

Taiwan Cultural Identity Construction and Dress

- A Contextual Analysis -

Sister Laumann, Maryta
Professor, Fu Jen Catholic University

Introduction

This research is based on the assumption that there exist a significant relationship between cultural identity construction and dress, and that people have the potential to transform their own realities by means of utilizing cultural forms such as dress and appearance to their advantage.

Using a contextual approach, this study explores the need, meaningfulness, possibility and practical aspects of Taiwan-identity symbolic dress as a means for strengthening local cultural identity in the context of global realities.

I. The Importance and Role of Dress and Appearance for Taiwan Cultural Identity Construction in a Fast-changing World

(1) The global context: threats to local cultural identity and autonomy

We are living in an era of accelerated change, characterized by increasing international interdependence and global competition. The driving force behind this universal phenomenon is well-known: an uncompromising commitment to a worldwide free market economy, to industrialization and modernization which easily translates as westernization. Examining these global trends from a critical perspective, the following three threats to the identity, autonomy, and integrity of local cultures are seen as significantly related to developments in our textiles and clothing culture.

One of the threats is related to the fact that in the global free market economy everything tends to become commercialized, including culture. Already in 1981 Baudrillard predicted this inherent tendency of the free market economy saying that "in the world market place all values - labour, knowledge, social relations, culture and nature - are transformed into a form of economic exchange value." Thus the production and use of textiles and clothing, which in pre-industrial societies constituted a significant aspect of cultural construction and local identity expression, now has turned into big international business.

This leads us to the second negative impact of the free market economy on local cultures: the threat of globalization. As an inevitable consequence of fierce international competition and increasing interdependence, globalization tends to create a universal culture deprived of local identities and cultural diversities, a "melting pot" of cultures. Mass media and modern communication technologies accelerate this process with unprecedented effectivity. The textile and fashion industry worldwide has evolved as one of the most powerful agents of globalization

through its practices of global sourcing, global production, international marketing and consumption, thereby changing the world into a single fashion market. Thus, whether in Taipei, New York, Shanghai or elsewhere, one nowadays easily can lose a sense of locality and cultural context face to face with the same multi-national retail chainstores, the same brandnames and universal styles everywhere. "Does all this mean massive homogenization of cultures, of the decorative arts, of clothing?" asks Laughlin, coming to the conclusion: "It is possible. This possibility should urge us to capture and record individuality, the richness and the uniqueness of current civilizations of the world before these are obscured by the melting pot of international communication."

The third threat on the integrity of local cultures, intimately connected with globalization, is the exploitive character of eclectic post-modernism in the field of the visual arts in general, and fashion in particular. It involves stripping cultural symbols - such as elements of design - from their local cultural context and meaning, then re-combining and juxtaposing them on an international scale, thereby creating new fashion stories deprived of their original historical and local significance. Unfortunately, in this process a sense of history and tradition, a respect for the integrity of local cultural forms and identities is disappearing. The world becomes a "grab bag" of cultural and ethnic elements, to be turned into mere images and impressions, emptied of meaning. In the opinion of S. Kaiser(1992), the ultimate challenge in a world of multi-national fashion is to find a meaningful way to blend postmodernist culture with the specifics of local cultural contexts, so as to maintain a framework within which to locate oneself in a meaningful relationship to ones past and future, and within which the basic human need for individual and cultural identity construction can be met.

(2) Taiwan within the global context: problems of cultural identity, autonomy and dress

Despite its relatively small size, a tiny densely populated island of about 22 million inhabitants, Taiwan plays a vital role in the global economy of today. Especially during the last half of the twentieth century, with its ambitious claim to dominion over all of China, the ruling party, for better or worse, has led the country high-speed along western models of industrialization, modernization and militarization. From the outset of local mass production, based on the availability of cheap labour, our local textile and garment industries in particular, have contributed to the speedy economic development of the island, so much so that textile and apparel products came to be looked upon primarily as commercial commodities, foreign exchange earners, means toward the development of other industries and economic interests, rather than as of unique significance for our own local cultural development and identity construction. On the contrary, under forty years of KMT martial law government, preceded by fifty years of Japanese colonization, Taiwan historical and cultural consciousness was systematically suppressed and an all-China mindset among the people was promoted. Foreign influences did their part to stifle the development of a local taste. Overwhelmed by western images of modernity and progress, there has been too little interest in developing local identity clothing culture by means of creatively

integrating traditional cultural forms into the design of modern fashion products. As far as formal wear is concerned, our men have felt socially obliged and physically uncomfortable for too long, wearing the western-style suit in this tropical climate and most of our women have abandoned the westernized skin-tight chipao, without finding a worthy substitute for official occasions. As far as today's Aborigines textile and dress culture is concerned, it has changed into little more than a means for tourist attraction, with the surviving pieces being kept in museums or the homes of private collectors.

It all amounts to saying that people are faced with a kind of local cultural vacuum as a consequence of long-time overemphasis on economic and political ambitions. A more serious consequence of such ambitions has been the emergence of a multi-dimensional identity crisis, deeply affecting people's ethnic /cultural and political consciousness for decades, splitting the population along ethnic and cultural lines. No wonder therefore, that more and more people today begin to question the achievements of the so-called "Taiwan economic miracle" as they realize the enormous cultural, social and environmental cost it has demanded and still continues to demand.

(3) Conclusions and Proposals

The foregoing brief analysis of the global context, and Taiwan as part of the problem, challenges us to change threats into opportunities, at least to some extent, by means of:

- ① Realizing the importance of becoming more keenly aware of the intensifying destructive impact of the prevailing global economic system on local cultural systems, including dress and appearance as a unique form of cultural development and identity.
- ② Realizing the need and urgency for action by more consciously and intently than ever working at our own cultural identity to counterbalance the global trend toward homogenization of cultures and preventing ourselves from being totally swallowed up into the anonymity of the global melting pot of cultures.
- ③ Considering the possibility of symbolic ethnicity through official dress, as a means to Taiwan cultural identity construction. Gans (1979) defined symbolic ethnicity as a nostalgic allegiance to a specific culture as one's root culture and a love for, and pride in, a tradition that can be experienced without being incorporated in everyday behaviour". In as much as official dress is out of the realm of everyday global fashion behaviour, yet has great potential to convey cultural messages in public, i.e. at places and occasions when such is particularly desirable and meaningful, it could be well utilized as a highly appropriate and effective category of dress for constructing a Taiwan cultural identity image. Its high visibility, instantaneous and memorable impact, due to absence of language barriers are additional advantages. Moreover, as a public sign of self-communication, official dress could provide that sense of symbolic self-completion which is a basic need and right of every people. (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1983)
- ④ Realizing the need and urgency for a unified, collective identity consciousness of "who we

are and want to be" as a people, prior to any meaningful self-symbolization through official dress.

II. Emergence and Historic Dimensions of the "New Taiwanese" Consciousness and its Significance for Cultural Identity Construction through Dress

To design a set of official wear symbolizing Taiwan cultural identity is no small task because it presupposes a lot more than a designer's creative talent. As the foregoing analysis has concluded, it is only on the basis of a collective self-consciousness that a meaningful identity symbol, such as official dress, can be developed and expected to find broad-based acceptance among the people.

But what is the image, the collective consciousness Taiwan people presently have of themselves? Have they overcome the multi-dimensional ethnic/ cultural, political, and international identity crisis referred to earlier?

(1) Emergence and relevance of the "New Taiwanese" consciousness

Thanks to the concept of the "New Taiwanese" (first promulgated by President Lee Teng-hui in 1999) a constructive formula designed to overcome a prolonged historical and political dilemma has been offered, showing the way into the future. The "New Taiwanese" concept stresses the unity of all Taiwanese, that is "all the people who now live in Taiwan, no matter when they immigrated to the island". While respecting subcultural identities, the "New Taiwanese" subsumes all separate ethnicities and classifications - the nine Aborigines tribes, the Hakka, Hoklo, Taiwanese and Mainlanders - under one overarching Taiwan identity umbrella, thereby helping people to shelve their historic differences and develop a sense of joint destiny and solidarity. The "New Taiwanese" idea found immediate and widespread support from sixty percent of the people, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. It showed a constructive way out of the deep-seated identity crisis that has troubled the consciousness of the Taiwan population for decades.

It is on the basis of this significant breakthrough in collective identity consciousness, in the ability of having come up with an all-Taiwan answer to the question "who are we and who do we want to be", that we now can proceed to give meaningful expression to the "New Taiwanese" identity by means of symbolic official wear. However, in as much as the "New Taiwanese" official attire is intended to communicate a love for, and pride in our own historical past and unique experience, we ought to briefly examine the historic profile of the "New Taiwanese", in the hope of becoming more conscious of its rootedness, and more appreciative of its uniqueness. Thus we permit the symbol to assume its fullest meaning and become more dear to those who will wear it.

(2) The Historic Profile of the "New Taiwanese"

The historic profile of the "New Taiwanese" examines its Aborigines as well as Chinese

consciousness components. However, since this is not possible because of space and time limitations, may it suffice to mention here but three major insights:

- Taiwan history can be interpreted as a prolonged struggle of four hundred years for cultural identity and autonomy on the part of all its ethnic participants.
- Negative historical experience of colonization, discrimination, exploitation, betrayal and systematic suppression of Taiwan historic and native consciousness have led to a strong "Taiwan is Taiwan" sentiment among the people today, which also prepared the way for the success of the "New Taiwanese" idea.
- Dress and appearance played a major symbolic role at every stage of Taiwan's changeable history. It was effectively utilized as a means to transform cultural and political realities.

(3) Conclusions and Proposals

- The future-oriented "New Taiwanese" idea represents the aspirations of the majority of Taiwan's multi-ethnic and culturally pluralistic population of today. As such it lends itself to meaningful symbolical expression of an overarching all-Taiwanese cultural identity in the context of global reality.
- It is to our own benefit to concretize and strengthen the still tender "New Taiwanese" identity by whatever means available. Official dress, purposefully designed to symbolize and remind us what the concept stands for, is an appropriate and effective way to re-inforce the message of solidarity and joint destiny which took centuries of painful struggle on the part of every ethnic group on this island to mature.
- The "Taiwan is Taiwan" dimension of the "New Taiwanese" consciousness should also mean that local weather conditions as well as the natural environment for design inspirations need to be taken into consideration in developing the new Taiwan-identity official wear.
- Our histories teach us that official and ceremonial attire had an enormous significance in symbolizing cultural identities, political and social realities and relationships. Hence, to utilize symbolic attire for the purpose of Taiwan identity construction would be highly congruent with the traditional role of dress in the larger historical Chinese context.

III. Guidelines and Directives for Designers

Having explored the meaning, historic profile and relevance of the "New Taiwanese", we now are prepared to turn to the more practical concerns of the designer, whose challenging task it is to transform this vision into a meaningful symbol, a visible set of official dress for modern Taiwan men and women.

To guide designers in their challenging task, the following guidelines and directives are proposed for their consideration:

Category and style of dress:

In the process of this research, it became clear that official wear would be the most appropriate category of dress to effectively carry and convey symbolic messages into the public local or international realm. While Taiwan-identity official dress does not need to be conceived of as a uniform, it does need some stable non-variable design component of highly distinctive character so that it can be easily identified, recognized and remembered as "uniquely Taiwanese".

It appears that style of dress lends itself best to constitute this fundamental non-variable. The Indian sari, Chinese chipao, the Japanese kimono, the Western-style men's suit are all examples of this kind: while their basic style remains unchanged, it can assume endless variations to suit different occasions, seasons, climates, age groups, and personalities. Structural simplicity of style is to be recommended in order to achieve a kind of classic feeling, whereby to transcend fashion changes and insure long-term acceptability.

Symbolic expressiveness:

This study has led to the realization that without a majority-supported identity consciousness, such as the "New Taiwanese", there is no basis for successfully achieving cultural identity through dress. In as much as the "New Taiwanese" concept has obtained widespread support by the people, the opportunity for its symbolic expression through official wear is available and promising. In as much as the concept stresses solidarity, and a sense of shared destiny above and beyond tribal and ethnic identities, this basic message is being communicated, first of all, by the very fact of people wanting to adopt a common Taiwan identity symbol. However, the symbol chosen - in our case the basic style or form - must recognizably correspond to the main cultural message it is to convey.

This may be accomplished in more than one way. For example, it could be done by means of creatively integrating traditional style features of different ethnic origin, including both Chinese and Aborigines. It also could be done by way of modernizing a traditional form to a degree that it conveys an overall feeling open to Aborigines as well as Chinese identity interpretation. Innovating a completely new style, one that can be conveniently and convincingly invested with and interpreted in terms of the meaning the "New Taiwanese" identity stands for, is still another option. Other design aspects such as fabric design, colour choice and combination, ornamental detail, accessories, etc., can be added more freely to strengthen the symbolic message or provide desirable variety.

Aesthetic appeal and wearability

Obviously, the quality and attractiveness of the symbolic expression of Taiwan official wear is the most crucial and challenging aspect for a successful design solution. Nevertheless, if there is not sufficient aesthetic attractiveness of the overall appearance, people cannot feel proud of the new official wear, and will not, or only seldom want to wear it. Ideally, the aesthetic appeal of

the total look should reveal some of the uniqueness of the local Taiwan taste.

Furthermore, designers in choosing the basic style features, as well as additional changeable design details, ought to take into consideration, how well the attire will suit individuals of different figure types and age levels, so as to gain broad-based acceptance by all the people. Finally, designers will have to think in terms of complementariness of style and design features for women and men's wear, in as much as they will often appear in public together, in couples or in groups.

Comfort and versatility

In as much as the sentiment "Taiwan is Taiwan" is an essential component of the "New Taiwanese" consciousness, official wear must also correspond to local climatic conditions all-year-round. To achieve the optimum degree of comfort which, no doubt, is an important requirement of today's consumers, designers need to make purposeful choices in terms of fiber content and fabric construction. Equally important are mobility features in relation to garment construction. Predictably "official wear" would be worn at various international events, and a variety of official or semi-official occasions, hence, it might be a good idea to create an ensemble with "add or subtract" possibilities, so as to more easily adjust to varying indoor and outdoor climatic conditions as well as varying social requirements.

Relation to present day formal wear

The guidelines and directives presented above reveal quite clearly, why present day formal attire, the western suit and the chipao, cannot meaningfully fulfill the requirements expected of the "New Taiwanese" official wear.

While the western-style men's suit may do well as a global identity symbol for modern men, there is need for a local identity symbol as well. In addition to its lack of symbolic value for locals, its style and construction meet does not meet basic comfort requirements for our high-humidity subtropical / tropical climate. The chipao for women is not able to communicated the "New Taiwanese" cross-cultural and trans-ethnic identity either. While flattering women of perfect figure type, it lacks wearability for women less confident about their physique. Moreover, comfort of movement is another deficiency contributing to the fact that the classic chipao is favoured less and less by the younger generation.

This brief summary on the limitations of present-day formal wear from the perspective of the "New Taiwanese" consciousness is well substantiated by past survey results and popular opinion.

Nevertheless, this by no means implies that the men's suit and women's chipao should not continue to be worn by as many local men and women as desire to do so, since these traditional cultural forms carry their specific symbolism and have their specific seat in Taiwan life and history. What is suggested here is that, in addition to these cultural forms - now that we have arrived at the broader, more inclusive and democratic "New Taiwanese" consciousness - we

would do well to fit this new identity into a set of symbolic attire, capable of conveying our new newly achieved common identity.

Conclusion

This study proceeded from the assumption that people have the potential to transform their own realities by means of how they use cultural objects - such as clothing - to their advantage. A contextual approach was used, aimed at examining present-day global realities affecting local cultures specifically Taiwan and explore possibilities of strengthening local cultural identity through the medium of dress.

While a number of directives and guidelines resulting from the inquiry could be offered to designers to develop a set of official wear symbolizing the newly emerging trans-ethnic and trans-cultural "New Taiwanese" consciousness, it may take time and conscious effort on the part of the designers to develop the symbol, and on the part of the public to own the common vision that the symbol stands for. However, success lies as much in the process as in the final result. In addition, there will be the need for high-level promotion if this project of cultural re-construction is to succeed. Nevertheless, now while the "New Taiwanese" idea is still fresh in our mind, it is the opportune time to strengthen it by means of concrete cultural forms such as symbolic official dress. Poet W. H. Auden reminds us of how important such symbolization in our human lives and history are, saying: "What we have not named or beheld as a symbol escapes our notice." Moreover, we owe it to our own symbolic self-completion as members of a people with a common history and destiny, to take conscious, concrete efforts to define ourselves from within our own collective experience, instead of merely yielding to the fast-changing external forces around us. This will eventually enable us to make our own "uniquely Taiwan" contribution to the, hopefully, multi-cultural global village community of the 21st century.