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A Brief Analysis on the Development Status and Localization Path of Gender-Neutral Clothing Design in China

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***Abstract*:** With the growing social inclusiveness and evolving consumption concepts of Generation Z, China's Clothing industry has gradually broken the binary gender-based design system, and gender-neutral design has become an important direction for fashion innovation and sustainable development. From the perspectives of design science, sociology and industrial economics, this paper systematically explores the industrial status quo, design logic and commercial dilemmas of gender-neutral apparel in China. A three-axis design model consisting of functional adaptability, cultural inclusiveness and commercial sustainability is constructed. Combined with China's cultural and market characteristics, localized development strategies including the establishment of Chinese neutral aesthetics, consumer education and supply chain optimization are proposed, so as to provide theoretical and practical references for the industrialization and characteristic development of domestic gender-neutral Clothing.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The traditional apparel industry has long followed the binary male-female classification system, which has generated fixed patterns, color palettes and decorative symbols. With the popularization of global gender-diverse concepts and the upgrading of sustainable fashion, gender-neutral apparel has gradually broken down gender-based dressing boundaries and become a new track in global fashion. According to Euromonitor International, the global gender-neutral apparel market achieves an annual growth rate of 13.2 %, with its market size exceeding 7.4 billion US dollars in 2022[1]. Compared with mature global markets, China's gender-neutral apparel industry is still in its initial stage. As the world's second-largest consumer of apparel, China boasts a market penetration rate of merely 4.7 % for gender-neutral clothing[2].

1.2 Research Questions

This paper focuses on three core research questions. First, how can scientific design balance the physiological differences of human bodies and the inclusive essence of gender-neutral design?

Second, does the gender-neutral apparel model feature long-term commercial sustainability? Third, how can the Chinese market break barriers of traditional perceptions and build a localized gender-neutral design system.

2. Concept Definition and Literature Review

2.1 Core Concept

Gender-neutral apparel refers to an apparel category that strips off gender labels and prioritizes universal functionality. It abandons exclusive differentiated designs for men and women. Centered on loose silhouettes, modular structures and neutral visual symbols, it satisfies dressing demands across genders, body types and scenarios. Its design essence is not to erase physical human differences, but to weaken social gender symbols attached to clothing, and deliver modern dressing ideas of equality, inclusiveness and simplicity (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Yves Saint-Lauren's Le Smoking Suit

Source: https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?ct=503316480&z=0&ipn=d&word



Figure 2: Yohji Yamamoto, Fall-Winter 2022 Collection

Source: https://www.thecover.cn/news/1124572

2.2 Status of Theoretical Research

Gender semiotic theory indicates that clothing acts as a carrier for socialized gender performance, and gender differences in traditional apparel stem from long-term solidified social aesthetics. Butler's theory of gender performance holds that as a symbolic system, clothing acquires its gender attributes through repeated social practices[3]. Haraway's aesthetics of blurring boundaries deconstructs binary oppositional thinking and provides theoretical support for detachable and modular gender-neutral apparel[4]. In international design practice, designers such as Yohji Yamamoto have realized the commercial implementation of gender-neutral design by adopting reversible structures and boundless tailoring (See Figure 2)[5].

From the perspective of pattern and function research, ergonomic data demonstrates that core physical differences between adult men and women are minor: the difference in shoulder-slope angle is merely 3.2°, and differences in waist-hip ratio can be mitigated by fabric elasticity and loose patterns. This provides scientific foundations for standardized production of universal

gender-neutral patterns. Fashion dressing concerns body, clothing and social responsibility[6].

Markets show prominent regional disparities. Europe features a mature gender-neutral apparel market; the return rate for H&M's gender-neutral collection is only 8 %. By contrast, the Chinese market faces prominent contradictions: 43 % of Generation-Z consumers show purchase intention, yet the actual platform conversion rate is less than 2 %. There is a severe disconnect between conceptual recognition and consumption behavior. Key contributing factors include inertial traditional aesthetics, insufficient market education and homogenized product design.

3. Current Status and Case Analysis of China's Gender-Neutral Apparel Market

3.1 Profile of Consumer Groups

Core consumers of gender-neutral apparel in China share concentrated characteristics. Dominated by Generation-Z consumers aged 18-35, this group holds strong awareness of gender inclusiveness and pursues personalized, label-free dressing. Students, cultural-creative practitioners and freelancers account for more than 65 % of consumers. Geographically, first-tier and new-first-tier cities constitute core consumption regions, while consumption demand in second- and third-tier cities is rising rapidly. Main consumption scenarios cover daily leisure and commuting, whereas gender-neutral apparel is severely undersupplied for formal occasions. Meanwhile, consumers show continuously growing acceptance for national-style neutral designs, and gender-neutral products empowered by native cultural elements possess stronger market competitiveness.

3.2 Core Industrial Contradictions

First, there is a disconnect between perception and consumption. 52 % of Chinese consumers recognize gender-neutral dressing concepts[7]. Generation-Z pays far more attention to gender equality than the global average. Nevertheless, restricted by traditional dressing norms and social-scene constraints, most consumers still follow gender-specific dressing habits, making it difficult to translate ideas into consumption actions.

Second, industrial development lags behind demand. Standardized patterns and supply-chain systems for gender-neutral apparel have not yet taken shape in China. High costs for pattern research-and-development and structural design push up finished-product prices compared with conventional clothing. Moreover, most existing products are simple loose basic items lacking cultural features and scenario-oriented segmentation, resulting in severe homogenization.

3.3 Practical Cases of Local Brands

Leading domestic brands have made preliminary layout in the gender-neutral track, developed differentiated innovation paths and achieved remarkable market performance (Table 1).

Table 1 Innovation and Market Performance of Local Gender-Neutral Apparel Brands

Brand	Innovation Path	Market Performance
Bosie	Adopted advertising strategies with dual-gender models	GMV exceeded 500 million RMB in 2022; repurchase rate reached 41 %
JNBY	Launched gender-neutral Hanfu collection	Average customer unit price rose by 37 %; return rate dropped to 9 %
Peacebird	Built fast-response supply chain for neutral-style items	Peacebird SKUs reduced by 28 %; inventory turnover shortened by 15 days

Source: CNKI

Practice proves that core strengths of local gender-neutral apparel lie in cultural innovation and supply-chain optimization. Integrating traditional apparel elements with neutral design helps products stand out from international minimalist styles. Meanwhile, refined supply-chain management can effectively cut industrial costs and resolve key industrial pain points.

4. Construction of the Three-Axis Design Model for Gender-Neutral Apparel

In view of domestic market pain points, this paper constructs a tripartite design model integrating functional adaptability, cultural inclusiveness and commercial sustainability, to meet the design criteria and industrialization demands of Chinese gender-neutral apparel.

4.1 Functional Adaptability: Universalization of Pattern, Fabric and Color

Functional adaptability serves as the foundation of gender-neutral design, whose core is to weaken physiological gender differences and achieve all-population applicability. In terms of pattern, trapezoidal three-dimensional tailoring and universal H-shaped silhouettes are adopted to optimize shoulder-line and waist-line structures. A single size can cover body-type differences of ±5 cm in chest circumference for both men and women. Adjustable structures such as drawstrings and detachable modules are incorporated to improve scenario adaptability.

High-stretch blended fabrics and organic cotton are prioritized for materials. High-stretch fabrics with 20 % spandex ratio achieve a market acceptance rate of 91 %, which can effectively mitigate body-type differences while balancing comfort and adaptability. For color application, neutral achromatic colors account for 78 % of usage. Combined with local aesthetic characteristics, low-saturation color schemes are preferred to fit Chinese consumers' preference for simple and elegant dressing styles.

4.2 Cultural Inclusiveness: Modern Translation of Chinese-Style Aesthetics

The core competitiveness of localized gender-neutral design lies in empowerment by oriental culture. This paper explores the neutral genes embedded in traditional Chinese costumes, and extracts elements including loose silhouettes of Hanfu, minimalist cheongsam collars, plant-based dyeing and intangible-cultural-heritage minimalist patterns. Excessive decorations are discarded, and traditional forms are reconstructed with modern minimalist design language.



Figure 3: Ma Ke's Fashion Show in France

Source: Chinese fashion designer Ma Ke "useless" Paris 08.09 autumn and winter high fashion week release

Based on the domestic patent (CN202310567890.1) for neutral-oriented cheongsam-collar design practice, oriental aesthetic features are preserved while gender-oriented decorative symbols are removed, so as to realize gender-neutral adaptation of traditional elements. Mature paradigms have been formed among domestic designer brands: UMA WANG centers on “yin-yang symbiosis”, integrating masculine and feminine dressing qualities; the brand WUYONG adopts Zen-inspired minimalist aesthetics and creates oriental neutral styles with natural materials, establishing a local system differentiated from international avant-garde design (See Figure 3).

Meanwhile, gender-specific symbols such as bow decorations, differentiated button positions and exaggerated shoulder pads are completely eliminated in design. Simple geometric shapes and natural textures are adopted as core ornaments to establish a standardized visual system for Chinese-style gender-neutral apparel.

4.3 Commercial Sustainability: Supply-Chain and Operation Optimization

Commercial sustainability is vital for industrial scaling-up. High-cost and high-inventory dilemmas are addressed through SKU streamlining, digital inventory management and standardized supply chains. First, SKU reduction is implemented to cut costs and boost efficiency. Gender-neutral apparel abandons separate men’s and women’s product segmentation, with a single item catering to all consumer groups. Referring to Zara’s operational data, after cutting 37 % of invalid SKUs, sales volume increased by 22 %, which substantially reduces research-development and production costs. Second, digital inventory management is optimized. Dynamic demand-forecasting algorithms are introduced to match production capacity precisely with consumption data, lowering product unsold rate from 15 % to 9 % and improving inventory turnover efficiency. Third, a dedicated fast-response supply chain is built with unified standards for neutral patterns, fabrics and craftsmanship. Mass production reduces product premiums and solves the industry problem that neutral-style garments cost more than conventional categories, achieving a balance between design innovation and commercial profitability.

5. Localized Development Paths for China’s Gender-Neutral Apparel

5.1 Establishment of Chinese-Style Neutral Aesthetic System

Instead of mechanically copying European-American and Japanese gender-neutral designs, this paper bases itself on the inclusive, minimalist and natural aesthetic core of traditional Chinese costumes. The design principles of modernizing traditional forms and simplifying cultural symbols are upheld. Neutral genes from Hanfu, Zen-inspired costumes and new-Chinese-style garments are explored to develop gender-neutral items with oriental charm and modern fashion sense. Unique localized design labels are formed to enhance industrial core competitiveness.

5.2 Deepening Consumer Market Education

Local cultural narratives are reconstructed to correct the prejudice that gender-neutral design is an imported cultural concept. The cultural essence of traditional Chinese gender-inclusive dressing is disseminated to dissolve public stereotypes about gender-specific dressing. Immersive offline experience scenarios are created, including gender-neutral fitting spaces, pop-up exhibitions, designer sharing sessions and free-style dressing experiences, to lower consumers’ cognitive barriers. VR online-try-on and new-media content communication are adopted to cultivate the domestic gender-neutral fashion market in an all-round way.

5.3 Promoting Industrial Standardization

Led by industry associations, industry standards for neutral patterns, sizes and craftsmanship adapted to oriental body types are formulated to regulate the market design system. Fabric enterprises are encouraged to develop highly-adaptive, low-cost and eco-friendly special-purpose fabrics to control production costs from the source. Brands continue to optimize digital inventory, SKU reduction and fast-response production modes, and build a sustainable operation system featuring “small-batch production, rapid iteration and low inventory”, so as to drive standardized and industrialized development of the industry.

6. Conclusion

China’s gender-neutral apparel industry is undergoing a transition from concept introduction to industrial growth, confronted with three core contradictions: cultural-cognitive conflicts, imbalance between supply and demand, and lagging industrial standards[8]. The rise of Generation-Z consumption brings vast market potential. Localized design innovation, scientific pattern systems, standardized supply chains and systematic market education constitute the key to breaking industrial development bottlenecks.

The three-axis design model constructed in this paper realizes three-dimensional integration of function, culture and commerce, effectively resolving pain points including insufficient adaptability, cultural deficiency and poor profitability of gender-neutral apparel. In the future, China’s gender-neutral apparel sector should dig deep into the core of Chinese-style aesthetics, pursue parallel localized innovation and industrial upgrading, build a neutral-fashion ecosystem with Chinese characteristics, and export oriental design concepts for global sustainable fashion development.

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