

Studies on the Great Change of Woman's Dress in Shengpu (1980-2017)

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Abstract. The woman's costume in the watery land of Shengpu, Suzhou is a very rare living fossil for the research on the traditional Han-Chinese costume in China. Different from previous studies in this field simply from the perspective of clothology, in this paper we try to interpret the historic process about the evolution and perishing of the traditional costumes in the watery land of Shengpu, Suzhou along with the urbanization of the rural areas and the perishing of the agriculture in the past 30 years from the perspective of the interdisciplinary thoughts of socio-economics and clothology. This investigation is performed by field study, comparative research, and understanding from the development of socio-economics and the developing laws of clothing. Hence we try to reveal the objective inevitability of the transition of the traditional costumes along with the rural industrialization. This may help to improve the vitality of traditional costume when it accepts and absorbs the positive nutrients from modern industrial civilization.

Introduction

The women (especially the old) in the watery land in Shengpu, Suzhou still keep the tradition of wearing traditional Han-Chinese costume in ancient times. From 1983 to 1993, Cai-ping Wei and other scholars from the Minzu section of the Nanjing museum had spent 10 years on the field investigation on the local folk customs and costumes in the Qiandai village in Shengpu, Suzhou. Their achievements have laid a solid foundation for the research on women's costume in the watery land in the southern Jiangsu.

In 2014, researchers from the institute of Minzu and Folk-custom, Nanjing museum found the same group of villagers of Qiandai village, and started a long-term (until 2017) comparative study on the transition of the Folk-custom and costumes in the same village over the past 30 years. We are in charge of the study on the costumes in this project. Today, women's traditional costumes in the watery land in southern Jiangsu have become the provincial and national intangible cultural heritage. Since there have been a lot of research on the fashion styles and decoration details of the women's traditional costumes in this area, we are not going to repeat the similar discussions here again and instead focus on the changes of the traditional costume along with the urbanization of the rural areas and the structural transition of the local economy.

Changes of the Woman's Dress in Qiandai Village, Shengpu over 30 Years

Shengpu Women's traditional costume in the 1980s

In the 1980's, women in the Shengpu area was wearing the Pan-Pan hairdo, patchwork blouse, Zuo skirt, crotch-jointing shorts, leggings and embroidery shoes in their everyday life. (Refer with: Fig.1) The patchwork blouse, Zuo skirt, Pan-Pan hairdo, and headscarf are the representatives which present the local characteristics of the woman's costume in watery land. The patchwork blouse, a type of blouse, is named by its stitching technique, and also called "stitching-blouse" accordingly. The typical matching colors of it are blue and white. The Zuo skirt is a short skirt bunched in the outside of the patchwork blouse, and there are many pleats on the two sides of it (near the waist). The Pan-Pan hairdo has rich decorations, including the bun hairpin (called "hua

qian" by the locals), comb, silver chain, wool and flowers. (Refer with: Fig.2) The headscarf has a notable local style featured by the two-color or three-color patching. (Refer with: Fig.3)



Figure 1. Qindai Women's dress (Photographed by Si-hua TU, 1980s).



Figure 2. Pan-Pan hairdo (Photographed by Si-hua TU, 1980s).



Figure 3. Headscarf (Photographed by Si-hua TU, 1980s).

This type of costume is especially suitable for doing farm work, and every detail of the design style shows the elaborate practical function of the woman's costume in watery land. Its most notable aesthetic feature is "stitching", which also originates from the purpose of saving. Detailed studies can be found in the Investigation on Qindai Women's Costume in Shengpu, written by Cai-ping Wei etc. in 1988. [1]

The current status of the Women's dress in Shengpu area

Compared to 30 years ago, only a few elders at and above 70 years old in Shengpu still wear the traditional costume sometimes. The relatively younger elders never keep this tradition any more, not to mention the young people. Currently, the dress of the young and middle-aged women in Shengpu has become very fashionable, and already urbanized. Even the elders over 70 years old only wear the traditional costume in spring and autumn. In nowadays, with the urbanization of the rural areas, the industry and commerce in Shengpu has highly developed, and the people have a wide choice of apparel commodity. Hence the elders also tend to wear the urbanized cloth in summer and winter, which obviously feels cooler in summer and warmer in winter.

Analysis of the Reasons for the Change of Shengpu Woman's Dress

Everything is evolving during the process of coming into being, developing, maturing, decaying and perishing, and there is no exception to the change of clothing. Simply from the temporal point of view, the clothing has always been changing along with the history. Every generation has their own fashion style. As pointed out by the famous expert on clothogy, Prof. Ze Yuan, 'The clothing of an era reflects the spirits of the times, including the social politics, economy, culture, regional environment and many other aspects. It is closely connected to the social transition, economic vicissitude, people's cultural literacy and consumptive habits, and even the natural environment and climate changes'[2].

According to our field investigation, the main reasons that effect the changes of woman's dress in Shengpu can be outlined as follows.

The structural transition of economy

As the developing of social productivity and economy, the changes of the lifestyle and aesthetic taste are the most important reason for the changes in clothing.

Personal income directly determines the purchasing power, and further affects the fashioning and changing of clothing. During the recession of social economy, the whole society concentrates on the recovering and increasing of social production. People's demand for clothing only stops at the basic practical functions, and has no needs for various detailed aesthetic appreciations. On the contrary, during the period of economic boom, since people's material requirements for living are satisfied, they will have strong spiritual needs. They naturally pursue the aesthetic function of clothing, and

this will accelerate the change of clothing. After the rural economic reform in 1983, the per-capita income of rural residents has increased greatly. During the period 1984-1990 before the rural house removal took place, the per-capita income of rural residents in Shengpu only increased by 150%, while by more than 70 times in 2016 than that in 1984. (Refer with: Fig.4) It is really hard to imagine what a great income growth this is. As indicated by the past international examples, the development of the society and economy of a country or district will enter into a new sustainable and fast round of growth when the per capita GDP there reaches 10000 U.S. dollars. During this period, the industrialization process will be remarkably accelerated, the industrial structure will be further optimized, the consumption structure will be greatly upgraded, and the consumer demands are also growing [5]. In 1997, the farmland in Qiandai village was purchased by the government, and the local villagers acquired rich financial compensation and gradually became urban residents. This is a landmark of the great change of the local life and economy in Qiandai village. Under the background of structural adjustment of macro-economy, presented as the urban-rural unification, the rapid increasing of the income and changing of the consumption structure induced by the upgrading of local economic structure has led the acquisition of woman's dress change from self-manual production to direct purchasing of the massively produced industrial goods. This results in the perishing of the traditional costumes.

Therefore, it is not hard to find that the decaying rate of the traditional costume is proportional to the economic growing rate in the Shengpu area. (Refer with: Fig.5)

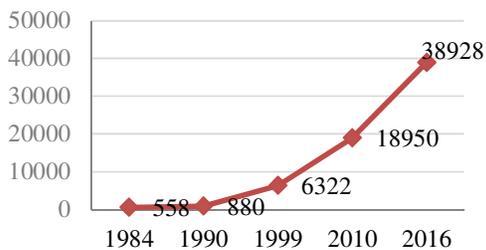


Figure 4. The annual increment of the per-capita income of rural residents in Shengpu from 1984 to 2016 (unit: Yuan) [3,4].

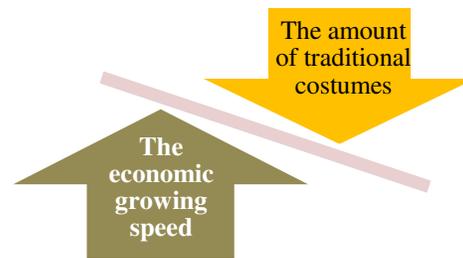


Figure 5. Relation between the economic growing speed and the amount of traditional costumes.

Change of traffic and communication environment

In addition to economic structural transition, there are also changes induced by the change of traffic and communication. Comparing to the nearby Luzhi area (less than 9 kilometers away), which has a similar economic environment but more convenient traffic, the traditional dress in the watery land of Shengpu 1980's was preserved more completely. This indicates that the change of local dress in Shengpu is closed connected to the inconvenient traffic other than the economic factor. In the 1980s before the rural house removal took place, Shengpu was surrounded by a lot of rivers, which makes it very inconvenient to contact with the outside world. At that time, the basic transportation is the boat, and the basic communication media is the paper letter. Cai-ping Wei once recalled: 'it took us more than two days to get there from Nanjing by boat and walking'. The terrible traffic and communication became a barrier between the urban and rural areas, which provided a natural condition for the formation of the isolated island of dressing culture, and also the necessary condition for the formation of the unique folk-costume in the Shengpu area. According to the 'stagnation remnant law' and the 'invariant fixed law'[6] outlined by the Japanese scholar Anrina, it is not hard to notice the following facts. In a remote area far away from the central city, the clothing style cannot be fully developed and catch up the fashion trend. If an ever-popular dressing culture reached there, it may gradually stop developing and preserve its original style, and finally became the distinctive local costume style. In the contrast, the fashion style are replacing frequently in the developed central city. At long last, a generation gap between different regions comes into being finally, which is called the 'space-time difference of the popularity'[7]. In this situation, it is a typical space-time difference between the urban and rural costumes. In fact, the traditional dress of

watery land in southern Jiangsu which persists until today still retains the original style in the Qing dynasty, which has a time gap as huge as 100+ years comparing to the fashion in the metropolis in nowadays.

With the economic development in the Shengpu area, the dense river network has been buried and transformed into an all-round road network, and the communication facilities also develop remarkably. By 2017, the Suzhou Industrial Park has been linked into the Beijing-Shanghai high-speed railway, and it only takes 1.5 hour to get there from Nanjing now. It will take another 20 minutes to get to the Shengpu sub-district by bus. Hence the total trip only takes about two hours. Today, almost every family in Shengpu has the modern communication tools like the telephone, mobile phone, WeChat and QQ. With the improvement of the traffic and communication, the dressing barrier between the urban and rural areas has been completely broken, and the popular fashion style in the metropolis can unimpededly come into every rural resident's eyes. Therefore, the original isolated ecologic environment of the woman's costume of watery land never exists, and the rural dress has been 'urbanized'. The dressing difference between the urban and rural areas is gradually diminishing, and finally vanishes.

The inevitable trend of the law of fashion

From the perspective of the intrinsic reason that drives the development of clothing, the transition of the Shengpu woman's dress is an inevitable trend of the law of fashion.

On the one hand, from the view of peoples' internal psychological factor which results in the popularity of clothing, being off with the old and on with new is human's nature to pursue changes, which is also the psychological basis of the emerging of fashion. Christian Dior, the founder of the world-famous fashion brand, Dior, said: 'fashion is developing along with desires. You can certainly change it once you get tired of it. Being tired will make you discard anything that you loved so much before. What is opposite to the fashion is the habit. The German sociologist F·Tonnies and American sociologist W·G·Sumner hold the opinion that the fashion is a changing habit. Thus they unify the fashion and the habit which are contradictory to each other. People always incline to seek stability in the habit, and are simultaneously controlled by the desire of 'being off with the old and on the new'. Influenced by these two contradictory mentalities, fashion and habit, as a couple of paradoxes, interact with each other, and develop collectively by adjusting the new and old endlessly. Based on these considerations, it is an unavoidable result that the traditional costumes still beloved by the elders over 70 is gradually replaced by the new popular dressing widely accepted by the young. This is an objective rule of the developing of human dress.

On the other hand, according to the regular rule of the fashion cycle, the popularity of any clothing has its own life-cycle (the life of any type of clothing or any typical dressing style in the history, in short). Throughout history, it is not hard to notice that the fashion cycle becomes more and more short along with the developing of human society. In the primitive and slavery societies, the unit of the fashion cycle was as long as millenniums. In the feudal society, it was calculated by units of centuries. While after the industrial revolution, it was shortened to decades, due to rapid developing of traffic, communication and information technology and the acceleration of the pace of life. In the post-world war I era, the fashion cycle was further shortened to be counted by lustrums. In the modern society, the development of the fashion is accelerating towards the direction beyond the regions and across the classes, on a large scale but within short cycles, in a high speed and with little limitation.

In short, the traditional dress of the watery land in Shengpu belongs to the folk-costume of the Qing dynasty relative to modern trend in fashion from the perspective of time-latitude, and the local rural woman's dress relative to the dresses in the modern urban areas. Therefore, according to the classification of popular fashions, woman's traditional costume in Shengpu can be classified into the popular fashion of the agriculture civilization in the past, of which the popular cycle has already entered into the stage of decaying and perishing. On the contrary, along with the acceleration of the urbanization of the Shengpu area, the fashion style of the young and middle-aged women there has converged with that in the metropolis, which obviously belongs to the popular fashion in the

modern society. From this point of view, the change of the woman's dress style in Shengpu can be thought of as a big jump in the quality of the fashion. (Refer with: Table 1.)

Table 1. The difference between the women's traditional and modern dress in Shengpu.

	Shengpu Women's Traditional costume	Shengpu women's modern fashion
Time Latitude	Ancient Times(Qing Dynasty)	Modern Times
Space latitude	Rural women's costume	Urban women's fashion
Products Properties	Products of agricultural civilization	Products of industrial civilization
Production Modes	Manual production	Mechanized production
Production Capacity	Single-piece production	Mass production
Production purpose	Self-sufficiency	Commodity exchange
Economic types	Natural economy	Commodity economy
Duration of popular cycle	Century	1-2 years

Summary

To summarize, the change of woman's dress in southern Jiangsu has its own historical inevitability. It is an explicit expression of the economic development along with the unification of the urban and rural areas. Woman's traditional costume in that region has become an important provincial and national intangible cultural heritage. Its importance on the culture inheritance and protection is self-evident. The main point of this paper is that we must realize the objective inevitability of the change of dress from more macroscopic perspectives of history, philosophy and socio-economics, when the traditional costume culture in the rural areas is hit by the modern industrialization. We must dig out the positive sides of it in our future work on the inheritance and protection of the traditional culture. Only in this way, the traditional costume culture will have a stronger vitality when accepting and absorbing the nutrients from the modern industrial civilization.

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