

Research on the Transition from the “Cross-Plane” Structure to “Draped” Cutting in Chinese Classical Women’s Clothing —Taking the Evolution of Qipao Styles from the Republic of China to the Mid-Late 20th Century as an Example

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Abstract: Influenced by traditional aesthetic tastes, Chinese classical women’s clothing has long featured the “cross-plane” structure. This paper takes the evolution of qipao styles from the Republic of China to the mid-late 20th century as the main line, combining the analysis of material objects with the study of documentary sources, to sort out the historical context of its transition from flat cutting to draped cutting. It explores key nodes such as the introduction of the “three measurements” concept, the improvement of cutting technology, and the collision of Chinese and Western clothing cultures, analyzes the integration process of traditional aesthetic concepts and modern cutting technology, and reveals the theoretical and practical basis for the structural transformation of the Chinese qipao, providing a historical reference for the research on the modernization of traditional Chinese clothing.

Keywords: Cross-Plane Structure; Draped Cutting; Qipao; Clothing of the Republic of China; Style Evolution

1. Cultural Origin of the Traditional “Cross-Plane” Structure

An enlightened thinker once said a golden saying: “To understand the origin is to understand the essence.”^[1] This view provides a key idea for understanding the historical path of qipao style evolution. As a cultural “symbol” in the development of Chinese clothing, the qipao has different forms and functions in its occurrence, initial stage, and developed stage, and thus plays different roles in the corresponding society and culture. Therefore, to determine the direct causes and motivations for its emergence, existence, and continuous development in human life, it is necessary to trace back to its initial style. Only by starting from the original style and tracking its entire evolution process into civilized society can we deeply understand why the qipao of the Republic of China presents the retro and highly modern style we see today.

The origin of the “cross-plane”—a typical flat-cutting feature of traditional Chinese clothing characterized by two-dimensional tailoring without three-dimensional shaping—style of the qipao can be traced back to the Neolithic Age after the emergence of textile technology. The clothing of the pottery figures unearthed in Xinhe, Gansu Province already featured the prototype of the “cross-plane” structure. The figures in the patterns wore “long clothes of X-shape with a straight line from shoulder to knee.”^[2] According to archaeological records, the Xindian culture is a bronze culture in the late primitive society, dating approximately to the Yin and Zhou periods. Similar patterns were later found in rock paintings in Cangyuan, Yunnan, Heishan, Gansu, Jingyuan Wujiachuan, and the Langshan area in western Inner Mongolia, which were from the Warring States Period and the Qin and Han Dynasties. It can be seen that this X-shaped clothing remained very stable from the Neolithic Age to the Qin and Han Dynasties, gradually developing into a popular clothing style, and was used for thousands of years due to the slow social development. The emergence of “one-piece clothing” broke through the limitations of “component-style clothing” in the Paleolithic Age. It was no longer a simple superposition of scattered components but formed an integrated clothing structure of “upper and lower connected,” laying a structural foundation for the later “Shenyi” and traditional clothing with integrated upper and lower parts derived from it, such as “pao,” “shan,” “chanyi,” “lanshan,” “changyi,” and “qipao.”^[3] It established the “structural rules” of “integral clothing” and promoted

the integration and innovation of traditional clothing components.

2. Aesthetic Taste of the Traditional “Cross-Plane” Structure

Lin Yutang once wrote in his article “On Western Suits”: “Probably the difference in clothing philosophy between Chinese and Western suits lies in that Western suits aim to show the human body shape, while Chinese suits aim to cover the body.”^[4] Chinese clothing does not deliberately emphasize the display of body shape, and this aesthetic concept is inseparable from the traditional aesthetic taste of China that emphasizes implicit beauty. Since the establishment of the “Yufu System” in the Zhou Dynasty, Chinese classical women’s clothing has always presented a distinct “cross-plane” structure. Different from Western clothing that highlights human curves through draped cutting^[5], Chinese classical women’s clothing mostly adopts flat cutting techniques.

This cutting method retains the sense of space between the clothing and the human body, does not pursue the display of local body lines, and the loose style forms natural folds and drapes when worn, creating a relaxed and self-consistent visual effect. According to newspaper materials from the early years of the Republic of China, the millennia-old “cross-plane” structure did not disappear with the collapse of the feudal clothing system. The integrated robe clothing throughout the Republic of China still used this style. For example, in 1921, the periodical “Women’s Magazine” held an essay contest to collect suggestions for improving women’s clothing. At that time, the main topic focused on whether clothing should change with the times. In the early years of the Republic of China, industrialization made significant progress. Simple, beautiful, convenient, hygienic, and easy to participate in social affairs became the primary demands for clothing improvement. The mainstream public opinion was the binary opposition between retaining the loose Chinese clothing style or adopting the tight-fitting and narrow-sleeved draped clothing of Western style. This debate that ignored the physical relationship between human body shape and size reflected that clothing at that time had not yet broken away from the traditional thinking of the feudal clothing structure, namely the “cross-plane” structure. Although the appearance of clothing had changed to be shorter and narrower, the cutting structure was not Westernized. Another example is the “Dao Da Xiu”^[6] qipao (inverted wide-sleeved qipao) that appeared in the 1920s (as shown in Figure 1). The body still had a “cross-plane” structure, with a nearly straight waistline, almost no difference from the style of the Manchu clothing in the Qing Dynasty, except that the sleeve length was shortened to expose half of the jade arm. In the mid-to-late 1920s, women’s ao clothing underwent significant changes in body shape and length. Long ao clothing had a narrower waist, and the hem gradually widened into a flared shape, while short ao clothing gradually shortened, and in some cases, the waist skirt could be vaguely seen^[7]. The free change in the length of women’s clothing reflected that women’s clothing at that time had tended to aesthetic freedom, and personalized aesthetics began to be recognized by society. At this time, women’s clothing had shown improvements to the straight structure of traditional clothing. The size difference between the chest and waist made the ao clothing begin to have curve changes, and the curvilinear beauty of women’s bodies gradually emerged, just as Eileen Chang described in “The Age of Clothing”: “Fashion also showed unprecedented innocence, lightness, and joy. ‘Trumpet sleeves’ fluttered like immortals, exposing a large section of jade wrist. The waist of the short ao was extremely tight...”^[8] This description by Eileen Chang of fashion in the early years of the Republic of China shows the changes in clothing style at that time and the reflected era characteristics.



Figure 1 “Dao Da Xiu” qipao popular in the 1920s (left one, image source: Internet; middle one, the author’s restored work; right one, a Republican woman wearing “Dao Da Xiu” qipao)

3. Introduction of the “Three Measurements” Concept and the Breakthrough of the Limitations of Flat Cutting

An important node in the transition of Chinese classical clothing from the “cross-plane” structure to “draped” cutting is the proposal of the “three measurements” (bust, waist, hip) concept. This view was first put forward by Zhuang Kaibo. In his article “Improvement of Women’s Clothing (1)” published in “Women’s Magazine” in 1921, he pointed out that the difference between Chinese and Western clothing lies entirely in the difference between straight lines and curves. The carrier of these lines cannot be separated from the human body. Traditional Chinese women’s clothing emphasizes straight lines, and the flat cutting method eliminates the natural waist curve of women^[9], which is a major difference from Western clothing that emphasizes curves. At the same time, Zhuang Kaibo clearly put forward the concept of “three measurements,” correcting the fallacy of confusing bust and waist measurements in traditional clothing cutting, introducing the concepts of “waist circumference” and “bust circumference,” and providing a feasible amendment for the transformation of traditional clothing structure from straight lines to curves. He suggested achieving the effect of showing body curves through cutting techniques such as taking in the front and back center lines and side seams. Zhuang Kaibo’s proposal reflects that clothing critics in the Republic of China already had a scientific understanding of the human body’s curve structure. However, at this time, women’s clothing structure was still different from the curved shape achieved by Western draped cutting. There were two main reasons: first, the clothing production group was still trapped in the traditional thinking of Chinese flat cutting; second, because the classical Chinese aesthetic regarded “sloping shoulders” and “thinness” as beauty, the Western draped cutting methods of “separating the body and sleeves” and adding “darts”^[10] did not quite match the body shape of women at that time. This technique of highlighting women’s body curves relying on traditional flat cutting remained largely unchanged until around the 1940s of the Republic of China^[11]. Based on existing verifiable historical records and documentation, it can be seen that since clothing in the early years of the Republic of China began to break away from national political constraints and become more personalized, its “cross-plane” cutting style was maintained until around the 1950s. During this period, the changes in cutting styles mainly focused on the “stealing lapel” technique and the narrowing changes of the qipao’s waist and hem^[12] (as shown in Figures 2–3).

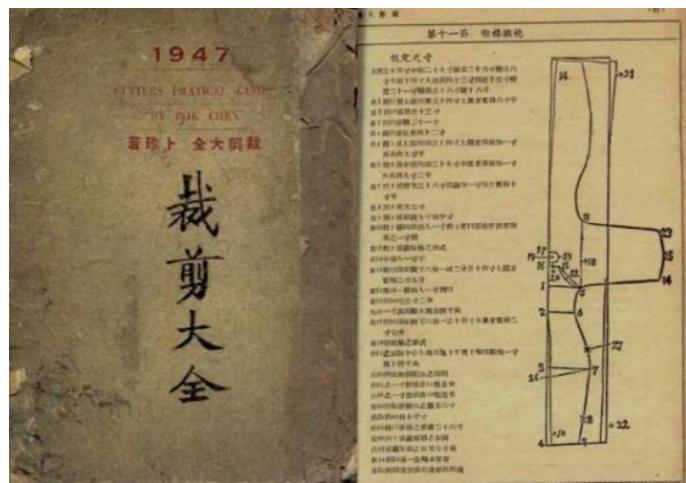


Figure 2 In 1947, Bu Zhen's "Complete Book of Cutting" recorded the "stealing lapel" qipao with a narrowed waist, which did not deviate from the "cross-plane" structure as a whole.

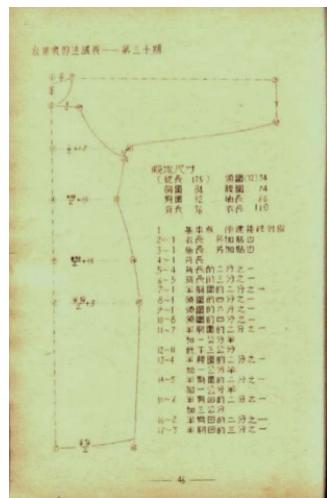


Figure 3 In 1953, Dai Yongfu[13]., the heir of the "Hongbang Tailors," compiled the clothing production teaching plan "Yongfu Cutting Method," and the cutting structure was still the "cross-plane" cutting method[14].

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, a small number of qipaos with "darting" and "sleeve-separating" techniques actually appeared in Shanghai^[15] (as shown in Figures 4-5). However, due to special political factors, these techniques did not form a scale or theoretical development.

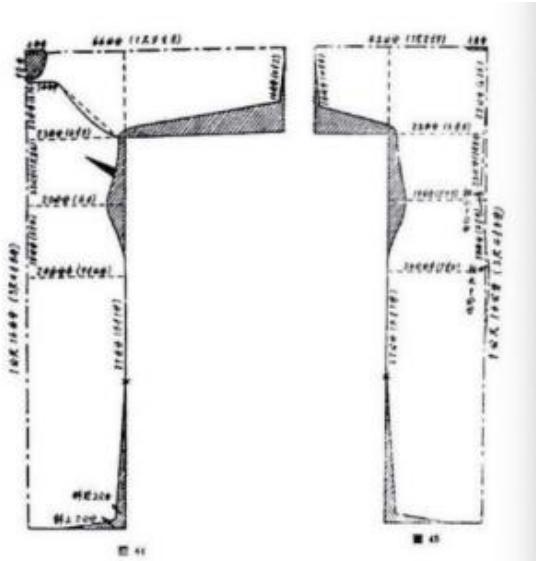


Figure 4 "Chest Dart" Technique Appears in "Women's Spring Clothing"

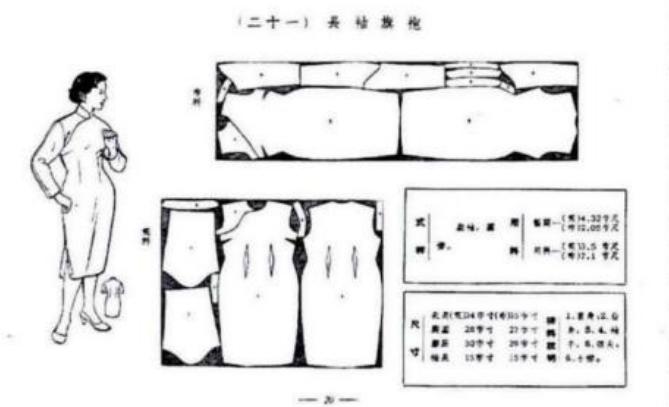


Figure 5 The Long-Sleeved Qipao in “Clothing Material-Saving Cutting and Matching Method” Shows “Chest Dart,” “Waist Dart,” and “Shoulder Seam Breaking”

4. Westernized Practice of Shanghai-Style Tailors and the Theoretical Completion of Draped Cutting

Cutting From the 1950s to the 1970s, a large number of “Shanghai-style tailors” moved to Hong Kong and Taiwan with their clients. Influenced by the Western culture of the port cities, Western draped cutting methods of separating the body and sleeves were gradually adopted by Shanghai-style tailors in qipao cutting. During these 20 years, teaching books related to draped cutting qipaos appeared frequently, with rich styles and more systematic data than before^[16]. Among them, the most famous is Mr. Yang Chenggui, the heir of the “Hongbang Tailors.” In his 1975 monograph on qipao draped cutting, “Theory and Practice of Qipao Cutting and Making,” he developed a digital tutorial for the structure of “qipao changing from non-separated body and sleeves with no obvious darts to separated body and sleeves with a total of three darts, two in the front and one in the back”^[17] (as shown in Figure 6), completing the theoretical construction of the transition of qipao from “cross-plane” to “draped cutting.” This work, which integrates traditional aesthetics and modern draped cutting technology, has become a milestone in the history of Chinese qipao development. The establishment of this theory has laid a solid foundation for the standardized and modern development of qipao craftsmanship. At this point, the Chinese qipao has completed the transition from the “cross-plane” structure to “draped cutting.”



Figure 6 Teaching Diagram in “Theory and Practice of Qipao Cutting and Making”

In summary, the transformation of Chinese classical women’s clothing from the “cross-plane” structure to “draped” cutting is not a simple technological innovation, but a product of the continuous collision and integration of traditional aesthetic concepts, social trends, and Western

clothing culture. From the intense debates on clothing improvement during the Republic of China, to the scientific proposal of the “three measurements” concept, and then to the practice and theorization of draped cutting technology by Shanghai-style tailors, the style evolution of the qipao vividly shows the tortuous process of modernization of traditional clothing. This process not only reshapes the external form of the qipao but also demonstrates the ability of Chinese clothing culture to embrace and innovate modern technology and diverse cultures while adhering to its aesthetic core, providing a highly valuable historical mirror and inspiration for the inheritance and development of traditional clothing today.

References

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- [2] Shen C W. Research on Ancient Chinese Clothing [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2005: 4, 18.
- [3] Song Z H. Social Life History of the Xia and Shang Dynasties [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1994: 381.
- [4] Lin Y T. Selected Works of Lin Yutang [M]. Wuhan: Changjiang Literature & Art Publishing House, 2014: 87–90.
- [5] When measuring the human body, Western clothing adjusts to different body curves, with bust, waist, and hip measurements accurate to within 3 centimeters. It mostly adopts curved and diagonal cutting; its three-dimensional shape is mainly achieved through dart stitching or transfer, adding pleats and split lines, and reducing fabric allowances to handle the size differences between bust, waist, and hips, making the clothing fit the body and highlight three-dimensional curves. See: Zhao F. The Eastward Spread of Western Suits [D]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Normal University, 2013.
- [6] Description of the “inverted wide-sleeved” qipao in Xiao Jizong’s Historical Materials of the New Life Movement: “Around the 15th and 16th years of the Republic of China (1926–1927), on the eve of the Northern Expedition of the National Revolutionary Army, the trend of women wearing robes became increasingly popular. However, the styles were mostly conservative, with loose waists, sleeves reaching the wrists, and lengths above the ankles. Because they were similar to men’s clothing, only fashionable women dared to try them at that time.” See: Zhou S F. Clothing of the Republic of China: Old Systems and New Fashions [M]. Guangzhou: Nanfang Daily Press, 2014: 21.
- [7] Juan B. Changes in Women’s Decorations (Part Two) [N]. Shanghai: Republic Daily, 1927-01-08.
- [8] Chang E L. The Age of Clothing [J]. Gossips, 2002: 79–81. (Published by Zhejiang Literature & Art Publishing House, Hangzhou)
- [9] In traditional Chinese clothing cutting, the term “waist area” (yaoshen) refers to the position from the chest to the waist, which is a general term for three measurements: bust circumference, underbust circumference, and waist circumference.
- [10] “Separated body” and “separated sleeves” refer to cutting the front and back panels of the garment, as well as the body and sleeves separately. “Dart” is a cutting technique that involves proportionally cutting fabric on a single panel according to the curved surfaces of different parts of the human body to fit the body curves.
- [11] Bao Mingxin argues that by the late 1930s, the cutting method and structure of the qipao had been Westernized; bust darts, waist darts, shoulder seams, and set-in sleeves made

the shoulders, armpits, and other parts of the qipao more fitted. This improved qipao was representative and marked the finalization stage of the qipao. However, after chronological research, Zhu Bowei believes that these three indicators could not have appeared simultaneously on a specific qipao earlier than the late 1940s. This paper adopts Zhu Bowei's chronological conclusion on the qipao. See: Bao M X. Shanghai-Style Qipao in the First Half of the 20th Century [J]. Art & Design, 2000(5): 11-12. Zhu B W. Chronological Textual Research on the Structural Evolution of the Qipao in Three Periods [J]. Journal of Textile Research, 2017, 38(5): 115-121.

[12] Published in 1947, the third edition of Complete Book of Cutting by Bu Zhen was a professional textbook officially approved and issued by the Central Ministry of Education at that time. The cutting illustrations of the "qipao" in the book are consistent with the qipao images in Liangyou Pictorial of the same period. At this time, the "stolen lapel" cutting method and the narrowing of the waist appeared in qipao cutting. Published in 1953, Yongfu Cutting Method, a clothing production teaching manual compiled by Dai Yongfu, heir of the "Hongbang Tailors," recorded the narrowing of the qipao's hem following the narrowing of the waist. These two verifiable clothing teaching manuals show that the qipao's style did not deviate from the traditional "cross-plane" cutting structure. See: [13] Zhu B W. A Study on the Structural Evolution of the Qipao in Three Historical Periods [D]. Beijing: Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, 2017.

[13] Dai Yongfu (?-1999) went to Shanghai to apprentice at the age of 13. Later, he opened an independent clothing workshop near the City God Temple in Nanshi, Shanghai. After 1949, he was transferred to the Shanghai Clothing Research Institute to engage in clothing scientific research and education. His works include Yongfu Cutting Method and How to Learn Cutting.

[14] Dai Y F. Yongfu Cutting Method [M]. Shanghai: Yongfu Clothing Cutting Special Training Class, 1953: 46.

[15] The 1956 book Women's Spring Clothing published by Shanghai Culture Publishing House included illustrations of the "chest dart" technique. The long-sleeved qipao in Clothing Material-Saving Cutting and Matching Method compiled by Shanghai Fuzhuan Company in 1958 contained structural diagrams of draping techniques such as "chest dart," "waist dart," and "broken shoulder seam."

[16] Dai Yongfu. Yongfu Cutting Method [M]. Yongfu Clothing Cutting Special Training Class. Shanghai, 1953; Self-Taught Qipao and Short Clothing, a textbook printed and distributed by vocational training classes in 1953; Qipao Cutting Method, a textbook of the Beijing-Shanghai Qipao Training Class in Taiwan in 1960—all included structural diagrams of draping techniques such as "chest dart," "waist dart," "separated body," and "separated sleeves." See: Zhu B W. A Study on the Structural Evolution of the Qipao in Three Historical Periods [D]. Beijing: Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, 2017.

[17] Cui A M. A Study on Qipao Production and Body Shape [M]. Taipei: Jiali Printing Industry Co., Ltd., 2001: Appendix 2. (Citing Shi S Y's viewpoint in Functional Western-Style Cutting of Qipao)