

The New Shanghai Xiaojie: Chinese Fashion Identities

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Abstract

'The whole brand is like a presentation of myself. The Chinese part is from my blood and the European/Western influence is from what I'm experiencing ...'
Huishan Zhang, 2012

The Shanghai Xiaojie (海小姐) or Shanghai Miss was a constructed female fashion identity that represented modernity in 1920s/30s China. Fostered in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Shanghai she reflected the country's socio-cultural changes (Fenby, 2009; Ko, 1999). Her iconic image was rekindled in the 1990s becoming a powerful symbol for nostalgic merchandising, employed by fashion brands such as Shanghai Tang as an indicator of heritage and cultural authenticity, (Ko, 1999:147-148).

The twenty-first century fashion industry is increasingly international yet there is no consensus on whether globalisation inevitably homogenises cultural experiences (Levitt, 1983) or allows for heterogeneity (Kapferer, 2005). New generations of Chinese working in the fashion industry are creating diverse fashion identities however whilst fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gaultier scour the globe for exotic inspirations and are hailed as creative forces, the work of non-Western designers is often excluded from the contemporary, their designs interpreted as culturally rather than individually-based (Kondo, 2010). Undoubtedly when cultural symbols (e.g. the qipao or dragon) are represented there is a risk of culturally essentialist interpretations (Tsui, 2010).

As we experience the development of both global and local cultures (Cowen, 2002), the extension of media access and cross-cultural exchanges in education and industry make it increasingly difficult to separate out cultural influences on creativity (Lubart, 1999). My own research reveals how a new generation of fashion students are embracing their cultural heritage and enjoy transposing it against the more traditionally disseminated (Western) models of fashion (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2011).

Using a series of key Chinese creatives working across the fashion industry- including models, journalists, stylists, photographers and designers- this paper traces the development of twenty-first century Chinese fashion identities to illuminate discussions about national identities in fashion and to put the Middle Kingdom back at the centre of the fashion map.

KEYWORDS: *Chinese fashion, identity, Vogue China, Shanghai, Ma Ke, Huishan Zhang, Liu Wen, Angelica Cheung, Chen Man*