

LOINCLOTHS AND SILLY SHIRTS: TEXTILE AND DRESS TRADITIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND CONTEMPORARY MALE DRESS

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At this year's Tết (Vietnamese New Year) celebration in Vancouver sponsored by the Vietnamese consulate and attended by hundreds of Vietnamese living in Vancouver it stuck me that while virtually all of the women present wore colorful *áo dài*, only one of the males, the MC, wore clothing that was identifiable as Vietnamese or associated with Vietnamese cultural traditions. Most men wore some form of generic male attire – primarily plain, dark-colored generic suits with plain white shirts. From my experience, men and women in Vietnam tend to follow a similar pattern when dressing for such events. No surprises, but it got me thinking more generally about differences in contemporary male and female Southeast Asian dress in relation to local dress traditions and the use of traditional textiles.

First of all, it occurred to me that the Vietnamese example is perhaps an extreme one among people from Southeast Asia. Thus, while Vietnamese men tend to prefer plain, fairly drab generic styles of clothing, many Indonesian men are quite at home wearing what some would consider gaudy batik shirts even for very formal occasions. It almost seems as if there is a geographical factor at work in Southeast Asia, with male dress getting darker and plainer to the north and more colorful the closer one gets to the equator. This certainly wasn't always the case. All one has to do is to look at the courtly attire of past Vietnamese emperors to see that this is too simple an explanation, although there may be some element of truth to it. One of the objects of the present paper is to explore why traditional design elements are so unpopular with men in Vietnam in comparison not only with female dress but also with male dress in most other Southeast Asian countries.

If we look back at male and female dress traditions in Southeast Asia one thing that is abundantly clear is that most of the styles of clothing that were worn by males in the region in the past do not blend so easily into contemporary styles of dress as do older styles of female dress. It is a situation that accounts not only for the disappearance of many male dress traditions, but also the difficulties faced in efforts to revive or utilize traditional elements in male dress, much more so than is the case with female dress. These tendencies can be seen when viewing traditions as including not only the general styles of clothing that are worn, but also specific design elements of the cloth used to make clothing such as decorative patterns, and even the color or colors of the clothing. The loincloth, once widely worn by Southeast Asian males (even at one time by Vietnamese rulers), is an obvious example of an item of male attire that has little place in the world of contemporary male dress. It is hard to imagine any current head of state wearing a loincloth in public, or even at home. In contrast, women wearing millennia-old styles of skirts would not seem out of place even at a formal social event for heads of state. Thus, a second and related agenda in this paper is to examine more generally the factors that have influenced male fashion and their impact on the retention of elements of traditional dress and the use of traditional textiles. The discussion is intended merely as an introduction to what I believe to be the undeveloped study of male clothing in Southeast Asia when compared with the study of female dress.

Local styles of male dress in Southeast Asia have a long history of external influence from China, South Asia and the Middle East, and more recently the West. Generally, the earlier influences from China, South Asia, and the Middle East allowed a far greater range of local expression, especially in terms of the use of color and in decorative details, than Western male fashion as it developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which tended to restrict the scope for local elements since it overwhelmingly favored relatively plain clothing and a limited range of colors. This was especially true of formal dress, but this tendency also carried over to informal, leisure styles of dress. It is not that bright colors have been completely purged from Western male dress, but their use has been restricted largely to small ornaments (ties) and to holiday or sportswear. Even here, however, wearing bright colors is often the subject of ridicule or used as a means of creating a humorous or negative image. In movies James Bond certainly never

wears bright shirts with floral patterns like his somewhat comic CIA counterpart. And then there is the stereotypical fast-talking, crooked used car salesman in a gaudy checkered jacket. According to such popular media images in the West serious, fashionable men don't wear such clothing. This theme will be explored at greater length later in the paper.

Western-inspired dress styles have increasingly influenced the ways in which people in Southeast Asia dress since the 19th century, but the impact has been far greater on men than on women. Not only has Western-style dress become much more pronounced for men than for women in Southeast Asia, even when women adopt Western-inspired dress there is more scope for the incorporation of local aspects since such clothing is less restrictive in terms of design, color, and the use of decorative patterning, which makes it easier for Western-inspired female dress to contain local traditional elements. In contrast, male fashion trends in Southeast Asia since the mid-19th century have worked against wearing more traditional styles of dress or even incorporating elements related to local traditions not simply by replacing loincloths with trousers, but also in the trend towards males wearing rather drab and plain clothing with little variety in color and an absence of decoration. While some ethnic minorities have successfully adopted traditional textiles and textile patterns and colors to modern Western-inspired items of male attire (Haka Chin Western-style suits and ties provide a good example) such innovations remain marginal to Southeast Asian male fashion trends in general and are widely viewed as suitable only for so-called ethnic dress. The reasons for this difference in impact in relation to gender will be examined in greater detail below, but in general they are related to differences in how male and female dress styles have evolved in response to perceptions of modernity and its association with Western fashion and views related what constitutes acceptable and desirable male and female fashion in the modern world.

Traditions

For the purposes of the present discussion it is important to take into account the significance of ethnicity in that most dress traditions in Southeast Asia are associated

with particular ethnic groups and the disappearance of such traditions is commonly part of a general trend of assimilation or acculturation into the national majority. Our concern with the survival or adaption of traditional styles of dress is, more or less, twofold. On the one hand, there is the issue of the survival or revival of male dress traditions among ethnic minorities. On the other hand, there is the extent to which the dress and textile traditions of the various peoples that comprise the states of Southeast Asia have found a place in male clothing styles associated with majority culture (i.e., within national fashion).

Identity, emulation, comparison, and perceptions of relative status are important factors influencing the decisions that people make about their dress and about how they view the dress of others. These factors are influenced by general views about such things as the desirability of being civilized or modern as distinct from being uncivilized, backward, or old fashioned. The role of tradition in terms of decisions about what to wear is influenced by all of these factors as well as by the particular setting and the gender, age, and status of the individual. A person might consider wearing traditional attire appropriate at a wedding, while view it as inappropriate at a nightclub. More generally, while some may view dressing according to tradition in a positive light, others may view it negatively. Both of these considerations sometimes are influenced by gender, with more scope being given for females to wear clothing with traditional local elements than men.

Historically those from powerful states or empires within as well as beyond Southeast Asia often looked down on the dress styles of those they considered to be their inferiors and such notions of superiority often had an influence on those who wished to avoid being seen in such a light. Accounts of the peoples of Southeast Asia by early Chinese and later European writers often portray local styles of dress in a negative manner. Zhào Tuó, the ancient Chinese conqueror of northern Vietnam referred to the peoples of the region as naked. A Chinese account of the kingdom of Fù Nán, the *Liáng Shū* (“Book of Liáng”, written in AD 635), records the founding myth of the kingdom in which a foreigner named Hùntián marries the local queen named Lüyè.¹ She is described as being naked and Hùntián not being happy about this folded a piece of cloth to make a pullover blouse, which he had her wear. Likewise, early Spanish accounts of the

Philippines commonly referred to people there as being naked. In such cases, the local people were not naked (Liüyè was probably simply topless), but their clothing was deemed to be so inferior and minimal that such people were not worthy of being considered clothed. In response, those wishing not to be seen as naked savages sometimes emulated the styles of dress of the more powerful.

Of course, last century's cutting-edge fashion can subsequently become part of a people's traditional dress. In this way, the new fashions adopted by Southeast Asian societies from abroad over the millennia gradually have become part of the region's traditional dress repertoire. An interesting question then arises concerning the extent to which such items of dress are distinctive from similar items in their place of origin. For example, how distinctive are Vietnamese dynastic imperial robes from their Chinese counterparts? In fact, while similar in general features, they often were distinctive in some details. In the case of the robes, gowns, shirts, and trousers worn by Vietnamese and Chinese men outside of the court in the past, however, it would be more difficult to discern significant differences. This does not make such items of clothing any less a part of traditional Vietnamese male dress, but it does serve to highlight that not all dress traditions are unique to a particular country. Hence the need to recognize that just because something is part of a group's dress or textile tradition it is not necessarily a distinctive identity marker.

Ancient Southeast Asian Male Clothing

The oldest styles of male clothing in Southeast Asia tended towards the minimal and generally covered even less of the body than female clothing. Such a minimalist approach to clothing no doubt contributed to male clothing styles being particularly susceptible to external influences in the face of shaming and a desire to emulate.

The *koteka* is perhaps the best-known example of ancient dress surviving from the time before the advent of woven cloth and its recent history provides a good example of the problems facing older styles of male dress in the modern world. The term is an Ekari [Me] one referring to a phalocrypt or penis covering made from a gourd that is worn by males in some parts of New Guinea.² While Dutch colonial authorities and American

Protestant missionaries (who began work in the ‘koteka zone’ in 1956) were not overly concerned with promoting the adoption of Western dress by their converts, a few years later the new Indonesian administration saw eradication of the koteka as part of a more general civilizing mission and launched *Operasi Koteka* in the Baliem Valley and Wissel Lakes region in 1971. *Operasi Koteka* met considerable resistance and largely failed in its effort to get highland males to wear trousers. However, increased economic development and greater external influence in the highlands of Indonesian New Guinea in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in changing attitudes towards dress among local males and the widespread adoption of shorts and trousers. The koteka certainly has not disappeared as an item on male dress in highlands New Guinea, especially in more remote areas, but shorts and trousers have become more common as male everyday wear. In addition, it is not something that males from the area wear when living elsewhere or when traveling outside of their home region. The koteka has survived, but only as a highly localized form of ethnic dress.

Loincloths were common items of male attire throughout much of ancient Southeast Asia. The earliest versions appear to have been made of two pieces of bark-cloth attached to the front and back of the wearer by a cord fastened around the waist. Versions made of woven cloth include both the two-piece and cord variety and longer narrow pieces of cloth worn wrapped around the waist with the ends hanging down in front and back. Geographically traditions of wearing loincloths stretch from the Naga peoples of the Myanmar-India border area in the west to the coastal areas of New Guinea (Papua) in the east. Male figures on Đông Sơn bronzes are depicted wearing loincloths made of woven cloth.³ In the case of lowland Vietnam, even under Chinese rule, loincloths remained common male attire. Even when men wore Chinese-style long-sleeved gowns, they usually wore them over local-style hip-cloths or loincloths. In fact, even the early emperors commonly seem to have worn loincloths on occasion, especially when not performing official functions. A Chinese description of the court of Lê Hoàn (r. 980–1005) mentions that the emperor sometimes wore only a loincloth/hip-wrapper with his chest and feet bare, as did many in his palace.⁴

Writing a short time ago, I lamented “One of the traditions that has been in decline for some time and that now is probably in its terminal phase is the wearing of

male loincloths... The Chinese fashion of men wearing trousers triumphed over wearing loincloths throughout much of northern Southeast Asia quite some time ago. Trousers were associated with civilization, loincloths with backwardness. There was an element of shame as well.”⁵ By the mid-20th century men were still wearing loincloths only in more remote areas, such as the highlands of southern Laos, central Vietnam, and western Myanmar. There has been something of a revival of wearing loincloths for cultural events in recent years, but not for everyday wear and they are often worn over running shorts. In this regard, they have become a symbol of ethnic identity for men belonging to particular ethnic groups and generally are worn only within the home territory of these groups.

In ancient times men in Southeast Asia commonly wore no upper body garments. Male figures on Đông Sơn bronzes are usually bare-chested. If their upper body is clothed, they are shown wearing a sleeveless pullover shirt or a blanket wrapped over their shoulders. It is also common for them to have tattoos.⁶ Shoulder-cloths and pullover shirts were worn mainly in the northern parts of Mainland Southeast Asia, primarily during periods of colder weather. *Sĩa* is an ancient Tai word (*xĩa*, *shĩa* in some Tai languages) for an upper body garment such as this, although in recent times the term has come to be used for a shirt with sleeves. Early tailored sleeveless pullovers feature a neck opening and stitching down the side below the arm opening (sometimes with an opening down the middle of the front). A little further south and more than a thousand years later, Mã Huān’s account of Chāmpa in 1413 describes commoners as wearing a short sleeveless shirt.⁷ It is unclear, however, how common it was for Chām men at this time to wear such shirts and it is likely that they often went bare-chested. Men of related Malayo-Polynesian speaking groups in the Central Highlands, such as the Ê Đê and Gia Rai, traditionally either went bare-chested or wore a shoulder-cloth. Sometimes they wear a sleeveless pullover shirt (there are also varieties with sleeves worn by high-ranking men), but this does not seem to be an ancient tradition and the various names used for these shirts all include the Vietnamese word *áo*, which probably indicates that the style of dress was adopted from the Vietnamese.⁸ Zhōu Dáguān’s account of the Khmer of the 1290s describes both men and women as “naked to the waist.”⁹ Only a few ethnic minorities in Mainland Southeast Asia, primarily in the highlands, have continued to wear sleeveless pullovers in modern times. This includes Karen in Myanmar and Thailand for whom

traditional pullovers have become important symbols of ethnic identity. Likewise, the use of shoulder-cloths has largely disappeared and continue to be worn by men from a few ethnic minority groups.

Imported Traditional Male Dress Styles

Gourd phalocrypts and loincloths can be considered indigenous styles of male dress for Southeast Asia. Other types of clothing are derived from fashions imported from outside of the region as a result of external cultural influences during particular periods starting over two thousand years ago. Once adopted locally in Southeast Asia such fashions tended to be modified with local design elements being added to varying degrees. The earliest of these external fashion influences came from South Asia to the west and China to the north.

South Asian and later Middle Eastern influence on dress styles in Southeast Asia followed the maritime trade route and diffused from the coastal areas of contact in southern Myanmar, western Indonesia, central and southern Thailand, Cambodia, and southern and central Vietnam. For the male lower body this entailed a hip-cloth (aka hip-wrapper) consisting of a rectangular piece of cloth that is wrapped around the waist and tucked, sometimes with an accompanying belt. Hip-cloths initially likely were adopted by local elites to emulate the fashion of what was perceived to be a more prestigious South Asian civilization. Over time this style of clothing spread to the population at large, becoming the normal style of clothing for men. Some of these hip-cloths were made of plain or at least relatively plain cloth that differed little from their South Asian counterparts, sometimes they were made from imported cloth from India, but there were also varieties with distinctive decorative patterning associated with particular Southeast Asian locales and peoples (tapestry weave *acheik* patterning in Myanmar, some styles of weft ikat patterning in Cambodia, batik on Java, etc.). Whether made of plain or highly decorated cloth, however, over time the hip-cloth came commonly to be viewed as local and eventually even as a local traditional style of dress.

The cloth used for hip-cloths tended to reflect status differences, with the particularly long and ornate ones being worn by feudal elites. Such elites served as role

models that presented wearing hip-cloths in a positive light for the local population in general. The subsequent fate of these feudal elites and newer fashion trends from outside of the region in turn had an impact on the popularity of this style of dress as well as on particular types of cloth used to make them. Thus, the end of the feudal order and onset of British colonial rule in Burma led to the rapid decline in *paso* wearing throughout the country. The final conquest of Champa in the early 19th century and destruction of its feudal elite put an end to the weaving of regal versions of these hip-cloths (*khan mbar jih*), although Cham men continued to wear versions made of plain white cloth and Hindu priests and others wore ones with decorative supplementary weft patterned cloth attached to the edges on special occasions. After the final conquest of Champa in 1832 the Cham became an ethnic minority in Vietnam and the style of male dress was influenced increasingly by Kinh-Chinese and later by Western styles of dress and hip-cloths came to be reserved primarily for special occasions and to be viewed as a marker of ethnic identity.

There is an ancient Chinese tradition of men wearing hip-cloths (*jin xianguan*).¹⁰ These were unsewn rectangular pieces of cloth that were wrapped around the waist. The fabric used and color tended to vary according to rank. Those worn by men of lower rank usually were plain, whereas those worn by men of higher rank often were decorated with colorful embroidery. Hip-cloths went out of fashion in favor of trousers in China as a result of influence from nomadic peoples, especially under the Mongol Yuán Dynasty rulers. Following Chinese fashion, hip-cloths were adopted in northern Vietnam (*xiêm*) during the period that it was under Chinese rule and remained popular in Vietnam after Chinese rule ended and long after they had fallen out of fashion in China. Under the first Nguyễn Dynasty ruler Gia Long (r. 1802-20) the color of hip-cloths worn by civil servants was flexible (green was popular) and they usually were decorated with embroidery, images of birds and flowers being common. Military officers wore hip-cloths embroidered with images of various animals.¹¹ In general, however, under the Nguyễn Lords and Dynasty, hip-cloths were reserved for certain courtly functions and men mostly wore Chinese-style trousers, under their gowns rather than hip-cloths. Such trousers also became standard dress for the male population at large. By this time hip-

cloths had come to be identified as Vietnamese traditional male clothing and trousers with more modern Chinese fashion.

While the term sarong (derived from the Malay *sarung*) is popularly used for a wide range of types of hip-cloth, it is more appropriate to restrict its meaning to refer to a particular type of hip-cloth that is sewn into a tube. This tube is then worn by folding it in front and then rolling it at the waist. The *Oxford Universal Dictionary* dates the introduction of the term into English to 1834 and defines it as “The Malay national garment, a long strip of cloth, worn tucked round the waist like a skirt.”¹² In regards to Malay dress it should be distinguished from the *kain sampang*, a decorative hip-cloth that is worn over trousers as an accessory (and that is perhaps a survival of an earlier form of hip-cloth). The sarong gained popularity in the regions of Southeast Asia linked to maritime trade across the Indian Ocean and among converts to Islam in particular. It is a common item of male clothing in countries adjacent to the Indian Ocean from the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula and along the southern coastal areas of South Asia. Sarongs are variously called *izaar*, *futah*, *magtab* (*maqtab*), or *wizara* in the Arabian Peninsula and Iran, *macawis* (*ma’awiis*) in Somalia and Djibouti, *lungi* in southern India and Bangladesh, and *sarung* by Malays and in Sri Lanka. They come in a wide range of colors and, while they often feature checkered patterning they may be made of plain cloth or feature a variety of other patterns.

The sarong’s early history in Southeast Asia is poorly documented prior to the 19th century, but it probably dates back at least to the early days of the Sultanate of Melaka, and its spread beyond the Malay Peninsula seems to be related to the influence of Melaka as a commercial center and to the spread of Islam in the region. Its use gradually diffused among Muslims throughout much of Southeast Asia and to some non-Muslim as well. Numerous 19th century writers describe it as common men’s dress on the Malay Peninsula.¹³ Writing about the sarong worn by Malays in the 1920s, R.O. Winstedt remarks “it can serve as a nether garment, a bathing cloth, a night shirt, a turban, a wallet, a cradle, a shroud; it was retained and respected as a shibboleth of Islam when the use of trousers became almost universal.”¹⁴ Malay migrants introduced the sarong to Cambodia, where Cham converts to Islam as well as some non-Muslim Khmer adopted it. Cham from Cambodia who subsequently settled near the Cambodian border in southern

Vietnam brought with them the tradition of wearing sarong. In northeastern Thailand, it is called *pha sarong* and *salong* in Laos. Non-Malay Muslim peoples in Indonesia such as the Buginese, Makassarese, and Bima of Sumbawa also adopted the sarong for male dress. Taylor comments on the diffusion of sarong wearing in colonial Indonesia: “a style for men introduced throughout the archipelago by Buginese traders.”¹⁵ The Burma/Myanmar version of the sarong (*longyi*) was adopted from neighboring South Asia during the period of British rule, replacing the *paso*. Burma was administered as part of India for much of the British colonial period and there was considerable migration from South Asia as well.

Southeast Asian sarongs are made of silk or cotton in a wide variety of colors. Plaid or checkered sarongs are by far the most popular style of men’s sarongs throughout Southeast Asia. There are often local preferences in terms of precise check patterns and colors, but in general such sarongs do not differ to any significant extent from the checkered sarong worn across the Indian Ocean. There are local sarongs, however, that have distinctive features. In the case of checkered sarongs these include those made of cloth with ikat in addition to checkered patterning made in Peninsular Malaysia and by Muslim Cham in Cambodia and Vietnam. Other distinctive styles include Arakanese men’s sarongs (*longyi*) in Myanmar featuring the ‘king of flowers’ motif.¹⁶

The sarong has fared relatively well as non-elite male everyday wear in modern Southeast Asia. Fancier versions continue to be worn as well, even by heads of state in some countries. The *longyi* in particular remains an accepted style of formal male dress in Myanmar and is regularly worn by President Htin Kyaw. Indonesian president Joko Widodo, already known to wear a checkered sarong at low-keyed events, received considerable favorable attention from local social media as well as in the local press when he was seen wearing a more formal sarong, suit jacket, and *peci* combination while visiting Pekalongan on 8 January 2017.¹⁷

The origin of trousers in Asia is associated with ancient horse-riding Central Asian nomads such as the Scythians to the west and Xīróng to the east. The oldest known trousers have been found in Xīnjiāng, dating from the 13th to 10th centuries BC.¹⁸ The sedentary Persians in the west and Chinese in the east subsequently began wearing trousers as a result of contact with nomads and sedantarized former nomads such as the

Parthians, the Chinese adopting them during the Warring States period in the 300s BC (trousers are called *kù zi* in Chinese). Early Persian trousers (called *šalvār*) commonly feature a drawstring and tend to be wider (baggy) in the center and narrower at each end. Significantly, both men and women in these societies wore trousers.

Not riding horses or having contact with nomads, people in most early Southeast Asian societies did not wear trousers. The sole example of an older tradition among in the region comes from some sub-groups of Karen in Myanmar who originally lived in Yúnnán. Evidence of this comes from depictions on Diǎn bronzes from Yúnnán of male figures wearing short trousers that are reminiscent of the short trousers worn by some Kayah sub-groups of Karen in Myanmar.¹⁹ Otherwise examples of wearing trousers in Southeast Asia dates back only a few centuries and was fairly restricted until recently. Besides the Karen example, there are three external sources of male trousers in Southeast Asia: China, the Muslim Middle East and South Asia, and Europe. It is interesting to note that unlike China, the Middle East, and South Asia, in most of Southeast Asia until a few years ago trousers were widely considered only to be male clothing. There are a few exceptions such as Kinh women in Vietnam (and in Vietnam getting women to wear trousers initially was a contested issue); Aceh where women wear black trousers (partially covered by a sarong); and the southern Philippines where Yakan women wear trousers and women of some of the other Muslim groups sometimes wear loose trousers called *kantiu*. (close to the Chinese word for trousers, *cháng kù*).

Traditional Chinese-style trousers are straight-legged with a wide waist that is folded and tucked at the front, sometimes with a tie as well. Their length varies, with those of farmers and laborers being shorter than those worn by men of higher status. They tend to be undecorated. Such trousers were increasingly popular as male attire in Vietnam from around the 1300s (the time of the Yuán Dynasty in China) and became almost universally worn under the Nguyễn rulers, who promoted Chinese styles of dress (trousers are called *quần* in Vietnamese). The popularity of this style of trouser spread elsewhere two ways. First, many highlands ethnic groups living along the Chinese border adopted them as a result of Chinese cultural influence. This can be seen in the case of various Tai-speaking groups in Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. Second, migrants, including both Chinese and various other ethnic groups from China (such as the Hmong),

introduced them in many areas, especially during the 19th century, and they were subsequently adopted by neighboring local populations. Thus, the large number of Chinese migrants in 19th century Siam and Vietnam helped to promote wearing trousers by people already living in these countries. This style of trouser became popular primarily in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and northern Myanmar, but was also worn elsewhere in Southeast Asia, although mainly by ethnic Chinese. Today they are still worn in some rural areas and occasionally by urban-dwellers as a form of casual wear or by those desiring a country, old fashioned look.

Men in Tai-speaking societies originally wore loincloths, but replaced them with Chinese-style trousers long ago and most Tai now consider them part of their traditional clothing. The history of trousers in Tai societies is poorly understood beyond the general outlines. Speakers of Central Tai languages have a history of greater Chinese and Vietnamese influence than speakers of Southeastern Tai languages. This pattern of influence includes dress, but gender once again is significant in this regard. Thus, while the dress of both males and females of Central Tai speaking groups has been strongly influenced by Chinese-Vietnamese fashions for quite some time, the influence on Southwestern Tai speaking groups is more recent and seen mostly in regard to male dress. Even in the case of Southwestern Tai speaking males, Chinese influence on dress was seen primarily among those living in closest proximity China and lowland Vietnam, such as in northwestern Vietnam, whereas the dress of Southwestern Tai speaking males living further to the southwest in Laos and Thailand was influenced more by South Asian fashion. Linguistics highlights this difference (and more work along these lines would seem like a worthwhile undertaking). Gedney notes there are no cognates in Southwestern Tai languages for trousers.²⁰ Thus, while the Tai Dam call trousers *suông*, in Thailand they are called *kāngkeng*. In contrast, Central Tai languages tend to use a variety of closely related words for trousers, *hông khạ* in Nùng Phạn Slinh, *khaa*² in Western Nung, and *khwaa*² and *vaa*² elsewhere.

Even when made from hand-woven local cloth, Chinese-style trousers worn in Southeast Asia are essentially the same as those worn in China. This characteristic is reinforced by the fact that they tend to be undecorated, leaving no scope for adding local decorative embellishments. Thus, such trousers subsequently have come to serve as an

identity marker primarily through association with rural-dwelling people in general rather than as an indicator of a specific ethnic identity. There are, however, a few distinct local variations of Chinese-style trousers, such as the trousers worn by Lự men in the highlands of northern Vietnam that are decorated with a few embroidered narrow stripes near the bottom of each leg.²¹

The history of external influence on male upper body clothing in Southeast Asia mainly entails the adoption of various types of gown, tunic, or jacket from China, South Asia, and the Middle East. Chinese influence on upper body male dress begins over 2,000 years ago during the early days of Chinese rule in northern Vietnam as local feudal elites began wearing gowns like their Chinese rulers.²² The adoption of Chinese style dress by elites in northern Vietnam was encouraged by the codification of dress for elites within the Chinese Empire starting in AD 59 under Emperor Míng.²³ The Suí Emperor Yang issued a decree in AD 605 establishing a common code of dress for all officials and it is around this time that the Middle Chinese word *áo* appears, referring to an upper garment with lining worn by men or women.²⁴ Until this time Chinese influence on male dress in northern Vietnam appears to have been limited primarily to elites in closest contact with Chinese culture, but this changed during the Táng Dynasty, when there was increased Chinese migration into the lowlands of northern Vietnam and greater overall Chinese cultural influence. During this time, Chinese-style gowns appear to have been more widely worn by the population at large. This trend continued after independence from China since such clothing was still identified with civilization and high status. It is worth noting, however, that especially away from the court, while male commoners sometimes wore Chinese-style long-sleeved gowns, they often went bare-chested.

Following Chinese practice, in feudal Vietnam there were significant differences in the type of gown according to status. Higher status men wore gowns made of from a variety of colors of silk and with wide sleeves, while lower status men wore darker colored, plain ones, made of cotton, and with narrow sleeves. Moreover, men of higher status could wear up to three gowns: an outer gown made of colorful silk with embroidered patterning; a middle gown also made of silk, but of a different color and with different embroidered patterns; and an under-gown made of some type of un-dyed

fabric. Also, formal gowns tended to be lined, while ones for everyday wear or worn by poorer commoners often were unlined.

With variations in detail, Chinese-style gowns (*chángshān* refers to the tunic or long jacket commonly worn in China during the Qīng Dynasty) remained the standard item of upper body dress for Vietnamese males until the 20th century. The style of gown called *áo dài* (long blouse or tunic) was created during the reign of Nguyễn Phúc Khoát (r. 1714-65)²⁵ and common male dress under the Nguyễn emperors included a loose-fitting gown called *áo the*. Nguyễn dynasty civil and military officers wore over-gowns, such as the formal five-panel *áo ngũ thân*, that resembled those worn in China but with distinctive features in terms of tailoring and decoration, usually over hip-cloths, though sometimes over Chinese-style trousers.

French colonial policy in Indochina favored keeping ethnic groups apart. This included allowing Kinh society to maintain some vestiges of its traditional feudal order. Thus, the French allowed the Nguyễn court to function, although stripped of most of its power, within the context of limited indirect rule. This policy of maintaining a distance between ethnic groups and limiting acculturation had an impact of dress. It meant that well into the early years of the 20th century men at court and mandarins around the country continued to wear upper status style gowns and other men generally wore a variety of Chinese-inspired upper body garments. As in the past these varied according to the status of the wearer in terms of style and the materials used, with those worn by lower class men sometimes being so short as to resemble shirts (*áo sơ mi*) more than gowns. Also, while courtly gowns often were decorated, outside of the court male gowns tended to be plain, especially when worn by lower status males. We will return to a discussion of the fate of Chinese-style gowns in Vietnam later.

Beyond Vietnam in the past Chinese-style gowns were worn mainly by Chinese immigrants and their descendants as well as occasionally by feudal elites and by members of many highland minority groups living near the Chinese border. An account from 1225 describes the ruler of Brunei dressing in Chinese style on formal occasions, but in Javanese style for everyday wear.²⁶ In the case of the kingdom of Chămpa, the *Xīn Táng Shū* (“New Book of Táng”) describes the king of Chămpa wearing a piece of cloth draped slanting from his upper arm, reminiscent of Indian fashion on some occasions.²⁷

However, for formal ceremonial occasions it describes the king wearing “a robe of damask with golden flowers on a black and gold background.”²⁸ Likewise, Mǎ Huān’s account of Chāmpa in 1413 describes the king as wearing a colorful robe.²⁹ It is difficult to tell from these descriptions precisely what these “robes” looked like, but they may be indicative of Chinese influence.

In the past, Chinese-style gowns were worn by men belonging to many of the Tai and Kadai speaking groups living in the highlands near the Chinese border, especially by those of higher status in the old feudal system. A plain dark blue or black five-panel long-coat/gown was worn by Tày and Thái men in what is now northern Vietnam on special occasions.³⁰ It reached to the knees, had a rounded standing collar, and was fastened on the right side with knots or brass buttons. In the past Palaung men in northern Myanmar also wore Chinese-style gowns.³¹ These too were relatively plain and made of dark blue or black cloth, usually cotton and sometimes silk in the case of those worn by higher status men. Wearing Chinese-style gowns pretty well went out of fashion in the northern highlands during the 1950s. Thái men in northern Vietnam often still keep them for funerary wear and Lachi male religious specialists still wear them,³² but it has been several decades since they were commonly worn on special occasions in most communities.

Gowns or robes, and various styles of tailored coats or jackets have a long history in the Middle East and South Asia, but gowns or robes from this region do not appear to have had much influence on dress styles in Southeast Asia prior to the spread of Islam. The *jubba* is a loose-fitting long-sleeved gown that is worn by men over another garment. It is widely worn in the Muslim Middle East. Muhammad Ibn Battuta provides what is probably the earliest written mention of Middle Eastern style clothing being worn in Southeast Asia in an account of his visit to the Sultanate of Samudra Pasai in northern Sumatra in 1345. Ibn Battuta describes the sultan wearing a *jubba* (“robe of a legal expert”) when visiting the mosque and discussing religious matters at a meeting. He notes that after the meeting the sultan changed into a royal tunic made of silk and cotton (which unfortunately is not described in detail).³³ But as Kees van Dijk notes,³⁴ the adoption of Middle Eastern style Islamic dress by local rulers was not always a smooth one. He cites a tradition that Raden Patah, the founder of the Sultanate of Demak in 1475 on the north

coast of Java, either fell ill or lost consciousness whenever he tried to sit on the throne dressed as a *haji*.

Dutch accounts of Indonesia from the 1600s such as the writings of Jochen Nieuhof indicate that the fashion of wearing Middle Eastern Muslim influenced robes and other upper body garments had spread beyond northern Sumatra since the 1300s along with conversion to Islam.³⁵ However, the adoption of such a style of dress appears to have been limited mainly to the courts and to the merchant class, and courtly dress in particular generally continued to be a mixed affair, combining local styles, Muslim-influenced styles along with newly introduced European fashions. As for common people, fairly typical is Nieuhof's description of male commoners in Aceh in the late 1600s wearing only a hip-cloth, while only elite men wore Muslim ("Moorish") style dress-coats.³⁶

Middle Eastern Muslim influence of male dress in Southeast Asia was not entirely limited to local sultanates and their converts. One particularly interesting example is the case of the influence of Iran's Safavid Empire, especially under Shah 'Abbās II (r. 1642-66), on courtly fashion in the kingdom of Ayutthaya.³⁷ In addition to Persian merchants being active in the kingdom, a number of Persians held important posts in the court, where they exerted considerable influence, including on styles of dress.³⁸ Ayutthaya's ambassador to France in 1686, Kosa Pan, provides a good example of this influence. A well-known picture of Kosa Pan shows him wearing headgear (a *lomphok*) and outer-gown (a *khruai*) adopted from Persia. The *khruai* is a long-sleeved outer gown that is open in the front and often decorated with embroidery. It survived the fall of Ayutthaya and continued to be worn by the Rattanakosin court. Consciously seeking to link the new dynasty to the former kingdom of Ayutthaya, King Rama I's Three Seals Laws, which were enacted in 1804, reserved the right to wear the *khruai* to high ranking members of the court. *Khruai* as official dress for senior ranking government officials in 1912 and were adopted as academic dress at Chulalongkorn University in 1930 and subsequently were adopted by other universities as well.³⁹

From the above discussion, we can see that by the mid-20th century older styles of gowns and related forms of long upper body garments were not commonly worn by men in Southeast Asia. Even among elites they tended to be worn only rarely on special

occasions. By this time, they were by far most popular among the Kinh majority in Vietnam and, as we will see shortly, even in Vietnam their popularity was in sharp decline. Throughout the region they were being replaced by modern Western-style shirts and jackets.

Modernity and Western-style Male Dress

Male fashion globally began an important transformation during the 19th century that coincided with the spread of Western cultural influence along with the growing impact of the Industrial Revolution on clothing. Men's fashion in the West underwent a significant transformation in the wake of the French Revolution that witnessed the replacement of the fashion style associated with the European feudal elite with a more austere style of the rising middle class. This transition is commonly referred to as the Great Renunciation, characterized by G. Bruce Boyer as “a movement away from gorgeousness and towards simplicity.”⁴⁰ George Beau Brummell (l. 1778-1840) is often mentioned in relation to this new style and credited with introducing the first “modern urban uniform,” comprised of a “plain wool coat and trousers, white linen shirt, and necktie.”⁴¹ Not only was this new uniform relatively plain, it also tended not to be very colorful: “For Brummell the key color in a gentleman's dress was black, and the best harmonies for black were, he always insisted, the quiet colors.”⁴² Important changes in male dress during this period also took place in the realm of military uniforms. During the latter part of the 19th century military forces around the world were discarding local fashions in favor of variations of increasingly generic European-inspired uniforms. This trend meant that brightly colored uniforms were disappearing and by the early 1900s military uniforms were tending towards khaki and other sedate colors.

The ascendancy of Western-style male fashion in Southeast Asia was a gradual process and initially only a small segment of the local population was influenced. During the 19th and early 20th centuries this was restricted largely to the upper levels of the feudal aristocracy, Eurasians, and military officers. In the case of Siam kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn played important roles in the introduction of Western-style clothing and the relegation of more traditional clothing to ceremonial wear on special occasions.

Under King Mongkut a mixed Siamese-European style of dress became fashionable in the court and the influence of Western fashion in the court increased under King Chulalongkorn. In particular, following his return from a trip to Singapore and Batavia in 1869 he decreed that tailored clothing in a European style be worn at court as part of a policy to promote the modernization of the country.⁴³ This decree mainly resulted in the adoption of Western-influenced dress for the upper body, while many men at court continued to wear hip-cloths and had little immediate influence on male fashion away from the court. Over time, however, wearing European-style trousers became increasingly popular among males associated with the court as well as among other elites in Bangkok.

The military's influence on male dress in Siam also deserves mention (and in general the military and civil service in Southeast Asia played an important role in promoting the adoption of Western-style clothing). Both kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn sought to create a modern military with Europe as the model. King Mongkut established the Royal Armed Forces in 1852, and by the latter part of the century the country had a semblance of a modern military, complete with uniforms that increasingly resembled those worn by their European counterparts, including trousers, but it was a gradual process. Photographs of Siamese soldiers from the 1870s up to the eve of World War I depict a mixed picture with some soldiers wearing hip-cloths, some European-style trousers, and others Chinese-style trousers.⁴⁴ Many members of the officer corps during this time had gone to Europe for training and returned with attitudes favoring the wearing of European-style uniforms. By the First World War European-style uniforms had become relatively standard. This trend was consolidated after the war as inspiration for the military increasingly came from Japan, which had adopted European-style uniforms in the 1870s.

The promotion of Western styles of dress in Siam was given a boost with the overthrow of the monarchy in 1932. The military rulers of the country (that they re-named Thailand in 1939) were avid proponents of modernization and this included the promotion of Western styles of dress. After assuming power in Siam in 1939 Phibun Songkhram issued a series of cultural mandates between 1939 and 1942 to promote national identity and modernization.⁴⁵ The mandates encouraged men to wear Western

style trousers and shirts. Mandate 10, issued in 1941, told people to avoid inappropriate dress, which included not wearing a shirt and wearing a wrap-around cloth. Appropriate dress included Western-style uniforms related to a person's position, "polite international style attire," and "polite traditional style." To urban elites of the new Thailand older styles of clothing such as the traditional hip-cloth came to be seen as suitable clothing for servants and poor people or for leisure wear around home and wearing them in public was associated with backwardness. Beyond Bangkok, government employees and institutions played an important role in spreading Western-style fashions and the positive perception of such clothing.

The adoption of Western-style clothing was later in Vietnam than in Siam. Nguyễn Emperor Thành Thái (r. 1889–1907) generally wore traditional long gowns, but Emperor Duy Tân (r. 1907–16) sometimes wore Western-style suits, while retaining traditional imperial clothing for formal occasions. The clothing worn by Emperor Khải Định (r. 1916–25) was far more eclectic and included a variety of traditional imperial clothing, western clothing, as well as hybrid clothing. Emperor Bảo Đại (r. 1926–45, Chief of State 1949–55), who had been educated in France when young, wore a mixture of styles of clothing and in later years he was usually seen wearing Western-style clothing. Outside the court most Vietnamese men continued to wear Chinese style clothing, but during the 1920s and 1930s some middle-class Vietnamese men began wearing European-style clothing. Male gowns of all sorts gradually disappeared during the war years and were largely gone by the time of independence, being replaced by a mixture of Chinese and Western style shirts and jackets.

I would now like to turn our attention to the Western-style men's turn-down collar shirt in particular since it has provided more scope for local influence and the use of traditional materials and design elements than Western-style jackets or trousers. First of all, however, it is important to note that such shirts are only one of several styles of shirt that have influenced male clothing styles in Southeast Asia, each with distinctive tailoring features. We have already mentioned the Chinese-style shirt. This type of shirt features a stand collar (aka Mandarin collar) that extends 2-5 centimeters above the neck line and usually has a gap above the uppermost closure. Early versions of these shirts had a front flap, but later one opened down the front. They commonly are fastened with

ornamental braiding (aka a frog). While sometimes associated specifically with Chinese ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia, Chinese-inspired shirts have become more or less identified as generic tradition-oriented male attire throughout Mainland Southeast Asia, though in Vietnam they tend to be associated primarily with certain northern highland minority groups. King Rama IX of Thailand created a modern version of this shirt in 1979, the *phraratchathan*, with a 3.5-4 centimeter stand collar and two front pockets. It is something of a hybrid Chinese-Western style of shirt. This shirt style took longer to gain popularity in Thailand than the tradition-based dress styles promoted by Queen Sirikit. Inspired by the King's creation, over the next couple of decades various styles of hybrid shirt appeared in Thailand, some of them utilizing traditional textiles, especially weft ikat patterning. Writing in the late 1990s, I noted that such shirts continued to have trouble gaining popularity, especially when compared with women's tradition-based clothing. At the time, I commenting that perhaps this was because of their ambiguous status between formal and informal wear: "As formal wear they have not been able to compete with formal Western-style men's clothing and as informal wear they have not done well in competition with Western leisure fashions," adding that such shirts "certainly have not achieved the status of batik shirts in Indonesia."⁴⁶ Since then the status of these hybrid tradition-based shirts has improved considerably and today they are widely worn in Thailand on special occasions. Although those made of plain fabric tend to be more popular, they appear in a fairly wide range of colors, not simply the dark indigo blue of the past.

There are a variety of shirt styles from the Middle East (e.g., the Persian *pīrāhan*) and South Asia. These include both stand collar and collarless varieties and in Southeast Asia generally are associated with particular Muslim ethnic groups such as the Malays. A Tamil Muslim named Tun Hasan (the son of the Bendahara of Malacca Tun Mutahir) is credited with being particularly influential in creating a local style of the Malay *baju* (shirt) in the early 1500s.⁴⁷ The current style of *Baju Melayu* (Malay shirt) with a stand collar was created in AD 1818-19 and is widely worn by Malay men on special occasions.

In the West shirts began as undergarments and only emerged as outer garments in the 19th century. While pre-19th century Western shirts sometimes were quite plain,

starting in the 16th century decorative features were often added, especially on shirts worn by elites, such as lace or frills around the neck and cuffs and embroidery and other forms of decorative stitching on the body. Such shirts were worn by the early European traders and colonizers who came to Southeast Asia, but had little impact of local male clothing styles with the exception of the Philippines, which boasted a larger European and Eurasian population than other Southeast Asian countries. The *Baro ng Tagalog* or *Barong Tagalog* was the Filipino version of a pre-Great Renunciation Western-style style of shirt. Made from a variety of local fabrics (e.g., *piña*, *abacá*), it featured decorative stitching including sometimes very elaborate embroidery and was worn as an outer garment. While Filipino men today normally wear contemporary Western-style shirts, the Barong Tagalog has attained the status of an important marker of national identity and continues to be commonly worn on special occasions by Filipinos in the Philippines and around the world, making it one of the most successful examples of tradition-based contemporary Southeast Asian male dress.

Western-style shirt styles also underwent a Great Renunciation during the 19th century. Frills, lace, and other decorative features were out in favor of relatively plain fabrics in muted colors. Shirt styles tended to reflect the status of the wearer with elites and so-called white-collar workers wearing shirts featuring band collars (it closes at the throat) with a detachable turndown collar and laborers or so-called blue-collar workers wearing collarless shirts. During the early decades of the 20th century the band collar and turndown collar combination gave way to an attached turndown collar and versions of this style of shirt came to be worn by most men in the West.

In Southeast Asia, modern Western-style shirts, like other Western-style clothing, initially were associated with modernity and were worn by those who were most in contact with Western institutions and culture: some feudal elites, civil servants, and those in the military. In addition, they were not associated with any particular local ethnic group. The Western-style shirts worn in Southeast Asia during most of the 20th century mirrored Western fashion with no attempt to create localized versions.

Since the mid-20th century, in Western fashion men's shirts have been divided generally into formal and informal or serious and casual wear. Formal or serious shirts are relatively plain, perhaps with narrow stripes, and not overly bright in color. More

colorful shirts and especially those with a lot of patterning or other decorative elements are generally viewed as suitable only for informal or casual occasions and, as mentioned in the introduction, in the West are often viewed somewhat negatively—silly shirts. The advent of colorful casual Western-style shirts with decorative patterning begins in Hawaii with the Aloha shirt. The origins of such shirts can be traced back to Japanese immigrants using kimono fabric to make man's shirts in the early 20th century, with the first distinctive Aloha shirt being made by a Chinese merchant in the early 1930s.⁴⁸ It is worth noting that Aloha shirts were considered acceptable as business wear in Honolulu as early as 1947. They became increasingly popular in Hawaii in the 1950s and moved into the world of fashion under the Tori Richard brand, which was established in 1956. Meanwhile, casual shirts referred to as lounge shirts and barbecue shirts were also becoming popular in the United States in the mid-1950s as were Western or Cowboy shirts (decorated with a stylized yoke, decorative piping, and sometimes embroidery). On the mainland, however, such shirts were certainly not considered suitable business attire or particularly fashionable. Within the past few years in the United States casual shirts have become acceptable for wear in an increasingly wide range of contexts and the notion of what constitutes acceptable formal wear shirt-wise has become a little more liberal,⁴⁹ but these are trends that continue to meet resistance.

The emergence of colorful casual men's shirts in Western fashion is of particular relevance to Southeast Asian male fashion since attitudes towards this type of shirt has had an impact on how local versions of Western-style shirts featuring local Southeast Asian design elements have been received beyond the local setting. Thus, while in a sense Western-style shirts are something of a blank canvas on which traditional patterns and other design elements can be incorporated. The use of such design elements has had to confront issues relating to the status of the shirt as part of its Western cultural baggage.

In Southeast Asia, casual Western-style shirts with local decorative patterning are primarily identified with Indonesian batik-patterned shirts. This style of shirt was promoted by Jakarta mayor Ali Sadikin (mayor 1966-1977), who in 1972 “proposed that a collared, long-sleeved button shirt in batik would be an acceptable formal alternative to the three-piece suit and hoped this strategy would vitalize the batik industry.”⁵⁰ Since the 1970s both casual and formal Western-style turndown collar shirts featuring a wide array

of traditional-oriented as well as innovative batik patterns as well as ones made from older pieces of batik-patterned cloth have become firmly established as a central feature of men's fashion in Indonesia. Like the Aloha shirts of Hawaii, in Indonesia they have managed to transcend the category of casual wear and come to be viewed as suitable wear for almost every occasion, including by leading political figures on formal occasions.

Since the batik technique in Indonesia is closely associated with Java and the many of the patterns employed are derived from the traditional Javanese repertoire, promoting these shirts as a form of national dress has met with some resistance by those who view them solely as Javanese dress and as a symbol of Javanese cultural hegemony. Such perceptions seem to have diminished in recent years, aided perhaps by the appearance of regional styles of batik shirts outside of Java. Batik Irian/Papua shirts provide a good example of this. The emergence of these shirts began in earnest with Proyek Batik, which was established at Waena (near Jayapura) in 1983, and was strengthened by a 1995 statement by provincial government urging government employees to wear batik Irian at least on special occasions.⁵¹ Papua having only a very limited weaving tradition, the motifs inspired by local carving traditions. While some batik patterns on shirts today may be commonly perceived as being linked to a particular ethnic group, for many in Indonesia most of the patterns have lost their ethnic specificity and are identified more with the country as a whole than a certain group or region.

Western-style shirts with locally-inspired designs have appeared in other parts of Southeast Asia as well over the past few decades. Malaysia, of course, also has a batik tradition and men's shirts with locally-inspired batik patterns, as in Indonesia, have become increasingly popular attire. They are also a dress style that is not closely identified with a particular ethnic group. The national government encourages civil servants to wear batik on the 1st and 15th day of the month, while the government of Sabah urges teachers to wear batik shirts on Thursdays. Also, as in Indonesia, batik shirts have become acceptable attire for casual as well as more formal settings. One Malaysian blogspot, for instance, goes into detail about selecting a suitable batik shirt for formal occasions: "For a more formal occasion the long sleeved batik shirt is the one you should use. This means sit down wedding dinners, the orchestra at the Petronas Philharmonic

Hall, government related events and anything you feel you need to dress up but without the need of a business suit or going black tie (if not specifically mentioned in the invite) here in the tropics. The short sleeve shirt is less formal. It could be used to weddings but it is a more casual variety.”⁵² The patterns employed on batik-patterned shirts in Malaysia tend not to be as rooted in local textile design traditions as in Indonesia, but they often have distinctive characteristics.

Western-style shirts with extensive colorful patterning are produced in most other Southeast Asian countries, but they generally are simply intended as casual wear and tend not to have decorative features that are linked to local textile or other design traditions. In addition, while there are examples where local tailors have made Western-style shirts with turndown collars using local handwoven fabric, such shirts are fairly rare. Even the Chin of Myanmar, who were mentioned earlier and have made men’s jackets and ties using local textiles for formal wear, tend to wear plain white Western-style shirts under these jackets.

Mention should also be made of the Western-style band collar shirt. This style of shirt closely resembles the Chinese-inspired shirt, but there are differences. The Western band collar resembles the Chinese-style stand or Mandarin collar, but it can be closed with a button, while the Chinese version has a gap. The band collar shirt usually has a pocket on the upper left front side, whereas the Chinese-inspired shirt has at least two pockets on each of the lower front sides and may have an additional two pockets on each of the upper front sides as well. Also, the band collar shirt is fastened using a button, while the Chinese-inspired version is usually fastened with frogs or some other type of two-piece fastener. Band collar shirts recently have gained in popularity in North America.⁵³ They have also become increasingly popular in Southeast Asia in recent years, perhaps because of their resemblance to Chinese-inspired shirts, while having more of a modern look. There are examples of such shirts being made from local handwoven textiles. A good example is provided by the shirt worn by Henry Van Thio, the Vice President of Myanmar, when he addressed the UN in September 2017. He is ethnic Chin himself and wore a Western-style band collar shirt made of Chin hand-woven patterned cloth for the occasion.

APEC Leaders' Family Photo: Local Fashion in a Global Context

Looking at the attitudes and discussions surrounding the clothing worn by heads of state for the APEC Leaders' Family Photo provides an excellent study of the challenges faced when seeking to promote male clothing with traditional elements on the world stage. It also serves to highlight how much harder it is to promote such traditional elements in men's clothing than it is in the case of women's clothing. Some people have employed the terms 'silly shirts' and "funny shirts" when referring to the practice of male political leaders donning attire linked to local dress traditions at the APEC conferences and the varying attitudes towards such male dress highlights the problem of gaining acceptance for male dress that deviates from a rather narrow norm.

This photo-op dress tradition began at the first APEC Leaders' Meeting in 1993 on Blake Island, Washington, when U.S. President Clinton presented bomber jackets to the leaders. CNN referred to this as a "cool move."⁵⁴ The next APEC meeting was held at Bogor, Indonesia, in 1994, and Indonesian President Suharto presented the leaders with batik shirts designed by Iwan Tirta for the photo. The Indonesian hosts saw this as an opportunity to showcase this tradition-based fashion by one of its leading designers to the world. Japan's decision the following year at the APEC Leaders' Meeting in Osaka is revealing that not everyone shared the Indonesian enthusiasm for highlighting local dress traditions for males. Despite Japan's reputation for supporting its dress and textile traditions, in this instance the hosts decided against such a show for the photo: "Kimonos were apparently thought to be too bright and too figure-hugging for the more demure world leaders, and business casual better fit the mood of Japan at the time."⁵⁵ Hayes Brown in a somewhat tongue-and-cheek article commented, "Are you actively trying to be boring, Japan? Because you're succeeding."⁵⁶

Over the next few years the attitude of hosts varied. It was back to highlighting local dress traditions with Barong Tagalog at the 1996 Subic, Philippines, meeting followed by what Hayes Brown referred to as "dull" matching leather bomber jackets at the 1997 Vancouver, Canada, meeting. It was batik shirts again at the 1998 Kuala Lumpur meeting (Hayes Brown commenting, "Vice President Al Gore doesn't look very comfortable in his traditional Malaysian batik shirt, but that kind of makes the picture

better”) and then matching black yachting jackets with a small white leaf insignia in Auckland in 1999. Brunei opted for something of a fusion with largely plain blue shirts with a strip of traditionally-patterned cloth on the right front side in 2000. The Chinese had the leaders wearing colorful silk shirts featuring Chinese patterns and Mandarin collars in Shanghai in 2001. Guayabara shirts for the meeting at Los Cabos, Mexico, in 2002. For the 2003 meeting in Bangkok, the Thais on relatively plain silk shirts/blouses in two shades of blue. Returning to Latin America in 2004, the leaders donned *chamanto* ponchos featuring a variety of patterns and colors for the meeting in Santiago, Chile. Unlike their Japanese neighbors, the South Koreans opted to highlight traditional Korean clothing and had the leaders wear silk hanboks that were plain but in a variety of colors for the 2005 meeting in Busan: Hayes Brown, “The traditional Korean overcoats... worn this year are awesome if for no other reason than the intricate knots holding them closed.” The Vietnamese provided the leaders with patterned blue *áo dài*, at the 2006 meeting in Hanoi. Reviews tended to be negative. One in particular highlights the difficulty in getting men to wear traditional Chinese-style robes or tunics, which to many have come to be viewed as clothing only for females: “world leaders looked visibly uncomfortable as they shuffled onto the stage for a photo-op wearing the tight-fitting traditional ‘ao dai’ tunics, which are now most commonly worn by women.”⁵⁷

Reponses to the plain brown Drizabone raincoats and hats selected by Australia for the 2007 meeting in Sydney are indicative of what happens when Western fashion strays too far from the norm. Hayes Brown remarked, “the fact that only Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper chose to wear the sweet hat that goes with the outfit diminishes this photo.” Another writer referred to the raincoats as “bizarre.”⁵⁸ Aside from the main event, a minor fashion scandal erupted when a press release by the organizing committee referred to the Barong Tagalog as a “peasant shirt. The Philippines found this description of such a national icon as potentially derogatory and requested clarification regarding the offending reference.

The meeting took place in Lima in 2008 and Peru selected a local version of the poncho for the photo-op. Reviews of this selection varied, but tended towards the negative. Some “unkind fashionistas said [the ponchos] resembled potato sacks.”⁵⁹ Hayes Brown, perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek, ranked them as #1 in his list: “The only thing

that could top Chile's ponchos? Peru's ponchos." Singapore decided to highlight its Chinese heritage at the 2009 meeting and selected red and grey silk shirts/blouses with Mandarin collars and patterning on the lower left side.

At the 2010 meeting in Yokohama, Japan once again avoided a tradition-based Japanese outfit in favor of a "smart casual" look comprised of suits, but no ties. On the whole, commentary was relatively favorable of this decision. One commentator remarked, "Chinese President Hu Jintao won't have to worry about maybe having to put on a kimono at the weekend APEC summit in the midst of his row with Japan over disputed islands... The government official declined to give a reason for this year's fashion decision, but traditional kimono, once the preferred dress of samurai, aristocrats and workers alike, could have made some of the leaders look uncomfortable, including Hu, who favors dark Western business suits."⁶⁰ Another wrote, "Over the years, the event has been lampooned for its annual show of world leaders in "funny shirts," but this year's Japanese hosts have said no more. Rather than outfit the participants in kimonos or other form of traditional attire, the Japanese have instructed delegates to simply wear suits."⁶¹ But it was U.S. President Barack Obama's joking about decking the leaders out in "flowered shirts and grass skirts" at the 2011 meeting on Honolulu that probably received the most attention.⁶²

I find the 2011 Honolulu meeting especially important for our discussion because of how it serves to highlight the negative view of clothing not fitting into the narrow Great Renunciation aesthetic (along with perhaps a degree of a sense of cultural superiority: "There were no 'silly shirts' for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit's 'silly shirt photo' this afternoon... A conversation between Obama and [Australian Prime Minister Julia] Gillard could be overheard with talk of grass skirts and coconut bras before Chilean President Sebastian Pinera Echenique asked, 'Where are the Hawaiian shirts?' Obama replied: 'We are ending that tradition.'... Asked about the decision, Obama said leaders were given an aloha shirt, 'And if they wanted to wear the shirt I promise you it would've been fine. But I didn't hear a lot of complains about us breaking precedent on that one.' He said he looked at past family photos, 'and some of the garb that had appeared previously, and I thought: this may be a tradition that we might want to break'."⁶³ In fact, the White House had commissioned the Tori Richards

company of Honolulu to produce shirts for the gathering, but as the above quotation indicates, these were given to the delegates with no expectation that they would be worn for the photo-op. It seems that President Obama shared the negative view of such shirts held by many North Americans, such as Canadian fashion writer Sabrina Maddeaux, who said of Hawaiian shirts: “These days, you’re likely to spot them on men over a certain age, beleaguered restaurant servers and at theme parties.”⁶⁴ The following year at the Vladivostok meeting Vladimir Putin adhered to the anti-silly shirt theme

Not to be cowed by Western fashion imperialism, the Indonesians decided on *endek* shirts by local designer Ida Bagus Adnyana with patterns symbolizing harmony and balance for the 2013 meeting in Bali. Referring to it as “apparently a tradition that won’t die,” an article in the *Washington Post*, reported, “Following calls for a return to the ‘silly shirts’ in the press and online, Indonesia brought back the tradition in 2013.”⁶⁵ Referring to the photo-op tradition as an event that “has seen its share of fashion disasters, sometimes leaving leaders looking grim-faced at group photos,” an article by Australian Broadcasting Corporation commented on the decision: “After falling out of favour during the global economic turmoil, APEC’s propensity for dressing up its leaders in ‘silly shirts’ returned with a gusto as Indonesia’s guitar-strumming president led a stylish parade of Balinese design. US President Barack Obama was a notable absentee, perhaps relieved that a budget shutdown kept him home after he axed the annual fashion show when he chaired the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Hawaii two years ago.”⁶⁶ A rather uncomfortable looking Secretary of State John Kerry appears in the photo instead of the US president. But President Obama could not escape forever. The Chinese selected relatively plain silk Tang jackets with Mandarin collars in of burgundy, teal, and brown for the 2014 meeting in Beijing. CNN commented: “as the photos spread around the world, many thought they were attending a Star Trek convention rather than a state banquet, with the outfits resembling those sported by Spock or Captain Kirk. Host Chinese President Xi Jinping worked his silky tunic but the awkward expressions of U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian leader Vladimir Putin suggested many guests wished they could be transported away from the pomp and protocol by using the hit show’s immortal catchphrase: ‘Beam me up, Scotty’.”⁶⁷ The Filipinos seem to have

worked their magic and we see a seemingly much more relaxed President Obama wearing a Barong Tagalog at the 2015 meeting in Manila.

The APEC leaders returned to Lima for their 2016 meeting. This time the photo-op featured the shawls rather than ponchos (plain brown ones made from vicuña wool). Worn over one shoulder, the shawls allowed the dark colored suits to be seen clearly, and thus provided an image in which the local clothing item was served as a highlight to the serious suits without appearing dominant. The strategy seems to have worked for both the leaders and reviewers. One commentator remarked, “By opting for shawls rather than ponchos, Peru may have been seeking to avoid the mockery that accompanied its hosting of the 2008 APEC summit.” Adding that the leaders, including President Obama, “looked relaxed, smiling and waving as they lined up.”⁶⁸

The APEC leaders will return to Vietnam in November 2017, to the city of Da Nang. In preparation for the meeting in December 2016 announced that it had selected five fashion designers to submit costume designs for the photo-op the criteria being that the costumes “will be made by the materials mainly produced by Vietnam, demonstrating the Vietnamese tradition, and easy to wear.”⁶⁹ It is perhaps significant that these criteria did not include the need specifically to link the designs to Vietnamese textile or dress traditions, only more broadly with “Vietnamese tradition.” Also, perhaps in response to criticisms of the selection of *áo dài* for the 2006 meeting, they were to be “easy to wear”, presumably for those unaccustomed to wearing such exotic types of clothing. It was announced in April 2017 that two of the six designs submitted had been shortlisted, noting “Both designs feature patterns inspired by the lotus flower, which is considered Viet Nam’s national flower, embodying the virtues of its citizens, and both are made from locally produced material.”⁷⁰ Here it is interesting to note while lotus flower imagery is certainly very much a part of Vietnamese cultural heritage in general, it is not a motif that is normally found on traditional male clothing.

As for the two semi-finalists, one choice is a shirt designed by the Thai Tuan Textile Company of Ho Chi Minh City. It has a stand or Mandarin collar. The collar and prominent wide plackets running down the length of the front opening are decorated with checkered patterns, said to be inspired by the scarf/headcloth (*khăn rằn*) of the Khmer ethnic group of the Mekong Delta. The remaining lower portion of the front of the shirt

along with the sleeve ends is decorated with a lotus pattern. The cloth is made using a Jacquard weaving technique. The other choice, by designer Thu Ha, is a hybrid shirt featuring a Western-style turndown collar and buttons down the front opening with relatively wide sleeves and pockets on each side of the lower front opening. It is made of hand-dyed Vietnamese silk. The shirt is decorated with a large embroidered lotus pattern on the right shoulder of the men's shirts and the left shoulder on the women's shirts, with additional embroidery at the sleeve ends.

The 2018 meeting is scheduled to take place in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Something koteka themed?

Western attitudes towards non-Western dress featured in the APEC photo-ops are by and large negative. Even somewhat positive comments tend towards the tongue-in-cheek: "Back in 2011, when Honolulu hosted the forum, Obama put the kibosh on the same-shirt festivities. But luckily, leaders came to their senses this year and decided the awkward family photo needed to make a comeback."⁷¹ Outright negative comments have been more common in Western media: "Being a world leader doesn't necessarily mean being a fashion leader. It also doesn't make you immune to that awkward part of the international travel deal... Like group tour t-shirts and other travel-inspired clothing purchases, these may look OK at the time and generate a sense of unity. But they later run the risk of mixing with mothballs at the back of the closet and only seeing the light of day, or night, during a bout of nostalgia or for a themed party."⁷² It is easy enough why Southeast Asian and Latin American hosts have become increasingly defensive in their choice of what to have the leaders wear, not wishing to stray too far from the Great Renunciation norm and avoiding anything with tailoring that is too different from common Western-styled clothing or that is too decorative or colorful. The message clearly has been that such funny, colorful clothing might be suitable as silly leisure wear, but it is certainly not high fashion or suitable for male political leaders. Pity.

Modern Vietnamese Male Dress

Male clothing styles changed dramatically in Vietnam during the mid-20th century in the face of Western-influenced modernity. During the period of the short-lived State of

Vietnam (1949-55) Prime Minister Trần Văn Hữu sought to revive wearing traditional male gowns to a limited extent when in 1952 he assigned dress comprised of a male gown (*áo dài chèn*), white silk trousers, and a black headscarf for government officials attending events of a religious or historical character.⁷³ Once the country was divided there was little interest in preserving or reviving traditional male dress in the communist-ruled north and in general a combination of Chinese and Western style shirts was favored as male dress along with Western-style jackets for formal wear. During the 1950s and 1960s communist party leaders such as Hồ Chí Minh and Phạm Văn Đồng sometimes followed contemporary communist fashion in China by wearing Zhōngshān suits or, as they were known at that time, Máo suits, a hybrid Chinese-Western style of male tunic/jacket. By the 1970s, however, these were largely out of fashion and Western-style suits like those worn by Soviet leaders were in style. Western-style shirts and jackets were also widely worn by men in the south, but traditional gowns continued to be worn by some men on special occasions. Before becoming Prime Minister in the south, Ngô Đình Diệm had served as a mandarin under Emperor Bảo Đại during the French period and in this capacity, he often wore a traditional gown. As Prime Minister in the south, he usually appeared wearing Western-style clothing in public, but he also wore a traditional gown on occasion, especially for events of a cultural nature. Because of their association with feudalism, unification under communist rule resulted in the virtual disappearance of traditional male gowns.

The era of *đổi mới* in Vietnam that commenced in the late 1980s created an opening for the revival traditional styles of dress. However, while the government of Vietnam “became more open to expressions of cultural pluralism and promoted attention to cultural traditions..., rapid economic growth and greater openness to the outside world were producing conditions that undermined people’s desire to maintain or reassert cultural traditions.”⁷⁴ Over time, however, persistence paid off and as the government increasingly became involved in promoting the country’s cultural heritage interest in traditional dress increased.⁷⁵ Initially at least both government and public interest focused on female dress, especially the female *áo dài*, which was promoted as a symbol of national identity.

The male *áo dài chèn* or *áo gấm* (supplementary weft/brocade patterned silk over-gowns/robes) was largely ignored at first. Within the context of efforts to revive interest in Vietnam's feudal past, it is not surprising that reviving male dress traditions gradually gained some traction. Selection of such a garment for the 2006 APEC Leaders photo-op illustrates this, although the negative Western response to this choice highlights the difficulties reviving such a type of clothing faced. Despite such obstacles, Vietnamese males have begun to wear *áo dài chèn* for special occasions to a limited extent in recent years. Thus, grooms at weddings sometimes wear them, though even in this case the other males at the wedding rarely wear them. The Tết celebration mentioned at the beginning of this paper remains a fairly typical situation. Moreover, in contrast to political elites in many of the other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam's male political elite continues to favor wearing generic Western-style clothing, whether Kinh or from one of the country's ethnic minorities, and senior male political figures rarely appear in public wearing traditional gowns. In contrast, female political figures commonly appear in *áo dài* or ethnic dress if they are from one of the country's minorities. It is also noteworthy that the range of colors and decorative patterns found on male *áo dài* is relatively limited and male *áo dài* certainly have received far less attention among fashion designers than the female *áo dài*. The selection of clothing for the 2017 APEC Leaders photo-op reflects not only the negative Western response to the 2006 selection, but also an ambivalence within Vietnam about traditional male dress, especially when it entails wearing a gown. Unfortunately, although Vietnamese designers have shown considerable creativity when it comes to colorful and decorative leisure Western-style shirts, these do not draw on Vietnam's traditional textile pattern repertoire to a noticeable extent, as is evident from the 2017 finalists.

It is also important to mention ethnicity in relation to current attitudes towards traditional male dress and textiles in Vietnam. While Vietnam certainly is a multi-ethnic country, the Kinh ethnic group (which has been formed over the centuries from the amalgamation and assimilation of a variety of peoples) comprises over 85% of the population with over fifty other ethnic groups included in the remainder. Because the Kinh comprise such an overwhelming majority it is common to view Kinh dress as the country's national dress, but this is not a view held by many from the smaller ethnic

groups who view traditional male gowns as ethnic Kinh dress as distinct from their own particular style of dress. This is especially true, for example, in the Central Highlands where the male loincloth remains an important ethnic identity marker and in the past elites rarely wore Kinh-style gowns. From the Kinh perspective, while many of Vietnam's other ethnic groups have a very rich history of dress and textiles, such things tend to be viewed as suitable only for clothing to be worn by members of those particular ethnic groups and not for those who identify themselves as Kinh or as generic national dress. Designers have created women's clothing that blends some of these traditions, resulting in styles that might be considered fusion tradition-based fashions, such efforts are rare in the case of male clothing.

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