

A Comparision Between Whether and How Western Fashion Represents the Identity of Upper-Class Women in Shanghai and Chinese Immigrant Women in the United States during the 1920s

Rebecca Peng^{1,a,*}

¹*Yew Chung International School of Chongqing, New York, 14845, United States*

a. peng-rebecca@outlook.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: During the 1920s, the city of Shanghai became a hub of Western influence, as more foreigners and Chinese individuals with overseas degrees brought new ideas to the port city. The growing upper-class in Shanghai increasingly had access to purchase Western products, specifically Western fashion on Nanjing Road. Meanwhile, Chinese immigrants living in the United States during this decade experienced varying degrees of Western influence in their everyday lives and how they dressed. The topic of this paper addresses an understudied comparison, utilizing fashion as an angle to examine the identities of upper-class women in Shanghai and Chinese immigrant women in the United States during the 1920s. This paper observes primary sources including photographs and a newspaper as a method to address the research topic. This paper argues that during the 1920s, most second-generation Chinese immigrant women adopted Western fashion to assimilate into American culture. However, the first-generation Chinese immigrant women mostly maintained their Chinese culture despite being in a new environment. On the other hand, in Shanghai, Western fashion became popular among upper-class women during the 1920s as it reflected their social and economic power; their identity became increasingly linked to progressive Western women's ideals. Ultimately, this paper's assertion contributes to shaping a larger perspective explaining how the different environments of Shanghai and the United States caused the upper-class women in Shanghai and Chinese immigrant women in the United States to have disparate values in regard to Western fashion.

Keywords: East Asian studies, social studies, Chinese American history, Shanghai, western cultural influence

1. Introduction

The decade of the 1920s featured globalization, modernization, and cultural diffusion. Shanghai became a hub of Western influence as more foreigners and Chinese individuals with overseas degrees brought new ideas to the port city [1]. New skills such as utilizing Western marketing to sell Western fashion on Shanghai's Nanjing Road gave the growing upper-class in Shanghai more options for dress and leisure. Scholars have described Shanghai as the "Paris of the East," which characterized the opulent lifestyle of the Shanghai elite who had access to a variety of European goods and services

[2]. Meanwhile, some Chinese immigrants chose to remain in the United States after immigrating during the 19th century in response to the demand for cheap labor [3]. Few immigrated to the United States during the first half of the 20th century due to legal barriers [4]. Western influences had varying degrees of impact on Chinese immigrants in the United States.

Despite extensive research on Western influence on 1920's Shanghai fashion, scholars largely neglected to examine how Western fashion represented the identity of upper-class women in Shanghai by comparing this group with Chinese immigrant women who lived in Western countries. Therefore, this paper's assertion contributed to shaping a larger perspective explaining how the different environments of Shanghai and the United States caused the upper-class women in Shanghai and Chinese immigrant women in the United States to have disparate values regarding Western fashion. This paper primarily observes primary sources such as photographs and newspapers to compare the different groups with the concepts of fashion in different environments to describe the current research and contribution to this essay.

This paper argues that during the 1920s, most second-generation Chinese immigrant women adopted Western fashion to assimilate into American culture. However, the first-generation Chinese immigrant women mostly maintained their Chinese culture despite being in a new environment. On the other hand, in Shanghai, Western fashion became popular among upper-class women during the 1920s as it reflected their social and economic power; their identity became increasingly linked to progressive Western women's ideals. This paper will define fashion in terms of their women dress, their hairstyles, and their shoes.

2. Western Fashion and the Identity of Upper-class Women in Shanghai During the 1920s

The upper-class women in Shanghai embraced Western fashion as it became more accessible to purchase in the city. Wen-hsin Yeh, the author of *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949*, states how the department stores on Nanjing Road were modern and kept up with Western trends [5]. Shopping in downtown Shanghai became a source of leisure for this upper-class group because they could spend their time window shopping and experience high-quality customer service, which were marketing ideas that both came from the West [6].

Along with the rise in popularity of Western fashion in this upper-class, the fashion served as a symbol of some of the progressive Western women's ideals: freedom, independence, and equality. The 1920s was a decade in which the gender revolution started in the West, as women began to take action to call for equal rights [7]. The rise of flappers in the West, who wore their skirts short and hair in bobs, challenged traditional expectations of a woman's appearance [8]. Upper-class women in Shanghai began to have more access to buy more Western form-fitting dresses and cut their hair into Western-style short bobs.



Figure 1: Two Women in a Photo Taken by Boonly Studios During the 1920s.
<https://www.historic-shanghai.com/the-evolution-of-shanghai-fashion/>.

The photo shown above [Figure 1] above was taken during the 1920s by the company “Boonly Studios” in Shanghai. Found on the Historic Shanghai website, both of the women are likely to be from the upper-class, due to their ability to access a studio for professional photos. Figure 1 depicts both upper-class women with their hair in finger waves [9]. Finger waves were a popular trend in the West as part of the short “boyish” bobs that flappers in the West often wore their hair in as well [10]. Similar to flappers, this Western fashion trend allowed these upper-class women in Shanghai to appear more masculine, a demonstration of the increased equality in their status.

Traditionally, most upper-class Chinese women engaged in foot-binding, a practice in which women broke and bound their feet to attract men [11]. As a result, women had to stay confined within their homes, with limited mobility due to their physical state. However, in Figure 1, the two women wear Western-style leather shoes instead of lotus shoes for bound feet. By wearing Western-style shoes, the shoes represent how this group experienced increased amounts of freedom. Indeed, the upper-class women in Shanghai now had the ability to transport themselves and experience more independence.

Furthermore, Western fashion represented the economic power of Shanghai’s upper-class women during this decade. By wearing clothes that included Western elements, this group could demonstrate a form of affluence as they wore fashion from different countries. Chan argues that wearing foreign fashion showed an exclusive knowledge of other cultures [12]. Upper-class women in Shanghai were able to afford such fashion which included Western elements. For example, the qipao in the 1920s was influenced by Western culture as it became more fitted and shorter, highlighting new sexuality in women [13].



Figure 2: One Woman in a Popular Upper-class Qipao During the 1920s.
<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-01-19/Travelogue-The-qipao-China-s-most-iconic-dress-XaVEZEKisM/index.html>.

The upper-class women in Shanghai were able to afford and purchase goods that were imported from the West, paying the higher prices for foreign goods. Meanwhile, others in the lower classes did not have this same privilege. Therefore, the wealthy could showcase their opulence through their Western fashion. As Tyson states, there was a “vast gulf” between the economic success of the elite and the rest of the population in Shanghai [14]. In Figure 2 [15], the young woman appears to be an upper-class woman due to her presence in the photograph; there were limited resources for photography during this time.

In the background of Figure 2, there is a telephone and a Parisian-style carpet. It can be implied that these two goods were limited to the upper-class as technology and imports were uncommon because of their prices. Therefore, the woman in Figure 2 demonstrates a form of wealth because both her Western-influenced fashion and the background setup represent the posh life that the upper-class enjoyed.

In the “Shanghai Girls” and “Old Shanghai” collection [16], the photographs show varying forms of entertainment that the upper-class women in Shanghai enjoyed during the 1920s. Several photographs show these women dancing in ballrooms or attending cinemas. This collection indicates the glamorous life that the upper-class women in Shanghai experienced because the women shown in this collection are taking part in luxury leisure activities that originated from the West.

In all of the photos, these women are wearing Chinese-style clothing with Western elements. Moreover, most of their hairstyles follow the Western hairstyle trends during this time: bobs, waves, and curls [17]. Hence, engaging in Western entertainment activities supports how upper-class women in Shanghai utilized Western notions, specifically their Western-style fashion, as a symbol of their social exclusivity to others.

3. Western Fashion and the Identity of Chinese Immigrant Women During the 1920s

The different generations of Chinese immigrant women differed in their willingness to accept Western fashion. For first-generation Chinese immigrant women, this group generally did not assimilate to Western-style clothing. Jorae argues that early Chinese immigrants during this period chose to keep their traditional Chinese-style fashion as a “statement of their cultural pride” [18]. In a new environment, living in the United States, first-generation Chinese immigrants utilized their clothing to maintain their connection with their culture and home. A photo from Jorae’s journal is shown below.



Figure 3: Chinese Immigrant Family Portrait Taken During the 1920s.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/westhistquar.41.4.451>.

In Figure 3, the Chinese immigrant family is shown to be preserving some of their Chinese cultures by posing in a traditional Chinese format. Based on China’s belief in filial piety, traditionally, the elders, in this case, the grandparents, sit in the front to demonstrate their higher place in the hierarchy. In the background, the parents stand with their children next to them while the youngest child sits in the front.

The elderly woman sitting in the foreground in Figure 3 appears to be wearing traditional Chinese fashion. Her dress can be dated back to the Qing Dynasty. The younger generations behind her have mixed styles of dressing. The women standing in the back have Western-style hairstyles, and two of the young ladies have Western bows in their hair. Furthermore, the second and third-generation Chinese immigrant women in the background seem to be wearing more fitted dresses, elements of Western fashion.

Continued, second-generation Chinese immigrant women sought to adopt Western fashion during the 1920s. Since they grew up in American society, most immigrant children had the desire to fit in with the rest of their peers; the Pew Research Center’s study on second-generation immigrants states that this group generally “think of themselves as a typical American” [19].



Figure 4: Chinese American Girl's Trousers From 1915-1925.
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1194180.

Figure 4 is taken from the National Museum of American History's website [20]. On the website, it states that Lee's daughter wore this Chinese-style outfit only on special occasions, implying that it was not worn often. Second-generation Chinese immigrants were more likely to have an American personality and attitude, which reflects how Western fashion represents a social means by which they could integrate into the American society they lived in.

However, there is an extent to which second-generation Chinese immigrant women wore Western fashion in the United States. In a New York Times article published in 1923, "Flappers of Chinatown," the article gushes over a Chinese American woman, Miss Mah Jong, who is described to embody both "the East and the West in one" [21]. The article writes how Miss Mah Jong is an individual who has both a Western and Chinese sense of fashion, taking the best from both worlds. In one section, the article writes that Miss Mah Jong could be wearing Chinese traditional fashion, embracing her role as a Chinese flapper, but her American personality juxtaposed with her Chinese clothing. Miss Mah Jong is an example of a second-generation Chinese woman who did not necessarily need Western fashion to fit in with her peers, as her personality and energy of a "California girl" demonstrated her Western identity [21].

4. Comparison

The upper-class women in Shanghai sought to utilize Western fashion as an exterior display of their social and economic power. While other economic classes could not afford this lifestyle, upper-class women in Shanghai could take part in Western leisure activities. Their identity became increasingly similar to Western ideals such as independence and embracing their femininity. They welcomed Western influence and experience more freedom during this decade.

In contrast, second-generation Chinese immigrants generally wore Western fashion in an effort to fulfill their interior desire to assimilate into American culture and society. By wearing Western fashion, this group could be considered or feel more included among their peers. Meanwhile, first-generation Chinese immigrant women broadly did not wear Western fashion because they desired to stay connected with their traditional Chinese culture.

However, both groups – upper-class women in Shanghai and Chinese immigrant women in the United States – during the 1920s share similarities as both continued to maintain aspects of Chinese

fashion. For example, the upper-class women in Shanghai did not completely reject their traditional Chinese clothing. Instead, they incorporated Western elements into Chinese fashion. Likewise, first-generation Chinese immigrant women continued to wear Chinese-style clothing in the United States to maintain their culture in a different environment. Moreover, second-generation Chinese immigrant women did not completely dismiss Chinese fashion as they wore them at certain times of the year, such as when they celebrated Chinese holidays in the United States.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyze the influence of Western fashion on a group that lived in China (the upper-class women in Shanghai) and a group that immigrated to the United States (Chinese immigrant women in the United States) to find whether and how their identities differed. This paper contributed in shaping a larger perspective explaining how the different environments of Shanghai and the United States caused the upper-class women in Shanghai and Chinese immigrant women in the United States to have disparate values in regard to Western fashion.

The overall findings are that Shanghai's upper-class ladies aimed to use Western fashion as a symbol of their status and wealth. Their identity started to resemble more Western progressive notions, such as freedom and accepting their sexuality. Although Chinese immigrants of the second generation tended to dress in Western styles in an effort to blend into American culture and society, first-generation Chinese immigrant women generally avoided wearing Western clothing because they wished to retain their cultural identity.

Broadly speaking, there deserves to be more research comparing United States immigrants and individuals who stay in their ethnic country to address how different environments affect one's identity, values, and beliefs. As of January 2022, there are around 46.6 million immigrants in the United States, the largest number recorded in any government survey in the United States dating back to 1850 [22]. This indicates the importance that these immigrants should have access to the rich history concerning immigrants with their same ancestral heritage compared to their ancestors who stayed in their ethnic country.

References

- [1] Yeh, Wen-Hsin. 2007. *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [2] Brook, Daniel. n.d. "The Rise and Fall and Rise of New Shanghai." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/13/the-rise-and-fall-and-rise-of-new-shanghai/>.
- [3] "Chinese Immigration and the Chinese in the United States." 2018. National Archives. February 14, 2018. <https://www.archives.gov/research/chinese-americans/guide>.
- [4] "Growth and Inclusion | Chinese | Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History | Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress." n.d. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/chinese/growth-and-inclusion/>.
- [5] Yeh, Wen-Hsin. 2007. *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [6] Yu, Zhang. 2013. "When the Shops Showed Style - Global Times." *Www.globaltimes.cn*. February 25, 2013. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/763979.shtml>.
- [7] Gilkison, Taylor. 2017. "TopSCHOLAR® the Transformation of Gender and Sexuality in 1920s America: A Literary Interpretation." https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1688&context=stu_hon_theses.
- [8] Editors, History com. 2018. "Flappers." *HISTORY*. A&E Television Networks. March 6, 2018. <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/flappers#:~:text=Flappers%20of%20the%201920s%20were>.
- [9] "The Evolution of Shanghai Fashion «Historic Shanghai." *Historic Shanghai*. <https://www.historic-shanghai.com/the-evolution-of-shanghai-fashion/>.

- [10] Rudolph, Katie. 2014. "News & Events." *Denver Public Library History*. November 24, 2014. <https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/historic-hair-%E2%80%9Cbobbing%E2%80%9D-and-%E2%80%9Cwaving%E2%80%9D-1920s-1#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20women>.
- [11] Cartwright, Mark. 2017. "Foot-Binding." *World History Encyclopedia*. September 27, 2017. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Foot-Binding/>.
- [12] Chan, Heather. 2017. "From Costume to Fashion: Visions of Chinese Modernity in *Vogue Magazine*, 1892-1943." *Ars Orientalis* 47 (20181025). <https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0047.009>.
- [13] Chen, Amy. 2021. "Roaring 1920s of Shanghai: The Origin of the Qipao." *The Daily Campus*. February 12, 2021. <https://dailycampus.com/2021/02/12/roaring-1920s-of-shanghai-the-origin-of-the-qipao/>.
- [14] Li, Laura Tyson. 2007. *Madame Chiang Kai-Shek: China's Eternal First Lady*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
- [15] "Travelogue: The Qipao, China's Most Iconic Dress." 2021. *News.cgtn.com*. 2021. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-01-19/Travelogue-The-qipao-China-s-most-iconic-dress-XaVEZEKisM/index.html>.
- [16] "1920s Dance Hall, China. The Dancer on the Left in the Foreground Seems to Be Wearing a Cheongsam (Known in Mandarin As... | 1920s Dance, Shanghai Girls, Old Shanghai." n.d. *Pinterest*. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/715861303246766295/>.
- [17] Rudolph, Katie. 2014. "News & Events." *Denver Public Library History*. November 24, 2014. <https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/historic-hair-%E2%80%9Cbobbing%E2%80%9D-and-%E2%80%9Cwaving%E2%80%9D-1920s-1#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20women>.
- [18] Jorae, Wendy Rouse. 2010. "The Limits of Dress": *The Western Historical Quarterly* 41 (4): 451–71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/westhistquar.41.4.451>.
- [19] "Second-Generation Americans." *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, 7 Feb. 2013, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/02/07/second-generation-americans/.
- [20] "1925 - 1930 Chinese American Woman's Skirt." n.d. *National Museum of American History*. https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1194180.
- [21] "Flappers of Chinatown (May 27, 1923)." 2013. *Fashion Historia*. January 31, 2013. <https://fashionhistorian.net/blog/2013/01/31/flappers-of-chinatown-may-27-1923/>.
- [22] Camarota, Steven A., and Karen Zeigler. "Foreign-Born Population Hits Record 46.6 Million in January 2022." *CIS.org*, 23 Feb. 2022, cis.org/Camarota/ForeignBorn-Population-Hits-Record-466-Million-January-2022.