How do Chinese Fashion Designers Become Global Fashion Leaders? A New Perspective on Legitimization in China's Fashion System

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Abstract

The term fashion system describes inter-relationships between production and consumption, illustrating how the production of fashion is a collective activity. For instance, Yuniya Kawamura (2011) notes systems for the production of fashion differ around the globe and are subject to constant change, and Jennifer Craik (1994, 6) draws attention to an 'array of competing and intermeshing systems cutting across western and non-western cultures. In China, Shanghai's nascent fashion system seeks to emulate the Eurocentric system of Fashion Weeks and industry support groups. It promises designers a platform for global competition, yet there are tensions from within. Interaction with a fashion system inevitably means becoming validated or legitimised. Legitimisation in turn depends upon gatekeepers who make aesthetic judgments about the status, quality, and cultural value of a designers work (Becker 2008).

My paper offers a new perspective on legitimisation that is drawn mainly from my PhD research. I argue that some Chinese fashion designers are on the path to becoming global fashion designers because they have embraced a global aesthetic that resonates with the human condition, rather than the manufactured authenticity of a Eurocentric fashion system that perpetuates endless consumption. In this way, they are able to 'self-legitimise'. I contend these designers are 'designers for humans', because they are able to look beyond the mythology of fashion brands, and the Eurocentric fashion system, where they explore the tensions of man and culture in their practice. Furthermore, their design ethos pursues beauty, truth and harmony in the Chinese philosophical sense, as well as incorporating financial return in a process that is still enacted through a fashion system. Accordingly, cultural tradition, heritage and modernity, while still valuable, have less impact on their practice.

Becker, H. S. 2008. *Art Worlds*. Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Craik, J. 1994. *The Face of Fashion : Cultural Studies in Fashion*. London, New York: Routledge.

Kawamura, Y. 2011. *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress*. New York: Berg.