

How do Chinese Fashion Designers Become Global Fashion Leaders? A New Perspective on Legitimation 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. Legitimation 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.

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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. As is commonly understood, a system is comprised of varying parts including processes, interconnectivity and institutions. In systems of cultural production these components are relatively static, yet they provide in their response to mutability, a place for individual creativity. The Eurocentric fashion system described by Craik (2009, 63-103) is not geographically bound, nor is it a fixed entity. In many ways, the fashion system behaves like the ebb and flow of an ocean tide, motivated by consumption instead of gravity. As it moves

into new national markets, a cultural assimilation occurs, and as it retreats, the tide takes with it fresh actors who in turn influence its own constitution.

Yet in its perpetuation some broad questions arise concerned with the nature of role of creative identity and national culture. This is especially so in the context of China where substantial new and unsaturated markets have attracted the attention of foreign fashion brands, while the country's domestic economy moves simultaneously from 'made in China', to 'created in China'. In this paper I wish to explore some characteristics the dominant Eurocentric fashion system in the light of a global focus on Asia, and China in particular. In the first section I will explore various tensions that occur as China raises its profile in the international stage, and in the finally, I will discuss how some Chinese designers are moving forward, shaping their aesthetic and aspiring to greater roles.

In the main shopping districts of Shanghai, it is acutely apparent that dramatic and rapid change has swept through the streets, clearing away the old and replacing it with a gleaming new Chinese reality. Along key streets such as Huaihai road and Nanjing road, the new temples of European luxury fashion brands have quickly, and with the planning and compliance of the Shanghai city council ousted the traditional department stores that once embodied the vibrant character of Shanghai. The physical size of new retail stores that contain labels such as Prada, Valentino and Balenciaga is confronting, as is the numbers of dark-suited security personnel watching quietly on the periphery. Yet it is not only luxury brands with their polished provenances that occupy these premium sites.

Fast fashion operators such as Zara and H&M have long garnered success in this marketplace, attracting a new urban consumer to their diverse portfolios of rapidly changing wares. The worlds largest Uniqlo opened in October 2013 to excited crowds, red-carpet celebrities and a strong police presence in case of riot. Uniqlo is a Japanese brand and this store is Fast Retailing Co's forty-sixth store in Shanghai. In spite of long-standing political tension between Japan and China, fashion consumers have no such qualms in their rush for these products.¹ In fact, the Fast Retailing Company expects to add eighty more stores in China in 2014 alone, increasing its Chinese holdings to three hundred and five stores (Fast Retailing 2013). For domestic shoppers in Shanghai, possession of Uniqlo's small white rectangular shopping bag with its distinctive red logo is an important trophy, a signal of having engaged with the new terms of the city, and for those whose hands are empty, the bag is a visual reminder of the potentialities of one's engagement with this new and liquid modernity. Along the sidewalks of Huaihai road, these shopping bags swing, leading back to their source like a trail of breadcrumbs.

In this way, Shanghai's historical reputation as an early symbol of China's modernity has been supplanted by new desires borne of a global momentum that casts the city as yet another iteration of Bauman's liquid life. Zygmunt Bauman's (2005) concept is particularly appropriate for Shanghai, where consumerism offers a range of short-term solutions to deal with the ever-present problems associated with living in a fast changing city of twenty three million people.² Bauman refers to a type of dislocation, a setting off without settling down, and a perpetual unease with the diminishing moral absolutes of higher authorities. For Bauman, liquid life means constant self-scrutiny, self-critique and self-censure (Elliot 2007, 113). These tensions are reflected not only in the rush by foreign fashion brands for prime urban real estate, but in the dislocation of the city's residents, ever-present industrial and air pollution as well as a fundamental distrust of basic resources like food and water (Ma and Adams 2013).³ In addition recent government commentary about official corruption and an ingrained

¹ Fast Retailing has 225 retail stores in China with plans for 1000 sites by 2020.

² Shanghai's population is expected to reach 30 million by 2020

³ According to Ma and Adams, half of China's lakes and reservoirs are unfit for human consumption due to contamination.

culture of gift-giving, or bribery, shed light on Yang Dacai, or 'Brother Watch', an official with a taste for luxury watches, mostly supplied by his constituents, who has come to epitomise a growing public distaste for conspicuous consumption (Tejada and Zhang 2012).

As well as the tidal inflows of new fashion brands, there has been a steadily increasing outflow of fashion aspirants. For instance, in 2012, the well-known Chinese brand Boisedeng purchased a prestigious site near Mayfair in London for a flagship retail store.⁴ Boisedeng moved quickly to activate their strategy of establishing a brand platform in the UK and Europe by forming a partnership with iconic English football club Tottenham Hotspur (Mathews 2013). However it is mostly Chinese students who have made their way to global fashion capitals like London to gain qualifications from prestigious institutions. Upon their return to China they are in the unique position of being able to focus upon building brands in their own domestic market, as well as participating in international fashion week events. Unlike their contemporaries from the 1980s and 1990s, for whom international education was almost impossible, they have been fast-tracked and must now keep up with the rapid pace of the Chinese economy. Their capacity to do this is advanced by substantial numbers of Chinese tourists who are able to travel to Europe in pursuit of cultural experiences they have previously not had access to. Their travels invariably take them to European luxury retailers where they are able to purchase products without incurring the hefty value-added tax they would otherwise be charged in China. However upon their return to China, they carry with them new expectations of quality and service from fashion brands, and new standards for creative producers to aspire to.

Yet at the cultural interface that appears to separate China from the rest of the world there are many tensions. The rising tide has brought many institutions with it, including fashion weeks and imported fashion magazines that now serve as mediators between consumer and producer. Some of these mediators function as important conduits to an aspiring consumer, providing information channels unavailable in China's last decade, serving to provide legitimisation for the incoming tide. For instance at Vogue China, Angelica Cheung has become a celebrity, capitalising upon her professional role as the magazine's editor-in-chief. Her alignment with the Eurocentric fashion system is readily apparent. Vogue China's September 2013 issue celebrated the magazine's eighth anniversary in China. It is heavy with 312 pages, 123 of which are luxury advertisements, with Dior on the inside front cover and Louis Vuitton on the back (Hille 2013).

On the other hand, Shanghai Fashion Week is a localised attempt at providing support for a nascent infrastructure that will cater to the expectations of a new generation of Chinese fashion designers. While this event is still controlled by the local government, the emphasis on raising the status of the city by emulating the model of global fashion weeks in London, or New York has left many Chinese designers unsure of the relevance of participating. Some designers speak of poor and dictatorial management and substantial costs, while rows of empty seats are held for government officials who fail to appear. All speak of the lack of wholesale buyers, a fundamental reason for the existence of this global trade show format. Some are concerned that if they do not participate, there will be repercussions as they enact the routines of their businesses throughout the year. Yet supporting the Chinese national good is important, and designers must also demonstrate their desire to be involved in this fragmented, still-forming yet important iteration of a fashion system.

For many designers building a business model and nurturing a brand's provenance is still a relatively new process. When China opened its borders for trade in 1978, after

⁴ Boisedeng has 7,580 retail outlets in China selling clothing across six core brands.

then-president Deng Xiaoping granted Chinese entrepreneurs new permissions, the Chinese clothing industry was predominantly focused upon its contributions to the country's export income. However the Chinese Government is determined to move from an export focus to a greater emphasis on the national economy where the domestic consumer becomes responsible for stimulating growth. In fact, the Chinese government's most recent, 12th Five Year Plan, implemented in 2011, clearly articulates a renewed focus on the domestic economy. The plan is to move China's economic momentum from an export-led income to domestic-led consumption. Furthermore, the plan stresses less reliance on foreign technology, and a greater importance of domestic innovation. Point eight, of the ten-point plan, specifically encourages cultural production in order to increase China's 'soft power' (Harris 2011).

There is great financial value yet to be realised from the infrastructure of the clothing and textile industries, and China's need to provide employment for a domestic populace is increasingly urgent. The accompanying demands of consumption means re-thinking how these processes will take place. As Michael Keane (2007) explains, 'made in China' is to be supplemented with 'created in China', yet it is the manner in which this is occurring that is important. Typically this process has been constrained by two key forces that have shaped the perception of Chinese development. Chinese culture, and Chinese politics have long held an almost insurmountable presence over many aspects of daily life, including cultural expression, however this is changing, in part because of exchanges of aesthetic information due to globalisation, but also because of China's global ascendancy as an economically powerful nation. Chinese fashion designers are increasingly capable, confident of their skills, and comfortable with their nationality. Moreover, their global forays and their domestic successes, while relatively unappreciated by a global fashion culture concerned with the consumption of Western products, and the subordination of the Chinese consumer, have been translated into examples of international success by the Chinese domestic media

For some Chinese designers, the advancing tide brings concerns for their own sense of place and their creative identity. On one hand China remains a country controlled by the Communist party, yet its rapid embrace of the values of capitalism creates a certain tension. Caught between the expectations of the European fashion system, the expectations of their country and their own desires, some designers seek legitimisation from within by drawing upon philosophical underpinnings that have guided China for centuries. Their creative journey is as much concerned with identity and self-realisation, as it is of participation in the fashion system in pursuit of profit. For some designers this means examining their relationship with their natural environment in order to gain a sense of place amid life in an urban China epitomised by a constant liquidity to daily life, along with the vista of visible pollution. The principles of Daoism and Buddhism offer some logic to the disorder, where Chinese philosophy asks for belief in one's self, and one's relationship with nature, while European tradition divorces man from nature and asks for belief in an external deity, an act that relocates the responsibility for one's self elsewhere.

Moreover, the Chinese philosophical process is not abstract, nor is it philosophical wishful thinking, because some designers have shown their practice already forms the basis of some very successful domestic fashion practices and businesses. The Buddha label from ādarsa, Wang Yiyang's ZucZug and Chagang labels, Zhang Da's Boundless label, and Ma Ke's Wuyong label are resoundingly rich with Chinese philosophical concepts. Ji Cheng's recent collection titled 'Zen Awakening', and Qiu Hao's collection, called 'Retiring from the World' also allude to Chinese philosophies. The translation of Wang Yiyang's label, ZucZug or Su-ran, as 'raw, plain, essence and nature, and correct or right', epitomises the carefully layered thinking that accompanies their brands.

The rapacious technological advance of digital and social media also means information that was once the exclusive domain of powerful gatekeepers is now available quickly and freely from numerous sources, in the process altering the power-base of traditional gatekeepers. As well, Chinese e-commerce, almost non-existent five years ago has emerged as a major sales channel for retailers with combined sales of about RMB1.3 trillion, (US\$211 billion) in 2012, second only to the United States of America (Wassener 2013). However mostly, it is the frenetic pace of change, driven by consumers that fashion designers must contend with. If legitimisation is based upon the ability of gatekeepers to shape consumption, then what does this mean for the creative process? It is apparent there is a tension between the organisation of creativity for the purpose of profit, and the manifestation of creativity and a means of self-actualisation and the formation of a creative identity. There are some important ramifications to this formative process. Juanjuan Wu (2009, 181) posits the fashion system provides structures, institutions and behaviours for fashion designers to cling to, yet ultimately it is an aesthetic content that fills these structures, which will allow some Chinese fashion designers to differentiate themselves. As China increases domestic consumption and more products are designed rather than simply manufactured in China, it is also apparent new actors, systems, methods and processes of legitimisation will arise to challenge the hegemony of the dominant Eurocentric fashion system, where the flows of capital currently leave China to become profits for foreign companies.

Such change has already occurred. The emergence of new gatekeepers such as the agencies, the Hive, Dongliang, and the China Fashion Collective, serve to curate only Chinese fashion designers for a new Chinese consumer, and foreign media have been slow to react to the strengthening undercurrent. In Beijing, Hung Huang's retail store B.N.C, (Brand New China), and her fashion magazine iLook provide not only a similar service, but a reputable and culturally sensitive voice that is syndicated to the global fashion media service, Woman's Wear Daily. Most importantly, rather than a new system arising for legitimisation, it is the not-so-obvious process of self-legitimisation that has become central to the practice of experienced Chinese fashion designers.

The concept of self-legitimisation brings to mind Michael Polanyi's (1958) view that the universe is always seen from a centre within ourselves and that truth is always personal. However is truth the same as authenticity? As Eric Hobsbawm (1983) explains, authenticity is malleable and thus able to be manipulated, and as Richard Peterson (2005) contends, authenticity is a very different concept when compared to creativity. I conclude that authenticity is a cultural manifestation, and creativity through the process of design is an intrinsic process that is driven by the search for a personal truth and a desire to achieve harmony, or balance.

A sign this process may have already begun in contemporary Chinese culture occurred in March 2013 when China's First Lady, Peng Liyuan, accompanied her husband Xi Jinping, China's newly elected President, on their first state excursion to Russia.⁵ Instead of wearing a luxury European fashion brand traditionally favored by heads of state, Peng Liyuan specifically wore clothing attributed to the mid-priced Chinese fashion brand called Exception. Her careful choice of a non-luxury Chinese fashion label caused immediate and ongoing speculation in the Chinese and international press about her reasons for doing so (Hung 2013; Jing Daily 2013; Zoo 2013).

For many in the Chinese cultural sector, Peng Liyuan's choice was seen as politically driven in a new governmental era where corruption among officials, most evident in the conspicuous consumption of foreign luxury fashion brands, has been reframed as a noxious practice in the new president's term of office. In fact, as has been established with the case of 'Brother Watch', President Xi Jinping has made fighting

⁵ President Xi Jinping was formally elected on March 14th 2013.

corruption a top priority, urging the ruling Communist Party to 'oppose hedonism and flamboyant lifestyles' (Shanghai Daily 2013). Peng Liyuan's sartorial message is equally powerful, and alludes to an increasing acceptance by elite officials of Chinese consumer brands, yet this action might also be interpreted as an oblique directive enacted by the wife of China's most powerful official, generated from deep within the political hierarchy.

At the China Foreign Affairs University, Wang Fan, head of the Institute of International Relations proclaimed, 'In her role as first lady on this visit abroad, Peng Liyuan is exhibiting China's soft power,' (Moore 2013.) Furthermore, Zhang Yu, an editor at Vogue China said, 'It's the first time that China's first lady appears [sic] like a modern woman...after so many years, we finally have a first lady who can represent us so appropriately. I think it is a landmark event' (White 2013). While time will diminish the newsworthiness of this event, the attention given to Peng Liyuan serves best to illustrate the great expectations, and aspirations of the Chinese creative sector.

While individual creativity is core to the process of self-realisation for fashion designers, as it is for many creative practitioners, it is the depth of engagement with the fashion system that determines peer recognition, and subsequent commercial viability. This is relevant, because as Chris Bilton (2007, 49) points out, creativity is located within a system or network rather than a gifted individual. Bilton (2007, xiv) also contends that creative individuals tend to be more successful in systems or organisations, where they know how to 'deploy and manipulate their own talents and those of other people in crossing and recrossing different perspectives and stages in a process'.

Yet China's advance from modernity to liquid modernity has caused a fundamental distrust of the basic tools and components needed by a fashion designer, and China's embrace of consumption contributes to many problems related to the fashion system. When combined with the oppressive and relentless daily vista of visible levels of pollution, the routines of tainted food, and official corruption, the reaction makes itself manifest in the work of the designers, who prefer to import the fabrics and components of their garments.⁶ It is against this backdrop that some key concepts of Daoism and Buddhism find a place for exploration where designers turn from away from these spinoffs of consumption and turn toward practices that seek to resolve some of the tension. Therefore I contend that some Chinese fashion designers are on the path to becoming globalised fashion designers because they have embraced a global aesthetic that resonates with the human condition, rather than the model of Western fashion consumption that is based upon a mythologised heritage, with its accompanying environmental degradation, and issues of sustainability caused by irrational and conspicuous consumption. As long as global attention stays focused on China these designers will remain the new fashion leaders.

⁶ In a trend called 'face mask fashion', young Internet users post photos of themselves wearing air filtration facemasks. One popular mask is hot pink and another looks like a panda bear (Kaiman 2013).

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