

From Auspicious to Suspicious Evaluating the Intention and Use of
Imperial Chinese Symbolism in Contemporary Fashion

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“Ever since the silk trade flourished between Asia and the Roman Empire, China has been a source of fashion inspiration for the West” (Hearn, 2015, p. 12). Cultural appropriation is a long-standing trend in the fashion industry. Specifically, Chinese clothing and decorative motifs from the imperial era have inspired designers and Hearn (2015) notes that inspiration in the most creative Western fashion designs have come from Chinese aesthetics.

Yu, Kim, Lee and Hong (2001) stated that the original meaning is rarely connected to an ethnic design in the contemporary fashion industry and demonstrated that Asian ethnic dress is a force that influenced fashion designs. Delong, Wu, and Bao (2005) examined the role aesthetic characteristics played in fashion design. Prior studies of Chinese style focused on one specific aspect related to aesthetic elements, or aesthetic value. However, no studies that investigated the Chinese motif system as a whole were identified through a review of the literature. Because of different aesthetic values in the East and West, contemporary designers may change the original Chinese traditional motif to meet their aesthetic standard or imagination (Rado, 2015). Due to this, Bolton admitted, “The original function or significance of a motif or form may have been misunderstood” (2015, p. 14). Often this is a fanciful interpretation that combines Eastern and Western aesthetics. Consequently, use of traditional Chinese symbols or motifs in contemporary fashion design has been altered via cultural appropriation. Non-verbal communication cues of Chinese motifs are illustrated via the culture, history, legends, and Chinese aesthetics.

Three questions were raised in this paper: (1) What are the aesthetic characteristics and non-verbal communication cues embedded in the artifacts of traditional Chinese culture? (2) How has cultural appropriation influenced the use of traditional Chinese aesthetics in contemporary fashion? (3) What is appropriate use of Chinese traditional motifs and what is inappropriate? A Chinese Motif Evaluation System (CMES) was developed as a tool for visual content analysis to assist in understanding the relationships between Chinese culture and aesthetics. The CMES further provided a platform to associate aesthetic characteristics such as colors, motifs, and compositions to non-verbal communication cues which helped explain the meaning behind certain motifs.

Thirty garment images were carefully selected to illustrate cultural appropriation influenced by traditional Chinese aesthetics in terms of contemporary fashion design. These were grouped in ten sets of three images. Each set of images contained a control image (an imperial-era Chinese garment), a contemporary Chinese apparel design of similar aesthetics, and finally, a comparable contemporary Western apparel design of similar aesthetics. The ten imperial-era Chinese garments were selected based on their aesthetic characteristics and non-verbal communication cues representative of Chinese culture. For each image, a detailed description of the garment

describing the composition, the non-verbal communication cues behind these motifs, the color scheme, cultural appropriation, and the spiritual link of these garments was developed.

Final analysis of each garment was conducted according CMES, criteria included Chinese Aesthetics - colors, motifs, and compositions. Analysis revealed imperial imagery in three of ten garment sets, floral imagery in 15 garments, faunal imagery was present in four garments, and seven garments combined floral and faunal imagery. Four Chinese designers used pure colors on their designs; half of the Western designers applied pure colors on their garments. In terms of non-verbal communication, all the selected garments exhibited cultural appropriation. Eight garments related to content cultural appropriation; all but one of these originated from Western designers. Five garments utilized motif cultural appropriation, with one design by a Western designer. The seven remaining garments exhibited a mixture of content and motif cultural appropriation. Two of these garments were from Western designers.

Based on our CMES analysis, contemporary Chinese designers utilize cultural appropriation differently than Western designers. Contemporary Chinese designers tended to focus primarily on two aspects of cultural appropriation, motif and content, or just one, whereas Western designers focus their emphasis on the content principle associated with cultural appropriation, i.e., reusing an idea from another country (Young, 2008). Future research accommodating “on site” tangible studies in applying the CMES tool would be beneficial in expanding key attributes of this model. This case study serves as a methodological model, implications suggest that this model could be applied to garments from other cultures, offering researchers, analysts, and designers a tool for gaining insight from garments related to other cultures.

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