

## Chinese Dream and Chinese-Style of Fashion Design

**Shi Yajuan**

Ph.D of Literature

Associate Professor

Foreign Language Department

Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology

Beijing, China

### Abstract

*This paper tries to examine Chinese dream expressed in the Chinese-style fashion design in terms of its passion, power and politics. Passion in Chinese-style fashion design means a deep love and understanding of traditional Chinese culture and its spirit which inspires and nourishes lots of fashion designers. This passion is the same as that initiates the Chinese dream to be a great country in the world. The power of Chinese-style fashion design mainly means the soft power. To create and spread the Chinese-style fashion design and Chinese clothing culture is also part of Chinese dream, which will not only make Chinese's life more beautiful, help build people's confidence, but also attract the attention, admiration and aspiration of people around the world. The politics of Chinese-style fashion design means the spirit of opening-up, confident and friendship shown in Sino-foreign diplomatic relationships. President Xi Jinping and the first lady take the lead in spreading traditional Chinese culture and cultivating national spirit in the road of rejuvenation of Chinese culture.*

**Keywords:** Chinese dream, Chinese-style, fashion design

### 1. Introduction

The "Chinese dream" has been widely discussed home and abroad recently, after a speech by Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) when visiting the Road toward Rejuvenation exhibition at the National Museum in Beijing on Dec. 29, 2012. Essentially Chinese dream means the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation with the prosperity for the country, renewal of the nation and happiness for the citizens as the final aims. However, there is no doubt that the core of Chinese dream is the great revival of the Chinese nation economically, culturally and politically. Culture revival is an inseparable part of it. The culture revival means more than the protection and carrying forward of traditional Chinese culture. This revival is a creation and integration of modern and tradition, east and west both in terms of its cultural philosophy and its application in different culture fields such as art, film and fashion design. This paper contends that the Chinese-style fashion design philosophy partly enacts and explains some connotations of Chinese dream. The passion, power and politics of Chinese dream are intersected with the philosophy of Chinese-style fashion design and fashion art. In one sense we can say the former inspires and nourishes the later and the later can be regarded as footnotes of the former.

Therefore, this paper tries to examine passion, power and politics of the Chinese-style fashion design and its inner connection with Chinese Dream.

### 2. The passion of Chinese-Style Fashion Design

#### 2.1 Dream and Passion

As far as dream is concerned, it reminds us something unreal, illusive and impractical, so does the Chinese dream. This partly explains why the term is widely discussed or debated home and abroad. Even some Chinese doubt the realistic significance of this new concept because it sounds like something out of impulse and is the result of passion instead of careful thinking and thorough planning. Is it true? Then what's the relationship between dream and passion? Psychologically the word "passion" can be understood as: a very strong feeling of sexual love, a strong belief or feeling about something and a very strong liking for something. In the literature field the word "passion" is usually associated with romanticism.

William Wordsworth, a famous English romantic poet in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, defined poetry as “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility” in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*(Wordsworth,1981) in which he spoke highly of passion in the writing of poetry. In the art theory, passion also plays an important role. Plato put forward the concept of “mania” to describe the artist’s creation of artistic work which could be partly attributed to the movement of passionate feelings. From these examples, we conclude that deep love and passionate feeling can be the source of great creation. President Xi Jinping has constantly mentions publicly his deep love about our nation and country. As the leader of PRC, he is another great “architect” succeeded the former leader Deng Xiaoping who is renowned as “the architect”of a new brand of socialist thinking. Similarly, Chinese dream can be regarded as another great concept put forward by President Xi Jinping, in the building of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which has equal status with Deng Xiaoping’s theory of reform and opening up. If we agree that Chairman Xi Jinping is another “architect” of Chinese socialism, what’s wrong with his passion in this creation?

## 2.2 The Passion in Chinese-Style Fashion Design

A lot of example in fashion design and fashion art history tell us no passion, no creation. Passion in the artistic theory not only refers to a strong feeling that needs to be released and waits to break out, but also denotes a strong and deep love about something. The term “Chinese-style fashion design” literally relates that this design style is typically Chinese and with strong Chinese feature artistically, visually and culturally. A deep love and understanding of traditional Chinese is a precondition and a must.

### Case Study 1: Laurence Xu Fall Couture 2013



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4

Laurence Xu(劳伦斯许) (Picture 1) is a famous China-born, Paris-based fashion designer. His Chinese-style fashion design has been quite popular in the world fashion world and won world-wide recognition recent years. The foreign media call him a dreamer and he realizes his dream by combing excellent traditional Chinese culture with western cutting and shaping craft in the world T-stage show once and again. For example, the Dragon Robe(Picture 2) worn by Fan Bingbing in Cannes Film Festival 2010 was designed by him and later it was collected by British National Museum. In Laurence Xu Fall Couture 2013, he staged some highly embellished, vividly colored gowns that were an opulent melding of Western cuts and traditional Chinese techniques cultural symbols. In that fashion show Taiwanese actress Pace Wu modeled the finale gown which is named “Snowy Tree and Cold Bird”(Picture 3) to underscore the red-carpet appeal of Xu’s extravagant designs. The bodice of this dress is made of strings of pearls and a floor-length navy blue voile skirt and dip-dyed train. The inspiration of this work comes from a same name painting (Picture 4)by Li Di, a famous painter in ancient Chinese Song Dynasty. Lawrence Xu tries to reproduce the artistic conception of this painting by the use of pattern, color and fabrics, which proved to quite successful. The dress worn by the beautiful actress expresses a feeling of quiet, indifferent to fame or gain and reveals the traditional Chinese scholars inner calmness and comfort and an acquired distance to the outside noisy world. However, this leisure cannot disguise a sense of sadness being sensed and touched by the viewers.

Other costumes made by Lawrence Xu in this couture show are also full of Chinese cultural elements and stigma such as Dragon robe, wintersweet (plum blossom), embroidery, and tassels. Most importantly, the greatness of his couture work lies not only in the appropriation of Chinese cultural elements, but also in its expression and embodiment of Chinese cultural spirit conveyed especially through Chinese painting, such as quiet and comfort, graceful and expressive, dignified and inclusive, harmonious and integrative with nature. Actually, Lawrence Xu has highlights constantly that his love to the traditional Chinese culture inspires and nourishes his career as a fashion designer.

### 3. The Soft Power of Chinese-Style Fashion Design

#### 3.1 Chinese Dream and the Soft Power

President Xi Jinping also emphasizes that the Chinese Dream is a dream for peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit for all. It is connected to the beautiful dream of the people in other countries. It means that making contribution to the entire human race is the end and essence of the Chinese dream. Through the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, China will demonstrate its 5,000 years of splendid culture, share its values with the world and use its “soft power” to promote world prosperity and absolutely stand firm among the nations of the world in the end.

Soft power is a concept developed by Joseph Nye of Harvard University to describe the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, use force or give money as a means of persuasion. Nye coined the term in a 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He further developed the concept in his 2004 book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. The book identifies three broad categories of soft power: “culture”, “political values”, and “policies.” (Nye, 2004) Since then the term is now widely used in international affairs by analysts and statesmen. For an example, in 2007, CPC General Secretary Hu Jintao told the 17th Communist Party Congress that China need to increase its soft power.

Popular culture and mass media are regularly identified as a source of soft power (Karllson, 2011), as is the spread of a national language or a particular set of normative structures. Some scholars argue that a nation with a large amount of soft power and the good will that engenders it inspire others to acculturate, avoiding the need for expensive hard power expenditures. It is commonly recognized that “A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it.”<sup>1</sup>

In another sense, soft power also means attraction. To promote cultural attractiveness is part of the project of building a country’s soft power. Consequently, to develop and spread the Chinese-style fashion design and Chinese clothing culture is for the promotion of Chinese soft power. Of course, it is also part of Chinese dream, which will not only make Chinese’s life more beautiful, help build people’s confidence, but also attract the attention, admiration and aspiration of people around the world. Therefore, the Chinese-style fashion is synonymous with soft power.

#### 3.2 The Soft Power of Chinese-Style Fashion Design

In fact Chinese-style is not a new concept in the fashion world. The word “Chinoiserie” (French for “Chinese-esque”) also means some kind of Chinese-style fashion. It is a recurring theme in European artistic styles since the seventeenth century, which reflect Chinese artistic influences.<sup>2</sup> It is characterized by the use of fanciful imagery of an imaginary China, by asymmetry in format and whimsical contrasts of scale, and by the attempts to imitate Chinese porcelain and the use of lacquer like materials and decoration. The style held particular favour during the Rococo period and the court of Louis XV, with which its fanciful, ornate and idyllic imagery is commonly associated.<sup>3</sup> The term is used in the fashion industry to describe “designs in textiles, fashion, and the decorative arts that derive from Chinese styles.” (Calasibetta, 2010) Therefore, this term is a reflection of European’s understanding and imagination of Chinese art and custom and the western aesthetic taste.

Nowadays, with the development of Chinese fashion industry, some Chinese designers such as Lawrence Xu, try to create some kinds of characteristically Chinese-style fashion by learning from western designers’ usage of Chinese elements in their works. Their Chinese-style designing works differ from the western Chinoiserie in the following as three aspects. The first, they think Chinese-style fashion design means more than the use of Chinese patterns in the designing process, such as Dragon, phoenix, Yin and Yang. The traditional Chinese culture commits to arrive at the union of human being and nature by regarding everything in the world as a harmonious whole. The cultural spirit of being modest, introverted, generous and dignified are admired and highly praised. The Chinese-style fashion should express the Chinese cultural spirit and aesthetic value accurately and objectively through the shape design as well as the choose of pattern, color and fabrics.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft\\_power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power), Retrieved 2014-09-28

<sup>2</sup> See: “Chinoiserie”. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Retrieved 2014-09-28.

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinoiserie>. Retrieved 2014-09-28.

## Case study 2: Blue-White Porcelain Series (Picture 5-6): Costume for Medal Ceremony in 2008 Beijing Olympics



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7

**Designer:** You Jia ( 尤加 ) (Picture 7), a famous Chinese-style fashion designer and teacher of Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology

**Design philosophy:** To create something that is national, global and fashionable

**Design features:** This series includes tray-holder costume, honored guest costume and sportsman guide costume which seek to keep the same style in changes by creating different visual focus.

- 1) **National elements:** Chinese collar and cap sleeve are used in pattern design which are two important ethnic elements of Chinese traditional clothing. In craft, crewel embroidery, one of the techniques in Suzhou embroidery is used. The contrast color of blue-white which is characterized by blue-white porcelain is soft, but eye-catching.
- 2) **Western elements:** Fish tail skirt, one of the typical western silhouettes, is used in pattern design which can fully show the elegant figure of woman wearer.
- 3) **Fashionable elements:** The costume is draped, which is the most popular cutting method at present. Draping makes the cloth fit to the body and produce perfect shaping effect.

**Inspiration:** This series are inspired by blue-white porcelain, one of Chinese traditional and representative classical chinaware, which is featured by simple and elegant modeling, intense color and national appeal.<sup>4</sup>

The benefits of the soft power of Chinese-style fashion design and fashion art can be defined and listed easily. However, it is not easy to acquire and it needs the efforts of Chinese designers generation after generation and there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, there are some designers, such as what have been mentioned above, they are doing their best to create a typical Chinese-style fashion which are characteristically Chinese, but also belong to the world. Some Chinese scholars have summarized the Chinese-style shape design philosophy as follows: expression of moderate and introverted, unity of form and spirit, combination of tradition and modern, east and west. (Liu Wei, Shi Yajuan, 2013)

### 4. The Politics of Chinese-Style Fashion Design

#### 4.1 Chinese Dream and the Politics of the Chinese-Style Fashion Design



Picture 8



Picture 9



Picture 10



Picture 11

Chinese dream is closely associated with the rise of China after years of oppression of colonialism and inner struggles. By bringing happiness to its people we determines to set up the image of a responsible and big power. Actually, Chinese-style fashion design has played an important role in this project. The often discussed example is the dress of our leaders and their wives when visiting the foreign countries.

<sup>4</sup>See: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/olympics/2008-08/03/content\\_8922331.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/olympics/2008-08/03/content_8922331.htm) Retrieved 2014-09-28

In this aspect, the fashion brand, “Wu Yong (无用)” takes the lead. It is well-known that Peng Liyuan (Picture 8-9), our first lady’s dresses in some official occasions are designed by Ma Ke(马可)(Picture 10), the chief designer of this brand. Nearly all these dresses become a hit immediately, and they not only look simple, elegant and dignified, but also with national aroma. For example, in a state banquet hosted by King and Queen of Holland in the March of 2014, both President Xi and the first lady Peng Liyuan dressed Chinese-style clothing. President Xi’s Chinese-style clothing is an improved form of Zhongshan suit, which is a melding of traditional Chinese clothing elements such as the fly front and stand collar, with western elements such as the pocket square, besides the western pattern and craft. The color of suit also helps make the leader look powerful and stand out. This combination of Chinese and western elements helps create fashionable and harmonious atmosphere at the formal diplomatic occasions.

The first lady Madam Peng’s stand collar, powder blue Qipao is typically Chinese-style, too. But her black embroidery coat jacket is a mixture of western cloak and Chinese front opening collar. The loose structure of her flowing look contrasts and matches with the tension of President Xi’s improved Zhongshan suit. Besides, the bright color of her dress echos Xi’s steady and dignified dressing style. In one word, our President and first lady’s charisma are fully displayed through their clothing.

In fact, President Xi and our first lady’s choice of Chinese-style clothing in this state banquet held by the King and Queen of Holland is in line with the diplomatic etiquette. This is only one side of the political meanings of their clothing. With the development of the Chinese-style fashion design, some foreign political figures also try to please Chinese government by wearing Chinese-style fashion. For example, during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit in Britain recently, British Queen Elizabeth II wore a dress with blue-white porcelain pattern (Picture 11). Obviously, her dress was chosen carefully, and she is using this dress to show her love and recognition of Chinese culture, as well as her kindness and pleasure in the meeting with Chinese Premier.

#### **4.2 The Politics of Chinese-Style Fashion Design**

Therefore, we can see the the political meaning of Chinese-style fashion design which means opening-up, confident and friendship in Sino-foreign relationships. And our leaders take the lead in spreading traditional Chinese culture and cultivating national spirit in the road of rejuvenation of Chinese culture. Some critics say, President Xi shows the Chinese-style costume culture and Chinese fashion to the world in an approachable way during his visit. They also think that Chinese-style fashion will change with the pace of times, but it will always echo the voice and politics of that era. President Xi’s clothing not only displays Chinese integration with the world, but also shows the world our national spirit. Even though most Chinese-style fashion brand still have a long way to go in their road of winning global recognition. However, it will improve and being promoted steadily with the building of national image in the world.<sup>5</sup>

#### **5. Conclusion**

From the above analysis, it is clear that the passion, power and politics implied in Chinese dream are homogeneous with Chinese-style fashion design. The cultural and creative spirit, ideal and pursuit of Chinese fashion style are the same as those of the Chinese dream. In the modern technology-driven society cherishing a dream seems a kind of luxury and even illusive. However, absence of a dream will surely make our life dull, pointless and inactive. Chinese dream offers every ordinary Chinese an aim worthy of aspiring, which is also rewarding. Instead of political slogan Chinese dream has profound cultural, political and economic connotation which is an un-exhausted resource of Chinese-style of fashion design.

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<sup>5</sup>See:[http://www.sd.xinhuanet.com/news/2014-03/24/c\\_119906805\\_3.htm](http://www.sd.xinhuanet.com/news/2014-03/24/c_119906805_3.htm) Retrieved 2014-06-28.