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HOW ARE HONG KONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS INSPIRED BY CHINESE ART AND CULTURE IN DESIGNING NEW FASHION?

 Phoebe Ling, Joe Au*, Jin Lam, Chupo Ho, Natalie Lai

School of Fashion and Textiles, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Hunghom, Hong Kong

Abstract. Chinese traditional culture has been widely used and provides a rich resource for modern fashion design. Through the "Stitchable Chinese Art" fashion design competition 2024, organized by the Arts Education Section of the Education Bureau and the School of Fashion and Textiles of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, secondary school students deeply explored the meanings embedded in traditional Chinese culture and create new fashion styles with distinct Chinese characteristics. This study aimed to motivate students' appreciation of Chinese art and culture and investigate how Hong Kong secondary students were inspired when designing new fashionable clothing. Mixed research methods were adopted. The quantitative method was used to analyze all 844 submitted works to determine the most frequently used Chinese artistic and cultural themes. Qualitative methods, comprising an in-depth examination of the 30 shortlisted design works, were used to identify how inspiration was drawn from traditional Chinese cultural elements. The key findings suggest that their most favorable design elements are: the conventional dragon as the main design inspiration; cheongsam style as the core silhouette; red as the major color; embroidery patterns as the featured design detail and silk fabric as the foremost fabrication.

1.   Introduction

Trends and fashion designs often draw inspiration from traditional cultures. Traditional clothing reflects a community's history, identity and values and should be preserved amidst the homogenizing force of globalization. Young people can be encouraged to learn about traditional clothing to form a close emotional connection with the culture that they are native to. The use of Chinese traditional cultural elements with distinct symbolic colors and national feelings to design new fashion has become a typical trend and the unique allure of Chinese traditional culture has begun to shine brightly on the global stage of fashion design (Zou, 2019).

The "Stitchable Chinese Art" fashion design competition jointly organized by the Arts Education Section of the Education Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the School of Fashion and Textiles of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University provided an excellent opportunity to examine how Hong Kong

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secondary school students understand and incorporate Chinese art and cultural elements in designing new fashion outfits. The theme of this competition is "Modern China-Chic". To prepare for submission, secondary students participated in a series of briefing sessions and courses on fashion design and technology, as well as design workshops, to learn how to design fashionable clothing inspired by traditional Chinese art and cultural elements and catch a glimpse of the dynamic and ever-changing fashion industry.

Thus, this fusion of fashion and traditional Chinese culture provides a valuable means of connecting young Chinese people to their culture. The specific objectives are:

- to examine the design concepts of traditional Chinese clothing,
- to explore the value of Chinese traditional costume patterns,
- to investigate the influence of Chinese art and culture on fashion designers,
- to introduce the "Stitchable Chinese Art" Fashion Design Competition and
- to investigate how Chinese art and culture influenced Hong Kong secondary school students in designing new fashion clothing.

2.   Literature Review

Fashion designers use various external sources for inspiration throughout their design process, including celebrities, old photos, artefacts, fabric textures and garment shapes (Chun, 2021) and they are also frequently inspired by a lot from history when developing new fashion collections (Aspers, 2006). The 5,000-year-old Chinese civilization has fascinated many artists and designers (Lai, 2018) and Chinese cultural artefacts such as Ming vases, Chinese operas, Ink wash paintings and traditional costumes are well-known across the globe. Fashion designers draw inspiration from traditional clothing gel well with the recent emphasis on sustainability, particularly cultural sustainability and lead to greater innovation in fashion (Amirova *et al*., 2024). Traditional costume is a vehicle of cultural identity and can foster cultural cohesion (Amirova *et al*., 2024). This study examines the design concepts of traditional Chinese clothing and costume patterns and the incorporation of ancient Chinese costume patterns in modern fashion design.

2.1. Traditional Chinese Clothing Design Concepts

Traditional Chinese clothing emphasizes long, unified forms. Traditional Chinese clothing is primarily cut in flat, straight lines. The entire garment is usually connected by only one structural line, focusing on the fabric's natural drape. Clothing shapes are diverse, comprising H-shaped and T-shaped traditional wide robes with long sleeves, A-shaped vests and long coats, A-shaped cheongsams from the late Qing Dynasty and X-shaped and H-shaped cheongsams during the Republic of China period (Guo & Shang, 2017).

Traditional clothing also focuses on the design of the collar. The stand-up collar is the modern clothing feature with the strongest connection to traditional Chinese clothing. Traditional clothing also features round collar and cross-collar designs. In the design of plackets, traditional forms in use are rich and diverse, such as the double placket, large placket, one-line placket and pipa placket, all of which are imbued with a strong, subtle and elegant Chinese style (Pang, 2013).

2.2. The Value of Chinese Traditional Costume Patterns

Traditional art is timeless and reflects the richness of human culture. Its preservation is vital to understanding and appreciating history. Individuals pass down traditional art, including customs and stories to preserve and enrich their history. Chinese fashion is imbued with humanistic and artistic values. In China, patterns with auspicious meanings are aesthetic creations that reflect one's yearning for blessings and a better life. The patterns in traditional Chinese clothing also have specific symbolic meanings and functions (Guo & Shang, 2017). For example, jade symbolizes good fortune and good luck. Additionally, traditional Chinese clothing often uses embroidery, piping and other techniques in its design (Zhang, 2016).

The design of Chinese clothing inspired by traditional culture can be generally divided into primitive patterns, classical patterns, folk patterns and ethnic minority patterns. These patterns also draw inspiration from traditional Chinese artistic media, such as Chinese period dramas, architecture and classical gardens. Ethnic patterns refer to designs with characteristics inspired by designs used by ethnic minorities. These patterns are often unique to the ethnic minorities who created them, such as Kazakh carpet patterns (Zhang, 2016).

Traditional Chinese clothing patterns exhibit considerable variety. These decorative patterns often reflect local customs and traditions, are passed down from generation to generation and reflect the unique styles of their designers. These design patterns have created rich materials for modern clothing designers (Zhang, 2016). Traditional Chinese clothing patterns are richly varied and have much to teach modern designers.

2.3. Influence of Chinese Art and Culture on Fashion Designers

Traditional clothing is not merely a set of garments but also a reflection of the social makeup of its time. It enables individuals to express their identity, preserve traditions and strengthen cultural ties. Designs inspired by traditional Chinese culture seek to recreate the original details, patterns and colors of antiquity, bringing the past to life. Therefore, preserving traditional clothing is essential to safeguarding cultural heritage (Amirova *et al*., 2024).

Many designers have drawn inspiration from traditional Chinese culture. Chinese paintings embody the nation's cultural spirit and are frequently featured in clothing (Lai, 2018). The use of traditional Chinese patterns and symbolic meanings from art encourages the development of designs that apply these unique patterns and meanings. Examples of contemporary fashion collections inspired by Chinese art and culture are as follows:

- Richard Quinn Spring 2020 Ready-to-Wear collection was inspired by the silhouettes and garment construction found in traditional Chinese cheongsam.
- Dries Van Noten Spring 2019 Ready-to-Wear collection developed new graphic motifs based on Chinese ink wash paintings.
- Manish Arora Fall 2018 Ready-to-Wear collection redesigned the Chinese fish prints into garment patchwork and textile prints.
- Adeam Spring 2017 Ready-to-Wear collection advanced Chinese calligraphy into digital textile prints.
- Dolce & Gabbana Spring 2016 Menswear collection recreated the shapes of dragon, peacock and swallow textile prints into new textile prints.

Recently, designers have sought to develop clothing to satisfy Generation Z consumers in China wishing for wealth, happiness and good luck. These consumers often want clothing that expresses their patriotism and cultivates pride in Chinese traditional culture (Qi *et al.*, 2023).

3.   Stitchable Chinese Art Fashion Design Competition 2024

The Stitchable Chinese Art competition was organized by the Arts Education Section of the Education Bureau and the School of Fashion and Textiles of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. This design competition aimed to cultivate an interest in Chinese art and culture, develop students' aesthetic sense and enhance their creativity, collaboration and problem-solving skills. Students' positive youth development while designing fashionable clothing could be promoted.

The theme of the design competition was "Modern Chinese-Chic". Participating secondary school students were required to design and sketch a complete garment and provide a 200-word description explaining the design and its connection to Chinese art and culture. To prepare for submission, secondary students participated in a series of briefing sessions and courses on fashion design and technology, as well as design workshops, to learn how to design fashionable clothing inspired by traditional Chinese art and cultural elements and catch a glimpse of the dynamic and ever-changing fashion industry.

4.   Methodology

The fashion design process model adopted in the present study was the creative fashion design process proposed by Au and Au (2018), which involved 3 primary cognitive processes namely, "analysis", "synthesis" and "evaluation" (Figure 1).
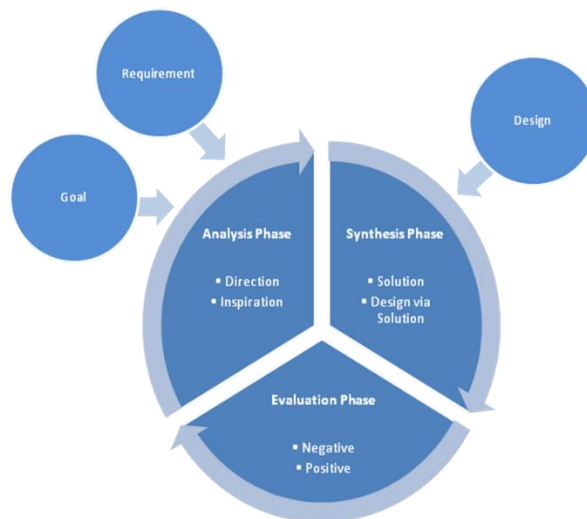
Figure 1. Creative design process model of conceptual fashion designer
Source: Au and Au (2018)

Following an investigation and clarification of the primary design challenges and problems involved in achieving the goal in the work environment, the "analysis" phase

yields the "requirement, goal, direction and inspiration". Afterward, the "synthesis" step receives input from this output. An ongoing cycle of "artwork and prototype" must occur before the "solution" can be transformed into a "design" and only then can the "evaluation" phase yield an "outcome". The "synthesis" phase processes the "solution and design" as output. As the input for the "evaluation" step, the "solution and design" results are shown. If the suggested solution violates a design criterion and causes new or additional problems, the evaluation will be negative. A positive evaluation result will result in the process' "outcome" if it is determined that the suggested solution satisfies the design criteria.

The research data were collected and analyzed using the mixed methods research proposed by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004). The quantitative method was used to analyze all 844 submitted works from secondary school students to determine their most frequent adaptation of Chinese artistic and cultural themes and uncover the design trends in these themes. Qualitative methods, comprising in-depth examination, close reading and interpretation of the descriptions of the 30 shortlisted design works, were used to identify how secondary school students drew inspiration from these traditional Chinese elements.

When analyzing the secondary school students' descriptions of their work, the literature on fashion design was consulted to strengthen our interpretations and conclusions. The use of various data sources and data collection methods ensured the data's validity and reliability and increased the findings' robustness (Athens, 2015).

4.1. Selection of Samples

All secondary school student entry forms were analyzed. However, the shortlisted works were thoroughly analyzed based on the use of Chinese cultural and artistic characteristics, design process and feasibility. The selection criteria of the competition included the assessments of originality, creativity, use of Chinese artistic and cultural elements and aesthetic appeal. A panel of judges consisting of experts in Chinese history and visual arts of the Education Bureau and senior fashion design academics of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

4.2. Data Analysis

Data sorting, coding and comparative analysis were used to analyze the data collected from the descriptions of design artworks stated in the competition entry forms. Data collected from the works submitted by all secondary school students including the descriptions of their works were transcribed into a data word processing program and analyzed.

The coding process was designed to capture the associations regarding how and to what extent the secondary school students were inspired by and learned about Chinese art and culture in the fashion design process. Each description from the entry form was coded into categories and coding examples are presented in Table 1.

Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated into this final stage of data analysis. A systematic integration of all data provided a clear view of the fashion design process of Hong Kong secondary school students inspired by Chinese art and culture.

Table 1. Coding examples

Evidence (Descriptions of design)	First-order Category	Second-order Category (Design Elements)
The dragon represents a sense of Chinese identity in this unique Tibetan costume.	Dragon	Main theme
This design is inspired by the blue-glazed porcelain produced during the Yuan dynasty.	Porcelain	
Peonies are frequently found in traditional Chinese paintings and it is associated with wealth, good fortune and prosperity.	Peony	
The lotus represents the sun, a symbol of creation and renewal.	Lotus	
I adopted the garment shape of cheongsams in my design because cheongsams symbolize traditional Chinese art, culture and history.	Cheongsam	Core silhouette
This design traces the evolution of red colors used in historical Chinese costumes.	Red	Main color
The embroidery patterns on the cheongsam strongly reflect the wearer's sophistication.	Embroidery	Featured design detail
The outfit is made of heavy silk satin with three-dimensional pleats to create contrasting proportions.	Silk	Key fabric

5. Results – How are Hong Kong Secondary School Students Inspired?

5.1. Requirement and Goal

The secondary students were required to design and sketch a whole garment outfit inspired by Chinese art and culture with a written description explaining the design ideas and their connections with Chinese art and culture. The theme of this fashion design competition was "Modern China-Chic". The submitted artwork must be original and have not been publicly released. Any rendering techniques were accepted, e.g., colored pencils, markers, pastels, digital tools, etc.

Their main goal was to develop new design styles delivering a message of China-chic. It could be achieved by modifying the garment constructions, signature design details and color combinations of the historical Chinese costumes without losing students' self-interests and design preferences in fashion. China has people of all ethnic groups who have designed unique traditional costumes. The clothing traditionally worn by the 55 ethnic groups in China also served as a source of inspiration to the students. Secondary school students focused not only on the largest ethnic group - the Han - but also researched other ethnic minorities remote from Hong Kong, such as Tibetans, to learn about the local culture and clothing. Each ethnic group or Chinese dynasty had unique fashion tastes that provided a rich source of inspiration for modern fashion designers (Zou, 2019).

5.2. Analysis Phase

Common themes run throughout the secondary school students' artworks, but the written descriptions of their artworks reveal their unique artistic sensibilities. During the competition, the students first researched those aspects of Chinese art and culture

about which they most wanted to adopt. Once they discovered inspiration, they used their creativity to produce original artwork. Their topic selections reveal their deepened understanding of Chinese cultural symbols, from flowers, handicrafts and natural scenery to legends, food culture, animals and festivals.

Although traditional Chinese elements are extremely diverse, secondary students most frequently adopted the following major design elements in their artwork designs.

5.2.1. Main theme

Throughout China's long history, various plants, animals and flowers have appeared in artworks as motifs for philosophical ideas. Each motif has a different symbolic meaning such as representative wishes for wealth, longevity and good luck (Qi *et al.*, 2023). The desire for wealth is a strong, recurrent theme in Chinese culture and many cultural practices are tied to themes of prosperity and abundance (Ma, 2017).

12.4% of students used a dragon as their main theme. Student A stated, "I chose a dragon, which has appeared in Chinese myths and stories for thousands of years. Traditionally, the dragon symbolizes peace and prosperity" and student B claimed, "The dragon is a traditional miraculous animal in Chinese mythology. This design is intended to suggest that modern women can break through their limitations and become unique and extraordinary people" (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Chinese dragon as the main theme of the design

5.8% of students chose blue and white porcelain as their main theme. Student C said, "In the Ming Dynasty, blue and white pots replaced costly pots made of gold or silver, providing a sense of stability, beauty and flexibility. Such blue and white patterns symbolize feminine elegance in Chinese culture".

5.2% of students selected the peony as the main theme for their artwork. Student D said, "Peonies appear frequently in northeastern Chinese paintings. They are native to China and representative flowers of the country. It is called the King of Flowers and symbolizes wealth, honor and fame". Peony patterns have long been widely used in traditional Chinese paintings, architecture and clothing (Qiao & Lee, 2010).

2.4% of students selected the lotus as their main theme. The traditional lotus pattern in China is found in many murals and buildings as decorations and is widely used as embroidery on clothing fabrics. The lotus is consistently used in temple decorations and Buddhist paintings, influenced by Buddhist culture in China (Qi *et al.*, 2023). Student E said, "The lotus pattern signifies beauty and holiness in Buddhism and is used for decoration. Based on a Tang Dynasty model, this lotus pattern represents the best of traditional Chinese culture". The lotus seed symbolizes a noble gentleman and fertility (Chen *et al.*, 2020).

5.2.2. Core silhouette

19% of students referred to the cheongsam as the core silhouette of their designs. The cheongsam is associated with women's liberation in Chinese history, factors which may explain its popularity among the students. Student F explained, "Cheongsams symbolize traditional Chinese art, culture and history. In the early years of China, the cheongsam became a popular symbol of women seeking liberation, independence and women's rights. The cheongsam is a symbol of the country's ideological modernization'. Student G echoed, "The cheongsam is a garment with a long history in China and is emblematic of Chinese women. Many Chinese women wear cheongsams whenever a momentous occasion calls for emphasizing Chinese identity. Thus, wearing a cheongsam signifies embracing and being embraced by Chinese culture" (Figure 3). The horse-faced skirt was also popular and 3% of students used horse-faced skirt as the core silhouette of their design. The other silhouette references were Tang suits, Ming and Qing Dynasty imperial robes and Pipa sleeves.

Figure 3. Cheongsam as the core silhouette

5.2.3. Main color

Color is a cultural phenomenon created by a complex combination of human, social, economic, technological and environmental factors. Colors resist attempts at objectification and standardization and are a sensitive factor that espouses relative values in the contexts of time and space. The colors favored by civilization are a cultural product created by the interaction of various elements, such as climate, thoughts and customs, markets and industries, materials and technology and institutions and laws (Choi *et al.*, 2007). The colors of clothing convey multiple culturally conditioned meanings. It is the best reference standard for color design (Zou, 2019). For example, black, a symbol of authority and nobility, became highly valued in the clothing of the Qin Dynasty. Pure red symbolizes superior status and immortality (Wei, 2022).

Many students emphasized the use of traditional Chinese colors in their designs. Student H said, "The blue and gold design emphasizes traditional Chinese colors. The color blue symbolizes freshness and purity and gold represents nobility and prosperity". 6.3% of students chose red as the main color, explaining that they believed it symbolized China's history and power. Student I added, "Maroon red and champagne orange are the primary colors in this design, evoking the warm sky at sunrise. Gold emphasizes the dragon and clouds, which sparkle brilliantly" (Figure 4). In addition to red, students also used other colors representing the Chinese style, such as gold and blue.

Figure 4. Red as the main color

5.2.4. Featured design detail

9.2% of students preferred to add traditional Chinese embroidery as the featured design detail. Apart from traditional Chinese embroidery, hand painting and garment panels inlaying are the main techniques for decorating traditional Chinese clothing. Traditional Chinese handcrafts are complex and mature and traditional Chinese embroidery is unparalleled in its quality and intricacy (Zou, 2019). Student J said, "My design employs traditional Chinese embroidery and knots with complex craftsmanship to showcase the superb skills of ancient Chinese masters" (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Embroidery patterns as the key design detail

5.2.5. *Key fabric*

9.1% of students used silk fabric as the key fabric. Student K stated, "The lustrous texture of silk satin refers to the color of goldfish and the blue-yellow silk organza suggests the elegant fins on a goldfish's back. Tight-fitting silk material is used and the lower portion of the design is asymmetrical to imitate a flying fishtail" (Figure 6). In addition to the silk fabric, the students also suggested fabrics used in traditional costumes of different ethnic minorities, finding inspiration in the traditional designs and styles of this clothing. Student L added, "I was also inspired by the Tibetan robe. The Tibetan clothing is primarily made from wool, dyed and woven to form a robe of various bright colors and patterns". Textures, such as smooth and rough, can enhance the overall beauty of the designs, creating contrast and visual appeal (Zou, 2019).
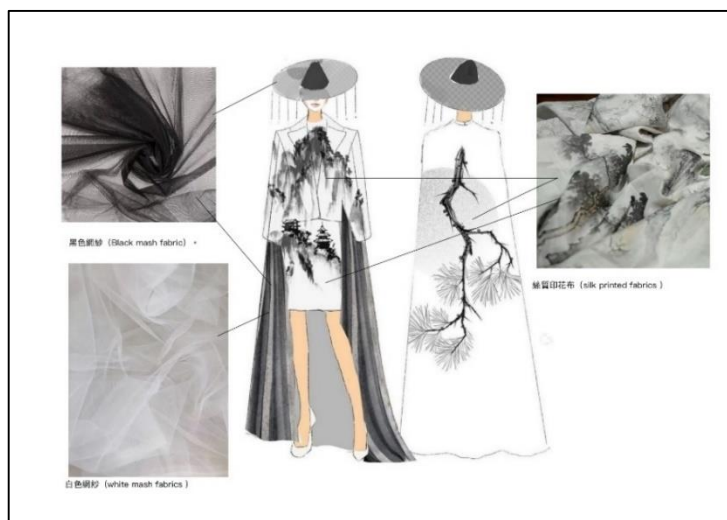
Figure 6. Silk as the main fabric

5.3. Synthesis Phrase

Sketching was the first step in transforming a design concept into a tangible creation. The secondary school students began drawing from scratch. They first learned to visualize the body proportions and then to draw their works according to the body shape of their models. The students designed their preferred facial expressions to match their clothing styles.

The secondary students brainstormed ideas to explore their design ideas by i) elaborating the main theme through a proper mind-mapping process with supporting visual images, ii) adopting a core garment silhouette to experiment with different garment proportions and develop new garment shapes, iii) proposing various color combinations for achieving maximum visual impacts, iv) developing new embroidery patterns to reflect the traditional Chinese art and culture and v) applying the most suitable fabric to enhance the unique design style of the garment. These initial drawings served as blueprints for the actual garment designs.

5.4. Evaluation Phrase

Secondary school students regarded evaluation as an ongoing judgment process of good design quality when developing new fashion garments. They evaluated their new designs mainly referring to the following factors: i) the level of satisfaction from the student's point of view, ii) Whether the overall design style could present the main theme proposed in the beginning, iii) the newness of the design in connection with the use of Chinese art and cultural elements, iv) the proper arrangement of design elements guiding by the fashion design principles in terms of the silhouette, the correct usage of color and fabric and the development of featured design detail, v) the possible technical problems when prototyping the new design into a real garment of 3-dimensional form.

Negative evaluation results occurred more frequently than design-process-derived solutions. It implied that evaluation involved more than just deciding whether a particular solution was desirable. Evaluation, on the other hand, was tied to meeting the needs and goals of the student. The secondary kids' design process exhibited a circular movement. Statements regarding the advantages or disadvantages of the student's solutions to the objectives and goals arose from the evaluation, both positively and negatively. Secondary pupils can only determine the merits of a "solution" and why it is beneficial through evaluation.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study adopts the mixed research process model proposed by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) and makes references to the creative fashion design process proposed by Au and Au (2018), which involves 3 primary cognitive processes namely, "analysis", "synthesis" and "evaluation". The "analysis" phase produces the "requirement, goal, direction and inspiration" as the output of investigating and clarifying the key design issues and problems involved in attaining the goal in the design task. This output then provides input for the "synthesis" phase. The "synthesis" phase processes the "solution and design" as output, but there is a cyclic process before the "solution" generates into "design" and the "evaluation" phase can produce an 'Outcome'.

The 'solution and design' output is depicted as the input to the "evaluation" phase. An evaluation is negative if the proposed solution conflicts or is inconsistent with a design requirement creating sub-problems or new problems. If the proposed solution is confirmed as consistent with a design requirement, the result of the evaluation is considered positive and will lead to the "outcome" of the process. However, a negative outcome indicates that further work on the proposed solution is required.

The literature lacks a systematic process describing the design process of secondary school students creating new fashions inspired by Chinese art and culture. This study presents the insights of design process including all aspects involved in design creation, such as the design conception, the integration of ideas and the visualization of the final design. Young designers are strongly suggested to explore every stage of the design process and address any issues that arise. This study's proposed processes for design and application will undoubtedly make relevant young designers aware of their existence.

Fashion design rooted in traditional Chinese components will be crucial in the information age for addressing consumer demand for fashion, enhancing added value, building a national brand and reaching new markets both domestically and internationally. It is also one of the most effective ways to advance Chinese traditional culture and the Chinese clothing industry. We anticipate that Chinese fashion designers will fortify their own traditional cultures, successfully integrate traditional Chinese features with fashion design through a great understanding of fashion and open new avenues for Chinese clothes fashion design.

Chinese traditional costumes play a crucial role in contemporary clothing design because they capture the essence of five millennia of Chinese history and folklore, offering a wealth of resources and richness to the current fashion design industry. To develop stylish clothing designs with Chinese features, designers must constantly delve deeper into the meanings of Chinese traditional culture and absorb the traditional Chinese art production methodology along with modern garment design methods and techniques.

The acceptance of both the old and the new is the unchanging rule of the coordinated development of everything in the world, as demonstrated by the universal link and the everlasting evolution of the material world. Designers will be the organic fusion of current society with traditional culture, encouraging win-win cooperation and mutual benefit between the two, meeting the inescapable trend of the times. As a result, researching the current state of Chinese traditional cultural elements' application in modern fashion design not only helps to preserve Chinese traditional culture for future generations but also effectively encourages their appearance on the global fashion design scene and fully helps the innovative development of fashion design.

It is important to include traditional Chinese cultural components in contemporary clothing design. It has significant importance for both the advancement of contemporary clothing design and the passing down of traditional Chinese culture. Fashion designers are strongly encouraged to continually explore the sources of Chinese art and traditional culture and employ traditional craft techniques when developing new fashion designs with Chinese characteristics (Zhang, 2016). Traditional culture has been transmitted throughout history. Using Chinese traditional art and cultural elements to create design innovations presents the fashion moments of one

nation after another and realizes the innovative development of fashion design to the maximum extent.

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