

On Fashion's Political Engagement in Modern Society

Shi Yajuan

(Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology , Beijing, China, 100000)

galqsyj@126.com

Abstract

In class society, fashion is identified as a sign of class position and social status, while in modern democratic society fashion's political connotation and significance have greatly changed and is mainly displayed from the following three aspects: 1) as a way of social protest from vulnerable social groups by being symbol of being an independent and free subject. However, the resistance or protest represented by fashion is no more than something ritual. 2) as a way of identity and subjectivity construction, both individual and national; 3) as embodiment of fashion leadership and a way of incorporation. Generally to say, fashion has played an important role in every aspect above. However, there is still a tension between them and we must manage carefully to keep a balance.

Keywords: Fashion, Politics, Engagement, Protest, Soft power

Traditionally, fashion is regarded as a symbol of class demarcation in class society, which has been discussed a lot in Georg Simmel's work, *The Philosophy of Fashion*. With the development of modern society, the social function and fashion's political engagement in society has changed gradually and presented itself as expression of social protest, identity recognition, subjectivity construction, embodiment of fashion leadership, incorporation and so on. Of course it is not unusual for us to see these aspects contradict, overlap or intertwine with each other in different cultures and political systems, which make fashion's political engagement more complicated, but worth being elaborated deeply.

1. As a way of social protest

Fashion's role of being a way of social protest can be examined from two opposite subject positions ---- consumers and designers.

1.1 The consumers

Fashion's being used by the consumers as a way of social protest is so common in modern society that it seems a cliché to mention it. In contemporary modern society, it is no doubt that T-shirt with the words of some political slogans is one of most commonly scene of fashion involving in politics, esp. in some social movement, demonstrations and all kinds of right-claiming occurrence. Since the appearance of this kind of street wear, it is closely connected with the expression of personal emotion, will, ideal as well as their political standing and individual identities. Since the 1960s T-shirts of this kind have been very popular on the street whenever there is some important social and political turmoil. One of the latest examples by making use of T-shirts happens in South Korea during the political demonstrations against Park Geun-hye's administration. Some people participated in the demonstrations in T-shirt with words like "NOT MY PRESENT", "下野 (DOWNFALL)", "GET OUT" and so on, which expressed their political standing and outlet their anger and disaffection of their President.

Sometimes the political protest and resistance conveyed by fashion is only ritual without much significant social influences, such as what happened in the youth subculture movement represented by

the look of hippies and punks in 1960s and 1970s. By dressing themselves with some anti-fashion looks they outlet the anger of being marginal groups in the society and went against the main-stream culture and the establishment. As we all know that being dressed as elegant gentleman with three-piece suits and graceful lady with long dress have always been the ideal of main-stream fashion culture in western countries. The American hippies gave up all of those things, they preferred some oriental or national style such as colorful Turkish robe, Afghan coat, exotic flower pattern shirt, strings of beads and so on. What being mixed with the anti-fashion modern looks are flares, military uniform from the second-hand store, gold rimmed glasses and so on. While the British punks even went to the extremes comparing to the hippies. Mohawk was the symbol of male punks. The female punks put on tight leather jacket, skinnies, colorful long mesh stockings and Martens and wore gothic black eye-shadow and nails. Technically, the social force of these styles as social protest against the authority of the establishment or main-stream culture is mild and only ritual or symbolic. However, these looks are unique and eye-catching enough to attract attention of the public and make a scene in society so as to have their image being noticed and remembered and voices being heard. In this way did their anti-fashion styles become part of the media through which people criticize the cultural values of middle-class and present their marginal political standings in western societies during that time.

1.2 The designers

Fashion designers' involvement in politics with fashion is also not something new just as the point we discussed previously. A simple retrospect of fashion history will provide us a long list. Sometimes they will toss "fashion statement" on T-shirt on high fashion stage just like what the common protestors or the subculture youths do in the street. However, after studying many fashion activities it is easy to find that most of time they choose to state their political or social standpoint by some particular fashion design or some controversial fashion photos, through which to attract the public's attention for political, social or environmental problems.

Usually designers will manage carefully to express their political attitude and standing point through Mix&Match, deconstruction, retros and other designing technics and concepts. It is well-known that some designers have been using sartorial semiology as a transformative variable in collections, such as Jean Paul Gaultier's 1993 Hasidic show, Hussein Chalayan's 1997 chador collection and John Galliano's "homeless" Dior couture in 2000. Immigration from Middle East countries has become the subject of controversy and existential self-questioning throughout Europe in recent years. It was reported Norbert Baksa, a photographer, posted pictures on Instagram of a shoot he had done featuring a model wearing luxury brands against the background of a Hungarian refugee camp. Italian Vogue in 2008 featured a photo shoot on an oil-strewn beach after the BP disaster in 2010 and another one dealing with domestic violence in 2014, and the outcries that followed (Vanessa Friedman,2015) . Actually both the designers' fashion works and the fashion pictures or activities incurred different kinds of criticism even though they claimed their aim was to attract the attention of the world for the poor or arouse people's awareness of environmental protection. Sometimes they were either criticized for their cultural appropriation and commercialization of other's misery or acknowledged as unique ways of fashion's engagement in life. These arguments remind us fashion's limitation and inability in dealing with some deep and long-term social and political problems.

2. Construction of social identities

Besides making a social protest fashion also helps constructing the sub-cultural identity or group identity by flocking people with the same political opinion together. In other words, the other side of the coin is that people also construct their individuality, subjectivity or collective identity in this process. Therefore, to express resistance against society is only part of fashion's significance for the

public against sovereignty of Park Geun-hye or the youth in American or British youth subculture movements. T-shirt with slogans of anti-Park Geun-hye was very helpful to attract the attention of people with same political standings and it was easy for them to flock together and gain support and identification from each other. In this way their collective identity as a large group of people representing the some political ideals are established, which is mainly characterized with anti-corruption, anti-plutocrats and so on. In this process a collective identity of upholding democracy and freedom also came into being.

In the second place, the looks of anti-fashion style also played the same role of constructing the marginal identity of the hippies and punks. The early days during which these looks appeared in the street they were regarded as something weird and unacceptable by the conservatives and conventionalist. However, the uniqueness, difference and attractiveness of their anti-fashion styles gradually transformed their identity of being aliens in society. Gradually they were seen as free subjects out of control of the social bond, which was such a miraculous transformation for the young man to achieve and to celebrate. With the popularity of these fashion styles in street, the subcultural youth gained a new identity and subjectivity which was free, wild, creative, rebelling, individualistic, anti-conventional and so on. Even though their fashion style was incorporated by the main-stream culture in the form of commercial goods later, its connotation of rebellion and anti-convention and its function of being anti-cultural signs have always been part of history and been recalled constantly.

3. Fashion leadership and the incorporation

As we all know that what to wear and how to wear in some state visit, political conferences or meetings are quite important in international affairs. All details of dressing including the color of political leader's tie will be consulted by two sides in detail beforehand. The staff in charge of these affairs will not stop exchange ideas constantly until a final consensus is reached. Such carefulness and cautiousness always prove worthy because what leaders wear in some political occasions are always the focus of media and will be reported and interpreted in headline news widely. Therefore, in order to win the favor of the electors, masses, even their political opponents, nearly all political leaders, east or west, will make good use of fashion to shape their political image. And surely they will benefit a lot from it due to fashion's good function of attracting attention, manifesting or disguising their personality. All these examples will lead to our discussion of fashion leadership and the fashion's role played in process of incorporation of some social rebellions by the establishment.

3.1 Fashion leadership

Fashion leadership refers to the fashion's ability to inspire, lead, change and go beyond the limits of life as well as its influence on social life. It is mainly composed of the following five elements: charisma, vitality, future force, cohesion and influence which are expressed through the following aspects: 1) By initiating and leading various kinds of fashion trend, fashion endows ordinary life with alternation, novelty and fuel of moving forward. 2) Fashion helps us know ourselves and the world around us with its stunning charisma and unexpected breakthrough in shape, pattern and color. 3) The elevation of fashion is a process with its unique operational mechanism. 4) Fashion is a kind of soft power (Shi Yajuan, 2017,223-225) . Among the five elements the fifth one is closely related with our discussion of fashion's political engagement.

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 *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). In this book three broad categories of soft power are listed: "culture", "political values", and "policies." (Joseph Nye,

2004,X) Since then the term has been widely used in international affairs by analysts and statesmen. For an example, in 2007, CPC General Secretary Hu Jintao said in 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 (Markus Karlsson, 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.”(Joseph Nye, 2004,X). In other words, soft power also means attraction. To promote culture attractiveness is part of the project of building a country’s soft power. Consequently, how to increase soft power through fashion is what we are going to discuss in the following two case studies.

Case study 1. Power suits

In modern democratic politics, suits are the standard clothes which help people show an image of authoritative, dignified, rational and powerful. It is very popular among businessman and politicians. Most men leaders in formal political occasions like to dress themselves with dark suits matched with a light colored shirt and dark or light colored necktie. However, for women leaders, most of them will dress themselves with fashion. Among them, Mrs Thatcher’s dressing of power suit 1980s are one of the good examples and has been discussed in ages ever since. Power suit was designed for the hero in film *American Gigolo* by Giorgio Armani, the famous Italian fashion designer, in 1980. Men’s wear of this look features wide shoulder, lapel, silk tie with dark pinstripes and peaked collar shirt. Different from men’s wear, women’s look adopted some men’s fashion elements, such as peak lapel, shawl collar so as to emphasize wide shoulder and lapels. Besides, women’s power suit featured with “> <”shaped waistline which was quite different from the popular “S” shape of women’s popular look at that time. Therefore power suit helps to provide its wearer an authoritative and professional look visually, especially, for the women wearer. It was been favored by a lot of career women working in the field of politics and business since its appearance in 1980s. Mrs. Thatcher, Nancy Reagan and Princess Diana were all followers of this fashion.

With the development of times power suit gradually lost its influences, but fashion still exists. Of course, its connotation and function have changed. Nowadays some western women political leaders choose fashion to impress the public in order to win their support, admiration and recognition. The former intention of showing authoritative and professional, helping constructing of dignified political image becomes the secondary. For example, Angela Merkel, the German Premier, was used to dressing herself in a very low profile before being premier in Germany. However, her dressing style gradually changes and her suits and dresses become colorful, even sexy sometimes when in office. According to statistics, the color of her suits amounts to more than 90 kinds. The change of look helps a lot to transform her into a kind next-door aunty instead of an indifferent, cool and powerful politician. It contributes a lot for her to win the admiration, love and respect of women electorates. The example like this is a long list and we can only name a few here.

Generally, either the power suit populated in 1980s or the more fashionable political dress at present has the same implication, that it, to cater for the collective taste of the public. By doing this the political leaders identify themselves to be a member of the mass and society. Obviously in modern democratic politics, fashion contributes to narrow the distance between political leaders and the public and helps them construct a dignified political image, authoritative and democratic. Here fashion acts as a sign of the democracy and equality in society. Of course during this process, fashion will inevitably contribute the influence of their country’s soft power in the international world.

Case study 2. Chinese-style fashion

Fashion's political engagement in China mainly lies in the construction of a collective and national identity with the help of Chinese-style fashion, through which our nationality's attractiveness is promoted and our country's soft power are increased. Literally the term "Chinese-style fashion" means that this style is typically Chinese, with strong Chinese features artistically, visually and culturally. It also implies that a lot of Chinese cultural elements reflecting Chinese cultural identity and spirit have been used in the design. For example, some traditional Chinese cultural symbols, such as dragon, porcelain, locus, peony, shape designs, such as Duijin(对襟)、Stand-up collar, Qipao and so on. Traditional Chinese textiles or colors are also often intentionally made use of.

Chronologically, the Chinese-style fashion developed in China from 1980s. It is the heritage, development and creation of traditional Chinese costume culture, as well as a creative combination of Chinese clothing culture with some western fashion cutting crafts or patterning style. In addition, it embodies traditional Chinese cultural spirit such as the union of Heaven and human, harmonious and inclusive, elegant and introverted. This popularity of style helps Chinese construct the nationality and collective identity in modern society contributes to the establishment of national and international image which is modern, confident, open and friendly. Nowadays, there are many popular and well-known Chinese-style fashion brands, such as "Shanghai Tang"(上海滩), "JNBY"(江南布衣), "Useless"(无用), "Heaven Gaia"(盖娅传说), "Rose Studio"(玫瑰坊) and so on. Besides, there are more and more Chinese-style fashion designers are staging their fashion in the world fashion stage. Definitely these efforts will not only increase and promote the influence of Chinese-style fashion, but also be beneficial to the construction of a collective and national identity and spreading of the cultural attractiveness of our nationality and country. Of course, it is also part of Chinese dream to make Chinese's life more beautiful, help build people's confidence, attract the attention, admiration and aspiration of people around the world. In this sense, the Chinese-style fashion is synonymous with soft power.

3.2 Incorporation

Economically, incorporation is the legal process used to form a corporate entity or company while politically it refers to way of authority and government taking some opposite social force into their control through commodification or ideological redefinitions by attaching them new labels. Herbert Hebdige makes a detailed description and analysis of the British and American governments' incorporation of youth subculture in 1960s and 1970s in his book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*(1995). For him, commodification of the youth subculture such as their fashion style and music is crucial to the understanding of the incorporation from the establishment. It means to convert the signs and symbols of youth subculture displayed in their fashion and music into commodities or goods in the market. The adoption, reformation and popularity of the youth subcultural signs and symbols effectively weaken or eliminate the original rebellious meaning of those styles. Once their fashion becomes consumer products in life, the protesters become consumers. Then the youth subculture becomes the source of fashion aesthetics, esp. part of postmodern aesthetics, instead of expression and embodiment of political resistance. Furthermore, Herbert Hebdige analyzes incorporation of youth subculture ideologically by claiming that the establishment represented by police, media and judicial system redefined the meaning of youth's behavior and their subculture by attaching new labels to them.(迪克·赫伯迪格, 2009,117). The rebellious young people were reported to be "civil devil", unimaginable "other" for their weird outlook and behavior by some media at the beginning of the youth subculture movement. However, later this obvious pejorative and derogatory tone became mild and even some of them were being reported as good examples of being successful from scratch when these rebels started to profit from their styles and transform them into commodities. Thus, in this way did

fashion participate in the incorporation of marginal social group by the establishment commercially and ideologically.

4. Conclusion

Viewing from the above analysis, the feature of fashion's political engagement in modern society can be summarized as the following three points: at first, it is a complicated process which always involves in the two groups of people, the politicians and the public, as well as the ensuing conflict, compromise and regulation. The latter one intends to take fashion as a way of social protest while the former attempts to incorporate it into the mainstream culture and make it serve for the construction of national and individual identity and subjectivity. Secondly, it is a process of giving meaning to things in life and life itself. For example, the political statements printed on a ordinary T-shirt is eligible enough to transform its original function of a shirt into a banner of a political cause. Thirdly, the resistance or protest represented by fashion is no more than something ritual. It is quite difficult or even impossible for the daring and avant-garde fashion design in fashion stage or weird sub-culture youth fashion in the street to weaken the rule of the establishment or institution which have been there for many years or more than a few centuries. Besides their influence on the construction of their avant-garde or marginal social position, individual identity and subjectivity, their engagement in politics also greatly enrich the choices of fashion style for the common people and the post-modernist design aesthetics in the ensuing years. However, it is no doubt that the incorporation, administration and exploitation of fashion from the establishment remain one of the most important aspects of fashion politics.

The last but not the least, it is necessary to make a brief analysis on the inner features of fashion which are closely connected to the fashion's political engagement in modern society. Generally to say, fashion's flexible, creative and non-political quality are critical to its role played in the social and political world, either as a way of social protest from the public or as a measure of cooperation and administration from the authorities. Fashion has been part of people's life in modern society since the beginning of last century. In order to win the favor of the consumer, fashion is available to be changed and fit into any cultures and political surroundings anytime, anywhere. Its flexibility and creativity is extraordinary and without rival in life. Besides, fashion is also regarded as something non-political and irrational. Just as what we discussed previously its political meaning is given by the consumer, the designer, the producer, the media or even some political groups. Therefore, fashion's significance and connotation can go far beyond politics. People from anywhere in the world and any kind of political background, socialist or capitalist, need to dress and choose a look for themselves. People dressed in the same fashion may not be on the same political position because it is easily to be redefined and given new political meanings. To some extent fashion plays a great role in the field of politics, but not always.

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Biography

Shi Yajuan, Associate Professor, Doctor of Arts, Master's Supervisor, Beijing Institute of Clothing, Visiting Scholar of Peking University, Visiting Scholar of University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA. Research Interests: Fashion Theory and Dress Culture.