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The Rise of Chinese Fashion in the Global Market

China through the Looking Glass of Fashion

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摘要

我选择的论文主题是针对中国时尚在国际市场的发展趋势的研讨。考虑到现在中国在国际市场地位日趋重要的影响力下，引发我原本对时尚见解的兴趣，因而我论文的研讨在分析关于中国如何引进世界时尚体系运用在中国市场上发展与如何将它的声誉立足于国际时尚的重要来论述。

在过去的四十多年来，中国在全球化的过程中有得到很大的影响，尤其正在继续扩展它的市场实力。中国纺织工业不断地发展，而今它在国际市场上已占有最大的份额。现在中国市场的竞争非常的激烈：外国公司，中国服装公司，中国设计师等团队都希望赢得在这个市场的优势地位。虽然中国是世界上最大的时尚消费者其中之一，但是它在国际时尚方面，还没得到承认。这个情况主因是跟现代时尚概念有关。这个概念是将欧洲主义的时尚观做为主轴，以致影响当今我们对中国时尚典型的观感。首先，像一位时尚作家(Gilles Lipovetsky)说，现代时尚是来自1857年的设计师夏尔·费德里西·沃兹(Charles Frederick Worth)所建立的高级服装定制与1949年成衣的发展作为基础。这两个承制方式都盛行于欧洲，造成了在时尚方面所谓的欧洲中心主义。另外，在1950到1980年间西方国家已具时尚的风潮，但对中国任何资讯是完全陌生，所以他们认为中国是没有时尚理念。

当然中国现代时尚的起源跟西方国家不同。在八十年代之前中国还没接触到这些所谓的服装定制的概念，无法让时尚大众化。当时他们对穿着很保守。在文化大革命时，只有中山装，青年装，军便装，这三种服装可以流通。自从中国门户开放之后，也开始改变它的经济社会的形态。进过三十年来的资讯封闭的影响，人们面对新的观念，生活方式和时尚方面的改变是踌躇不安。但随着时势的引领下，中国与西方国家的交流越频繁，促使中国的时尚走向国际，进而

引进外国著名品牌入驻中国。因而西方国家的设计时尚倾向深被东方国家的风格吸引诱惑，所以欧美国家的设计师受到中国的异国格调值入而激发不同的时尚潮流，这种中国式风格是按照东方主义的逻辑演释而来。根据东方主义最具影响力的批评莫过于爱德华·萨义德(Edward Said)，以东方主义形容西方对东方的研究层面是有它的负面意思，因此在“西方”的知识、制度，政治和经济长期积累的观念下将“东方”是以假设并建构为异质的、分裂的和“他者化”的思维认知的影响。在这许多年来，由于受到这个观点的影响让西方国家认为他们的时尚受制于思维的认知，从而也影响到对东方国家的看法。从这个概念，中国被看着像一个没有美育的国家，唯有一昧的希望模仿西方国家的时尚风格。在这个想法下，它常被利用在很多豪华时装设计公司的广告活动上。比如说，最近杜嘉班纳(Dolce&Gabbana)的广告活动让中国人非常的恼怒，因为它的广告版画所呈现出落后建筑，贫困背景等等。这些画面不应该代表一个发展中国家应有的画面。尤其，其他有名的品牌，像普拉達 (Prada)，迪奥 (Dior)，香奈儿 (Chanel)，它们关于中国的广告都影射出很浓厚的自卑心理。今日一个国家的面子是依靠国家的创作美感，独创力和创意才华，方能得到国际市场给予承认。所以每个国家对艺术和时尚的追求日新月异。

虽然这些典型和时尚方面的欧州中心主义，中国也成功的创造一个很完美的风范，相对的也获得很多方面的时尚身份。我将中国时尚不同阶段的层面予以研讨分析。首先，以欧洲设计师来说，他们的身份来自于高级服装定制的因素，继而在成衣工业的发展让经营者必须去承认设计师的重要性，这样从五十年代设计师开始创造一些具有代表性社会变化印象的风格。在这个时代，有一批日本设计师改变传统服装的结构，以欧州中心主义作为一个转折点，启动了东方国家的时尚认知创造出具有国际水平的时尚作品。基于这个因素引发我想深入了解“为什么中国服装设计师当时无法得到这种设计水平？”的动机。

服装设计师，这个概念是在中华民国的大陆时期(1912-1949)出现，当时中国纺织品工业开始发展，尤其当时上海变成一个很奢华繁荣的城市。但以1949年中华人民共和国建立之后，关于时尚这方面的发展受到压迫。而从1978年，中国开始逐渐的重组一些时尚展览并提供某些大学时尚相关课程，让中国设计师得到更多的机会和能力。八十年末，出现所谓的第一代中国设计师。他们设计的主要观点著重于中国传统的特点。虽然他们对自己的设计作品已尽己所能的发挥，但还是无法达到预期的水平成效。这个失败主要的因素是他们面对着环境给予的资源不足，加上经济发展的迟缓不稳，政府和工厂方面的政策管理与经营状态都限制了设计师的创意力，让设计师无法放手一搏的去呈现他们创作才华。尤其组织的时尚活动不是为了推广设计师的作品，而是一种表演。除了这些因素之外，中国文化背景本身没有时尚概念的效益主义也是有关系的。虽然在这第一代的设计师未能达到市场水平的成就，但是他们还是为未来的设计师作为先驱的动力。在九十年代中，有第二代中国设计师出现了。这批设计师在一个比较稳定和积极的环境背景下发展，他们能顺势的承接社会主义市场的优势；当时的服装工业已具有时尚市场的经营力，了解如何去推广设计师的作品，早期国际交流已经有助于中国服装工业的发展。所以这批设计师知道怎么平衡市场的需求和她们的创意性。他们的铭言是“更多的国际，更多的国家”：他们在服装的设计上诠释了中国时尚比较旷达的艺术面，比如说园融，和谐，安逸。现在中国政府也在鼓励中国的时尚发展提供新的生机，开办的中国国际时尚周就是为了给予中国设计师有新的创作发表能力的环境机会。尤其，为了培养年轻设计师的成长，有一些具有当代艺术的艺术区，比如说这个方案在上海的M50创意园和田子坊提供给有才华的新设计师有机会去呈现他们更好的设计创能。在国家发展迅速的脚步下，这些新的设计师更能去迎合时尚的潮流，所以他们越来越有信心的在国际上发挥他们的才华并活跃于世界的舞台上。考虑到这部

分，我介绍了一位中国设计师名叫韩枫(Han Feng)的经历。她从九十年代开始一步一步的将它的设计作品从国内走向国际。现在她已在上海及纽约拥有她的个人工作室。

在国际的时尚舞台上中国的设计也有它独特的风格：某些在中国品牌的潮流风格他们利用东方传统的理念改良设计将它融入国际时尚的潮流，一方面他们要表达中国时尚的象征性，一方面是针对国际市场的战略性。所有中国传统服装之中对西方人的眼光来看，旗袍肯定是最象征性的服装。有名的影片，像苏丝黄的世界(The World of Suzie Wong)或者花样年华(In the Mood for Love)让旗袍变成一个代表中国的印象。旗袍样式的奇特雅致亮丽风格也带给国际设计师们将它融入他们设计的元素。旗袍的理念是跟二十世纪三十年代的海上海繁荣鼎盛时期的态势有关。这种服装形成当时的时尚风格，但是它还是保有传统的理念，即是所谓的改良式旗袍。而今一些品牌从这种改良式风格到一个具有中国顶尖时尚的品牌。比如说上海滩(Shanghai Tang)这个品牌是自1994年创立以来，上海滩继承发扬了传统上海裁缝的精湛工艺和对布料的完美剪裁。自此上海滩以展现中国文化底蕴而著名，通过不同设计的色彩鲜艳服饰重新演绎了昔日的美感以及上海的富有。而此他们的服装和配件大受外国观光客的喜爱成为他们来中国观光所购买的纪念物，但是对品牌的市场在国人的购买力是失败的。主要原因是国人对舶来品的奢华理念所致，因而认为凡是来自西方的品牌都是很高档的。

面对旗袍时尚的回流确实是他们持有犹豫与怀疑的心态，因为在老一辈受过文化革命时代的生活，旗袍如同一个禁忌，年轻一辈的不能将旗袍作为他们时尚衣着的眼光，因为旗袍在此时已被认为是服务生和空服员的制服，所以也形成该市场失败的主因。

在2004年上海滩的品牌被新的经营商团收购。他们在产品的风格做了修饰去跟国际的流行接轨并努力地建立品牌的意识，将国内市场对品牌的认识度提升，也开设分店和各种改善去增加公司的收入。

今日我们可证明中国是具有时尚市场的灵活度和一个能提升品牌认知度的国家，在这两种因素下引领中国流行风潮走向世界舞台。尤其中国消费行为正逐渐的提高水平，过往因自尊的心态倾向奢侈对物料质量意思并不重视，而今他们已认知物价与商品的对等观念，提升他们的消费水平。现在在高档级品牌的市场，它是一直被外国品牌独占而中下档级品牌的市场则是由国内和外国品牌共占。但在彼此的品牌竞争下，国内品牌还是有它的竞争力。无论如何，中国公司还是缺乏所谓的快时尚的商业模式的发展结构，因为这模式的结构需具备有很精干的设计能力与高配合度的产业链管理来面对现代时尚界流通市场。除此之外，中国国内公司已具有自己的经营潜力去扩大他们所控制的市场份额。在时尚市场方面也有一些中国公司已经获得在世界时尚市场的声誉。比如说 维格娜丝 (V.GRASS) 作为中国高端女装一线品牌，已经成为拥有气质内含知性的生活型品牌。今年他们成功地在米兰的时尚四边形，它是一个集中了许多最重要时尚品牌商店的商业区，设立了他们第一个海外精品店。现在他们有自信地能变成中国时尚世界的瓦伦蒂诺。祈丽诗雅 (KRIZIA) ,一个60年前由Mariuccia Mandelli创立的祈丽诗雅品牌被中国深圳玛丝菲尔服装有限公司收购。这个意大利品牌推出的时装系列和特许经营，将自己品牌打造成意大利著名品牌之一。之后，因为经营不善，业绩下滑，所以于2014年被深圳的玛丝菲尔公司 (Shenzhen Marisfrog Fashion Co Ltd) 收购。对于祈丽诗雅，深圳玛丝菲尔服装有限公司他们计划五年内分别在北京，上海，广州，深圳也成功开设了五间专卖店，同时也陆续地在欧洲，日本和美国等最重要城市重新开设祈丽诗雅销售点。

现在世界上最高档的时尚品牌是被酩悦·軒尼詩—路易·威登集团（LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton）和开云集团（Kering），这两家法国跨国公司主导市场。但是考虑到现在中国投资集团积极的在做海外并购投资，我们不能否认未来中国跨国公司的投资经营会跟LVMH在时尚市场上立于同样的重要。

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INTRODUCTION

China through the Looking Glass of Fashion

The 4th May of 2015 the Metropolitan Museum of Art's annual exhibition explored the impact of Chinese aesthetic on Western fashion and how China has fuelled the fashionable imagination for centuries. The Costume Institute and the Department of Asian Art provided some sensational high fashion pieces characterised by the combination of Chinese costumes, paintings, porcelains and other art including films, that reveal the enchanting reflections of Chinese imagery.



Fig. 1. A gown designed by Guo Pei at the Costume's Institute's new exhibition, 'China: Through the Looking Glass.'

From the earliest period of European contact with China in the sixteenth century, the West has been always enchanted with the richness of the manufacturing, the paintings and the complexity of the embroidery from the East. In the past, the Chinese influence on the European clothes was evident in the asymmetry of the textile themes, silks, the unusual combination of colours, the neat and flat surface of cloth, the looping and wrapping of the garments, and the integrity of the textiles.¹ For

¹ *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, in "The Met", October 2004 http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orie/hd_orie.htm, Retrieved 25 September, 2017

centuries these refined imagery of exotic mystery and allure have provided inspiration for international fashion designers, and their impressive creations were what this exhibition at the Met showcased through different pavilions.

There were countless vintage couture outfits, designed by famous *couturier* such as, Paul Poiret, who in 1912 proposed clothing characterised by the richness of shades, materials and shapes that retrieved the influence of China; Jeanne Lavin, who introduced in her collection black silk taffeta embroidered with green silk and silver metallic thread. Later, in 1960 Cristobal Balenciaga's oriental headpiece blew into the rarified *haute couture* ateliers that offered a kind of attractive and forbidden sensuality. Yves Saint Laurent was inspired by the majesty of colour and opulence, as well as the dangerous intoxication of opium, which became the name of his successful fragrance. Furthermore his '*Chinese collection*' relaunched the exotic brightness of the early 1900s, the golden brocade, the nomad fur that reminds the myth of Genghis Khan. Karl



Fig.2. Tom Ford for YSL FW 2004-2005 at China Through The Looking Glass

Lagerfeld, Roberto Cavalli and Valentino have also created dresses made of white silk satin embroidered with blue and white beads, that clearly reproduce the feature of the *Ming* porcelains. Not to mention the several gowns and jackets characterised by tiger and dragon prints, Chinese character motifs or mandarin collars produced by famous fashion houses over the years. Moreover we can find many updated *qipaos* that feature decorative *Chinoiserie* patterns, like the ones designed by Jean Paul Gaultier or Tom Ford. Vivienne Westwood and John Galliano instead, have both been inspired by the profound plainness of the Mao jacket and the idea of Chinese

military uniforms. Hence it is evident how the fantasy of China is forever evolving and providing each generation with the magic it desires.

Next to these famous Western designers creations, the Met exhibition left room for the sensational creations of Chinese designers, such as Guo Pei, Huishan Zhang, Christopher Bu and Bao Bao Wan.

Through the looking glass of fashion, designers conjoin disparate stylistic references into a collage of Chinese aesthetic and cultural traditions. However, nonetheless what one might think, “*The show is not about China, per se,*” – said Andrew Bolton, curator of the Costume Institute – “instead it is about the *collective fantasy of China and how it is represented in Western culture.*”² But for this reason, the show has also raised some critics: “*The China mirrored in the fashions in this exhibition is wrapped in invention and imagination. Stylistically, they belong to the practice of Orientalism.*”³

As famously articulated by Edward Said, a Palestinian American literary theorist and cultural critic, *Orientalism* is a term that refers to the colonial-era system of knowledge, that defined East and West as fundamentally opposite, with the East perpetually inferior and exotic.⁴ In the past, this stance rationalised Western political domination, today it still influences the perception of some countries with a colonial past in the cultural system and also in the economical field. What Said intended is that *Orientalism is a combination of power and knowledge that produced an East built by the West.*⁵ In this conception frame, the West is constantly changing, characterised by the rational thinking and progress, the East instead is defined by steadiness, irrationality and backwardness. This theory was developed in a precise geographical and political frame linked to the Middle-East countries, but recently the literature of the fashion studies has applied it to describe the relationship between

² HOLPUCH, Amanda, *Met's China: Through the Looking Glass show presents a fantasy of the far east*, in “The Guardian”, May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/may/04/met-china-fashion-art-exhibit-gala>, Retrieved 25 September, 2017

³ *Ibid*

⁴ LESHKOWICH, Ann Marie and JONES, Carla, “What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?”, *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, Volume 7, Issue 3/4, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2003, pp. 281–300

⁵ SAID, Edward W., *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978

the sartorial production of the West and the sartorial production of non-West countries. This perception is naturally related to an *Eurocentric vision* in the fashion field, which has started with the European colonial rule between the 17th and the 18th century. It's interesting to note that in this period the flat, not sewed on and not cut textiles, that have been characterising the East sartorial tradition for centuries, compared to the Western clothing, were considered as retarded 'costumes', result of unchanged traditions.⁶ Nevertheless, many Western designers recreated some of these exotic styles in their collections, above all at the beginning of the 1900s, but with an evident Orientalistic implication, as if only *powerful outsiders have the sensibility to access the charm of Asian cultural styles in ways that Asians cannot.*⁷ Nowadays, many scholars have pointed out the groundlessness of the steadiness of the East tradition, but it's important to observe how fashion and custom have produced a series of stereotypes and prejudices that were able to justify the superiority of countries such as France or Great Britain, as a symbol of civilisation. Furthermore this vision still influences the present-day fashion issues: as several authors have highlighted, the Western fashion industry's attitude and behaviour towards the *other* fashion industries are still expression of the *Orientalism*.⁸

However, in response to these considerations, Andrew Bolton and Wong Kar Wai, acclaimed filmmaker and the exhibition's artistic director, said that what the Met exhibition was aiming to, is "*a rethinking of Orientalism as an appreciative cultural response by the West to its encounters with the East. As if by magic, the distance between East and West, spanning perspectives that are often perceived as monolithic and diametrically opposed, diminishes. What emerges is an*

⁶ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Un mondo di mode – Il vestire globalizzato*, Bari, Laterza, 2011, p.6

⁷ *Ibid* p.15

⁸ LESHKOWICH, Ann Marie and JONES, Carla, "What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?", *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* , Volume 7, Issue 3/4, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2003, pp. 281–300

*active, dynamic two-way conversation, a liberating force of cross-cultural combination, and representation.*⁹

So the exhibit was supposedly a positive spin on the negative connotations of the *Orientalism*, and furthermore an exploration of how fashion designers view China through a “looking glass” or mirror, in reference to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Bolton wanted the exhibit to portray an authentic view of Western ideas of China, fully disclosing the fantasy that many placed upon the country in the 19th and 20th centuries. It portrays Western fashion and its Chinese inspirations through a veil – through a looking glass.¹⁰

The idea of steadiness linked to China is a stereotype that has always influenced our society and its effects are still evident in the common spoken language and above all in the fashion journalism, that seemed to find difficulties combining the idea of fashion *avant-garde* to the East.¹¹

But today we are also witnessing at the expansion of the fashion perspectives, that is shaking this *Eurocentric* vision of fashion. The recent globalisation has brought multiple consequences, also in the field of fashion, it is clearly visible in the bloom of different styles, that have provided new aesthetic identities and in the few collaborations between different countries. The establishment of a *global fashion*,¹² as a new language that draws on the Western fashion and the different local expressions, creates a new mosaic of fashion, in which the unbalanced relationship that produced the image of an *Other* opposite to the West, nowadays can be considered quite *anachronistic*.¹³

Considering the renewed economic importance gained by Asia in the last decades, in particular the rise of China, whose economic power and international influence are

⁹ Andrew Bolton, current Head Curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute in New York City

¹⁰ WANG, Lia, “China: Through the Looking glass”: An Embrace of fantasy, in “Generasians”, 2016, <http://cs.wellesley.edu/~lianka110/beta/article2.html>, Retrieved 25 September, 2017

¹¹ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Un mondo di mode – Il vestire globalizzato*, Bari, Laterza, 2011, p.16

¹² *Ibid* p.11

¹³ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda*, vol.4, Roma, Meltemi editore, 2006, p.125

nowadays second only to the United States of America, we can remark new patterns of development that have contributed to the progressive dissolution of some *Orientalism* stereotypes. However, ironically, it is still in the Chinese fashion industry, that these stereotypes and prejudices of the past are still curbing its recognition in the global context.

Chinese fashion system has been shaped by its relations with Western fashion, which has deeply influenced its connection with aesthetics and cultural practice. China can't deny its past, but it is creating newness through its continuous metamorphosis. Indeed, the Chinese fashion world has succeed in creating "a quite intricate aesthetic identity, multifaceted and multi sourced."¹⁴ In order to better understand these implications with reference to the recent rise of Chinese fashion industry in the global market, I think that it is worth to know how the modern concept of fashion has developed in Europe and China and how the Orientalism has influenced our perception of the fashion world over the years. Furthermore, I think it is also worth to illustrate the different expressions of Chinese fashion world that are featuring the rise of the Chinese fashion in the international arena.

¹⁴ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda*, vol.4, Roma, Meltemi editore, 2006, p.135

CHAPTER 1

MODERN FASHION AND STEREOTYPES

Why is fashion a field that popular opinion tends to associate with Western countries? What are the factors that have influenced our conception of modern fashion? How the stereotypes of Orientalism have been developed over the years? According to one of the most important fashion theorist, Gilles Lipovetsky, we can start talking about modern fashion from the second half of the 19th century, when a 'new logic of the ephemeral'¹ was established with a new organisation of power. The modern fashion is articulated in two industries that have different aims, methods, production and prestige, but both are pillars of what we define as fashion nowadays. The first one is the French *haute couture*, ideated by Charles Worth in the 1857 in Paris, its authentic originality dwells on the creation of tailor-made luxury: new clothing were showcased in fancy hall through models, then selected by the customers and tailored to suit them. With Worth's innovation, fashion became a creative firm and commercial show, and the *couturier* began to gain extraordinary prestige among the society, compared to the past, when his work was relegated to the applied arts. However the real revolution that reversed the industrial production's logic is the development of the *prêt-à-porter*, launched in France by J.C. Weill in the 1949. Compared to the mass production, the *prêt-à-porter* consists of the production of clothing, accessible to everyone, but still 'fashionable', inspired by the current trends. From the beginning of the 1950s, department stores, such as the Galleries Lafayette, Printemps, introduced stylists in their offices, in order to provide to the customers clothing that had as added value fashion and taste. Under the directives of designers, the clothing of the mass-industry became fashion product. In this process the *haute couture* didn't disappeared, it evolved from innovator that boosted

¹ LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes*, Editions Gallimard, 1987 (with reference to the Italian version of the book translated by ATZENI, Sergio, *L'impero dell'effimero, La moda nelle società d'oggi*, Garzanti, 1989, p.69)

the new trend, to prestigious institution that legitimates what is created elsewhere.² The *prêt-à-porter* has turned fashion into a democratic system, accessible to each social class, thus fashion became also a collective aspiration, part of human life in a society devoted to change, pleasure and novelty.

Considering that these two systems, pillars of the modern fashion, have been developed in the Western society, it is conceivable how they enhanced and defined the hegemony of West in the fashion imagery.

However, the globalisation in the last decades have provided several changes also in the field of fashion. Nowadays, next to the institution of the *haute couture* and *prêt-à-porter* that have defined the fashion system for a long time, we can remark that fashion can also be defined as *fast* and *global*. The experience of fashion has become immediate and global, the fashion shows can be followed in real-time, the development of fast fashion is based on the possibility of imitation of the newest collection just after the *prêt-à-porter* fashion shows and new cities have joined the list of *fashion cities*, such as Paris, Milan, London, New York. Hence the evolution of fashion has proved that it cannot be limited to a unique social class or part of the world. With the rapid rise of globalisation over the past several decades, the spread of fashion across global cultures has mirrored the changes in economy, culture, and daily life. The increasing awareness of the cross-boarder effects of fashion has provided a new meaning to the circulation of brands, products, clothes and also new stylistic ideas that have redefined the old *Eurocentric* conception of fashion world. However it is still interesting to observe how the modern Western fashion system has dealt with other cultures's fashion features over the years, above all the Chinese ones.

Until the first Industrial Revolution (1780-1830), the East was perceived as symbolic source of luxury and finer goods, an imaginary place that satisfy the Westerners's desires. After the Industrial Revolution, the Western textile industry took advantage of the East's one and became more and more flourish.

² LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et..*, p.116

Since the early years of the 1900s, exotic, fascination with the diversity and the desire to own precious objects are the main elements that built the idea of an *Other* far away from the Western society. Egypt mania, japonism and *chinoiserie* converged in the fashion world of the 'Roaring Twenties' and in the features of the Art



Fig.3. Confucius, Paul Poiret, 1905

Déco, becoming fashion trends for Westerns. These exotic themes were revised by famous couturiers, following a precise and implicit logic: “*the Other is excluded as subject, it is only a mere source of admiration, whose distance have to be maintained in order to preserve its exceptional and mysterious nature.*”³ On one hand the Westerners saw the East clothing as a theatre masquerade and on the other hand as real elements of the wardrobe, admired because of their beauty, style and craftsmanship.⁴

In the 1940s and 1950s fashion started turning into an institution, becoming a symbol of the Western modernity and the *exotic*, as opulent inspiration, faded away and lost its relevance. In this period, we can remark a new elegance inspired by the iconic glam of Hollywood, that warded off the imagery of the

East, giving room to new concepts, for example the new role of the woman, well depicted by Chanel's '*la garçonne*', an independent, athletic and modern woman, who rejects the complicated *mise* of the past. Of course Chanel was also referring to the layered gowns from Asia, that have a defined and articulated order in the layers and imply the help of an another person to wear.

Opposite to the vision of the East of the early years of the 20th century, in the 60s there is the idea of an East created by the *counter-culture* hippie that idealises and identifies the East as place safe from the capitalistic culture. This time the focus of

³ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda*, vol.4, Roma, Meltemi editore, 2006, p.87

⁴ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Un mondo di mode – Il vestire globalizzato*, Bari, Laterza, 2011, p.16

the inspiration was not the opulence and the disguise, but the utopian *research for the authenticity* of life, through the proximity to nature and a simple life, already lost in the consumerist Western society. There were plenty of Oriental inspirations, among them there were also the *Mao suit jacket*. In this context a new type of Orientalism appreciation linked to the *counter-culture* of the 60s-70s, brought a new attention to China and in particular to Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In this period Mao 'Little Red Book' contributed to a sense of rebellion, against conservative values as the ones represented by the middle-class, obsolete and socially unjust.⁵ However it was again an East made up by the West, as fictitious as the one that emerged in the collection of the *haute couture* of the 70s.

By the end of the 70s we can remark two different stereotypes of China, an old one and a modern one. The first 'exotic' one, that refers to the *Catai* and the wonderful descriptions provided by Marco Polo, which defines the opulent Orientalism of the *haute couture* that mixed the masquerade with the costume. The second one is 'cultural and ideological', generated from the normalisation of the relationship between People's Republic of China and the Western democracies. According to this second stereotype, China is seen as a poor and rural country, defined as '*the paradise of workers*'⁶ by Steele.

The 80s are characterised by a continuity in the relationship between the East and the West, not only in the stylistic field but also in the domain of industry. The Western companies started offshoring parts of the production process to Asia, in particular in China, where, thanks to the *Open door policy*⁷ of Deng Xiaoping, the economy started getting off the ground.

⁵ DONNELLY, Kevin, *Politically correct education and the Cultural revolution*, in "New Zealand Centre for political research", 2010, <http://www.nzcp.com/test-post-158/>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

⁶ STEELE, Valerie, MAJOR, John S., *China Chic: East meets West*, Yale University Press, 1999, p.197

⁷ The Open Door Policy , announced by Deng Xiaoping in December 1978, was aiming at encouraging and supporting foreign trade & investment, in order to modernise China. It is considered the turning point of China economic fortune, that truly made China became 'The World's Factory'.

In this period, the *prêt-à-porter* and the branding culture recorded a huge spread, marketing strategies became more incisive, determining the success of the fashion world, which became one of the most flourish market. In this context a process of diversification took on: designers and brands used the exoticism to define their collections, which means that the oriental stylistic features are no more accidental, with an implicit meaning, but they became prerogatives that distinguish a brand.⁸

In the 90s, with the diffusion of post-colonial thematics, the critic aspects about the construction of non-Western countries became evident and suddenly the exotic *Other* rose not only just as an object of inspiration, but as a subject with a precise identity.⁹ It became evident the existence of another subject besides the Western one. This phase not only marked the beginning of the recognition of non-Western designers, but also the beginning of the researches about the role of the fashion designers, the meaning of Orientalism in the field of fashion and a change in the concept of fashion production. For Western fashion designers it became quite treacherous to



Fig.3. John Galliano for Christian Dior
Fall 1997

use ethnic patterns or styles, because *'the catalogue of taste'* they dipped into may collide with the new identity and cultural instances. In these years many fashion designers such as Cavalli, Karl Lagerfeld, Gaultier were criticised for their stylistic inspirations, their creations were withdrawn from the market and the pictures of the fashion runways destroyed because of the complaint of the foreign communities. The

⁸ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda*, vol.4, Roma, Meltemi editore, 2006, p.101

⁹ *Ibid.* p.113

debate on the identity, that became more pronounced in the social field, involved also the fashion world as form of communication and expression of cultural identity and ambivalences. Also the relationship with the East and all the prerogatives linked to the Orientalism started changing.

Until we get to the present day, characterised by the rise of the *fast fashion culture*, a consequence of the democratisation of fashion, that have seen the increase of accessibility for fashion goods globally and of media, the decrease in exclusive specialty clothing (*haute couture*) and in barriers like formal and casual, with an increase of ready-to-wear and a greater mixing of class, gender and cultural codes.¹⁰ As the horizon of fashion lengthens, the cornerstones of the Western conception are challenged, so the supposed *exclusivity* of the European prerogatives, its continuous change compared to the *immutable Other* and the firm belief that the Western clothing is doomed to remain the global clothing are all convictions that seem to reel under the competing pressure of Asia, not just in the economic field, but also in the cultural one.

For example, also the reasons of the foreign investments in China have also changed their reasons to be. Before China was just considered as a productive base, where Western industries can produce in order to re-export products in the international market, by exploiting lower labour costs, the wide availability of workforce and favourable regulatory conditions. Now the same companies are looking at China as a target market of their products. Western companies have also started spending time and effort to investigate the market landscape and adapt to the local culture, design, and develop the right strategy to enter the market. So we see how in the modern time, the same concept of East, as source of inspiration and as a Western projection, collide with an *Other* that is became more and more powerful.

The usual opposition between East and West is fading away, leaving room for a *new global appeal*.¹¹ *“The superiority of the Western fashion industry and its aesthetic*

¹⁰ *Global Chic*, in “Fashion & Power”, 2011, <http://fashionandpower.blogspot.it>, Retrieved 26 September, 2017

¹¹ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda*, vol.4, Roma, Meltemi editore, 2006, p.120

*leadership cannot be taken for granted anymore*¹²: the institution of the *haute couture* and the *prêt-à-porter* has been replaced by a fragmented reality that reflect the current pluralism of the global fashion.

In the current global landscape we can recognise two different trends in the fashion field. First-able there is the fashion intended as inexhaustible source of ideas, models, textiles techniques to be re-elaborated in freely and creative ways. An example of this conception is provided by John Galiano, always fascinated by other cultures and who mixed the rules of the *prêt-à-porter* and the *haute couture*, creating spectacular pieces of art. The second approach that we can identify in the contemporary fashion world is characterised by the desire of the stylist to express his personal cultural background in a research of authenticity. In this case, the origin of the designer has become a source of inspiration, that has found its starting point in its historical identity and artisanal tradition. For example Chris Chang,¹³ a fashion designer based in Shanghai, takes as reference in her creations minority costumes of China, or Renli Su,¹⁴ who recently has presented a new collection inspired by her roots: she looked to the 19th century workwear of her small seaside hometown in Fujian. So we can remark how the contemporary fashion world is characterised by a local and a global trend, in which the *identity* plays a major role in the creation of collection genuinely local or global, by calling into question the concept of *authenticity*. Furthermore this trend can also challenge the distinction between tradition and modernity, fashion and costume, open up the cage of stereotypical identities, that have characterised the Western world system.

¹² SEGRE REINACH ,Simona, *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda*, vol.4, Roma, Meltemi editore, 2006, p.121

¹³ CNN: China segment on fashion and style featuring Hung Huang, Andrew Keith and Poesia's designer Chris Chang. The interview was conducted in the Poesia Showroom in Shanghai. 22th January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkK5LAH1CwM>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

¹⁴ SU, Renli, <https://www.renlisu.com/aw2017/>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

THE RISE OF MODERN FASHION IN CHINA

*Modern fashion*¹⁵ in China has clearly different origin from that of the West, where fashion was already beginning to take on a popularising aspect and role in the late 1960s. As the French social thinker, Gilles Lipovetsky, pointed out, the rise of the *prêt-à-porter* turned the fashion world system into a democratic phenomenon, in which the working classes stopped considering fashion as a privilege of the upper classes, and made fashion become a mass need, part of human life in a changing society.¹⁶ The *prêt-à-porter culture* started offering a production model of fashion adapted to the gradually emerging mass consumer society. Furthermore, by the 1980s the association of *popular culture* and fashion was considered a constant destined to last until the present day, as attested by the present success of *fast fashion* and *fast luxury*.¹⁷

What it's interesting to note about the different development of fashion between China and the West is that, ironically, as in contemporaneous hippie subculture of the West, prevailing anti-fashion sentiments gave birth to new looks and new fashions that distinguished themselves from the past, this outcome was certainly neither intended nor desired by China's revolutionaries. Concepts such as *subculture*, *anti-fashion* and *popular culture* were totally absent in China in that period, that was marked by turmoil, repression and violence brought by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The new China that Mao and the Red Guards set out to create should have been a place free of the 'four olds', namely old costumes, old habits, old culture and thinking. How we can imagine, the concept of fashion did not seem to belong to such revolutionary, proletarian society.

¹⁵ According to the French social thinker, Gilles Lipovetsky, we can start talking about *modern fashion* since the second half of the 19th century, with the rise of the *haute couture*, that identifies the beginning of *the hundred years of fashion*, the first phase of the modern fashion.

¹⁶ LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et...*, p.117

¹⁷ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Manuale di comunicazione, sociologia e cultura della moda*, vol.4, Roma, Meltemi editore, 2006, pp. 125-127

“ Over attention to outward appearance was deemed shameful, sinful and anti-revolutionary and display of individuality and eccentricity in dress were merely invitations to danger and thus a rigid uniformity in dress prevailed”¹⁸

The range of fashion choices contracted as creativity stifled, the revolutionary looks were marked by the pursuit of frugality, simplicity and sobriety in dress: *“the more plain the clothes, the more revolutionary people considered to be”*. The ‘three old

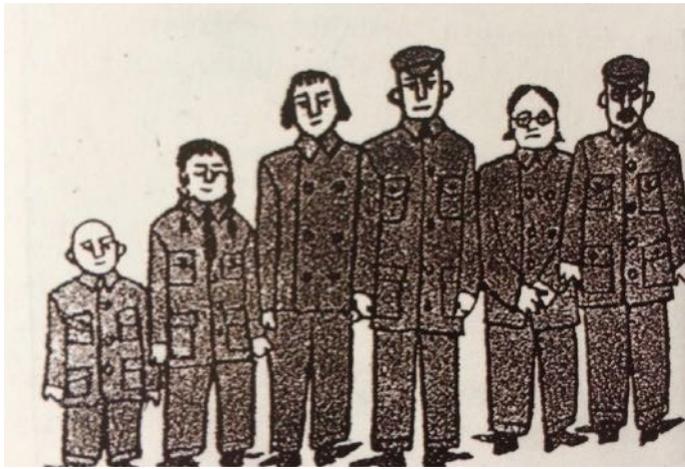


Fig.4. Cartoon commenting the lack of differentiation in clothing between male and female, young and old.

styles’ consist of the 中山装(Mao suit), the 青年装(youth jacket), and the 军便装 (casual army jacket). The ‘three old colours’ are the subdued blue, white, and grey that were worn by most people, and consequently earned the nicknames in the West like ‘blue ants’ and ‘grey ants’. As visual symbols of bourgeoisie, both Western suit and the *qipao* – a one piece form-fitting dress combining

elements from East and West that was popular from the late 1920s through the 1940s on the mainland China— were prohibited. The matching accessories, such as rings, high heels, bracelet, bow ties and top hats, were also shunned. Virtually every aspect of dress had its own sartorial taboos.¹⁹ There was a careful expression of fashion, everything was either right or wrong and dress either revolutionary or reactionary, there was no middle ground. In the years of the Cultural Revolution everyone had to be fashion conscious in order to adjust to the nuances and subtle changes in dress and appearance in order to wear the ‘correct’ fashion.²⁰

¹⁸ WU, Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York, Berg, 2009, p. 2

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 8

²⁰ *Ibid* pp. 9-10

Mao's death in 1976 and the subsequent arrest of the Gang of the Four finally brought end to the Cultural Revolution. With the adoption of the Open Door policy²¹ in 1978, China took its first steps on the path of economic reform, a move that marked the beginning of the post-Mao era and a turning point in the modern Chinese history. The Cultural Revolution had left China severely wounded as a country, and authorities were anxious to reestablish confidence, among both outsiders and its own people. People were still encourage to dress to 'reflect the spirit of socialism' and at the same time to emancipate their minds to become more creative. Countless fashion events and activities took place in Shanghai after the reform began. Leaders from the Ministry of Commerce and the Municipal government set guidelines for clothing design, stating that they should be 美观 (beautiful), 大方(composed), 健康 (healthy) and 使用(practical).²² Designs or styles that did not meet these guidelines were deemed offensive 'bizarre looks' and generally condemned by the state. This transitional period, that followed fundamental shifts in political ideology and changes in China's economic system, led to cultural dislocation and confusion. Ideologically, culturally and historically, China remained a collectivist state, but as China began the transformation of its economy and society, the role of individualism and its meaning came to the fore. After three long decades of self-imposed isolation, people felt uncertain about how to react to new ideas, lifestyle and fashion: "*it was never easy for people to draw the line between the appropriate and the inappropriate, the egalitarian and the bourgeois, or healthy and obscene.*"²³

After a short period of mainly modification of existing styles and revival of styles of the 1950s or even the 1940s (the *qipao*), closer interaction between China and the West led to the gradual internationalisation of the Chinese dress, and the 'gradual centralisation' too of the Western high fashion.²⁴ So as government loosened the

²¹ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Un mondo di mode – Il vestire globalizzato*, Bari, Laterza, 2011, p.102

²² WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York, Berg, 2009, p.138

²³ *Ibid* p.18

²⁴ LI, Xiaoping, "Fashioning the body in post-Mao China", in BRYDON, Anne and NIESSEN, Sandra (editors), *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 1998, pp. 71-89

tight grip it had maintained over the preceding decade, copies of Western styles leaked in through the cracks.

The transformation of clothing in the 1980s took place in a society that was still repositioning itself in relationship both to the outside world and to its own past, as it is shown in literature, music, painting and film. In general the daily dress of Chinese people in the 1980s can be said to have shown both a determination to break with the immediate past and a desire to be up-to-date by the international standards.²⁵ In these years we can remark the flourishing of fashion institutes, fashion magazines and fashion shows.

In the fashion world, the creative artist was the fashion designer, who emerged from the offices and factories of the Maoist-era to take up one of the most challenging but also most glamorous roles in the Reform-era economy. The designers's first task was to produce a new wardrobe for the masses of China, but in a very short time this became the way to establish China's credentials in the surreal world of international fashion.²⁶

China again began to look outside its borders, though no longer in terms of an exchange or cultural hybridisation, as in the early decades of the twentieth century, but with a clear sense of disadvantage. As Antonia Finnane describes, "*on the whole, people in the Reform-era China wanted to be citizens of the world and fashion – she goes on – was precisely one of the areas where the reforming country could enter into contact with the rest of the Westernised world.*"²⁷

"Many Chinese felt left behind and were now desperate to catch up. It's like we

²⁵ FINNANE, Antonia, "China on the Catwalk: Between Economic Success and Nationalist Anxiety", in *The China Quarterly No. 183*, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 2005, pp. 587-608

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, "The Identity of Fashion in Contemporary China and the New Relationships with the West", in *Fashion Practice: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, Volume 4, Issue 1: Contemporary Chinese Fashion, 2012, pp. 57-70

*have been called ugly ever since we were little and we want to be called beautiful*²⁸

The 90s saw the proliferation of design contests, modelling contests, festivals, fairs, fashion shows and exhibition in nearly all major cities. The fashion designers gradually acquired more freedom to develop individuality, providing a new image of the modern Chinese fashion designer: creative, charismatic and independent. The proliferation of Chinese fashion media coupled with expanded financial means greatly elevated the status of fashion designers. It was only then that Chinese clothing designers finally shed their image as 'modern tailors'.²⁹ Most mainland designers were firmly convinced that the path to international fame and recognition lay in China's rich sartorial history. Hence the early attempt by Chinese fashion designers to become players on the stage of international fashion was predicated on the idea that *'the more their designs appeared Chinese, the more international appeal their designs would have.'*³⁰

The multiplication of Chinese themes on the domestic runway created a separate fashion world in which Chinese designers indulged themselves in the glories of China's past. But considering the domestic fashion critics and these collections irrelevance to the contemporary fashion, Chinese fashion designers started to question whether fashion was for the show or for the market, and whether the Chinese runway had already alienated itself from the cosmopolitanism of contemporary fashion.

These many designers originally had few connections with the apparel industry: their design talents were discovered and validated by design contests, not by the market. But to maintain their status as fashion designers, many of them resorted to the industry. On the other hand, influential big-name domestic clothing brands, normally relied on quality control and large economies of scale to gain market share, rather

²⁸SPENCER, Richard, *From Mao suits to fashion, the new revolution*, in "The Telegraph", 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1538110/From-Mao-suits-to-fashion-the-new-revolution.html>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

²⁹ WU, Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York, Berg, 2009. p.141

³⁰ *Ibid* p.144

than on innovative design. In-house designers in these big brands were no different than pattern makers or cutters. However, big domestic brands in the 90s faced intensified competition, especially from global brands that had recently entered China. As consumers became more and more conscious of international trends and brand names, the pressure to improve designs, to enhance brand's image and to gain more publicity led to a marriage between domestic star designers and big brands. Some large companies also hired foreign designers to implement their international design vision. On the other hand, shrewd brands owners with comparatively limited financial means recruited less famous but talented designers to their fashion teams, giving birth to famous casual fashion wear brands such as ZUCZUG or CHAGANG.³¹

In recent time, the international fashion world has seen China's entry on its stage. Firmly established as the world's production powerhouse and the number one exporter of apparel and footwear. The Chinese fashion industry has long dreamed of one day exporting China's own fashion labels rather than only the fruits of its cheap labor.

Like most other industries, the apparel industry has integrated at a global level, but in the globalised apparel supply chain, China's fashion designers have been largely ignored or have functioned only as *ghost designers* for fashion brands produced in China. In the 2000s, policy called for fashion innovation in the hope that China would produce its own designers capable of competing on the international stage. So in this period we can remark a new trend among the fashion designers, that replaced the earlier '*the more national, the more international*' with '*the more international, the more national*'. The previous generation, as we have seen, believed that highlighting Chinese characteristics in their designs was the path to international acceptance. However this quickly degenerated into tacking on traditional Chinese design elements that had little connection to international fashion. The next generation of designers took the opposite path: they deemphasised stereotypical Chinese elements and, instead, try to express their individual creativity. Only in this way, they

³¹ WU, Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York: Berg, 2009, p.148

believed, could their 'Chineseness' be truly expressed.³² Designers, such as Uma Wang, Chen Ping, He Yan, joined the research of a new aesthetic, that starts from China to embrace the international language.

The reason of this shift in trend is the structure of the fashion world system, as Zhang Da expressed, "*the power of fashion is in the West. All of us need to exhibit in Paris in order for the world to see ... Westerners come to China for the market, but Chinese go to the West for recognition.*"

Although China is nowadays one of the main fashion consumers, the recognition of Chinese fashion is still underway. For this aim, the CNGA (China National Garment Association, founded in 1991) is trying to increase the quality of the products, rather than the volumes of sales, and to replace the manufacture of Western brands with the production of local fashion designers.

The strengthening of Chinese fashion inside and outside its borders is part of a bigger project of the construction of aesthetic and Chinese culture, which is a priority to complete the economic growth. The Chinese that have showcased their collections abroad, are contributing to enhance the new perception of *a creative China* and defeat the stereotypes that still keep China stuck into an Orientalistic vision of *a country without any initiative and style*.³³

The road towards a Chinese identity in a globalised world is complex and the difficulties and ambivalence are reflected in the various creative phases Chinese mainland designers have gone through. However traditional Orientalism adjusted with different practices of emancipation from the *Eurocentric* visions of fashion and the Chinese capacity of production can influence its repositioning in the global market.

³² WU, Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York: Berg, 2009, p.153

³³ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Un mondo di mode – Il vestire globalizzato*, Bari, Laterza, 2011, p. 99

HOW IS CHINA PERCEIVED IN THE GLOBAL FASHION MARKET?

China is turning from an 'economy based on imitation' to an 'economy based on innovation'

-L. Mandrieux

The recent process of globalisation, the leading role of China in the international market, above all after the economic crisis of 2008, has repositioned the image of China, as powerful country. Chinese market has developed in short time a new pattern of strategies that is disrupting the economic forces and also the fashion world system. Since the 1980s China has been the prime producer internationally and since a decade ago, one of the main fashion consumers. The Chinese fashion industry has undergone tremendous change within the past decade and is continuing to expand at an exponential rate. Because of increasing income and rising living conditions, markets for both high-end and low-end clothing are increasing sharply, with an overall trend of becoming more fashionable and differentiated. With a population of 1.4 billion and rapid economic growth, China offers potentially the world largest consumer market for the fashion industry.³⁴

Through the years, "*China has turned from factory of the world, to market of the world and now innovator of the world*"³⁵: in the present day China aspires to move from a "*made in China*" towards a "*created in China*" country.³⁶ China is already shifting to more value-added products and services such as branding and design,

³⁴ Consulate General Shanghai, *China's fashion industry, An overview of trends, opportunities, and challenges*, Kingdom of the Netherlands, 2014, <https://www.nederlandenu.nl/documenten/publicaties/2016/12/06/china-fashion-industry-kansenrapport.pdf>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

³⁵ Hung Huang, CNN On China segment on fashion and style featuring Hung Huang, Andrew Keith and Poesia's designer Chris Chang. The interview was conducted in the Poesia Showroom in Shanghai. 22th January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkK5LAH1CwM>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

³⁶ FERRERO-REGIS Tiziana & LINDGREN Tim, "Branding 'Created in China': The Rise of Chinese Fashion Designers", in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, Volume 4, Issue 1: Contemporary Chinese Fashion, 2012, pp. 71-94

and will continue to improve in expertise. During the process of urbanisation, the lifestyles and fashion goods consumption patterns of Chinese people have experienced great changes, as they adapt to their new living conditions. The increasing product knowledge and surging purchasing power of mainland consumers in China are developing higher demands for quality and comfort in clothing. Consumers are concerned about labels of material composition and the product's impact on health. Furthermore, with much more recent exposure to Western media, the Chinese consumer is now far more aware of global fashion trends, and they learn very fast. Few years ago, they may have been merely chasing logos, now they seek more than that. Currently, consumers focus on both improving basic living conditions and enhancing their overall quality of life.³⁷ Chinese consumers are looking for more innovation, personalisation, interaction, convenience, and they know what's in demand globally. So as

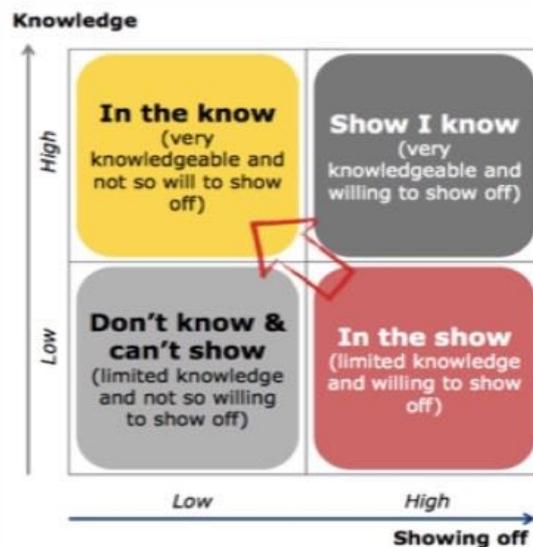


Fig.5. Source: Bain & Company - 2012 World Luxury Good Market Study

a consequence we can remark that Chinese market is shifting from a 'show off stage' to the 'in the know stage' of market. The "show off" stage is when consumers start "tripping over each other trying to acquire symbols of wealth and displaying them in a conspicuous manner," according to HSBC.³⁸ This attitude has characterised Chinese consumers for several decades, but recently consumers in China has become more aware of the quality of the products, their origin and particular features and *showing*

³⁷ FERRERO-REGIS Tiziana & LINDGREN Tim, "Branding 'Created in China': The Rise of Chinese Fashion Designers", in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, Volume 4, Issue 1: Contemporary Chinese Fashion, 2012, pp. 71-94

³⁸ ZEVELOFF, Julie, *China has entered the 'show-off' stage of luxury evolution*, in "Business Insider", 2011, <http://www.businessinsider.com/china-showing-off-wealth-luxury-2011-9?IR=T> Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

off their status labels is no more the main reason for the purchase of an high-end product.

Despite rising labor costs, RMB appreciation and lower demand from export markets, China's textile industry is still growing at a healthy rate and looks to dominate the global apparel sector, both as a producer and a consumer for years to come. Moreover, there are several groups that are competing for dominance in the Chinese fashion market: Western brands, Chinese apparel manufacturers trying to establish new brands or buy famous foreign brands, and Chinese fashion designers. Western fashion brands have been entering the Chinese market for years and have had an advantage because they are seen as *more reputable*. On the other hand Chinese designers, as well as Chinese manufacturers, have an advantage too, because they have a well-controlled powerful supply and distribution chain with a good knowledge of the local market, but they still need to be internationalised.³⁹ Furthermore, more and more Chinese clothing manufacturers are now aiming at creating their own brand, which suggests the huge opportunities for international designers/clothing labels to collaborate with local manufacturers. In this context the main challenge for the local production is represented by *the imperialism of Western brand*. As claimed by Wu Juanjuan, the future of China lies in the result of the transition from an economy oriented to the exportation to an economy oriented to satisfy the domestic demand, that could scatter the Western brand imperialism, that is actually limiting the development of Chinese fashion.⁴⁰ This change could revolutionised the perception of Western luxury brands, that could be replaced with Chinese luxury brands, created on the aesthetic vision recognised by the Chinese and by the cosmopolitan community of fashion.

³⁹ FERRERO-REGIS Tiziana & LINDGREN Tim, "Branding 'Created in China': The Rise of Chinese Fashion Designers", in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, Volume 4, Issue 1: Contemporary Chinese Fashion, 2012, pp. 71-94

⁴⁰ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York, Berg, 2009, p. 41

THE IDENTITY OF FASHION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

'The China guiding the world economy naturally also needs aesthetic recognition, so far obscured by prevalent vision of the country as factory of the world'

-Antonia Finnane

Fashion identities are increasingly relational, interdependent and constantly fluctuating between self-perception and external recognition. As Simona Segre stressed out, nowadays more and more often the reputation of a city, a nation or a culture to claim a role in the global fashion industry depends on the prejudices and the capacity to produce something that is aesthetically relevant.⁴¹ In the present day we can talk about the *catwalk economy*, a concept that, since the advent of the new economy⁴² of the 90s, seemed to have invaded the corporate world, the business media, but also the ways in which regions, cities and nations were marketing themselves in the new economy. The catwalk economy focuses on “*the need to communicate an appetising image of being fast, innovative, creative and with an important stake in the future.*”⁴³ Thus, *catwalking* is a technology for staging the potential energy of ‘*being ahead*’: in order to be successful as a fashion nation, it may not be necessary to have had a manufacturing past but it is however necessary to achieve international recognition. The seemingly esoteric world of Parisian *haute couture*, from which the catwalk economy is actually originated, became a laboratory for trying to organise this kind of energy and had a great impact on the cultural and economic organisation of fashion in all kinds of fields. As a consequence of this *catwalk economy*, each nation has a vested interest in being recognised as a place

⁴¹ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, “China and Italy: Fast Fashion versus Prêt à Porter . Towards a New Culture of Fashion”, in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, volume 15, Issue 2, pp. 267-272

⁴² The new economy is the result of the transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy.

⁴³ LÖFGREN, Orvar, WILLIAM, Robert, *Magic, culture and New Economy, Catwalk and coolhunting - the production of Newness*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2005. p.57-68

of creativity and aesthetics, we may call it “dressed power”⁴⁴. So fashion itself is no longer an issue regarding ways in which people dressed up and ways in which brands are distributed, but the chance for countries to take part in the global exchange.

As countries and cultures seek to define their cultural identity within the globalised context of the information age, fashion weeks are being born around the globe. These fashion weeks do not only serve to celebrate local fashion designers, they also attract international buyers and journalists that push forward the globalisation of the fashion industry. Hence for a country or a city, expressing an immediately recognised aesthetic has become an important factor to communicate political, economical strength and to take part in the culture of globalisation.

Chinese Government has understood that fashion changes one’s image in the world, as a matter of fact it has been promoting fashion industry, which is divided across an array of separate cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou or Shenzhen, each supporting the fashion industry in its own way with its unique strengths.⁴⁵ However establishing a recognised fashion goes beyond succeeding in matching a more or less specialised textile and garments: *“the fashion nation might require actions of communication to adjust old stereotypes to global interactions.”*⁴⁶

It’s clear that both Chinese Government and fashion designers are more and more aware of this aspect. On one hand the Government has encouraged the development of Chinese fashion schools and the spread of fashion weeks among the country, but on the other hand, often in the eyes of young Chinese designers, any new aesthetic discovered by the new generation will only add another form of originality and exoticism to Western fashion, but not be a dominant force in global

⁴⁴ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, “China and Italy: Fast Fashion versus Prêt à Porter . Towards a New Culture of Fashion”, in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, volume 15, Issue 2, pp. 267-272

⁴⁵ PARENT, Timothy, *China’s elusive fashion capital*, in “The Business of Fashion”, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/global-currents/chinas-elusive-fashion-capital-part-1>, 2015, Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

⁴⁶ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, “China and Italy: Fast Fashion versus Prêt à Porter . Towards a New Culture of Fashion”, in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, volume 15, Issue 2, pp. 267-272

fashion.⁴⁷ The point is that during the post Mao era and the Reform era, China competed successfully for a place in the international trade in textile and apparel, but its economic success has not been matched by recognition of Chinese fashion design on the world stage.⁴⁸ One reason for this lies in the obstacles posed by the existing hierarchy of fashion capitals, that pinpoints the West as leading model, which has proved notoriously difficult to subvert. Although China is one of the most important fashion market, Chinese fashion designers and fashion brands are quite unknown in the world consciousness. Western reports on fashion in China routinely sound a note of surprise and discovery, as though Chinese people were still to be seen wearing Mao suits. This situation is the result of a process that has made Europe the hub of fashion system, since the institutionalisation of the *haute couture*. Also the absence of China from the life and culture of Western World in the years after World War II, when fashion acquired a relevant role in popular culture ('50s to '80s) have contributed also to the picture of China as *a country incapable of expressing style*.⁴⁹ The first years of the exposure to Western fashion tell a story of a country which suddenly discovered beauty, style and aesthetics, as if China had not existed before. So from this scenario we can detect two main stereotypes: one depicts China as the *colonial milieu*, a vision soaked in the orientalism, and on the other hand, "*the aesthetically deprived country*"⁵⁰, *looking forward to imitate the West*.

Besides, a lot of Western luxury brands have claimed their superiority by playing with this shared colonial imaginary. They have used a rhetorical construction of their brands based on orientalist stereotypes: they haven't used exotic issue directly but they have overturned and aestheticised some images in their advertising campaigns.

⁴⁷ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York: Berg, 2009, p. 153

⁴⁸ FINNANE Antonia, *China on the Catwalk: Between Economic Success and Nationalist Anxiety*, *The China Quarterly* No. 183, *Culture in the Contemporary PRC*, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 2005, pp. 587-608

⁴⁹ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *The puzzle of fashion distinction in China*, in BARTLETT, Djurdja, COLE, Shaun, ROCAMORA, Agnès (editors), *Fashion Media: Past and Present*, 2013, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, pp.177- 190

⁵⁰ *Ibid* p. 180

For example, the advertising campaign made by Dior, *Shanghai Dreamers* (2010), directed by Quentin Shih (时晓凡), reveals the old stereotype of the rigour and uniformity of Chinese mass culture, made of workman, maoist soldiers and girls in *qipao*. In all the images, a Western model wearing a Dior dress is presented a step forward compared to the mass, emphasising the concept of individuality in opposition to the uniform Chinese mass. And the same photographer was already criticised in 2008 for another campaign for Dior, '*The Stranger in the Glass Box*', that again seemed to emphasise the comparison between the wealth of the West and the backwardness of China.



Fig.6. Christian Dior - Shanghai Dreamers, one of the seven images created by Quentin Shih (2010)



Fig.7. Christian Dior - The Stranger in the Glass Box one of the seven images created by Quentin Shih (2008)

In 2010, Chanel created a sort of *soap opera* as an advertising to present Chanel's *Paris-Shanghai Métiers d'Art Collection*, entitled *From Paris to Shanghai, a Fantasy* and directed by Karl Lagerfeld.⁵¹ In this short film, a fictitious Coco Chanel time travels through the different epochs of Chinese history, revealing the repetitive old stereotypes and the idea of a mass ignorant of his past and in need of imitating the West. Also Prada, in the same year, launched a 9-minute black and white film, called *First Spring* directed by Yang Fudong (杨福东)⁵² to present the Spring/Summer 2010 menswear collection. Yang presents the exchange between West and East in a surreal slow motion borrowed from the film noir. The protagonists, "two young western dandies, alienated and arrogant, stumble like somnambulists through streets, restaurants, and stores populated by eunuchs, court ladies, and post-communist scenarios".⁵³ China again looked like a backward country, trapped in the past, in a reality completely opposite to the West.

Finally, a more recent D&G advertising campaign has raised many critics among Chinese, that reacted with anger on different social media platforms. The Morelli brothers, who this April shot the advertising campaign named *#D&GLovesChina*, showcased good-looking models in high-end fashionable clothes together with ordinary people in notable's Beijing landmark, such as Tian'anmen Square and the typical 'hutongs' (胡同). The majority of the netizens were offended by these shoots that showcased images of poverty, old people, backward looking buildings and sides of Beijing, that do not feature the positive traits of an international big city.

Above all, it is the comparison between other shootings of the *#D&GLoves* campaign that disappointed Chinese audience the most. In Japan, photos were taken on

⁵¹ SEGRE REINACH Simona, *The puzzle of fashion distinction in China*, in BARTLETT Djurdja, COLE Shaun, ROCAMORA Agnis, *Fashion Media: Past and Present*, 2013, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, p. 184

⁵² Yang Fudong (杨福东) was born in 1971 in Beijing, considered one of China's most well-known cinematographer and photographer, his most important work is *Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest* (2003)

⁵³ KITO NEDO, *Yang Fudong*, in "Contemporary elegies, Deutsche Bank Art works", 2011, <http://db-artmag.de/en/66/feature/yang-fudong-contemporary-elegies/>, Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017



*Fig.8. D&G lovesChina
campaign 2017*



*Fig.9. D&G lovesJapan
campaign 2017*



*Fig. 10. D&G lovesHongkong
campaign 2017*

glamorous urban streets in the night with neon lights shining in the background to create the idea of a modern metropolis. They also included ordinary people as well, but they are all young and well dressed people. Similarly, the Hong Kong series also featured an evident sophistication and wealth of a highly developed modern city. Moreover, even if all models of the Chinese campaign come from the East Asia, they look westernised and their poses express a *superiority* compared to ordinary people: the models never truly interact with them. And although the photographers meant to present how D&G's potential consumers would look fashionable even in routine interactions by wearing their designs, Chinese audience, however, will immediately identify with the ordinary people in the advertising, instead of the models. "*Hence a sense of inferiority is created may or may not by accident.*"⁵⁴

In the past decades Chinese fashion system has been shaped by its relations with Western fashion, which has deeply influenced its connection with aesthetics and cultural practice. Nevertheless, the Chinese fashion world has succeed in create a mottle aesthetic identity. Of course, China can't deny its past, but it is creating newness through its continuous metamorphosis.

Global fashion is a cultural arena characterised by ambiguous boundaries. All the experience of fashion in present-day China, from Chinese fashion brands to fashion designers creations, are about "*to generate a flow, leading towards a dynamic perception of what Chinese fashion and Chinese style is about.*"⁵⁵ China has gone under a process of emancipation from the Western influence, with the emergence of national sartorial tradition in contemporary aesthetics, producing intriguingly hybrid forms in globalised fashion, and in the same time China fashion industry keeps tracking down global trends.

⁵⁴ WU Dee, *Should I be offended by 'D&G loves China' campaign?*, in "Resonate: Global voices on East Asian issues", 2017, <http://www.weareresonate.com/2017/08/feature-i-offended-dg-loves-china-campaign/>, Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

⁵⁵ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, "The Identity of Fashion in Contemporary China and the New Relationships with the West", in *Fashion Practice: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, Volume 4, Issue 1: Contemporary Chinese Fashion, 2012, pp. 57-70

So the confident relaunching of Chinese fashion should not be seen as a reaction to Western fashion, as it is often described by Western analysts, but as a new configuration for contemporary fashion in China.

Chinese fashion cannot be described anymore as subordinate, when China is a leading economy and when the Western world is obsessed with China at least as much as China is obsessed with Western brands.

Therefore I would suggest it might be useful not to consider Western fashion and Chinese fashion “*as two separate entities either in conflict or in collaboration*”⁵⁶. We should “*refuse the polarity as we also refuse a single perspective on global fashion.*”⁵⁷

China is still constructing and consolidating the recognition for its own fashion culture, and it is still shaking off the image of ‘the World’s factory’. Chinese fashion designers are still fighting off the perception of a Chinese fashion as cheap and gaudy. This is actually the biggest obstacle linked to the western perception that “made in China” means cheap and badly put together.⁵⁸

The only way to overcome this obstacle is gaining the global market, a goal that is expressed by “*the tension – that animate the Chinese fashion industry – between the satisfaction at economic success in penetrating world market and nationalist anxiety over failure to win world acclaim for Chinese fashion designers.*”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *The puzzle of fashion distinction in China*, in BARTLETT, Djurdja, COLE, Shaun, ROCAMORA, Agnès (editors), *Fashion Media: Past and Present*, 2013, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, pp.177- 190

⁵⁷ *Ibid* p. 153

⁵⁸ ASOME Carolyn, *Met Ball 2015: where were all the Chinese designers?*, in “The Guardian”, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/may/05/met-ball-2015-where-were-all-the-chinese-designers>, Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

⁵⁹ FINNANE, Antonia, “China on the Catwalk: Between Economic Success and Nationalist Anxiety”, in *The China Quarterly No. 183*, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 2005, pp. 587-608

CHAPTER 2

THE FASHION DESIGNER

“...This... 'stuff'? I see, you think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select out, oh I don't know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise, it's not lapis, it's actually cerulean. You're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn't it, who showed cerulean military jackets? ...And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of 8 different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic casual corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room. From a pile of stuff.”

— Lauren Weisberger, *The Devil Wears Prada*

The speech of Miranda Priestly from the cult comedy-drama *The Devil wears Prada*¹, based on Lauren Weisberger novel, draws the connection between the designer fashion in Runway's pages and Andy's cerulean sweater, criticising Andy's snobbishness about fashion and explaining the trickle-down effect.² Hence, it shows us what lies behind the moral *denigration*³ that strives to depict fashion as a

¹ FRANKEL David (directed by), *The Devil Wears Prada*, 20th Century Fox, based on the novel of WEISBERGER Lauren, *The Devil Wears Prada*, 2003

² “The trickle-down effect is a model of product adoption in marketing that affects many consumer goods and services. It states that fashion flows vertically from the upper classes to the lower classes within society, each social class influenced by a higher social class. Two conflicting principles drive this diffusion dynamic. Lesser social groups seek to establish new status claims by adopting the fashions of higher social groups in imitation, whilst higher social groups respond by adopting new fashions to differentiate themselves. This provokes an endless cycle of change, driving fashion forward in a continual process of innovation” (Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities, McCracken, Grant).

³ LIPOVETSKY, Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes*, Editions Gallimard, 1987 (with reference to the Italian version of the book translated by ATZENI, Sergio, *L'impero dell'effimero, La moda nelle società d'oggi*, Garzanti, 1989, p.69)

frivolous and irrational world, devoted only to consumption and concerned just with a narrow social élite. Indeed, fashion does have a *rational craftiness*, that follows the rules of seduction and ephemeral in the creation of subjective autonomy.⁴ All our decisions about what to wear in everyday life are in reality the result of a selection made by a narrow group of people, which have caught the *zeitgeist* of a specific period and set the new trend of fashion, but above all, even if we are not aware of it, our wardrobe is made of creations of fashion designers, who express defined concepts in the form of clothing.

These fashion designers, who have made fashion a huge industry, and whose work is as controversial and influential, as traditional art, are a quite recent-born figure. Before Worth and the establishment of the *haute couture*, who worked in the fashion field hasn't any right to create deliberately, because the tailor was completely subordinated to the clients's will. The launch of the *haute couture* revolutionised this old-centuries custom, started during the *Ancien régime*, and marked the first step towards the recognition of the independence of the tailor, as fashion designer. The dressmaker, ahead just known as *simple artisan became a supreme artist*.⁵ from a period, during which tailor and client collaborate for the creation of clothing inspired by a quite unchanging model, we move to a period in which the clothing is conceived by a professional according to his or her taste and insight.

We can see how fashion before was an aristocratic privilege, dictated by the logic of tradition, and on the contrary with the *haute couture*, the innovation is no more a birthright but the task of a specialised and autonomous administration, evaluated by its capacities and the quality of its products. At the head of the big fashion houses we find an irreplaceable artist, because of his or her unique style and talent. The couturier defines himself through a personal touch, a *griffe*,⁶ that in the case of the most acclaimed designers, such as Chanel or Yves Saint Laurent, there will be the attempt to immortalise it, beyond the demise of the designer.

⁴ LIPOVETSKY Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et...*, p.8

⁵ *ibid.* p. 94

⁶ CEDROLA, Elena, JIN, Byoung-ho, *Fashion Branding and Communication: Core Strategies of European Luxury Brands*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p.4

Even if items of clothing are created in the ateliers, the *couturiers* are not the only ones to take part in the establishment of what fashionable is. As we can assume from *The Devil wears Prada*, the current fashion is decided after the presentation of the collections and based on the selection of the press and remarkable figures. Nonetheless, it is still the result of the *demiurgical power* of the fashion designer, that creates what we can call the fashion world.

Furthermore, by considering that the *haute couture* produces a kind of '*frivolous sophistication*' and deals with the variety rather than the uniformity, it does handle with a process of seduction that has introduced an unreleased logic of power. The *haute couture* with its charming advertising and the theatricalisation of clothing through shows and exhibitions has done the first step towards the Commercial Revolution, basis of nowadays consumerism.⁷

Besides these aspects, what really played a major role in the rise of the Fashion Design is the inebriation of change: '*the seduction of free choice in harmony with the myth of individualism, originality and personal metamorphosis*'⁸ that have individualised fashion. What this new organisation of fashion is trying to do, is to emphasise the individual personality and to consecrate the *value of originality*. By doing so, the *haute couture* has also psychologised fashion, creating models that are able to express emotions and personal temperament.⁹ As stated by Roland Barthes, what before was a symbol of social class has become an expression of psyche and identity:¹⁰ the woman, according to her dress, can appear sophisticated, romantic, happy, relaxed, naive, athletic or polished. What ahead defined the belonging to a social class, now tended more and more often to represent personality and attitude.

⁷ LIPOVETSKY Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et...*, p 97

⁸ *ibid.* p. 99

⁹ *ibid.* p. 98

¹⁰ BARTHES, Roland, *Système de la mode*, translated by WARD, Matthew and HOWARD, Richard, *The Fashion System*, Oakland, University of California Press, 1990

“When you come in a big atelier you would not have the impression to be in a shop,
but in an artist studio,
where the fashion designer is painting a portrait of yourself by making a clothing”¹¹

The *haute couture* is the result of a compromise between two different eras, on one hand it confirms the aristocratic idea that fashion produces symbols of luxury, and on the other hand it turns on a modern production, aligned with the new ideology of the democratic individualism. However, nowadays it doesn't produce anymore the latest fashion, it reproduces the image of the 'enduring' brand, by creating timeless masterpiece of elegance, freed by any commercial obligations. At this time, the Fashion Designer of the *haute couture* conjoins the frivolousness with the perfection, it does not create for someone anymore, because it devoted itself to the *aestheticism*. All these changes generated by the *haute couture* have defined the characteristics of the modern fashion world and the figure of the modern fashion designer, who have to take into accounts all these features.

Beside the *haute couture*, we have another form of organisation of fashion that has marked a new step in the development of the role of the fashion designer. In 1949, J.C. Weill launched the *ready-to-wear*. In order to provide a new aesthetic approach to the mass production, the *prêt-à-porter* diffuses the idea of novelty, style and good taste, by creating fashion clothing that can be accessible to everyone. Gradually, all the industrials recognised the added value of a stylist in their production and the importance of a fashion designer. Through stylism, the industrial clothing changed its foundation and became real product of fashion.¹² From the beginning of the 60s, we see a flourish production by new and revolutionary designers for the *prêt-à-porter*, that do not imitate the collection of the *haute couture* anymore. The miniskirt of Mary Quant, then the futuristic minidress of André Courrèges or *la marinière* of Jean Paul Gaultier or Yves Saint Laurent, who made *le smoking* a female clothing, Kenzo Takada who mixed Western and Oriental folk influence with a fantastic *joie de vivre* and Vivienne Westwood, responsible for

¹¹ POIRET, Paul, *En habillant l' époque*, Paris, Grasset, 1930, p. 217

¹² LIPOVETSKY Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et..*, p. 112-113

bringing modern punk and *new wave* fashion look into mainstream... These are just some examples of the many designers that have defined the idea of fashion in these years, by creating some of the most iconic looks, that over time have marked and reflected the changes of society. During the 20th century stylistic innovation matched the anthropological changes: so we see how in this period the coexistence of different styles moves together with important social events.

In this quite various stylistic context, during the 80s, we can remark the emergence of a group of Japanese designers that have represented a “*breaking point in the Western fashion monopoly*”¹³. Yoshi Yamamoto with his asymmetries and simplicity, Rei Kawakubo, founder of the brand ‘*Comme des garçons*’ and Issey Miyake turned the traditional Western clothing structures upside down,¹⁴ by proposing a new fashion that refuses the gender rules and enhances the irregularity and imperfection, in an overall pauperised inspiration. Their creations were not the usual oriental clothing, that the West expected from the East, like the clothing of Hanae Mori, characterised by typical flowers and butterflies. Instead, they proposed quite disturbing figures that will influence also the Western designers, who started engaging with wide shapes and darker colours. This so-called ‘Japanese Revolution’ or ‘Japanese shock’ suggested a new idea, that the stylist innovation may also come from the East.

By considering that, an obvious question that came to me is: why was this revolution possible for Japan, but not for China? Will Chinese fashion designers have the potential to establish labels worldwide and become a promising force in the international market? With the current trend towards globalisation, will we hear about a Chinese revolution in the fashion world, as it was possible for the Japanese designers during the 80s?

¹³ SEGRE REINACH Simona, *Un mondo di mode – Il vestire globalizzato*, Bari, Laterza, 2011, p. 105

¹⁴ LIPOVETSKY Gilles, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et..*, p 112-113

CHINESE FASHION DESIGNER

Chinese fashion designers are a force that cannot be ignored in the arena of fashion today. As a group of creative people who live in a country with the fastest economic growing rate, Chinese fashion designers are more eager than ever to display their capability to the world, becoming more active in the international fashion shows. Furthermore, younger designers have successfully created their own brands, have moved into big cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, and some of them are about to introduce their designs in department stores such as Galeries Lafayette in Paris and Selfridges in London.¹⁵

Given that, China is a state with a unique political and economic environment, a nation that has 5000 years of history, a country that has the largest population in the world, so it is accurate to state that Chinese fashion designers have grown up in a complex, unique background.

The notion of fashion designer in China can be traced back to the Republican period (1912-1949), when the fashion industry in China started blooming, particularly in the so-called 'Paris of the Orient', Shanghai, which played a major role in promoting a modern and urban lifestyle in the Far East. The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 dramatically altered China's social conditions, and everything related to fashion almost withered away, in particular every attempt to restore the notion of *fashionable dress*¹⁶ was definitely suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. Only in the following period of *Reform and Opening Up* from 1978, people began to have more freedom in what they could wear, a wider choice in clothing and a growing demand for fashionable dress.

The early generations of fashion designers after the establishment of People's Republic of China worked in three ways. The first one was a group of designers who worked mainly with silks, taking inspiration from traditional motifs. The second group of designers worked mainly in the apparel industry, focusing on design,

¹⁵ TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 2

¹⁶ PARKER, Lauren, ZHANG, Hongxing, *China Design Now*, V&A publishing, London, 2008, p.107

choice of material, pattern making, and so on; they had a lowly status within these state-owned enterprises and were few in number. The third group worked in fashion retailing as dressmakers, creating garments according to their client's requirements, but also integrating their own suggestion concerning style, colour and material. The majority of these designers had no training or formal education background; instead they were chosen to be designers because of their skills in pattern making and tailoring. They produced new mass production styles for domestic market that generally featured conservative design with no relation to international fashion.¹⁷ Although their names were almost unknown, this group could be regarded as the very first fashion designers in China, even if they did not bear that title at the time.¹⁸ The end of the 1970s could be described as the starting point for the development of a Chinese fashion designer education system. This new education system began to support talented individuals and did much to help the progress of fashion design in China. In 1977 the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts¹⁹ in Beijing and Suzhou Institute of Silk Textile Technology started to accept students in textile and fashion design. Besides these fashion-design courses, also large factories funded fashion exhibitions for their designers, sent their works overseas to international exhibitions and support their participation in national design competition.²⁰ These events were the starting gate for designers to become known nationally, providing a stage for the designers to show their talents and enhancing their influence on Chinese new media.

In 1987, to demonstrate the growing power of China, the ministry of Light Industry sent a delegation at the Fiftieth International Woman's Wear Trade Fair in Paris. Chen Shanhua (陈珊华), a Shanghai designer, was sent to Paris for a show in front of the Eiffel Tower that surprised the European audience: this was the first time since

¹⁷ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York, Berg, 2009, p. 129

¹⁸ PARKER, Lauren, ZHANG, Hongxing, *China Design Now*, V&A publishing, London, 2008, p.107

¹⁹ now Tsinghua Academy of fine Arts

²⁰ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York, Berg, 2009, pp 129-130

the establishment of the new China that the world could meet China at an International Fashion Fair.²¹



Fig. 11. Chen Shanhua's first fashion show at the Fiftieth International Woman's Wear Trade Fair

It was at the end of the 1980s, that the economic reform process enable the first true generation of Chinese fashion designers to gain much more attention. Born between 1950-1960, this generation of designers had done varied jobs, thus possessed a strong knowledge of politics and an ability to bear hardships.²² They learned tailoring and design in garments factories or stores, as part of their apprenticeship during or before Mao's era.

This group of designers highlighted their Chinese identification. They spent a lot of time studying historical Chinese culture and art crafts to apply them to their clothes. There were three main reasons for this choice: as designers, they wanted to

²¹ TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 26

²² WU Juanjuan. *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York: Berg, 2009.p 131

distinguish their styles from those in the West, besides Chinese elements were considered as an object of fascination for the Western world, that can provide a fresh look and, last but not least, their childhood education left a strong mark on this generation, together with all the political events that they had experienced.

Another signature of this generation was the classic elegance of the 1920s and 1950s adopted in Europe. This was because starting by imitating names such as Dior, Cardin and Chanel, was an easy way of beginning for these Chinese fashion pioneers.²³ Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s were a source of inspiration, together with international fashion magazines, such as Harper's Bazar, that had been just introduced to China.

Their designs were characterised by a great attention to details, and shapes, that reflect the tailoring tradition of China, which emphasised construction, pattern design, and trims rather than innovative silhouettes. *"They may not have known how to dress fashionably, but they definitely knew how to please the market."*²⁴ Fashion designers such as, Wang

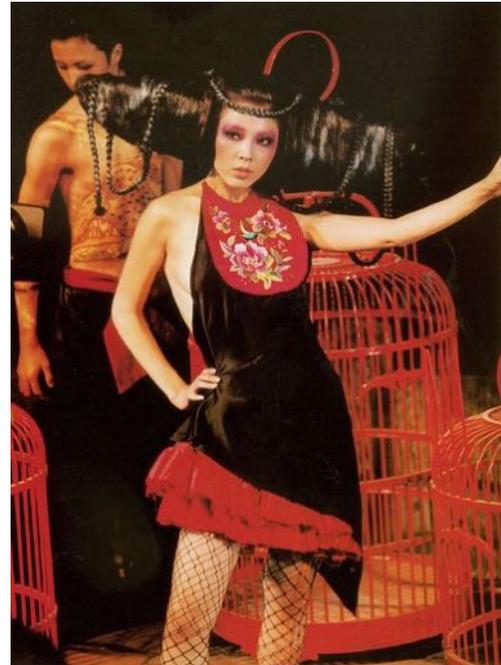


Fig.12. The 'Oriental silk' collection of Wu Haiyan showed near the West Lake in the city of Hangzhou, 2001

²³ TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 134

²⁴ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York: Berg, 2009.p 132

Xinyuan (王新元)²⁵, Wu Haiyan (吴海燕)²⁶ and Zhang Zhaoda (张肇达)²⁷, belong to this first generation, which although the great efforts, was not destined to succeed. There are many reasons that can explain this failure, mostly linked to a quite not favourable environment. Unlike the Western designers, supported by almost a century of history of couture houses, the economic boom after World War II, woman's emancipation movement, the rebellious youth movement of the 60s, the growth of the baby boom generation that created the needs for ready-to-wear clothes... Chinese designers did not meet any kind of these favourable facts. Indeed, China was still dominated by political power in the 1980s, so '*the creativity of the designers was limited not only by the scarcity of fashion resources, but also by the tastes of factory management and government authorities*'²⁸ and actually just few people were brave enough to wear fashionable clothes without the fear of being regarded as subversive. Furthermore, the overall economic climate in China in that period restricted the number of people who could afford fashionable clothes. And above these aspects, we have to consider a socio-cultural aspect: the *utilitarian philosophy* of the Chinese culture, in which "*wearing clothes was more an utilitarian necessity rather than an opportunity for an aesthetic display*"²⁹; so also the clothing industry in this period had little sense of *the concept of fashion*. These fashion pioneers believed that the function of the clothes was more important than

²⁵ born in a small village in Zhejiang province in 1958, now based in Shanghai. He worked for the Beijing Silk Factory as a designer, 1985; moved to *Fashion*, the first fashion magazine in new China, and was responsible for fashion events, 1986; writer and editor for TV documentary program *Fashion Culture* for CCTV; 1989-1991 chief designer for the first private fashion label in new China, *Yin Meng*; 1990 first to launch office wear for Chinese businesswomen; 1996-1999 chief designer of *Firs*, a women label funded by Shanghai Garment Group; 2006-present General Secretary of Shanghai International Fashion Federation.

²⁶ born in 1958, now based in Hangzhou. She worked as professor in China Academy of Fine Arts; chief designer of several companies e.g. China Garment Group, Beijing 1998-2000; 200-present established her own studio. Especially known for her silk fashions with suggestive Chinese-style patterned embroideries(吴海燕)

²⁷ founded the brand *Mark Cheung*, 1991; awarded the first "China Ten Excellent Fashion Design" prize, 1995; Chairman of the China Fashion Committee of Asia Fashion Union

²⁸ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York, Berg, 2009, pp129-130

²⁹ TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 132

creativity: “an article of clothing that looks innovative but isn’t practical was not considered good design.”³⁰

Besides the limits related to the political and cultural context, we have also to consider a significant lack of knowledge and experience of the Chinese clothing industry, the anxiety of achieving success and the isolation from the world beyond China. The various industrial organisations made little effort to help designers in the aspects of commerce. Fashion festivals were focused on the entertainment rather than be platforms to deliver trend information to the professionals and the masses. This eventually led this first generation of designers to be just *show designers*. As instance, even if they produced extravagant ‘haute couture’ catwalk shows, they were less successful commercially.³¹ Also the international parade they attended to were meant to be a cultural exchange rather than a stage for commercial purpose. Another great issue was the unfortunate partnership between entrepreneurs and fashion designers: business partners often interfere in the creation process, changing some aspects of the design, believing to make them more marketable and often because of fashion designers naivety, their property has been stripped away by their business partners, and they were also blamed in case of failure. Of course, the effective lack of practical skills is also worthy to note: the teaching was inappropriate and many students were attracted to the courses because of the passion for painting rather than clothing design. In addition, there were none references about how to create a collection or about branding. Moreover, limited media exposure coupled with the society’s unclear notion of fashion design made the public indifferent to these early fashion designers. Finally the difficulty in finding high-quality fabrics and accessories and the absence of qualified sales agencies have influence the failure of this generation of fashion designers, that acted as

³⁰ TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p.134

³¹PARKER, Lauren, ZHANG, Hongxing, *China Design Now*, V&A publishing, London, 2008, p.107

lonely warriors,³² who had to do all the work themselves due to the general backwardness of the industry at the time.

Although this generation of fashion pioneers did not reach a commercial success, they provide a base for the next generations of Chinese designers.

During the 1990s college-educated designers played a major role in the formation of a fashion industry in China. The launch of a Chinese Designers's Association in the mid-1990s merged individual designers and commercial enterprises. The latter part of 1990s saw a rapid growth in many areas related to the fashion industry, not only design, but also merchandising, promotion and fashion management. At this time, a second generation of Chinese designers, mainly in Shanghai, was also beginning to emerge, mostly by showing their work in design competitions while still at university, before establishing small-scale studios after graduation.³³

Compared to the pioneers of Chinese fashion, this second generation was luckier considered several aspects of the background they grew up in. First of all, they took advantages from a more relaxed political environment, characterised by the development of the Socialist Market Economy,³⁴ the emergence of private companies, joint ventures, foreigner-invested companies, and finally clothing choices were no longer regarded as a political statement.³⁵ Furthermore the clothing industry became more pragmatic and skilful in promoting designers. Some progresses were made in the educational domaine, providing also foreign exchange programs and activities, adopting the educational system used overseas and inviting overseas teachers or professionals for seminars. These early global connections, the new ideas, the international experience eventually benefited the transformation of traditional China's apparel industry into a modern fashion

³² TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p.134

³³ PARKER, Lauren, ZHANG, Hongxing, *China Design Now*, V&A publishing, London, 2008, p.107

³⁴ The Socialist market economy was a concept introduced by Deng Xiaoping in order to incorporate the market into the planned economy in the People's Republic of China

³⁵ TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 136

system.³⁶ The design courses started including a wider range of subjects, from creating, drawing, cutting to marketing, thus the students receive a comprehensive training about the design process.³⁷ So unlike the first generation of designers, they were more pragmatic and down-to-earth, learning from the experience of the previous generation: they knew that to survive in the marketplace, they had to associate themselves with concrete brands. The first generation underestimated the importance of a business education, because the pursuit of commercial success was controversial among China's early fashion designers: in their idealistic thoughts, the relationship between art and commerce seemed conflicting. Instead, "*since the mid-1990s, foreign brands have poured in and have forced domestic designers to compete and learn from them*" – stated Wang Wei, successful fashion designer of this generation – "*designers became the core of fashion commerce. They needed to balance the pursuit of artistic creativity and commercial success to give the product extra value*".

So we see in this period the affirmation in China of the *fashion system*, as intended by Yuniya Kawamura,³⁸ which means the combination of organisations, institutions and individuals interacting with one another to legitimate fashion designers and their creativity.³⁹ This fact is reflected also by the Chinese government's effort to produce global fashion centres, along with international fashion designers and brands in China.

Compared to the straight Chinese look of the first generation, these young designers reproduced the traditional Chinese spirit in a more subdued, sometimes imperceptible way. They emphasised the spiritual and philosophical aspects of the traditional Chinese values, thus we can remark an intense focus on the idea of harmony, peace, nature in the various collection. It was evident the influence of

³⁶ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p.134

³⁷ TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 209

³⁸ Associate Professor of Sociology at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, USA. She is the author of *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress* (2011), *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (2012), and *Sneakers* (2016)

³⁹ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p.136

international contemporary designers, expressed in the idea of the deconstruction of the clothes through cutting techniques and new materials.

The reasons of this shift in the representation of the Chinese spirit is expressed by Wang Yi-Yang, famous fashion designer, who built the brand ZUCZUG:

“How can one piece of design cover the cultural history of a nation? A few elements do not represent all of the national culture. Because we showed too many Qipaos, dragons, the Cultural Revolution and the image of red lanterns on clothing or films, it misled Westerners into thinking that these were all about ‘Chinese’ . I think it is important, as designer, to show yourself honestly. There are more than the so-called Chinese elements inner daily lives. There is no need to highlight that we are Chinese designers. In the international market, I don’t think people really care about where you are from. I think the more important thing is that your design fits your target group people”⁴⁰



Fig. 13. *The Useless* collection of Ma Ke, 2007

Indeed, they do not tend to favour everyone’s taste, but rather look for the customers who mirror their personal values.

Ma Ke was the first designer of this generation to build a brand featuring an obvious designer’s attitude rather than having a typical ‘Chinese flavour’. After some setbacks, her private label established in 1996, *Exception*, became a leading designer brand in China, featuring clothes for fashion-conscious middle class consumers,

especially modern young ladies. Then in 2007, she presented a new line labeled *Wuyong/Useless* at the Haute Couture Show of Paris Fashion Week. This collection

⁴⁰ Reference to an interview made by TSUI, Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 208

was made of hand-woven natural, finer fabrics, in order to promote the concept of ecology. It reflected the values and philosophy held by the designer herself, and it was not meant for commercial purpose, but for museum exhibition, as an artistic display. For instance, in 2008 it was the subject of *Fashion in Motion*, a series of live catwalk events presented at the V&A Museum, bringing catwalk couture to a wider audience by modelling it in the beautiful scenery of the Museum.⁴¹

THE FUTURE OF CHINESE FASHION DESIGNERS

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the first generation of Chinese designers faded off the stage, except for those who managed to transfer their design skills to other areas, like Wu Haiyan, who established *Why*, a corporation that provides design services to other companies or individuals.⁴² On the other hand, the second generation played an increasingly important role in the development of the Chinese industry. The best designers of this generation were those who can successfully balance artistic and commercial pressures, meeting popular demand as well as developing their own creative visions. Today, Chinese textile industry has continued to expand and International interest in Chinese design has grown. In particular, in the 2000s policy makers called for fashion innovation, hoping that China would produce its own designers capable of competing on the international stage.

“The question of whether China can pull off his transformation, from workshop of the world to cradle of invention, is the key to the giant country’s future”⁴³

⁴¹ *Fashion in Motion: Ma Ke*, in “Victoria and Albert Museum”, 2008 <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/f/fashion-in-motion-ma-ke-wuyong/>, Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

⁴² PARKER, Lauren, ZHANG, Hongxing, *China Design Now*, V&A publishing, London, 2008, p.108

⁴³ CODY, Edward, *In China, Dreams of Bright Ideas*, in “Washington Post Foreign Service”, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/16/AR2006061602060.html>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

To achieve this goal, in 2000 *China Fashion Week* changed its name into *China International Fashion Week*, offering an international platform also for the Chinese designers. By getting rid of the title *festival*, which was focused on entertainment, it was clear the attempt to highlight the commercial purposes of the event, more and more concerned for connecting with business collaborators. Moreover to promote young talents, cosmopolitan cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, built structures called *Innovation Centre* for designers to create their works and sell them. An example of this kind of place, that came from the 'Loft'⁴⁴ concept, can be founded in Tianzifang and Moganshan Road in Shanghai.

In this innovative context, more Western designers decided to come to China in order to cover the position of chief designers in some companies and to coach local designers.⁴⁵ Further, with the growing economic power of the Chinese people and easier access to fashion capitals such as London, Paris, New York and Tokyo, more and more Chinese students went abroad to study fashion design, eager to learn the latest innovation.

Of course, the new generation of Chinese designers can take many advantages from China's current situation. China is the largest and fastest growing country in the world and it is becoming an international market, that everyone wants to occupy. In this highly competitive background, native Chinese designers have the advantage in surviving and sustaining their business in a local market, in which the growing middle class represent a prosperous resource for the young Chinese designers.

Given this situation, I think it would be interesting to move our attention to the experience of a Chinese fashion designer, whose identity summarises the temperament of a society, that is moving towards the globalised world and that is looking for the right approach to maintain its identity, while coupling with the new aspects of the internationalisation.

⁴⁴ the idea of transforming old abandoned factories into trendy and innovative spaces

⁴⁵ TSUI Christine, *China Fashion: Conversation with designers*, Oxford and New York, Berg publisher, 2010, p. 214

HAN FENG

韩枫

The New York Times has described her creations as “*elegant, emotional, with a theatrical flair*”.⁴⁶ Han Feng is a multifaceted artist, a costume designer, an interior designer and also one of the most sought-after fashion designer on the international stage.

This august (11/08/2017), I had the chance to interview this cheerful and inspiring artist, who was willing to share with me her personal experience as one of the first Chinese fashion designer that gained high success in the global market.

Born in Nanjing during the Cultural Revolution, Han Feng graduated in graphic design, not fashion design, from the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou in the early 1980s. At the age of 25, she moved to New York, eager to make a mark in the history of fashion. She started creating scarves with a wrapping and veiling techniques, that were uncommon in the West. Wendy Goodman in *House and Gardens* described her early works as “magic out of silk”⁴⁷: by assembling the

garment as a light sculpture on the body, Feng realised the most beautiful romantic dresses made of organza, gathered in little puffs, as if they were filled with helium.⁴⁸ Han Feng rose to prominence in the 1990s, when her beautiful and dramatic



Kim Komenich / The Chronicle
Kim Komenich / The Chronicle

Fig. 14. Han Feng designed the costumes for the San Francisco Opera's "The Bonesetter's Daughter", based on the Amy Tan novel, 2008.

⁴⁶ L'Uomo Vogue, *Han Feng*, in “Vogue Italia”, 2012 <http://www.vogue.it/uomo-vogue/people-stars/2012/11/han-feng>, Retrieved 26 Sept, 2017

⁴⁷ GOODMAN, Wendy, *Living with Style: Hang Feng Comes Round the World to Spin Heavenly Tales in Silk*, in *House and Garden*, New York, June 1993.

⁴⁸ SPLINDER, Amy M., *Review/Fashion; Bringing New Life (and Bamboo Bra Tops) to the Party*, in “The New York Times”, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/03/news/review-fashion-bringing-new-life-and-bamboo-bra-tops-to-the-party.html>, Retrieved 24 Sept, 2017

creations caught the attention of Henri Bendel.⁴⁹ The store asked her to make a blouse for the holiday selling period, she made two blouses and the buyer reordered, thus she made the leap from being a maker of pleated scarves and dresses to becoming a designer of coats, tailored suits, evening dresses and furs.⁵⁰ By 1993 she was ready for a fashion show. She was the first Chinese designer to show at New York Fashion Week in Bryant Park and during this event she launched her first ready-to-wear collection. She presented a line characterised by an historical romance, influenced by Romeo Gigli and the asymmetrical simplicity of Miyake's pleats, creating a synthesis of Eastern and Western inspiration, that would become her signature.⁵¹ Indeed, this theme of '*East meets West*' is also expressed in the performing costume of *Helix* (1995) and *Gandhara* (1998), commissioned by the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, and again in her following collections. For example, in her fall/winter 1998 collection, she was inspired by the story of a love affair between a fabric trader and a young woman along the silk road to China. In 1999 her focus was on the neckline: one item was a high-collared Chairman Mao jacket accented with rose-pattern scarf. Then, in 2001, her collection highlighted her signature accordion-pleated skirts that reminded Miyake influence.⁵² She also gained high admiration as costume designer in the theatrical opera production of *Madama Butterfly*, directed by Anthony Minghella. The enormous success and talent for stage costumes brought her to the attention of the screen and also other important theatrical opera productions. After several awards as an Asian designer in US, she returned to China in 2005 to relocate her showroom, and she is currently active as

⁴⁹ Henri Bendel, established in 1895, is an American upscale women's specialty store based in New York City that sells handbags, jewellery, luxury fashion accessories, home fragrances and gifts. In 1913, Henri Bendel was the first retailer to sell Coco Chanel designs in the U.S and also the first retail to stage its own fashion show.

⁵⁰ SCHIRO, Anne-Marie, *A Designer's Careful Leap to Success*, in "The New York Times", 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/05/02/style/a-designer-s-careful-leap-to-success.html>, Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

⁵¹ TAUBER, Natasha, *Thirty Years of Chinese American Designer Han Feng*, in "Cool Hunting", 2016, <http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/designer-han-feng-synthesis>, Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

⁵² MARTIN, Richard, *Han Feng*, in "Encyclopedia of Fashion", 2003, <http://www.fashionencyclopedia.com/Es-Fo/Feng-Han.html>, Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

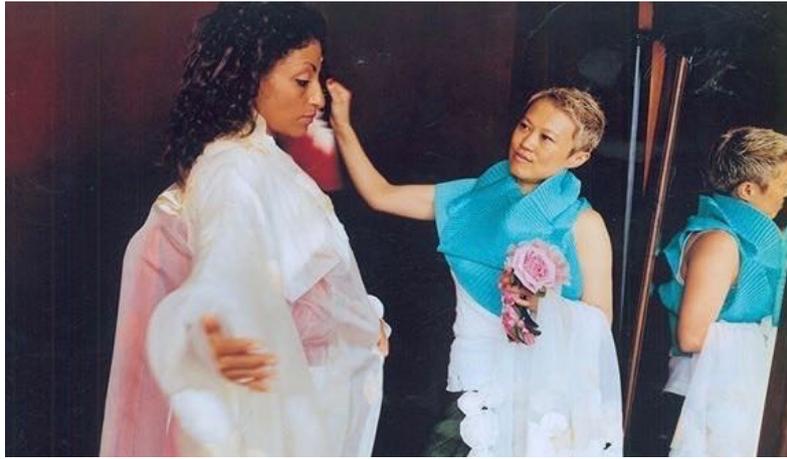


Fig. 15. Han Feng as a costume designer for Madame Butterfly with soprano Christine Gallardo-Domás

designer in both countries.⁵³ So even if she has a base in New York, she often goes back to China to find some inspiration from her Motherland.

Han Feng's style is characterised by uneven hems, asymmetric cuts, her pleating, which *"creates something dramatic in a simple way"*,⁵⁴ origami styled folds and a quite various palette that combine light colours with more intense ones, enhanced by printed pattern. She declared that *"her aim for her clothing is to express the freedom and fearlessness of the West and the history and tradition of the East"*,⁵⁵ and the result is something timeless, that never goes out of style.

Today her collections are made for modern women and reflect her personality too. She likes to mix different pieces to make clothes more interesting, simple but still elegant, versatile, easy-care and playful. She wants to create clothes that can be transformed and used for different occasions, like evening dress that can be donned as daytime wear. Her style matched a new lifestyle that she wants to share with the other working women, help them to feel confident and comfortable in any situation, by neglecting anything too complicated.

⁵³ *Han Feng website*, <http://hanfeng.com/article/index.php?cid=5>, Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

⁵⁴ TAUBER, Natasha, *Thirty Years of Chinese American Designer Han Feng*, in "Cool Hunting", 2016, <http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/designer-han-feng-synthesis>, Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

⁵⁵ "Han Feng: Tastemaker", *Departures*, 2008, <http://hanfeng.com/picture/index.php?cid=20> Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

Han Feng has never forgotten who have supported her career when she first arrived in US and in turn, she has always considered her Loft in New York as a platform for increasing the visibility of young designers. She has seen a lot of young Chinese fashion designers doing great and she is really proud of them and won't stop supporting their efforts.

Han Feng is one of the most successful born Chinese fashion designer, who gained high recognition on the international stage, capable of bridging contemporary Chinese sensibility with a global perspective, by combining the aesthetics of two cultures. Through her creations, she has made something that has gone beyond her provenance and market demands. She sometimes thinks that she has done enough in fashion, but she still wants to do art. I am sure we will hear again her name in the fashion world or in other artistic fields, keep showing to the world a face of contemporary China that is endeavouring to stand out in the fashion system.

Above all, I hope she will keep inspiring people to find confidence and to never lose the interest in life.



Fig.16. Illustration by Han Feng

CHAPTER 3

RE-ORIENTING THE *ORIENTALISM*

Now I would like to move our attention to another form of expression of Chinese fashion that might result quite controversial. Before, in the first chapter I have already presented the concept of *Orientalism*, its implication as a barrier for the affirmation of Chinese fashion in the global market, and as a producer of a series of stereotypes.

The *Orientalism* has been often intended as a manifestation of the balance of power that the Western fashion world has imposed to other fashion systems, by influencing the parts involved in the creation, reshaping the potentiality of their expression and determining their success or failure. How we have already seen, beneath the idea of multiculturalism of some cultural phenomena there is a form of exoticism, an easy aestheticising idealisation for Westerners.

However, besides the *Orientalism*, as *an East redefined by the West*, we can also witness to the *self-Orientalism*, *an East recreated by the East*, that features the cultural heritage and craftsmanship of the East. This form of *Orientalism* has been extended to different forms of expression, from the cultural field to fashion and cinema. The reasons that explain its adoption can be traced in the desire to express the national identity, but it can be also the result of a strategic decision. As a matter of fact, it is often used in order for the product to be welcomed in the global market, by promoting something that is exotic but still modern for the Western consumers, and at the same time it is traditional but still cosmopolitan for the East consumers.

This is the strategic design decision made by many brands in China, that have decided to endorse Chinese culture and craftsmanship to create timeless garments. These brands gained a great success among Westerners and have started arouse an increasing interest also in the domestic market, where forms of revival of the past were first rejected or considered with hesitation. Although this trend of *self-Orientalism* is denied by many Chinese fashion designers, that are engaged in the

research of the *authenticity*¹ beyond the national tradition, I think that it is worth to consider this expression of the Chinese fashion world, that have stepped in the global market quite early and has become an expression of the global fashion.

THE ALLURE OF THE QIPAO

'The way the cheongsam shapes the body is unique. The collar makes the wearer hold her head up high, totally realigning her posture and separating the head from the body; she looks proud, and a little bit up in the clouds. The narrow cut holds the body in, but the slits at the hem liberate the legs. The body is revealed, every movement means more'.²

–Vivienne Tam

Let's think about what is actually considered to be fascinating in the Chinese culture, which are the most stereotypical fashion items that depict the '*Chineseness*' for a Western consumer?

I would like to answer to this question through one of the most remarkable filmmaker's work. Wong Kar Wai's films, that I have already mentioned as artistic director of the Met Gala 2015, create an image of '*Chineseness*' for consumption in a global marketplace, while simultaneously providing a destructive critique of '*Chineseness*' and '*Orientalism*'.³ Indeed, he is aware of the memory of Asia's long history of colonialism, which relegates the '*Chinese*' to an exotic *Other*, who is distinctly apart from the West. Hence, unlike many other filmmakers, he does not propose the idea of an East as intended by Westerners, ancient and exotic. Wong establishes an unique dialogue that portrays a '*Chineseness*' that goes beyond the

¹ SKOV, Lise, "Seeing is Believing: World Fashion and The Hong Kong Young Designers Contest", *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress Body & Culture*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2004, Oxford, Berg, pp. 165-193

² TAM Vivienne, HUANG Martha Elizabeth, *China Chic*, New York, Harper Collins, 2000, p.3

³ PARRIS, Michael, *Wong Kar Wai's 2016: Film as Critical Cultural Dialogue*, in "All Academic Research", 2017, p.3 http://citation.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/9/4/1/8/pages194183/p194183-3.php, Retrieved 28 Sept, 2017

martial-arts films, that according to the author, increase the distance between the East and West. Instead, he believes that it is “the intimate interpersonal encounter that largely dictate a culture.”⁴ This aspect is quite evident in *2046*⁵ in which he tries to distance himself from the Orientalist perspective of his early films,⁶ such as *Chungking Express* (重庆森林).⁷ Another aspect in Wong’s films, that highlights an evident oriental fascination that amazes the Western audience, is represented by “the transitive motion of clothes.”⁸ Both the short film *The Hand*⁹ and *In the Mood for Love* (花样年华)¹⁰ can be considered ‘fashioned’ in many ways. Wong Kar Wai conceives fashion as a piece of art, an expression of visual representation and an interactive form of image-making, thus images are fabricated as if they were textile, not only in the pattern of editing, but also the history of the film can be said to follow the undulation of clothes. So we see how the movement of the fabrics goes along in a “sort of fashionable dance of veils”, that have “the potential to activate a kinaesthetic sense as the motion of her garb, folding and unfolding, made for shifting figures and patterns, whirling in spirals.”¹¹

⁴ PARRIS, Michael, *Wong Kar Wai’s 2016: Film as Critical Cultural Dialogue*, in “All Academic Research”, 2017, pp. 18-19 http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/9/4/1/8/pages194183/p194183-3.php, Retrieved 28 Sept, 2017

⁵ WONG Kar-Wai (directed by), *2046*, 2004, Block 2 Pictures and Jet Tone Productions

⁶ DAO, Ha, *Crouching tiger, Hidden dragon and Chungking Express under the lens of Orientalism*, in “Ha Dao” (Blog), 2016, <https://thuhadao1995.wordpress.com/author/thuhadao/>, Retrieved 28 Sept, 2017

⁷ WONG Kar-Wai (directed by), *Chungking Express* (重庆森林), 1994, Rolling Thunder Pictures, Miramax Films, Ocean Shores Video (HK)

⁸ BRUNO, Giuliana, *Surface, fabric, weave: The Fashioned world of Wong Kar Wai*, in MUNICH Adrienne (editor), *Fashion in Film*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011, p. 90

⁹ WONG Kar-Wai (directed by), *The Hand*, short segment of the anthology film *Eros*, ANTONINI Michelangelo, SODERBERGH Steven, WONG Kar-Wai, 2005, Warner Independent Pictures, Artificial Eye

¹⁰ WONG Kar-Wai (directed by), *In the Mood for Love* (花样年华), 2000, Universal Pictures

¹¹ BRUNO, Giuliana, *Surface, fabric, weave: The Fashioned world of Wong Kar Wai*, in MUNICH Adrienne (editor), *Fashion in Film*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011, p.91

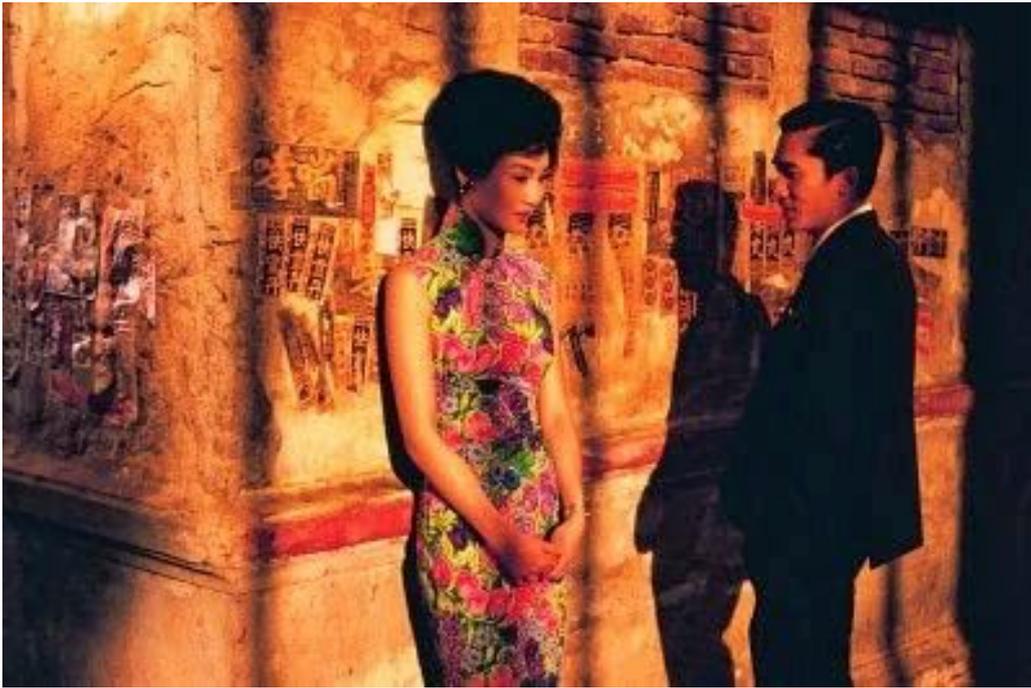


Fig.17. Wong Kar Wai, *In the mood for Love*, feature film, 2000

The main subject of this “transitive motion of clothes” is the *cheongsam*¹², which represents the fashion trend in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan during the 60s. In *The Hand* we see a tailor fabricating a *cheongsam* for a woman he loves, turning the fabrics of the dress in her second skin, and although they cannot be together, the garments still connect them. The story continues, as if following an invisible thread, in *In the Mood for Love*, in which the *cheongsam* tailored on the beautiful Mrs Chan (Maggie Cheung), defines the passing time and the architecture of Hong Kong. In this film the attire is carefully constructed, the change of clothes makes us aware of the existence of time, and when she walks through the streets and alleys, they turn into a catwalk. Above all, in these films the *cheongsam* becomes a cherish souvenir, a pattern of memory that follows the protagonist, down to 2046, as a melancholic memory of a female figure elegantly clad in a retro cheongsam still unrequitedly uncatchable.

¹² *Cheongsam* is cantonese name for the *qipao* (旗袍)

This imagery of a *dragon lady*, a mysterious Chinese woman encased in a tight and sensual *cheongsam* with stunning fabrics, has fuelled both fashion and cinematic stereotypes. For example, *The World of Suzie Wong*,¹³ directed by Richard Quine, brought the *qipao* in the international spotlight and



Fig.18. Anne May Wong in a film scene, 1930



Fig.19. *The World of Suzie Wong* film poster, 1960

also inspired a Chanel *qipao* and gave the start to the trend of the Asian dress, that would become very fashionable during the 60s and then in the 90s.¹⁴ Although *The World of Suzie Wong* has been often criticised for its stereotypical views of Chinese women and racism,¹⁵ it was an effective advertisement for the *qipao* in the West. Besides, also the figure of Anne May Wong, the first Chinese American film star to gain international recognition, perfectly iconised the *qipao* image in the West.¹⁶

So we can remark how films characters, artists, fashion designers have created a fashion icon,

¹³ QUINE Richard (directed by), *The World of Suzie Wong*, 1960, Paramount Pictures

¹⁴ FLORA, Liz, *The End of the Orientalism*, in “The Business of Fashion”, 2015 <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/op-ed-the-end-of-orientalism>, Retrieved 29 Sept, 2017

¹⁵ JAACL *Statement on Katy Perry AMA Performance*, in “Japanese American Citizens League”, 2013, <https://jaacl.org/jacl-statement-on-katy-perry-performance/> Retrieved September 29, 2017

¹⁶ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009. p 114

that have influenced the Western perception of the *qipao* as a national symbol of China.

THE PARIS OF THE EAST

For commentators and writers, such as Audrey Yue, *In the Mood for Love* is an example of 'cinema of style',¹⁷ that has provided the commoditisation of some aspects of Asian popular culture by hinting at the nostalgic revival of the '*Paris of the East*'. The imagination of Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s has always amazed the West, the cosmopolitan but still indigenous atmosphere envelop the city with a sense of thrill and mystery. As instance, it was chosen within other Chinese cities to serve the country as a site of cultural experiment, economic development and social change. In the eyes of both Chinese and foreigners, Shanghai seemed a foreign city:¹⁸ its tall building, electric lights, mechanised transport, large foreign population, young women in fashionable body revealing clothes, were aspects quite singular in China in that period. Besides, at this time the Chinese fashion industry began to take shape and Shanghai was the hub of this development.

"For the first time, people were free to pursue the best of East and West, and that meant combining rich layers of Qing palace style with the most streamlined shapes of European and American designs. Not just the cheongsam, but also the architecture. The sleek skyscraper of the Bank of China on the Shanghai Bund, with its pagoda roof and its palace balustrade treatments; the great dining room of the Peace Hotel, with the latest Art Deco light fixture, a hall of mirrors lined with Lalique glass, and heavy dark Qing tables and chairs. At night the sky lit with neon

¹⁷ PARKER Lauren, ZHANG Hongxing, *China Design Now*, V&A publishing, London, 2008, p. 93

¹⁸ FINNANE Antonia, *Changing clothes in China: fashion, history and nation*, London, Hurst & company, 1988, p.101

advertising- nightclubs like Ciro's to the Empress or Western trademarks like Johnie Walker whiskey or Camel cigarettes framed with Chinese characters."¹⁹

It was in this booming context that the modern *qipao* made its first appearance. *Qipao* means 'banner gown', a one-piece dress with side slits and a curved asymmetrical closure from the neckline to the underarm on the right side, wore by the Manchu women in the Qing dynasty. Chinese novelist Zhang Ailing dated the origin of the modern *qipao* to 1921, when it was first worn by female students and then it became very popular among the young ladies.²⁰ Then later in 1927, the Republican government proposed the *qipao* as a 'national' garment for Chinese women. However the modern *qipao* was different from the Manchu 'banner gown': it still maintained the designed patterns with delicate banding trims, but it also revealed



Fig.20. Yuan Xiutang, A Prosperous City That Never Sleeps, poster, 1930s, Shanghai History Museum

the use of lighter materials, abstract pattern, it was slimmer and shorter in the sleeves, and it was combined with matching accessories. All these aspects reveal a clear Western influence.²¹ Changes in the *qipao's* length, cut, sleeves and fabric have taken place over the years, following the international fashion trends. It became the most prominent urban female fashion of the 1930s and 1940s.

"While flappers in the West dance in Chanel's little black dress, Shanghai's flappers, or so-called 'social flowers', donned the qipao and enjoyed ballroom dancing and

¹⁹ TAM, Vivienne, HUANG, Martha, *China Chic*, New York, Harper Collins, 2000, p.15

²⁰ FINNANE Antonia, *Changing clothes in China: fashion, history and nation*, London, Hurst & company, 1988, p. 141

²¹ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*. New York: Berg, 2009. pp. 106-108

nightclub activities such as drinking whiskey and watching dancing and singing spectacles."²²

The *qipao* can also suggest an *androgynous* image. As a matter of fact, it is also known as *cheongsam*, which in Cantonese also means 'long gown' featured by mandarin collar, asymmetrical closure and side splits, and it was worn by Chinese men.²³ Thus, the Cantonese name seemed to indicate another origin for the *qipao*. Hence, wearing a *qipao* was also considered a symbol of equality between the two genders.

By recalling both the Manchu women's banner gown and the Han men's long gown, along with the evidence of Western influence on its fabrics, construction and accessories, "*the qipao was embedded with modern meaning while still perfectly connected to a traditional frame.*"²⁴

The *qipao* fashion started as an urban phenomenon of the leisure class but by the 1940s it had been adopted by women of all classes, used for a wide range of situation from the daily wear to school uniform or factory uniform and formal wear.

The prominence of the *qipao* stepped out of fashion after the establishment of People's Republic of China (1949), when it was associated to a symbol of the bourgeois, diametrically opposed to the new sense of frugality, hardship and egalitarianism. Around 1956, the government seemed to tolerate the return of the *qipao* as a formal dress and symbol of national identity, used by female diplomats or political leaders's wives, when they visited foreign countries. But this tolerance ended during the Cultural Revolution, when it was attacked and everyone, who had worn it, was publicly humiliated, labeled capitalist and imprisoned.²⁵

²² BAO, Mingxing, 包铭新, *Jindai zhongguo nuzhuang shilu*, 近代中国女装实录 (*A Record of Chinese Women's Wear in Modern Times*), Shanghai, Donghua daxue chubanshe, 2004, p. 194

²³ In Chinese it is translated in *Changsha* 长衫, a Manchu dress, considered the male equivalent of the *qipao*

²⁴ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p. 110

²⁵ For example the case of Wang Guangmei, wife of chairman Liu Shaoqi. She wore the *qipao* and a pearl necklace on a visit to Indonesia. This clothing choice was then used against her during the Cultural Revolution.

However the *qipao* fashion continued outside China, in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, where it was still considered a symbol of Chinese culture identity.



Fig.21. Skeleton print stretch netting cheongsam with black satin piping detail, Vivienne Tam, Fall 2007 collection.

Only after the Open Door policy in the 1980s, when there was the call for a meaningful vestimentary symbol that would mark China in the international stage, the government promote a revival of the *qipao*. But despite the efforts, it only did a minor comeback in Mainland China, considered the near past and the understandable doubts and hesitation that surrounded this fashion choice.²⁶

Nonetheless, Westerners already associated the *qipao* with Chineseness, becoming a source of inspiration for fashion designers like John Galliano, Valentino, Ungaro, Jean Paul Gaultier. As instance, many reinvention of the *qipao* filled the fashion runways of 1990s, by maintaining its essential aspects: the mandarin collar, a body-conforming silhouette, side slits,

asymmetrical closure and frog fasteners. Also Chinese born fashion designers, such as Vivienne Tam and Anna Sui, proposed the *qipao* in their collection and by doing so, they reinforced the connection between the *qipao* and a Chinese identity in the West.

“When I design a cheongsam, I want it to be clean translation of the dress’s essence, almost an abstraction, beautiful, but without restriction. I’ve made it in stretch fabric, unconstructed, hugging the body with no darts. The collar is still there, but it doesn’t have to stiff upright against the neck; it can be folded down into

²⁶ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p. 112

*points or it can stretch. It's fun to experiment with the basic elements... to make a new slit where the side closure would be, use a zipper instead of frog fastenings, find ways of liberating the shape."*²⁷

So we can see how the cult of a romantic nostalgia about the *qipao* and the Shanghai of the 30s still permeated fashion world, cinema screen and the wider cultural and commercial economies. For example, in the modern Shanghai, the luxury retail developments along the Bund, trading houses, hotels, shopping districts such as Xintiandi, took on designers to create a modern and hybrid design style on the basis of the iconography of an imagined Shanghai of the 30s.²⁸

MODERN CHINESE CHIC CHINESE LUXURY BRANDS WITH GLOBAL AMBITION

Shanghai Tang is the best of 5000 years
of Chinese tradition exploding into the 21st century

–David Tang

This cult of romantic nostalgia of the Chinese glorious past has characterised also the Chinese fashion world, creating form of what is called '*self-exoticism*'. It can be considered as an expression of the *Orientalism*, that we have already analysed in the first chapter, but instead of this one, the *self-exoticism* or *self-orientalizing* is made by Asians. They reinterpret, produce and use images that is presumed to be part of their own heritage, but by doing so, "*they would appear to be remaking themselves to match Western fantasies of the Oriental Other.*"²⁹ Indeed, the process

²⁷ TAM, Vivienne, HUANG, Martha, *China Chic*, New York, Harper Collins, 2000, p.274

²⁸ PARKER Lauren, ZHANG Hongxing, *China Design Now*, London, V&A publishing, 2008, p. 93

²⁹ LESHKOWICH, Ann Marie and JONES, Carla, "What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?", *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, Volume 7, Issue 3/4, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2003, pp. 281–300



Fig.22. Shanghai Tang Fall 2013
Ads by Richard Bernardin

of self-exoticism is quite delicate and uncertain: it internalises the stereotypes projected by the West, with the risk to reveal the apparent truth of those claims. Nonetheless, it also moves the Asian products closer to the global discourses, thus the product will be easily welcomed in the global market.

A case of *self-exoticism* in the fashion realm is represented by the renowned brand Shanghai Tang, which promotes itself as “*the first and only Chinese luxury brand with global presence*” with the mission to be “*the global ambassador of contemporary Chinese Chic.*”³⁰

Shanghai Tang provides a nostalgic notion of modern, by featuring a clear quotation of the *Paris of the East's* retro glamour, blending iconic elements of Chinese culture with the current globetrotting trends, providing the image of a modern Chinese lifestyle. Shanghai Tang's success depends on its DNA, based on the attention to

³⁰ BORGERSON, Janet, SCHROEDER, Jonathan, WU, Zhiyan, *The Brand Culture of Shanghai Tang: An Aspiring Global Brand*, in “Academia”, 2013, <https://www.academia.edu/3657489/> . Retrieved 29 Sept, 2017

details and craftsmanship inherited from Shanghainese tailors, that express the evident sense of *Chineseness*.

Not only the clothes and the accessories, but also elements such as its Chinese name (上海滩), which refers to the Chinese name of the 'bund', the famous Shanghai riverfront promenade and iconic 1930s landmark, its logo in traditional calligraphy, the colour palette used, and the store decoration, all these aspects enhance the brand's image, as conjunction between Chinese history, culture and contemporary fashion.³¹

The fashion label was founded by sir David Tang³² in Hong Kong in 1994. He created the image of prestige and luxury that features Shanghai Tang, by emphasising the quality and craftsmanship of his products, made of the best of Chinese materials, ranging from luxurious Chinese silk to the finest Mongolian cashmere and precious Chinese jade. The key characteristic of this brand is the specific symbolic meaning of their products and details, that stress out the Chinese roots, for example the Chinese zodiac, phoenix, the peony flower, bamboo, clouds, calligraphy, *yuan bao* etc.

However despite the great effort of sir David Tang, the concept of luxury was still related to the West and therefore "*Western luxury brands were generally perceived as being more luxurious and prestigious.*"³³ However the label had a discreet success among the Western tourists, who bought clothes and accessories as a 'souvenir-like' must-haves and for the exotic taste. Moreover, the attempt to expand the business abroad failed, as instance in New York it was a financial disaster. The main reasons were that the interest of American consumers for the brand was overestimated, the style of Shanghai Tang was confusing for customers, because there wasn't any consistency in the style of the product offerings, which included both pre-revolutionary and Cultural Revolution styles and the post-modern representation of China's heritage. It was also difficult to justify the high price of those Chinese products, when much cheaper options were readily available in the

³¹ *Shanghai Tang website*, <https://www.shanghaitang.com>, Retrieved 23 Sept, 2017

³² A British-Educated businessman, descendent from a family of refugees from Shanghai, who formed a tailor guild

³³ HEINE, Klaus, PHAN, Michel, "A Case Study of Shanghai Tang: How to Build a Chinese Luxury Brand", *Asian Marketing Journal*, Vol.15 No. 01, 2013, p.4

local Chinatown and finally the choice of retail space on Madison Avenue location was too expensive.³⁴ Moreover, despite its strong brand DNA, the brand did not generate enough repeated sales, and over the years the company cumulated heavy debts and became unprofitable. So after nineteen months David Tang ended closing the retail shop in New York.

What's interesting to note is that, despite the success among Westerners, the brand first failed to reach the domestic market...Why a brand featuring a number of significant icons and symbols from the vast lexicon of Chinese culture and history wasn't appreciate by Chinese?

Most of all, we have to consider the attention Chinese people have given to Western brands and to the concept of luxury. At the end of the 1970s there was an evident promotion of the new friendly relationship between China and Western countries, that was aimed at overcoming the deep sense of humiliation and resentment towards the West, that were a result of the historical background.³⁵ Despite the initial confusion and hesitation, as more and more Chinese have the chance to see personally the "*comparative splendour of capitalist material culture*"³⁶, the West became a land of wealth, plenty and modernity, the idea of foreignness became something sensational, worth to imitate. Everything Western became popular, thus the faith in local fashion and lifestyle faded away, leading to the rejection of Chinese culture, practices and beliefs throughout the Chinese society. In this context, even if the concept of luxury seemed odd and foreign to many, everyone understood that fashion was tied up with the wealthy foreigners.

³⁴ HEINE, Klaus, PHAN, Michel, "A Case Study of Shanghai Tang: How to Build a Chinese Luxury Brand", *Asian Marketing Journal*, Vol.15 No. 01, 2013, p. 15

³⁵ Century of humiliation (百年国耻), period during which China has suffered from consecutive wars and chaos, started from 1839 with the Opium wars, followed by the unequal treaties, the Sino-Japanese wars, down to the 1949. During this period, China lost all except the last of the wars it fought (World War II), often forced to give major concessions to the great powers in the subsequent treaties.

³⁶ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p. 164

Since Pierre Cardin has first introduced Western fashion lexicon to Chinese,³⁷ other brands started moving the business to China, where everything Western was considered special and outstanding. However these foreign brands also encountered great challenges, due to cultural misunderstandings. For example, when Giorgio Armani opened his store in Beijing, he decided to use a red lacquer Chinese-style door for the front of the store and it was a big mistake: Chinese wanted the Armani they saw in Europe, the one they saw in TV or on magazines. Their desire for luxury brand is strictly related to the idea of *foreignness* and not to China's traditional past in any way.

In this panorama, during the 1980s,³⁸ there was also a government conscious promotion of the *qipao* and other indigenous dress, but hesitation and doubts characterised this late revival of *qipao* fashion. After failing to come back, it finally became a standard uniform among airline hostess and waitresses, thus on one hand its attraction as a fashionable dress for younger generation was reduced drastically and on the other hand for the older generation its adoption was still considered a *taboo*. Moreover its formality was increasingly incompatible with contemporary fashion and for this reason, outmoded.³⁹ Along with the *qipao*, it was also suggested the comeback of other Chinese traditional garments, such as the *changshan* or the *Zhongshan suit*,⁴⁰ but they completely looked out of place in a modernised China and immediately replaced with Western suit.

Hence, Shanghai Tang's designs were too antiquated for Chinese, as Raphael Le Masne de Chermont, Shanghai Tang's executive chairman, stated "*everything was too costume-y. It was like Western people dressing like Chinese,*" and Chinese were "*almost embarrassed to even set foot in the shops!*"⁴¹

³⁷ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p. 166

³⁸ The government sought a vestimentary as a national symbol and chose the *qipao*

³⁹ WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion: From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p.112

⁴⁰ 中山装, also called Sun Zhongshan, after Sun Yat-San and later as the Mao suit, after Mao Zedong. It serves as an uniform for diplomats.

⁴¹ *China's first luxury brand battles to shed cultural clichés*, in "China Economic Review", 2014 <http://www.chinaeconomicreview.com/shanghai-tang-struggle-heritage-history-chinese-consumer-luxury> Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

In 2001, Tang sold the company to the Swiss luxury conglomerate, Richemont Group, that owns also other renowned fashion brands such as Piaget, Cartier and Montblanc. Raphael Le Masne de Chermont, appointed to lead the company, chose a new strategic path to develop the potentialities of Shanghai Tang designs, in order to appeal not only to Westerners but also to Chinese consumers. The management group recast the brand as *a modern Chinese luxury lifestyle brand*, including not only clothes, but also home accessories and curiosities.

They wanted to make the brand more wearable and contemporary to global fashion, while still showcasing a modern Chinese lifestyle enriched by traditional cultural codes.⁴² Joanne Ooi had served the company as creative director for seven years, creating new collections that were no more exotic or ethnic Chinese. They chose to move away from the nostalgic feel and the very traditional 1930's Chinese style to a more contemporary modern Chinese design "*while still keeping the bright and bold colours that made the brand unique.*"⁴³ They wanted to attract Chinese domestic market and also distance themselves from the souvenir shop idea, that had been characterising Shanghai Tang brand image in the West.

The new management group made great effort in building brand awareness with new advertising and social media campaigns. For instance, they released "City Chic" a smartphone app, that showcases the latest collection and the most stylish location to visit in Beijing and Shanghai, and opened a web blog on modern Chinese chic that talks about anything that relates to modern Chinese chic around the world. For the same purpose, they opened "Shanghai Tang Café" in their flagship store in Shanghai and in 2009 they launched the "Mandarin Collar Society",⁴⁴ a club with the goal to promote an elegant Chinese-inspired style for men, supporting Shanghai Tang

⁴² BORGERSON, Janet, SCHROEDER, Jonathan, WU, Zhiyan, *The Brand Culture of Shanghai Tang: An Aspiring Global Brand*, in "Academia", 2013, <https://www.academia.edu/3657489/> . Retrieved 29 Sept, 2017

⁴³ HEINE, Klaus, PHAN, Michel, "A Case Study of Shanghai Tang: How to Build a Chinese Luxury Brand", *Asian Marketing Journal*, Vol.15 No. 01, 2013, p. 15

⁴⁴ CRAPTON, Thomas, *Cut Ties: Join the Mandarin Collar Society*, in "Thomas Crampton" (blog), 2007, <http://thomascrampton.com/uncategorized/cut-ties-join-the-mandarin-collar-society/> Retrieved 23 Sept, 2017

collection, against neckties fashion. They also improved the customer service, by training the boutique sales team to provide the most memorable experience, and above all, they opened new retail stores around the world and in particular in major Asian airports such as Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai and Singapore. Now there are thirty two *Shanghai Tang* stores in Asia, Europe and in the US. Furthermore, thanks to these new strategic arrangements, Shanghai Tang's sales have grown considerably. The growth has depended also in a shift of its customer base away from Western tourists towards Chinese customers.⁴⁵ Today Chinese are the first customers of *Shanghai Tang*: many appreciate the functional combination between modern and traditional codes, other perceive the brand as a ladder for professional and personal success. Both non-Chinese and Chinese consumers enjoy the possibility to establish a cosmopolitan identity through this brand stylistic features: for non-Chinese, it provides a touch of exotic to their style and for Chinese, it expresses a Chinese identity in an international environment.

A recent released information announced that this year on June Richemont Group sold Shanghai Tang to the Italian businessman, Alessandro Bastagli, chairman of A. Moda⁴⁶, Lineapiù Italia Spa and Finalba SpA.⁴⁷

In order to stay on the top of the market, Shanghai Tang needs to continue to develop and redefine its brand ideology, blending Chinese cultural symbols and distinctive detailing with the modern and international aesthetic codes.

The future challenges for Shanghai Tang will be how to capture a larger share of the fast-growing Chinese luxury market. For this purpose, the company has to open more stores and invest more capital in the domestic market, which has become the leading force in the global market and the turning point to gain success for every brand.

⁴⁵ MOVIUS, Lisa, *Shanghai Tang Ready to Make Move in China*, Dehradun, Icfai University press, 2009, p.8

⁴⁶ A clothes manufacturer based in Florence, founded in 1978, that produces and allocates Dimensions Danza, Everlast, Empire and Virtue Palestre. Among its clients there is Versace.

⁴⁷ THOMPSON, Jennifer, *Richemont sells Chinese luxury brand Shanghai Tang*, in "Financial Times", 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/6329c9b7-418f-3383-a964-590495392cdf> Retrieved 24 Sept, 2017

Beside Shanghai Tang, there are others brands that feature Chinese culture heritage as a hallmark of their design. For example, Blanc de Chine is a brand established in 1986, whose name refers to “*the admiration of the 18th century on the purity of the Chinese white porcelain originating from the Province of Fujian, it symbolises a time when the West was looking to the east for beautiful and luxurious creation.*”⁴⁸ They seek inspirations from the Chinese culture and philosophies and modernising them into timeless creations “*so ancient, yet so modern*” (串古連今, 經典永恆). The female collection is based on the principle of simplicity, harmony, purity, sensuality, functionality and comfort; while the male collection, labeled as ‘*blue de Chine*’ is inspired by martial arts and characterised by an active, versatile, tenacious spirit, aimed at the functionality and easy care.

Furthermore, also Shiatzy Chen, established by Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia in Taipei in 1978, has created a “*neo-Chinese chic*”⁴⁹ that features a traditional Chinese craftsmanship and blends together East and West appeal. Traditional embroidery and modern aesthetic details are the signature of this brand that has been often defined as ‘*The Chanel of Taiwan*’.

NE·TIGER is another Chinese luxury brand, established by Zhang Zhifeng in 1991. This brand promotes the revival of Chinese culture and their design philosophy is “*integrate antiquity to the present.*”⁵⁰ Among their creations we can remark several evening dresses, Chinese-style wedding dresses, and in particular *Huafu*,⁵¹ a kind of *haute couture* dress, which is one of the most innovative product released by NE·TIGER, presented as a unique clothing image in contemporary China. The *Huafu* is presented as Chinese national dress and its design concept is based on different principles: ‘courtesy’ as the soul, ‘Jin (traditional royal fabric)’ as the material,

⁴⁸ *Blanc de Chine website*, <http://www.blancdechine.com/blanc/en/background.html> Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

⁴⁹ *Shiatzy Chen website*, <https://www.shiatzychen.com/en/story> Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

⁵⁰ *NE·TIGER website*, <http://www.netiger.com/en/Brand-culture.html> Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

⁵¹ “China is called *Xia* because of its great ceremonies and called *Hua* because of its beautiful clothes.” *Huaxia Dress*, also called *Huafu*, is China’s national dress that represents the spirit of Chinese people.

'embroidery' as the handicraft, 'national colours' as base of the expression, and 'Huafu' as the symbol of China.⁵² In particular, NE·TIGER promotes itself as heir of Chinese civilisation, by introducing in its design also Chinese minorities textiles heritage for the representation of Chinese modern chic.

These brands are all quite successful in the domestic market but they didn't manage to gain the same international attention as Shanghai Tang has done.

Concepts, such as *heritage* and *craftsmanship* are becoming the hallmark of many strategic design choices in the global market, not just among Chinese brands. This strategy has been supported also by governments, that recognise the growing importance acquired by the culture in the new global economy. For instance, *culture industry*, to which belongs fashion, is becoming meaningful to the economic balance-sheet of the country and this has led to an *economic patriotism*,⁵³ above all in the luxury market.



Fig.23. An example of NE·TIGER's Huafu at the opening show of China Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2013 in Beijing

However, today in the era of globalisation, the fashion that features national characteristics has become an expression of the *creolisation* of the world, the convergence of different cultures, that excludes the hegemony of a culture over the others, and also rejects the theory of the unchanging nature of the local traditions.

⁵² Interview: NE·TIGER Founder Discusses History, Future Of Luxury In China, in "Jing Daily", 2010, <https://jingdaily.com/interview-ne-tiger-founder-discusses-luxurys-history-future-in-china/> Retrieved 29 Sept, 2017

⁵³ SEGRE REINACH, Simona, *Un mondo di mode - Il vestire globalizzato*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 2011, p.28

CHAPTER 4 CHINESE FASHION GOES GLOBAL

THE GLOBAL WEAR

For centuries, the main characteristics of Chinese clothing had been a smooth and neat surface, a structured silhouette, and defined edge lines, which were associated with the disciplined, restrained, and conforming behaviours that featured the Chinese culture. Clothing items such as the *Mao suit*, the *qipao*, and the *changshan* emphasised the formality, that had been the hallmark of Chinese aesthetics. On the other hand, casual wear, sweatshirts, T-shirts and blue jeans lacked a defined structured look, and often used textured and soft materials. Above all, the spirit behind casual wear and most street fashions was carefree, easygoing, and individualistic, values that were quite antithetic to the Chinese culture.

However, the beginning of China's market economy in the 1980s brought new identity schemes and freedom of self-construction, self-expression and new lifestyle associated with modernity.¹ Thus, China met the global capitalism, that led to an improvement in personal incomes and a consequent growth in consumerism with a boom in the use of communications technologies. The development of television and the internet has been particularly crucial in influencing youth identities and culture. After the controversies over fashion and culture of the 1980s, people finally came to accept new ideas as well as more casual and individualistic expression in dress.² The impact of modern Western values had an evident implication also in Chinese everyday wear. For instance, as foreign fashions took on, a new informality became the norm. But adopting these fashions not only changed Chinese appearance, it also signified a change in life attitude and behaviours. At the time, fashion critic, Wang Weiming, questioned whether street culture could thrive in a city with a highly controlled social and political structure that was deeply immersed in Confucian

¹ KIPNIS, B. Andrew, JACKA, Tamara, SARGESON, Sally, *Contemporary China: Society and social change*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 182

² WU Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, pp. 170-171

culture.³ After all, only a few years earlier state-owned stores had refused to sell jeans because of their foreign appearance and the rebellious spirit they expressed. But by the mid 1990s, all stores were selling jeans and brands like Puma and Lee. The majority of the younger generation in the 1990s embraced global brand names without any of the government restrictions, that marked their parents first encounters with Western fashion in the late 70s and early 80s. “They took pride in owning popular labels like the Hong Kong brands Giordano, Bossini and Baleno; the German brands Adidas and Puma; and American brands Nike, Lee, and Esprit.”⁴ However, at first, the market remained immature, and many were unable to differentiate various foreign brand names.⁵ In this period, all the domestic fashion brands adopted an English or French name as a marketing strategy to take advantage on the prestige associated with foreign brand names. But the effective ad campaigns and promotional events of global brands, started to make brand wearers aware of the hierarchy of the brand names, which were differentiated not only by price but also by brand image. It was only then that Chinese consumers separated casual brands from luxury brands like Armani, Prada or Chanel. However, since casual wear brand were more affordable, they dominated urban youth fashion in China.

Thus, in very short time China moved from a supposedly classless, equitable poverty to an increasingly stratified, class conscious society. The great disparity in economic and social standing between urban centres and rural villages has made fashion itself a luxury for the majority of Chinese, and *Chinese fashion* is still in many ways Chinese *urban* fashion.

³ WANG Weiming, “Jingsheng qeshi, shui neng gei chengshi wenhua zhuru xin de huoli?” “精神缺失, 谁能给城市文化注入新的活力?” (*Lacking Spirit: Who Could Give City Culture New Energy?*), *Shanghai Style*, 1995, p.12-13

⁴ WU, Juanjuan, *Chinese fashion : From Mao to now*, New York, Berg, 2009, p. 170

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 170-171

CHINA'S CLOTHING INDUSTRY

Today China's demand for fashion items and accessories has continued to expand and it is expected to become more and more sophisticated, since brand awareness and the global fashion influence have increased steadily. In 2008, sportswear was the most sought-after item in the Chinese clothing industry, even though Chinese consumers play sports only once per week. However, today there is a new trend among Chinese consumers, that are moving towards a lifestyle where there are more occasions demanding formal or fashionable attire. This of course creates new opportunities for a wider range of domestic and foreign apparel brands.

By analysing the situation of clothing market in China, is quite clear that the high-end portion is dominated by foreign brands, such as Giorgio Armani, Cerruti 1881, Hugo Boss, Dunhill, Chanel, Dior, Ermenegildo Zegna and Salvatore Ferragamo.

The middle and low end of the market are dominated by a mix of foreign and domestic brands. Overseas brands, such as Levi's, Lee, Jack & Jones and Tommy Hilfiger, still play a major role in the segment. However, most of the casual wear in China is manufactured locally. As instance, China's clothing industry still possesses great competitive advantage in terms of labour cost, lead time, vertical integration of the industry, the variety of products, and political stability.⁶

Today a decisive force in the contemporary fashion landscape is represented by *fast fashion*. The rapid development of fast fashion, despite a deceleration of the economy, also reflects the consumption characteristics in modern China. The low-priced fashion market is growing fast: people demand not only low prices but also better presentation of fashion, function and quality. The new brands of fashion market require high quality, special designs, fast delivery and reasonable prices.⁷ So in order to maintain their competitiveness, many domestic market, such as Nouqi or Peacebird, have just started their first steps towards the fast fashion model, that

⁶ International Trade Centre(ITC), *The Chinese Market for Clothing*, Geneva, 2011, p.2 http://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Exporters/Sectors/Food_and_agri_business/Cotton/AssetPDF/China%20final%20technical%20document%20for%20print1.pdf Retrieved 29 Sept, 2017

⁷ *ibid* p. 36

have been used by brands such as Zara, H&M or Forever21, that have gained high attention in China. However this model requires strong design capacity and highly effective global supply chain management, which is the core of its business model and cannot be easily copied.⁸ Indeed, Chinese domestic brands have still to improve this business model to compete with the foreign brands.

However, these domestic brands are also improving themselves continuously and compared to foreign ones, they still enjoy a ready network of trading partners and are actively trying to upgrade to international standards through more investments in R&D or JV establishment.⁹ They also know very well the local business environment, customer preferences and have a strong connection with different sales channels.¹⁰

So, in reality also domestic brands have the potentiality to expand even faster. For example, Metersbonwe, which has ranked first in sales in the Chinese casual wear market, was founded by Zhou Chengjian in 1995. By using franchisees and building a strong team of French and local designers, the company grew by more than 30% every year. The brand quickly catered to the needs of a young and increasingly fashion conscious consumer base. By focusing on good quality and reasonable prices, the company gained increasing popularity. In 2003, the company invited Taiwanese star Jay Chou to become the brand's image ambassador, and as a result, MetersBonwe became the best selling brand for the year 2004, evaluated by the China National Garments Association. Today, Metersbonwe expressed ambitions to expand into Western capitals such as New York and London, although this has yet to happen.¹¹ Besides MetersBonwe, there are other domestic brands that are quite

⁸ International Trade Centre(ITC), *The Chinese Market for Clothing*, Geneva, 2011, p.36 http://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Exporters/Sectors/Food_and_agri_business/Cotton/AssetPDF/China%20final%20technical%20document%20for%20print1.pdf Retrieved 29 Sept, 2017

⁹ *Textile and Apparel Market in China*, in "EU SME Centre", 2011, https://www.ccilc.pt/sites/default/files/eu_sme_centre_report_tamarket_in_china_2017.pdf Retrieved 20 Sept, 2017

¹⁰ WONG Billy, *China's Garment market*, in "HKTDC Research 经贸研究", 2017 <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/China-Consumer-Market/China-s-Garment-Market/ccm/en/1/1X000000/1X002L72.htm> Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

¹¹ *The future of Chinese fashion*, in "Translate Media", 2016 <https://www.translatemedia.com/us/blog-usa/the-future-of-chinese-fashion/> Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017

successful, such as ZUCZUG and JNBY, which has succeed expanding overseas with branches in New Zealand and Canada.

SUCCESSFUL ACHIEVEMENTS

“We are finished here in the West – our moment has come and gone. This is all about China, India and Russia. It is the beginning of the reawakening of cultures that have been historically worshipped luxury and haven’t had it for so long.”¹²

-Tom Ford

In recent time everyone could have heard with surprise or even worry about Chinese gaining market positions in the international market, in many different fields. It is a growing trend, and it has, of course, included fashion world.

As an instance, V-GRASS, which has been engaged in design, production and sale of women’s apparel products since 1997, has developed its marketing strategy in Shanghai, Nanjing and Seoul, by focusing on the manufacturing of high quality silk, wool and *yunjin*.¹³ According to vice president Tao Weimin, “*this is now a period of consolidation and adjustment*’ of their industry and it is the time for “*a dominant local fashion apparel company to emerge,*” and their goal is to be that company.¹⁴ To gain such result in 2016 the company has bought from E-Land Group, a famous South Korean fast-fashion brand with a good positioning in the market, Teenie Weenie. Then, this year V-GRASS opened a boutique in the ‘*Quadrilatero della Moda*’, Via Montenapoleone fashion district, a high-class shopping district in the centre of Milan, that features numerous boutiques and related retail outlets. By placing its first

¹² DANA, Thomas, *Deluxe: How luxury Lost Its Luster*, New York, Penguin Press, 2007

¹³ An intricately weaved silk fabric traditionally worn only by Chinese royalty

¹⁴ BLOOMBERG, *V-Grass Fashion Outlines Plan to Rule Chinese Fashion World*, in “The Business of Fashion”, 2016, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/v-grass-fashion-outlines-plan-to-rule-chinese-fashion-world> Retrieved 27 Sept, 2017



Fig.24. Items from V-Grass's 2016 collection

overseas V-GRASS boutique in this district, where we can find most of the world's major fashion houses, the aspiration of the company is clear. They already envision themselves as a luxury fashion company and are looking for international recognition. Supported by the ex-designer of Valentino fashion house, they have reinvented the brand image, and now V-GRASS has planned to

become “*the Valentino of Chinese fashion world.*”¹⁵ They are certain that Chinese apparel industry is strengthening, and they are determined to make a strong imprint to this process.

Beside V-GRASS, as an example of Chinese company that has made to position itself in an emblematic place such as Milan fashion district, there is another famous brand led by Chinese in this area. I'm referring to the case of Krizia, an Italian fashion label founded by Mariuccia Mandelli in 1954, which together with Versace and Armani created the Italian fashion system. In 2014 the famous Italian brand was passing through some financial trouble, and Shenzhen Marisfrolg Fashion founded in 1993 by Zhu Chongyun stepped in and bought the company. Shenzhen Marisfrolg Fashion is among the 100 most famous Chinese fashion brands with the highest quotation in the *prêt-à-porter* market with more than 400 selling points in the main shopping centres of China, Korea, Singapore and Macao. Zhu Chongyun, who according to Forbes is among the 25 most influent entrepreneurs of the

¹⁵ RODDOLO, Enrica, *V-Grass prende casa in via della Spiga*
A Milano la maison di Shanghai, in “Corriere della Sera”, 2017, http://www.corriere.it/moda/news/17_maggio_15/v-grass-prende-casa-via-spiga-milano-maison-shanghai-48257dae-398f-11e7-8def-9f1d8d7aa055.shtml?refresh_ce-cp Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

international fashion business,¹⁶ is now the new chairwoman and artistic director of Krizia in 2015.¹⁷ The Chinese has great creative plans for Krizia: although the heating up competition from bigger companies, Zhu Chongyun is determined to reinforce the



Fig. 25. Zhu Chongyun, the new chairwoman of Krizia

myth of Krizia in the global market, by repeating the success of its glorious past. She has always said that they want to maintain the traditions that have made the brand memorable in the Italian fashion history. So Krizia's identity will not change in substance, but it will simply be updated to a contemporary sensibility and a global perspective.¹⁸ The company forecasts to open new boutiques in China and in the most fashionable cities in Europe, Japan and USA. The brand is still highly engaged with idea of *Italianness*, but with a consumer base that is constantly increasing its brand awareness, they will have to develop an authentic story telling, new contents and collaborations, that have to be

coherent with the story of the brand and the recent acquisition.¹⁹ If the brand follows this plan, it is probably that Krizia will return to be one of the main player in the global scenario.

¹⁶ JADELUCA, Paola, *Zhu Chuongyun la regina del lusso: "Così rilancerò Krizia tra Milano e Shanghai"*, in "La Repubblica", 2016, http://www.repubblica.it/economia/affari-e-finanza/2016/09/26/news/zhu_chuongyun_la_regina_del_lusso_cos_rilancer_krizia_tra_milano_e_shanghai-148600887/ Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

¹⁷ Today the creative director is Cristiano Segnanfreddo

¹⁸ AFP, *Chinese designer Zhu charms Milan fashion world with plans for Krizia*, in "South China Morning Post", 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-watches/article/1597455/dont-worry-im-keeping-it-italian-says-new-chinese-owner> Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

¹⁹ CRIVELLI, Giulia, *Clemenza (ceo): «Krizia sarà il più internazionale tra i brand italiani»*, in "Il Sole 24ore", 2017, <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/moda/2017-03-29/clemenza-ceo-krizia-sara-piu-internazionale--brand--italiani--184827.shtml?uud=AEg1zlv> Retrieved 25 Sept, 2017

Today, in the world of fashion luxury there are two main multinational conglomerates that represent the piers of the fashion system, LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE and Kering, which are both French. However, considering the rate at which big Chinese multinationals are acquiring many famous and emblematic brands all over the world, we cannot deny the possibility in the future of a Chinese multinational conglomerate with the same importance of *LVMH*. With Chinese consumer goods manufacturers such as Haier and Lenovo establishing themselves as household names in the West, despite this once seemed impossible, it is logical to think that large fashion retailers would attempt the same.

CONCLUSIONS

Choosing fashion to talk about Chinese world was not a casual choice. China has been always perceived as a fascinating and mysterious country. The wonderful and exotic *Catai* described by Marco Polo, the beautiful Shanghai ladies wearing *qipao* on the *yuefenpai* of the *Paris of the East*, or even Mao's *army* of workers clad in dark uniforms, are all imageries that over time have mesmerised the West. Nowadays we are still observing China with curiosity and sometimes worry. Its society changed completely in a very short time, and the impact of these changes had many effects on the global scenario.

Today, everywhere we hear of the role that China has acquired in the recent decades. However, the recognition of Chinese fashion on the international stage is still underway. The strengthening of Chinese fashion within and outside its borders is part of a bigger project of constructing a Chinese aesthetic culture, which is a priority to complete the economic growth.

China is now striving to distance itself from the image of *Factory of the world*, and be recognised as *Innovator of the world*. In order to reach this goal, it has promoted a more value-added production, an increasing brand awareness and it is continuing to improve its expertise. Despite three decades of isolation and a consequent atmosphere of hesitation and doubt, Chinese has made to succeed in creating, in a very short time, a fashion world, characterised by a quite *intricate aesthetic identity, multifaceted and multi sourced*. Moreover China's textile industry is still growing at a steady rate and it seems to dominate the global apparel sector, as a producer and a consumer. Today, besides the renowned Western brands, more and more often we can find Chinese brands or designers, that have learnt very fast how to approach the global market, looking forward to gain success and recognition on the international stage. Therefore, I think that thanks to many innovative and brilliant minds endeavouring to show the world a long lost face of contemporary China, the West will soon settle into the idea that China is a modern country capable of creating authentic *beauty*.

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