

## **The New Shanghai Xiaojie: Chinese Fashion Identities**

Dr Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas  
Course Leader Access Fashion Business LCF  
n.radclyffethomas@fashion.arts.ac.uk

Babette Radclyffe-Thomas  
MA Fashion Journalism Candidate LCF  
b.radclyffethomas1@arts.ac.uk

### **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

*'The Orient is neither a cultural, religious or linguistic unity'*  
Miyoshi & Haroorunianm, 1989:117

October 2013 sees London's V&A museum hosting 'Masterpieces of Chinese Painting' the most extensive first exhibition of Chinese art since the 1930s (The Culture Show October 23) reminding London's culture vultures of the extent and depth of Chinese creative arts. The exhibition covers the years 700 to 1900 and explores the transition from painting as craft to high art within Chinese society, how the anonymous painters of the 8<sup>th</sup> century were transformed into scholar painters of the latter period. Will the 21<sup>st</sup> century see China's fashion industry- a key driver of the country's industrialization, urbanisation and international standing- moving in a comparable direction? As many commentators have put it: moving from 'Made in China' to 'Designed in China?' And how will the domestic and wider fashion system recognise and respond to this? Outsourcing clothing manufacture to China 'provided for an unprecedented knowledge transfer from the Western world in terms of design processes and business models' (Ferrero-Regis & Lindgren, 2012:76) and a key issue for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese fashion industry results from its huge success as a garment manufacturing hub and its latent associations with production not creation; its fashion identity as that of follower not creator- especially at the luxury market level (Tungate, 2009). Furthermore fashion journalist Marion Hume (2011) points out that international brands thrive on their ability to build on the 'foundations of national success' which in China's case, with the high profile of its counterfeit market, presents a barrier around issues of provenance for China's aspiring fashion brands. A corollary of this issue is how in an increasingly globalised world Chinese consumers and designers can recognise and claim a modern Chinese fashion identity and this paper explores how Chinese fashion is escaping its perennial associations with replication and mass production, and is in fact offering multiple fashion identities both for itself and the wider global fashion system.

The West has long been enamoured of China, Marco Polo's explorations heralded a fascination with the Orient, the motifs and stylisation of an imagined China became the height of fashion. The European imitative decorative art form Chinoiserie exemplifies this stylised vision of China perfectly in its 'tangible and solid realisations in the West of a land of the imagination' (Jacobson, 1993:7). This 'invented tradition' of Chinoiserie has been a ubiquitous feature of many of the decorative arts traded between East and West and its style and content continues to inform many Western notions of Chineseness, and pervades many fashion products and promotions. Stylised ideas of Chinese design identity and cultural symbols are reproduced and reinforced through the fashion media; the Western fashion industry repeatedly references this imagined China that simultaneously reinforces the East-West binary and precludes the recognition of a contemporary Chinese fashion identity. Whilst Western fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gaultier scour the globe for exotic inspirations to be reworked into their fantastical fashion creations, the work of non-Western designers is often excluded from the contemporary, their designs interpreted as culturally rather than individually-based (Kondo, 2010). Reading reviews of Chinese designers' work and shows or in its editorial presentation there is a un-selfreflexive tendency, almost a compunction, amongst the Western fashion press to perpetuate a 'complex' and 'disturbing' ethnocentrism that defines fashion through the common cultural heritage of its designers, de-individualises the creators and reinforces Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese culture and tradition (Chow, 1991:4).

Certainly China has as many comparable traditions, 'specific historical and cultural features' as the Western fashion capitals of Europe and North America, yet fashion theorists argue that China's political history- whereby the government attempted to

obliterate pre-revolutionary Chinese identity, history and tradition through the destruction of historical relics- disrupted Chinese design history making the current development of a national aesthetic identity and the resulting definitions of what comprises contemporary Chinese fashion design extremely complex questions (Ferrero-Regis & Lindberg, 2012). And whilst the process of categorisation is a natural phenomenon, Western definitions have created and perpetuate a hegemonised 'Chineseness' constructed in the mirror of the Occident; by assigning ethnicity to material culture and bestowing authenticity on certain images and symbols assumptions of a static Chinese culture are reinforced (Sakai, 2000). At a time when 'authenticity' is a key driver for fashion brands (Tungate, 2009) what is the modern Chinese fashion industry's response? Will they embrace a new design aesthetic, or reclaim their mythical heritage- a fashion 'saudade'?<sup>1</sup> And is it possible to reclaim Chinese imagery without becoming complicit in cultural essentialism? Although many Chinese designers reject the 'hyper-*chinazation* of their aesthetic' (Ferrero-Regis & Lindgren, 2012:74) many others are complicit in 'self-orientalising' (Kondo, 1997). Designer Wang Yi-Yang argues that the repeated use of 'Chinese' design elements in fashion, perpetuate stereotypes of Chinese design and national identity: 'because we showed too many qipao, dragons, the Cultural Revolution and the image of the red lanterns on clothing or films, it misled Westerners into thinking these were all about 'Chinese'' (Tsui, 2010:208).

One of the key debates in fashion marketing is the global-local binary; the twenty-first century fashion industry is increasingly international, both in terms of production and consumption yet there is no consensus on whether globalisation inevitably homogenises cultural experiences (Levitt, 1983) or allows for heterogeneity (Kapferer, 2005). Spearheaded by luxury labels, the stagnation of the Western markets and the prospect of vast untapped markets of the BRIC countries has led to increasing global expansion for fashion brands. 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), and make national definitions of fashion problematic. Whilst acknowledging that this is necessarily a snapshot view of the Chinese fashion industry at a particular time, and acknowledging the limitations to such an approach, this paper references the work of key Chinese creatives working across the fashion industry- including models, journalists, stylists, photographers and designers- to trace 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.

### **THE SHANGHAI XIAOJIE (SHANGHAI MISS) 上海小姐**

The last pre-Communist Chinese fashion identity is the strongest iteration and the Shanghai Xiaojie or Shanghai Miss of 1920s/30s Shanghai persists as the go-to or stock image of Chinese femininity. This constructed female fashion identity who reflected the country's socio-cultural changes as particularly embodied in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Shanghai, represented modernity in 1920s and 1930's China (Fenby, 2009; Ko, 1999). The Shanghai Miss had evolved from the Yuefenpai (calendar girls 月份牌) of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; glamorous reimaginings of historical or legendary female characters from Chinese history whose powerful visual iconography was recognised by marketers who adapted the calendar girl imagery

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<sup>1</sup> Yearning for something that never existed in the first place (Portuguese).

and applied it to marketing materials across a range of consumer products<sup>2</sup>. Clothed in the traditional qipao 旗袍, legendary beauties from Chinese literature were joined by popular singers and movie stars, the marketing illustrations blending traditional Chinese features with Western style hair and make-up and thus representing the epitome of modern Chinese womanhood (Yin, 2012). With their bobbed hair, make-up and tight-fitting qipao, this hybrid Chinese fashion identity was disseminated both domestically and internationally through film and fashion media, embodied for the domestic market by filmstar Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 who starred in such hits as Cai Chusheng's 蔡楚生 1935 classic *New Woman* 新女性, and for the international market by Anna May Wong whose memorable appearance in von Sternberg's 1932 film 'Shanghai Express' retains a magnetic attraction for generations of fashionistas. Fostered in Shanghai, after years of dormancy 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).

With China's contemporary fashion renaissance Shanghai finds itself once again at the epicentre of Chinese fashion. Western brands and international designers have flocked to Shanghai to open flagship stores and host press events. Diane Von Furstenberg's 2010 New Year's resolution 'I want to be known in China' (Liu, 2011) is symptomatic of Western fashion brands' scramble for market share in the huge potential consumer pool. Shanghai's photogenic cityscape features as the backdrop for many contemporary fashion shoots in international titles, utilising the powerful architectural iconography of the art deco Bund or its polar and geographic opposite- the ultra modern skyline of Pudong. Shanghai chic features literally or representationally in many fashion editorial and marketing images- the name alone conjuring allusions of smoky speakeasies and glamorous 1930's vamps. For although modern Beijing is also home to many luxury flagships and is the seat of government power, Shanghai holds the upper hand for fashion's tastemakers- retaining its pre-war cosmopolitan, hedonistic aura, and combining this with associations with the contemporary Chinese art scene as symbolised by the 2011 'Red Ball' hosted by Diane Von Furstenberg and held in the conceptual artist Zhang Han's Shanghai studio.

#### **MA KE** 马可

*'Exception de Mixmind is the platform where I practise eastern beauty, it's also my dream: creating an original Chinese brand that can demonstrate Chinese spiritual essence and national confidence...'*

Ma Ke, 2010<sup>3</sup>

Tracing the development of fashion design in modern China, Tsui (2010) highlights the brand-building potential of the 'second generation' of Chinese designers, those born in the late 1960s and 1970s. Amongst these Ma Ke stands out as the antithesis of mass-produced Chinese fashion, rejecting fame and monetary rewards in order to follow her design values, and celebrating traditional textile techniques and an artisanal approach to fashion design. Ma Ke graduated from the Suzhou Institute of Silk Textile Technology in 1992 and was spotted as one of the 'Top Ten Fashion Designers' at age 25, going on to found Exception in 1996, a new brand catering for

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<sup>2</sup> Kwong Sang Hong, one of the first cosmetic companies in China founded in 1898, still features its 'two girls' imagery on its packaging and marketing materials.

<sup>3</sup> Domus article at <http://www.wuyonguseless.com>

the 'young, well-educated, independent, intelligent' fashion-conscious Chinese consumer (Tsui, 2010:168), and in Tsui's opinion 'the first brand featuring a designer temperament in China' (p164). Ma Ke very much aligns herself with designers such as Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo and the Exception label reflects what commentator Huang Hung calls '21<sup>st</sup>-century Zen... a local antidote to glam' (Hung, 2012a).

Exception de Mixmind went from a niche brand to a household name overnight after it was reported, although not confirmed, that Peng Liyuan 彭丽媛 (the wife of the Chinese Premier Xi Jin Ping) wore their designs during a state visit to Russia, with accompanying media frenzy in the same manner as that which surrounds the wardrobe choices of Western stateswomen Michelle Obama and Kate Middleton. In a country known for its love of Western luxury brands, Peng's endorsement of a homegrown label surprised and delighted fashion observers. Exception's CEO (and Ma Ke's former husband) Mao Jihong describes the brand as 'Chinese in its core' (Hung, 2012a), and whilst for many this description might conjure the ubiquitous qipao and dragon, Exception's design handwriting avoids oriental clichés, instead offering 'a distinctly Chinese philosophy'; a minimal aesthetic, with oversized, asymmetrical garments in carefully considered textiles (Welters & Mead, 2012, p34).

Exception is headquartered in Guangzhou, has over 100 stores in China and an estimated annual turnover of more than 900m RMB (\$150m), yet retains its identity as a niche brand, one that does not mimic Western fashions, avoids trends and aims to deliver unique, considered pieces for discerning modern Chinese customers (Hung, 2012a). Working in an industry heavily criticised for its anti-environmental practices, Ma Ke is known for promoting sustainability and her work incorporates the traditional dyeing, weaving and embroidery techniques of Chinese minority people, particularly the Dong of Southern China.

Ma Ke won the 2007 Elle Style Award for Best Asian Fashion Designer a year after founding another non-traditional fashion label, the internationally renowned couture line Wuyong 无用 (Useless), an experimental fusion of art and fashion that explores differing perspectives on 'uselessness' and the dynamics of value through sculptural pieces crafted from discarded items such as old sheets or tarpaulins and using only natural fibres (V&A, 2008). Ma Ke was the first Chinese designer to be invited by Paris' Chambre Syndicale to show as part of the Paris couture shows in 2007 and the collection was also showcased in 2008 at the V&A museum as part of its Fashion in Motion series.

Ma Ke's success both domestically and internationally shows there is a viable option for Chinese-trained designers to recognise and endorse their cultural identity through original, creative designs. A vision for modern Chinese fashion that is endorsed both by the international fashion system and by the Chinese establishment, and has the potential to inspire others to engage with issues around identity and sustainability one of the most significant challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> century fashion industry.

## HUIZHAN ZHANG

*'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<sup>4</sup>

Huishan Zhang recognises that he is starting his fashion career at a key moment in the Chinese fashion industry's development; one at which Chinese consumers prepped on European fashion houses are eager to engage with designers who share their cultural heritage. Transitioning through Asian-American fashion designers such as Alexander Wang and Philip Lim<sup>5</sup>, Zhang feels the stage is set for the launch of homegrown Chinese fashion designers '...it's time for a Chinese designer, for everybody to work together to show the world how much we are capable of and how much we can do. The world is open to China as well. It's a really good time- everyone is in China already, so many Vuittons, so many Guccis. Now the Chinese want to see something that actually belongs to them' (Blanchard, 2012). Despite his nationalistic assertions Zhang left China to study fashion design first in New Zealand and later at London's prestigious Central Saint Martins college- a beacon for many aspiring designers worldwide and alma mater of his fashion idols John Galliano and Alexander McQueen. Hailed as CSM's 'first mainland Chinese success story' (Zhang hails from Qingdao) by fashion journalist Marion Hume (Hume, 2011), Zhang's college experiences echo many CHC designers who leave Asia to study fashion design overseas and experience a kind of 'creative culture-shock' working within the Western fashion education system (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2011, 2013a). As Zhang puts it: 'The Chinese and Western ways are very different. The Chinese want to see the result, they don't care what the process is. The West, they care about the result but they want to see the whole process of research and inspiration' (Blanchard, 2012). Zhang is representative of a new generation of Chinese fashion designers who seek to exploit the interplay of Western and Chinese cultures- marrying technical skills honed through work experience at the Dior haute couture atelier, with design elements that symbolise his understanding of Chinese tradition with a nod to the modern Chinese luxury consumer, and a stated aim to embrace a new model of quality Chinese fashion production.

Zhang followed in the fashion footsteps of his heroes when he was given the coveted Brown's boutique windows during London Fashion Week 2011 to showcase his fashion vision- one described as 'original and exquisitely made' and 'new and exciting' by Françoise Tessier Browns' womenswear buyer (Hume, 2011). Zhang's design studio is based in London, his ready-to-wear line is manufactured in China, he employs Chinese fabrics from Qingdao in his collection, and he is conscious of both the cultural and symbolic implications of fashion design and manufacturing geographies: 'What I want to show is that 'Made in China,' if combined with 'Designed in China,' can be high quality and good. Not the cheap stuff, or the fakes' (Hung, 2012b).

Zhang is keen to leverage what he sees as his ability to cross two creative cultures, in interviews he talks about Chinese parenting (Blanchard, 2012) and without exception fashion journalists focus on his Chinese heritage and the East-West interplay in his work; as exemplified in a piece by Business of Fashion editor Imran Amed which talks of Zhang's fashion design as a 'balance between Chinese aesthetic and pattern-cutting, and Western levels of quality and craftsmanship' (Amed, 2011). Zhang's designs explicitly reference Chinese culture and fashion history, with cuts based on cheongsam and Zhongshan/Mao jackets and decorative detailing featuring Chinese dragons- a symbol whose potency for his design sensibilities he explains thus: 'In China the dragon represents power, strength, good luck and is regarded as a deep rooted symbol of the Chinese culture. In Western

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<sup>4</sup> Blanchard (2012)

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Wang and Philip Lim are both New York-based designers.

society, the dragon is considered as a symbol of China. It's the perfect emblem to marry the cultures portrayed in my collections, highlighting the main values behind every garment and every woman who wears them... power, strength and culture' (Amed, 2011).

Zhang has been recognised by the international fashion press: Womens Wear Daily rating his 2013 A/W collection 'among the strongest outings so far in London this season' (WWD, 2013). His work has also been recognised by his fashion industry peers; Zhang was awarded the 2013 Dorchester Collection Fashion prize. But his ambition is to move beyond fashion and to become a 'leading Chinese lifestyle brand'; Zhang recognises that the Chinese market is changing and sees his future creating products to satisfy the needs of what he calls 'a modern new Chinese lifestyle' (Blanchard, 2012). But this claim to modernity is somewhat tempered when one considers it is the V&A museum's T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese art, rather than its Fashion Gallery where Zhang's recently acquired Dragon Dress is to be displayed to 'show the progress in Chinese craftsmanship from ancient times to the present' (Hung, 2012c).

### **VOGUE CHINA & ANGELICA CHEUNG 张宇**

*'Vogue is where international fashion and China meet'*

Angelica Cheung, 2005:117

According to Baudrillard 'the fashion spread not only emanates from the society in which it was produced but also comments on it' (1988:2). September 2013 was the eighth anniversary of Vogue China's launch and founding editor-in-chief Angelica Cheung took this opportunity to share her vision of modern Chinese fashion in her editor's letter where she highlights the rapid development of the Chinese fashion industry, stressing its modernity but highlighting its links to China's past.

As with many aspects of the fashion industry, fashion magazines are a relatively new phenomenon in China, international titles only gaining access to China in the late 1990s. Elle was the first foreign fashion title to enter in 1998 (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b), followed by Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping and Marie Claire; and although these magazines were in Chinese, they featured Caucasian models and translations of western fashion journalism (Wu, 2009:79). The expansion of the Chinese fashion magazine market saw Vogue China's launch in September 2005, and with its slogan 'Vogue, Ultimate Fashion in China' Vogue China has positioned itself as the leading authority on fashion. Vogue China is currently the dominant title in Chinese fashion media, and whilst the publication is similar in look to Vogue titles elsewhere, its dual role in China has been of simultaneously educating its readership about fashion history and current trends, as well as informing and reflecting an identity for the modern Chinese woman (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b). Dismissing the efforts of the existing fashion magazines in China, at the time of its launch Angelica Cheung wrote 'the market is crying out for a top-level, high quality fashion magazine' (Cheung, 2005:114).

To establish its brand pedigree Vogue China's launch issue included 40 pages surveying the history of the Vogue brand, firmly entrenching its position as tastemaker and authoritative arbiter of all that is stylish (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b). Vogue China's vision is very much that of its editor, whose incomparable influence has been recognised by social commentators; BBC Arts Editor Will Gompertz chose Cheung to launch his recent Radio 4 series 'Zeitgeisters': those 'cultural

entrepreneurs with the ability to capture and bottle the spirit of our age and giving us what we want before we know it... exceptional individuals with the ability to scan the horizon and correctly sense what or who is about to appear' (Gompertz, 2013:120). Cheung herself acknowledges her position of influence and outlines her passion to 'change China' through an editorial strategy for Vogue China that educates Chinese women (Zeitgeister, 2013). Fashion images codify 'standards of taste and beauty' (Breward, 2007:280) and with five times more editorial pages than the US or UK editions Vogue China has the space in which to explore and explain not only the cultural history of the West for an increasingly internationalised readership, but also to promote Chinese fashion designers and the Chinese art and design industry (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b).

At 622 pages Vogue China's fifth anniversary edition was a tangible demonstration of the decade-long 'explosion' of China's luxury market (Liu, 2011). Vogue China is comparatively expensive at 20RMB, is distributed to first and second-tier cities with a readership of 3,200,000 and a target circulation of 640,000, rating it higher than Cosmopolitan, Marie Claire, Elle and Harper's Bazaar (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b). This rise of a domestic fashion culture reflects the profound socio-economic changes in China and the success of local fashion titles is indicative of increased demand for Chinese-produced content and allows increased 'diversity of social identities for emulation' (Tay, 2006:10). Producing its own content on the Mainland and in Hong Kong Vogue China is 'a melange of Western and Eastern creativity published for a Chinese audience produced by an international team and existing on a global platform' (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b).

Writing in British Vogue about her experiences working with an international creative team on the launch issue of Vogue China, Cheung recounts an incident that crystallises the Western fashion industry's misinterpretation of the modern Chinese fashion consumer; Cheung tells how the make-up artist initially suggested a look based on the styling of Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 historical masterpiece 'The Last Emperor'- Cheung had to explain to him that 'young Chinese women want to be modern and chic. Make-up like that... would remind them of ancient women' and how, young Chinese women- like millions of other fashionable women worldwide- '...want to look like Kate Moss' (Cheung 2005:118).

## **LIU WEN 刘雯**

'...Chinese models have become a stronger presence. Just a season or two ago, there weren't many models for me to talk with backstage in my native Mandarin. Now I usually have no trouble finding someone at any show.'  
Liu Wen, 2010<sup>6</sup>

H&M 'New icon'<sup>7</sup> Liu Wen has many firsts to her name: first Asian model to be selected as a Victoria's Secret Angel, first Asian model to be hired as the face of Estée Lauder and first Asian model to appear on Forbes top 10 list of the world's highest earning supermodels (in fifth place). In common with other aspects of the Chinese fashion industry, modelling is still a developing profession; it is only recently that modelling has risen above its categorisation as 'immoral' (Wu, 2009), moving from the 1980's concept of shizhuang yanyuan ( 时装演员 fashion actor) to the 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chang (2010)

<sup>7</sup> Liu Wen featured in H&M's A/W 2012/13 marketing campaign 'New Icons'.



century incarnation of chao mo (超模 supermodel). This development, alongside the fervour with which Western fashion brands have sought to engage with the Chinese fashion market (especially at the luxury level), has seen the promotion of Chinese models on runways, fashion spreads and billboards internationally. But whilst the Western fashion industry has been keen to congratulate itself on the diversity of ethnicities it now showcases, there are many critiques of the lack of true multiculturalism in fashion imagery and a fundamental issue remains as to the extent to which the use of Asian models is less a democratisation of fashion, and more a strategic marketing ploy. As fashion journalist Clare Coulson (2013) writes of Liu Wen 'Her career... highlights how much the fashion industry is responding to the spending power of China's luxury consumers'. The question of fashion models' ethnicity is not an exclusively Western fashion industry preoccupation; Angelica Cheung goes to some lengths to explain the debates around Vogue China's use of Canadian-born Chinese models Stephanie Siu and Mackenzie Hamilton-Cheung alongside Chinese nationals Du Juan and Shu Pei on the 2007 cover, concluding that international Chinese models reflect Sino-foreign girl power and embody a modern essence of localisation and internationalisation (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b).

In research charting the development of Vogue China, Babette Radclyffe-Thomas analyses the choice of cover image and how the models featured reflect changes in the wider Chinese fashion industry. The launch issue featured Du Juan (then China's leading model) with four other Chinese models on a gatefold cover, but the focal point of the cover image was 2005's most popular model the Australian Gemma Ward. Since then the number of Chinese models used in editorial has increased, and of the September issue covers, excluding 2008, all have featured a Chinese model (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b); Liu Wen having the honour of featuring on one of the eight covers for the 2013 eighth anniversary issue. The selection of models to feature in fashion photographs is inextricably linked with contemporary ideas of beauty and fashion. Rosie Bendandi, Elle's bookings editor speaks of the beauty world's current love affair with 'Asian girls' (Coulson, 2013) and the desire for fashion brands to use Chinese models in their campaigns is equalled by the models themselves: 'China's models have started to have international aspirations and dreams' (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2013b). Hailing from Hunan province- coincidentally the birthplace of Chairman Mao- Liu Wen entered a modelling competition at 18 in order to win a computer- which she did- and moved first to Beijing and then to New York. Walking in her first major catwalk for Burberry in Milan in 2008, Liu Wen has featured in fashion editorials and campaigns at luxury and high street levels. Wen's career trajectory echoes the more general increase in the use of Asian models in the fashion industry as charted by the fashion media in multiple articles charting the rise of the Asian supermodel.

### **CHEN MAN 陈漫**

*'It's an adventure to define the expression of contemporary Chinese fashion.'*  
Chen Man, 2012<sup>8</sup>

Chen declares 'Chinese essence, Western method' as her motto (Nowness.com, 2012) and Chinese cultural references inhabit many of her fashion images, drawing on the iconography of recent Chinese history. The 2009 issue of Vogue China features a creative collaboration between Chen Man and Du Juan '60 Fashion Moments of China' which charts the last century of Chinese fashion identities denoting one key image per decade. Through the styling, the use of iconic backdrops

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<sup>8</sup> Nowness.com (2012)

e.g. Mao's portrait in Tiananmen Square, and colour palette Chen creates striking imagery yet this editorial created by a Chinese production team and aimed at a primarily Chinese audience could be interpreted as reinforcing the West's idea of a static, mono-faceted Chinese fashion identity.

i-D magazine commissioned a series of twelve of Chen Man's images for their 2012 'Whatever the Weather' pre Spring covers, that explored and celebrated images of contemporary Chinese beauty; these images whilst ultra-modern in finish, reference Chinese history and tradition and Man sees this binary opposition as central to her work 'I feel like this is like my responsibility, not to repeat history but to create the new image for modern China' (Shift, 2012). As one of China's leading fashion photographers Chen's work spans the commercial and the avant-garde. By the time she graduated from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art she had already showcased her bold, experimental use of colour with a digitally enhanced cover shot for Shanghai-based Vision magazine. Chen's use of post-production techniques and her choices of subject and background have, according to i-Donline 'revolutionised the way China and the rest of the world thinks about beauty'.

2013 sees the publication of Chen Man 2003-2010 a retrospective of Chen's work, showcasing her body of work. Citing Nick Knight as one of her inspirations, Chen uses digital technology to mediate her subjects into 'futuristic cyborgs of Asian beauty, representing the computerised sensibility of China's accelerated art scene' (Raphael, 2010). Chen works at an acknowledged point of hybridity between East and West, one which she feels she can execute without danger of cultural essentialism or, in her words, 'cheesiness' due to the fact she is Chinese born, bred and educated. Chen acknowledges her Chinese heritage as providing the philosophy behind her creations, which she explores through western technologies; she cites her use of Chinese faces and modern Chinese backgrounds as at the forefront of contemporary photography practices (Shift, 2012) and this approach and aesthetic has been endorsed by the fashion industry- her work featuring in titles including Chinese Vogue, Elle and Harpers Bazaar as well as in campaigns for Nike and Adidas. Chen has also been recognised by the international art and design elite- Chen has exhibited in Beijing, Shanghai and London's V&A.

## **THE FUTURE?**

Western fashion brands have pursued expansion into the Chinese market relentlessly, but more recently domestic brands are looking to claim some of this market share, and also expanding internationally- 2012 saw Chinese brand Bosideng open on London's fashionable South Molton Street. Additionally a series of design partnerships seek to leverage East-meets-West branding to exploit the aesthetic and heritage of both cultures; jewellery brand Qeelin trades on just such a concept. My own research with current CHC<sup>9</sup> fashion students studying in London 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. Students talk about the different approaches to creative practice they experience in their home cultures and in London, and how whilst these divergent practices can initially be confusing, ultimately they see their own strengths in their ability to combine practices and design elements from East and West (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2011). With the development of the Chinese fashion industry, increases in mobility- both virtual and physical- between East and West and with ideas of authenticity- real and invented- mediated through fashion product and imagery it becomes ever more problematic to define what is a Chinese fashion identity.

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<sup>9</sup> Not exclusively Mainland Chinese students.

Certainly there is a government and nationalistic-driven desire to claim a modern Chinese identity and fashion can play an integral role in defining that. But as the future Chinese fashion industry develops in diverse directions at both mass-market and luxury levels, providing fashion media to engage a range of consumers from the UHNWI<sup>10</sup> to the XQX<sup>11</sup>, the future looks set to provide the multiple fashion identities a contemporary fashion system can support. And the rate of change for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Shanghai Xiaojie may be rapid, after all as Angelica Cheung puts it 'in less than a decade China has gone from Karl Marx to Karl Lagerfeld!' (Chang, 2010).

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<sup>10</sup> Ultra High Net Worth Individuals

<sup>11</sup> Xiao Qing Xin (small and fresh)

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