

## **A Different Blue: The Rise of Jeans in China's Reform Era**

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### **Abstract**

Blue was one of the few colors in most Chinese wardrobes in the twentieth century, but it underwent a revolutionary shift in shade and texture in the late 1970s, when the country initiated a series of reforms to actively engage with the West economically and culturally. The influx of blue jeans was both virtual and tangible. They appeared in Hollywood films and TV programs featuring Hong Kongese and Taiwanese pop stars. Meanwhile, jeans produced in Hong Kong were imported into the Chinese market for the young and fashionable generation eager to replace traditional blue cotton or woolen garments with blue jeans. This change in fashion sparked a grand debate on the legitimacy of this new outfit throughout the 1980s, before it solidified its place in Chinese popular culture in the following decade.

This paper contextualizes the early history of jeans in China through the lens of visual and popular culture. Unlike its neighboring countries, such as Japan and Korea, where the introduction of jeans was directly tied with American military presence and cowboy pop culture, Chinese consumers primarily accepted jeans through secondary agents (i.e. Hong Kong and Taiwan). Rather than the masculine cowboy image, such circumstances gave jeans a new significance as a symbol of connecting with the latest trend and economic opportunity. By contrast, the authority still held onto the historic connection between jeans and the “corrupted U.S. imperialist capitalism.” The debate was resolved by Kris Philips (also known as Fei Xiang), a Taiwan-born superstar of mixed Chinese and American heritage. He made a surprise appearance on the Chinese Lunar New Year's Gala in 1987, wearing a red motorcycle jacket and a pair of blue jeans. Fei's unique biological background and pro-Chinese identity, together with his chosen outfit, embodied how conflicting ideologies could co-exist harmoniously in a new era.

## Biography



Ying-chen Peng is an associate professor of art history in the Department of Art at American University, Washington D.C. She was also a visiting scholar at the Rijksmuseum (2019) and NYU Shanghai (2024). Peng specializes in late imperial and modern Chinese art history with a focus on gender issues and the globalization of material culture. Peng has published widely on Qing imperial women's artistic intervention and extended into contemporary women artists such as Hung Liu. Her book, *Artful Subversion: Empress Dowager Cixi's Image Making*, was published by Yale University Press in 2023. Peng has two ongoing book-length projects. One is on the gendered history of women's jeans in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. The other is on the Chinese porcelain industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the role it played in shaping modern connoisseurship of Chinese decorative art in Europe and the United States.