

PUSH THE BOUNDARIES: THE EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S HANDBAGS IN 1925-1937

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Abstract: The woman's handbag is a symbolic consumer artifact imbued with multiple layers of meaning. This object reflects and intertwines ideologies, economics, culture, social statuses, and personal identities. However, current academic literature lacks a clear focus on this ubiquitous and meaningful artifact. In China, the early 20th century marked an important turn in the history of Chinese women's clothing, with a shift from wide robes with large sleeves to tight-fitting cheongsams. The cheongsams made it impossible to hide women's belongings, and bags and accessories gradually came to the forefront of people's attention. However, several researchers have identified the historical evolution of Chinese handbags during this period of transformation of the dress phenomenon. Therefore, this study applies the historical research method based on the data of Chinese women's magazines during the period of 1925-1937, aims to clarify the development of Chinese bags during the period of 1925-1937, and to analyze the evolution of the appearance of Chinese bags in the early twentieth century. This study contributes to the Chinese bag history by offering an analysis of its evolution. It serves as a valuable reference for future scholars in this field, enhancing our understanding of the cultural and social significance of Chinese bag history.

Keywords: Handbag, Chinese fashion, Women, Evolution, History.

1. INTRODUCTION

If one asks any lady about the single most coveted item in her closet, she will most likely tell you about the cherished handbag. The women's bag has a special concept in the field of fashion; it is an iconic item with multiple meanings. It encompasses the ideology, economy, and culture of society, embodies the identity and status of an individual, what's more, it has a special connection and symbolism with the female community (Ribeiro, Miguel, Pereira, Lucas, & Trindade, 2015). According to Skyquest's data on handbag market size, share, and growth analysis in April 2024 ("Handbag Market Size, Growth & Trends Report | 2031," 2024), Handbag Market size was valued at USD 49.12 billion in 2019 and is poised to grow from USD 52 billion in 2023 to USD 81.79 billion by 2031, growing at a CAGR of 5.8% in the forecast period (2024-2031). In a way, bags are no longer just a fashion accessory, but a representation of power dressing and practicality, spawning a multi-billion-dollar industry that continues to grow. The handbag is a product that has permeated everyone's life, not only as an accessory, but also as a style statement, with its versatile appearance and practical function for many occasions and uses. However, current academic literature lacks a clear focus on this ubiquitous and meaningful artifact (Rosenberg, Turunen, Järvelä, & Arnould, 2022).

In 2023, the British Museum organized an exhibition on the resilience and innovation of 19th-century China—China's hidden century, and this hidden history of the art of dress was opened a new page in public (H, 2023). At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese society was in a period of violence and turmoil, and it was also a period of drastic transformation. It was experiencing a leap from a traditional agricultural society to a modern industrial society, and from a feudal society to a modern society. Especially in the 1920s, as the influence of the May Fourth Movement gradually expanded, nationalism in Chinese society was on the rise, which promoted a re-examination of local culture. The outbreak of social movements led to the liberation of women's thoughts and prompted women to seek a more independent and liberated lifestyle (Chen, 2005). At the same time, it also marked an important turning point in the history of Chinese women's clothing, from wide robes and large sleeves to tight cheongsams (Zhang, 2012). This transformation made it impossible for women to hide their belongings. Bags, as an emerging fashion and functional accessory, followed this trend and gradually became the focus of people's attention. In addition, the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 put China's economy into recession. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, most factories were forced to stop production or

relocate, and the fashion industry was forced to simplify in the wartime environment, which also set a clear end point for the period of this article. However, while Chinese fashion history has studied the transformation of clothing during this important period, there is little research on the history of Chinese handbags (Rosenberg et al., 2022; Li, 2001).

In addition, driven by international trade, Shanghai has become an important commercial and financial center and an important gateway for Western fashion culture to enter China. The entry of foreign capital and the rise of the emerging middle class provided an economic foundation for women's fashion and consumer culture. The rise of Shanghai cheongsam has led to the rapid popularization of bags in this region, especially among the upper class and the emerging middle class, becoming an important symbol of identity, status and personality expression. At the same time, Shanghai's unique cultural atmosphere has promoted the diversification of bag design and innovation of function. Therefore, this study focuses on the Shanghai region of China, but also recognizes that there are cultural and social differences in the use and development of bags in other parts of China (such as Guangzhou and Beijing). Future research can be further extended to these regions to analyze the regional differences in the popularity and evolution of bags.

Therefore, in this study, based on the data of Chinese women's magazines during the period of 1925-1937, the author applies historical research methods and image research methods to clarify the development of the Chinese bag especially in Shanghai during the period of 1925-1937, and to analyze the evolution of the Chinese bag in the beginning of the twentieth century and the social significance that it has given to the Chinese society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Handbag describing principles

It seems that a bag can be described in many ways, shape, pattern, color, style etc. can be used to describe it. If we analyze the anatomy of a bag from the perspective of design and production, it can be composed of handles, closures, flap, sides, corners, bottoms, pockets and interior (Fashionary, 2016). Certainly, the way of expression of the constituent parts of different bags is different. For example, Hermes' platinum bag closes the bag space by fixing the front piece of the bag with a lock, while LV's bucket bag closes the bag by pulling the drawstring.

The details become more apparent when a handbag is dissected. There are the key terms anatomy from the top to the bottom from outside to inside (Blumenthal, 2011) :

Piece Good (material that a bag is mostly composed of), Trim (any material that is used for decoration), Handle, Seam (the line for piece goods stitched together), Closure (any zip or frame for close the bag), Hardware (any metal, plastic or jewel that acts as a connector, clasp, or decoration), Bag Body, Flap, Gusset (an extra piece of fabric that makes bags roomier), Feet (pegs placed on the bottom of a bag to add stability and protect), Interior, and Lining.

Therefore, the authors use the above principles to describe the development of bags in this study. However, whether the bag is in line with the fashion trend is more concerned by the designers. The bags designed for the brand should be in line with the brand's style and match coordination with a more attractive set of look. For studying and describing handbags from the last century, given their simpler production and materials, it seems overly detailed to approach them from a modern perspective focused on sophisticated design and manufacturing. Therefore, based on the research of the above scholars, the author will analyze the evolution of Chinese historical bags from these four parts: structure, material, function and coordination.

2.2 Bag in China

The history of handbag usage in China, if considered as a container, can be traced back to the dawn of human civilization; however, if viewed as an accessory, this history is relatively short (Ribeiro et al., 2015). In the history of Chinese dress, due to the wide and loose design of clothing, small objects that needed to be carried around were often hidden in pockets on the cuffs of the sleeves or in the pockets in front of the lapel, which were not easy to be found. Bags were mostly tied around the waist as decorative accessories, called purse (Yang, 2004).

This traditional and ancient bag used as a decoration can be found in many works of art, when bags took different forms and held a variety of objects. In the Tang Dynasty (618–907 ce), more and more purse accessories were worn around people's waists, such as purses for spices, purses for jade and purses for knives, etc. There were so many things hanging around the waists that it was necessary to have a belt with a lot of small rings to hang them, which was known as the "Diexie Seven Things" (Figure 1).



Figure 1. "Diexie Seven Things"

The custom of wearing a purse on the waist continued until the late Qing Dynasty (around 1912). During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the purses used at the court were often made into sets according to the purpose of the items, and a set of purses had almost the same fabric and pattern, but each had its specific function and also changed with daily habits.

For example, this set of small purses (Figure 2) was used as accessories for the wedding of Emperor Dezongjing of the Qing Dynasty (Yan, Fang, & Yin, 2010). The set consists of nine pieces, including a pair of purses, a tobacco purse, a dalian (a type of square bag worn around the waist or shoulders), a watch cover, a fan cover, a betel nut bag, a finger guards purse, and a glasses case. The beaded design is raised on the surface of the base fabric, giving a solid relief effect. This set almost covers the main varieties of purse work from the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, and the inclusion of mirror covers, powder boxes, and other items also broadens the concept of traditional purses.



Figure 2. Purse Set for Emperor Dezongjing's Wedding

However, the function of traditional Chinese bags is not limited to holding objects but also has a narrative meaning. The patterns of folk bags are rich in creative themes and metaphors, often expressed in the form of embroidery on the bag. For example, to express the theme of love between men and women, often with double fish, double dragon, and double butterfly to symbolize. Flowers as a metaphor for women and butterflies for honey picking as a metaphor for men. For example, to celebrate the birth of a child, the grandmother is to be embroidered a purse patterned with tigers and lions, they are symbols of bravery and might, implying the protection of the child's healthy growth.

In addition to the patterns, the structure of bag forms also has a symbolic meaning attached to it, for example, Yuanbao shape, Ruyi shape, heart shape, and auspicious cloud shape. The author catalogs the primary types of bags from the Qing Dynasty and analyzes their characteristics from three perspectives (Table 1). This analysis serves

as a foundation for identifying the development of bags during the Republican Period from 1925 to 1937.

Table 1: Types of Bags from the Qing Dynasty

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| Factors Bags |  |  |  |  |  |
| Structure | Square without cover, top opening | Square shape with covers on both sides | Drawstring bag | Drawstring heart shape bag | Gourd shape |
| Materials | Silk | Silk | Rope weaving | Fabric | Silk |
| Function | For coins and small items | For coins and small items | For snuff bottle | For spices | For storing tobacco |
| Factors Bags |  |  |  |  | |
| Structure | Oval shape | Long strip | Round shape | Square shape with six pockets | |
| Materials | Fabric and beading | Silk | Silk | Silk and fabric | |
| Function | For glasses | For fans | For coins and small items | Wearing inside boots, use for storing letters | |

From the above, it can be seen that in the Qing Dynasty, although there were many kinds of bags, each bag had a specific function. Small purses were mainly square and round, with various patterns and symbolic meanings. Functional purses were mostly shaped to fit the items themselves, such as fan covers and glasses covers. The way purses were hung around the waist was in line with the traditional Chinese clothing of the time, which was wide robes and with big sleeves. Traditional Chinese clothing was mostly cut in straight lines, hiding the waist and blurring gender. Under the etiquette-

based clothing system, an extensive set of intricate clothing rules restricted women's dress and constrained their thoughts (Zhu, Wu, & Tang, 2022). However, early communist leaders successfully organized support for the New Culture Movement (1915–1921), which advocated for the abolition of prostitution and polygamy as well as the freedom choice in marriage and divorce (Leung, 2003). This was regarded as China's first women's movement and was a period of social and political awakening for many (Leung, 2003). During this period, restrictive clothing practices that constrained women, such as foot binding and chest binding, gradually disappeared. Aesthetic preferences shifted towards natural and healthy forms, becoming the mainstream. In 1920s, there was growing concern that wide and loose robes obscured women's femininity and made gender distinctions difficult. This led to the evolution of the cheongsam, which fit closer to the body, showcasing a balanced physique and redefining the boundaries between man and woman (Ng, 2015).

In a sense, it can be said that the emergence of cheongsam has promoted the development of handbags. The belt around women's waists disappeared. The one-piece cheongsam from top to bottom showed the curves of women, and there was no place to hide the small items carried with them. Women's bags could no longer be hung on the belt around their waists, so handbags appeared in the history of Chinese clothing. However, few scholars have studied this important turning point. Therefore, this study analyzes the evolution of handbags through pictures in historical magazines.

3. METHODOLOGY

To answer these research questions, qualitative historical research method is applied to solved. The chosen data are relevant to the research during that time. For the historical study of the development of bags, this study focuses on using visual materials of Chinese women as the main research data. This is because photographs provide precise records of the material data in front of the lens when the shutter is pressed (Ahmad, 2021). Therefore, local publications are observable objects. The author collected the photographs and historical "traces" from *Pictorial Weekly of the Eastern Times* and *Ling Long* during 1925-1937.

Pictorial Weekly of the Eastern Times is the first photography supplement of a newspaper in China. It was published once a week in the early period and twice a week in the later period, mainly in news and photos of people. *Ling Long* was a popular women's fashion magazine at that time. It was published once a week from its founding in 1931 to its closure in 1937. It mainly includes articles and photos related to fashion and beauty, domestic and foreign movie stars, and advertisements for women's daily

necessities. Zhang Ailing said in "Talking about Women": "In 1930s, every female student had a "*Ling Long*" magazine."

The author read 1145 issues of available data from these two publications to select images of women who carrying bags. The Pictorial Weekly of the Eastern Times provides 4,374 pages of data from 1925 to 1937, with 245 pages meeting the criteria for female images. *Ling Long* offers 11,666 pages of data from the same period, with 144 pages in criteria. However, the inevitable limitation is that in China in the 1920s and 1930s, printing technology at the time could not meet modern standards, resulting in lower image clarity, so it became difficult to track the details of the bags. There were some images published small or the shape of the bag cannot be recognized, therefore the author conducted a secondary selected to reducing data, and the two publications have a total of 101 pages.

In the original publication, photographs are usually attached to text, such as the title or description of the photograph. Therefore, based on the original text, the author reads and codes the images, and according to Literature Review to descriptions and terminology of the bag design details are referenced and organized to justify the features and components of the bag evolution.

The bag evolution in this study is a historical and culturally oriented process that describes the transformation of bag appearance by considering how people themselves use bags to construct and interpret their social experience. A review of relevant literature, such as books, journals, magazines, articles, and papers, was conducted to identify the research context of the era and serve as descriptive data to demonstrate the factors that led to the bag changes in this study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The result of the Chinese bag evolution during 1925-1937 was pushing the boundaries (Table 2). In the way of wearing, Chinese bags have moved from the waist to women's hands or underarms. In the bag types, transfer to handbag, clutch, purse, clasp purse, can be hand-held, hand-carried, wrist or clip in the armpit use. Bag types to the development of geometric shapes, square bags and frame bags become the mainstream, while gourd, clouds, treasure and other figurative bag type become less. The pattern on bag surface compared to the Qing Dynasty bags were simpler, although meaningful patterns still exist, occasionally with leaves, flowers and other botanical patterns can be seen in the bag. During this period, women gradually turned from complex traditional accessories to simpler, modern designs. This trend reflects

Chinese women's pursuit of increasingly modern and independent social roles and reflects the influence of industrialization and modern aesthetics.

Table 2: The Evolution of China's Handbags in 1925-1937

| | | |
|------------|---|--|
| PRINCIPLES | STRUCTURE Clutch, Purse, Clasp purse, Handbag Handle : Top handle, Metal chain strap Closures : Kiss lock closure, Purse frame, Bamboo lock closure, Full-flap front, Half-flap front, Flap with hidden magnetic closure, Flap top with squeeze-lock closure, Flap with push-lock, Flap top with front strap Bag Side : Gusset, Accordion Bag Bottoms : Square studded bottom |  |
| | MATERIAL leather, silk and metal materials |  |
| | FUNCTION Daily use, Military use, Medical use, Travel, Photography, Office use |  |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | <p>COORDINATION</p> <p>Spring and Summer : Cheongsam, Ru skirt or Western-style dresses</p> <p>Autumn and Winter : Fur coats or Western-style windbreakers over cheongsam</p> |  |
|--|--|--|

From the advertisements published can be seen that most bags were made of leather, silk and metal materials. The popularity of leather handbags is closely linked to the development of technology of industrial. In the 1880s and 1890s, officials from the Self-Strengthening Movement established a number of modern textile enterprises (Zhang & Yang, 2021). In the early 20th century, China's leather industry entered a period of rapid development. In 1919, a tannery was established in Fengtian Beiguan, specializing in the production of leather and its products for the China Northeast Army. During this period, some tanneries were also established in other parts of China, and the leather products produced began to be exported to other country (Wang, Chen, & Xie, 2006). Therefore, the advancement of China's leather production technology is the basis for promoting the development of bags.

Most bags in the Qing Dynasty were small with single function. However, bags between 1925 and 1937 were more inclusive and functional. Women could carry multiple items in one handbag. The professionalization of women, referring to their shift from household tasks like sewing and farming to taking on professional roles in society, led to handbags becoming more functional for social life, such as military messenger shoulder bags, medical waist bags, and briefcases. The data obtained show that, in addition to travel cases, most box products are used in some specialized fields, such as shoulder photography boxes, hand-carry record boxes, etc., which have a built-in camera or movie player.

From the perspective of clothing matching, the bags at that time were mostly matched with cheongsam, Ru skirt or Western-style dresses in spring and summer, and with fur coats or Western-style windbreakers over cheongsam in autumn and winter. The popularity of the cheongsam after 1925 marked a significant shift in Chinese women's fashion. The cheongsam gradually replaced the traditional wide-sleeved robes, becoming the most fashionable clothing style of the time (Liu, 2020). At the same time,

Western clothing styles also spread rapidly due to the opening of China's trading ports after the Opium War. Students who returned from studying abroad and intellectuals who received new-style education in China became the disseminators of Western fashion. They not only accepted Western clothing concepts, but also integrated these concepts into their daily lives and work, promoting changes in China's fashion.

5. CONCLUSION

Bags play an indispensable role in women's lives. They are not only practical items, but also symbols that integrate culture and history. The turning point of Chinese fashion in the early 20th century had a profound impact on the evolution of bags. With the change of the times, clothing styles broke through the boundaries of traditional clothing, which promoted the change of bag shape structure, from traditional waist-worn cloth bags to exquisite leather handbags. These bags not only have a new look in appearance, but also carry rich social status and gender connotations. They are both essential tools in the workplace and luxurious accessories in leisure time, reflecting the multiple roles and identities of women in different scenarios. The functional changes of bags not only reveal the liberation of Chinese women's consciousness and transcend the restrictions on women in feudal society, but also inject new vitality and fashion into the history of Chinese clothing in the turbulent early 20th century. Their evolution is not only a follow-up to fashion, but also a witness to social progress and cultural change, giving the expresses for women's independence and empowerment.

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