

[Original Article]

## Subject positions embodied in military uniform and its influences on modern fashion design

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### Abstract

As a solemn and serious uniform, military uniform can be differentiated easily from any other clothing in the aspects of color, material and style. Inspired by military uniform, fashion designers have been applying military uniform elements into modern fashion design in recent years, which helps to bring military uniform from the trench onto international fashion runway. The primary method of this research is theory analysis method and exemplifying study method. Based on the collected materials of modern military uniform, this paper takes the fashion and cultural study theory of the famous American scholar Susan B. Kaiser as the leading theory to analyze four subject positions embodied in military uniform, including nation, rank, gender and time and space. By analyzing the subject positions embodied in military uniform, it shows the rich cultural connotation of military uniform and the function of various small details. Meanwhile, by giving specific examples, this paper explores the influences of military uniform on modern fashion design in respect to color, style, material, pattern and accessory. Through the conduct of this research, it comes to the conclusion that military uniform also has the characteristics and properties described in the fashion and cultural theory of Susan B. Kaiser, in addition, designers can be inspired by every specific object around them, which shows the talents of designers.

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### I. Introduction

Military uniforms have their own unique aesthetic forms, which can be differentiated from any other fashion design in respect to color, material and style. In recent years, the elements of military uniform have gradually become the source inspiration for fashion design and appears on many runways. In this paper, based on American scholar Susan B. Kaiser's fashion theory, the subject positions reflected on military uniform have been studied from the aspects of nation, rank, gender and time and space. This paper employs the 07 military uniform of Chinese People's Liberation Army in use at present as an example to analyze the main subject positions embodied on military uniform. The 07 military uniform includes Full Dress, Informal Dress, Physical Training Uniform and Identification Accessory, its colors cover green, blue

and white. In addition, the paper analyzes the discipline of fashion development, and at the same time, discusses the influence of military uniform on modern fashion design.

## II. Literature Review on Military Uniform Research

In the long history of its development and evolution, military uniforms have always been closely linked to physiology, sociology, psychology and economics. In addition, military uniform also reflects a country's political, economic, scientific and cultural level to a certain degree.

One of the reasons why I choose this topic is that this particular clothing style has been widely spread in recent years. However, few researches are conducted on military look. In some works on clothing history and design, military look was just slightly discussed. According to the literature found, *Foreign Military Uniform and Military Look Fashion Design* (Zhang & He, 2000) is the only monograph on military look in China. This book gives an introduction to military uniforms of different countries, which can help us to compare the differences and similarities between various military uniforms. From this perspective, it inspired us to conduct the study on how nation (one subject position in Susan B. Kaiser's fashion theory) were embodied in military uniforms. However, only little space was left in this book for discussion of the relationship and influence between military uniform and modern fashion design.

There are also some scholars who have studied military uniform from three other different aspects, namely Application of Military Uniform Element to Modern Fashion Design (Bao, 2008; Song, 2012; Zhu, 2013), Influences of Military Uniform on Men's Wear (Xu & Gan, 2008) and Influences of Military Uniform on Women's Wear (Zhang & Guo, 2010; Chen, 2012, Zhu, 2011). These topics offer more information that the book above does not cover, because they discussed

in detail on how the military uniforms affects modern fashion and what elements of military uniforms are more popular among talented designers and tasteful consumers. Nevertheless, most of these papers and studies only list the facts, the phenomenon and some examples, only few explain the reason why military look is so popular and why military uniforms are designed in a certain way. Moreover, in western countries, military look includes three parts, namely Army look, Air force look and Navy look, these three parts are classified according to the three different military services. While most literature exist names all of them as military look without the detailed classification.

All these researches have their own characteristics, and build up a solid foundation for our further study. This paper tries to cover more content that other studies did not include, for instance, analyzing the color use of the military uniform from the perspective of psychology. In addition, to make this paper more organized, the author employs the fashion theory of Susan B. Kaiser as the guiding theory, then analyzes the subject positions embodied in military uniform and explores its influences on modern fashion design with the help of related examples.

## III. Research Method

### 1. Theory analysis method

Susan B. Kaiser is a professor at the University of California Davis who studies textiles, clothing, feminism, gender and culture. In her recent book *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, she analyzes the increasingly complex relationships between culture and fashion, explores fashion theory and practice, and establishes the Susan B. Kaiser's fashion theory. Kaiser (2012) thinks that "fashion is not a thing or an essence, rather, it is a social process of negotiation and navigation through the murky and yet-hopeful waters of what is to come. Fashion involves becoming collectively with others, and it is also about producing clothes and appearance, working through ideas, negotiating subject positions

(e.g., gender, ethnicity, class), and navigating through power relations.” This paper analyzes the subject positions embodied on military uniform under the guidance of this fashion theory.

## 2. Exempling study method

Kaiser (2012) thinks that “there are multiple subjectivities shaped by the interplay among diverse subject positions (e.g., social status, gender, age, nation, ethnicity, class, sexuality and race). These subject positions are embedded in cultural discourses over which individuals may have little control. Furthermore, there are intersections among different subject positions. Like the cultural discourses in which they are embedded, subject positions cannot be totally separated from one another; they intersect in complex ways.” For example, for the two subject positions age and social status, generally speaking, with a person growing older, he/she will get higher social status. Certainly, there is also the situation in which his/her status remains stable or lower. As a semiotic system, clothing can present various symbolic meanings. You might tell one's age, gender, and nation from one's clothes. Thus, people believe that clothing can talk silently.

This paper takes the 07 military uniform of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) as an example to analyze the subject positions it conveys. Meanwhile, this paper explores the influences of military uniform on modern fashion design through giving and analyzing different examples of modern fashion design

## IV. Subject Position Embodied in 07 Military Uniform of Chinese People's Liberation Army

The People's Liberation Army is the armed forces of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). August 1st is celebrated annually as Chinese Workers and Farmers Red Army Day. The PLA consists of four professional service branches: the People's Liberation

Army Ground Force, the People's Liberation Army Navy, the People's Liberation Army Air Force and the Second Artillery Corps. The military uniform in use at present is the 07 military uniform, which includes Full Dress, Informal Dress, Physical Training Uniform and Identification Accessory. Its colors cover green, blue and white, and the subject positions mainly reflect on military uniform are nation, rank, gender and time and space.

### 1. Nation

In cultural studies terms, a nation is not a thing or an essence that necessarily has a culture wholly distinct from other nations. Rather, a nation is a context and a site of articulation and ongoing formation: one that does not always neatly coincide with one's ethnic or other subject positions, or with the idea of being a transnational subject influenced by fashion produced, distributed, and consumed in a global economy. Nations have to continually re-create themselves in order to foster a sense of belonging (a “we”) on the part of their “members”. Some imagination is required in this process because it is not possible for all of the subjects belonging to a nation to interact with each other on a face-to-face or daily basis.

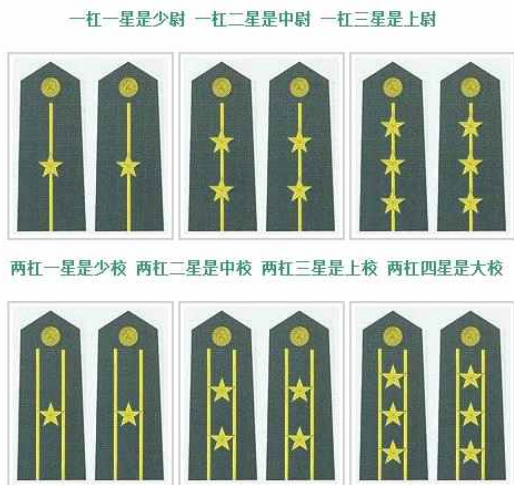
Nations, like fashions, are made, not born. Fashion, like nation, requires imagination and fosters a sense of identification. There are in total 56 nationalities in China, each with its own unique national dress. Similarly, different countries have different military uniforms for their soldiers. Although the color, overall silhouette and material of different military uniforms are similar, there are distinct differences in the details, such as the cockade, chest badge, collar flower, and qualifications chapter. It is exactly all these details that epitomize the subject position in Chinese military uniform, revealing its unique cultural connotation, and reflect different dressing habits, traditions, national mentality and aesthetic standards.

### 2. Rank

Rank is an unstable subject position: it is always in relation to the rank subject positions of others. On the one hand, it can be viewed as a kind of bottom line in terms of one’s economic circumstance. On the other hand, there is a certain kind of ambiguity and complexity surrounding rank as a subject position. Rank is more than what people do or earn for a living. It is a complex concept and subject position, typically located by combined demographic variables such as income, education level and family background.

The army is a well-organized and disciplined militant group. This determines its nature of an organization with strict rank concept, and thus grade marks are used to reflect the rank becomes one of the characteristics of military uniform. Rank system is the regime to distinguish the rank of soldiers, the implementation of rank system can help to facilitate the standardization construction and help to enhance international communication.

Grade marks include epaulet, armband and collar badge. Epaulet (Fig. 1) refers to the grade mark wears on the shoulders, generally composed of rung and star, which can reflect the level of the wearer; Armband (Fig. 2), usually refers to the grade mark soldiers wear on the sleeve of uniforms, also composed of rung of different size and star flowers, mainly used to



<Fig. 1> Epaulet



<Fig. 2> Armband

present the soldier’s rank; Collar flower can indicate the rank of the wearer as well. In addition, qualification chapter also has the function of grade marks. All these grade marks on military uniform can clearly reflect the wearer’s status.

### 3. Gender

From the moment of birth (or even earlier), gender becomes an everyday process of the body-navigating and negotiating through time and space. “Becoming visibly gendered-binary oppositions notwithstanding-involves engagement with complicated, shifting coding systems of colors, fabrics, trims, forms, shapes, and patterns and other body fashionings. These systems are not natural; rather, they are arbitrary and vary by time and space, history and culture” (Kaiser, 2012).

#### 1) Differences in male and female military uniform

The first duty of a soldier is to obey their orders. The army is a highly unified organization, thus, no personalization is allowed in combat. And the military uniform must be neat in the same military branch. However, there are some subtle differences among male and female military uniforms because of their different physiological structures.

### (1) “T” shape male military uniform, “X” shape female military uniform

Male military uniform highlight the T shape, which can show men's inherent masculinity. To achieve T shape, the most popular way is to match identification accessory, such as badge, name card, qualifications chapter, aiguillette, etc. People usually pay much attention to looking at the part above the chest, and identification accessories are mainly worn on this area. Reasonable use of identification accessories can help to widen visual depth, thus to make the wearer appear strong and powerful.

Female military uniform emphasizes the X shape, which can reflect the beauty of the female body, slim waistline and skirt will help. Skirt of the military uniform shows one subject position, that is gender. In most places around the world, the skirt is a representative of the woman. At the early stage of all civilizations, both men and women can wear skirt, and wearing a piece of cloth around the waist is normal. Since modern times, skirt became woman's clothing, and trousers became the clothing of man, woman can wear trousers as well, nevertheless, there are exceptions, such as Scotland, Fiji, men still can wear skirt.

### (2) Difference in male and female military hat

Although men and women wear the same military hat in most cases, sometimes there can be the gender difference. For example, in contemporary 07 military uniform, male soldiers wear large breasted hat during outdoor activity, while female soldiers wear beanies, and both will take off their hats in the room. In the specific period, people can tell the wearer's subject position, gender, through the military hat.

### (3) “Left for man, Right for woman” principle

On formal occasions, soldiers need to wear full dress, and this involves the adornment of aiguillette. What's interesting is that male and female soldiers wear it differently, because man will wear it on the left side and woman on the right side, which fully

embodies the Chinese traditional culture “left for man and right for woman”. According to the study of Zuo (2011), it is said that “in China the Sun God (Fu Hsi, a man) and Moon God (Nu Wa, a woman) were the left and right eyes of Pan Gu (who creates the world), thus there is the custom of “left for man and right for woman”. Chinese ancient philosophers deemed that the two opposites of things and people in the universe are Yin and Yang.”

### 2) Phenomenon of “female dressed as male”

There is an instructive anecdote in China about the woman Hua Mulan, who joined the army in lieu of her father, although female soldiers at that time were not in accordance with military provisions. Since it was only modern times that women were allowed to join the army, the basic military uniform profile is man's wear, which is stiff, majestic, powerful and serious, and at the same time must be convenient for military activities. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of “female dressed as male” also appeared in ancient times, during Tang dynasty, with the frequent exchanges with foreign countries, women have more freedom, and women dress Hu uniforms and man's clothing became popular at the moment. According to historical records, princess Taiping once dressed in man's clothing to remind her parents to find a partner for her.



<Fig. 3> Male soldiers wearing aiguillette



<Fig. 4> Female soldiers wearing aiguillette



<Fig. 5> 87 Spring-Autumn informal dress  
(Suits with ties)

#### (1) “Female dressed as male”-suits and tie

Since 87 military uniform, tie appeared in female uniform. Suits originally showed up in western countries, and were then gradually introduced to China, but they are still man's wear. In recent years, working women began to wear a suit, or even start to use a tie, “female dressed as male” reveals that modern women have equal status in the business world with men (Fig. 5).

#### (2) “Female dressed as male”-blue, green and white

The color of military uniform is closely associated with geography and psychology. In order to protect

and hide soldiers, “armed forces” usually dress consistently with the natural environment, like green, white and blue, among which blue and green are cold tonal color. The overall color of the Army Force uniform is green, such as dark green, grass green and olive green. This kind of cool color is more serious, and accords with the color of the rural grass, leaves, and biological convergence, which is convenient for forest, grassland and farmland combat or disguise. The Air Force uniform is generally in blue, which is on behalf of the color of the sky and mountains; from the psychology perspective, blue can make people calm down, and bring down one’s blood pressure, breathing and heartbeat. Navy Force uniform is overall in white, white is associated with the kingdom of heaven, which represents authoritative. The color of armed forces uniform in general is given priority to cool colors, which keep in harmony with the environment, and conforms to the male calm characteristics. In accordance with the customs “blue fits for boys, pink fits for girls”, military uniform in the blue, green and white belongs to male soldier on the part of color. Hence, when male and female share the same uniform color (Fig. 3, Fig. 4), this is also the presentation of “female dressed as male” (Shi & Dan, 2015).

#### 4. Time and space

Nation, rank, gender and other subject positions do not happen “on the head of a pin”. Rather, they happen or, more accurately, we do them in the larger contexts of time and space. Intersecting, embodied subject positions are not just about who we are becoming; they are also about when and where we are becoming. Time and space are abstract and yet crucial-concepts that shape how we style-fashion-dress our bodies, and what we know (and how we know it) about ourselves in relation to others. Tying together how we look and how we think, time and space influence how we mind and manage our appearances.

Body adornments not only expressed the intersections among subject positions, but also reflect the connection

of time and space which cannot be separated. As an object, it must exist in a certain time and space, so is the military uniform. The journey of military uniform, according to Kaiser (2012), is not just linear or straightforward. Rather, it twists and turns, detours, and entangles with other routes. From August 1, 1927 to now, Chinese People's Liberation Army has the history of 89 years, the military uniforms also experienced revolution for many times, each time added with some new designs and deleted some old ones. Take the military hat for example, with the change of time and space, there are octagonal hat, big breasted hat, 50 liberation hat, beanie, garrison cap, 65 liberation hat, helmet hat and beret, etc. The change of the hat at each time during these years is closely related with people's subject position, including factors like nation, rank, gender and so on.

## V. Influences of Military Uniform on Modern Fashion Design

### 1. Application of military uniform color to modern fashion design

In the spring and summer collection of Paul&Joe 2012, designer applied the pine green into the knitting coat and summer suit. Pine green is not particular about skin color, the model appeared to be rather healthy especially after the make up. Blue from the Air Force uniform is popular all over the world, in the spring and summer collection of Alexis Mabille 2014, the designer picked up the color blue as main color and create the Air Force Look, although there are no other elements from military uniform, the whole collection reminds people of military uniform.

### 2. Application of military uniform pattern to modern fashion design

The grain and color of camouflage pattern are both similar to green. Camouflage is widely employed in physical training uniforms, which are used in training and has the characteristics and properties of water-

proof, windproof and camouflage. Since camouflage pattern appeared in the spring and summer collection of Jean Paul Gaultier 2008, Blumarine 2010 and Antonio Marras 2013, camouflage uniform become popular all year round. Serious and stiff military coat shows the coolness of a female, takes away the weakness from the female image, and presents us with a girl of neuter temperament.

### 3. Application of military uniform style on modern fashion design

Speaking of striped sailor shirt, the first brand appears in people's mind would probably be Jean Paul Gaultier. In the fashion show of Gaultier, striped sailor shirt has appeared in various forms. It used to be the underwear clothing of sailors, after the deduction of fashion magician, it has become the most important fashion totem for a brand. The appearance of the most classic Jean Paul Gaultier man's perfume is a man wearing striped sailor shirt. Foreign stars are also fond of striped sailor shirts, from the great artist Picasso, to Andy Warhol, from the UK national female artist Jane Platinum, to excellent actor James Dean who died young but shocked the world. These celebrities all left precious memories that recorded the classic striped sailor shirt.

As one of the most classic Chinese elements in westerner's mind, 65 military uniform is possibly the simplest in the history, there is no rank, no full dress or informal uniform in the uniform. Chanel 2010 Pre-Fall Paris-Shanghai used the 65 Chinese military uniforms for reference, and the classic liberation hat is rather memorable.

### 4. Application of military uniform material to modern fashion design

Military uniform materials mainly consist of khaki, camouflage and whipcord, these fabrics have more advantages over general fabrics, they not only are good ornaments, but also have special functions. Khaki has good moisture absorption function, because it is

a kind of cotton twill; camouflage, as a kind of special printing, has the property of waterproof and fire prevention; whipcord belongs to the worsted wool fabric, this kind of material is solid, and the surface is bright and clean. According to Xu and Gan (2008), clothing made of these fabrics will have distinct silhouette and solemn effect, which is appealing to international man's fashion brand.

#### 5. Application of military uniform accessory to modern fashion design

The accessory and details such as hat, collar flower, pockets, badges, zippers and belt in military uniform also serve as inspiration for fashion designers. They are brought to the fashion stage, and worn by more and more people. Especially with the coming of the agitation restoring, military hats are deduced by stylist into fashion military hat with holes and improved military hat, each has its own flavor. In the return to the orthodox clothing trend, according to Fashion Week, the collar flower is becoming men's most attractive ornament. And as an important element in a military uniform, pockets are applied for their rich variety of shapes in the classical style, leisure style and avant-garde style. Badges are identification accessories among military uniform, modern garments make use of the badges and reflect the military uniform characteristics. Belts in the military uniform are also widely adopted in modern fashion design, which adds a sense of fashion to some simple clothing. As for the application of military uniform zipper, brass or bright silver zippers are more popular. Zippers are mainly used in pockets, cuffs, collars and plackets for the sake of decoration, which can show the strong and cool charm as well.

In fact, the exclusive military green is never away from fashion. On February 7, 2015, the godfather of fashion, Tony, showed up in a gorgeous military green suit at the Eslite Bookstore Conference, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong for the signings. His overall appearance makes him a gentleman and has a sense of

retro chic. Currently, to show the fresh vigor, personality and fashion, popular casual wear brand is inclined to military uniform style. The international fashion brand Jack Jones employs military elements like epaulet, pockets, belt, brass buckle in its design, all of which perfectly show the vigor and confidence of man.

## V. Conclusion

Thanks to people's yearning for peace, and worship and respect for soldiers, military uniform has become so popular. The subject positions-nation, rank, gender, time and space-embodied in military uniform provide the designers with inspiration in aspects of color, style, material, pattern and accessory. Military green, badge, collar flower, all these military elements has become the fashion symbols through the time, and help to enrich the diversity of modern clothing.

Through looking for professional knowledge from the literature and materials form the internet, this paper introduces a new perspective of conducting research in the fashion and cultural field. By analyzing the subject positions embodied in military uniform, which are in accordance with the fashion theory of Kaiser, people can have a better understanding of the rich cultural connotation of military uniform. Meanwhile, the paper explains the design of the military uniforms from different angles, which is meaningful for people who wants to do similar research. Moreover, this paper may inspire more designers to have a close-up view of the military uniform, and apply the details and elements to modern fashion design.

However, we need to admit that there are limitations here in this study. For instance, when talking about some phenomena, the analysis is not deep enough and further exploration needed to be made, which will be the sector we work on in our future research. As a special kind of costume, despite many of the differences, military uniform also has some common properties with normal clothes. Thus, when people do research on military uniform or other kind of clothes,



they can also employ related fashion theories to analyze military uniforms or other clothes.

Fashion world changes every day, and the military uniform also gets updated from time to time. Since we have been talking about the influence of military uniform on modern fashion for a long time, is it possible that modern fashion also has certain impacts on military uniform? This can be a study to be conducted in the future.

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