subsequently spread to Taiwan.

During Japanese colonization, Taiwanese clothes underwent two major transformations. First, the appeasement approach during the Pacification era (1895–1919) promoted Western-style clothes vis-à-vis the adaptation of Qing dynasty clothes. However, men were allowed to keep their queues until the fall of the dynasty. While Westernization of menswear was much faster than for womenswear, women’s folded apron-skirts were replaced by Western-style tube skirts by the late 1910s. Women’s clothes generally became more fitted, with narrower sleeves and simplified patterns, and traditional symbols such as the phoenix, bat, and peony were discarded. Second, the assimilation period (1919–1936) saw the blending of Japanese and Western styles and the fusion of tradition and modernity. Japanese women living in Taiwan wore traditional kimonos as a social marker. Taiwanese women could only wear them on special occasions, for instance at weddings or at school, otherwise they were restricted to women working in a limited number of service industries. There was one attempt to start a campaign to allow every woman to wear a kimono but it failed due to the subtropical weather in Taiwan, high price, and rationing adopted during the war. During this period, it was not uncommon to see a household with family members in a variety of styles ranging from *qipao* (also known as cheongsam, a one-piece Chinese dress) to kimono to a Japanese-style uniform to Western-style suit.

The Japanese desire for Taiwan to break ties with China and develop a sense of “Japanese-ness” was undeniably strong. This was manifested in official and school uniforms for which the Japanese model was followed. Taiwanese civil servants were instructed to wear Japanese official uniforms at work, which were based on the style of military uniforms in the West. As government staff abounded in Taipei City, the colonial façade was reinforced in public places. Not only did the uniform serve as formal wear on important occasions but it also became a prestigious symbol for the Taiwanese elites who had newly entered the ruling class. As for schooling, the education system introduced school uniform, and girls wore bob haircuts and were taught Western-style dressmaking. The early 1920s sailor-style uniform for Japanese schoolgirls spread to some women’s schools and colleges in Taiwan. From the 1920s on, the Japanese school uniform for male students began to be widely adopted in Taiwan’s public schools and colleges.

In response to anxiety about the erosion of traditional values by the colonial power, in the late 1920s, the New Cultural Movement was launched by Taiwanese intellectuals to preserve the advantages of Chinese traditional culture. Qipao were worn at formal public occasions to assert cultural identity, and some wore it as an act of opposition to colonization. The trend of the 1930s fashionable qipao from Shanghai only came to Taiwan via Japan, together with Hollywood movies, as well as Western music and magazines. However, the qipao fad was not enthusiastically endorsed by the Japanese authorities. While the promotion of the kimono in Taiwan fell through, the colonizers in turn fast-tracked Westernization.

The Japanese colonial ruler subsequently imposed Westernization of the dress code in Taiwan. As upper-class Japanese gradually opted for Western-style clothing at social events with Westerners, Western dressmaking techniques were actively promoted to disseminate the benefits of the convenience and affordability of Western-style clothes. This trend also spread to Taiwan and was welcomed especially by working women ranging from teachers to white-collar executives to factory workers. The spread of the man’s suit in Taiwan was facilitated by the influences of the fashion trends in Japan and mainland China. A strong desire for the end of the feudal system and hence for progress could be seen following the fall of the Qing dynasty in how returning overseas students and businessmen cut their long braids and swapped traditional riding jackets for suits. Connected with this was the embodied notion of advanced Western civilization that suits symbolized in Japanese society. As a result, suits became widely accepted in the 1920s in Taiwan. By the early 1930s, suits, shirts, neckties, and hats became standard formal wear for Taiwanese upper- and middle-class men.

After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the colonized were forced to become “true Japanese” by the call to abandon the wearing of traditional Chinese clothes. Only kimono or Western-style clothing was allowed. The Japanese government also attempted to regularize clothing during the war by forcing women to wear simple and convenient clothes such as a blouse and knickerbockers. Such an attempt proved

unsuccessful but nevertheless had a profound impact on Taiwanese indigenous clothing for it has been Occidentalized since the Japanese occupation. The acceptance of Western culture paved the way for the pursuit of international fashion in later decades.

THE REINTRODUCTION OF SINICIZED STYLES

The authoritarian period (1945–1987) featured the transition of political power, industrialization, and rapid economic growth. The end of the Second World War and the defeat of Japan made Taiwan Chinese territory once again when it became part of the Republic of China (ROC). Taiwanese clothing was plain, functional, and durable due to the economic depression from 1945 to 1949. The hostility felt toward mainlanders in Taiwan was manifested in the unpopularity of the qipao. When the KMT relocated ROC from mainland China to the island, Taiwanese clothes were once again linked to national identity. Although women started wearing the qipao again, it was characterized as “Taiwanese style,” typified by its fitted silhouette. Fighting to eradicate the legacy of colonization, the Nationalists prohibited the wearing of Japanese clogs and military uniforms. After the Second World War, with the assistance from the United States through the China Aid Act and the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction, Taiwan’s economy gradually recovered during the 1950s. The close ties with the United States meant that Taiwanese clothes became Americanized due partly to the vast circulation of imported North American magazines. Japanese-style clothes fast disappeared. The Taiwanese did not hesitate to adopt Western-style clothes given their already Occidentalized indigenous clothing.

Furthermore, many textile producers retreated to Taiwan along with the Nationalists and brought with them substantial capital to set up the textile industry. For example, Tai Yuen Textiles Co. Ltd. and Far Eastern Textile Company began with cotton spinning in the island. The Textile Export Committee was established in 1957 to promote the export business. The industry achieved significant growth in exports owing to a series of successful economic measures and abundant labor. Textile and clothing products had the largest export value in Taiwan by 1965 followed by their export expansion in the 1970s. Consistently high-level economic growth has made Taiwan into one of the “four Asian dragons” together with South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

During the 1980s, the importation of international high-end brands and Japanese and Euro-American fashion magazines turned a new page in fashion consumption in Taiwan. Following international fashion was a symbol of social status. The Bureau of Foreign Trade also encouraged designers to incorporate their names directly onto their products. With the promotion of Sunrise Department Stores, the careers of designers such as Chen Tsai-hsia, Isabelle Wen, Jamei Chen, and Lu Fong-chih gradually took off. Some injected a Taiwanese rustic chic into their creations to distinguish themselves from their Western counterparts. Yet the brand explosion of the

1980s points to the fierce competition between local designers and international brands.

IN THE DAWN OF THE DEMOCRATIC ERA

The lifting of martial law in 1987 permitted the rise of democratization in political and social spaces, resulting in an increased information flow. For example, cable TV was launched, which facilitated the circulation of international news; major fashion magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Elle*, and *Vogue* published Chinese versions in Taiwan; and high-end fashion labels such as Jean-Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood opened local branches. Diverse tastes in clothing and a hybrid style of dress appeared. Consumers became more fashion conscious and better educated, thanks to the wide circulation of fashion trends and images. Consumers were not afraid to experiment with new styles and trends. As Taiwanese women's self-confidence about their appearance grew so did their level of body exposure. The rise of sensuality in the 1990s saw the end of the taboo around wearing revealing clothes. The resulting liberated clothing allowed women to show off their bodies and also gave rise to the popularity of tattoos.

Later generations of fashion designers became more confident in promoting their own named brands. Shiatzy Chen and Sophie Hong were among those with a strong retail presence in Taiwan who showcased their collections at Paris Fashion Week. The fusion of East and West was prevalent in these designers' collections. However, these are an exception. Homegrown Taiwanese fashion designers were yet to experience a breakthrough like their Japanese or Chinese counterparts. Night markets selling affordable catwalk fashion, together with a large number of independent clothing retailers' hand-selected fashionable items from abroad, fed right into the affluent consumer market. Equal attention was not given to homegrown designer labels as to the expensive imported brands.

While a large pool of available international fashion at various price points spoiled Taiwanese consumers, the distinctiveness of Taiwanese fashion was insufficient to satisfy the appetite of local trend followers. Its style could at times be perceived as "old wine in new bottle." The fact that local fashion designers face an identity crisis when it comes to creation has much to do with the complex political and cultural history of Taiwan. The interdependent cultural transfers and appropriations between Euro-America, Japan, and Taiwan mean that when it comes to creation, a cohesive visual identity is hard to define. The long-standing feeling of alienation arising from the undeniable cultural linkage with mainland China has prompted many to incorporate visible Chinese elements into their creations. Yet, wearing cultural identity on one's sleeve can at times defer the enjoyment of being fashionable. Chinese-inspired collections among Chinese consumers have proven less enticing than the prevailing trends. While the combination of Chinese tradition, Japanese colonial aesthetics, and half-baked Western visualization can often be characterized

as hybrid, such Taiwanese hybridization has been submerged into the world of diverse and multicultural fashion. The affluent Taiwanese consumers were heavily under the influence of fashionable trends on a global scale. Crafting a space in such a severely competitive market remains the major challenge for most homegrown designers.

INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

In contemporary Taiwan, two mainstream styles can be identified: the "kawaii" cute Japanese style among the young generation, and European/Japanese-oriented elegant style among career women of the old generations. Although Japanese colonization has ended, Japanese cultural Imperialism has returned to Taiwan in another form. Its visual and pop culture ranging from music, design, and fashion to TV dramas have continued to shape Taiwan's visual landscape. Japanese soaps have an influential role to play in the construction of Asian femininity across East Asia. The advantages of open trade and sharing aesthetics have caused the popularity of Japanese fashion to endure through time. Appropriate size, fit, and cut to the Asian body further its dissemination. The kawaii look, the aesthetics of which have been widely endorsed in Taiwan, can be seen as pretty and beautiful in an Asian way. Even Euro-American fashion has a light touch of Oriental Japanese elegance on the Taiwanese body. It is worth noting that the Occidental clothes first introduced to Taiwan during the colonial period were a version already adapted by the Japanese. They became the instructors in the way Occidental clothes should be adapted and presented. Such a preconception remains in spite of the influx of international fashion since the 1980s.

Since the late 1990s, increasingly popular Korean TV dramas have further reinforced certain intra-East Asian aesthetics. They have brought various fashion styles with them into the market in Taiwan. As Euro-American labels maintain their favored position among trend followers, homegrown designers thrive and open branches at home and abroad. For example, Taipei's biggest bookstore, Elite, has dedicated an entire retail floor in their lifestyle department to emerging homegrown fashion talents; shopping malls such as Bellavita Mall support young designers by providing affordable retail space; Taipei's new creative hub at the Songshan Cultural and Creative Park organizes regional fashion exhibitions. Taiwanese fashion keeps on thriving.

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See also: Natural and Social Environments and Historical Background (with Design Focus) of Taiwan; Contemporary Textiles and Fashion Design in China; Contemporary Textiles, Apparel, and Fashion Design in Hong Kong