SSOAR Open Access Repository
www.ssoar.info

A Narrow Space for Rebellion: The Cultural T-shirt in China's 1990s

Wu, Juanjuan

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Wu, J. (2022). A Narrow Space for Rebellion: The Cultural T-shirt in China's 1990s. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, *53*(1), 77-96. https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2022.1.18746

Nutzungsbedingungen:
Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de

Terms of use:
This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Comercial-NoDerivatives). For more Information see:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

gesis Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

IQAS Vol. 53 / 2022 1, pp. 77–96

A Narrow Space for Rebellion: The Cultural T-shirt in China's 1990s

Juanjuan Wu

Abstract

Following the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the beginning of the 1990s witnessed one of the few instances in modern Chinese history of the silenced making their voices heard – through printed messages on T-shirts. Phrases and sentences in large Chinese characters were printed on the front or back of plain white short-sleeve T-shirts with statements originating from a variety of sources, including literature, rock music, pop songs, movies, cartoons, old sayings and political slogans – or sometimes only an apparently meaningless assemblage of words. These phrases distanced the wearers from the earnest attitude that was promoted by the state, affording the wearer a sense of individual empowerment. This paper focuses on this cultural T-shirt fad of the 1990s in China and traces its rebellious origins, along with the multiple interpretations of its significance. This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry relies on Chinese newspapers published at the time, as well as the researcher's own observations as a participant of this shared cultural experience. As a unisex sartorial symbol, the "cultural T-shirt" presented an open arena for both males and females, as well as a battleground over "spiritual pollution".

Keywords: China, fashion, clothing culture, cultural T-shirt, youth, non-verbal communication

An evolving, complex Western cultural symbol

Likely a descendant of the T-shaped tunic worn in Europe during medieval times, the white cotton knitted T-shirt became an official undergarment for the United States Navy in 1913 (Sewell 2010). By the 1930s, US companies such as Sears, Roebuck & Co. and Hanes started to market T-shirts as both inner and outerwear (Harris 1996). In the post-World War II era, T-shirts expanded into sportswear, informal wear at home and workwear, due to their superior material functionality and adaptability (Sewell 2010). However, the basic, plain white T-shirt broke through its utilitarian role overnight when Marlon Brando wore it for his ground-breaking role in the 1951 film "A Streetcar Named Desire" (Kramer 2015). Brando's body-clinging, semi-transparent T-shirt gave the shirt a previously undiscovered erotic power as well as a rebellious edge, shaped by

Juanjuan Wu, College of Design, University of Minnesota, Saint Paul, USA; jjwu@umn.edu.

© International Quarterly for Asian Studies

DOI 10.11588/iqas.2022.1.18746

Brando's brooding attitude in the film (Kramer 2015, Sewell 2010). This rebellious, youthful spirit was embodied by the T-shirt in several influential film roles thereafter, with the seemingly modest and undistinguished white top often paired with blue jeans and a black leather jacket. With neither the rugged texture of jeans nor the shiny surface of the leather jacket, the soft, plain cotton-jersey T-shirt shockingly blended rebellion with fashion – a mix that proved contagious across younger generations, genders and nationalities.

Pop culture played a critical role in imbuing the proletarian plain white cotton Tee not only with rebellion and eroticism but also luxury (see Faiers 2016). Adding to the association of the garment with enigmatic silver-screen personas, the US popular media supplied interpretive or imaginative narratives to construct and enrich the cultural meaning of the plain T-shirt. In 1951, *Life* magazine announced that the T-shirt "had gone high fashion […] appearing on city streets and country club porches – and even at formal dances" (Harris 1996: 106).

From the 1960s onward, T-shirts metamorphosised into a popular vehicle for the delivery of commercial, political, social or personal messages to selected audiences or the public when adorned with promotional logos, graphic images, slogans, celebratory messages or cultural commentaries (Whittick 2021). Widely circulated messages ranged from "I Love New York" and "Make Love Not War" to "Save the Whales" (Sewell 2010). Not only did commercial entities find the communicative nature of T-shirts appealing, but various political and community events, civil, environmental and women's rights movements, and the burgeoning hippie subculture embraced T-shirt fashion. "By the 1980s, T-shirts were commonly designed and used to express affiliations, advertising, proverbs, protests, violence, vulgarity, music, movies, as well as political and social attitudes, school loyalty, vacation destinations, taste in music or food and one's sense of humor" (Presley / Jenkins 2011: 142). By that time, T-shirts had broken the boundaries of gender, age, class, body type and formality and were worn in the West in all walks of life.

Clearly, the journey of the T-shirt from its working class and military roots to its symbolisation of youth and hippie culture to permeating high fashion presents a complex and somewhat contradictory image. The blend of purity with eroticism, patriotism with rebellion, proletarianism with luxuriousness makes the T-shirt a truly versatile form not only in a physical sense but also symbolically. In this regard, T-shirts encapsulate the ambiguous nature of fashion. Fashion's message has always been ambiguous, intentionally or unintentionally. The essential messages that fashion communicates about wealth and class in modern times are rarely that straightforward. Even in the case of branded fashion with conspicuous logos, the social status of these logos is only understood by those with a certain level of fashion awareness or knowledge. The pursuit of one's ability to decipher fashion messages masked in the layers of fabrics constitutes an ultimate attraction for fashion. At times, this ability, representing

"taste", can socially outweigh one's financial ability to acquire refined and embellished materials.

Fashion's inherent ambiguity was redefined when messages on T-shirts appeared. These messages are extremely explicit in the meaning they are designed to communicate, leaving no room for ambiguity except when ambiguity is intended. This explicit nature of message T-shirts is certainly unique in the history of fashion. In the pre-Internet era, T-shirts provided a democratic, reader to reader (R2R) communication platform with an open-ended possibility for readership. The uncertainty of whom the T-shirt messages would end up reaching often added to the excitement of exposing one's inner self to the public eye. The limited space on a T-shirt also requires that the message be short, witty and readable from a distance, providing it with some of the characteristics of Twitter and thus a similar outcome for achieving popularity. The strong visual and psychological impact of these moving tweets on individual bodies quickly wove through the social fabric of the West and crossed national borders.

A brief note on methodology

This paper focuses on the Chinese T-shirt fad of the 1990s and traces the evolution of its cultural meaning in its original context. This fad demonstrated a short-lived empowerment that ordinary Chinese found in creating and using a visual symbol that was distinctively against the dressing norm. With the aim of deciphering the dynamic evolution of the multiple meanings of the T shirt phenomenon, this paper employs hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology as its primary inquiry method. This qualitative research method is suited for research questions that seek to understand the meaning of human experience (Crist / Tanner 2003, Laverty 2003). I critically analysed narratives identified in Chinese newspapers and academic journals published from 1991 to 1994, at the time of or shortly after the T-shirt fad. These Chinese publications are an integral part of this T-shirt phenomenon as they played a critical gatekeeping role and thus shaped Chinese behaviours.

Rather than collecting the kind of quantitative "factual data" that positivistic inquiries rely on (Cerbone 2013), this paper attempts to uncover the layers of nuanced meanings, conflicting interpretations and diverse perspectives of the T-shirt phenomenon as a shared cultural experience. Narratives that reflected these lived experiences, along with a myriad of their iterations, were collected by the author in both English and Chinese. Photos from that time-period were also reviewed as a triangulation method. In fact, redundance was observed in both the types of T-shirt messages and themes of newspaper articles that attempted to guide Chinese thinking and practices. In conjunction with the author's

first-hand observations as a participant of this shared cultural experience, these narratives served as the primary data for this interpretive analysis. In this sense, the author also utilised ethnographic methods with rich and versatile data from multiple sources (Fetterman 2020). The paper aims to gain a holistic understanding of this complex, culturally contextualised phenomenon as well as making inter-cultural and temporal comparisons.

The birth of a Chinese rebel Tee

Beginning in the early 20th century, T-shirts, as an imported dress form, were used as plain undershirts called *hanshan* in China (literally meaning "undershirts that absorb sweat"; Bian 2014). They shared the modest roots of Western T-shirts. However, in China they did not go through the series of cultural transformations of T-shirts in the West. The T-shirt's first appearance as outerwear in China was in the form of message T-shirts from overseas in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was once again a completely foreign idea. They appeared with printed English or "Chinglish" with or without graphics as a unisex item of clothing with a roomy cut. Most of the T-shirt's complex Western cultural associations (e.g., patriotism, rebellion and eroticism) were lost in translation. The shirt arrived as a novel form of fashion that was waiting to be stamped with Chinese character(s) and was subsequently dubbed the *wenhua shan* ("cultural T-shirt"). At first, only urban youth had access to imported fashions but this geographical class demarcation blurred once an abundant supply of locally produced cultural T-shirts became widely accessible, largely thanks to the booming street-vendor economy.

As a fashion form, cultural T-shirts were sought after more for their expressiveness than for their utility. Only young people with the strong desire and enough courage to express themselves would don these T-shirts, which often displayed frowned-upon messages. The T-shirt messages, from a Western point of view, were perhaps harmless and thus entertaining. But in the aftermath of the events of 4 June 1989 on Tiananmen Square, not only was the mainstream media extremely cautious about what was communicated with and among the public, the average person also had a heightened political sensitivity. Explicit messages carrying negative emotions certainly challenged the psychological comfort zone of most social conservatives, let alone the government.

In the summer of 1991, the so-called cultural T-shirt fad swept through Beijing and quickly spread to metropolitan areas, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin and Shenyang. These T-shirts, a localised version of the imported message T-shirts, featured messages in Chinese, with some accompanied by graphics. They quickly attracted attention for the cynical, humorous, vulgar or "negative" moods they

communicated. Though the rebelliousness of the fad was short-lived (mainly due to governmental intervention), this form of explicit self-expression can be spotted ever since, leaving a unique impression on the history of contemporary Chinese fashion.

Fashion has demonstrated its resilience in the face of government repression at various times in the sartorial history of both the West and the East. The spirit of rebellion highlights fashion's many memorable moments and forms. Rebellion marks an intentional, and in some cases, a forceful departure from existing social norms, and thus introduces new concepts, forms, values and ways of social interaction. The defining feature of fashion[1] – change – is precisely the result of "rebellious" dress choices. In that sense, rebellion is not a new element of fashion but an inherent quality. Often, compromised versions of the initial rebellious forms survive longer as they reflect the outcome of negotiations between individual interests and various social, political and economic forces. The extreme sarcasm, venting of frustrations and feelings of failure, as well as overt sexual depictions, that appeared on the T-shirts in China subsided after they were officially banned.

The investigations of Wang Lin (1992), a journalist at the *Beijing Qingnian Bao* (*Beijing Youth Newspaper*), found that the cultural T-shirt was an invention inspired by message T-shirts from overseas: it was a journalist and a recent college graduate who designed and produced the first batch of these cultural T-shirts. They were first printed with emotionally loaded messages such as, *fan zhuo ne, bie li wo* ("Leave me alone, I am fed up"), *la jia dai kou* ("My big family depends on me") or *zuo huai bu luan* ("I couldn't even be seduced by a woman sitting on my lap"), which was illustrated with nude male and female figures. In some cases, street vendors handwrote any words that came to the customers' minds at the point of sale. It was creative folk writing manifested in innovative fashion forms. Quite clearly, the phenomenon started with a mostly apolitical motive that sought to cash in on Chinese desires for both self-expression and novel fashion forms. This fashion invention was not an issue, at least not a political one, until its overwhelming popularity made it an effective channel for uncensored public communication. These printed messages were consumed quickly, displaying easily transmissible emotions of disappointment, frustration, unhappiness or despair, mostly expressed in sarcastic or witty phrases (see Table 1).

1 In this paper "fashion" is used within the realm of dress. Note that the word "fashion" is also popularly used to indicate changes in modes of thought and design of other consumer products as well as clothes (see Eicher 2010).

Table 1: Popular phrases on cultural T-shirts

Front of T-shirt	
Leave me alone, I am fed up	There is no way out
I am just sick of everything	My future is not a dream
My big family depends on me	I only follow my feelings
If you are unlucky, do not blame society	
I couldn't even be seduced by a woman sitting on my lap	
If you are ill-fated, do not blame the government	
I don't know how to please people	I did not offend anybody
Nothing to my name	I am kind but am always at a loss
I am ugly, but I am gentle	I am a tiny, tiny birdie
Don't ask me, I know nothing	Getting rich is all there is
God is dead	We are still alive
Boring	Really exhausted
Shut up	Kiss me
Teasing you	Don't forget me
Treat comrades like the breeze in spring	Fill the world with love
Only mom is the best in this whole world	
Heaven has endowed me with talents for eventual use	
Money is not almighty, but without money, nothing is all righty	

Front of T-shirt	
It is not that I do not understand, it is the world that changes too quickly	
Black cat, white cat; it doesn't matter as long as it catches mice	
We, your sisters and brothers, cannot tolerate sand in our eyes	
A single spark can light a prairie fire	I eat apple and you eat apple skin
Serve the people	Sweep away all pests
Money, money, money	Sour, sweet, bitter, spicy
A true heart	Beef potatoes
Spy	
Firstly, I am not afraid of bitterness, secondly, I am not afraid of death, thirdly, I am not afraid of you	

Front of T-shirt	Back of T-shirt
Make sure you do not fall in love with me	I have no money
I have only one shortcoming	That is sincerity
Sorry, I quit drinking	Well, I only take one drink
I want to have a banquet	Who would treat me?
Open your arms	You've got nothing
Playing just for the thrill...	Of being a vendor at the flea market

Source: Compiled by author, according to Liu 1991, Schell 1992, Wang 1992, Jiao 1992, Wu 2009.

Runming Jiao (1992) sorted popular cultural T-shirt messages into five categories of self-expression, which I further expand upon and modify as follows:

1) Expressing one's lonely, noble soul. People scorned the deteriorating, money-centred morals of the day in phrases such as *qian qian qian* ("Money, money, money") or *shangdi sile* ("God is dead"). They distanced themselves, either willingly or unwillingly, from the strong currents of economic advancement and strived to preserve some level of moral purity, as displayed in phrases like *geer men jieer men yanli burou shazi* ("We, your sisters and brothers, cannot tolerate sand in our eyes").

2) Feelings of losing a sense of self and belonging. Amid exploding consumerism, feelings of individual disempowerment and misplacement prevailed. While a select few were growing rich, many felt left behind materially and deprived spiritually, as shown in phrases such as *bushi wo bu mingbai, shi shijie bianhua taikuai* ("It is not that I do not understand, it is the world that changes too quickly"), or *biewen wo, wo shenme dou buzhidao* ("Don't ask me, I know nothing").

3) Cynicism. Cynicism was manifested in the deliberate use of vulgar or offensive language, such as *meijin* ("Boring)", *bizui* ("Shut up"), or *banshi bu songli buxing, ke songleli ye weibi neng bancheng shi* ("Nothing can be done without gift giving, but gift giving cannot guarantee anything").

4) Romanticised depictions of love, youth and innocence, particularly by young women. Favoured phrases included *wo shige xiaoxiao niao* ("I am a tiny, tiny birdie"), *wen wo* ("Kiss me") or *wuwang wo* ("Don't forget me").

5) Longing for group affiliation and a better future: *rang shijie chongman ai* ("Fill the world with love") or *feng yu tong zhou* ("Stand together through storm and stress").

However, based on the phrases collected in Table 1, two more categories can be added to the above list:

6) Nonsense words. Seemingly nonsensical words used to express coolness or a carefree outlook, or for entertainment in a subtly cynical way, such as *mitan* ("Spy") or *tudou shao niurou* ("Beef potatoes").

7) Quotations from popular songs, slogans, sayings of political leaders or model workers. In some cases, these phrases can be interpreted either in a supportive or a satirical tone, which shall be elaborated below.

One example of a song lyric repurposed as a T-shirt slogan is "Nothing to My Name", a song written and sung by Cui Jian, marking the birth of Chinese rock and roll (Sebag-Montefiore 2014). Though the lyrics depict love, the great popularity of the song can be attributed mainly to, first, its audacious attitude toward the individual self. This individualistic angle greatly deviated from the collectivist, socialist norm that stressed the virtue of individual sacrifice for the

country. Second, there is the loud, assertive presentation of the self from an overtly negative stance. The public sphere in China was customarily reserved for sharing positive feelings, achievements or optimism, especially in the social milieu cultivated and controlled by the Communist Party. Thus, the individuality and negativity expressed in this song, though directed toward a rather private subject (love), signalled rebellion and resonated with the young. Unsurprisingly, it became the anthem of the June Fourth movement of 1989, which further enhanced its anti-establishment connotations. The song was thus a "subliminal message" about China's lack of freedom (Matusitz 2010). In addition, Cui Jian's unconventional dress, his hoarse voice and the song's rhythm accentuated the rebellion expressed in the lyrics (ibid.). Needless to say, the spirit of this song aligned neatly with that of cultural T-shirts: the courage to publicise individual feelings, angst, frustrations and dreams.

Widely circulated lyrics that appeared on cultural T-shirts also included *wode weilai bushi meng* ("My future is not a dream"; see Figure 1) and *genzhuo ganjue zou* ("I only follow my feelings"; see Figure 2). These are more mellow and lighter songs, popularised by Zhang Yusheng and Su Rui, respectively. Both are Taiwanese singers. They shared the central themes of the cultural T-shirts in terms of centring individual feelings on the map of socially communicable signs. The lyrics of these songs also touch on freedom, self-expression and hope, all prominent themes of the cultural T-shirts of the time.

A variety of other phrases came from sayings of political figures, e.g., Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping or model workers like Lei Feng, such as *dui tongzhi xiang chuntian yiyang wennuan* ("Treat comrades like the breeze in spring"), *buguan heimao baimao, neng zhuadao laoshu jiushi haomao* ("Black cat, white cat – It doesn't matter as long as it catches mice"), or *wei renmin fuwu* ("Serve the people"). These were likely emulations of Cui Jian's enigmatic mix of rock and roll with Maoist accessories worn by the Red Guard. The intent of such repackaged messages can be interpreted in two completely opposite ways. At face value, as authoritarian propaganda, they appear politically correct. But they could also be interpreted as the disguised social satire favoured by politi cal dissidents and grey culturalists (see Schell 1992). This ambiguity shielded these fashion messages to some extent from censorship and thus enhanced their appeal and popularity.

Some phrases added to or slightly modified heroic or political slogans, such as *yi bu paku, er bu pasi, san bu pani* ("Firstly, I am not afraid of bitterness. Secondly, I am not afraid of death. Thirdly, I am not afraid of you"). The original slogan "Firstly, I am not afraid of bitterness. Secondly, I am not afraid of death" was published by Renmin Daily in 1965 to stimulate heroism and patriotism and call on the people to sacrifice for the country. The added portion ("I am not afraid of you") once again could be read in opposing ways: the toughness and determination communicated in the original phrase can be car-

ried over to the wearer, but the pronoun "you" might also be interpreted as the political authorities. In that case, this toughness and determination totally change their target and purpose.

Figure 1: The cultural T-shirt message reads *wo de weilai bushi meng* ("My future is not a dream"). Photo taken in the early 1990s in Beijing by and courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

Figure 2: The cultural T-shirt message reads *genzhuo ganjue zou* ("I only follow my feelings"). Photo taken in the early 1990s in Beijing by and courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

A narrow space for rebellion

These widely circulated T-shirt messages instantly alarmed the authorities that monitored trade. Holding stability as its core principle, the government was suspicious of anything that was capable of mobilising the masses or anything that attracted wide public attention, due to its potential for disrupting the social or political equilibrium. News reports from Taiwan and overseas interpreted the T-shirt slogans as expressions of dissatisfaction with and silent protests against the government (see Wang 1992). At this point the issue had already crossed the border of fashion into the nation itself. Media attention from overseas elevated the fashion controversy to a matter of political and foreign affairs, which made governmental intervention more likely. The issue was dealt with promptly by the Beijing Administration for Industry and Commerce, which began to confiscate and ban the products, fine vendors and appeal to the public to refrain from wearing these cultural T-shirts. In addition, the journalist and student who first developed these T-shirts were detained (Wang 1992, Schell 1992). However, as Lin Wang (1992) observed, governmental intervention also resulted in a backlash, resulting in a doubling or tripling of the prices of the T-shirts on the underground market.

Mainstream newspapers such as the *Economic Daily* employed a critical tone, as in the opinion piece published in July 1991 by Ya Rong (1991) entitled "This 'Cultural T-shirt' Phenomenon". It refuted the view that these T-shirt

messages should be treated as a private matter, a question of harmless, self-effacing entertainment. The author argued that these cultural T-shirts had crossed the boundary of dress and become a form of "cultural pollution", selling ideas that were counterproductive to China's reform. Rong also expressed concerns over how these T-shirts might affect China's image abroad. Thus, he called for the intervention of the "relevant entities" to ensure that the designers and producers of cultural T-shirts abide by their "social responsibilities". Similar opinions were also expressed in Yi Xian's (1991) "Worrisome Cultural T-shirts" in the *China Youth Daily* and in Yushi Mu's (1991) "'The Cultural T-shirt' and 'Anti-Culture'" in the Beijing *Youth Daily*, both also published in July of 1991, confirming this as the peak time of popularity of cultural T-shirts and the beginning of governmental intervention. As Yi Xian put it:

> Desires for novel and differentiable forms of dress are justifiable. But the current cultural T-shirts on the streets are beyond the realm of adornment. What they express is a kind of cultural consciousness that is out of sync with our societal milieu. Other than contagious decadent emotions, what else can you gain from these dark, murky, passive and cynical words? They reflect neither our national spirit nor any meaningful pursuit of beauty. Regarding our country, there are certainly unsatisfactory aspects of our spiritual or material living conditions. Needless to say, it is also a known fact that all our people are pulling together to achieve the four modernisations, which is our national goal. Thus, any forms of promotion or exaggeration of certain negative factors, especially the use of cultural T-shirts to spread their effects, go against our current cultural atmosphere. (Xian 1991)

Considering the close publication dates and formulaic writing, this wave of criticism in July of 1991 might have been a coordinated effort from the highest levels of state media. Though the three aforementioned opinion pieces were not identical, the similarity of their arguments invites a reasonable suspicion of the claimed identity of the authors. The names of these authors resembled the preferred pennames of the editorial teams of the newspapers, with meanings conveying either a moral or a nationalist connotation.[2] Moreover, all of them were published in a section featuring essay contests, likely disguised as voices of readers. The three essays all began in a similar fashion, detailing an unexpected encounter with a cultural T-shirt and its cynical, mocking or nonsensical message. The authors then acknowledged the right of individuals to choose how to dress themselves via the pursuit of fashion. This acknowledgement was in line with the state promotion of the "emancipation of the mind" at the time, which greatly relaxed control over what ordinary Chinese chose to wear. However, the authors then proceeded to argue that the cultural T-shirts were more than a matter of fashion, which, in their view, was synonymous with beautifying the body. Criticism of the misalignment of the T-shirt slogans with the proper optimistic attitudes toward the nation's political and economic agen-

2 One of the names, Yi Xian, for instance, could mean "righteousness" and "obligations". Another name, Ya Rong, could mean "glorious Asia" or "making Asia prosperous".

das followed. Mu further asserted that "from that silent teasing, people sense a sulking rage. It uses dark humour to blaspheme and mock beauty, elegance and all of our established values. In this sense, the 'cultural T-shirts' reflect an 'anti-culture' attitude" (Mu 1991). Thus, the authors stressed the urgency of governmental intervention in the production and circulation of cultural T-shirts. Furthermore, the young wearers were told to face the reality of hardship instead of escaping into a fantasyland.

Given that the wearers of cultural T-shirts were mainly fashion-seeking youth who merely chased fads for the thrill and without ill intent, the tone of the criticism was generally mild. All three authors referenced the West. Both Xian (1991) and Rong (1991) pointed out that Western T-shirts in China were printed with images of the American Stars and Stripes, the rising sun of Japan or the Union Jack but never with the Chinese flag, an omission that was also viewed as somewhat problematic. The authors' (misguided) perception of T-shirts as a symbol of patriotism in the West was held up as a positive example for Chinese youth to imitate. In this case, the supposed Western example was not to be blamed; it was the imitator, who deviated from the "intended" patriotic use of the T-shirts. However, Mu (1991) argued that the cultural T-shirt phenomenon was part of a shared, anti-establishment, rebellious mindset of the twentieth century, as manifested in art or social movements, such as Dada and the hippie movement; only the wealthy West, the writer insisted, could afford to let their people indulge themselves in the "luxury" of rebelling without a cause.

Most interestingly, in June of 1991, when cultural T-shirts were first discussed in the Chinese media, the reports were promotional instead of critical. A piece entitled "'Cultural T-shirt': The Hottest", authored and photographed by journalist Liu Xi (1991), was published by *China Youth Daily*. The same kind of T-shirt messages – e.g., "I am fed up, leave me alone", "My big family depends on me" or "sour, sweet, bitter, spicy" – were generously interpreted as a way to release stress, balance the mind, laugh at failure and tolerate others. The author regarded the exaggeration expressed in these messages as a form of humour. Similarly, Li (1991) observed various new fashions through a positive lens in "Let Your Pizzazz and Coolness Shine", published by *Beijing Youth Daily* in June 1991. Though the round-neck white T-shirt[3] was thought by the wearer's parents to be too showy and might leave a bad impression at work, the author defended the wearer's decision to adopt this refreshing and lively new fashion. Though the media generally took a pro-fashion stance in the 1990s, scorn was occasionally expressed over imported fashions or styles that were deemed a form of "spiritual pollution", as in the case of imported T-shirts. A commentary entitled "Foreign Decorations and Your Worth" (Luo 1991) in the *China Youth*

3 Based on the timeline suggested by Wang (1992), the beginning of June 1991 marks the first appearance of cultural T-shirts on the market. Thus, the round-neck white T-shirt mentioned in this piece is likely not the cultural T-shirts, but a precedent form.

Daily derided T-shirts printed with English that the wearer, attempting to display a sense of superiority, actually failed to understand – such as "Big mate" or "HardWard".[4] And the author ridiculed a consumption attitude that blindly favoured anything imported from overseas.

Table 2: Sample publications in Chinese newspapers on T-shirt fashion in the early 1990s

Publication Date	Publication Title	Publication Source
12 May 1991	"Foreign Decorations" and Your Worth	*China Youth Daily*
4 June 1991	Let Your Pizzazz and Coolness Shine	*Beijing Youth Daily*
25 June 1991	"Cultural T-shirts": The Hottest	*China Youth Daily*
11 July 1991	This "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon	*Economic Daily*
17 July 1991	Worrisome Cultural T-shirts	*China Youth Daily*
19 July 1991	The "Cultural T-shirt" and "Anti-Culture"	*Beijing Youth Daily*
31 August 1992	Rock and Roll on the Round-Neck T-shirts	*Beijing Evening News*
1992	The "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon in the Capital Bejing in 1991	*Youth Study*
1992	Investigation into the Development of Youth Pop Culture: Starting from the "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon	*Youth Study*
1994	Cultural T-shirts: A Deep View into the Hearts of the Youth	*China Soft Science*

Source: Compiled by author, critical publications are shaded in grey.

By the summer of 1992, criticisms of cultural T-shirts had largely faded away. Promotional, investigative or explanatory essays on the topic could still be found in various sources ranging from newspapers to academic papers. The evolving attitude of the media toward this phenomenon was clearly shown in the titles of the publications shown in Table 2. Several factors might have contributed

4 Likely a misspelled word for "Harvard" or "Hardware". The author of the commentary translated it as "hardware" in Chinese.

to this turnaround. First, the exponential growth in the number of T-shirt messages made it pointless to implement the initial ban on the 34 specific messages (Wang 1992). There was a lack of explicit criteria to judge the newly invented messages from a legal standpoint. Second, even within the government, opposing viewpoints existed over how the cultural T-shirt phenomenon should be handled.

One viewpoint supported the banning of these T-shirts because they besmirched the image of the nation and corrupted socialist morals, but it was also recognised that this approach would not completely erase people's negative emotions. Another viewpoint regarded the cultural T-shirts as a true expression of real feelings and thus an effective channel for the government to understand its people (Wang 1992). There was also the opinion that one should acknowledge the right of the individual to make fashion choices to express one's personality or even to vent negative feelings (Jiao 1991). Jiao (1991) further emphasised the increasingly prevalent use of cultural T-shirts to enthusiastically promote patriotism and socialist morals or to proudly identify with one's social group.

Thus, instead of rejecting cultural T-shirts, many embraced them for constructing an "upright" image. This attempt "to repackage traditional Marxist messages in pop-culture wrappings" (Schell 1992) is a common strategy of the state to acculturate any new forms of social invention. These repurposed uses of the cultural T-shirt by individuals or government-affiliated entities, such as the military, universities, media groups, etc., greatly diluted the rebellious messages that initially made a strong impression. Even though cultural T-shirts continued to be worn, the rebellious aspect of the fad faded. For this very reason cultural T-shirts lost their appeal to fashion innovators, and the threat they posed to social stability was neutralised. Thereafter, cultural T-shirts found their freedom to express individuality only within the confines of social appropriateness and political correctness.

Cultural T-shirts had much in common with the big posters of Chinese characters of the "Democracy Wall" movement in 1978: both represented young voices from the grassroots finding unexpected avenues of expression, representing desires for both freedom of speech and influence in the public arena. Though the two movements/fads had distinctively different motives (i.e., political vs. financial), both were short-lived rebellions. Interestingly, the big character poster movement, which explicitly expressed grassroots criticism of the political system and supported individual rights,[5] was at first tolerated by the authorities, perhaps in the interest of the newly issued calls to "emancipate the mind" by the Deng regime, as well as its aim of maintaining an open-minded image. The cultural T-shirt phenomenon was scrutinised with the same criteria: on the one hand, the principle of anti-Westernisation was not to be challenged in political or

5 According to Lei Guang (1996), in the Democracy Wall movement young activists held the view that democracy was a necessary condition for the nation's power and prosperity. Thus, it was more nationalistically than democratically motivated. Only a few activists marginally emphasised individual rights.

social spheres; on the other hand, minds needed to be emancipated and bodies refashioned to revive the economy and align with the reformist image. However, as there were no explicit criteria for judging what was intrinsically Western and what could be safely acculturated to fit a socialist agenda, controversies, negotiations and struggles arose in the creation and adoption of new ideas and forms of fashion.

Gendered choices of T-shirt messages

Though the T-shirt is a gender-neutral garment in terms of cut, colour and fabric, young Chinese females and males indicated their gender preferences via their T-shirt messages. Instead of expressing cynicism or negative emotions, women tended to choose romantic or cute messages, such as "I am a tiny, tiny birdie", "I am an innocent little girl", "Kiss me", "Don't forget me" (Wang 1991, Jiao 1991) and "Teasing you" (see Figure 3).

Despite being worn on female bodies, these were nothing like the feminist messages one would encounter on any Western T-shirts, which often challenged the status of women, although they were frequently criticised as commodifying deep sociopolitical issues. In an analytical essay on "the meaning of the feminist T-shirt" Trine Kvidal-Røvik (2018) argued that through their placement on a fashion item (with its inherent ambiguity), sociocultural messages were able to reach places normally unreachable by other forms of sociopolitical resistance precisely because of the identity of their fashion "host". However, in the case of Chinese cultural T-shirts, messages favoured by urban women went against the idea of "everyday forms of resistance" (see Scott 1985). These cultural messages worn by Chinese women appeared playful, light-hearted or even flirty.

It seemed to be a natural choice of young women, who took a more restrained approach, to release bottled-up emotions onto T-shirts. Compared with men, they were more used to hiding their emotions, as the public sphere had never been a level playing field on which they could showcase their wisdom, creativity or true feelings. In addition to feeling less ownership of the public sphere, women were further confined by the predominant social attitudes about proper womanhood: an emphasis on endurance and sacrifice that was in sharp contrast to the self-indulgent enjoyment or complaints that were the prevailing sentiments initially carried by cultural T-shirts. Most women habitually removed themselves from the forefront of confrontation with political or societal problems. Women's cultural T-shirts were thus more "fashion" focused, featuring less controversial and more commodified messages.

This public sharing of a slice of the romantic self by women via T-shirts was positively interpreted, as it corresponded with the common understanding of

contemporary femininity in China. By this time, women had made a new return to their non-confrontational and instrumental role thanks to fashion, to some extent. Serious debates over how fashion might objectify or enslave women were also hard to find. Systemised promotion of the extreme sensuality and desirability of fashion became the norm, fuelled by a booming fashion industry. Young women who were addicted to fashion gave no thought to the question of whether they were adorning their bodies for men or for themselves. What was ultimately important was whether the fashions they wore were the latest, the priciest and the most desired – much as the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping had dismissed the legitimacy of the question of whether a market economy belonged to capitalism or socialism. In the end, urban women's growing power in both the family and society simultaneously fed into the independent image of fashion, while fashion rewarded them in turn with a sense of individual empowerment.

Men also indulged themselves in the pursuit of the latest fashions, as well as in getting their kids into the best schools and purchasing the most desired flats. The government seemed to be steering society as a whole in the direction of consumerism, quite possibly via various political slogans promoted at different times, such as "focusing on the central task of economic development", "avoid self-inflicted setbacks" and "harmonious society". The rapid growth of material wealth anaesthetised most Chinese and gave them a false sense of empowerment. The relaxation of controls over fashion further enhanced this sense of empowerment for both men and women.

Figure 3: The cultural T-shirt message on the girl reads *dou ni wan* ("Teasing you"), the one on the boy *wo dengshang le Nantianmen* ("I have been to Nantianmen"). Photo taken in the early 1990s in Beijing by and courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

Conclusion

The cultural T-shirt phenomenon perfectly embodied the ideological struggle over the extent to which Chinese could comfortably Westernise, both in terms of outward appearance and inward spirit. Though the journalist who first produced these cultural T-shirts did mention that the creation of the fashion was in part motivated by the events of June Fourth (Wang 1992), the cultural T-shirts were primarily used by youth as a novel form of communication, an outlet for individualistic expressions of emotions, frustrations, dissatisfaction, grievances, aspirations, humour and love. This fad was interpreted as a "youth rebellion" because the cynical image depicted on the cultural T-shirts deviated from the optimistic, reformist image that was promoted by the government – which resulted in their official ban. In this sense, the cultural T-shirts were a tool, disguised as fashion, for youth to resist and reject the government-prescribed "positive" image. It was a tool that empowered Chinese fashion consumers as creative individuals to acquire an uncensored platform (at least initially) through which to communicate their otherwise neglected feelings. It also served as a refreshing outlet of self-expression for those who felt adrift and alienated in the currents of economic reform.

The singular importance assigned to economic development and the acquisition of wealth in the 1990s, coupled with the fact that fashion's inherent ambiguity provided a sort of shield against moral attacks, led to increasing freedom in the field of fashion. Dress became more revealing and transparent on the body and increasingly sexualised and provocative on the pages of magazines. It seemed as though moral decadence in fashion was no longer a red line, at least not in terms of the endless pursuit of global luxuries or the encroachment of sexuality into public spaces. But fashion's invasion into the political sphere, as was the case of cultural T-shirts (interpreted as a form of criticism or protest against the government) clearly crossed the line. The cultural T-shirt, as well as similar examples of self-expression, such as the Democracy Wall, was only one of the many conditioned stimuli that could evoke a nearly guaranteed response from the authorities. This demonstrated the continuing power dynamic between the state and the people. Chinese youth rebellion leaked through the tightened fist of the censoring party into fashion, rock-and-roll and other forms of pop art. As in the song "Nothing to My Name", perhaps even something initially intended as apolitical could end up being interpreted politically and thus enhance its appeal as a symbol of social rebellion among the youth.

Nevertheless, the cultural T-shirt phenomenon represented a short-lived empowerment of young individuals who fashionably resisted the prescribed upright image. This phenomenon simultaneously signalled the end of the idealistic era of the 1980s and the beginning of an era of Chinese "entertainment spirit" from

the 1990s onward. The spirit of criticism and rebellion that attracted intellectuals in the 1980s was manifested in certain genres of literature (such as *shanghen wenxue* ("scar literature") and *menglong shi* ("misty poems"); see Chen / Song 2000) and in the feverish absorption of Western philosophies.

But under tightened control in the aftermath of June Fourth, critical and rebellious spirits co-opted the various forms of entertainment to give birth to a new zeitgeist. This new entertainment spirit presented itself in shadowy, cynical and humorous forms in visual, verbal and non-verbal fields, such as literature (e.g., novelist Wang Shuo), cinema (e.g., actor and director Zhou Xingchi), fashion (e.g., cultural T-shirts) and, more recently, on social media. When the realm of politics was not a viable creative outlet, Chinese indulged themselves in other forms of creation, including fashion, which was perhaps an area that had the least political surveillance. But when politics began to encroach upon fashion, it was not surprising that Chinese fashionistas quickly replaced subversive cultural T-shirt messages with conspicuously placed luxury brand logos in that deeply commodified and apolitical period in China of the early 2000s, before the country began to lurch back towards Mao in the Xi era.

References

Bao, Mingxin / Juanjuan Wu / Li Ma / Shu Yang / Di Wu (1998): *Zhongguo Qipao* [*Chinese Qipao*]. Shanghai: Shanghai Wenhua Chubanshe.

Bian, Xiangyang (2014): *Zhongguo Jinxiandai Haipai Fuzhuangshi* [*History of Shanghai Style of Dress in Modern China*]. Shanghai: Donghua Daxue Chubanshe.

Blumer, Herbert (1968): Fashion. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 5, pp. 341–345.

Cerbone, David R. (2013): Phenomenological Method: Reflection, Introspection, and Skepticism. In: Dan Zahavi (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*. Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press (online version), http://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/97801995-94900.013.0002.

Chang, Eileen (2003): A Chronicle of Changing Clothes. Translated by Andrew F. Jones. *Positions* 11(2), pp. 427–441.

Chen, Sihe / Song, Mingwei (2000): Wusi Jingshen de Chongxin Ningju: "Zhongguo Dangdai Wenxueshi Jiaocheng" Zhi Shi [The Reemergence of the May Fourth Spirit: "History of Chinese Contemporary Literature", Series of Ten]. *Wenyi Zheng Ming* 3, pp. 39–45.

Crist, Janice D. / Tanner, Christine A. (2003): Interpretation. Analysis Methods in Hermeneutic Interpretive Phenomenology. *Nursing Research* 52(3), pp. 202–205.

Eicher, Joanne B. (2010): Introduction to Global Perspectives. In: Joanne B. Eicher / Phyllis G. Tortora (eds): *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 3–10.

Faiers, Jonathan (2016): Sartorial Connoisseurship, the T-shirt and the Interrogation of Luxury. In: John Armitage / Joanne Roberts (eds): *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 177–198.

Fetterman, David M. (2020): *Ethnography: Step-by Step*. 4th edition. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Guang, Lei (1996): Elusive Democracy: Conceptual Change and the Chinese Democracy Movement, 1978-79 to 1989. *Modern China* 22(4), pp. 417–447.

Harris, Alice (1996): *The White T.* New York: Harper Collins.

Jiao, Runming (1992): Cong "Wenhuashan" Xianxiang Tanjiu Qingnian Liuxing Wenhua de Fazhan [Investigation on the Development of Youth Pop Culture: Starting from the "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon]. *Qingnian Yanjiu* 4, pp. 7–12.

Kramer, Stephanie (2015): Marlon Brando. Bloomsbury Fashion Central, Fashion Photography Archive. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350934429-FPA346 (accessed 25 March 2021).

Kvidal-Røvik, Trine (2018): The Meaning of the Feminist T-Shirt: Social Media, Postmodern Aesthetics, and the Potential for Sociopolitical Change. *Media and Communication* 6(2), pp. 210–219. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i2.1302

Laing, Ellen Johnston (2003): Visual Evidence for the Evolution of "Politically Correct" Dress for Women in Early Twentieth Century Shanghai. *Nan Nu* 5(1), pp. 69–114.

Laverty, Susann M. (2003): Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2(3), pp. 21–35.

Li, Qiang (1991): Liangchu Nide Xiaosa Lai [Let Your Pizzazz and Coolness Shine]. *Beijing Qingnian Bao*, 4 June 1991.

Liu, Xi (1991): "Wenhuashan" Zhishoukere ["Cultural T-shirts": The Hottest]. *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, 25 June 1991.

Luo, Shuang (1991): "Yang Dianzhui" yu Shenjia ["Foreign Decorations" and Your Worth]. *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, 12 May 1991.

Matusitz, Jonathan (2010): Semiotics of Music: Analysis of Cui Jian's "Nothing to My Name," the Anthem for the Chinese Youths in the Post-Cultural Revolution Era. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43(1), pp. 156–175.

Mu, Yushi (1991): "Wenhuashan" Yu "Fan Wenhua" [The "Cultural T-shirt" and "Anti-Culture"]. *Beijing Qingnian Bao*, 19 July 1991.

Pan, Feng (1994): Wenhuashan: Dongxi Qingnian Xinfei de Chuangkou [Cultural T-shirts: A Deep View into the Hearts of the Youth]. *Zhongguo Ruan Kexue* 11, pp. 118–120.

Presley, Ann / Jenkins, Martha (2011): The T-shirt: Canvas for Signs of the Times. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* 4(2), pp. 141–150.

Rong, Ya (1991): Ruci "Wenhuashan" Xianxiang [This "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon]. *Jingji Ribao*, 11 July 1991.

Schell, Orville (1992): Shake, Rattle, Roll in Post Tian An Men China: Cui Jian and a Rock and Roll Underground Keep on Playing for Change. *Los Angeles Times*, 15 November 1992.

Scott, James C. (1987): *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven / London: Yale University Press.

Sebag-Montefiore, Clarissa (2014): Cui Jian, the Godfather of Chinese Rock 'n' Roll, Talks about Tiananmen: "Nothing to My Name" Became the Unofficial Anthem of Student Protesters in 1989. *Wall Street Journal*, 5 June 2014. https://www.wsj.com/articles/cui-jian-the-godfather-of-chinese-rock-n-roll-talks-about-tiananmen-1401969989 (accessed 7 April 2022).

Sewell, Dennita (2010): T-Shirt. In: Valerie Steele (ed.): *The Berg Companion to Fashion*. Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 690–692.

Steele, Valerie (2005): Fashion. In: Valerie Steele (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*. Volume 2. New York: Scribner, pp. 12–13.

Steele, Valerie / Major, John (1999): *China Chic: East Meets West*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Wang, Lin (1992): 1991 Nian Jingcheng "Wenhuashan" Xianxiang [The "Cultural T-shirt" Phenomenon in the Capital Bejing in 1991]. *Qingnian Yanjiu* 4, pp. 1–6, 12.

Welters, Linda / Lillethun, Abby (2007): Introduction. In: Linda Welters /Abby Lillethun (eds): *The Fashion Reader.* Oxford: Berg, pp. xviiii–xxiii.

Whittick, Olivia (2021): Why Do We Wear Words? Diving Deep into the Relationship between Fashion and Writing. SSENSE, https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/fashion/why-do-we-wear-words (accessed 7 April 2022).

Wu, Juanjuan (2009): *Chinese Fashion from Mao to Now*. Oxford: Berg.

Xian, Yi (1991): "Wenhuashan" Zhi You [Worrisome "Cultural T-shirts"]. *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, 17 July 1991.

Zhang, Fengshe (1992): Yuanlingshan Shang de Yaogun [Rock and Roll on the Round-Neck T-shirts]. *Beijing Wanbao*, 31 August 1992.