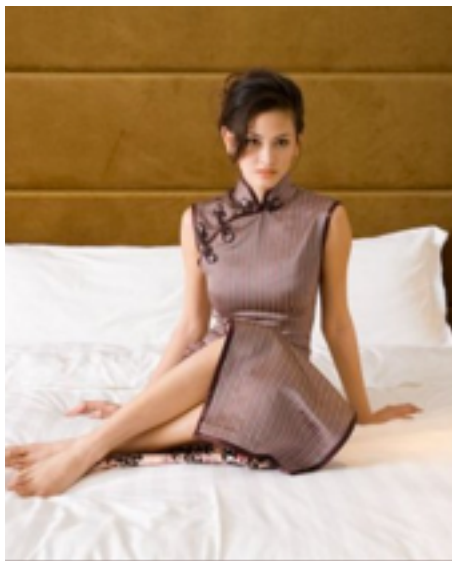


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Shown in Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, a qipao collection named Matcha: The Shanghai Dress was reported as “gorgeous and updated qipao and explain the history and intricacies of the iconic garment.”¹ One of those piece shows below.

It seems whenever we see a qipao in the museum, all our concerns are how luminous the fabric is, and imagination about how elegant we would be if we were in it. However, if we look back a little, we may be so surprised about that decent traditional evening-gown like dress was originally worn by men to show their faith to the dynast in old days. And even then, in contemporary time, the qipao was still considered to be a peripheral and bourgeois item. In case of how elegant the qipao looks like vs how suffering the history is, the verdict is in.



All pictures from <http://qipaoobjane.com>

The report also says “The qipao originated in the 17th century Qing Dynasty as a baggy, one piece dress that hung straight and covered a woman from her neck to her ankles. In the early 1900s, the garment was revised in Shanghai to be body-hugging and sleek. Shanghai socialites and high-end courtesans made it the centerpiece of

¹Michele Gates, “*The Shanghai Dress Modernized by a Bay Area Designer*”, *Fashionable Fun: San Francisco*, June 2, 2010, <https://fashionablefunsf.wordpress.com/2010/06/02/the-shanghai-dress-modernized-by-a-bay-area-designer/>

their wardrobes and the qipao became a symbol of sophistication, elan and modernity. Called “cheongsam” in Cantonese.” It’s very impressive that the reporter do have some sense of the history of qipao. However it’s also confusing that he believes if something change a name, it can suddenly deny its background and represent a brand new aesthetic standard.

As the report said, the original qipao was a traditional baggy one-piece worn by people in Qing Dynasty. Because that was a time of domination switch. As a new regime, the Manchu ethnic group dominated China. To make people obeisance to them, they forced all men to wear just like them which was known as qipao. And that was also the time the Chinese traditional clothing is moving from Hanfu to qipao.

But what the reporter missed is this baggy one piece were worn only by men until 1920s. “In 1926, the long vest and the top became one and gave birth to the first generation of the qipao. An illustration of this was drawn by the famed Shanghai artist Cheng Shifa depicting a female student in a men's long scholar's gown circa 1921.”² According to the records, it is quite interesting that qipao’s origin is men’s outfit. Therefore, to separate qipao from men’s clothes, it was designed to make the slits’ seams to the toes.(Because men’s have slits to the crotch for moving freely.) Then we have the following description, “Originally, the qipao had a loose fit, hanging straight down the body, or flared slightly in an A-line. It covered most of the woman’s body, revealing only the head, hands and the tips of the toes.”³ from a study by Matthew Chew.

This kind of style remained until 1980s. Influenced by western culture, the qipao has a trend to become tighter and shorter to show women’s body beauty. Even through, ladies try to keep it elegant and traditional by the slits up the side. Tailors was told to ensure those slits keep under the knees to show their gentility of the women who wore them.

Back to the qipao exhibited in Asian Art Museum with compliment “ explain history” is actually shows nothing about culture and even anti that aesthetic standard. Actually for those qipao-like dresses slit to the thigh like what showed in museum are purchased for exotic purpose in another culture. They may not wear a haute couture qipao at balls or elite social gatherings. Instead, they may wear qipao as an exotic souvenir. According some study, Japanese tourists especially like to purchase qipao

²Yu Leung, Sally. “The last empress in qipao.” *Ornament*, Volume 35, Issue 5. Page 58-63. (accessed February 27, 2015)

³Matthew Chew *The China Quarterly*. London: Cambridge University Press(accessed February 27, 2015)

tailors to sexy exposure style. Because the qipao is a staple costume for characters in Japanese adult video films.⁴

Even some people may hold the view that what was showed in the museum embodies the evolution of the qipao that they become more sexier for the open and pluralistic society. While Chinese outfits did have a big turning point, but in other ways. It had a trend for small collars and sleeveless styles. Also the Art Deco designs and Japanese prints were added to the new items. For the Fabric, western ones on the market helped to give multi choices of color and textures for qipao tailors. Although slits became higher to expose the legs more, but not to the thigh like the one in museum.

All in all, what showed in museum is not either a sample of history microcosm or the evolution of iconic garment. Instead it is much more like a back to Qing dynasty for men's wearing mixed with modern pattern and fabric. It shows nothing about culture or aesthetic.

⁴ibid.

resources

Matthew Chew *The China Quarterly*. London: Cambridge University Press(2007)

Yu Leung, Sally. "The last empress in qipao." *Ornament*, Volume 35, Issue 5. Page 58-63. (2012).

Michele Gates. "*The Shanghai Dress Modernized by a Bay Area Designer*". *Fashionable Fun: San Francisco*. <https://fashionablefunsf.wordpress.com/2010/06/02/the-shanghai-dress-modernized-by-a-bay-area-designer/>