

Diasporic Garment in Overseas Chinese Literature: The Cultural Memory of the Cheongsam in the 20th Century Nanyang Writings

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ABSTRACT This study investigates the qipao (cheongsam) in terms of its garment construction, material properties, and sartorial evolution as represented in twentieth-century Nanyang (Southeast Asian) Chinese literature. Through systematic textual analysis, it examines how textile characteristics—including fiber selection, fabric architecture, garment configuration, and decorative techniques such as embroidery and batik motifs—operate as narrative mechanisms for cultural expression and identity formation. The findings reveal that the adaptation of the qipao to tropical environments involved substantial modifications in material selection and structural design to improve wearability, thermal comfort, and functional practicality while preserving symbolic continuity. The qipao consequently emerges as a diasporic garment whose physical configuration evolves into a tangible archive of cultural memory, reflecting the dynamic negotiation between tradition and local adaptation. By integrating literary criticism with textile history and clothing studies, this research demonstrates that literary descriptions of material structures can illuminate the social evolution and technological transformation of garments. Furthermore, the analysis provides methodological insights into hierarchical pattern organization, material–structure relationships, and functional surface representation, offering potential reference for computational textile modeling, wearable engineering, and electromagnetic functional fabric design involving complex patterned structures.

INDEX TERMS qipao, garment construction, material-structure relationship, wearable engineering, electromagnetic functional textiles

I. INTRODUCTION

THE 20th century has witnessed profound global migrations, with few as impactful as the movement of Chinese populations into the region then known as Nanyang or the “Southern Seas” of Southeast Asia [1,2]. Fleeing political instability and seeking economic opportunity, its migrants brought with them not only their skills and traditions but also their material culture—the tangible objects that structured their daily lives and anchored their identities [3]. Among the most evocative of these objects is the qipao, a form-fitting dress which, after evolving from the Manchu changpao, was popularized in the cosmopolitan crucible of the 1920s Shanghai as a symbol of Chinese modernity. In the literary imagination of the Nanyang Chinese diaspora, this single garment was transformed from a mere article of clothing into a powerful and polyvalent symbol [4]. This paper argues that the qipao in the 20th-century Nanyang Chinese literature functions as a critical site for the negotiation of cultural memory, identity, and belonging. A careful examination of its literary representations can grant us a

view of how the diasporic experience is inscribed onto the very materiality of this textile object. The garment is seldom a piece of passive description; instead, its fabric, the cut, and the context of its wearing are active narrative agents. This study will demonstrate that the literary qipao operates on three primary symbolic registers. First, it serves as a vessel of nostalgia, providing a sensory connection to an idealized and often imagined, ancestral homeland, embodying notions of cultural authenticity and tradition. Second, the qipao becomes a locus of adaptation and hybridity, where modifications in its material and design reflect the complex process of acculturation and the forging of a new, syncretic Nanyang Chinese identity. Third, as an exclusively female garment, it is an intensely gendered symbol used by authors to explore the evolving roles, subjectivities, and social pressures faced by women as the designated custodians of culture. By analyzing the qipao not only as a cultural symbol but as a piece of textile technology—a specific construction of fabric and form—this paper seeks to build a bridge between literary criticism and textile studies. It moves beyond what

the qipao represents to examine how its material properties enable that representation. Consequently, it illuminates the crucial role of clothing and material culture in shaping the affective and social worlds of diasporic communities, thus revealing the integral role of textiles in the material construction of identity. Figure 1 presents a conceptual flowchart of this entire dynamic.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated at the intersection of the following three scholarly fields: the history of Chinese dress, diaspora and material culture studies, and literary criticism of Nanyang Chinese writing. Foundational research in Chinese fashion, notably by scholars such as Hazel Clark, Valerie Steele, and Antonia Finnane, has meticulously charted the historical evolution of the qipao in Republican China [5-7]. They detail its transformation from the Manchu changpao into the iconic dress of the modern Chinese woman. Its changing silhouette is associated with powerful socio-political forces, including nationalism, feminism, and the rise of a new urban consumer culture in Shanghai. While this body of work provides an indispensable history of the garment's origins, it is largely focused on mainland China. Accordingly, this paper extends this scholarship by tracing the qipao's "social life" as it migrates, questioning how its meanings were preserved, contested, and remade in the diasporic setting of Southeast Asia.

To theorize this process of migration and meaning-making, this study draws on theories from material culture and diaspora studies. Arjun Appadurai's concept of the "social life of things" is central, suggesting that objects are not static but acquire new meanings as they travel through different hands, contexts, and cultures [8,9]. The qipao, in this framework, is not a fixed symbol but a dynamic artifact whose significance is actively produced by the Nanyang community. Its value shifts from being a fashionable item in Shanghai to a potent emblem of ethnic identity in Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. This movement and re-contextualization invest the garment with a profound nostalgic power. Notably, it is a concept explored in diaspora studies. For communities separated from their homeland, objects such as clothing become powerful vehicles of "cultural memory," serving as tangible anchors for shared narratives that ground a collective identity in a new land. Furthermore, the adaptation of the qipao in Nanyang is best understood through the lens of cultural hybridity, as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha [10]. Bhabha argues that cultures in contact do not simply clash or assimilate but produce a "Third Space" of enunciation, a site of negotiation and syncretism. The existing scholarship on Chinese diasporic material culture has provided valuable insights into objects such as ceramics, furniture, and ancestral portraits. However, the specific semiotic function of clothing, particularly as it is represented within the literature, remains a less explored area. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to this subfield

by focusing specifically on the qipao, with an aim to demonstrate how a textile-centric analysis of literary sources can reveal nuanced negotiations of cultural memory and hybrid identity that may not be as visible through the study of other artifacts alone. The Nanyang qipao, as it will be shown, is a quintessential product of this Third Space. Its literary depictions often detail subtle but significant material transformations—the substitution of silk with local cotton, the incorporation of batik motifs, and the alteration of its cut for the tropical climate. These attributes are not signs of cultural dilution; instead, they are acts of creative translation, thereby giving rise to a new sartorial form that is at once Chinese and uniquely Nanyang. This hybrid garment materially embodies the complex identity of its wearer. Finally, for the generations born in Nanyang, the qipao can be understood through Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post memory"—a powerful, inherited memory of a past their parents experienced but they have only known through stories and images [11]. For these characters, the qipao is not a personal memory but a connection to an imagined history, rendering its symbolism all the more potent and idealized.

III. METHOD

The methodological approach of this paper is a qualitative textual analysis of the qipao's representation within the broader corpus of the 20th-century Nanyang Chinese literature. This interpretative method is selected for its distinct ability to uncover the nuanced symbolic and affective dimensions of material objects within narrative contexts. Although a historical or quantitative survey could catalog the types of clothing worn, only textual analysis can reveal how these garments are invested with meaning, emotion, and social significance by the authors and characters who engage with them. The scientific rigor of this approach lies in its systematic, theoretically informed reading of the texts, where interpretations are meticulously grounded in descriptive evidence and contextualized within the socio-historical framework of the Nanyang diaspora. The research scope encompasses fictional prose narratives (i.e., novels and short stories) written primarily between 1920 and 1980, a period covering the major waves of Chinese migration and the subsequent formation of settled diasporic communities. The literary corpus informing this study includes, but is not limited to, the works of key authors such as Suyin Han, Catherine Lim, and Gungwu Wang, whose narratives frequently explore the complexities of diasporic identity, cultural memory, and generational negotiation during this period. The analytical process involved a two-stage qualitative approach. Initially, the selected texts were subjected to an inductive, open reading to identify all passages where the qipao appeared and to note recurring patterns, character types, and symbolic contexts. Subsequently, these emergent patterns were systematically organized and interpreted through the theoretical lenses of cultural memory, hybridity, and gender studies, which led to the consolidation of the following three primary thematic categories that structure

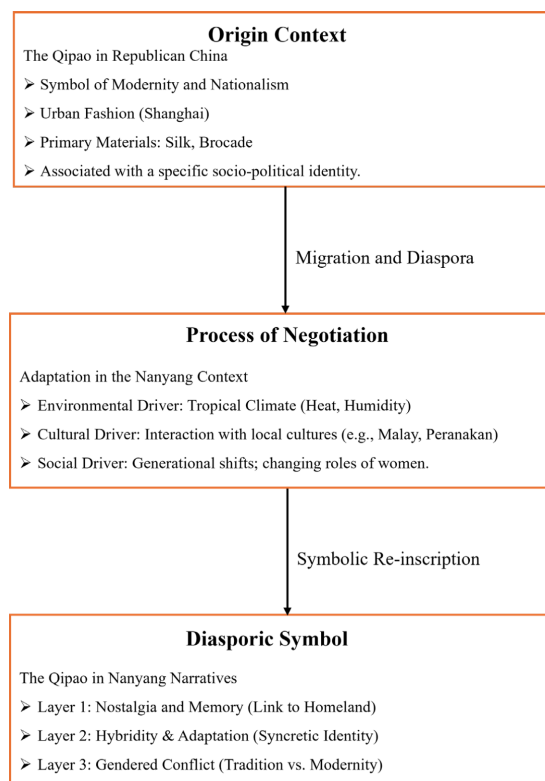


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Flowchart of the Qipao's Symbolic Transformation in the Nanyang Diaspora

this paper's discussion: (1) identifying material descriptions of the qipao that signify nostalgia and cultural authenticity; (2) analyzing sartorial details that evidence adaptation and cultural hybridity; and (3) interpreting scenes where the garment is central to the performance or contestation of gendered identity. In this methodology, the literary text is treated as a rich cultural archive. The author's choice to describe a qipao's fabric as "worn silk" versus "crisp linen" or its cut as "restrictively high-collared" versus "liberatingly sleeveless" are not arbitrary details. They are deliberate narrative choices that encode information regarding class, generational status, moral values, and cultural allegiance. By deconstructing these descriptions, this study illuminates the lived experience of the Nanyang Chinese diaspora, treating the garment as a key artifact for understanding the community's internal and external negotiations of its identity.

IV. DISCUSSION

The qipao as it appears in the pages of the Nanyang Chinese literature is a garment of profound complexity. It is simultaneously a shield of tradition and a canvas for modernity, a memory of a distant homeland and a marker of a new life. Its threads are woven with the tensions of the diasporic condition, which are best explored through the distinct but overlapping functions the garment performs within the narrative as a material link to an imagined homeland, as a site of sartorial hybridity, and as a contested symbol of female identity. These three thematic functions are not

mutually exclusive but radiate from the qipao's central status as a material object. Figure 2 provides a schematic diagram of this analytical framework, which guides the subsequent discussion.

A. QIPAO AS A MATERIAL LINK TO AN IMAGINED HOMELAND

In numerous narratives focusing on first-generation immigrants, the qipao is depicted as a sacred object, a material embodiment of an idealized China left behind. It functions as a defense against the perceived formlessness of the Nanyang cultural landscape. This trope of the elderly matriarch as a vessel for cultural memory is a recurring theme in Nanyang literature, powerfully embodied by the character of Suyin Han in *A Many Splendoured Thing* [12]. Profoundly akin to this character, our analytical archetype of "Old Mrs. Lim"—a matriarch in the 1950s Kuala Lumpur—possesses a single, treasured qipao of dark silk brocade, whose phoenix motifs and preserved state become a tangible link to a lost homeland. This garment is not meant to be used as a daily wear; instead, it is reserved for Lunar New Year and family weddings, and its appearance marking is a ritual of cultural reaffirmation. Within this study's textual analysis, specific descriptions of the garment's physical properties are interpreted as key narrative devices. For example, literary references to tactile qualities such as the "weight of the silk" or olfactory details such as a "scent of camphor" are read not as passive descriptions but as sensory triggers that forge a tangible link to cultural memory. For Mrs. Lim, wearing

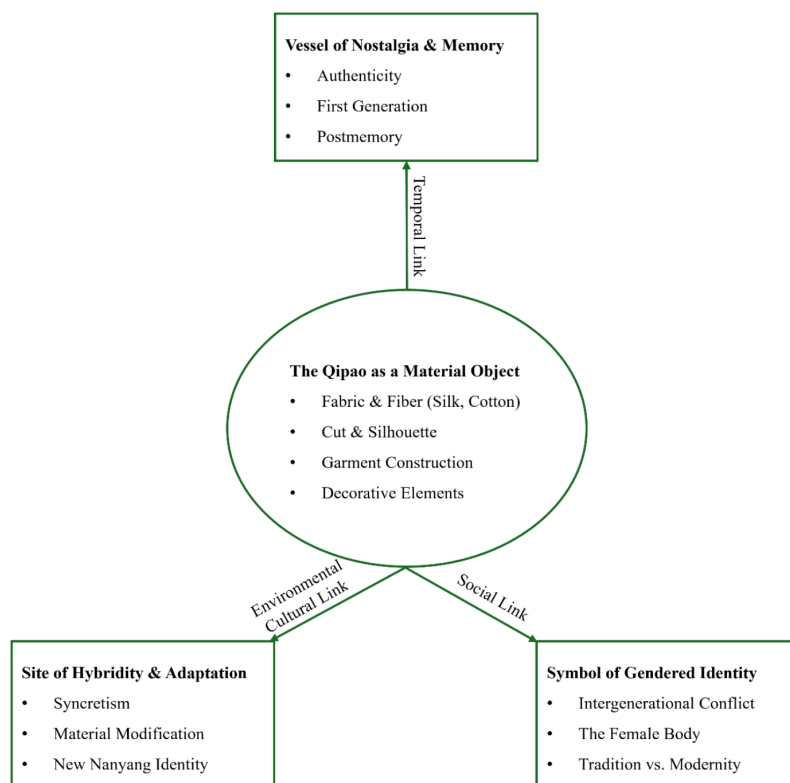


FIGURE 2. Thematic Framework of the Qipao's Semiotic Functions in Nanyang Literature

this qipao is a performative act of authenticity. Its high, stiff collar and long sleeves are physically restrictive, enforcing a posture of propriety and dignity that stands in stark contrast to the perceived casualness of tropical life. It is a piece of portable territory, a fragment of the homeland worn on the body as a testament to an unchanging identity.

For the subsequent generation, born in the Nanyang, this same garment evokes Hirsch's "post memory." A granddaughter may be depicted tracing the embroidered phoenixes on Mrs. Lim's qipao, a garment she has never worn and a homeland she has never seen. The texture of the silk and the stories attached to it form her only connection to a foundational past. For her, the qipao is not a memory but a myth, a beautiful, untouchable symbol of a "Chineseness" that is both a source of pride and an alienating standard against which her own hybrid identity is measured.

B. SARTORIAL HYBRIDITY: ADAPTING FORM AND FABRIC IN THE TROPICS

While tradition is preserved in silken threads, Nanyang literature also chronicles the qipao's pragmatic and creative evolution. The garment's survival in the sweltering equatorial climate necessitated adaptation, a process that authors use to symbolize the broader process of cultural negotiation and the creation of a new, syncretic Nanyang identity. This sartorial syncretism is often embodied in the figure of the modern, educated Nanyang woman, a character trope exemplified by Gungwu Wang's mother in *Home is Not Here* [13]. This archetype, whom we will call "Helen" for

the purposes of our analysis, is typically a figure similar to a schoolteacher in 1960s Singapore, whose daily wardrobe signifies a pragmatic and creative blend of cultural tradition and modern adaptation. Her daily wardrobe consists not of silk but of an array of qipaos tailored from crisp, imported Swiss voile or light, airy cotton. On the surface, this choice of material is a practical concession to the tropical heat and the demands of her active, professional life; these fabrics are breathable and far easier to care for than delicate silk. Nonetheless, this material shift is laden with meaning. It represents a move away from a ceremonial, display-oriented relationship with clothing toward one of daily practicality and modernity. Helen's garments are often sleeveless or feature modest cap sleeves; whereas the fit remains elegant, it is less constricting than her mother's generation's formal wear and thus allows for greater freedom of movement. This clear divergence in materiality and purpose between the ceremonial, memory-laden garment and the modern, adapted one highlights the dual role of the qipao in the diaspora. Table 1 summarizes a detailed comparison of these two idealized types as represented in the literature.

Most importantly, some of her qipaos subtly incorporate local aesthetics, representing a true act of cultural hybridization. A collar might be piped with a fabric printed with a delicate batik-inspired floral pattern, or the hem might feature a geometric motif reminiscent of local weaving traditions. This characteristic is not a rejection of her Chinese heritage but a confident reinterpretation of it within a new context. Her qipao is a product of Homi Bhabha's "Third Space"—

TABLE 1. Comparative Analysis of Qipao Characteristics in Nanyang Literary Narratives

Attribute	Traditional <i>Qipao</i> (in Nostalgic Contexts)	Adapted Nanyang <i>Qipao</i> (in Hybrid Contexts)
Primary material/fabric	Silk, brocade, heavy textiles	Cotton, linen, Swiss voile, lighter textiles
Design/cut	Formal, restrictive, high collar, long-sleeved	Practical, looser fit, sleeveless or cap-sleeved
Decorative elements	Traditional Chinese motifs (phoenix, dragon, peony)	Simplified patterns or localized motifs (e.g., batik-inspired)
Primary social context	Ceremonial use, special occasions, symbol of status	Daily wear, professional life (e.g., for a teacher)
Core symbolic meaning	Authenticity, cultural purity, connection to homeland	Adaptation, cultural hybridity, modern Nanyang identity

a hybrid artifact that challenges the binary opposition of “Chinese” versus “Nanyang.” It materially demonstrates the emergence of a unique Nanyang Chinese subjectivity, one that is both cosmopolitan and deeply rooted in its immediate environment. Through these descriptions of modified qipaos, the literature charts the evolution from an immigrant identity (sojourner) to a creolized, local one (settler).

C. GENDER, MODERNITY, AND THE CONTESTED BODY

As an exclusively female garment, the qipao in Nanyang literature becomes a potent symbol through which the tensions surrounding gender, sexuality, and modernity are explored. The body of the woman wearing the qipao often becomes a battleground for competing ideologies: the conservative, patriarchal values of the old world and the liberal, individualistic aspirations of the new. This conflict is most vividly captured in narratives of intergenerational strife between mothers and daughters. A recurring literary trope to dramatize this conflict involves the physical alteration of a mother’s traditional qipao by a daughter, an act symbolizing a break with established norms.

This conflict is vividly captured through the recurring literary trope of a rebellious younger woman altering a traditional garment, a scenario notably depicted in *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore* [14] through the actions of the mother–daughter argument in the book. This archetype of the rebellious daughter, whom we shall call “Su Lin” in our discussion, represents a generation in the 1970s grappling with increased Western cultural influence and seeking to define their own modern identity. For a social event, she might take her mother’s old, respectable qipao—a garment with a high collar, modest length, and low side-slits—and radically alters it. With her own hands, she shortens the hem, raises the slits to her upper thigh, and tailors the waist to be dramatically tighter. This act of cutting and sewing the garment is symbolic of a deeper transgression. To her mother, this altered dress is an affront to tradition and a sign of moral decay, a shameful capitulation to Western decadence. The high collar was meant to conceal, to promote a demure femininity; the new, altered form is seen to brazenly display the body.

Whereas for Su Lin, this act is one of liberation and self-definition. By modifying the garment, she is not necessarily rejecting her “Chineseness” but is refusing to accept the restrictive version of femininity that her mother’s generation embodies. She is claiming ownership over the qipao, transforming it from a symbol of communal propriety into a vehicle for individual expression and modern sensuality.

In such literary scenarios, the argument that erupts over the garment is symbolic of a larger, implicit debate over the future of the Nanyang Chinese woman. Is she to be a passive vessel of tradition or an active agent in shaping her own modern identity? In these narratives, the qipao becomes the contested fabric on which this crucial question is mapped. Having analyzed these three core themes, specific material attributes of the qipao are clearly found to have consistent links with particular symbolic meanings. Table 2 provides a comprehensive matrix that maps these literary themes to their corresponding material signifiers, summarizing the analytical findings of this entire section.

V. CONCLUSION

In the landscape of the 20th-century Nanyang Chinese literature, the qipao emerges as far more than a mere article of clothing; it is a complex “diasporic vestment,” a material text woven with the memories, struggles, and aspirations of a community navigating its identity between a distant homeland and a new environment. This paper has demonstrated how the garment functions as a powerful vessel of cultural memory and its silk and brocade materiality as a tangible link to an idealized, ancestral China, particularly for the immigrant generation. Simultaneously, the analysis revealed the qipao as a dynamic site of sartorial hybridity. Its literary evolution—through the adoption of local fabrics (e.g., cotton and batik motifs) and modifications in its very construction for tropical wearability—materially chronicles the community’s acculturation and the forging of a unique, syncretic Nanyang Chinese identity. Furthermore, the qipao was shown to be an intensely contested symbol of femininity, becoming a focal point for intergenerational conflicts over modernity, tradition, and a woman’s place within the diasporic family and society.

The significance of this research lies in its bridging of textile studies and literary criticism. By seriously considering the material properties of the qipao—its fiber, cut, and construction—as described in fiction, we unlock a deeper layer of narrative meaning. This approach affirms that clothing in literature is not merely decorative but is a critical medium through which social history, cultural negotiation, and personal identity are inscribed and contested. Therefore, the qipao acts as a textile archive, documenting the lived, affective experience of diaspora in a way that conventional historical records often cannot.

This study has outlined the primary symbolic functions of the qipao in Nanyang literature. Nevertheless, the field remains fertile for further investigation. Future research could

TABLE 2. Thematic Matrix of the Qipao's Symbolic Functions and Material Signifiers

Literary theme	Key function/concept	Material signifiers (textile and construction details)
Nostalgia and cultural memory	To establish a tangible link to the homeland and cultural authenticity.	Heavy silk/brocade fabric; intricate embroidery (phoenix/dragon); high collar; unworn, preserved state; scent of camphor.
Adaptation and hybridity	To represent acculturation and the creation of a new, syncretic identity.	Lightweight cotton/voile fabric; sleeveless/looser cut; adoption of batik-style patterns on collars or hems.
Gendered identity and conflict	To serve as a site for intergenerational struggle over modernity and values.	Physical alterations to the garment: raised slits, tightened waist; contrast between conservative vs. revealing cuts.

extend this comparative analysis, examining the qipao's role in Chinese diasporic literature from other parts of the world, such as North America or the Caribbean, to understand how different host environments shaped its symbolism. A complementary study could focus on the representation of men's attire, such as the Zhongshan suit, to provide a more complete picture of gendered sartorial practices in the Nanyang context. Additionally, the application of digital humanities tools to a larger corpus of texts could quantitatively map the changing descriptions of fabric and form over time, providing empirical support for the qualitative findings presented here. Ultimately, the story of the qipao in the Nanyang is a testament to the enduring power of textiles to hold history, shape identity, and narrate the rich and complex tapestry of human experience.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yaolong Zhu designed, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Yaolong Zhu conducted the study, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval of the version to be published. Yaolong Zhu participated fully in the work, take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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