

History Worn:

School Uniforms, Student Identity Formation, and School Belonging across a Century of Change

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Abstract

This paper studies the school uniforms and student dress codes of the Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University (EHS-BNU) from 1917 to the present. Drawing on school archives, design records, historical photographs, and interviews with designers and alumni, it asks how uniforms have expressed and helped build student identity in different periods. Across more than a century, the way students dressed moved from the distinct "modern female student" style of the Republican era to the clothing commonly worn by young people in the 1950s–1970s, and then, after the Reform and Opening-up, back toward a clearly recognizable campus style. Since the 1990s, red, black, and white have become the school' s visual signature, alongside increasingly stable designs and greater student participation in uniform design. The paper argues that uniforms shape student identity in three main ways: visual recognition, value expectations, and everyday belonging. The *Shiyanren* identity draws on visual and moral traditions the school has built up over time, but it is also made concrete, again and again, by how students of each generation actually wore, judged, and remembered their uniforms.

Keywords: school uniforms; student identity; school belonging; campus culture; EHS-BNU

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I.
Introduction

Research Background

School uniforms are among the most ordinary clothes in a student's life. They keep students warm, hold up to daily wear, and allow easy movement, but through standard colors, cuts, and emblems they also make the identity of "student" visible to everyone. Previous research has shown that a uniform is not only a marker for a group of students but also a reflection of a school's culture, its educational ideas, and what a particular era expected of young people (Fan and Yuan 2017). From a sociological perspective, dress is a system of nonverbal communication through which people establish and recognize their own identities and those of others in specific social settings (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992).

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University (hereafter EHS-BNU) was founded in 1917 as the Affiliated Middle School of the Beijing Women's Normal School (hereafter the Affiliated Girls' School). Its uniforms have changed repeatedly: white tops and black skirts in the Republican era; dark blue pinafore dresses in the early years of the People's Republic; military-style clothing and Zhongshan suits in the 1960s and 1970s; a rethinking of how students should look after the Reform and Opening-up; and, since the 1990s, the red, black, and white style still in use today. Each stage differs in cut, color, gender distinction, and rules of wear, and each corresponds to a different understanding of what a student should be—held both by the school and by the society around it.

In this paper, *Shiyanren* (members of the Experimental High School community) refers to a school-specific identity shared by students and alumni of EHS-BNU. To examine how this identity developed, the paper treats the school uniform as a form of social dress that connects school rules, the taste of a period, and students' daily experience. By following one school's uniforms across more than a century, it tries to show how a school's idea of the "student" was translated into particular colors, cuts, and dress codes, and how students made sense of those clothes while wearing them and in the memories they kept after graduating.

Research Question

The central question of this paper is: how have the uniforms of EHS-BNU, as a form of institutional dress, shaped and expressed student identity in different eras?

Three sub-questions follow:

First, what image of the student did school dress present in each period?

Second, how did specific elements—including color, cut, fabric, gender distinction, and rules of wear—carry that image?

Third, how did student identity shift from a broader youth identity shaped by each period toward the school-specific Shiyanren identity?

Research Subject and Scope

The study focuses on the uniforms and student dress codes of EHS-BNU from 1917 to the present. One clarification is necessary: in the early decades the school did not always produce complete sets of uniforms. Often a fairly consistent appearance came instead from rules about the color of tops and skirts and about shoes, socks, and hairstyles. "Uniform" in this paper therefore covers the officially designed or required school clothing, as well as long-standing, stable dress requirements that made students visibly identifiable with the school.

The paper is concerned with the relationship between uniforms, student identity, and the school's image. It does not attempt a full survey of the broader clothing trends in each period, nor does it treat all individual clothing choices made by students as part of the school uniform.

Research Methods

Three methods are used: analysis of historical documents, analysis of visual images, and oral history interviews. The documentary work draws mainly on *Shiyan bainian* (A Century of Shiyan), school archives, and design records to build a timeline of change. The visual analysis looks at graduation photographs and campus pictures, paying attention to color, silhouette, hairstyle, and differences between boys' and girls' dress. The interviews record how designers, alumni, and current students view, wear, and remember the uniforms.

II.
Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on the History of Modern Chinese Clothing and School Uniforms

Existing work on the history of dress supplies the background needed to understand how uniforms changed. In their histories of modern Chinese dress, Hua Mei (2018) and Yuan Ze and Hu Yue (2010) show that changes in dress reflect more than shifts in taste: political ideas, economic conditions, production technology, and ways of life all shape them together. As a result, the same color or cut can mean different things at different times. Dark blue, for instance, might be chosen simply because it hides dirt and is easy to produce, yet in certain decades it came to stand for plainness, labor, and collective spirit. A skirt marks gender, but as women's education spread it also became an outward sign of the modern identity of the "female student." Accordingly, this paper reads the colors and cuts of uniforms within the social and institutional settings in which they emerged.

Compared with these broad histories, research on uniforms speaks more directly to the link between standardized dress and student identity. Peng et al. (2020) treat uniforms as carriers of student identity, campus culture, and the taste of an era, and argue that design should take comfort, gender difference, and student participation into account. Studies like this capture the general direction of uniform reform in the People's Republic, but they say little about how uniforms developed within a single school.

Educational research usually starts from what uniforms are supposed to do. Fan Nannan and Yuan Jingui (2017) summarize these functions as strengthening order, building character, training aesthetic sense, and supporting healthy psychological development. This helps explain why schools emphasize words like "neat," "plain," and "proper." But focusing only on the functions the school intends risks treating students as passive recipients and overlooking their actual experiences of wearing the uniform, the adjustments they make in daily life, and the memories they attach to it. School histories such as *Shiyan bainian* preserve photographs, regulations, and alumni recollections that provide important evidence for reconstructing how the uniforms changed. Yet such sources mainly record events and traditions; they do not go on to analyze how this clothing presented and shaped the image of the student in each era.

Theoretical Perspectives on Clothing and Student Identity

This paper draws on Roach-Higgins and Eicher's (1992) discussion of dress and identity. They define dress as the full set of modifications made to the body and supplements added to it, and treat it as a form of nonverbal communication that announces identities such as age, gender, social role, and group membership. A uniform, as part of what a student wears every day, is thus an important medium for making identity visible: it marks the wearer as a student, and it can further show which school the student belongs to and what that era expected of young people.

In *The Fashion System*, Barthes (1990) distinguishes real clothing, image-clothing, and written clothing. Real clothing is the garment itself, with its material, structure, and construction; image-clothing is the garment as it is presented in photographs or drawings; written clothing is the same garment described and transformed into language. Barthes is most interested in the third. He analyzes how fashion magazines, by describing cut, fabric, color, and combination in words, turn a particular piece of clothing into "fashion" carrying a specific social and cultural meaning. This suggests that the meaning of clothing is produced not only by the garment itself but also by the images and language that surround it.

Craik (2005) argues that uniforms make a wearer's group membership, role, and institutional position recognizable through a standardized appearance. Uniforms also regulate how wearers conduct themselves, training their bodies toward the image the institution wants. Craik stresses, however, that conformity and transgression coexist in the uniform. Standardized dress aims to produce sameness, but in practice wearers adjust it, borrow from it, and give it new meanings. A school uniform can therefore embody a school's expectations of the ideal student, while its meaning is not determined by the school alone.

Entwistle (2023) proposes understanding dress as a "situated bodily practice," moving beyond approaches that treat clothing only as a system of signs or

representations. Dress, she argues, always acts on a lived body, and getting dressed always takes place within particular social spaces and situations. Therefore, the meaning of a garment depends on its cut, color, and cultural symbolism, together with how wearers experience and move their bodies in it and what a particular situation demands of body and clothing. For school uniforms, this means that the student image created by a uniform cannot be judged from design drawings or from the school's written descriptions alone; students' everyday experience of the uniform in different settings is equally important.

Research Gaps and Analytical Framework

Taken together, histories of modern Chinese dress provide the social and historical background for changes in uniforms; research on uniforms and education discusses their role in identifying and educating students; and school records preserve the clothing, photographs, and memories of particular institutions. However, these bodies of work have rarely been brought together. Compared with discussions of national trends or of what uniforms do in general, few studies follow a single school's dress across a hundred years as one continuous case, and then ask how the form of the clothing, the school's expectations, and students' actual experience together produce student identity. This matters because a school's student image does not remain fixed. Sometimes it follows general social taste and the look of young people at the time; sometimes it develops into an expression of identity the school can call its own.

Building on the research and theory above, this paper works on three connected levels. It first examines the uniforms themselves to see how student identity is expressed through dress. It then places these changes back in their social, educational, and institutional contexts, in order to understand where particular designs and rules came from. Finally, it turns to what students actually wore, thought, and remembered, and asks how the student image the school hoped for was accepted, adjusted, or reinterpreted in daily life.

III.
The Making of the "Modern Female Student" (1917–1940s)

School Dress in the Context of Women's Education

The Affiliated Girls' School was established in 1917. Since co-education was not yet common, a girls' middle school was itself a relatively new kind of institution. For girls, leaving the household to receive a systematic education meant more than greater opportunity; it also created a new social identity that drew growing public attention. Research on women's education in modern China shows that girls' schools of the time hoped to train modern women with knowledge and social ability, while continuing to insist on virtue, health, diligence, and proper conduct. Women's education thus held out the possibility of emancipation while remaining bound by existing expectations of what a woman should be (Bailey 2007).

Ouyang Xiaolan, the school's first director, had graduated from the Tokyo Higher Normal School for Women and spent much of her career in women's education. In the school's early years, she introduced the motto "diligence and prudence," and the school gradually built up a curriculum, a boarding system, and daily management rules that set fairly specific requirements for students' study and life (Cai and Chen 2017). Those requirements extended to appearance—the color of clothes, shoes and socks, hairstyle—which shows that the school's standards reached beyond academic content to how students looked and carried themselves on campus. Ouyang's years of study in Japan may help explain the school's early approach to women's education, but the available materials cannot show whether the dress code itself was directly influenced by Japanese girls'schools.

The white top and black skirt worn at the school did not appear in isolation. During the Republican era, this pairing became the "civilized new dress" commonly worn by Chinese female students. Finnane (1996) notes that in 1920s Beijing, female students often made themselves recognizable through short hair, black skirts, and high-collared tops. This style kept the basic combination of the Chinese-style top and skirt while cutting back on embroidery, jewelry, and elaborate decoration. It was seen as modern, simple, and practical.

White Tops and Black Skirts: From Social Trend to School Image

According to *Shiyan bainian*, in the early years of the Republican era, students at the Affiliated Girls' School wore white tops and black skirts with white socks and black shoes in summer, gray tops and black skirts in spring and autumn, and blue tops and black skirts in winter; hair was worn in two coiled braids. The 1925 graduation photograph (fig. 1) and later campus pictures show the tidy visual effect produced by light tops against dark skirts (Cai and Chen 2017).

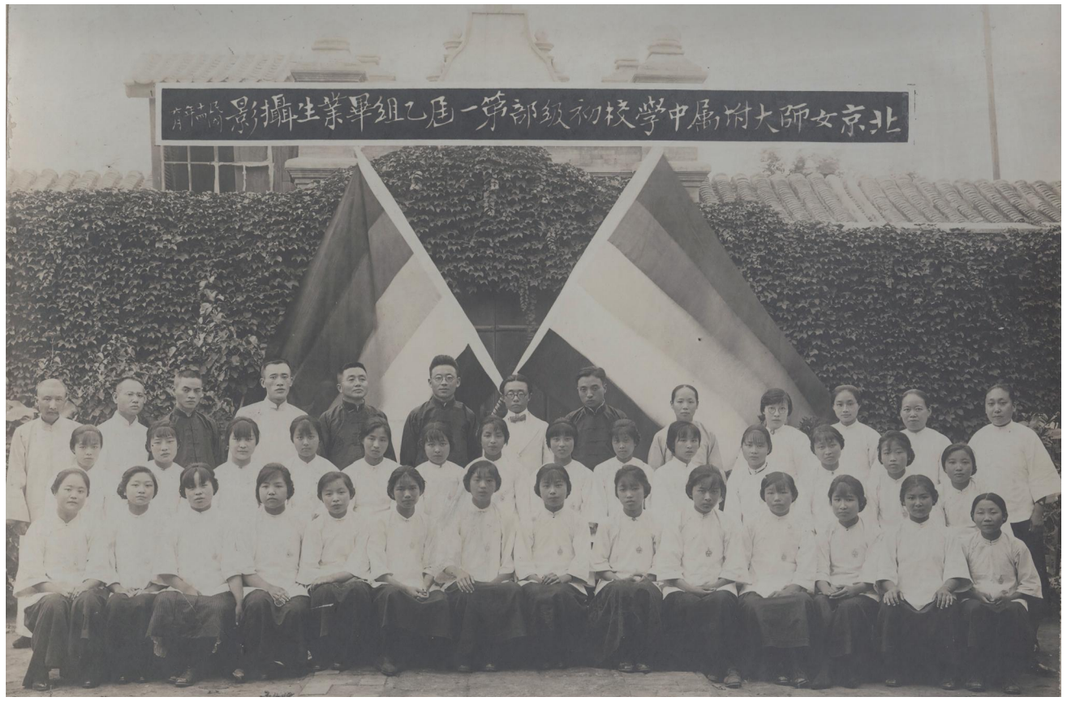


Figure 1. Junior high school graduating class of 1925

Strictly speaking, this was not a uniform made and issued by the school, as uniforms are today. Xu Erxiu, class of 1924, recalled that the school "had no uniform as such," but required light-colored tops with black skirts in spring and summer and blue cloth tops with black skirts in autumn and winter, and forbade anything showy or unusual. Uniformity at the time came mainly from clear dress rules: color, skirt, shoes and socks, and hairstyle together formed a student appearance that could be recognized again and again (Cai and Chen 2017).

In its basic form, this dress resembled the "civilized new dress" worn at other girls' schools. However, the Affiliated Girls' School specified three top colors—white, gray, and blue—for different seasons and standardized shoes, socks, and hair, giving a style that already existed in society a more clearly institutional character. A white top shows immediately whether it has been kept clean; gray and blue hide dirt better and look more subdued; the black skirt stays the same through every season, which gives the overall look continuity. The school did not necessarily assign these colors fixed symbolic meanings, but the effect they produced together was an image of simplicity, plainness, and order.

By the late 1920s the qipao had become a major choice for urban women, and women's clothing was growing more varied (Finnane 1996). The Affiliated Girls' School, however, long continued to insist on plain tops, black skirts, and little decoration (fig. 2). This suggests a deliberate selection: from what female students were already wearing, the school kept the parts that best matched its own character.



Figure 2. Students of the class of 1942 on a campus staircase

From Women to "Female Students" : The Formation of a Distinct Identity

Alumni memories often connect the school dress code with the ideal of "simplicity." Lu Shijia, class of 1929, remembered that students at the Affiliated Girls' School looked "simple and graceful, neat and full of energy, without any showiness." Pu Anxiu, class of 1936, also noted that even students from well-off families were not allowed to stand out through their clothing, because "in our minds, simplicity and grace were virtues" (Cai and Chen 2017). These memories suggest that dressing the same created a consistent student image and reinforced simplicity, neatness, and commitment to study as values shared across the student body.

The phrase "without any showiness" points to the boundary that school dress drew. Students at the Affiliated Girls' School wore skirts, which kept visible signs of femininity. At the same time, plain fabrics, matching shoes and socks, and limited decoration set them apart from fashionable urban women. Despite their simple and orderly appearance, students led rich and lively school lives. Female students took part in many kinds of sports (fig. 3). Chen Shouniao, class of 1928, recalled, "A serious and unpretentious school culture did not prevent the girls from being lively and innocent. Sports meets, recreation events, after-school music practice, ball games, New Year welcome events, and end-of-year farewell parties all gave students room to express their energy and enthusiasm" (Cai and Chen 2017). This shows that the identity of a "female student" at the time was multifaceted: receiving an education, following school discipline, dressing simply, exercising, developing personal interests, and taking part in collective life.

In its early years, the school required every student to wear her hair in two coiled braids. In 1927, it even refused applications from girls with short hair. However, as the social trend toward shorter hair spread, short hair later became the standard hairstyle among students (Cai and Chen 2017). What had at first seemed too radical came, over time, to stand for the restrained and orderly look of the modern female student. School rules, in other words, kept adjusting to changes both on campus and in society at large.



Figure 3. Martial arts performance by students, April 1924

This student image continued during the Second Sino-Japanese War. According to Bai Yangling, class of 1943, students wore lightweight blouses and black skirts in summer and long blue cloth gowns in winter. Even under Japanese occupation, campus life remained strictly ordered, and students appeared neat and uniform (Cai and Chen 2017). In this context, standardized school dress did more than keep students looking tidy; it also helped maintain the school's educational traditions and collective order.

Overall, school dress during the Republican period grew out of the style widely worn by female students at the time. Seasonal colors and dress rules created a more consistent school image and reinforced the school's broader educational ideals. Over time, school dress helped shape the "modern female student" as a figure with a specific social role: she received an education, took part in school activities, and entered public life; her simple and neat appearance, energetic spirit, and sense of collective belonging set her apart both from women confined to traditional domestic roles and from fashion-conscious urban women.

IV.
The Transformation of Student Dress and Identity (1950s–1970s)

After 1949, societal expectations of youth and students shifted significantly, with labor, collective life, and participation in national development taking on a more prominent role in youth education. At the Affiliated Girls' School, the simple and neat student image established during the Republican era persisted, but it began to evolve within a new social context, aligning with the broader values of youth at the time. As popular youth fashion made its way onto campus, what had set the school's dress apart gradually faded. These changes reflected a process in which student identity was renegotiated between the school's distinctive features and the common youth appearance of the era.

White Blouses and Dark Blue Pinafore Dresses: Continuity and Change in Student Dress (1950s–mid-1960s)

By the 1950s, white blouses and dark blue pinafore dresses had become the representative school dress of the period (fig. 4). Compared with Republican-era dress, the ordinary long skirt gave way to the pinafore dress, and the color shifted from black to dark blue, but the basic pairing of light-colored tops with dark-colored skirts, as well as the overall simple and modest style, remained intact.

This change was not limited to style; the student image conveyed by the school dress also took on new social meanings. From the 1950s onward, labor, collective life, and heroic role models gained greater prominence in school education.



Figure 4. Graduation photograph of junior high class 3-1, July 1962

Alumna Xu Rong recalled: "The most obvious examples were morning exercises and P.E. classes. Every morning around 6:00 a.m., students would start showing up on the sports field running laps, doing calisthenics, or lifting dumbbells—spring, summer, autumn, winter, without ever stopping… No one supervised us; back then, self-discipline was the norm!" (Cai and Chen 2017).

Alumna Zhang Shuqi mentioned that the "Zoya blouse" (Zhuoya shan) was popular among the girls at the time—a style modeled on the clothing worn in photographs by Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya (1923–1941), a Soviet partisan heroine of the Second World War. It featured a small rounded collar and pleats across the front. Zhang herself liked this style so much that she asked a classmate to make one for her. Zoya was an important youth role model on campus: in 1954, the school established the "Zoya Class," and after Zoya's mother visited the school in 1955, a wave of "learning from heroes" swept through the campus (Cai and Chen 2017).

Student Image Shaped by the Times (Late 1960s–1970s)

By the late 1960s and the 1970s, green military uniforms, Zhongshan suits, and blue-gray casual wear had become common among young people. Compared with the earlier white shirts and pinafores, these garments had looser silhouettes and fewer embellishments, placing greater emphasis on durability and ease of movement. In the social context of the time, green, blue, and gray also became associated with revolution, labor, and frugality.

In 1968, the school ended its half-century history as a girls' school and began admitting boys. With male and female students now sharing the campus, the gender composition of the student image became more diverse, and the campus dress traditions that had long been shaped by female students changed accordingly (Cai and Chen 2017).

Zhou Jie, class of 1973 and later an art teacher at EHS-BNU, recalled that when he enrolled in 1969 there was no such thing as a school uniform. Students mostly wore Zhongshan suits, and there was no clear distinction between school and casual attire. The distinctive features of the former Affiliated Girls' School—once expressed through skirts, color combinations, and dress codes—grew increasingly blurred, and students' clothing came to resemble the general appearance of young people of that era. At this time, what people first saw in such clothing was often the image of youth from a particular period rather than of a particular school; these outfits also more readily evoked associations with the values emphasized during that time—austerity, discipline, and a sense of collective mission.

V.
Reshaping School Identity and the Emergence of the Modern Student Image (1980s–1990s)

After 1978, with the onset of Reform and Opening-up, the school's teaching and campus life gradually entered a new stage of development, as reforms in curriculum and campus management, as well as international exchanges, got underway. By the 1980s, more standardized student dress had reappeared in campus photographs.

The Restoration of School Identity

On January 24, 1978, Beijing No. 150 Middle School, as the school was then called, was placed back under the administration of Beijing Normal University and officially renamed "The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University." That same year, the school resumed its fall semester and reaffirmed teaching as its central priority, gradually restoring normal academic order (Cai and Chen 2017). The school then carried out successive reforms in curriculum, teaching, and administration. *Shiyan bainian* characterizes this stage as a period of development in which the school "kept pace with the times" after Reform and Opening-up.

The restoration of its name gave the school a stable institutional identity once more. In their recollections of this period, alumni frequently mention the relatively open and self-directed learning atmosphere at school. Yang Shuqing, class of 1987, recalled: "We could discuss questions freely and as equals with our teachers both in and out of class, and we could arrange our spare time and study pace as we wished" (Cai and Chen 2017).

In this campus environment, student dress once again became relatively uniform. While this does not prove that the school had consciously established a complete visual identity through school uniforms, as it would in the 1990s, photographs at least suggest that students on campus began to regain a more easily recognizable shared appearance (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Student assembly on the sports field, 1980s–1990s

White Palettes and the Return of the "Student Look"

Extant school photos from the 1980s show that boys mostly wore white tops with white trousers, while girls wore white blouses with long navy pinafores. The boys' outfits were generally lighter in color, whereas the girls continued to wear the pairing of a light top with a dark skirt. White played a prominent role in both, giving the overall visual effect a clean and neat quality while reinforcing the distinction between student dress and ordinary everyday clothing.

From the broader perspective of school uniform history, this white-dominated palette echoes earlier student dress: the white tops and black skirts of the Republican era and the white shirts and dark blue pinafore dresses of the 1950s. In the 1980s, white tops once again became an element shared by both boys' and girls' dress. This light-and-dark combination preserved the clean, elegant visual characteristics of school dress, restoring a distinctly "student-like" look on campus.

Renewed Gender Differentiation in Student Identity

Another notable change in 1980s dress was the widening of the differences between what male and female students wore. Boys wore long trousers, while girls wore long skirts, making it relatively easy to distinguish them by their silhouettes. Compared with the 1960s and 1970s, when both male and female students might wear the same military-style uniforms, Zhongshan suits, or blue-gray casual wear, gender became a more prominent feature in student dress.

This change also took place as everyday clothing became increasingly diverse after Reform and Opening-up. Colors, styles, and personal aesthetic choices expanded, and styles that had become uncommon, such as skirts, returned to daily life. On campus, white shirts, trousers, and long skirts together formed a dress image closer to that of modern middle school students.

VI.
The Rise of Design Autonomy and the Formation of Shiyanren Identity (1990s–Present)

From the 1990s onward, the school began designing its own uniforms, which gradually took on a more stable and distinctive character. This process unfolded primarily in three ways: establishing a consistent school identity through the colors red, black, and white; addressing students' daily needs through styles such as jackets and sportswear; and, through student participation in redesigns, transforming the uniform from a garment unilaterally decided by the school into a campus matter jointly discussed by teachers and students. The function of the school uniform thus expanded beyond practicality, uniformity, and identity recognition to include expressing the school's philosophy and presenting a Shiyanren image unique to the school.

Red, Black, and White: The School's Ethos in Color

Color was the first design element to be settled. Zhou Jie, who was primarily responsible for the uniform design, put it plainly: "Color is the most important factor." In the 1990s, loose sportswear and baggy "sack-style" school uniforms, mainly in blue and white, were in vogue across schools (Shi 2014). By contrast, EHS-BNU adopted the high-contrast combination of red, black, and white, giving its students a look that stood out among the school uniforms of the time. In subsequent uniform updates, although the cut and fabric underwent numerous adjustments, the three colors were consistently retained (fig. 6).

When asked why red, black, and white were ultimately chosen, Zhou first explained it in terms of color relationships themselves, citing a line from *The Art of War*: although there are no more than five primary colors, in combination they produce more hues than can ever be seen (Sunzi 1910). The "five colors" here refer to red, yellow, blue, white, and black. Among these five basic colors, red stands first among the three primary colors, while black and white represent the two extremes of value, embodying the most fundamental relationship between light and dark. Few as they are, red, black, and white occupy the three most critical positions within the framework of color theory: the starting point of hue (red) and the two extremes of value (black and white).

On this basis, the designers further linked colors to particular student qualities. Red and black were interpreted as representing the relationship between emotion and reason. Red was taken to stand for enthusiasm, passion, and liveliness, corresponding to the vitality students display in sports, on stage, and in collective activities; black stood for calmness, composure, dignity, and steadiness, closer to the rational state required for classroom learning and academic reflection. "We hope students can find a dynamic balance between emotion and reason in their daily lives, just as the Chinese People's Anti-Japanese Military and Political University's motto states: 'Unity, Alertness, Seriousness, and Liveliness,'" said Zhou. Emotion provides the drive to act, while reason helps students find ways to achieve their goals. By combining red and black, the uniform brings these two seemingly opposite states together into the designers' vision of Shiyanren.



Figure 6. EHS-BNU uniforms in red, black, and white, late 1990s–2010

Black and white add another layer of meaning to the design. Drawing on the Taiji idea that yin and yang complement and transform into each other, Zhou Jie interpreted the relationship between black and white as the potential for change and creation. Zhou Dunyi's "An Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate" (*Taijitu shuo*) states that "movement and tranquillity alternate and become the root of each other" and that "the interaction of these two material forces engenders and transforms the myriad things" (Zhou 1963). Sun Yat-sen's *Sun Wen xueshuo* (Doctrine of Sun Wen) likewise states: "Taiji [which Sun used to render the Western term 'ether'] moves to generate electrons, electrons condense to form elements, elements combine to create matter, and matter gathers to form the Earth" (Sun [1919] 1985). Black and white thus do more than create the most fundamental contrast between light and dark; they are also imbued with deeper meanings of change, growth, and openness, reflecting students' continuous development and their potential to move from campus into the wider world.

In the actual garment design, these three colors also serve practical functions in visual composition. In this set of uniforms, black is the main color for boys and red for girls; white appears in both, so that boys' and girls' uniforms remain a unified visual whole despite their differences. The red, black, and white stripes on the chest further create clear lines and rhythm that give the overall look a sense of dynamism. Thus, white is both symbolic, carrying associations of purity and integrity, and functional, softening the contrast between red and black and adding depth to the overall color scheme.

Zhang Jing, class of 2001, described red, black, and white as a strongly contrasting "high-key, long-scale" color scheme. Compared with softer, low-contrast palettes, it appears brighter and more vivid, with significant visual impact. She particularly emphasized the importance of the proportion of white: reducing it would weaken the original color contrast, and the overall brightness would diminish as well. It is precisely this striking color relationship that allows the school uniform to be quickly recognized amid the complex, colorful campus backdrop. Such a color scheme "may not be to everyone's taste in every class," but through long-term use, it has become a clear marker of EHS-BNU. In her view, the continuation of this visual tradition is also tied to the school's own cultural identity: "So I think cultural confidence is really important."

Through repeated use over time, these three colors have gradually turned from a single design choice into one of the most stable visual features of EHS-BNU's uniform. They also help students across generations recognize a shared school identity and form collective memories. From Barthes's perspective, color has no fixed cultural meaning in itself; its meaning takes shape through the designer's interpretations and the school's long-term use (Barthes 1990). Red, black, and white have become the visual expression of the Shiyanren character: passionate yet unostentatious, steady yet not sluggish, open yet powerful.

Jackets and Sportswear: The Practical Logic Behind Style Choices

If color answers "who we are," cut and silhouette respond to "how we live." During the 1980s and 1990s, batwing tops, padded-shoulder suits, broad-shouldered silhouettes, and jacket-style outerwear became popular. Clothing design increasingly emphasized shoulder lines, garment structure, and overall shape (Chen and Zhang 2018). Within this broader aesthetic context, EHS-BNU chose a jacket-style uniform that maintained a clear silhouette while still fitting the practical demands of students' daily activities (fig. 7).

Zhou explained that a school uniform should both express student identity and work across different situations students encounter during the day. Compared with loose sportswear, the jacket's structured fabric, turn-down collar, and clear outline created a cleaner and more polished appearance. It also allowed greater freedom of movement



Figure 7. EHS-BNU jacket-style uniform, late 1990s–early 2000s

than more formal clothing such as suits. Students move between classes, exercise, assemblies, and other group activities throughout the day, so a style somewhere between formal and casual could adapt more easily to campus life.

Once the basic cut had been finalized, the designers continued to adjust the materials and smaller details to improve both appearance and wearability. Early versions added leather at the collar and pockets, using its firmer texture to strengthen the shape of the jacket. Genuine leather was considered at first, but its high cost led to the use of artificial leather instead. Since artificial leather tended to crack after long-term wear, later versions kept the leather only on the pockets. Similar concerns shaped the choice of the main fabric. The uniform used a composite material with polyester on the outside and cotton on the inside. The polyester outer layer was more resistant to wear and helped the garment hold its shape, while the cotton inner layer was more comfortable against the body.

The school also experimented with a more formal uniform design. Existing materials show students trying on a dark wool coat with a long, structured silhouette, paired with a plaid skirt (fig. 8). The overall appearance was more formal and visually uniform than the jacket-style version. However, this design was not used for long. The long, heavy wool coat limited students' movement in daily activities and also made standardized production and later replacement more costly. This attempt shows that a more formal appearance could create stronger visual consistency, yet it was less suited to the routines of everyday school life.



Figure 8. Trial formal uniform at EHS-BNU, 1990s

Later uniforms gradually shifted toward lighter sportswear. Compared with the earlier jackets, these designs used looser cuts that allowed students to move more freely, placing greater emphasis on comfort and everyday practicality. At the same time, polo shirts and stand-collar sportswear jackets retained relatively neat collars and clear outlines (fig. 9). As a result, although the current uniform is more closely oriented toward sports and daily wear, it still keeps a structured, neat, and presentable appearance.



Figure 9. Current stand-collar uniform jacket at EHS-BNU

From School-Led Design to Student Participation

In subsequent revisions to the school uniform, students gradually began to participate in the design and selection process.

Student involvement brought a consultative process into uniform design. According to Zhang Dayu, the teacher responsible for the uniform redesign at the time, the student council established a research group on school uniforms around 2010, when the school also began preparing for a formal partnership with the school uniform brand U-CAN. Compared with the previous approach, in which the school specified its requirements and manufacturers directly produced the uniforms, this redesign incorporated a more comprehensive research and design process. The brand's designers visited the school to learn about the campus environment and students' practical needs, and discussed design proposals with the school and the

student council. The student council conducted several rounds of questionnaires and voting to gather students' opinions on colors, styles, and everyday wear.

Following multiple rounds of research, design, and feedback, a new uniform was introduced around 2011, establishing the basic styles still in use today. Red, black, and white remained central elements of the overall design. Zhang recalled that the redesigned uniform received a generally positive response from students. The new cuts and color combinations further strengthened the school's visual identity.

The school's uniform system also changed during this period. The school gradually adopted a "1+N" approach: students were required to have one standard outfit for formal occasions, such as flag-raising ceremonies, and could choose to purchase additional everyday styles based on their individual needs. This approach maintained a relatively consistent school image on formal occasions and gave students more choice in their everyday clothing.

The redesign around 2010 established a clearer process for participation by multiple groups. Students could provide feedback based on their actual experiences of wearing the uniforms and influence specific proposals through questionnaires and voting; professional designers then translated these needs into choices concerning colors, cuts, and design details. In this way, student views began to enter the uniform design and decision-making process more systematically.

Continuity Through Change: The Formation of the Shiyanren Identity

From the 1990s to the present, uniform designs have continued to change in response to students' bodies, everyday needs, and developments in production technology. At the same time, certain elements have been retained across successive redesigns. School uniforms have translated the school's expectations of students into something that is visible and wearable, while also allowing students to evaluate and reshape them through everyday use. In this process, Shiyanren identity has gradually developed through an understanding of the origins of school traditions and judgments about what should be retained and what details could be improved, rather than through unquestioning adherence to tradition or change for its own sake.

VII. Discussion: Three Mechanisms of Student Identity Formation Through School Uniforms

School uniforms at EHS-BNU have consistently contributed to the formation of student identity through three mechanisms: visual identification, value expectations, and everyday belonging.

Visual Identification: Making Student Identity Visible

One of the most direct functions of school uniforms is to make student identity visible through a stable and clearly recognizable appearance. Color, style, and overall silhouette together form the visual features by which students are recognized on campus.

Across more than a century of change, the distinctiveness of school uniforms has depended on how far campus dress differed from everyday clothing in wider society. When students' clothing closely resembles what young people generally wear in the same period, its school-specific characteristics become less pronounced; when a school develops relatively stable colors, styles, and distinctive visual elements, students' school affiliation becomes more readily identifiable.

The meanings of identity embodied in school uniforms have also gradually become more specific. Early student dress primarily expressed broader social

identities, such as “female student” or “young student,” and shared many visual features with the clothing of other student groups of the same era. As red, black, and white became established features of the school uniform, they made affiliation with EHS-BNU more recognizable and gradually became associated with the distinctive Shiyanren identity.

Value Expectations: Defining Student Identity

School uniforms also reflect the school’s expectations of its students. Rules on style, color, hairstyle, and ways of wearing clothes show what the school considered appropriate student appearance and demeanor at a particular time. Uniforms thus do more than specify what students should wear: they translate an era’s judgments about what students should be like into concrete dress requirements.

Alumni recollections of the Republican period preserved in the school history repeatedly describe the desirable student appearance as “simple and graceful” and “neat and full of energy,” and the school’s rules explicitly restricted showy or unusual clothing and certain hairstyles. These regulations promoted an image of female students as educated, neat, restrained, and recognizably student-like. Subsequently, considerations such as collective identity, practicality, aesthetics, and gender expression also entered uniform design and dress regulations.

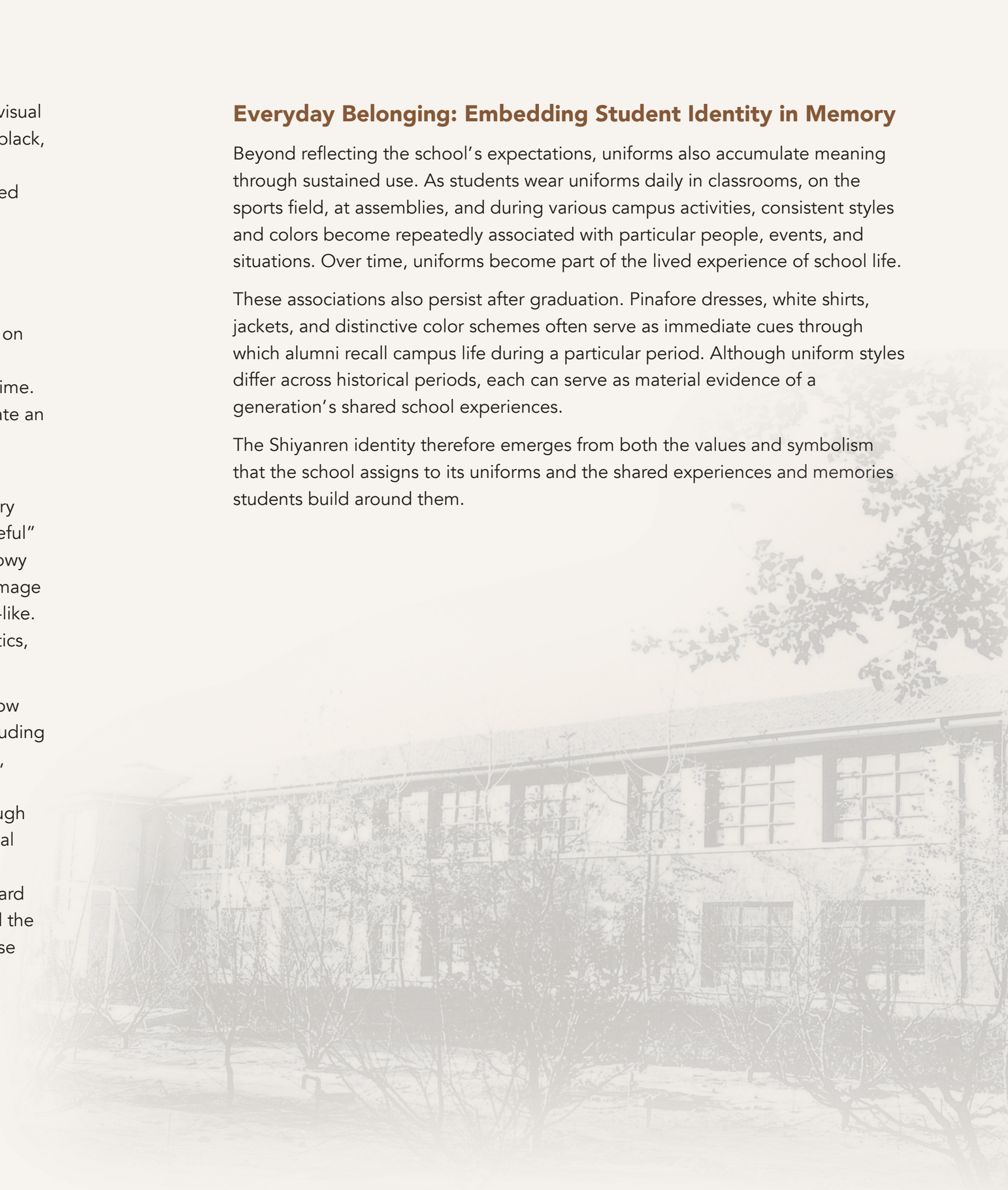
Since the 1990s, these expectations have increasingly taken into account how students actually use their uniforms. The demands of different settings, including classrooms, sports, and everyday activities, were built into design decisions, placing comfort, practicality, and aesthetics alongside neatness and appropriateness. Students’ involvement in parts of the design process through questionnaires, feedback, and voting also meant that the image of the “ideal student” was no longer defined entirely by the school. Over time, the expectations embodied in school uniforms expanded from regulating outward appearance to accommodating everyday life and student participation, and the school’s understanding of student identity became more specific and diverse accordingly.

Everyday Belonging: Embedding Student Identity in Memory

Beyond reflecting the school’s expectations, uniforms also accumulate meaning through sustained use. As students wear uniforms daily in classrooms, on the sports field, at assemblies, and during various campus activities, consistent styles and colors become repeatedly associated with particular people, events, and situations. Over time, uniforms become part of the lived experience of school life.

These associations also persist after graduation. Pinafore dresses, white shirts, jackets, and distinctive color schemes often serve as immediate cues through which alumni recall campus life during a particular period. Although uniform styles differ across historical periods, each can serve as material evidence of a generation’s shared school experiences.

The Shiyanren identity therefore emerges from both the values and symbolism that the school assigns to its uniforms and the shared experiences and memories students build around them.



VIII.
Conclusion

This study finds that the student identities expressed through school uniforms have continually changed in response to the social environment, the school's educational philosophy, and students' everyday lives on campus. Early student dress largely reflected contemporary society's shared conception of the "modern female student" ; from the 1950s through the 1970s, student appearance converged with broader youth images prevalent at the time; following Reform and Opening-up, campus dress regained more explicit school-specific characteristics; and the fixed color scheme and relatively stable system of styles established in the 1990s further strengthened the school's distinctive identity.

In terms of specific mechanisms, school uniforms contribute to the formation of student identity through visual identification, value expectations, and everyday belonging. Colors, styles, and overall silhouettes make student identity and school affiliation recognizable through clothing; dress regulations and design choices reflect the school's understandings of student appearance, demeanor, and campus lifestyles in different periods; sustained wearing, evaluation, modification, and recollection make uniforms part of students' individual and collective memories of school life. These three mechanisms reinforce one another rather than operating separately.

For more than a century, school uniforms have remained at the intersection of historical circumstances, the school's educational philosophy, and students' everyday experiences. Design choices in different periods have given visible form to the school's understanding of student appearance, while continued wearing, interpretation, and revision have helped build a shared sense of Shiyanren identity across generations.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its examination of more than a century of clothing changes at a single school as a continuous historical case, placing the specific forms of uniforms, the school's expectations of student appearance, and students' actual experiences of wearing them within the same historical context. This analysis extends previous research, which has focused mainly on changes in uniform styles or their general educational functions, by bringing students' practices, evaluations, and memories into the discussion of how school identity is formed. It also shows how school uniforms can serve as tangible evidence for tracing changes in school culture and student identity.

Nevertheless, this study has clear limitations. First, it focuses on the Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University as a single case, whose historical traditions, educational characteristics, and experiences of uniform design are highly specific, meaning that the changes observed here cannot be taken as directly representative of the overall development of secondary school uniforms in China. Second, the surviving materials are unevenly distributed across historical periods: research on earlier periods relies heavily on school histories, photographs, and alumni recollections, while the detailed design processes, production records, and student opinions associated with some uniforms can no longer be fully reconstructed. Oral accounts also come mainly from teachers and alumni who could be contacted by the researchers, leaving the experiences of students from different grade levels, genders, and attitudes toward uniform wearing incompletely represented.

Future research could build on this study by broadening the scope of comparison. For example, schools from different regions, school types, and historical backgrounds could be compared to examine how they negotiate school distinctiveness, contemporary aesthetics, and student needs through uniforms. In addition, further research could examine students' actual use of uniforms, including clothing choices across genders and students'acceptance or modification of, or resistance to, uniform regulations. Moreover, as contemporary schools increasingly encourage student participation, future research could also track the role of student views in uniform design and management, and examine whether such participation changes students' understandings of their identity and uniforms themselves.

IX.

History Worn Exhibition :
SDSZ Uniform Archive for School Memory, Student Identity & Inter-generational Belonging





I.Research & Preparation

Archival Research

Explored school archives through historical photographs and written records to trace over a century of school uniform history.

Alumni Interviews

Interviewed alumni from different generations, including an earlier designer of the red-black-white school uniform, gathering personal memories about school uniforms and everyday campus life.

Exhibition Planning

Developed the exhibition's theme, layout, and visual direction, turning our historical research into an initial curatorial plan.

Curation & Artifact Collection

Refined exhibition designs and collected old uniforms, student IDs, handwritten documents, and alumni memoirs.

Exhibition Installation

Set up display boards and placed physical school uniforms along with other archival materials.





Visiting Former Uniform Designer



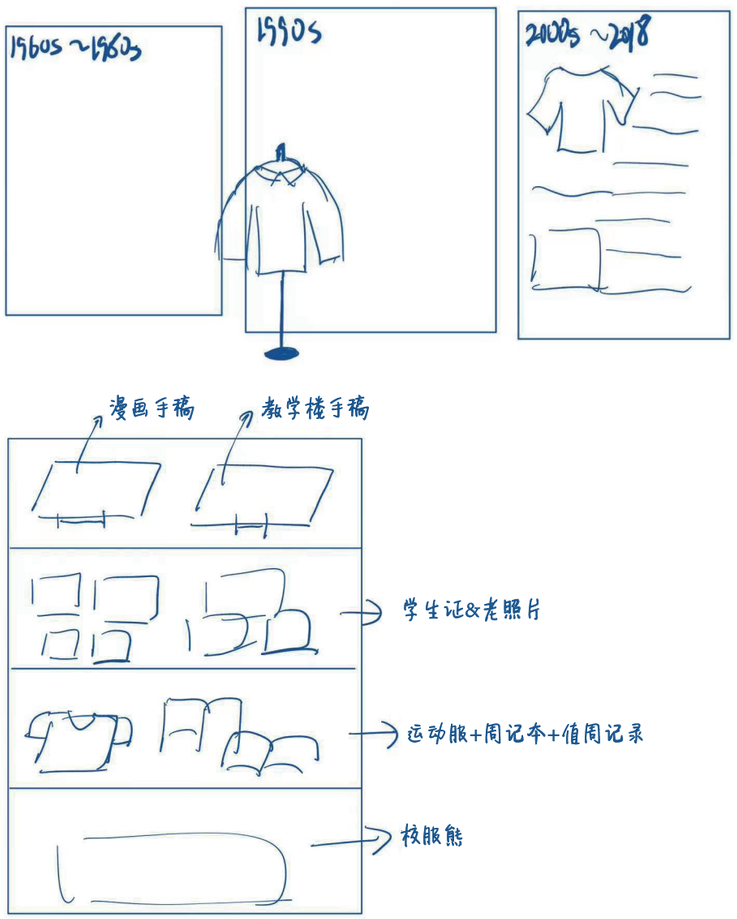
Interviews on Uniforms History



Discussing and Curating Exhibition with my Teammates



Curatorial Process



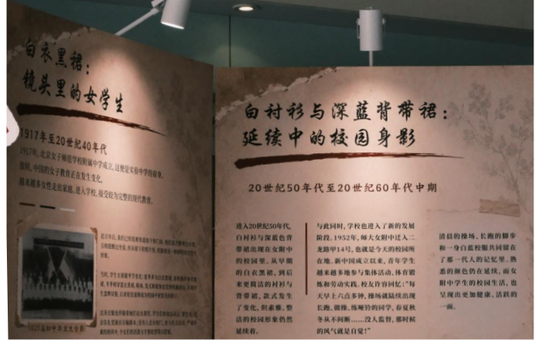
II.Mission & Design Concept

I wanted visitors to experience the history of school uniforms not only through photographs and written descriptions. By bringing actual uniforms and alumni memories into the displays, I hoped to make the past feel more tangible and personal.

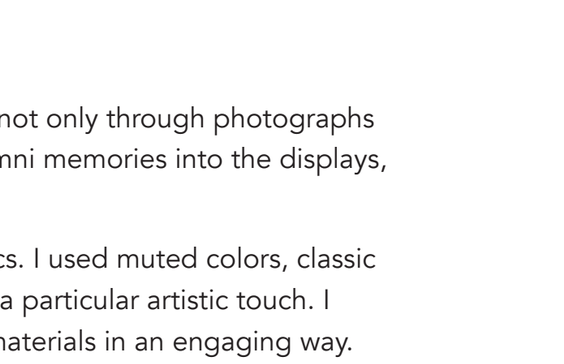
For the visual design, I drew inspiration from vintage aesthetics. I used muted colors, classic typography, and soft, flowing elements to give the exhibition a particular artistic touch. I wanted to make every panel stunning and present historical materials in an engaging way.

Ultimately, I hoped the exhibition would invite visitors to think about the role of school uniforms in different generations, and how they shape our sense of identity and belonging.













III.Impact and Feedback

The exhibition attracted an estimated 20,000+ visitors, including students, teachers, alumni, and other campus visitors. Many left handwritten cards in our memory box, sharing their own stories about school uniforms and the moments they remembered most from campus life.

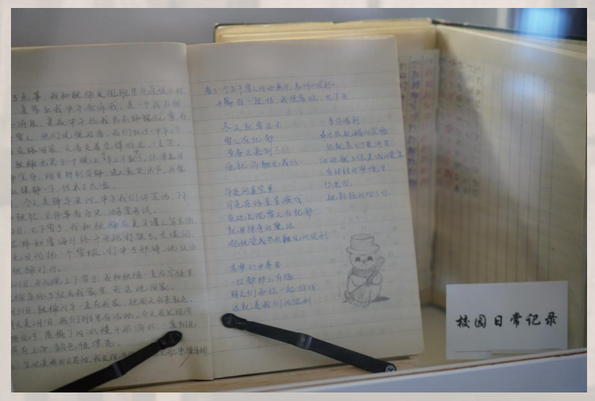
Lots of alumni returned to school to see the exhibition. Students also told me that they had never realized how much history and meaning could be found in something they wore every day.

Our research and student feedback also helped bring more styles, greater freedom of choice, and gender-inclusive options into the school’ s discussions about future uniforms.

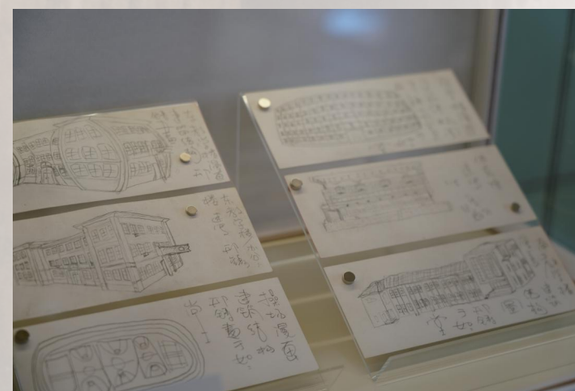












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