

## Dressing the Older Woman in Post-Mao China

Perspectives from Official Feminist Mass Media and Ordinary Chinese Women

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### Abstract

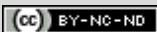
This article examines Chinese discourses on dressing the aging female body as a window into the tensions involved in the historical transformation of habitus in early post-Mao China. Drawing on Chinese media articles and ethnographic interviews conducted with Chinese women in their 40s-60s, the analysis compares depictions of new official ideals for older women's dress that appeared in Chinese government-sponsored feminist mass media with ordinary older Chinese women's personal sensibilities about dress. Assessing the applicability of dominant western feminist theories of gender, dress, and age, this article provides a historicized culture-specific application of practice theory, examining older women's struggles with competing moral logics associated with past and present, and with official media versus personal experience. Overall, it documents experiences of ambivalence and compromise accompanying lifecycle adjustment in embodiment in the context of rapid social change.

*Keywords:* China or Chinese, women, aging, dress, feminism.

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# Dressing the Older Woman in Post-Mao China

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Jeanne L. Shea

In my experience, American students often assume that since traditional Chinese culture emphasizes respect for the elderly, that contemporary China has few to no problems with ageism. Those interested in women's studies often assume that little attention must be paid to the appearance of older women in China, unlike in youth-worshipping, body-obsessed western culture. Focusing on data from China on dressing the aging female body, this article shows how these assumptions are misleading -- even for the early market-reform era.

Despite traditional ideals, China has experienced serious ageism for at least half a century. Rather than stemming solely from westernization or capitalism, ageism in China can be traced back five decades to a time when western capitalist culture was banned. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, substantial attention began to be devoted to issues of the external appearance of women age 40 and older. Stirred by the market reforms and opening up to the world launched by Deng Xiaoping, communist government-sponsored Chinese "feminist" mass media signalled then that middle-aged and elderly women should start paying more attention to their appearance, including manner of dress, makeup, and hair dye. Official Chinese feminist mass media messages trickled into the awareness of ordinary Chinese women through officially-backed magazines and newspapers and social interaction. Initially, it may seem odd that government-sponsored media, and a feminist media at that, would devote attention to this issue in such early days of the reform era. After briefly introducing early reform-era Chinese feminist mass media, this article takes an interpretive approach to explain how this attention to mature fashion made sense within the official media context, and to describe how some ordinary Chinese women responded.

China of the 1980s-1990s provides a window to the broader issue of gender, age, and dress in the context of rapid social change. During this period, Maoist and cosmopolitan values, as well as competing visions of feminism and women's rights, stood in vivid contrast (Brownell et al. 2002), as people struggled to reconcile widely divergent ideals and practices (Gilmartin et al. 1994). Here, I bring together media-studies and lived-experience approaches to address several research questions: What did official Chinese feminist mass media of the early reform era have to say about dressing the aging female body, and why? What did ordinary Chinese women think about issues of women's dress in middle and old age? How did these two perspectives interrelate?

I argue ordinary Chinese women's everyday deliberations on dress after the age of forty in some ways resembles, and in other ways diverges from state-supported Chinese feminist mass media discourse. Whereas official Chinese feminist mass media discourse emphasized the new age-positive, gender-differentiating, status-enhancing opportunities for bodily adornment opening up to Chinese women in their middle and later years, local women tended to express

personal ambivalence toward these opportunities. Overall, older Chinese women's talk of dress revealed unresolved tensions between the competing moral logics of lingering high-socialist minimalism and emerging market-reform consumerism and a generational need to forge creative compromise between past and present ideals for dress.

## Significance

I offer in this article a historically-situated analysis of Chinese views on women's dress in middle and old age, a topic to which little scholarly attention has been paid thus far. My main theoretical approaches include interpretivism and practice theory, focusing on emic meanings and on the relationship between prescriptive structures and personal experience. Channeling interpretivism (Geertz 1977), I provide thick description of instantiations of Chinese cultural views on dressing older women's bodies, from both government-sponsored feminist mass media and ordinary women. Applying practice theory and notions of embodiment (Bourdieu 1977), I examine the interactions, gaps, and tensions between official ideals and individual practice. Like Liu (2000), my goal is to provide a historically-situated culture-specific application of practice theory. In doing so, I focus on the early post-Mao period, a period ripe for examining how older Chinese women navigate a radical shift in moral valuations and normative expectations associated with bodily dress and habitus. After sketching local propagandistic pressures for fashion makeovers for mature women during that period, I describe older women's struggles with competing moral logics associated with past and present and their experiences of ambivalence and compromise in facing lifecycle adjustment in embodied practices during this time of immense political and economic change.

Given the dominance of mainstream western feminist theory in scholarly discussions of gender, the body, and dress, I interlace my analysis with an examination of the limitations of such frameworks for explicating my China data. In comparison with other identity dimensions like gender, sexuality, race, and class, western feminism has paid sparse attention to age as a category of analysis, setting aside notable exceptions (e.g., de Beauvoir 1970, Greer 1991, Friedan 1993). Still, recognizing age as a key intersectional dimension of experience, a minority of western feminist scholars and activists of the "second" and "third" waves have provided important perspectives on gender, dress, and the aging body. Here I engage two mainstream approaches to gender, age, and dress that have been dominant touchstones in western feminist analysis and activism. While they do not encompass all western feminist theorizing, they are widely referenced vantage points.

The leading relevant second-wave western feminist approach (hereafter 2WWF) has focused on the ageist, sexist character of modern images which promote idealization of youthful bodies and feminine fashion directed toward the male gaze, all of which can perpetuate women's second-class status and inflict double jeopardy on those both female and old (Twigg 2013: 17, 41). Feminist media studies from the 1970s-1990s showed how popular western media images objectified and subordinated young women, while rendering older women nearly invisible (41-43). Activist extensions of this approach have urged women to educate themselves about, critique, and resist this patriarchal capitalist system by rising above restrictive gender norms to "grow old gracefully" (Greer 1991: 4). Such activists have called women to focus on their own inner well-being, by following nature and refusing "inauthentic" artifice (Twigg 2013: 13) in order to protect themselves from the self-defeating illusion of age-defying consumption, thus

changing social norms and raising women's status long term (Ballard et al. 2005: 173, Hurd-Clarke and Griffin 2008: 656). In countering fashion messages that devalue older women's bodies and threaten self-esteem, such idealists have advocated resistance to popular fashion's fixation on appearance. Instead of the "mask-of-aging" dismay at disjunction between inner self and outer appearance (Featherstone et al. 1991), this stance has encouraged release from "normative femininity," allowing development of other aspects of self (Twigg 2013: 48).

The dominant related third-wave western feminist approach (hereafter 3WWF) has focused on issues of agency and utility, arguing that women should be able to choose whatever tools are available, including mainstream "beauty work," to promote their individual, albeit often short-term, self-interests in the world as it exists (Ballard et al. 2005: 173, Hurd-Clarke and Griffin 2008: 654, Twigg 2013: 24). They have reacted to 2WWF by demonstrating that individual women can, without being "dopes" (Hurd-Clarke and Griffin 2008: 656-7; Twigg 2013: 13) or damaging self-esteem, avail themselves of makeup, fashion, and surgery to project an image that will benefit them in competition for status. They have argued that feminists should not interpret this as false consciousness or "selling out," but, rather, as a "balancing act," iterating between "a critique of the technologies, practices, and discourses that define women's bodies as deficient and in need of change, and an understanding of why women might view various forms of beauty work as the only tools they have to compete in the many social realms that extol youthfulness" (Hurd-Clarke and Griffin 2008: 656-7). A realist position, 3WWF focuses on individual strategies in the world as it exists in the present, at a time when more technologies are available than ever for dressing up and altering the body. Some note, however, the limits of strategizing within consumer culture given the continuance of strong pressures for "conformity and order" (Twigg 2013: 24), as well as the inevitability of bodily aging (151).

Kathleen Woodward's (1988, 1991) notion of "masquerade" spans these instantiations of feminist theory. Applied to American culture, "masquerade" refers to bodily practices involving dressing up, adorning, and altering the aging body in order to disguise it as young in response to the social threat to selfhood posed by a culture that devalues age (1988: 121). For older women, this involves displaying youthful femininity to protect the self in society's patriarchal "economy of desire." Woodward has argued that such masquerade can lead down a path of either pitiful "pathos" (126) or admirable "resistance" (128). Which path depends largely on whether one maintains a "critical distance" from the illusion one is creating (127), strategically manipulating the image while bracketing it as artifice. Performatively, the difference involves moderation, avoiding too brightly-colored clothing or makeup so as to avoid making a public "spectacle" of oneself by exposing the distance between one's aging body and a youthful ideal (122).

Similar concerns for moderation were observed in Twigg's (2013) cultural gerontological research in the United Kingdom. Twigg demonstrated that while older women in Britain today dress more colorfully than in the past (142, 148), many still fear being judged as "mutton dressed as lamb" (16) and feel pressure to "discipline" themselves and "tone down" (18) their colors (136, 137) to avoid being "brash" or "dowdy" (138). Extending Woodward's logic, Twigg argued that "the sense that overtly feminine, pretty dress 'no longer works' and is inappropriate for women as they age" stems from how "it exposes the contrasts between the normative expectations written into the garment and the body that displays it... [Thus,] age is experienced as a form of exile and exclusion from the feminine" (43). Twigg qualified these remarks, saying that

anti-aging “beauty practices ...are part of the process of producing an acceptable form of woman in later years – still feminine ...yet in a toned-down way” (18).

Oyìwùmí (2014) and others have argued that mainstream western feminism has tended to assume a fairly universal vision of womanhood. Examination of official Chinese feminist media and interviews with ordinary older Chinese women from the first decades of the market reform era belies cultural, historical, and generational assumptions underlying the frameworks above. Likewise, in contrast to Twigg’s (2007, 2013) related notion of society “disciplining the body” of older women, I show how older Chinese women were portrayed in official Chinese feminist media of the time as, instead, un-disciplining a body once constrained by Maoism and poverty. I also demonstrate how the women I interviewed tended to prefer for themselves a style of un-disciplining that differed from official media prescriptions.

## Materials and Methods

### Official Feminist Mass Media and Ethnographic Fieldwork Data

This analysis is based on two sources of primary data: officially-backed Chinese feminist mass media articles published in the Chinese language in the 1980s-1990s and fieldwork data I collected through participant observation and interviews with aging women in China in the 1990s. In addition, for context, I use scholarly literature on the Maoist and post-Mao period with regard to gender and social life.

Government-sponsored Chinese feminist mass media pieces of the early reform era were primarily produced by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), the official organization responsible for women’s issues in China since the communist revolution in 1949. While some reform-era scholars have contested its legitimacy in representing grassroots women, as opposed to serving governmental dictates (Gilmartin et al. 1994), the ACWF and its messages were considered “feminist” by many Chinese scholars, activists, and ordinary citizens in the early reform era (Ding 1995, Guan 1995, Zheng 1998), especially those born in the 1950s and earlier. Whereas during the Maoist era “feminism” had western bourgeois connotations, and “women’s liberation” from “feudal oppression” was the preferred governmental idiom, with the market reforms and opening to the west these two notions were increasingly merged. In the 1980s-90s the ACWF, along with women’s scholarly and non-governmental organizations, began to align with global feminism, selectively borrowing from the west and articulating local Chinese forms of feminism, both present and past (Wesoky 2013). In this way, a government-sponsored feminist mass media emerged with China’s market reforms. This brand of feminism combined Mao-era concerns with women’s economic opportunities outside the home with a new reform-era fixation on femininity and “women’s special characteristics,” as will be discussed later.

The media pieces upon which I focus are drawn from the widely-distributed and broadly-read political bellwether magazine for women’s issues, *China Woman*, the ACWF’s main publication. *China Woman* was the most influential mass-distributed women’s periodical in China from the 1950s-1990s. After skimming through all issues of *China Woman* from 1980-1997, I selected several articles that epitomize early reform era trends in the

government-sponsored feminist stance toward older women's dress. The authors were older Chinese woman leaders in the ACWF.

The fieldwork data are drawn from 17 months of ethnographic research that I conducted in Beijing Municipality from 1992-1996 on women's views and experiences of aging (Shea 2006). I first focused on conversing informally with Chinese women in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. After a year of participant observation, with the help of a local research team, in 1994 I conducted structured questionnaire-based interviews with 399 Chinese women ages 40-65, divided equally between a neighborhood in Beijing's urban core and a rural village in its periphery. From these structured interviews, I analyzed responses to an item about women's appearance in later life.

In 1994 and 1996 I then conducted a series of semi-structured audio-recorded interviews in women's homes with a subsample of twelve of those women, half urban, half rural, ages 40-67. Here I examine interview material from three of those women to illustrate the ways in which women's views and experiences of dressing the aging body converged with and diverged from both western feminist theory and ACWF representations. While they cannot represent all older Chinese women, the interview material presented here reflects widespread trends that I noticed in my extended fieldwork as documented in my fieldnotes.

Following Twigg (2013), who argues that concerns about aging and appearance emerge by the thirties in many settings (36-37), in writing "older women," I am referring to women age forty and older (129). While some may protest that women are not older until they are old and thus age 65, it is conventional in the aging body literature to refer to those aged 40 and older as "older women." Furthermore, the notion that being "old" begins at age 65 was rare in China up through the 1990s. Then, women there placed old age at age 50, 55, or 60, all female retirement ages for various occupations. Also, age 60 is the traditional Chinese entrance into old age, as five cycles of twelve years. While some women knew that many westerners viewed age 65 as the entry point, it did not resonate. The distinction between middle and old age in China is far less marked than in western countries. In published literature and everyday conversations, middle-aged and elderly women are frequently lumped into the category *zhonglaonian* which means middle and old age merged together, or the fuzzy transition between them. Sometimes I use the shorthand of "aging women." By "later life," I mean age forty and older.

## Older Women's Liberation through Fashion

### Official Feminist Mass Media

In the mid-1980s, the government-sponsored China Woman magazine began to publish articles pertaining to middle-aged and elderly women's appearance, makeup, fashion, hair, and skincare. From the 1950s-1990s, China Woman set the tone for what was politically correct to say, do, or debate concerning women's issues, spanning Maoist and post-Mao eras. While not read by all women, China Woman, up through the 1990s, served as a prescriptive touchstone for neighborhood cadres and seeped into public consciousness through newspaper and newsletter articles, neighborhood bulletins, community activities, and local gossip. While articles on older women's grooming in the 1980s-1990s were a quotidian continuation of a long-standing trend in



western settings, in China they were a landmark change from the last decade of the Maoist era, at which time such concerns were bourgeois infractions for women of any age.



Fig.1-2: Cultural Revolution-style clothing from the early 1970s. Photo: unknown

During the Maoist era (1949-1976), Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong ruled, and the status hierarchy was flipped on its head from pre-revolutionary times. People with land, money, white-collar professions, conspicuous consumption, cosmopolitan habits, foreign ties, or patriarchal gender roles were socially demoted (Gao 1987). Values shifted to favor the broad masses of peasants and simple consumption habits, and efforts were made to reduce gender inequalities by showing that “women can do anything men can do” (Gilmartin 1994). While rapid modernization in farm, factory, and scientific work meant that some older people had difficulty keeping up, during the 1950s the widespread expectation remained that elders should be respected. Early on, women whose families had means still wore elaborate brocade *qipao* dresses at special occasions like weddings, but in everyday life, a new proletarian aesthetic and continuing poverty meant that most people wore simple homespun clothes and hand-made shoes. For females, this could include clothing with flowery patterns and shoes with embroidery, if time and budget allowed. While some older women cut their hair short, one was allowed to keep long hair, with girls plaiting it into two braids and women putting it back in a braid or bun. Over time, family life became increasingly subordinated to the communist work unit, with the sway of families reaching low ebb in the Great Leap communes (1958-1961) and Cultural Revolution.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), political conformism deepened, and men and women of all ages were expected to wear Mao suits in almost every social occasion (Honig 2002). Mao suits were simply-cut button-down cotton shirt-jackets with fold-down collars and baggy cotton pants in military colors of dull blue or green (Figs 1, 2). Often a Mao cap topped the outfit (see photo below left). The contours of the design originated with the “father of modern China,” Sun Yatsen, in the early 1900s, and thereafter were rendered more peasant-like by Mao during his guerrilla years before the 1949 revolution (Xin 2009). In the Cultural Revolution, beyond Mao suits, women had to cut their hair into short straight bobs, as more

“feminine” hairstyles like braids, ponytails, and perms were disallowed. “Feminine” clothing such as dresses, skirts, patterned cloth, and bright colors also became taboo. Dressing men and women and people of all occupations alike was designed to underscore the ideal of gender equality and socioeconomic egalitarianism under socialism.

Ageism in China is often traced back to the late Mao period. During the Cultural Revolution, a campaign to “smash the four olds” was unleashed by Mao Zedong (Gao 1987). Although it explicitly targeted old customs, culture, habits, and ideas, in practice middle-aged and elderly people themselves were potentially-suspect reservoirs of outdated ways from lingering traditional Chinese or bourgeois foreign influences. Thus, many mature adults, especially in positions of local leadership, were subjected to public criticism, beating, and other indignities by teenage activist “Red Guards.” During my years in China in the 1980s-1990s, it was common to hear acts of disrespect toward the aged attributed to the Cultural Revolution.

While some, especially younger women were early adopters of more colorful figure-accentuating feminine clothing, variations on Cultural-Revolution-style dress lasted into the late 1980s for many people and into the 1990s for some. This was especially true of members of the older generations, partly out of political caution, partly out of habit, and partly out of poverty, priorities, and little availability of affordable alternative clothing options. Men of lower socioeconomic status (SES) were the longest holdouts for wearing military style clothing and Mao suits. For women of lower SES, modification came earlier than for men. However, at first the modification for older women was modest and mannish. For example, it often involved a simple button-down shirt in a subdued light color with dark roomy trousers (Fig. 3). As late as my fieldwork in 2014, a minority of elderly folks still dressed in this manner at times.

After Mao’s death in 1976, the ensuing era of market reforms and “opening up to the world” invoked questions about and social change in women’s dress. By the 1980s, Chinese feminists in scholarly and governmental circles began to argue that Maoist gender egalitarianism had in fact continued to disadvantage women through gender blindness that forced them to look and act like men. Mao’s egalitarian “androgyny” was actually an androcentric denial of “women’s special characteristics” (Gilmartin et al. 1994: 10; Honig 2002: 257). China Woman’s attention to fashion in the 1980s-1990s was both intended and received as a signal that feminine and upscale dress was once again allowed. The message: “three years new, three years old, three years of patches” was no longer admired. Differentiation by gender and class and borrowing from the west was once again acceptable. Women of China needed to update their wardrobe for the good of both themselves and society. Having spent a large part of their lives in worlds in which fancy dress and makeup were economically impractical or politically discouraged, older women were slow to respond.





Fig 3: Elderly Beijing Woman in early reform-era modified dress, mid-1990s, Photo: Jeanne Shea

Of numerous period articles in *China Woman* on older women's appearance, I discuss three which are representative of the kinds of messages common in ACWF articles at the time. These pieces illustrate how older women were now urged to cultivate an appearance that was feminine, cosmopolitan, attractive, and youthful, often in ways unanticipated by western feminist theory.

### Making the Case for Understated Elegance

Xue Xiao's 1987 article, "Vitality Can Always Accompany You: Discussing Appearance, Makeup, and Dress with Middle-Aged and Elderly Women" was an early ACWF article on issues of dress in mature women in reform-era China. In contrast to 2WWF views of "beauty work" as artificial, Xue argued that the "natural" tendency to beautify oneself was artificially suppressed in the generations of Chinese women in their fourth decade and beyond at that time, not only in later life, but also in youth. It laid the blame not only on "historical reasons," a euphemism for Maoism, but also on "traditional customs" from before the Communist Revolution (1987, 42).

Xue (1987) entreated older Chinese women to strive for "understated elegance" to keep up with modern times and project a "dignified" image on national and international stages (43). Thus, in contrast to 2WWF and 3WWF, modernity and ethnic face were key. Unlike Woodward (1988) and Twigg (2013), Xue (1987) attested that "women from foreign developed countries" often thicken their application of makeup with age. While urging older Chinese women to also use makeup, Xue allowed that they can go lighter in order to suit "Chinese ethnic psychology"

(43). Xue also drew on nature and Chinese tradition for legitimation. In urging Chinese women to dye their hair, she attested to its naturalness with the saying “with hair like a crane and a face like a child’s” (42), invoking cranes’ lifelong black feathers. Xue then advised that “as in nature red flowers go with green leaves,” a groomed head and face must be matched with appropriate clothing like modern western suit jacket sets, western dresses, or traditional Chinese qipao. Nowhere were Mao suits recommended. Xue further advised that the new body type of “having put on weight after getting rich” (43) was best suited to small flowers or patterns, or thin lines or stripes, all disallowed in late Mao times. Xue concluded by giving women the go-ahead to choose any form of dress appropriate for their individual circumstances, job, and hobbies.

This portrayal differs in many ways from both 2WWF and 3WWF approaches. Xue gave no precaution about an ageist, sexist patriarchal focus on appearance and the dangers of an outer focus for inner wellbeing. There was also no cynical appeal to playing the game of appearances despite ageist implications. Instead, Xue presented “beauty work” as a new life opportunity, foreign to these Chinese cohorts, despite its being “natural.” Xue stressed that attention to appearance was now a positive moral act, and that cultivation of a new urbane habitus, taking the best of the traditional, modern, Chinese, and foreign, gave face to China as it re-emerged onto the world stage. Unlike in traditional familial conformism and Maoist collectivist asceticism, artful embellishment was now a reflection of one’s skill at self-care and tasteful presentation, thus simultaneously enacting self-expression and reflecting well on the nation.

### Moving Up To Elder Fashion Shows

Ying Xiao’s 1990 article, “Today’s Scene is Just Right” portrayed fashion as key for later-life enjoyment and elevated the level of taste to which elders could aspire. The focus was a fashion show in Beijing in 1990. A first in China, the “Capitol City Middle-Aged and Elderly Fashion Model Competition” was billed a “major advance” on the world stage in featuring mature fashion models, demonstrating the “level of cultural attainment” of the Chinese nation and people, and enacting a giant leap in the “liberation” of China’s older population from past constraints (1990, 1). The show emerged from volunteer performance groups headed by current or retired female neighborhood administrators in their fifties and sixties looking to enrich older people’s lives. The forty contestants, gleaned from 360 applicants, ranged from 40-72 years of age, with a majority being women, but with a few husbands drawn in. The main reasons for participating were to make their lives more interesting and to come into step with modern times.

Like Xue’s article, Xiao’s piece diverged from western feminist approaches in being overwhelmingly positive about present affairs. It signaled official approval of this new fashion “elderscape” (Katz 2005) (Figs 4-7) by detailing participants’ respectable professions, including teacher, professor, military veteran, party leader, and neighborhood bureaucrat. Xiao conveyed how this scene fulfilled participants’ longing for recognition as “talented” and “vital.” Reflecting mature, ageless, youthful, and high-status descriptors, praise included: “mature,” “refined,” “cultured,” “well-off,” “elegant,” “attractive,” “inner depth,” “confident,” “boundless energy,” “enthusiastic for improvement,” “optimistic,” “broad-minded,” “outgoing,” “in good taste,” and “heart of a child” (1990, 1-2). Even neighborhood functionaries like Mrs. Du, a

58-year old retiree “whose prime years were spent in a Mao suit,” could now achieve fashion acclaim.



Figs.4-7: 1990's Chinese Magazine Photos of Middle Aged and Elderly Fashion. Traditional Chinese qipao (far left) Photo: Paiji Li, 1991; “Western-style” upscale dress (middle) Photo: Ying Xiao, 1990; Western suit sets and bold color (right) Photo: Peiji Li, 1991.

Through the musings of a communist cadre who won “most stylish couple,” Xiao portrayed older people as models for adapting to social change and “aging gracefully” through high artistry and historical progress, rather than acquiescing to biological destiny, thus glocalizing graceful aging (cf. 2WWF).

“For a long time our generation saw hard labor and plain living as glorious, and we were very inattentive to dressing up, makeup, or clothing. ... In fact, though, there are a variety of different manifestations of socialism, and it is possible to advance to new forms. Times are different now, and we need to research aesthetics. Fashion is a kind of cultural phenomenon, and fashion performances are an external manifestation of the spirit and cultural attainment of a nation and an ethnic group.” (1990, 2)

Once a political crime, cosmopolitan fashion was now a cultural “skill of costume and makeup” that came with a “new kind of socialism,” not capitalist excess (1990, 2). Mature fashion had become a sign of social progress, elder liberation, and, keeping with modernity, bringing “glory” to age-mates and to the nation (1990, 1). According to Xiao, fashion was now equally by and for men and women, young and the old, and unlike 2WWF, the gaze was that of oneself and admiring contemporaries. Fulfilment outside work or family through material and leisure pursuits and self-care in the company of peers was now an approved social good.

Xiao ended with a contestant’s poem: “We have leisurely refinement and are contented with ourselves. White-haired venerable elders, we now serve as guides, follow our inclinations, and go with the Dao. Here, now, the scene is just right to inspire the wind and lift

our sails" (1990, 2). In referencing the "Dao," not only was the naturalness of fashion highlighted (cf. 3WWF), but the view that elders were veterans of change and natural leaders, not blind followers of youth. As in Xue's article, inner inclinations and outer manifestation, and pleasing oneself and society, were pictured in sync, unlike in 2WWF. Rather than losing their prime in Maoist times, mature adults were pictured poised to enjoy their prime in a glorious present, thus boosting the reforms' legitimacy and downplaying past excesses. Xiao signs off: "Dear middle-aged and elderly friends, your life's journey has just reached golden autumn. ...Grab onto this perfect scene!" (1990, 2).

### **Bold Pursuit of Beauty with Bright Colors**

Xuan Jin's 1991 article "There Are No Ancient Women Here!" began with the premise that both pre-Mao and Maoist China had suppressed natural human inclinations to cultivate personal appearance in the attempt, first, to contain women to domestic life and, then, to socially engineer a proletarian citizen. The example of Australia was used to illustrate the alternative minus such suppression. This piece raised the bar in calling for older Chinese women to go on par with western women by dressing in bold colors and thick makeup and increasing their informal community engagement. It even challenged them to consider eventually surpassing western women in beauty and youthfulness.

Jin began by recounting how during years on work assignment in Australia she learned that "inner love of beauty" and desire to look "younger and more beautiful" was a natural human universal for all women throughout life. While abroad, she was impressed by how "middle-aged and elderly women" there were "bold in their pursuit of beauty" and wore more colorful clothing and thicker, brighter makeup than younger women, unlike in China. Jin recalled realizing the sense of this, because younger women were like "lotuses emerging from clear water," requiring no adornment. Jin urged Chinese women to follow western women's lead, saying that rich adornment makes one "look younger" and "brings out a liveliness" while "leaving your maturity intact" (1991, 10). In contrast to cautious or cynical western feminist models, Jin celebrated synergy between bold bright makeup and dress, and high spirits, self-realization, and social efficacy.

Declaring that "in Australia, whatever young women can do, elderly women can do too," Jin argued that "westerners" were less ageist than Chinese people. Jin asserted that not only in appearance, but also in their lively spirits, individual self-expression ("no two are dressed alike!"), and continuing community engagement, older Australian women outdid their Chinese counterparts. In contrast to Chinese women retiring to domestic work within the family, Australians showed how older women can do so much more: "They can sing and dance, go on a diet to lose weight, get together and laugh, and when excited, shout out and cause a ruckus." Jin related how Australians form large voluntary associations for older people for continuing education, socializing, leisure, and entertainment. She stated that unlike in China, she never heard any old person in Australia say anything like, "I'm old! I'm of no use any more!" Instead "everyone did their best to continue contributing through their ever-youthful heart" (1991, 11).

Unlike in western feminist approaches, Jin's article focused on older women's "rights" in relation to younger women, rather than a male-dominated system. This was common in China

Woman articles on aging women's dress at the time. The point was to combat ageism, not double jeopardy. This emphasis was related to how rapid change in reform-era China had rendered the distance between opposite-sex contemporaries pale beside the gap between different generations.

### Liberation through Fashion as Ideal versus Practice

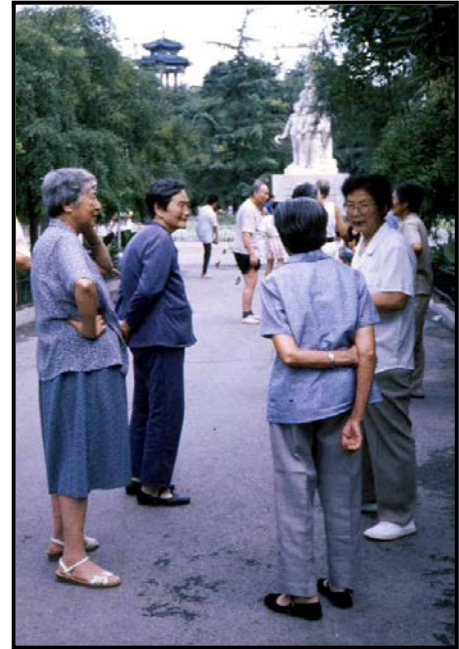
The ethnographic material from my fieldwork in 1990s Beijing in some ways echoes themes from *China Woman*, and in others goes beyond by presenting nuances of chronology, experience, and resistance. The theme of recognition of competing moral systems is clearly reflected in my interviews in ways that are more fraught than the prescriptive, celebratory media pieces. Ambiguity, self-contradiction, ambivalence, and lack of clarity were not qualities desired by ACWF editors aiming to prescribe a new ideal. The ethnographic material, by contrast, shows women grappling with competing moral logics and their complex articulation with past and present experience. Although many women agreed with the ACWF ideal of older women dressing up in fancy feminine clothing, they often did not feel that this new option was a priority for them, or something that they wanted, or were personally able, to pursue. As per below, outward appearance was not a prominent concern for many women in the communities I studied.

### Other Things to Worry About ...

In structured interviews conducted in 1994, we asked 399 Beijing Chinese women aged 40-65 if they worried about losing their physical attractiveness with advancing age. The majority stated that they did not worry about declining appearance in later life, and less than six percent said that they had such worries. Some of these women explained lack of worry by saying, "Why, I was never good-looking in the first place!" Others indicated that older women were not expected to make themselves physically appealing to men. Most indicated that physical appearance was of far less import than the ability to make ends meet financially, get their daily work and chores done, and get along with other people. Similarly, maintaining cognitive clarity was a worry for twice as many women as deterioration in appearance. This ethnographic data is congruent with the ACWF representation that older women at the time did not place a high priority on their current physical appearance. It counters, however, western feminist concerns that all too many older women, once in an environment open to potential western influence, may become consumed with anxiety over their appearance or join in a cynical struggle to appear younger.



Figs 8-9: While bright patterned clothing was fine, black, gray, white, and dull blues were still common color choices (*far right*). Women tended to opt for inexpensive casual comfortable clothing; although heels were available, more wore flats (*right*). Photos: Jeanne Shea



### Ethnographic Case 1: Subtleties of Timing and Resistance

Chun Zhiping was a factory worker in her early forties in the mid-1990s. Chun gave a finer chronology than ACWF articles did, distinguishing early, mid, and late Mao periods and the reform era. Now dressed in loose blue cotton trousers and a white button-down shirt, Chun talked about how she was able to wear pretty homemade clothes and keep her hair in long braids when she was a young girl in the early 1950s, but had to dress and wear her hair in a de-feminized manner when the Cultural Revolution came during her teen years. Going further in splicing history, Chun said that during the Great Leap Forward (1958-61), at which time agronomic mismanagement compounded by drought led millions to starve, clothing was old and worn.

When I was young, we just wore regular ordinary clothes. It wasn't like now where we've got every kind of clothes you can think of. ... Before the Cultural Revolution, it was all homemade cotton cloth, flowery patterns, and white cotton pants. I wore that to school when I was little. ... [Then] there were the three years of natural disaster [Great Leap]; those years were hard, and our clothes got worn out. At that time, the household head was given a ration of grain, oil, and such, and our parents ate little to leave as much as possible for us kids. Then there was all that Cultural Revolution stuff, and we didn't have high expectations. ... Back then there were no schools open, so all you could do was work. I started working at 16. My generation's teen years were totally wasted. ... Back then, what did people wear? Green shirts, green pants, blue shirts, blue pants! ... Now it doesn't matter how tough your situation is or how low your wages are, you have every kind of clothes you can think of. Back then, if you wanted to buy something, there was nothing to buy... Before the Cultural Revolution, I wore long thick braids. I was young then, but they [Red

Guard teens] were determined to make me cut off my braids. When they did it, I cried. It was a real pity. Now my hair is thin, and I can't pull off long hair anymore.

Although she discussed clothing at length, mourning the chance to preen in her teen years and expressing approval at reform-era variety, Chun added, however, that she has always valued eating more than clothes. A strong healthy body trumped its trappings. Like most women her age in the 1990s, Chun took a position toward present-day dress somewhere between uniform Maoist androgyny and fancy feminine fashion, valuing the choice to wear cheap casual clothing.

We are not like some families, who when they have a bit of money, they buy an item of clothing. I feel that those kinds of things are all secondary. Eat well and have good health, right? If you don't eat well, then your body will get sick. If you've spent your money on clothes, then you won't have money for medicine. And buying medicine isn't as good as having eaten well to avoid sickness in the first place. Anyhow, this is how my family thinks about this. ...Now we are a bit more particular about what we eat than in the past. It's not like in the past where it was monotonous and you just ate whatever was there. But, in terms of wearing things, we just wear regular ordinary clothing. Our family doesn't choose to wear fancy stuff. At our house, we wear casual clothing.

In contrast to ACWF portrayals, Chun spoke of not just the reform era but also the early 1950s in terms of freedom to choose one's clothing. Stressing personal preference, thrift, and function over social image, Chun positively characterized the kind of clothing that she wore during both periods as "regular, ordinary clothes." While the reforms offered more variety and availability, the periods were similar in that material means and taste guided what one wore in everyday life, rather than politics. The choice that Chun valued, however, was not the status-enhancing choice that 3WWF emphasized. Chun appreciated the ability to choose inexpensive casual clothing, not age-defying luxury apparel. Furthermore, in contrast to 2WWF, Chun was not seeing fancy feminine fashion as socially oppressive, but, rather, as beside the point as a lower priority than food, thus echoing global minority feminisms that judge mainstream western feminism as elitist.

## Ethnographic Case 2: Nice to Have the Options But...

Unlike the assumption in ACWF articles that women's attitudes and behavior tend to align, this case illustrates further how liking the availability of cosmopolitan goods in the abstract did not necessarily translate into dressing up one's own aging body in the early reform era. Song Jingling was a retired textile factory worker in her mid- to late- fifties when I interviewed her in 1994 and 1996. Dressed in a short-sleeved blue blouse over loose-fitting black trousers, Song shared how much better things were now in terms of eating and clothes than in the past and for her compared with her parents' generation. Like the ACWF pieces, Song showed a tendency to stress change over historical time in generational context, rather than personal chronological aging and its bodily effects, as mainstream western feminist theories tend to do.

Song mirrored in many ways but also went beyond *China Woman* articles by stressing further that the current wealth of goods and clothing available to buy was not just a function of “foreign influence,” but was a combination of global and “local” Chinese forces. Here Song was referring back to the radical Maoist notion that certain kinds and styles of clothing, regardless of whether they were manufactured in China or elsewhere, were considered to be “foreign” and thus suspect in nature, and how that concern had since dissolved. Song was also countering the radical Maoist idea that production and distribution of a wide variety of clothing through market mechanisms was alien to communist China. In so doing, she was affirming Deng Xiaoping’s blended “socialist-market” economy which had raised standards of living without, as Mao would have feared, ruining people’s lives or China’s integrity. Song’s stance also contrasts with western feminism that tags cosmopolitan fashion as predominantly capitalist and western.

Song went on to contrast her generation to her children’s, by saying that her cohort was still conservative, felt awkward in colorful patterned clothing, and did not like to spend money on clothes. In what she said, there was a tension between her generation’s inclinations and what the present ethos claimed as the better way to live. Song, like many others her age, found herself partially enveloped by the moral sensibilities of a former era. She allowed herself to enjoy some of the present’s material comforts, but only to a point. While she admired younger people’s clothing consumption, she felt that she herself could only strike a partial compromise by buying clothing more often than in the past, but nothing really fancy and no more than a few outfits. Unlike 3WWF, this realism was based on economic constraint, not *realpolitik*.

In comparison with ACWF representations, Song was less concerned with comparing her cohort of Chinese women with peers in western countries than with comparing herself to her children within the Chinese context. She did not opt for brightly-colored adornment. Rather than striving to surpass Western women, Song accepted that she would never even come close to her children.

There is no way to compare us with our children’s generation. There is no comparison. Because we are old conservatives. We don’t dare to wear colorful patterned clothing. We are too reticent and embarrassed. We don’t dare try to compare/compete with young people. Ever since I was young, I didn’t like to wear colorful patterned clothing. Now my daughter and son are already so grownup, it would be a sore sight if I now started to wear colorful patterned clothing. Young people today are very fortunate. Even a piece of clothing that costs several hundred yuan, they dare to buy it. We can’t bear to part with the money. The clothes we buy are all very inexpensive. In our daily lives, we are still pretty thrifty. It’s not like my daughter and her generation, they are very chic. We don’t dare. We are still pretty conservative. We are not as outgoing as the younger generations. Unlike us, they are all people who are open [as in reforms and opening].

Song’s “sore sight” comment stemmed less from self-esteem-related western concerns, and more from local ideas about cohort differences and the awkwardness and impracticability of sudden later-life change. A large part of Song’s reticence to dress up in the reform era rested in her concerns about her generation’s limited access to income. Throughout the reforms, pensions of older retired workers have been much lower than younger workers’ wages, and inflation adjustments have been modest. Agricultural workers typically had no pensions in the early

reform era, and today they remain low in most places. While the social safety net has improved from the 2000s on, older people of modest means to this day are reluctant to spend on consumer goods, fearing needing money later for subsistence or health emergencies. In the early reform era, health coverage was limited to certain urban employees, and although now there is some coverage to rural dwellers and unemployed urbanites, it is still inadequate. Older adults continue to be reluctant to ask their children for money, preferring to invest in their children's lives, educations, careers and progeny.

I can't bear to part with money to buy clothing. I am used to living a thrifty, arduous life. In summer, I have just two outfits that I alternate. I say, I've bought two good outfits, that's enough. I'll just wear these. ...Because we earn very little money, we need to keep our belts tight. When you earn as little as we do, you can't take big handfuls and large footsteps. ...You need to live within your means. You can't compare your lifestyle or try to compete with other people. Other people earn more, you earn less. You need to pass the days according to your own means. So we look at our own situation, and change our lifestyle over time according to that, not what other people are doing.

Living within one's means and eschewing conspicuous consumption continues to elicit great pride in many older folks in post-reform China. Despite its importance, however, budgetary constraint was not a focus for either ACWF or mainstream western feminist analyses of later-life dress, both of which tend to cut far from the bone of survival.

### Ethnographic Case 3: Making Up for a Cultural Revolution Wedding

The last case illustrates some older Chinese women's ambivalent feelings about aging and issues of dress in an elderscape not mentioned in *China Woman*. Peng Lingxiang was born in 1942. When I interviewed her in 1994, she was in her early fifties and a teacher at a local elementary school. Peng was absorbed most of the time with teaching and making sure her daughter excelled at her lessons. We met in their cramped apartment one summer afternoon. In addition to me and Peng, a woman friend surnamed Du, who was a retired neighborhood clinic worker, joined us. Dressed in a loose-fitting button-down shirt and a plain A-line skirt, Peng began the interview by saying how pleased she was with the respectful way in which her colleagues treated her at work now that she was an experienced senior teacher. Yet, she also revealed aspects of getting older that brought up feelings of deep regret as well. She expressed a common feeling among older Chinese women at this time of having been "born too late" in time "to fully enjoy the prosperity of the reform era," as she was no longer able to eat with the abandon of youth or to make anything she wore look good, having acquired a paunch. So her regrets were not a mere matter of chronology, but chronology in tandem with the vagaries of history. Like in the last *China Woman* article, Du and Peng expressed their sense that in foreign developed countries, older women dress in brightly-colored elaborate fashions, lending such legitimacy as a modern world-class ideal. Their dialogue contrasted what they felt they should do based on this ideal and what they felt comfortable doing, given their age, socialization, and changing bodies.

Unlike 2WWF, they located their feeling that their aging bodies were no match for the new ideal not in the influence of western ageism, but in homegrown Chinese conservatism.

Channeling ACWF ideals, they imagined that if they could bring themselves to do it, dressing up would not just enhance their aging bodies, but also lift their inner spirits.

Peng: I am not willing to get old. ... Sometimes I feel very pessimistic. Ah, yes, sometimes I casually say to people, 'Yup, I'm old!' But, in fact, deep in my heart-mind, I am not willing to get old. Sometimes I think, when I was young and the kids were little, everything was bitter hardship and plain living -- especially during the Cultural Revolution. When we got married, we all held up a book of Chairman Mao's Quotations as we crossed that threshold. Now that living conditions are better, you look -- our children are already grown up. I should enjoy the prosperity and enjoy a life of ease and comfort in later life, but at the same time, I'm old. If I wanted to eat, well, I can't eat much of anything anymore. If I wanted to wear something, I can't pull off wearing much of anything anymore. Sometimes I feel like it is a terrible pity! [Sigh]

Du: Yes, but in fact, it shouldn't be too late for us! We can still pull off wearing things. People in developed foreign countries are all like, the older you are, the more patterned and brightly-colored the clothing they wear. Young people have natural beauty, so they can dress more plainly. So, the older you are, the more you should dress up.

Peng: Yes, developed foreign countries are like that.

Du: Whenever someone dresses up, they immediately cheer up. The same article of clothing (pulls at her patterned shirt) -- you change into a gray one and wear it, you're going to look even older. But if you wear a little brighter shade, then your spirit will shine forth again, and you'll look just like you did when you were young. So you should dress up.

Peng: I'm with you!

Peng recounted how her biggest regret in life was her Cultural Revolution style wedding which had not allowed fancy feminine wedding garb. Like for Chun, Peng's wedding was her key fashion focus. Couples marrying during the Cultural Revolution had to dress in Mao suits and had few to no wedding photos. Beyond resolving to do her children's weddings "right," Peng was considering going for a makeover and photo shoot at a "middle-aged-and-elderly-people's wedding photo shop," a recent innovation in China. Stemming from 2WWF assumptions, this plan initially came as a surprise to me in that Peng had shown strong self-esteem and social respect. At her age in her line of work, why masquerade as a young bride? It became clear, however, that Peng's focus was not on pining to look young and stylish as an older woman in the present for other's approval, and more on being born too early to have been allowed to dress in fancy feminine style when young. She wanted to reenact her wedding to get "proper" photos to materially memorialize the occasion. However, Peng also expressed deep ambivalence about whether it would work. She worried that their attempt to pretend to be back in time at their wedding, but with the freedoms and amenities of today, would not prove convincing, even to themselves. The photos of their attempt to make up for the past risked failing to deliver the aesthetically-pleasing new mementos they desired. The excerpt below depicts Peng's feelings about her Cultural Revolution wedding and the tension between the prospects versus the risks of the new compensatory elderscape.

Peng: From my heart, I feel like it was especially unfortunate that I got married during the Cultural Revolution. Sometimes I look at how things are now -- like soon my youngest sister is going to get





Fig 10: Reform-era contemporary wedding photo. Photo: Jeanne Shea

married, so naturally I started thinking about it. When I got married, even what my maternal uncles and aunts gave me were all Quotations of Chairman Mao [books]. All the gifts were like that – lots of Mao pictures ...and Mao badges. ...Back then, could you perm your hair? No way! If I wanted to just brush my hair into long braids, even that was not permitted! Really! My braids were really long, but ...they cut my hair short, and all I could do was comb it flat against my head.

Peng: For clothes, who could wear fancy clothes? No one! That was entirely forbidden. Shoes couldn't have even a little bit of a heel! ...So my wedding was under those kinds of circumstances. Sometimes I think about it, and I feel really full of regret! So, when my daughter and son get married, I am definitely going to get them some good wedding photos! I say, "My own life just hasn't been up to par, but we can at least do it for the next generation." Then my husband jokes, 'Hey, soon we'll have our 25th wedding anniversary, right? So let's start anew and get our photo taken at one of those places where you can get makeup applied and get dressed up!' And I say, 'That's chillingly pathetic! At this advanced age!'

Du: No, that's really neat! I think that would be really fun and meaningful! Mom and Dad together, and your children can play best man and maid of honor!

Peng: They say that Tianjin has a photo studio that specializes in taking photos of middle-aged and old people.

Du: Even right here (in Beijing), we also have this sort of thing.

Peng: But if you got your picture taken here, if you ran into someone you knew, it would be a very strange and ugly sight for them to see. Yeah, if I'm still worked up over this a while from now, we can go to Tianjin to get a compensatory photo taken. Nobody would recognize anybody, and when we were finished with the photo-shoot, we'd come back to Beijing. There [in Tianjin], nobody would recognize us. If the photo turned

out good, then we'd let people look at it, and if the photo turned out bad, then it wouldn't matter, because no one would know we had done it.

As illustrated above, Peng did not express 2WWF reservations that this later-life glamour shoot may be buying into sexist and ageist patriarchal objectification of women. But she was equally not aligned with a 3WWF model about whether and how to dress the aging body for optimal social impact. Peng saw sharing the compensatory wedding photos with others as more of a risk than an opportunity for social status. She was considering the shoot primarily for her own personal consumption. Instead of masquerading as her young self in the present, she was considering reenacting the wedding of her youth at a better, future time.

## Discussion

Here I further examine misalignments across mainstream western feminist perspectives, official Chinese feminist messages, and ordinary women's experiences. I begin with the mismatch between these western and Chinese forms of feminism, and then advance to divergences between ACWF messages and Chinese women's personal views.

### Comparing Feminisms in Cross-Cultural Context

The early reform-era situation in China does not dovetail well with dominant western feminist approaches to dressing the aging body. It fits neither with the 2WWF notion that older women should resist age-defying fashions due to origins in sexist ageist capitalist patriarchal oppression, nor with the 3WWF notion that older women can opt to strike a devil's bargain for short-term personal benefit. Western feminist theory has been constructed in reaction to notions of past and present restraint different from those stressed in ACWF articles. Both address resistance and liberation, but referencing different targets.

The dominant imagined audience, notions of self and society, relation of behavioral practice to inner experience, and visions of naturalness all differed in mainstream western feminist versus ACWF discussions. Whereas Western feminist sources have focused on a local heterosexual male gaze, ACWF pieces have stressed the platonic gaze of an international audience, one's own self, and other local women. The relation of body, self and society were configured differently as well. In western discourse, focus on women's self-esteem was common, whether the negative effect of the sight of one's aging body on self-esteem (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991), or the effect of society's dominant evaluation of aging bodies on women's self-concept. ACWF pieces, by contrast, focused on how dressing well could lift one's inner spirits and reflect well on the cosmopolitan progress of nation and cohort. The 3WWF emphasis on individual competition for men, jobs, or status was absent. Naturalness was deployed differently in each context. In 1990s America, Canada, and England, western feminists portrayed as "natural" the act of forgoing makeup in later life, whereas in China going along with a "normal" lifelong female desire to decorate oneself was depicted as "natural."

While both mainstream western and ACWF feminists in the 1990s pitted two competing moral regimes for older women's dress against each other, one minimalist with less gendered differentiation than before the 1960s, and the other consumerist stressing youthful femininity, these two feminisms had distinctive historical emplotments. On the Western side, the 1960s was typically represented as a time of personal liberation of teens and young adults from formal fitted conformist feminine clothing of the past (Ballard et al. 2005: 172-73; also Hurd-Clarke, Griffin, and Maliha 2009: 720). On the Chinese side, the 1960s was a time of social constraint of teens and young adults no longer permitted to wear fancy feminine clothing of traditional Chinese or western style and forced to wear baggy masculine military-style clothing.

Both Chinese and Western feminism used a progress narrative, but focusing on different forms of evolution: In the western case, the progress was located in women either adopting and thus legitimating the natural look of unadorned aging, or realizing the right to choose "beauty work" while recognizing its long-term societal limitations. In the Chinese case, the progress was found in becoming liberated from radical Maoist constraint and in the novel ability of these older generations of women and men to express individual panache. ACWF and western feminist discourse likewise had different stances toward what was modern. While dressing in a fancy feminine style was seen as modern and novel to in 1990s China, it was seen in 2WWF as retrograde reversion, and in 3WWF as continuing utilitarian concession. ACWF pieces in the 1990s did not portray fancy feminine dress as spawning from societal "ageism, sexism, and commercial interests" with a "negative value on female ageing" as common in 2WWF literature in which progressive "women are urged to reject age-resistance" (Ballard et al. 2005: 173). Instead, ACWF articles depicted gender-marked cosmopolitan dress as a new age-positive opportunity for older men and women, countering ageism that might place such nice clothing out of bounds for mature adults. The early reform-era focus was on overcoming ageism within gender and on combatting earlier gender blindness that had denied "women's special characteristics." It centered on liberation of older women from a narrow historical box of mannish proletarian dress and being able to wear the same sorts of clothing that younger women in present-day China and western women wore.

Further differences in stances on aging women's dress reflect these divergent historical trajectories. In western feminist discourse, fancy consumerist dress was constraint or utility; the question was whether to forgo it to defy oppression, hoping for a world as it should be (2WWF), or to use it to gain the advantages of appearing youthful in the world as it was (3WWF). In Chinese discourse, it was liberation, freedom, access, and play; the question was whether one had the means and dared. Unlike in western depictions, in 1990s China, there was typically no 2WWF option to "retire from beauty work" (Hurd-Clarke and Korotchenko 2011: 499) as the majority of older women had little chance to do beauty work as young adults. For them, the option of beauty work had just opened up in middle or old age. Likewise, instead of seeing fancy feminine dress as a means to combat a social threat to the self as in Woodward's (1991) "masquerade," ACWF pieces depicted it as a new opportunity in a less threatening social order than before, in which older adults now could live a better life than previous generations. As such, Chinese was depicted as un-disciplining a body once bound by Maoist masculinist asceticism and economic deprivation, in contrast to Twigg's (2007, 2013) "disciplining."

Of course, there are alternative interpretations outside of the ACWF exegesis. Threatened with the ageism of encroaching capitalist consumerism on top of the late Maoist form

of ageism, beyond the veneer of propaganda, fashion may be a desperate attempt at clawing back some social capital. Even when some new freedoms are involved, Twigg (2013) argues that: "New cultural freedoms impose new requirements, new disciplinary demands in relation to appearance and the body" (146). In the interviews, we hear women both praising the new options, but also feeling the need to resist new pressures toward status-seeking consumerism.

ACWF representations in the 1980s-1990s belie limited access to Western materials at the time. Whereas Chinese representations of liberated older western woman focused on the ideal of heavy makeup and flamboyant dress, neither 2WWF nor 3WWF theory did. Empirically, research studies in England, Canada, and the US have all found older women feeling pressure to tone down makeup and clothing compared with younger women and younger selves (Fairhurst 1998: 1, Ballard et al. 2005: 180, Hurd-Clarke, Griffin and Maliha 2009: 716).

### Official Feminist Discourses Versus Women's Experiences

Just as western feminist theory simplifies the history and diversity of women, so too does Chinese feminist portrayal of Chinese history and women. The abstract ideals featured in ACWF representations were regularly extolled by ordinary older Chinese women in the 1990s as good progress for older people as a group. However, at the same time, ordinary Chinese women emphasized that these same ideals were not a good fit for their own personal preferences, priorities, means, or generational habitus. For themselves, they came to a casual compromise somewhere in between Maoism asceticism and consumerist splendor in the form of inexpensive casual clothing. Despite fixation on external appearance in ACWF articles, ordinary older Chinese women usually prioritized health, function and thrift over projecting a cosmopolitan image. Their focus belies neglect of such bare bones issues in mainstream western and official Chinese feminisms.

In the middle-aged-and-elderly wedding-photo phenomenon that arose in 1990s China, the logic is different from what mainstream western feminists might assume. It was not about trying to look young as an older woman in the present in order to boost self-esteem, personal status, or national dignity. Instead, it was about pretending to go back in time to do one's wedding over with the amenities of today, while keeping a semi-private memento of the compensatory mission. Peng was trying to recapture beauty work lost in the past; rather than attempting to reverse the aging clock, she was vying to turn back the historical clock. This dress-up was different from Woodward's (1991) masquerade in that the primary audience was oneself, and the purpose was not to masquerade as young now to fend off a current social threat, but, rather, to pretend to be one's young self in a fictive past stripped of former political constraints. The ambivalence that clouded this mission was not tied to feeling guilty about selling out to sexist ageism, but, rather, rooted in worry that this game of pretend was unlikely to feel personally convincing because one's present body would strain to look the part.

Whereas 2WWF has pitted itself squarely against and reform-era ACWF has triumphantly championed consumerist fashions, ambivalence as a theme was shared by 3WWF and ordinary older Chinese women in the 1990s. But the form of ambivalence was different. In 3WWF, one was caught between the moral duty to resist ageist sexist consumerism for the long-term good of oneself and others, and the selfish utilitarian temptation to go for makeup, plastic surgery, and sexy clothing in order to individually compete in the world as it exists.

With older Chinese women, the ambivalence was located in a different place. It was lodged in between the feeling that it would be ideal, as ACWF then asserted, for the image of older women in China in general if they donned bright makeup and fancy clothing, and the feeling that in practice that didn't fit their own inner tastes, comfort zone, socialization, habitus, budget, or present body. Thus, they came to a kind of compromise between the past and present ideals, with a few sets of cheap casual clothing.

Compromise as a theme has also arisen in interviews with older western women in recent decades. Similar to my interviewees, British women in their fifties have expressed that they cannot simply dress in "Cosmo" fashions, because it would feel like a "false image" that did not reflect "their inner sense of ageing" and not pass as socially authentic (Ballard et al. 2005: 280). In discussing interviews conducted with older Canadian women, Hurd-Clarke, Griffin, and Maliha (2009) argue that concerns about social judgments of older women and their dress in the context of financial constraints and limited market availability of appropriate clothing (721-24) force women to walk a fine line, "juggling many concerns," including: wanting to appear to be a "smart, independent person," show that "you can take care of yourself" (723) and have not "let oneself go" (721-22), but also to choose something "age appropriate" and "not dowdy, ... frumpy, or over-casual" (723).

Women in 1990s China were also juggling many concerns, but the constellation of concerns and their backdrop was distinctive. Rather than focusing on limited choices, older Chinese women observed a vastly increased availability of attractive choices. However, while my interviewees liked the existence of alternatives, they saw these new options as fitting for older western women, younger Chinese women, and a few daring Chinese elders, rather than themselves. Personal budget restrictions and early-adult aesthetic socialization made them personally uncomfortable buying or wearing them. While such considerations are important for many western women (e.g., some British women in Twigg 2013: 146), mainstream western feminist theory has not focused attention here.

These generations of Chinese women were aware in the 1990s of issues of objectification and sexualization of women's bodies through fashion. However, in an arguably ageist fashion, they saw these as applying to younger, not older women. While agreeing with an abstract ideal for older women to dress in a refined feminine fashion, my interviewees personally struck only a modest compromise in updating their wardrobe and altering their dress. This does not preclude the possibility that they were beginning to buy into a tale spun by the ageist sexist marketing of global capitalism. That global flow, however, was being filtered through a lens in which this kind of clothing was a novel opportunity.

## Conclusion

In the early reform era, government-sponsored Chinese feminist mass media and ordinary older Chinese women expressed a different constellation of moral tensions with regard to dressing the older female body, as compared with either mainstream second- or third-wave western feminists. This Chinese evaluative repertoire was based in differing visions of history, constraint, resistance, and liberation. Unlike the presumption in dominant western feminist approaches, government-backed Chinese feminist media and older Chinese women were both



focused on opportunities for breaking free of ascetic Maoist androgyny. Official and grassroots commentary on older women's dress was based on ageism and sexism as independent factors, rather than on the interactive double jeopardy featured in many western feminist accounts.

There were also important differences between state-supported Chinese feminist media and ordinary women. While ACWF articles focused on the positive status-enhancing possibilities of cosmopolitan gender-differentiating clothing for older women and the nation, ordinary older women tended to see these opportunities with ambivalence, as good in the abstract, but not well-suited to their own sensibilities, priorities, means, aging bodies, and generational habitus. They came to a compromise between Maoist asceticism and conspicuous consumption by buying a few inexpensive sets of casual clothing. While elaborate figure-accentuating feminine dress was still salient for these women in relation to bygone weddings of their youth, it held little personal significance for their daily lives in the present. Their everyday clothing was more feminine and individualized than during the Cultural Revolution, but in a subtle modest way.

Future studies could re-examine these issues within the contemporary mass media landscape and with new generations of older women, as well as with my original cohort. While the ACWF and *China Woman* still exist, they no longer have such a central role in defining women's issues, as the government has loosened its grip on such matters and market-oriented mass-media venues have multiplied geometrically. My experience returning to China over the years since 2000 tells me that due to increasing globalization, new generations of older Chinese and American women, now in their forties and fifties, have had more similar experiences of things such as feminist discourse, fashion media coverage, and lifelong dress norms than past generations did. Although there is growing concern about ageism in China, it is lodged more in concerns about whether children will care for their elders in old age, than it is in appearance or dress. With regard to my original cohort, now in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, my follow-up visits have showed that they have many more outfits than they did in the 1990s, but most still prefer inexpensive casual clothing, though with more color and patterns than in the past. Many have adopted hair coloring and facial creams, but few wear visible makeup. They still tend to be far more concerned about eating well and saving money for future exigencies than with appearance-based self-esteem or social status. Their resistance is still primarily related to a compromise between Mao-era thrift and asceticism and reform-era indulgence and conspicuous consumption, rather than couched in terms of double jeopardy or a devil's bargain.

Later-life shifts in habitus, embodiment, and dress practices must be viewed not only through standard western lenses pertaining to gender and age, but also through the frames of cultural variation, local historical trajectories, and cohort differences. Cultural and generational location in history has a large influence not only on women's personal experiences apropos gender, age, and dress, but also on local feminist approaches to these issues and on the ways in which women's practices interface with feminist frameworks and prescriptions. Ageism and resistance to ageism may take unexpected forms in different socio-historical circumstances, sometimes making it difficult to tell which is which.

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