



## Conceptualizing Chinese-Style Clothing: Empirical Evidence from Top Chinese Ethnic Apparel Brands

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**Rationale:** During the last few decades, the trade success in textiles and apparel has not only contributed significantly to China's modernization, globalization, and economic success but also helped cultivate its fashion industry. In the process of achieving economic success, China has nurtured the largest consumer population with increasing desire for more fashionable clothing. The size of the market, 1.36 billion residents (Statista, 2015), plus the increasing spending power of many Chinese consumers, has attracted brands from the fashion world to expand the market in China. The trend of chinoiserie, which features Chinese traditional cultural elements and styles, started in the global fashion market when China's economy took off (Clark and Milberg, 2011). However, the cultural interchange and interaction between China and the rest of world has not been balanced or even (Zhao, 2013).

The Chinese styles and cultural heritage have been recognized as one of the most influential sources for western designers to get oriental inspiration and create Asian chic designs (Yu, Kim, Lee, & Hong, 2001). Global brands have utilized Chinese-inspired designs and patterns to launch product lines, catering to the rise of wealthy Chinese consumers. For domestic fashion practitioners, historical and traditional Chinese cultural resources provide a great repertoire for creative designs, a cultural context for the product, and brand positioning with the less international competition. However, China's domestic market of culturally inspired fashion and fashionable ethnic clothing has been fragmented without any single brand being widely adopted by Chinese mass-market consumers.

In fact, the success of developing and growing the Chinese cultural fashion industry and ethnic fashion brands depends significantly on consumers' acceptance. It is critical to have a clear and consistent understanding of what the Chinese-style is and what consumers' preference for Chinese style fashion is. Such knowledge will facilitate the Chinese fashion industry, and more Chinese-style clothing brands to further develop and eventually have the power to set trends utilizing and capitalizing on its rich cultural heritage. To this end, this study intended to conceptualize Chinese-style fashion from Chinese consumers' perspective, as well as product design, and construction perspectives.

**Conceptualization:** A review of the literature found no consistently accepted definition of "Chinese-style clothing". In this study, we first conceptualize Chinese-style clothing from a consumer perspective. We consider a clothing style as Chinese-style if it is perceived by consumers as having the taste of chinoiserie. From the design/development/production perspective, we conceptualize "Chinese style clothing" as fashion clothing having traditional Chinese cultural or ethnic elements in terms of shape, apparel type, silhouette, color, feature of fabric, surface pattern, trimming, how to wear, and accessories following the framework proposed by Yu et al (2001). Furthermore, we also conceptualize "Chinese style clothing" in terms of the way to create the taste of chinoiserie through inheriting traditional Chinese cultural and ethnic elements directly or in a relatively subtle manner. Specifically, based on the degree and approach of inheriting traditional and ethnic elements in terms

of "symbolic resemblance", "modification", or "replication", we classify Chinese styles clothing into "modern Chinese-style", "traditional Chinese-style", and "ethnic Chinese-style".

**Method:** This empirical study is composed of two parts. First, an online survey was created using wjx.cn and administered to a national sample to identify top brands offering Chinese-style clothing from consumers' perceptive and to assess consumers' attitudes towards and acceptance of identified top brands. A national sample of 2,181 participants was recruited from Beijing (653), Shanghai (648), Guangzhou (445) and Shenzhen (435) in 2017. Among all the participants, 55% were female, and there is no significant difference in the sex ratio across the four regions. All respondents were over the age of 18, with 24% in the age range of 18–25, 34% in the age range of 26–35, 22% in the age range of 36–45, and 20% over 45. The average personal monthly income was mainly concentrated in the range of RMB 5,000-9,999. Nearly half of the respondents (49%) had a four-year college education or graduate degree, with 60% of respondents having post-college degrees. Then popular designs were collected from those identified top Chinese-style brands for content analyses.

**Empirical Evidence:** Fifteen of the top Chinese-style brands were identified based on the survey results. Among the fifteen top brands, *Shiatzy Chen*, *Shanghai Tang*, *Shang Xia* and *Blanc de Chine* were considered as "modern Chinese-style" since these brands apply Chinese cultural and ethnic elements using symbolic replications consistent with fashion trends. Brands *Refosian*, *Gege*, *Tangy*, *Mozen*, *Ne-Tigers* and *Zeng Fengfei* were identified as "traditional Chinese-style", which directly inherits the traditional design and construction methods. *Liebo*, *Wsfm*, *Husenji*, and *A-you* were characterized as mainly using authentic ethnic elements from Chinese minority ethnic groups in product design and development and hence classified as "ethnic Chinese-style"

Survey results showed that *Shanghai Tang*, a modern Chinese-style brand, obtained the highest level of favorable attitudes and acceptance among the respondents followed by the traditional Chinese-style brand, *Refosian*. The third and fourth brands in terms of consumers' attitudes and acceptance were *Jixiangzhai* and *Liebo*, which were classified as ethnic Chinese-style.

A total amount of 3,692 garments were collected from the top modern, traditional, and ethnic Chinese-style brands online respectively. The collected garments included eight categories of women's clothing: tops, dresses, qipaos, coats, shirts, trousers, skirts, waistcoats, and five categories of menswear: tops, coats, shirts, trousers, waistcoats. Content analyses identified seven common design and construction elements: mandarin collar, frog, embroidery, xiejin, duijin, binding, and backstrap woven, as well as nine popular surface patterns: floral, animal, plants, number pattern, word pattern, traditional pattern, ethnic pattern, geometric pattern, and abstract pattern.

**Conclusions and Implications.** Empirical evidence supported the proposed conceptualization of Chinese-style clothing. Even though China's domestic market of culturally inspired fashion and fashionable ethnic clothing is still under development, the market has shown emergence of different segmentations with brands positioning themselves differently as modern, traditional, and ethnic Chinese styles. Overall, modern Chinese-style brands gain more consumers' awareness and acceptance. Even though historical and traditional Chinese cultural resources provide a great repertoire for creative designs, applied traditional and ethnic elements in designing Chinese-style clothing are limited. More sophisticated, creative, and symbolic use of traditional Chinese cultural resources and ethnic elements should be encouraged to further develop Chinese-style clothing and brands.

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