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5 Promoting a Hygienic Dress That Transcends Cultural Life-Worlds: Some Remarks on the Rejection of Western Clothes by a Chinese Minister to the United States in the Early Twentieth Century

> Since the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911, ... the inelegant foreign dress is no longer considered fantastic; on the contrary it has become a fashion, not only in cities where foreigners are numerous, but even in interior towns and villages where they are seldom seen. Chinese ladies, like their Japanese sisters, have not yet, to their credit be it said, become obsessed by this new fashion, which shows that they have more common sense than some men. I have, however, seen a few young and foolish girls imitating the foreign dress of Western women. Indeed this craze for Western fashion has even caught hold of our legislators in Peking, who, having fallen under the spell of clothes, in solemn conclave decided that the frock coat, with the tall-top hat, should in future be the official uniform; and the swallow-tail coat with a white shirt front the evening dress in China. I need hardly say that this action of the Peking Parliament aroused universal surprise and indignation. (Wu, 1914, pp. 158–159)

Taken out of context, these sentences may sound similar to those which a traditionalist Chinese scholar, rejecting Westernization, could have said in the years that followed the establishment of the Chinese Republic. In a period when more and more Chinese intellectuals and entrepreneurs were starting to adopt Western clothing as a symbol of modernity and cosmopolitanism, rejecting the "foreign dress" in such a manner could have been regarded as narrow-mindedly conservative[108]. Yet, Wu Tingfang 伍廷芳 (1842–1922), the author of the above quoted paragraph, wrote a few pages later that "everything that brings the East and West together and helps each to understand the other better is good", and that "mixed marriages of the white with the yellow races will be productive of good for both sides" (Wu, 1914, pp. 184–185)[109].

108 Henrietta Harrison notes that around 1912, "Western-style suits marked the wearer as a reformer or a 'new person'" (Harrison, 2000, p. 51). On the identification of Western clothes with modernity and political reformism, and the evolution of clothes during this period of history, cf. Harrison (2000, pp. 49–60) and Finnane (2007, notably pp. 69–100).

109 One should note here that Wu did not use the term "East" in a manner that would mimic the Western notion of "Orient", and its Saïdian ontological implication of a world being divided into two uneven hemispheres: the "self" and the "other", "the dominant" and "the dominated". As hinted in the second sentence quoted, the East essentially meant for Wu: the Far-East (the land of the "yellow races") or even China alone. East and West should therefore be mainly understood as toponyms that did not embody the entire planet. It is highly improbable that Wu may have had Africa or even the Middle East in mind when he spoke of the East. The Chinese history of the concept of East or Orient (*dongfang* 東方 or *dongyang* 東洋) remains to be written, however one could get a glimpse at the

Furthermore, when one enquires into his background, one can notice that Wu was anything but a traditionalist.

Born in 1842 in Singapore and raised in Hong Kong, Wu was offered since his early childhood an education in-between East-Asia and Europe. After having studied the Confucian classics, he attended a local mission school, which enabled him to later enter St. Paul's College. This foreign and Christian education would then lead him to England, where he was trained as a barrister. Later, he became a key figure in the administration of Sir John Pope Hennessy (1834–1891), governor of Hong Kong from 1877 to 1883. When his Irish friend and protector left the colony, he joined the Chinese Imperial Administration. He worked under Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), the main actor of the "Western"—or more exactly—"foreign affairs" (yangwu 洋務) movement, whose aim was to provide "self-reinforcement" (*ziqiang* 自強) to China thanks to a policy of selective importation of Western technologies and ideas. In this regard, Wu played an important role in the introduction of Western conceptions of law and diplomacy. Appointed Minister to the United States, Spain, and Peru in 1896, he was in the United States until 1902. There he also served a second term from 1907 to 1909. During his time abroad, he was not only an important public figure, who did much to preserve the interest of his government and countrymen at both political and juridical levels, but he was also someone who understood the value of public opinion in modern democratic regimes, and embarked, as a consequence, on a crusade to defend and valorize China in the eyes of the Americans. After he returned to China, he once again played a central role in the political history of the country by winning the non-intervention of foreign powers during the events that led to the collapse of the Empire and the rise of the young Chinese Republic. He would continue to hold important political positions in the new regime until he passed away in 1922.

It is possible to say that Wu was a central figure of Chinese political and intellectual life during the beginning of the 20th century. However, he has never received much academic scrutiny. In China, only three scholars published books on him (Ding & Yu, 2005; Zhang, 2015). Only one monograph has been written about him in a Western language (Pomerantz, 1992). It would not be the place here to discuss the reasons that have led to such a lack of scholarly interest in Wu. However, one must note that all the above-mentioned studies also often neglected or belittled Wu's attitude toward Western social and cultural practices—such as clothing[110]—in focusing on his political achievement and his fight for the modernization and liberalization of

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transformation underwent by this Western notion by considering how it fared in the history of their neighbour: the Japanese (Tanaka, 1993).

110 Regarding bodily practices, previous studies about Wu have mainly insisted on his attitude toward the Manchu queue. This was a highly sensitive political subject, since this hairstyle had been imposed on the Chinese population by the reigning dynasty. By the end of the nineteenth century, cutting one's queue could be regarded as a political gesture that has received much attention from previous research. For a general presentation, see for instance Cheng (2000).

China. These oversights notwithstanding, the problem of what one wears was also a decisive issue not only with regard to modernization, but also in the defence and presentation of one's identity. In the context of an expanding West and colonialism, Jennifer Craik rightly noted that clothes were to become "a weapon in the struggle between colonizers and colonized. First, the colonizers used clothes to impose the authority of 'western' ways; later, local people used indigenous clothes to resist that imposition" (Craik, 1994, p. 26). Departing from this observation, I would like to reverse the above-mentioned academic tendency, setting Wu the diplomat or Minister a little aside, to enquire into Wu as the Western-educated Chinese man who lived in the USA, favoured the convergence of China and the outside world, and yet rejected any form of Western dress. Was he trying to refuse a set of standards imposed on the Chinese by Western civilization? Was he trying to defend through clothing a specific and cultural feature of the Chinese to declare its distance from the West? Both these questions will be answered in the negative. Rather, he was negotiating a "transcultural modernity"[111] where "hygiene" (*weisheng* 衛生) was a key standard.

Before entering into this question more deeply, let us first explain the context of this opening quotation. It is taken from chapter 11 of *America through the spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat* (hereafter *America*), a book written in English on the request of an American friend who had urged him to "write about our country [USA] and to speak of our people in an impartial and candid way": (Wu 1914, pp. ix–x). Entitled "American versus Chinese Civilization", this chapter was to discuss the differences between the conceptions of "civilization" in the West and in China. The text possesses, however, a very peculiar architecture: after quoting several definitions from Western and Chinese authors,[112] and affirming that the West inherited "Civilization" from the

111 This terminology is, of course, not part of Wu's own vocabulary. As a matter of fact, Wu had no use of the term "modernity", be it in English or in Chinese. In his English texts, the adjectives "modern" and "modernized" have very few occurrences, and in them, they should mostly be understood as synonyms for "developed" or "civilized". Wu did not express much concern for the modern times as a *Neuzeit* that would mark a decisive break from the past; the expression "modern times" is even impossible to find under his brush. Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that "Modernity" had not become an established sociopolitical concept (*Grundbegriff*) in the Chinese language at that time. Regarding *transculturality*, this is a very recent notion that has had many interpretations, and sometimes very loose frontiers. Here, I use it in the sense that cultures are absolutely not "internally cohesive, homogenous, self-contained, or hermetically sealed against influences" (Flüchter, 2015, p. 2), and that, furthermore, they are not congruent to nation states. They are rather "multilayered system[s] of rules (meanings, values, views, habits) and things (symbols, products, tools) that people apply or use in daily life" (Éigeartaigh, 2010, p. 8). With the label "transcultural modernity", I imply that Wu was not envisioning the world in the manner of a global competition for progress—a logic in which every national culture would walk its own path in a teleological framework. He rather understood history as the very process of an unraveling civilizational progress made possible by circulation and exchange between cultural units.

112 It is not written in the text but "the Chinese ideals of a truly civilized man" he speaks of are

East,[113] Wu embarked upon a description of the distinguishing features of the American people. They were presented as earnest, perseverant, and geniuses in organization. It is here, in the middle of the chapter, that Wu had a sentence of much interest for us: "As civilized people have always found it necessary to wear clothes I ought not to omit a reference to them" (Wu, 1914, p. 154). Yet, in this text Wu does not give a simple "reference". His comments about clothes stand for the entire second half of the chapter. He also explained having "submitted a memorandum to President Yuan" Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916) in 1913, protesting against the Westernization of clothing in the Chinese Parliament. The reform of clothing was as such located at the core of the question of civilization, a new and contested concept that had been moulding intellectual debates all around the world since its rise during the 19th century[114].

Presenting the problem of civilization under the theme of clothing is not trivial,[115] and what a twenty-first-century reader could consider as anecdotal appeared of much importance for Wu. Speaking of one's own civilization and the civilization of the other implied giving much thought to this problem. Clothing was, after all, a concept that served as a standard to consider and conceptualize the organization of the world and to justify European colonialism. Furthermore, this concern for civilization through the angle for clothes is to be found in several other works of Wu. For example, in his *Plan to reform the Chinese Republic* (1915), he notably wrote a chapter dedicated to "the appropriateness of costumes" (*fuzhi zhi shiti* 服制之適體)[116]—a chapter that was twice as long as the one dealing with "duties and liberties". Wu's (1914/1993) book,

mainly defined through quotations taken from canonical Confucian texts, such as the *Analects*, the *Mencius* or *The Great Study* (Wu, 1914, pp. 145–146).

113 This affirmation has since puzzled many of Wu's readers, as he remained here very obscure in his meaning.

114 The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, in particular, saw the rise of debates in which the often very loosely defined notion of "civilization" served as intellectual weapon—the most famous for a Western reader being probably the opposition between the French *la Civilisation* et the German *Kultur* during the World War I. For a general introduction to the history of this concept and its political consequences in the West, see Bénéton (1975); Fisch (1992) and Pauka (2012). Regarding how this concept affected non-Western societies, see Gong (1984); Mazlish (2004) and Pernau (2015). Wu was clearly aware of this contested history and of how "civilization" served the narrative of Western powers. In 1903, he lamented: "Civilization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like liberty in the eighteenth, is one of those catchwords that have been used to cover up all sorts of wickedness. What crimes have not been committed in the name of civilization?" (Wu, 1903, p. 190)—a sentence directly echoing the famous catchphrase by Madame Roland—"O Liberty how many are committed in thy name!".

115 "Civilized" was often used as a synonym of "Western" in matter of clothes and social practices. Furthermore, the issue of "what to wear" has been, as a matter of fact, a key problem not only in locating oneself in the civilization narrative but also to define one's identity in many lands around the world. For a comparative approach, see for instance the case of India (Tarlo, 1996).

116 In this text, one can find the reproduction of the above-mentioned petition (Wu, 1993, pp. 615–618).

New techniques to prolong life (*Yanshou xinshuo* 延壽新說), also had a small chapter about clothes (pp. 556–557)[117]. Finally, he did not simply write about clothes, but also showed them. Among the five illustrations displayed in *America*, four of them related to the question of clothing (Wu, 1914).

The very extensive room occupied by Wu's comment on clothing may have something intriguing within it for the historian working on modern Chinese intellectual debate regarding the differences and similarities between China and Western countries. Unlike the abounding literature published in China around the same time on the differences and similarities between hypostatized East and West, Wu tried neither to build a system of dichotomies, nor to oppose the Chinese and the Americans in an articulated series of contradictory values and ideals. He did not explain what the West or China were with an argumentation that would locate a religion or a "spirit" (*Geist*) at the core of every culture. In fact, he wrote in a very joyful, if not humorous, style about petty details of life on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. He simply depicted what was he was witnessing, and had some remarks about the contrast that had emerged in his sketches. However, it seems that despite, or perhaps more exactly because of, his witty and disjointed *bon mots* on the topic, Wu has been cast aside from academic research on this theme. One of Wu's biographers writes that "he was no theorist", that "his consideration on society and culture were … superficial and fuzzy", while his comparison between Chinese and Western cultures "lacked systematicity" (Ding, 2005, p. 351), as if one needed to put on paper a systematic *Weltanschauung* to be "deep" in contemplating a topic.

The aim of this chapter will therefore be to enquire into Wu's texts from a new perspective that will value his rhetoric and anecdotes as direct insights into "cultural differences". It will moreover question how Wu circulated across what appears to be, from our 21st century readers' point of view, multiple cultural identities. Instead of casting Wu away for not being serious enough, let us, on the contrary, take seriously what he has to say on clothing. Perhaps, then, one will realize that he was like the Greeks before him, "superficial—from profundity" (*oberflächlich—aus Tiefe*).

To do so, this discussion will proceed in three moves. I will start by briefly sketching how Wu entered the topic of clothing reform. This will lead us to the problem of how clothes relate to Civilization, understood with a capital C, and why it mattered to Wu. This being clarified, it will become possible to understand how Wu lived and negotiated a transcultural experience of civilization, and the normativity inherent to his conception of the world.

117 As a matter of fact, this text was probably the original version of what Wu (1914) later published in English in the chapter "American clothes" of *America through the spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat*, as both texts show some notable similarities.

5.1 "The Costume Should by no Means be Changed"

To begin with, one must note that Wu's rejection of Western dress and his valorization of Chinese clothing began very early in his career. In both Chinese and English, Wu wrote that he had tried to wear Western clothes when he was studying in England between 1874 and 1877, but he soon abandoned this experience because he "found it very uncomfortable". According to him, "in the winter it was not warm enough, but in the summer it was too warm" (Wu, 1914, p. 141). His attitude toward the topic of clothing already displayed a peculiar attention to "comfort". In November 1900, in an address before the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Wu (1901) also stated that he was "glad that some of the missionaries [in China] have adopted the Chinese dress, which ... is more comfortable" (p. 6). He was at that time commenting on the experience of a missionary that had changed his outfit, in order to avoid "attracting and exciting the curiosity of the natives". Such a comment invites two remarks: first, Wu did not value the missionary gesture because it symbolized an attempt to adapt to the Chinese life-world, but because it was the right and rational choice. Second, this advocacy of Chinese clothes as being somehow superior to the Western costume was quite original in the intellectual landscape of the time—especially among the reformist intelligentsia.

Indeed, the idea of reforming the official dress code had been in the air since China's defeat of 1895 against Japan (Finnane, 2007, p. 69). At the end of the Qing dynasty, many official figures had advocated the abandoning of the Manchu-style official dress (Rhoads, 2000, p. 65). The idea was to rejoin the international standards, notably in diplomatic life. At that time, "even seemingly unimportant differences of tradition and custom, such as dress or diet, sometimes presented obstacles to non-European countries in their quest for 'civilized' status" (Gong, 1984, p. 20). Chinese intellectuals could also take inspiration from their Japanese neighbours, who had soon understood that they needed to abandon their kimonos to accomplish their diplomatic objectives. In his comments about the Iwakura Embassy—the first official diplomatic mission after the Meiji Restoration—Gerrit Gong (1984) notes that

> [i]t took only one appearance before President Grant of the United States on 4 March 1872 to convince them that Western custom dictated Western styled dress, not silk and satin court kimonos. The group did not appear publicly in kimonos again. (p. 179)

The Chinese were facing an even deeper problem, as the official haircut—the queue, mocked in the West as a "pigtail"—was the source of much ridicule and criticism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many revolutionaries had cut off their queue and started adopting Western-style clothes as a means of distancing themselves from reformists. However, cutting one's queue was not always a revolutionary gesture. It was, for instance, needed for Chinese immigrants who had to blend in within their

host countries. It is this situation that led Wu Tingfang to write two memorials to the throne.

The first memorial, written in October 1909, while he was still in the United States, recommended that the hair be cropped but "the costume should by no means be changed" (Wu, 1910, p. 309)[118]. On the matter of clothes in particular, Wu's line of defence was built on three main arguments. First, he used a political argument, as he considered the costume as "being part of the government institution" (Wu, 1910). The question of what to wear held a specific place in Chinese political history. In the *Analects*, Confucius eulogized Guan Zhong 管仲 (720–645 B.C.) on the grounds that, without him, the Chinese would be wearing a barbarian haircut, and buttoning their clothes on the wrong side (Confucius, XIV, p. 17). Furthermore, according to the *Book of rites* (*liji* 禮記), specific clothes were assigned to certain functions and certain rituals. Later on, in the Imperial administration, "the identification of servants of the state with the state itself was partly established by a dress code" (Finnane, 2007, p. 25)[119]. Wu noted that "the Chinese costume dates from ancient times and *attains pre-eminence in the reigning dynasty* [emphasis added]" (Wu, 1910, p. 310). He added that each country had its own history of clothing, and that uniformity on Western standards would not be welcome. On the contrary, the queue was something of "China alone", and therefore should be dismissed. Because the Chinese who lived abroad were still concerned by the regulation on haircuts and clothing—it is in their names that Wu wrote his memorial—one could read this political argument as a form of cultural defence. However, Wu's obvious attempt to flatter the Emperor (see the added emphasis above) may encourage us to read this defence differently. Wu was probably implying that the Chinese Emperor's kingship was still universal, and as such the Chinese would have to abide by Chinese law whatever country they found themselves in. This idea also had a great deal of charm because it suggested a form of extraterritoriality of Chinese law and customs at a time when Chinese authorities could not judge foreigners living on their soil. As these political features would, however, disappear in the second memorial, which was written a year after, it is my impression that they were more rhetorical than argumentative.

The second argument concerned the appropriateness of Chinese clothing to the climate and the passing of the seasons: "With thin wrappers, close garments, short sleeves and long breeches, it ensures a variety of suits all seasons and affords convenience in dressing" (Wu, 1910, p. 310). This point will again be repeated in Wu's later writings about clothing. And finally, the third argument was economical. Western

118 I was not able to locate the original text and therefore used the English translation published in *The North-China Herald*.

119 On how clothes displayed a sense of hierarchy among officials in late Imperial China, see for instance Garret (1990, pp. 19–32), or more substantially Garret (1994), which give an illustrated panorama of clothes worn in China since the 14th century.

clothes were considered "costly" and of poor manufacture, as they "must be replaced a year". Still flattering his reader, Wu noted that "the Government places its wealth among the people and can ill allow it to be imperceptibly sapped away" (Wu, 1910, p. 310). About a year afterwards, Wu renewed his memorial and again stressed these economic and practical arguments, while the political dimension slowly faded away (Wu, 1993, pp. 358–359).

His memorials were received but not heard by the reigning dynasty. However, it was soon to collapse, and the birth of the Republic in 1912 changed the environment in various ways. As Finnane notes, "the fall of Qing dynasty marked a vestimentary as well as a political rupture in China" (Finnane, 2007, p. 15). Within a few days after the uprising that would lead to the birth of the new regime, journals started advertising Western clothes and "civilized" haircuts (Finnane, 2007, p. 97). Western costumes started replacing the official robes for the inaugurations of Presidents of the Republic (Harrison, 2000, p. 50). On October 3, 1912, the Parliament issued a law on "ritual clothing" (*lifu* 禮服), prescribing Western-style clothing for both "great and common ceremonials" (*dali* 大禮 and *changli* 常禮), or "full formal, for major state occasions, and regular formal, for other official events" (Harrison, 2000, p. 58)[120]. Military clothing was also reformed (see 1915, notably pp. 1–5). When the law project was under discussion, much opposition was expressed toward this piece of legislation. The textile industry did much to lobby the Chinese Parliament into integrating a piece of garment that would use more traditional patterns and textiles produced within the nation's borders. In the end, the law specified that all these dresses ought to be made with Chinese fabric. But this was virtually impossible, since at that time China didn't produce the required materials – notably wooden cloth (Wu, 1914, pp. 158–160; Harrison, 2000, pp. 58–60), a point that Wu would raise in a new petition (Wu, 1993, pp. 613–614).

In his new text submitted to the President and the Parliament, Wu defended once again the Chinese dress and rejected the adoption of Western costumes for official events. First, he greatly echoed the sentiments of the textile industry, as it was "an

120 A graphic depiction of these costumes is available in Harrison (2000, p. 59); see also Finnane (2007, p. 96). A sketch of the clothes was added to the legal text (1915), and it is reproduced here (see Figure 5.1). I should note that this material lets us see a facetious aspect of Wu's defence of Chinese clothing. In *America,* Wu (1914) reproduced a sketch of clothes under which it is written that "the uniform suggested by the author and laid before the President and Parliament" (p. 160). However, this sketch corresponds exactly to the pattern presented in the law. It is also exactly the same picture that Harrison (2000) reproduced from the national archive. Elsewhere in *America,* Wu (1914) also reproduced a sketch of a woman wearing the clothes defined by the 1912 law (a picture also reproduced in Harrison's (2000) book). Furthermore, there are no mentions of a sketch in the original Chinese text of the petition. Therefore, one can infer here that Wu embellished his role in the history of Chinese clothing for his American readership. The picture he supposedly submitted to the Parliament was in fact the depiction of what the Parliament had already voted on.

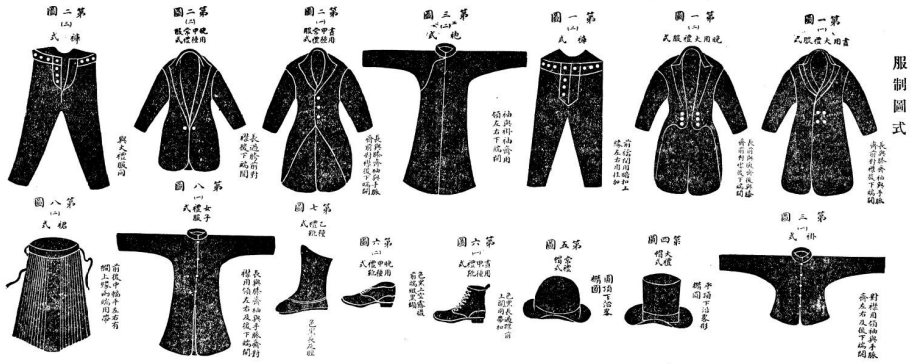

Figure 5.1: The patterns proposed by the Parliament for the new Chinese official clothes

urgent matter to protect the national products" (Wu, 1993, p. 615). He insisted on the fact that this law would endanger the national economy. He attacked the quality of materials chosen by the Parliament. He also mocked the legislators that had only given regulations on the mantels but not on what ought to be worn under them: "A ritual dress doesn't consist only of a coat" (Wu, 1993, p. 616). He would even give some of his own recommendations on the pattern, material, colour, length and items with which to pair these clothes. In the end, this new petition was really focused on the economical dimension of the problem. As always, Wu also added in a few remarks on the comfort of the Chinese dress.

Wu (1915) would reproduce this petition in the chapter he wrote on clothes in his *Plan to reform the Chinese Republic*. But here he explored the subject in still further depth. In the texts that he wrote in 1914—*The Plan, America and New Techniques*—a new theme emerged: the defence of Chinese clothing was explicitly linked to the question of civilization (Wu, 2014b).

5.2 Clothes as Markers of Civilization

In these later texts, Wu started writing that clothing is a distinctive feature of the state of being civilized (Wu, 1993, pp. 556, 613–614). While the people who lived in the age of savagery had settled for poorly designed clothes made from fur and feathers, the pattern and designs of their garments improved with the rise of civilization. While at first they only served to protect the body from the cold, they developed to fit new social purposes. The designs and patterns also evolved differently according to the nature (*xing* 性) of the many different people living on earth (Wu, 1993, p. 613). Unfortunately, aside from this reference to the classical Chinese notion of "nature", Wu did not develop at further length the problem of why clothes evolved differently in the

different corners of the globe, an idea already present in the 1909 petition. He made a few comments on the changes in costumes introduced by foreign invaders, but he did not seem to pay much attention to the general history of clothing in China. He spoke mainly from and about the current situation that he was witnessing.

In *America*, Wu (1914) asked rhetorically: "Why do we dress at all?" His answer to this question was as follows: "First, I suppose, for protection against cold and heat; secondly, for comfort; thirdly, for decency; and, fourthly, for ornament" (p. 132). If the first two elements are also mentioned in his Chinese texts, the third appeared as being particularly addressed to his Western or Christian readership. This formulation is also interesting as he spoke of "decency", when the Chinese text said that we dressed to "avoid looking doltish" (Wu, 1993, p. 556). Wu continued in this section of the text and quoted the Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck (1862–1939)[121] to highlight the idea that clothes are nothing other than a convention. He noted:

> Competent observers have testified that savages who have been accustomed to nudity all their lives are covered with shame when made to put on clothing for the first time. They exhibit as much confusion as a civilized person would if compelled to strip naked in public. (Wu, 1914, p. 135)

It is as if he wanted to say that the fruit of Eden's garden had nothing to do with the matter[122]. Clothes are a convention of the civilized. Modesty is not inborn. Even though this point only continues for two paragraphs, it is important to note it, as it stresses what was already a key feature of Wu's discourse: his attempt to make constant reference to scientific literature. In his footnotes, Wu even linked the reader back to studies related to clothing, notably John Harvey Nickols's *The clothes question considered in its relation to Beauty, Comfort and Health* (as cited in Wu, 1914, p. 155), a book that he quoted to a large extent[123]. Wu (1914) approached the topic of clothes from a supposedly scientific angle.

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121 However he did so probably through second literature, as he did not directly mention Westermarck's name. His quotation of the anthropologist is exactly the same as the one reproduced in the article "Costume" from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1911 (p. 225).

122 It should be underlined that Wu had a serious Christian education background. Several members of his own family, such as his wife and maybe his mother, also deeply believed in the Gospel. However, as rightly noted by Linda Pomerantz (1992), "[i]n spite of subsequent Christian education and baptism as a Christian, he was always far more attracted to the secular traditions of the western world than to its religions, and he maintained that Confucian social values provided a better basis for stability than Christianity" (p. 26).

123 It is worth mentioning that only two books are given proper references, and are not only mentioned in passing in Wu's footnotes, namely this book by Nickols and *The Living temple* by Firstnames Kellogg. These were both pieces of literature that dedicated many pages to the matter of clothes in civilized societies.

Then, Wu (1914) dived into the question: the fourth issue of "ornament". However, he did not pursue a "cultural turn" here. In fact, Wu did not defend Chinese clothes as something that would be part of a tradition, a history, or even an identity. The passage starts with an odd sentence: "The fourth object of clothes is ornament, but ornaments should be harmless, not only to the wearer, but also to other people" (Wu, 1914, p. 136). The question of ornamentation was in fact only considered through the lenses of what is "safe" and "practical". Aesthetics was not even considered for its own sake. If Wu admitted that jewels and ribbons make "a pretty sight", he found that a long gown was not elegant, because it was not practical, as the following quotation shows, "on ceremonial occasions each lady has two page boys to hold the train of her dress" (Wu, 1914, p. 138). In 1901, Wu had already defended to an American journalist that in order to stop having women trails dragging dirt on the street, Americans should "use less cloth at the bottom and more at the top of the dress!" (as cited in The Editor, 1901, p. 265)—a comment that may also have partly to do with decency. To speak about Chinese women's clothes, he quoted a Chinese lady, Dr. Ya Mei-kin, who wrote that Chinese women were keeping their traditional clothes not for the sake of conservatism, but because it was a rational choice (Wu, 1914, pp. 139–140). In regard to men's clothing, Wu seemed to be of the same opinion, and, speaking from experience, he considered that despite not being "perfect", the Chinese clothes for a man were "superior to any other kind of dress" (Wu, 1914, p. 141). As such, if one reads only the chapter on "Costumes" in *America*, one could think that Wu was simply a utilitarian when it came to clothing. He quoted M. S. G. Nickols positively: "First use, then beauty" (as cited in Wu, 1914, p. 155).

Furthermore, there is another dimension of ornament that is important to Wu: namely, the social dimension of clothing. Selecting the appropriate piece of garment according to a certain situation was obviously an issue worthy of consideration for Wu. In the preface to *America*, where he enumerated the different kinds of people that can be found in America, he mentioned, for instance, "the women wearing 'Merry Widow' hats who are not widows but spinsters, or married women whose husbands are very much alive" (Wu, 1914, p. viii). Readers could be tempted to see this sentence only as a worthless anecdote, but anecdotes are the key elements of Wu's rhetoric[124]. This mention in the preface indicates to us that such behaviour was surprising, if not choking, for Wu. As a matter of fact, Wu complained several times that Americans

124 Anecdotes may be regarded not only as a distinctive feature of Wu's writing, but also as an important means he used to take centre-stage in American public opinion. When browsing his interviews and how American newspapers pictured him during his stays, one cannot but notice that these texts are a patchwork of anecdotes regarding his life and practices. After his death, the first "biography" published on him was incidentally a simple collection of anecdotes concerning his life (Chen, 1925). At a more general level, "anecdote" appears as distinctive tropes of the Chinese way of theorizing. On the relation between anecdote, theory, and moral improvement in modern Chinese texts, see Davis (2016, pp. 33–38).

wore their clothes too casually. He wrote as having seen people wearing inappropriate clothes for the social gatherings that they had been attending. He recalled having witnessed "at the White House official receptions or balls in Washington, … ladies in ordinary dress" (Wu, 1914, p. 87). His uneasiness here could be explained by the importance of the ritual system in China. Despite being educated in Hong Kong and in the West, Wu's position in the imperial system may have made him more acutely sensitive to this matter. He believed that one's costume ought to be appropriate to the social situation, a position that led him to accept the idea that the Chinese diplomat ought to wear Western clothes "in order to avoid curiosity, and for the sake of uniformity" (Wu, 1914, p. 160)[125]. In fact, he admired the Japanese, who would dress like Westerners when negotiating in politics, but who continued to wear traditional kimonos at home. To return to the petition, the problem was partly that the dress put forward by the parliament was too loosely defined according to the etiquette of social gatherings (Wu, 1993, pp. 616–617). By clothing oneself in a certain manner and for a specific occasion, one showed how civilized one was.

5.3 Transculturality and Hygienic Normativity

Having noted these different elements, it appears that the question of what to wear was central to Wu in his understanding of civilization[126]. A civilized person could not go wandering about in the world, dressed as he liked—it was a social and health-related issue. It is important to note here that Wu never put forward the defence of Chinese clothes as an attempt to defend a specific feature of China or an identity opposed to the colonial West. Except for the brief remarks in the 1909 memorials—remarks written at a time when the Confucian ritual system was still a key element of the Chinese polity—dresses were not integrated into a political discourse about distinction. The word "civilization" was not even used in an ethnographical sense. Despite Wu's attempts to frame the distinctive features of Americans through comparison with the Chinese, he did not oppose the former to the latter in an essentialist manner. As a matter of fact, in his analysis of both the Chinese and the Americans, he often considered that neither the former nor the latter were right to do as they did, and that a middle ground ought to be found between the two positions. For instance, in

125 However, Wu never did so when he was in this position.

126 Clothing is not, of course, the only entry point that Wu (1914) deployed to discuss the question of civilization. In chapter 12, titled "American versus Chinese Civilization (continued)", he notably proposed over many paragraphs issues related to the problem of nationalism. He engaged in a line of argument that nationalism went against the very principles put forward by the West in her proclamation of "Civilization". He also defended the moral superiority of the Chinese over the Westerners, in a flowery language that is also full of funny remarks.

his eyes, American lacked manners, while the Chinese were too formal, but "a blend of the two would give good results" (Wu, 1914, p. 107).

Wu was negotiating what I have called a "transcultural modernity". Instead of locating "Civilization" with a capital, or what a contemporaneous reader could understand as "modernity", within one specific culture—the West—Wu elaborated a narrative of civilizational displacement. In antiquity, the Orient civilized the West. In the last centuries, it was the West that showed new paths to the ideals of Civilization. But Wu (1914) was "tempted to say that", in the future, "Asia will have to civilize the West over again" (p. 181). What Wu implied in between the lines in this statement was that there is such a thing as progress—he is completely embedded in an evolutionist discourse—but this progress is not the progress of one sociopolitical and cultural entity on a universal ladder of "Civilization", as a competition between countries in a race for modernity. Rather, he charted progress as the course of history, a history enfolded by exchange and circulation between entities located within it. As such, when Wu wrote that "the Chinese have a civilization of their own" (Wu, 1914, p. 40), he wished not to lock up China in her otherness, with her specific values, but on the contrary insisted on the fact that she could be a global actor in the dialogical realization of modernity. As a matter of fact, Wu was a "transculturalist" to borrow a term removed from Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh and Wolfgang Berg (2010, p. 11). He transcended a given culture to explore new horizons and produce a cohesive way of life and *Weltanschauung*, that acted as a junction between different life-worlds. Moreover, it is here that he gave much attention to petty or disregarded social practices such as clothing. Clothes are neither simply a "representation" of values, nor a "transformative instrument". Wearing a tuxedo does not immediately turn you into a modern civilized citizen. However, it does relate to one's understanding of a key element of modernity: *weisheng* 衛生.

Although one cannot find an equivalent to this concept in Wu's English prose, he noted in Chinese that "clothes relate altogether to the problem of *weisheng*" (Wu, 1993, p. 556). This term has often been translated into Western language by "hygiene". However, it encompasses a larger semantic field than this. Furthermore, it also conveys a normative ethical sense. The word finds its original sense in traditional practices of "protecting one's life" (the literal translation of the term) and "nurturing one's life" (*yangsheng* 養生). It referred to "a 'way of health', which depended heavily on knowing how to restrain oneself from indulging in food, drink, or sexual excess, on knowing the right time and place for sitting, sleeping, getting up, moving, eating, and drinking" (Messner, 2015, pp. 236–237; see also Rogaski, 2004, pp. 22–47). *Weisheng* was a real concern for Wu. With the many elements presented in his book *New Techniques to prolong life*, Wu (1914/1993) was proposing to prolong human life and fulfil all of its potential. He was claiming that with proper techniques and a mind at ease, man could live up to 200 years—a claim unfortunately not corroborated by his passing away at the early age of eighty. This was, incidentally, not an eccentricity from a scholar influenced by the Taoist alchemy of old. Many of his references were coming

from newly theorized "healthy practices" in the West, such as vegetarianism[127]. Wu also actively promoted his theories on *weisheng* in the society. The *weisheng* association (*sushi weisheng hui* 衛生會) that he established in Shanghai in 1911 was an important sociopolitical actor that encouraged the ban of dangerous products, such as drugs, alcohol or tobacco (Pomerantz, 1992, pp. 188–190). Wu was completely in symbiosis with the eugenic discourse of his time. At this level, he also participated in a broader attempt to nationalize and modernize the Chinese body (Liu, 2013). Modernity and nationalism implied an improvement of bodily practices: creating a healthy citizen was a step on the way to the creation of a healthy nation. As such, the case of Wu completely fit in the academic literature available on the subject. The concept of *weisheng* or hygiene served as a historical landmark in the modernization of society, a process that Ruth Rogaski has denoted as "hygienic modernity" (Rogaski 2004). Indeed, *weisheng* was a key element of the civilization discourse (Messner, 2015).

It has been shown that the core of Wu's defence of Chinese clothing was not an identity question but a matter of hygiene and safety. While he often insisted on the fact that Americans have poor health and that they easily catch cold (e.g. Wu, 1914, p. 78) he kept on pointing to the fact that Chinese dress changes with the seasons, making it a better defence against the environment. In the passage about "ornament" in *America*, Wu directed much thought to the problem of the safety of one's own body. Clothes are meant to protect a man from certain adverse meteorological conditions and changing temperatures without impeding his life, a term here understood as much in the sense of one's day-to-day activities as in the sense of one's biological existence. It was this last element that led him to a full denunciation of Western clothes as dangerous. According to him, "ladies' dress ... sometimes endangers their lives". In this connection he relates the extraordinary story of a young girl which was propelled in the air by a strong gust of wind that went under her clothes. He also abjured the tight corset binding the waist. He felt "confident that physicians will support [him] in [his] belief that the death rate among American women would be less if the corset and other tight lacing were abolished" (Wu, 1914, pp. 132–134). He even insidiously encouraged women to fight against this type of clothing in the context of the suffragette movement.

Wu's references to the corset are especially interesting because they also show how deeply infatuated Wu was with Western writing. In her biography of Wu, Linda Pomerantz (1992) suggested that Wu may have been deeply influenced by American social purity reformers such as John Harvey Kellog. Like them, Wu "became an advocate of vegetarianism and other 'modern' hygienic practices as a way of cultivating superior morality in individuals and ultimately, in nations" (Pomerantz, 1992, p. 128). Kellog's book, *The Living Temple*, published in 1903, certainly had an enormous impact

127 There is here a striking similarity with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) who also discovered vegetarianism in the West.

on Wu, especially in regard to eating practices. But clothes were also of importance. In this book, one can also find an entire chapter dedicated to clothing (Kellog, 1903, pp. 338–362). The lexicon and the arguments are quite similar to the ones put forward by Wu. They both gave much attention to the question of waist constriction. Yet, there is one small discrepancy that is worth underlining. Kellog wrote that "just as the Chinese women make their feet ridiculously small by compression, so the American woman makes her waist absurdly narrow in the same way" (Kellog, 1903, p. 347). This was an important comparison that can be found in many texts of the American doctor. He pictured the corset as the symbol of the "savage of fashions", and spoke of "the barbarity of popular modes of dress". For him too, clothing was linked to a certain idea of civilization. However, we do not find the foot binding comparison in Wu's writing. In fact, there is not even one reference to foot binding in any of Wu's English writing. It is as if this particular issue did not exist. As such, Wu's defence of Chinese clothing and bodily practices also functioned through some "small" omission[128]. Mentioning foot binding would not have helped his message, in his defence of the view that China was a civilized country and not a semi-civilized one. His discourse defended Chinese clothing but through the codes and argument of the American purity reformers.

One should therefore note that the wish to preserve Chinese clothing, and on the contrary, to reform American clothing, was profoundly linked to his ideology of political reformation, that implies the establishment of normative practices. By defending the civilized dimension of the Chinese dress, he indirectly wanted to impose it. He never said outrightly that Americans ought to clothe themselves like the Chinese did, but he did hint toward the necessity of a clothes reform. As early as 1901, Wu had started encouraging "a great convention" to "have your [American] experts decide what is the best in dress for women, and for men as well" (The Editor, 1901, p. 265). In 1914, the problem "to decide as to the best form of dress for men and women" would become global and concern all countries on earth (Wu, 1914, pp. 142–143). He endorsed a normative attitude toward clothing: the political power, advised by specialists, should take a decision on the topic. His liberalism and valorization of a free choice stopped at the door of the closet. However, when Wu presented to both his American and Chinese readerships his techniques to prolong life, or his recommendation on clothing, he probably did not realize that he was inviting a form of coercion and normativity that would govern the body. Of course, it would be conceptually anachronistic to criticize Wu for not taking into account what Michel Foucault has framed as the *biopouvoir*. Yet, in his defence of the Chinese life-world with its distinctive clothes, social and body practices, which he presented as being more civilized than the practices of Westerners, he was taking a step back in regard to the liberty of

128 Foot binding and the Manchu queue are in fact among the most important elements discussed in the academic literature about the transformation of clothes in Modern China. On the former, cf. Ko (2007).

individuals. He did not see any contradiction here. This is a logical issue that could let us rethink what Wu understood by the concept of liberty.

Last but not least, Wu understood civilization under definite principles. Wu was absolutely insensible to the Baudelairian conception of modernity as a time that passes by, and a way of putting valour in what is new. This point is quite obvious in his rejection of fashion: "Fashion is the work of the devil" (Wu, 1914, p. 131). At that time, fashion in the West was giving much importance to the "Orient". Many couturiers were clearly inspired by Asian clothes, as for instance in 1906, when the great French couturier Paul Poiret even designed an evening coat named "the Confucius" (Steele & Major, 1999, p. 72). Yet Wu rejected the very idea of fashion. The criteria of what is a good piece of clothing were simply established in terms of usefulness and rationality.

Wu remained committed to a universalist approach to civilization. What differentiates one person from another was his ability to understand and to adapt his practices according to the standards of civilization. However, he distinguished several dimensions within the term "civilization", and it is there that he established a hierarchy:

> From a material point of view we have certainly progressed, but do the "civilized" people in the West live longer than the so-called semi-civilized races? Have they succeeded in prolonging their lives? Are they happier than others? I should like to hear their answers. (Wu, 1914, p. 164)

Americans may have had a civilized economy and political systems, and yet their everyday practices were far from being so. They failed to pay enough attention to the question of health and happiness (or living well), two concerns that were crystallized in Chinese under the term *weisheng*. In an important article on the topic of civilization, Prasenjit Duara (2001) has noted that, in their defence of their civilization, Asian intellectuals had to build their argumentation according to two possible strategies. In his view, "[o]ne strategy [was] to rediscover elements identical to civilized society within the suppressed traditions of civilization. … Another strategy identifie[d] the opposite of the West in Asian civilizations" (Duara, 2001, p. 108). Yet, in the case of Wu, we are in between those two strategies. Or to put the matter more exactly, he moved from the latter to the former, in order in the end to dismiss the very distinction from East and West. Chinese clothing was valued without reference to any "Chinese traditions" such as Confucianism or Taoism.

5.4 Conclusion

Harrison (2000) has rightly noted that, in Republican China, "the primary values that Western dress and etiquette were seen as representing were liberty and equality" (p. 54). However, it seems that Wu, who shared these two values and who encouraged their adoption in political life, did not see them in the Western costume. In his 1909

memorial to the throne, he had theorized a distinction between the queue as a "form" and "the spirit" that lays behind it. They were supposed to be two separate things. For him, Chinese in foreign lands could cut their queue, and still harbour a strong sense of nationalism and respect to the emperor. Clothing was different. It was no simple form, but the real embodiment of a distinctive feature of civilization: *weisheng*. Being *weisheng* did not simply mean to import the hygienic standards of the West; rather, it meant living a civilized life in ethical and medical terms. But in matters of clothing, Westerners were absolutely not embodiments of *weisheng*. Therefore, they should not be copied. And in the end, Wu would not be the only Chinese intellectual to criticize Western costumes in English with such a discourse. About two decades later, Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976) would develop almost the same arguments in a chapter entitled "The Inhumanity of Western Clothes" (Lin, 1998, pp. 261–266).

To conclude, one of the distinctive features of Wu's thoughts and deeds, that the problem of clothing has put forward is that, for him, living in the modern world did not mean negotiating one's position between two clearly defined cultural life-worlds. He did not set the issue in the form of an evaluation of what was positive and negative in each culture, in order to later propose a synthesis or to even go cherry-picking. He simply navigated through very blurry cultures with only a compass indicating the direction to Civilization, a promised land that was obviously not in the West. De-territorializing the idea of civilization from the West was a powerful narrative that gave much agency to China. By such reasoning, he thought that China was able to lead the world upon a new and perhaps clearer path to Civilization. As a matter of fact, the problem of China was that she was over-civilized in certain aspects and under-civilized in others. This is a comment that also bears some truth for Wu at the personal level. Despite the fact that he was often mocked by his American contemporaries, he may have been on some aspects more modern or civilized than them. He had, for instance, many pro-feminist remarks to say. He also condemned the violence perpetrated against animals for entertainment. On hunting, he noted that "no country, with the least claim to civilization, should allow such [a] thing, and our descendants will be astonished that people calling themselves civilized should have indulged in such a wholesale and gratuitous atrocities" (Wu, 1914, pp. 264–265). Yet, he did not arrive to these ideas by proposing a fusion of cultural horizons, but by locating every people in a grand narrative that transcends cultures. "Civilization" prevailed over cultural comparison.

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