



External Space



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Amanda Kung

My Cheongsam

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Amanda Kung tells me when we meet that she was expecting the dim sum restaurant to be more bustling—however, in both channels of her video, she mirrors being mostly alone, except for occasional family members or staff strolling by. There’s a freeing sense in the matter-of-fact way Kung appears on screen, casually munching on food in spots where her family has gathered for meals together, as if re-enacting those experiences without apology or romance is its own defiance as a diasporic person, just existing. Can it be so simple?

(This is both a wish and a proposal.)

I often want a sharper language than “diaspora” to describe these multitudes of experiences, but maybe that’s what has to be done each time, to recall the word and then conjure its specificities in each instance. Diasporic people know about commonality and specificity. Can we ever stop thinking about what we don’t have or might have lost? That can also be a sarcastic tease. For some, the loss is clear and traumatic. Maybe in the vein of useful irreverence, I’m tired of feeling like I’m

The patchwork blocks of bright colour and playful patterns on Kung's cheongsam are decidedly unlike the typical sleek and tight-fitting style associated with the dress. I'm allured by the cheongsam (or qipao in Mandarin, often used to describe the same garment), despite its tendency to be appropriated or eroticized by othering gazes. As if it could ever stand on its own, un-projected upon. The contemporary cheongsam originates from 1920s modernity, colonialism, and European influence in Shanghai and Hong Kong, out of which its confining shape adhered to patriarchal ideas of beauty.¹ At the same time, the garment—popularized by singers, actresses, and upper class women—meant to suggest an independence of the modernizing Chinese woman through fashion.

The cheongsam is far from the only clothing object to exist in these relations (of woman's freedom tied to also performing for a gaze). I have a blue-and-white flowered one hanging in my closet, which I can only imagine comfortably wearing at family occasions or intra-community settings. I like it, still, because it makes me feel femme and "connected to my people," even if that includes being connected to the messiness internal to a culture, like costuming a type of femininity my family wants to enforce and I resolutely reject. Can it mean something different when I, an imperfect subject, wear it? A patchwork of ambivalence. Leave the subject alone.

Kung didn't want to make a fashion object. Her handmade cheongsam is looser and very soft, like pajamas, as she describes. In the video, she seems to wear more than just the garment; the remaking process gives an element of adorning

¹ Khanh Tran, "The Cheongsam and Ao Dai - from Eurasian constraint to nationalist icon," *Honi Soit*, September 16, 2021, <https://honisoit.com/2021/09/the-cheongsam-and-ao-dai-from-eurasian-constraint-to-nationalist-icon>; and Kai Cheng Thom, "How the Cheongsam helped me find my trans womanhood," *Xtra*, October 10, 2017, <https://xtramagazine.com/power/how-the-cheongsam-helped-me-find-my-trans-womanhood-80071>.

herself in her own belonging and an intimate language of chosen fragments, one not as intelligible to the usual story of those parts or outsider gaze. This cheongsam is for eating takeout at home or a communal meal alone.

Lately, I have been thinking about adornment power. Decoration can often be disparaged as surface-level, and as much as it is about being seen, it seems to me equally about obfuscation and refusal, what is not seen. It's about spiritually connecting to materials and signs to survive, like diasporic people often do to connect to their origins. There's an irony in the way that cultures can be exotified "decorations" for some people, but they are woefully only performing pastiches of meaning that will stay elusive to them. We ornament ourselves with much in this world. To paraphrase the artist Jaakko Pallasvuo (known by his Instagram handle `avocado_ibuprofen`), language is a decoration to ward off evil.² This applies to those who grew up not fluently learning their parents' language—the pieces of it you pick up along the way: adorn yourself. Call the evil whatever you like, alienation or distance? (Don't say loss.)

Does decoration protect us?

I have adorned my own body, in permanent and changeable ways, to become a vessel of symbols in this life amongst other vessels. The symbols are a private gathering, all the agencies moving through us; your confidence, and mine. How are we to define ourselves except by what we witness of each other?

Witnessing Kung on video loop eating feels both determined and nonchalant. There's a sense of dry humour in her continual eating: at her grandmother's house, she throws out the takeout container only to begin again; restaurant staff

² https://www.instagram.com/p/CZzw_SEs-JR, Slide 9.

keep taking her order and bringing out plates. Consuming, while representing a material connection to culture through food for Kung, also fits as a metaphor for inventing one's own identity, like: I'm going to keep eating and eating until I feel full in every sense of the word. No leaks, no gaps, no open seams.

Kung knew she wanted to make a cheongsam before the video. She says it's incredibly comfortable to wear. I ask her about the patchwork and sewing process, because I've thought of making my own garments.

“It got very thick—I broke many needles.”

- Joy Xiang