



不向制服妥協

# House rule Be COOL

For a uniform to work, does it have to be a designer creation?

By Eustacia Huen  
Illustrations by A Yip



To me, the idea of wearing a uniform to work is not so cool. As I see it, uniforms are there to help impose discipline among staff, and make sure that people don't go overly creative and wear something unacceptable to work. As a result, uniforms tend to be rather boring, "everyman" affairs. However in recent years, more Hong Kong corporations have started collaborating with fashion designers to come up with unique and stylish staff uniforms.

They are following the trend set by global establishments such as the Armani Bar, Jean George's 66 in New York City for whom Vivienne Tam designed the uniforms, Cathay Pacific which used to have uniforms designed by French house Hermès and British Airways whose uniforms were designed by Julien Macdonald. In Japan, staff uniforms for the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo City View and Museum Shop are designed by the team from Y's, one of the labels in the Yohji Yamamoto stable.

Clearly, the influence of fashion designers on the corporate image has become important. The MTR Corporation, for example, introduced a new set of staff uniforms in early December last year to mark its merger with the Kowloon-

「制服」一詞顧名思義、不辯自明，本來就含有馴服、制肘和控制的意思。公司給你一套制服，就是要你在上班的時候「生，做它的人。死，做它的鬼」。想一下就令人毛骨悚然

Canton Railway Corporation. The new uniforms were designed by local fashion designer 鄧達智 (William Tang) and are the result of several rounds of consultation involving some 200 staff representatives. Apart from being practical, the uniforms are designed to reflect the idea of "One company, one team".

They are certainly far more interesting and present a more coherent outfit than the dowdy old uniforms that consisted of a fluorescent waistcoat on top of a regular T-shirt, and a generic pair of dark navy/black pants. The old MTR uniform reminded me of lollipop men in England, whose job it is to guide little children across the streets. In contrast, the new dark navy uniforms with their

sharp yellow highlights, look comfortably boxy and vibrant, and have a pleasingly sporty feel.

Katherine Ng Wai-Fong, a 50-year-old administrative assistant at a missionary broadcasting company, has been a frequent traveler on the MTR for 20 years. When asked to comment on the old uniforms, she had this to say: "I think their (old) uniforms were really hideous. The kind of blue they chose was not only outdated, but also disturbingly ugly, and it made the wearer look tired. I think they made the MTR Corporation appear very stingy, as if they weren't trying hard enough to present themselves well. It was as if the sloppy uniforms were in direct contrast to their otherwise slick and efficient services. But then, as we all know the MTR makes a lot of money and has no real competition, so I guess they felt they did not need to bother with the way they looked."

With the new uniforms, however, Ng feels the MTR Corporation has moved in the right direction. "I really like William's new designs for the uniforms, particularly the yellow accents which give them a refreshing look."

Top marks for the new designs from a passenger then, but my next step was to find out what the people who actually wear the uniforms on a daily basis – the MTR staff – think of their new look. Interestingly, garnering their opinions proved difficult and took many attempts. I approached staff in MTR stations in Central, Admiralty, Tsim Sha Tsui and Jordan, and while they were very friendly and polite, they all had roughly the same answer, "I'm sorry, but I think you might have to contact our Communications Department first." Only one employee (who asked to remain anonymous) expressed an opinion, which in the context of this article was rather disappointing in that she said she didn't have much of an opinion – "After all, it's only a uniform."

Unsurprisingly, the fashion designer himself was a lot more forthcoming. Tang, who has designed uniforms for 12 years now, said he generally likes to add fashionable touches to his uniforms by playing around with necklines and colors, and he also tries to ensure the uniforms are as comfortable as possible. Tang has created uniforms for many companies including Bank of China, Citibank, Dragon Air, Hong Kong International Airport and Hong Kong Tourism Board.

Asked how he approaches designing clothing that people will have to wear day-in, day-out, Tang said: "Psychologically, I don't want the service providers to feel embarrassed. To best accentuate the Asian figure, the pants cannot be too wide legged, and the dresses cannot be too long. The

waist, however, is always a nice spot to highlight.

"For the MTR, my most recent project, I insisted on using the yellow as I believed it would add a refreshing touch to the uniform and be representative of the vibrancy of the company. Coincidentally, this yellow is going to be one of the "it" colors of spring 2008."

Tang has also collaborated with 鑪記酒家 (Yung Kee Restaurant), a landmark eatery in Hong Kong's food culture. Yung Kee's uniforms are an example of how good design can make a real difference to the dining experience.

As a Yung Kee regular – whenever I need a fix for my sporadic 叉燒 (barbecue pork) cravings – I feel that the taste of their food, the overall decor and the waiters' uniforms jointly culminate in creating a very comfortable and homey vibe, which is slightly 老土 (old-fashioned), but welcoming. It's a welcome contrast to restaurants with waitresses dressed in super sexy 旗袍 (qipaos) with dangerously high slits. I like how Yung Kee's uniforms look more understated and comfortable. Using a black and burgundy color scheme throughout, Yung Kee uniforms vary in details for different types of staff from waiters and waitresses through receptionists, and bartenders to parking staff. Skirt lengths vary, as do details in the waistcoats, jackets, hats, etc. This unified yet varied look evokes a sense of the style of traditional Chinese ladies: prim, proper, and well put together.

金瓊禮 (Ronald Kam), Yung Kee's executive director and general manager, commented: "We try to show the figures of the 20-30 year old ladies, and select something that matches the men's youth, while older waiters can opt for more subdued designs which aren't overbearingly elaborate. Moreover, we try to incorporate different details in collars, waistcoats and suits that distinguish the ranking and position of different staff."

Yung Kee's uniforms have also struck a chord with its patrons. IT manager Derek Leung, who has been working at a publishing company in Sheung Wan for four years, is a long-time customer at Yung Kee. He likes the restaurant mainly for its crispy roast goose, but also for its service and down-to-earth uniforms. "I like how their uniforms are clean, decent and not too fancy. Moreover, I like how it's so easy to pinpoint who's the waiter, who's the captain, and who's the manager."

Yung Kee may boast the most "proper" uniforms, but when it comes to the coolest look, in my mind, McDonald's fits the bill – and for this much credit goes to well-known actor, director and DJ 葛民輝 (Eric Kot Man Fai). Before

becoming a DJ, Kot – who alongside 林海峰 (Jan Lamb Hoi Fung) is also half of the successful duo 軟硬天師 (SoftHard) – was originally a window display stylist. In 2005, he joined hands with RMC, Martin Ksohoh's internationally renowned Red Monkey Company, to create a selection of hip and stylish uniforms for McDonald's.

According to Kot, the design process from the original briefing through creating the designs and testing samples in various outlets, normally takes around eight months. "The company pays close attention to every detail – whether it is selecting the right weight of denim, or picking the ideal font – they want to be sure the final uniforms will be both aesthetically pleasing and practical," he said.

For the most part, Kot said he does not have much trouble fighting for his own ideas. While there are several guidelines to follow, the company welcomes the inclusion of aspects of local culture into the look of the uniforms for different regions of their international business. "They would test the new uniforms in approximately eight branches. At around 200 people per store, we're talking about 1,600 workers trying out uniforms produced by different factories, so that they can select the ideal uniform for the 12,000 staff in Hong Kong," he said.

Creating uniforms is nothing like designing for fashion. Kot makes sure that his designs can cater to all McDonald's Hong Kong employees no matter what their size, age, working position and duties. While shop managers wear a suit-like outfit, front-line staff members have a more relaxed look – baggy red and white worker shirts, baggy jeans, and red and white baseball caps. These uniforms are also used as a means to display individual's accomplishments. Staff members are awarded with "smiley badges" to recognize their achievements at work – the more badges they have the more they have done.

The uniforms differ a little depending on the wearer's role in the restaurant. For example, those working in the very back of the kitchen are not required to wear the worker shirt which is mandatory for the frontline waiters. "That's because the back of the kitchen can get very hot, and the shirt would become too stuffy for comfort," explained Kot. "Also, these staff won't have to deal with the customers anyway."

Asked what other criteria he tries to inject into his uniforms, Kot said: "It's important to me to find a material that doesn't dirty too easily. And of course I don't want the staff to feel



# 設計制服的藝術，是既要著痕跡地幫老板執行紀律，又要令員工覺得自己穿上制服之後高人一等。這種兩面討好、吃裡扒外的手段，幾乎算得上一種外交手腕

embarrassed. After all, they do work long hours, so it's important that they are happy with their uniforms. It's equally important that they look bright and cheerful so customers feel excitement and happiness when they see them."

Improving staff uniforms can also improve staff morale, especially at a time when the economy is good. "Aside from a raise, there are other ways in which a company can compensate its employees," said Kot, "including by creating a better working environment and providing nicer uniforms."

To be served by a waiter or shop assistant wearing a designer uniform can be an extraordinary experience in itself. However, the success of any design depends not only on the choice of color, style and cut, but also on its compatibility with the wearer. "You can't force a subdued person to look ultra-sunshiny and energetic. It just doesn't work that way. 穿起龍袍不像太子," commented 26-year-old Winnie Lam, an assistant brand manager at an international luxury products company.

Uniforms represent a significant challenge for designers, who not only have to display creative flair, but also meet the demands of companies and staff. Local designer 何志恩 (Johanna Ho), aged 35, graduated from London's Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design with both undergraduate and masters degrees in 1997, and has previously showcased her ready-to-wear collections in London, Tokyo, Singapore, Australia and Hong Kong. As highly experienced as she is, Ho admitted that designing uniforms can be a very frustrating experience. "As opposed to designing for models on my runway shows, I have to make sure that the uniforms I create can cater to the different sizes and ages of the staff without forgoing the spirit that represents both the store and my personal style."

While working on her most recent assignment for On Pedder, the upscale shoe boutique that's part of the Lane Crawford Group, Ho was well aware of the irony of injecting personal style and uniqueness into uniform dressing, which by definition is the opposite of unique. She opted for a design that she believed would make the staff

look fashionable and approachable, no matter how old or young they are. "When there are pregnant ladies and young girls among the staff members, I have decided to add a simple and presentable belt in the waist area to highlight my collection of chic, black uniforms."

Ho's understated yet stylish design for On Pedder has found favor with shoppers such as 31-year-old Pattie Man. "Of all the places I shop in Hong Kong, I most fondly remember the girls at On Pedder in Central," she said. "Not only do they wear these chic black dresses, but they also have simple black stockings and flats to match. The whole outfit to me looks sufficiently professional, sufficiently comfortable, and definitely not too overdressed or heavily made-up. Just right."

Given that companies usually have strong set ideas when it comes to their image and uniforms, what is the real role of fashion designers in the collaboration? "The creative process can be a frustrating one for the designer," said Dr Raymond Au, associate professor at Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Institute of Textiles & Clothing, who has participated in designing uniforms for corporations such as Towngas and the General Post Office.

"Different customers often have different sets of rules and limitations, so as a designer you try to find a way to juggle your own ideas with the requirements of the corporate image. That said, companies are aware that working with a designer is always a good way to create a buzz."

Dr Au noted too that it is important to make sure that the uniforms are culturally sensitive. "For example, in Chinese culture, you can hardly ask your male service providers to wear a green hat, can you?" he said.

For the workers themselves, looking good in their uniform is important, but more crucial is that these outfits are both practical and comfortable. 謝炳輝 (Tse Ping-fai) is a 51-year-old waiter who has been working at the Kee Club for four years. He related an anecdote about his uniform. "Honestly, I don't feel so comfortable whenever I go out in this uniform," he said.

"People often give me weird stares. The other day,



add a theatrical touch to the whole place, but as a consumer I'd say the uniform looks a bit pretentious and not at all practical. Nevertheless, given the Kee Club's European atmosphere and decoration, the uniform does fit pretty well with the general theme.

Rhomberg's original criteria for staff uniforms were they should be smart and practical, and made of wrinkle-free, waterproof material. "When we began developing our current uniforms back in 2001, we chose Sin Sin, a Hong Kong artist to create a collection of practical, unisex, Japanese-style designs that are practical yet timeless. As Kee Club has traces of the look of a 19th-century monastery, I wanted our uniforms to reflect that too," said Rhomberg, adding that Kee Club is to have a new set of uniforms very soon.

In the world of fashion there's a fine line between pushing the envelope and being downright pretentious – the same applies when it comes to designing a cool uniform.

Designer Sin Sin said: "A uniform is like moving art. It is in the public eye, so it is a signature for a company, and it has to be relevant while also making the wearer feel comfortable. For the Kee Club, I concentrated on their layout and their style and, using my skills in the arts, I designed a uniform that's timeless and unique." Hong Kong-based Sin Sin began her creative career in 1984 and has since spread her talents in Asia to the fields of art, fashion and the media.

Evidently, Kee Club uniforms have successfully evoked the monastery look, although I doubt if Rhomberg and Sin Sin ever envisaged that an employee wearing the look would be mistaken for a priest.

Yo Yo, 19, who is a full-time waitress at Kee Club and a student in hotel management at the University of Hong Kong's School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU Space), feels that while the uniform is practical enough and the material breezy, the overtly wide-legged pants are extremely clumsy. "It's easy for them to catch burn marks from the candles placed around the club," she told me.

Another waitress Esther Lau, 31, also felt the uniform had its faults. "Though the uniform is unique and mature, and evokes a sense of dependability, I find the pockets a bit too small. During my night shifts, I can't even carry around a torch or fit a wine opener in the pockets. What's more, the uniform can be pretty stuffy during the summer." That said, Esther still prefers this uniform to those she has worn in previous jobs in other restaurants and hotels. "For the most part, I

a Filipino amah even walked up to me and asked if I'm a father from church!"

Hearing how Tse was mistaken for a priest while wearing his uniform led me to question whether this concept of designer uniforms really works.

The answer is apparently yes, where the bosses are concerned. Christian Rhomberg, one of the owners of Kee Club, feels strongly that every element of the club – from the embroidery on the wallpaper and the material used in uniforms, to the music, perfume and incense that purify the energy – is crucial to satisfying the increasingly high demands of consumers nowadays.

"Hong Kong people are receiving better education comprehensively, and the city is the ideal hub for fashion awareness," he said. "Unlike high-end stores in Paris or Milan, the boutiques in Hong Kong are very inviting. As a result, people are becoming more sophisticated, more fashion conscious, and more demanding. This explains why uniforms today are becoming more stylish, because company owners don't want their staff to look boring."

It's certainly true that the uniforms at Kee Club are not boring. Waiters and waitresses wear super wide-legged black pants, a white shirt and a black waistcoat. The look does



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like how the uniform here isn't as tight as the ones in other restaurants," she said, "and I feel more comfortable and less restricted when I'm doing my job."

On being told that some staff felt their uniforms were impractical, designer Sin Sin said: "Many people have told me about the width of the pants, and how some waiters/waitresses have almost tripped over them. As a designer, I have done my part in creating a uniform that complements the style of Kee, and have duly informed the staff about the ideal length of the pants. But if they still insist upon not following my advice, that's beyond my role as the designer."

Practicality aside though, as far as the consumer is concerned does uniform design matter? While it's nice to be served by well-dressed waiters, surely their outfits are only secondary to their service? Who cares if they are wearing Chanel if the service is lousy? "Stylish uniforms alone cannot miraculously improve service or product quality," said Dr Kay Chang, Head of Psychological Ensemble, HOPE and Ripples Psychological Ensemble, a collective of professional psychologists. She noted however that cool uniforms can raise the morale of a team, give them more confidence, and thus motivate them to provide better service.

One of my favorite restaurants is the venerable 太平館 (Tai Ping Koon, and more specifically their branch in Jordan). Not only do they have what is probably one of the worst fitting uniforms around, their waiters are also well known for their snappiness. However, these problems pale into insignificance when you are craving their heavenly 瑞士雞翼 (Swiss style chicken wings) and their perfectly airy soufflés. Diners quickly learn not to mess with the moody waiters, but simply to focus on the fabulous food at hand.

Tai Ping Koon aside, most people I spoke to agreed that a well-designed uniform can do wonders for an employee's confidence and sense of belonging to the company. Lee Stephens, spa director of the Paua Group, commented, "Uniforms ought to be comfortable so the staff

will be happy working in them; and they should be tailored and smart looking so staff will be taken seriously."

Created on October 2003, the Paua Group is a merger between the Beautiful Skin Centre Group and the Frederique Group. Within the group, the Frederique Spa has uniforms that are tailored, smart-looking and relatively comfortable, although I personally think they're a bit over-the-top. A burgundy suit made from a shiny material may be a good match for Frederique's high-end image, but I think the uniform is too corporate looking. If I'm an OL (office lady) in my 30s looking to have a manicure at a spa, I don't think I'd want to have another "executive" doing my nails. To me, the look simply does not match the fundamental idea of a spa as a place for relaxation.

Pauline Supangkat, head therapist at the Paua Group's Centre Stage spa, thinks her uniform is fashionable and authoritative and helps to bond her team together. If given the choice to wear her own clothes to work, Pauline said she'd still choose to wear her uniform because it makes her look and feel professional.

"I feel comfortable in my uniform," she said. "As therapists, we work as a team on a daily basis, and having a uniform helps as it provides an image of cohesiveness. I like how this uniform makes me feel authoritative, because I appear to my clients as a qualified therapist, who is confident and knows what she's doing."

Eve Roth Lindsay has been designing uniforms for the Paua Group since 2002, and has also designed uniforms for companies as varied as California Restaurant, M at the Fringe, M on the Bund, Le Salon and KGV School. Roth Lindsay is adamant about the practicality of her uniforms. "The spa therapists need to be able to work. They need clothes that they can move in when doing treatments from massages to facials. I wanted to create a uniform that the staff could work in yet they would also be comfortable in when going out for lunch or on to the streets," she said.

Her light, wrinkle-free uniforms are a hit with

employees too. Said Pauline: "At the end of the day, it is also about practicality as it is very important for a therapist to feel comfortable, to be able to move and not be restricted by the uniform especially when she is doing a treatment."

"Another important thing to me is to look presentable, clean and fresh, even after a strenuous treatment, so my uniform must be able to move with me and 'breathe' with me, and not make me feel uncomfortable or sweaty."

Likewise, the waiters at Kee Club all agreed that their uniform gives them a sense of belonging to the organization. Asked if they would consider changing jobs for similar remuneration package but nicer uniforms, waiter Tse Ping-fai responded, "I wouldn't change jobs for a uniform. I think most guys wouldn't, but the girls probably would, because they 貪靚啲 (care more about looks)."

Tse's colleague Yo Yo proved his point, as she mumbled a quiet "maybe" when asked the same question. When asked if they would choose to wear their own clothes at work if given the chance, waitress Mandy Lee and waiter David Chan both said no. "I'd much rather wear these uniforms than my own clothes," said David. "I like how this gives me a sense of belonging, and honestly it would just be too problematic if I had to think of what to wear for work every day."

According to Professor Raymond Au, practicality issues can ultimately make or break the uniform. If a waiter has to spend all his time tucking in a shirt and pulling up his trousers, and is constantly either too hot or too cold, then clearly the uniform has failed miserably to live up to its basic role. "In my experience with Towngas, I met with the organizers to discuss the functions of the uniforms," said Au. "And what they repeatedly emphasized was that the uniform must not have any traces of metal because if there's a gas leak, metal elements on the uniforms could be a serious hazard and may possibly contribute to an explosion."

Katherine Ng feels that good uniforms are important in making that crucial first impression on customers. "I like the uniforms worn by Cathay Pacific staff. Over the years, they have really varied their looks, and created many nice, easy on the eye uniforms that reflect professionalism."

The notion of service and presentation is becoming more important than ever in business today, as witnessed by Andy Lau's TV commercial about maintaining acceptable standards of service. Both Lee Stephens of the Paua Group and Christian Rhomberg of the Kee Club emphasize the importance of creating a thoughtful uniform that not only matches the overall image of





the company, but all the small details of the company's setup. Does this show that Hong Kong consumers are becoming increasingly demanding? "Yes," said designer Johanna Ho, "culturally, people are looking for up-market items. There is a strong recognition of quality and people are not so easily satisfied anymore."

And it's important to get the look right, for while a good-looking uniform creates a good image, a bad one can have an equally negative effect. "The white turtlenecks at the Mandarin coffee shop are hideous," noted Vanessa Li, a public health researcher who appreciates the finer things in life such as spas, afternoon teas and shopping.

But for a uniform to be right, does it have to be a classy, designer creation? When asked to name the most striking uniform he has ever encountered in any restaurant, shop or hotel, IT Manager Derek Leung replied: "I'd have to say... Hooters." ☐

**Eustacia Huen is a freelance writer and fashion stylist who graduated from Brown University with a BA in classics. While many live to write, Eustacia writes to live.**



Eric Kot



## SCHOOL UNIFORMS – SO UNCOOL!

"I feel like a prisoner wearing the school uniform, and the school is just like a prison," Jay Chung, a Form Seven student of 嶺南中學 (Lingnan Secondary School), said grudgingly when I asked her about her uniform – a white shirt with a 方領 (square collar) and a gray skirt with 中間摺 (center crease fold) and three white horizontal stripes near the hem.

Jay was clearly speaking on behalf of many adolescents who are just starting to embark on a search for self-identity, or as they prefer to call it, personal style. Given our city's need to develop creative industries, Hong Kong schools are supposed to encourage the search for individuality and help young people find and cultivate a sense of personal style. Yet school uniforms seem to suggest a reluctance by the schools to nurture creativity and uniqueness among students.

Conventional designs of school uniforms in Hong Kong are downright boring. Boys' uniforms typically consist of a white Dacron shirt with a patch pocket bearing the school's logo, and long pants in gray, brown, blue or white. The

usual accessories are a black belt, white socks, black leather shoes and occasionally, a tie.

Girls' uniforms are more varied, but they basically fall into three main categories: There's the 旗袍 (qipao or cheongsam), usually in dark blue; some wear a Dacron one-piece dress with a tie or a 蝴蝶 (binder) and a plastic or cloth belt. There's also the "sailor girl" uniform, which is relatively more stylish and interesting.

Some private schools boast trendier uniforms than those of mainstream schools. 現代書院 (XianDai College), for example, describes its uniform as "至潮而整齊" (meaning the most "in" and neat) on its website. XianDai boys wear a white long-sleeved shirt, dark gray pants, and a fairly stylish checkered tie bearing a small school logo. XianDai girls wear a white shirt and a checkered tie. But what makes the uniform cool is the checkered skirt that reminds one of the famous Burberry print. XianDai College's design is an example of how a uniform doesn't necessarily have to be 老土 (outdated).

But students at XianDai still

complain about what I consider to be the coolest school uniform in town. Joe Lee, a Form Five student of the school, finds his school uniform 太浮誇 (too exaggerated or high-profile). "I don't feel proud wearing a so-called beautiful uniform," she said.

Uniforms are after all designed to reinforce discipline and instill a sense of belonging in schools, and the aesthetics is secondary, academics say. "Once in their school uniforms, students will identify with the school. The function of school uniform is to play down self-identity," said Dr Frankie Ng, an associate professor of fashion and textile design at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

A well-designed uniform also needs to reflect the school's culture and be practical at the same time. "School uniforms in Hong Kong are designed to show the 校風 (literally academic climate, meaning the spirit of the school) and the tradition of a school. To highlight the style of individual students is not the main purpose of school uniforms," he said.

"In primary and secondary

schools, students need to learn about discipline. As in the army, students are asked to wear school uniforms to enforce discipline. They also build up a sense of belonging towards the school," Dr Ng said. "This sense of belonging is particularly strong when they wear the uniform for the first time."

I was bewildered at this point. Many students, including Jay Chung, told me they actually feel imprisoned by their uniforms. Dr Ng laughed when I told him about the "prisoner" comment. "This feeling [of being like prisoners] has nothing to do with the design of the uniform. They do not like the school uniform because it associates them with the school, which they may not like very much," he said.

Eva Yeung agreed with this view; she thinks school uniforms are a kind of "status symbol" for students from elite schools. Eva studied at Belilios Public School, a traditional Band 1 secondary school, before joining Lingnan Secondary School after the HKCEE. Eva initially hated the design of her Belilios school uniform – a white shirt with a green 背心

By Sylvia Chan

裙 (jumper skirt) – but got to like it over the years because it associated her with Band 1 elite students. "If you wear the same school uniform every day, you will start to have 感情 (an affection) towards the uniform and the school," Eva said.

In contrast, she admitted it was difficult to develop the same 感情 for her Lingnan Secondary School uniform, because the degree of affection towards the school uniform also hinges on how "elite" the school is. Unlike her old school uniform, her current uniform does not make Eva feel like an elite student.

All students are expected to comply with the "uniform rule", whether they like it or not. In a typical secondary school, hundreds of students routinely line up in the playground waiting to have their uniforms "checked". Uniform checks in secondary schools have been loved and hated by students from all generations. They love uniform checks for using up time when they should be having lessons, but they hate them when they get scolded for their attempts

to make the uniforms just a little bit more stylish. Students with unique young faces wear identical school uniforms. They hardly seem to have different 表情 (facial expressions) but share the same bored look, expecting boring comments like "your skirt is too short" and "your pants are too long".

It is usual for students to make changes to the uniforms to make them slightly more personalized and trendy. For example, girls occasionally fold back the 裙頭 (waist band) to make the skirt shorter, and boys wear black socks instead of white ones.

Boys of my generation loved to wear 喇叭褲 (bell-bottoms) to school, because bell-bottoms were all the rage during my school days. I asked Jay Chung's classmate Jeff Cheung about the "in" thing for boys nowadays. "Of course we don't wear 喇叭褲," Jeff said with a laugh. "Nowadays boys wear low waist pants with 修腳 (slim boots). People wearing 喇叭褲 look stupid," he said. In the winter, when boys wear ties as part of their uniforms, Jeff noted that some of his schoolmates try to make the tie lighter in color by

using a needle to pick out some threads. "I don't know how to do it though," he said.

It is common to hear students complain about their school uniform. Very often, they say they do not like their uniform because it is "not cool enough". Kayi Chan, a Form Seven girl at SHSS Szeto Ho Secondary School, does not like her school uniform, which comprises a white Dacron dress with red binding and a cloth belt. I asked why and she said, "It's not pretty enough."

I reckon student dissatisfaction with school uniforms may have something to do with their lack of confidence in their own individuality. They may possess a subconscious fear of losing themselves when they put on the same outfit as others.

Dr Ng said teens are rebellious and want to be different. Even if they want to be identified with their schools, they'll still find reasons to dislike their school uniforms because they play down self-identity, and prevent students from showing themselves as unique individuals.

I also asked Dr Ng if it made sense for schools to redesign and "refresh" the look of their

uniforms. He dismissed the idea. "Schools have 慣性形象 (established images) represented by the school uniforms. There is no strong rationale to make changes to the uniforms."

Every student I talked to seemed to dislike his or her school uniform. Yet they all agreed that having a uniform is better than none at all. On the day I talked to Jay, she was wearing a yellow blouse, gray shorts and a pair of white canvas shoes. She certainly enjoyed being able to dress according to her own taste and personal style. But she told me she still prefers wearing a school uniform to school. "Choosing what to wear to school could be a pain in the neck," she said.

Well, I too complained about my school uniform when I was a teenager. But now that I do not have to wear a uniform anymore, I miss the time when I didn't have to choose what to wear every day. Those years now form the most unique patch in my memory.

Sylvia Chan is Muse's staff writer.