

# URBAN FEMININE FASHION IN CHINA FROM 1987 TO NOW

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## Abstract

*As a symbol of the society, fashion features the reflection of political, economic and cultural conditions in different periods from a certain aspect. The development and changes of urban feminine fashion in China reflects women's social status, living conditions, moral and psychological growth, which embody the forward pace of the social civilization. Urban feminine fashion in China from 1987 to now is a history not only of dressing evolution, but also of modern development of women, which is a microcosm of the social metabolism in contemporary China. When China opened its door to the world, it took less than 10 years for the public to accept the Western fashion from abroad. Urban feminine fashion caught up with the international trends at an astonishing speed, and the dressing manner of women in China became more and more fashionable, stylish, modern, free and sexy. The fashion magazines witnessed every important step in the development of Chinese fashion and served as a bridge between fashion and people, especially before the Internet became dominant in daily life.*

**Keywords:** Urban Feminine Fashion, China, 1987 to Now

## Introduction

In 1978, Chinese government launched the reform and opening up policy. The policy included two important parts, of which one was to replace the planned economy with the market economy characterized by the social situations of China, and the other to open up to the rest of the world. China's reform covered sectors from the economy to the politics, culture, society and all the others, which started as a sparkle and then developed into an unstoppable wildfire. In the process of opening up, Chinese learned from the West not only abundant knowledge, advanced technology and management methods, but also the Western fashion. Bringing the Western fashion into China has diversified the life of Chinese people, and significantly changed the images of Chinese urban feminine.

At the beginning, reform and opening up policy brought Chinese people the opportunity to be connected with the fashion world. There came the chance for Chinese people to know the real conditions outside China, what were happening in the world, and the dressing fashion trends in other countries. Then,

rapid economic development, material prosperity, political environment easing as well as support from government give Chinese people chances to decide how they want to be dressed. Especially, Chinese women were keen to catch up with Western fashion, with their pursuit of beauty, economic independence, liberation and psychological freedom. As a result, nowadays the feminine images in China are becoming more and more fashionable, stylish, modern, free and sexy. And China's independent fashion designer brands for urban feminine attracted attention from the fashion world. Besides, it is noteworthy that fashion magazines played an important role in teaching women what is fashion, how to dress fashionably, and at the same time, communicated the "ideal" images for Chinese women in the developing process of urban feminine fashion.

### **Methodology**

Visual and written data collected included photographs from website, newspapers, and magazines. The photographs were analyzed visually and evaluated in regard to historical developments that took place in China from 1978 to now. Examination of written materials—newspaper and magazine articles—provided the historical context, including letters from the readers of magazines. Based on the analysis of these fieldworks, with the achievement of theory research, to research the fashion phenomenon and find out the reasons.

### **Development of urban feminine fashion in China**

It was said, "the clothing is a kind of language and a pocket drama which expresses life." Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the urban feminine fashion has changed a lot. According to the different characteristics, its development can be divided into several stages. Before 1978, the politics powerfully affected people's life, and people hadn't too many choices for clothing. From 1978 to 1980, the first 3 years of reform and opening up, Chinese people touched Western fashion and changed their thoughts to it. In the 1980s, the Chinese clothing finished its westernization, and feminine characteristics became more obvious in feminine fashion. In 1990s, Chinese feminine fashion followed the Western closely, and women dared to explore their bodies to show the self-confidence. After 2000, China began to go its own way of fashion. Independent fashion designer brands for urban feminine grew rapidly. And urban feminine images became diversified.

#### **1. 1949-1965: The early days of the People's Republic of China**

In 1949, People Republic of China was established, which brought great changes to the society. Clothing and fashion were linked with revolution. Chinese women abandoned the traditional female dresses in haste, as if they had been reborn. As western-style clothes and cheongsam were viewed as the capitalist class, they faded away in people's life.

New constitution gave women the same rights as men, including rights of education, work, and vote, etc. They loved to wear the similar styles to men for showing these equalities. As men were wearing the Mao suit, young women wore the Lenin suit, which was reformed from a kind of Russian men's uniform. There weren't many differences between men and women in clothing. Both of them were the styles of reformed uniform, and color was tedium, except the belt showed feminine characteristic.

In this period, only one kind of feminine dresses was popular. It was called Bragi, named after the Russian word "one-piece dress". Chinese women learned it from Russian experts, who they saw as idols. It became a symbol of revolution and progress. The dresses were baggy and in a limited range of colors and

styles—mainly floral, plaid and stripes—which disguised rather than accentuated womanly charms. Nevertheless, Chinese women everywhere donned Bragi dresses as a way of showing solidarity and friendship between China and the Soviet Union.

Not only the Lenin suit but also the Bragi showed us the fine relationship between China and the Soviet Union at that time. It is expected to show the politics had the power to effect what people wear.

## **2. 1966-1976: The Cultural Revolution**

From 1966 to 1976 was a very special decade in China, because that the Cultural Revolution swept up in the whole country. During this special time, people wore only kind of clothing—uniform. Clothes became asexual. There was hardly any difference between women and men in clothing. The young Red Guard wore green uniform, a Sam Browne belt, a Chairman Mao badge, a green bag, a Red Guard armband, military shoes, and waved a copy of the “little red book”—that included quotations from Chairman Mao.

The female Red Guards dressed like men, and tried to limit the fashion variety among the public masses. They cut their hair, and put on the military uniform. They were not allowed to have long hair, nor dressed and patterned blouses. If they did, they would be regarded as “capitalist” or “bourgeois”—rather than feminine. At that time, fashion no longer reflected individual character, but only popularity and a kind of approximate religious type anxiety and fanaticism just like Political tide.

From the founding of China to the end of the Cultural Revolution is the time when politics greatly influenced clothing styles of Chinese people. Asexuality was the particular attribute of the clothing. Women’s clothing styles did not represent a real sense of fashion because they had limited choices about what they wanted to wear. As well, in this period, people abandoned tradition, which made people more free when they accepted Western fashion later.

## **3. 1978 - 1980: The first three years of Reform and Opening Up**

In 1978, the Chinese government launched the reform and opening up policy, which changed China society deeply. Maybe to the public, they didn’t know what the policy meant exactly. But a Japanese movie *Manhunt* came into their views. The actor in this movie wore bell-bottoms style pants, which then rapidly became the trends in young people, both men and women. And from then on, Chinese women’s pants changed from opening at right side to opening in the middle of front.

1979 is an important year to Chinese fashion, because the first fashion show—Pierre Cardin fashion show was carried out in Beijing. Invited by the Chinese government, the famous French couturier Pierre Cardin presented his collections in the Beijing Palace of Nationalities, with an advertisement in a very political-correct manner: “Clothes demonstration in terms of strengthening friendship ties between the people of China and France.” This show, these clothes and these models on the stage shocked Chinese people very much. This event not only let them see the Western fashion, but also let them know it wasn’t a bad thing to follow trends.

In the next year, 1980, Chinese people had their first fashion magazine, *Shi Zhuang* (Fashion). It was published for giving people images of fashion, and teaching people how to tailor fashionable clothes. The cover girl of its first issue wasn’t a professional model, because at that time there was no professional model in China. She just was a young lady invited by the photographer when they met on the street. The photo was

taken in the park, and the lady wore her own clothes. As can be seen, the fashion magazine didn't far from people's lives at its beginning.

In the same year, the movie *Romance on Lushan Mountain* surprised Chinese people. It was the first national romance movie after the Cultural Revolution. And in the movie, the actress wore 43 sets of clothing. Women loved the actress and wanted to dress like her. They became crazy about fashion. When the actress Yu Zhang became the cover girl of *Popular Cinema* in 1980, she was in blue jeans, and brought a blast of jeans wave.

The first three years of Reform and Opening Up were very important to the development of China fashion. Information of the Western fashion changed people's attitude toward trends. Fashion was no longer seen as bourgeois sentiment, but the normal aesthetics. As fashion could be seen as a way to strengthen friendship with other countries, Chinese government relaxed the constraint of clothing to promote development of the fashion industry. Chinese clothing started its way to wholly westernization. In addition, the early fashion magazines gave people direction in the way to follow trends, and taught people tailor the fashionable clothes by themselves.

#### **4. In 1980s: Westernization**

As China's economy improved in the 1980's, female clothes became more and more westernized, with much obvious feminine characters. While China underwent its modernization period, women began to experiment with fashion. Many more flowery dresses were beginning to be seen, as well as leggings with straps on the foot, hoses that reached up to the ankle, and hairstyles other than just braids. Red and yellow became popular colors for women. Ready-made clothes became common, often altered by local tailors.

In 1984, a movie *Red Dress is Popular on the Street* made red dress the favorite of young women. No matter in the magazine, or in the street, women's dress became colorful and stylish. In 1985, embroidery, batwing sleeves, bows and puffs were showed on the covers of fashion magazine, leading the feminine fashion at that time. While young men were wearing European suits, jackets, shirts and trousers, women wore colorful sweater, long coat, skirts, leather shoes, and scarfs. The different characters between men's fashion and women's were obvious. And urban Chinese fashion almost finished the process of westernization.

In 1984, the magazine *Shi Zhuang* was published seasonally to show fashion season by season. The first time, it chose a Western female model as the cover girl on the last issue of this year. It could be seen as a sign that China wasn't distanced from the fashion world, and followed Western fashion closely. From then on, the fashion magazines communicated the "ideal" modern images for Chinese women.

In 1986, a movie star Lin Zhu wore a revealing top on the cover of *Popular Cinema*. However, scarcely any woman dared to wear such revealing clothing on the street. In spite of the difference between the feminine image on the fashion magazine and in the real street, the fashion magazine gave Chinese women an idea: it is not shamed to show the body.

Then in 1988, *Elle* came into China, as the first imported West fashion magazine. Unsurprisingly, its first issue chose a Western model as the cover girl to attract people's attention and to show how it was close to Western fashion. Noticeably, there was a Chinese girl shown in this issue. She was a student in Shanghai

Sports School. The photographer met her on the playground, loved her smiles and energy, and then invited her be the model in the photos. The shirt, jeans and sneakers, what the girl was wearing, were the normal clothing in universities, totally from the West.

In a word, in the 1980s, Chinese clothing finished its westernization with high speeds, and followed Western fashion more and more closely. Feminine characteristics became obvious in women's clothing, both in colors and styles. Women would like to show the curves of their bodies. Domestic fashion magazines published seasonally, and began to use Western models to show the attitude for learning from the West. International fashion magazine came into China, bringing more Western fashion information, and at the same time changed aesthetics of Chinese people.

### **5. In 1990s: The beginning of China fashion**

In 1990s, women wore clothes more daring and free. They dared show their bodies and their beauty. Platform shoes, miniskirt and T-shirt were welcomed among young people. And young women followed fashion more and more closely.

In the winter of 1990, mini skirts were shown on the fashion magazines. Then the next year, young women wore them to the street. From then on, mini skirts freed women's legs. Two years later, young ladies could go shopping in the dresses exposing their necks, shoulders and upper arms. In 1996, bare-midriff clothes swept the urban of China. In the summer, young women dressed these shirts to show their midriff, as soon as the bare-midriff style was shown on the fashion magazines for introducing the newest style. When time went to the end of 1990s, people were accustomed to see urban Chinese women wore revealing clothes on the street. The photo taken in Shanghai in 1998 showed young women was wearing halter-top and short pants in public place. They didn't feel shamed when they reveal their shoulders and legs, but were proud of their beauty and youth.

More female fashion magazines emerged in 1990s, and published from once each quarter to monthly. The world's latest trends in fashion, hairstyles and make-up from France, Italy, UK, US and South Korea could be delivered to China very quickly. "If you found the clothes, which were shown in Paris or Milan yesterday, were worn by the young people in Beijing or Shanghai today, you shouldn't be shocked", said by an editor in a fashion magazine in 1998. The fashion in China was almost zero distance from the West.

It was very interesting that a domestic fashion magazine *Shi Shang* gave an article to women in 1998, named "How three men look at women". Three typical men, one famous writer, one fashion magazine editor, and one businessman gave their views about modern women. They talked about many modern feminine characters, including independence, hard working, sexy and open-minded. From that time, the fashion magazines not only taught Chinese women how to wear, how to be beautiful, but also taught them what else makes women be "perfect" inside.

In this period, a growing number of fashion designers had established their own labels and worked independently. Many of them were young and entrepreneurial with a clearly identified market. They sold directly to customers or through up-market department stores. Government agencies had played an active role in developing China's fashion industry. The China Garment Designers' Association had promoted the work of young designers since its inception in 1993. It organized fashion events such as "the Golden Scissors Award for functional wear" and "the Japanese-sponsored Brother Cup for fashion designers under

35” which emphasized creativity over functionality. In 1996 the China Famous Brand Name Development Company was established to spearhead China’s ambitions to create ten world-famous fashion labels by the year 2000.

## **6. In The New Century: Developing of China fashion in high speeds**

Now in 21st century, fashion means showing your personality. Consumers, especially young women, prefer roaming garment markets and dressing distinctively. “I can dress anyway I like” has become the prevalent attitude. Wearing the same clothes or colors as others now makes them embarrassed. People’s dress sense has become a matter of personal taste and individual personality.

With the blossom of fashion magazines, the ideal modern urban feminine images were established gradually. In the fashion magazines, modern successful women always were beautiful, professional, free and luxury, which affecting readers’ thoughts. As a result, beauty had become the first key word to Chinese women. There came a famous sentence in China: “there are no ugly women, but lazy women.” Fashion, hairstyle and make-up could make every woman beautiful. Furthermore, modern Chinese women should be independent and professional. They must have a job, and did well in the workplace. Only if women got economic independence, they could be free, because of more choices. Besides, the most important is that successful women should live a luxury life. Consumption became the embodiment of personal value.

Additionally, the fashion magazines gave more possibility to Chinese women. They still could be individual, neutral, alternative and retro. We can find all these images on the street today. Women

could be individual, similar with nobody; could be neutral, wearing the jacket and jeans as men; could be alternative, dying their hair white and pink, and showing their tattoos; could be retro, dressing like they still live in 1980s. On the other hand, male fashion magazines communicated the feminine images as well. In these magazines, women became sexy, independent and available. The images of Chinese women became versatile.

At the same time Chinese fashion began to find its own way, and people were turning from foreign styles to developing their own personal taste and style. In line with the growth of national power, people’s confidence and sense of pride to their own culture has also increased. Movie star Maggie Cheung wore over 20 cheongsams in the popular film *In the Mood for Love*, which gave Chinese women a feel for the beauty of traditional Chinese clothing. Cheongsams have consequently become a favorite style once again. Showing little resemblance to the cheongsams of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), today’s dresses reveal not only the distinctive elegance and tenderness of Chinese women, but also their graceful posture. Revised Chinese jackets have also enjoyed resurgence in popularity after world leaders were photographed wearing Tang-style suits at the APEC meeting in Shanghai in 2001.

People who love Chinese classical culture have advocated the campaign for Han Dynasty costume. They believe stylish Chinese styles actually embody the characteristics of ethnic minorities in north China, but not the genuine clothing of the Han majority, which impressed people with its free and elegant feeling. Participants in the campaign are mainly young people born in the 1980s and 1990s.

Today in China there is great diversity of fashion trends and Chinese fashion designers meet consumer demands, which are raised through the influence of fashion, through celebrities and the media.

There are many young independent designers in China who sell direct to customers or you can find their garments, with their own labels, in department stores and boutiques. Their designs combine the use of traditional themes and styles with modern materials and innovations. Over the past decade, a large number of young Chinese fashion designers have acquired fashion degrees or training overseas and returned to China to develop their own fashion labels. With a few of them actively participate in the western fashion system, the majority of this group brings in Euro-American concepts to operate in Chinese retail, which further complicates the identification of what is Chinese and what is not. After the westernization of clothing, China began to explore its own fashion road. Urban feminine fashion is developing to individuation and diversification.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned above, political factors of China played a vital role in curtailing the development of Chinese fashion. From the opening of China's doors, the fashion caught up with the international trends at an astonishing speed. It took less than 10 years for the public to accept mainstream fashion from the West. Chinese women would like to wear their feminine garments and show their bodies. The Chinese media witnessed every important step in the development of Chinese fashion and served as a bridge between fashion and the people, especially before the coming of the Internet.

China fashion develops fast today. Just like China Daily once reported, "One only has to walk down the street in Shanghai and Beijing today and see the importance of fashion and street style, and how that's grown and changed in the last 20 years and definitely even in the last five years". "I think Chinese consumers can learn very fast. Three or four years ago, they may have been merely chasing logos. Now they seek more than that. The chase now is more about lifestyle, social status and how the brand can fit them. It's not just about a logo any more," said Stalla-Bourdillon, Marc Jacob's chief executive, to the South China Morning Post.

According to fashionista.com, Didier Grumback, head of France's fashion federation, claimed that China "is a country that is passionate about fashion, like all emerging nations where appearance is of the utmost importance." China Daily argued that China's eye is "set on creating brands and products that will win the world, much like Apple, Louis Vuitton and Ikea" and that it "wants to become known as a design and innovation center—and no longer just as a manufacturing powerhouse." With the pace of change in the global fashion scene, the identity of Chinese fashion should not solely consist of the "Made in China" label any more than it should be identified with China's booming luxury market.

Nowadays, China is the world's largest manufacturer of clothing and also the largest consumer: in large urban department stores and small boutiques and shops there is huge range of high-end fashion garments and also of inexpensive clothes. As China exports many garments, we might speculate that Chinese fashion designers and Chinese fashion themes—both traditional and modern—will be a significant influence in what the world wears in the coming period.

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