

## **The new Shanghai *Xiaojie*: Chinese fashion identities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the key debates in contemporary fashion marketing is the local–global binary; the twenty-first-century fashion industry is increasingly international, both in terms of production and consumption, yet there is no consensus on whether globalization inevitably homogenizes cultural experiences or allows for heterogeneity. The authors argue that the historical concept of chinoiserie has informed Chinese fashion identities, and seek to challenge this perception by presenting alternative perspectives on the importance of Chinese heritage and culture to those currently working in fashion. The disrupted nature of China's fashion history, the persistence of orientalist imaginings of her past, and the strength of China's manufacturing industry are all factors that contribute to the complexities in defining contemporary Chinese fashion. This article is written to provide an introduction to modern Chinese fashion through an exploration of how contemporary fashion creatives understand the influence of culture on their work, and how their understandings of Chineseness and the East–West binary impact their work. Whilst this is necessarily a snapshot view of the Chinese fashion industry the article confirms a belief in the importance of cultural identity on creative practices and shows how contemporary Chinese fashion can escape prescribed and restricted fashion identities.

### **KEYWORDS**

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

## ARTICLE

October 2013 saw London's V&A museum host 'Masterpieces of Chinese Painting', the most extensive exhibition of Chinese art since the 1930s, reminding London's culture vultures of the extent and depth of Chinese creative arts. The exhibition covered the years 700 to 1900 and explored the transition from painting as craft to high art within Chinese society, how the anonymous painters of the eighth century were transformed into scholar painters of the latter period. Will the twenty-first century see China's fashion industry – a key driver of the country's industrialization, urbanization and international standing – moving in a comparable direction? As fashion and creative industry commentators have been predicting for several years now: moving from 'Made in China' to 'Designed in China?' Fashion journalist Marion Hume (2011) argues that because international fashion brands thrive on their ability to build on the 'foundations of national success', the high profile of China's counterfeit goods market presents a barrier around issues of provenance for China's aspiring fashion brands. Outsourcing clothing manufacture to China 'provided for an unprecedented knowledge transfer from the Western world in terms of design processes and business models' (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012: 76) and a key issue for the twenty-first-century Chinese fashion industry results from its huge success as a garment manufacturing hub and its latent associations with production not creation; its fashion identity as that of follower not creator – especially at the luxury market level (Tungate 2009).

Although Miyoshi and Haroorunianm (1989: 117) remind us that 'The Orient is neither a cultural, religious or linguistic unity', the process of categorization is a natural phenomenon and western definitions have created and perpetuate a homogenized *Chineseness* constructed in the mirror of the Occident; by assigning ethnicity to material culture and bestowing authenticity on certain images and symbols, assumptions of a static

Chinese culture are reinforced (Sakai 2000). At a time when 'authenticity' is a key driver for fashion brands (Tungate 2009) what is the modern Chinese fashion industry's response? Will they embrace a new design aesthetic, or reclaim their mythical heritage – a fashion 'saudade'?<sup>1</sup> And is it possible to reclaim Chinese imagery without becoming complicit in cultural essentialism?

China has as many comparable traditions, historical and cultural features, as the western fashion capitals of Europe and North America, yet fashion theorists argue that China's political history – whereby the government attempted to obliterate pre-revolutionary Chinese identity, history and tradition through the destruction of historical relics – disrupted Chinese design history, making the current development of a national aesthetic identity and the resulting definitions of what comprises contemporary Chinese fashion design extremely complex questions (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012). The historical concept of chinoiserie has informed Chinese fashion identities and this article explores contemporary Chinese fashion designers' understandings of Chineseness and how this is manifest in their designs.

Thus, Ma Ke 马可 is representative of a critically acclaimed established fashion designer creating a new model of Chinese fashion business inspired by artisan crafts and simplicity of design in her main line Exception, whilst addressing the ethical challenges of fashion production and consumption with her sustainable brand Wuyong. Huishan Zhang is a notable emerging fashion designer, one whose cultural heritage has been made evident to himself through his experiences studying abroad in the western fashion education system, and a designer who feels an obligation to transform current perceptions of 'made in China'. Liu Wen 刘雯 is one of the world's top fashion models and her inclusion allows a discussion of fashion marketing's use of Chinese models as an entry strategy for western brands into the Mainland but also to highlight how differing beauty ideals claim cultural authenticity, a theme explored in the work of the fashion photographer Chen Man 陈漫. Chen Man's work acknowledges the position of China within a predominantly western fashion system and she

states a deliberate use of the East–West binary and claims to work from a truly Chinese perspective whilst adopting western techniques; her inclusion in this discussion recognizes her commercial and artistic success and is also because – in common with the other exemplars included – her stated aim is to produce modern representations of China. *Vogue* magazine is recognized internationally as an arbiter of style and Angelica Cheung 张宇, *Vogue China*'s editor and a key fashion professional, has identified her role as educating the Chinese fashion consumer and promoting Chinese fashion through the pages of the Mainland's dominant fashion magazine.

A corollary of the issues outlined above, is how, in an increasingly globalized world, Chinese consumers and designers can recognize and claim a modern Chinese fashion identity. Whilst this article is necessarily a snapshot view of the Chinese fashion industry, the authors argue that reviewing the practices of some key fashion creatives confirms a belief in the importance of cultural identity for/within creative practices, and additionally shows how contemporary Chinese fashion can escape prescribed and restricted fashion identities. The following arguments are based on primary research in the form of retail research visits in Shanghai; analysis of the Chinese fashion press as represented by a review of fashion editorials in *Vogue China* since its launch issue; a review of the literature on Chinese fashion identities; a review of significant fashion business commentaries; qualitative interviews with Confucian heritage fashion students in London; and desk research into contemporary fashion creatives – using their own words to inform the discussion.

### **Chinoiserie and exclusion from the modern**

Reading reviews of Chinese designers' work and fashion collections or in fashion editorial presentation, there is often an un-self-reflexive tendency, almost a compunction, amongst the western fashion press to perpetuate a 'complex' and 'disturbing' ethnocentrism that defines fashion through the common cultural heritage of its designers, de-individualizes the

creators and reinforces orientalist stereotypes of Chinese culture and tradition (Chow 1991: 4) that essentializes Chinese fashion, precluding its inclusion in considerations of modern fashion. China's fashion identity as transmitted through the lens of the western fashion media reflects a historical fascination with a fantasy China. Marco Polo's explorations heralded a fascination with the Orient; the motifs and stylization of an imagined China became the height of fashion. The European imitative decorative art form chinoiserie exemplifies this stylized vision of China perfectly in its 'tangible and solid realisations in the West of a land of the imagination' (Jacobson 1993: 7). This 'invented tradition' of chinoiserie has been an ubiquitous feature of many of the decorative arts traded between East and West and its style and content continues to inform many western notions of *Chineseness*, and pervades many fashion products and promotions.

Stylized ideas of Chinese design-identity and cultural symbols are reproduced and reinforced through the fashion media; the western fashion industry repeatedly references an imagined China, one that simultaneously reinforces the East–West binary and precludes the recognition of a contemporary Chinese fashion identity. Thus the western gaze has restricted Chinese fashion identities and the Shanghai *Xiaojie* 上海小姐 of the article's title continues to inform many ideas of Chinese femininity and fashion. The Shanghai *Xiaojie*'s look was the dominant modern ideal from the 1927 Nationalist reunification of China until the 1937 Japanese invasion when the government banned 'cloth demons' (women in western fashions) (Dong 2008: 215). Thus the last pre-Communist Chinese fashion identity remains the strongest iteration of modern Chinese fashion, and the Shanghai *Xiaojie* or 'Shanghai Miss' of 1920s/1930s Shanghai persists as the go-to or stock image of Chinese femininity. *Shizhuang* (fashion) has always been associated with internationalization and modernization (Li 1998) and this constructed female fashion identity who reflected the country's sociocultural changes as particularly embodied in the cosmopolitan metropolis of

Shanghai, represented modernity in 1920s and 1930s China (Fenby 2009; Ko 1999) and continues to be replicated in contemporary fashion design and media.

Chinese practitioners working in the contemporary fashion industry are in fact creating diverse fashion identities; however, whilst fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gaultier scour the globe for exotic inspirations, re-working historical and cultural design inspirations, and are hailed as creative forces, the work of non-western designers is often excluded from the contemporary, their designs interpreted as culturally rather than individually-based (Kondo 2010). This practice echoes colonialist notions of culture and identity that conflate modernity with westernization and create hierarchies that posit some societies as 'ahead' and others as 'catching up' (Weinbaum et al. 2008). Huishan Zhang, a fashion designer and recent graduate of London's Central Saint Martins, has been hailed as one of the most exciting new Chinese fashion designers and has garnered much attention, especially from the western fashion media who pepper their write-ups with multiple references to his Chinese heritage. However any claims to modernity or inclusion in the international fashion system are somewhat tempered when one considers it is in the V&A museum's 'T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art', rather than in its 'Fashion Gallery', that Zhang's recently acquired Dragon Dress is to be displayed, to 'show the progress in Chinese craftsmanship from ancient times to the present' (Hung 2012c).

Fashion photographer Chen Man has commented on how the phenomenon of repeatedly associating Chinese fashion creatives with clichéd ideas around ethnicity both essentializes Chinese culture and leads to stereotyped and paradigmatic ideas of modern China as viewed from the West:

Europeans watch *Farewell My Concubine* and come to China with all these romantic expectations, but when they arrive they're met with skateboarders, break dancers,

fashion photographers and a hip hop scene. I want to package this together and not only show this to China but show it to the world. (Raphael 2014)

But although many Chinese designers reject the ‘hyper-*chinazation* of their aesthetic’ (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012: 74) many others are complicit in ‘self-orientalising’ (Kondo 1997). Designer Wang Yiyang argues that the repeated use of ‘Chinese’ design elements in fashion perpetuates stereotypes of Chinese design and national identity. saying: ‘because we showed too many qipao, dragons, the Cultural Revolution and the image of the red lanterns on clothing or films, it misled Westerners into thinking these were all about “Chinese”’ (Tsui 2010: 208).

Writing in *British Vogue* about her experiences working with an international creative team on the launch issue of *Vogue China*, Angelica Cheung recounts an incident that echoes Chen Man’s observations, and crystallizes the western fashion industry’s misinterpretation of the modern Chinese fashion consumer. Cheung tells how the western make-up artist working on the cover-shoot initially suggested a look for the model based on the styling of Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1987 historical masterpiece *The Last Emperor* – Cheung had to explain to him that ‘young Chinese women want to be modern and chic. Make-up like that [...] would remind them of ancient women’ and how, young Chinese women – like millions of other fashionable women worldwide – ‘want to look like Kate Moss’ (Cheung 2005: 118). Having been selected to showcase the launch of the Apple Watch on the November 2014 *Vogue China* cover, international brands must be hoping that Angelica Cheung knows the new Chinese woman well when she says ‘We are an ancient country but at the same time a very young country when it comes to fashion and new products. We love to embrace everything that is new, modern and positive’ (BOF Team 2014).

### **Local-global-transnational fashion**

*Vogue* is where international fashion and China meet.

Angelica Cheung (2005: 117)

One of the key debates in contemporary fashion marketing is the local–global binary; the twenty-first century fashion industry is increasingly international, both in terms of production and consumption, yet there is no consensus on whether globalization inevitably homogenizes cultural experiences (Levitt 1983) or allows for heterogeneity (Kapferer 2005). Spearheaded by luxury labels, the stagnation of the western markets and the prospect of vast untapped markets of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), has led to increasing global expansion for fashion brands. As we experience the development of both global and local cultures (Cowen 2002), the extension of media access and cross-cultural exchanges in education and industry make it increasingly difficult to separate out cultural influences on creativity (Lubart 1999), and make national definitions of fashion problematic.

Fashion media play a major role in disseminating what is and is not considered fashionable; Jobling compares both images and the construction of fashion narratives to Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality as 'the fashion spread not only emanates from the society in which it was produced but also comments on it' (Jobling, 1999:12). In common with other aspects of the Chinese fashion industry, transnational fashion magazines are a relatively new phenomenon in China, international titles only gaining access to China in the late 1990s. Since their entry transnational fashion magazines have achieved some of the highest circulation figures in the country; *Elle* was the first foreign fashion title to enter in 1998 (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012), followed by *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Marie Claire*; and although these magazines were produced in Chinese, they featured Caucasian models and translations of western fashion journalism (Wu 2009: 79). China has had a disrupted fashion evolution due to government-imposed clothing restrictions and the fact



that China was closed to western fashion for several decades, and Wu highlights the fashion media's contribution to identity construction for modern Chinese women: 'The female body, masked and draped and concealed for millennia in China has finally been publicly unmasked in both art and fashion, giving women more space in which to define their physical and spiritual femininity' (2009: 182). The expansion of the Chinese fashion industry in general and fashion publishing in particular saw *Vogue China's* launch in September 2005, and with its slogan 'Vogue, Ultimate Fashion in China' *Vogue China* has positioned itself as the leading authority on fashion. Producing original content for a large market share, *Vogue China* has played an important role in supporting the Chinese fashion industry; changing the landscape of Chinese fashion journalism and validating the Chinese market for contributors (Wu 2009). *Vogue China* both filters global fashion to a local audience and promotes Chinese fashion designers, artists, models and celebrities on the domestic and international fashion stage.

Dismissing the efforts of the existing fashion magazines in China, Angelica Cheung wrote at the time of its launch 'the market is crying out for a top-level, high quality fashion magazine' (Cheung 2005: 114). To establish its brand pedigree, *Vogue China's* launch issue included 40 pages surveying the history of the Vogue brand, firmly entrenching its position as tastemaker and authoritative arbiter of all that is stylish (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012). *Vogue China's* vision is very much that of its editor, whose incomparable influence has been recognized by social commentators; BBC Arts Editor Will Gompertz chose Cheung to launch his 2013 Radio 4 series *Zeitgeisters*: those

cultural entrepreneurs with the ability to capture and bottle the spirit of our age and giving us what we want before we know it. [...] Exceptional individuals with the ability to scan the horizon and correctly sense what or who is about to appear. (Gompertz 2013a: 120)

Cheung herself acknowledges her position of influence and outlines her passion to 'change China' through an editorial strategy for *Vogue China* that educates Chinese women (Gompertz 2013b). In comparison to many international editions and the majority of western fashion media, Chinese fashion magazines have found it necessary to explicate western fashion icons e.g. the little black dress, and also debate iconic pieces from China's fashion history e.g. the *qipao*<sup>2</sup>.

With 622 pages, *Vogue China's* fifth anniversary edition was a tangible demonstration of the decade-long 'explosion' of China's luxury market (Liu 2011). *Vogue China*, comparatively expensive at 20 RMB, is distributed to first- and second-tier cities with a readership of 3,200,000 and a target circulation of 640,000, rating it higher than *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Elle* and *Harper's Bazaar* (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012). *Vogue China* is currently the dominant title in Chinese fashion media, and whilst the publication is similar in look to *Vogue* titles elsewhere, its dual role in China has been of simultaneously educating its readership about fashion history (Asian and western) and current trends, as well as informing and reflecting an identity for the modern Chinese woman (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012). September 2013 was the eighth anniversary of *Vogue China's* launch and founding editor-in-chief Angelica Cheung took this opportunity to share her vision of modern Chinese fashion in her editor's letter, where she highlights the rapid development of the Chinese fashion industry, on the one hand stressing its modernity but also highlighting its links to China's past.

Fashion images codify 'standards of taste and beauty' (Breward 2007: 280) and with five times more editorial pages than the US or UK editions, *Vogue China* has the space in which to explore and explain not only the cultural history of the West for an increasingly internationalized readership, but also to promote Chinese fashion designers and the Chinese art and design industry (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012). *Vogue China* features a regular column 'Made in China' that features Chinese fashion designers and has championed designers

including Uma Wang, Masha Ma and Huishan Zhang (Menkes 2013) and increasingly featuring Chinese models including supermodel Liu Wen. In research charting the development of *Vogue China*, Babette Radclyffe-Thomas analyses the choice of cover image and how the models featured reflect changes in the wider Chinese fashion industry. The launch issue featured Du Juan (then China's leading model) with four other Chinese models on a gatefold cover, but the focal point of the cover image was 2005's most popular model, the Australian Gemma Ward. Since then the number of Chinese models used in editorial has increased, and of the September issue covers, excluding 2008, all have featured a Chinese model, Liu Wen having the honour of featuring on one of the eight covers for the 2013 eighth anniversary issue.

Hailing from Hunan province – coincidentally the birthplace of Chairman Mao – Liu Wen entered a modelling competition at age 18 in order to win a computer – which she did – and moved first to Beijing and then to New York. Walking in her first major catwalk for Burberry in Milan in 2008, Liu Wen has featured in fashion editorials and campaigns at luxury and high street levels. In Autumn/Winter 2010 Liu Wen walked 74 shows, and her career trajectory echoes the more general increase in the use of Asian models in the fashion industry, as charted by the fashion media in multiple articles charting the rise of the Asian supermodel in both English- and Chinese-language publications. Chinese models have become a common feature of runway shows during international fashion weeks, as Liu Wen said in 2010: 'Chinese models have become a stronger presence. Just a season or two ago, there weren't many models for me to talk with backstage in my native Mandarin. Now I usually have no trouble finding someone at any show' (Chang 2010).

The selection of models to feature in fashion photographs is inextricably linked with contemporary ideas of beauty and fashion. Traditional Chinese standards of beauty trace a lineage at least as far back as the Tang Dynasty and were reinforced in the 1930s as 'oval face, willow leaf eyebrows, long thin eyes, small cherry-like mouth, and slim fragile-looking

body' (Dong 2008: 204). Despite being heralded by *Vogue China* as the most distinctive supermodel and the best modern Chinese beauty spokeswoman on the international stage (Fan 2014), and being a favourite of fashion photographer Chen Man, Liu Wen's single-fold eyelids and dimples are not universally endorsed, Chen reveals that 'as far as Chinese people are concerned she looks like an alien' (Raphael 2014).

The rise of social media and the proliferation of street-style photography has enabled twenty-first century supermodels to showcase their personal style and to grow their fan base internationally (Condé Nast 2013), imagery which is echoed in fashion marketing campaigns such as Coach's Autumn/Winter 2013/14, which featured Liu Wen and her New York fashion story. H&M 'New icon'<sup>3</sup> Liu Wen has many firsts to her name: first Asian model to be selected as a Victoria's Secret Angel; first Asian model to be hired as the face of Estée Lauder; and first Asian model to appear on Forbes's top-ten list of the world's highest-earning supermodels (in fifth place). In common with other aspects of the Chinese fashion industry, modelling is still a developing profession; it is only recently that modelling has risen above its categorization as 'immoral' (Wu 2009), moving from the 1980s concept of *shizhuang yanyuan* 时装演员 (fashion actor) to the twenty-first-century incarnation of *chao mo* 超模 (supermodel). This development, alongside the fervour with which western fashion brands have sought to engage with the Chinese fashion market (especially at the luxury level), has seen the promotion of Chinese models on runways, fashion spreads and billboards internationally. Rosie Bendandi, *Elle's* bookings editor, speaks of the beauty world's current love affair with 'Asian girls' (Coulson 2013), and the desire for fashion brands to use Chinese models in their campaigns is equalled by the models themselves: 'China's models have started to have international aspirations and dreams' (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012). But whilst the western fashion industry has been keen to congratulate itself on the diversity of ethnicities it now showcases, there are many critiques of the lack of true multiculturalism in fashion imagery and a fundamental issue remains as to the extent to which the use of

Asian models is less a democratization of fashion, and more a strategic marketing ploy. As fashion journalist Clare Coulson (2013) writes of Liu Wen, 'Her career [...] highlights how much the fashion industry is responding to the spending power of China's luxury consumers'. The question of fashion models' ethnicity is not an exclusively western fashion industry preoccupation; Angelica Cheung goes to some lengths to explain the debates around *Vogue China's* use of Canadian-born Chinese models Stephanie Siu and Mackenzie Hamilton-Cheung, alongside Chinese nationals Du Juan and Shu Pei on the 2007 cover, concluding that international Chinese models reflect Sino-foreign girl power and embody a modern essence of localization and internationalization (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012).

### **East vs West, East + West**

Fashion is not created in a vacuum and contemporary fashion creatives engage in dialogues about the influence of Chinese culture and how their understandings of Chineseness and the East–West binary impact their work. Established fashion designer Ma Ke is hugely successful in China with minimal interaction with the western fashion system and promotes a model for Chinese designers that is all about big business but not about fast fashion. Ma Ke's success both domestically and internationally shows that there can be a viable option for Chinese-trained designers to recognize and endorse their cultural identity through original, creative designs. A vision for modern Chinese fashion that is endorsed by the international fashion system, by the Chinese central government and by the domestic fashion industry, has the potential to inspire others to engage with issues around identity and sustainability, the latter being one of the most significant challenges for the twenty-first-century fashion industry. The brand has recently expanded its retail presence in Shanghai and perhaps made a statement about its market placement by opening a store in super-luxury mall iAPM, a mall noted for its rota of high fashion western rather than Chinese labels. Fashion photographer Chen Man claims her Chinese education, untainted by western notions, gives

her a clear vision in which to construct a modern Chinese identity and exploits what she terms western technologies to produce work for transnational brands. Chen declares 'Chinese essence, Western method' as her motto (Nowness 2012) and Chinese cultural references inhabit many of her fashion images, drawing on the iconography of recent Chinese history. Chinese-born western-educated fashion designer Huishan Zhang discusses how his understandings and practices of creativity were developed by engaging in the western fashion education system and, similarly to Chen Man, he works at a point of hybridity between East and West. Huishan Zhang's design studio is based in London, his ready-to-wear line is manufactured in China, he employs Chinese fabrics from his hometown of Qingdao in his collection, and he is conscious of both the cultural and symbolic implications of fashion design and manufacturing geographies: 'What I want to show is that "Made in China," if combined with "Designed in China," can be high quality and good. Not the cheap stuff, or the fakes' (Hung 2012b).

Tracing the development of fashion design in modern China, Tsui (2010) highlights the brand-building potential of the 'second generation' of Chinese designers, those born in the late 1960s and 1970s. Amongst these, Ma Ke stands out as the antithesis of mass-produced Chinese fashion, rejecting fame and monetary rewards in order to follow her design values, which celebrates traditional textile techniques and an artisanal approach to fashion design: 'Exception de Mixmind is the platform where I practise eastern beauty, it's also my dream: creating an original Chinese brand that can demonstrate Chinese spiritual essence and national confidence' (Domus 2010). Ma Ke graduated from the Suzhou Institute of Silk Textile Technology in 1992 and was spotted as one of the 'Top Ten Fashion Designers' at age 25, going on to found Exception in 1996, a new brand catering for the 'young, well-educated, independent, intelligent' fashion-conscious Chinese consumer (Tsui 2010: 168); in Tsui's opinion: 'The first brand featuring a designer temperament in China' (2010: 164). Ma Ke very much aligns herself with designers such as Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo and

the Exception label reflects what commentator Huang Hung calls '21<sup>st</sup>-century Zen [...] a local antidote to glam' (Hung 2012a). Reporting on the brand's fifteenth anniversary party, *Vogue China* endorses Exception's innovative approach to fashion design and celebrates the international platform Ma Ke has created across the fields of fashion, art and cultural events (You 2011).

Ma Ke won the 2007 Elle Style Award for Best Asian Fashion Designer a year after founding another non-traditional fashion label, the internationally renowned couture line Wuyong 无用 (Useless). The label is an experimental fusion of art and fashion that explores differing perspectives on 'uselessness' and the dynamics of value through sculptural pieces crafted from discarded items such as old sheets or tarpaulins and using only natural fibres (V&A 2008). Ma Ke was the first Chinese designer to be invited by Paris's Chambre Syndicale to show as part of the Paris couture shows in 2007, and the collection was also showcased in 2008 at the V&A museum as part of its Fashion in Motion series. Although operating at the highest levels of the international fashion industry, Ma Ke's inspiration for the brand Wuyong comes from her trips to rural China and her appreciation of farmers who live lives 'insulated from fashion', where clothing is passed down through families, repaired and reworn (Ma Ke quoted in Wan 2014).

The Exception de Mixmind (例外) store in Shanghai's iconic heritage retail development Xintiandi is located in the section of the shopping complex dedicated to promoting Chinese fashion designers. Its store design reflects the brand's eco-friendly ethos with warm colours, raw natural elements and organic design. The store's walls are constructed from reclaimed railway sleepers and curved wooden panels and the simple cream, white, grey and black garments hang suspended from bamboo garment rails cocooned within these panels. Continuing the natural materials theme, the floor is made from varnished reclaimed wooden floorboards. The store's interior contains several large white display panels with quotes in English and Chinese e.g. 'life is beautiful', reflecting its

designer's philosophy.

Exception de Mixmind went from a niche brand to a household name overnight after it was reported, though not confirmed, that Peng Liyuan 彭丽媛 (the wife of the Chinese Premier Xi Jinping) wore their designs during a 2013 state visit to Russia, with accompanying media frenzy in the same manner as that which surrounds the wardrobe choices of western stateswomen Michelle Obama and Kate Middleton. In a country known for its love of western luxury brands, Peng's endorsement of a homegrown label surprised and delighted fashion observers, and Peng's fashion choices were endorsed by *Vanity Fair* when they placed her on their International Best Dressed list. Exception's CEO (and Ma Ke's former husband) Mao Jihong describes the brand as 'Chinese in its core' (Hung 2012a), and whilst for many this description might conjure the ubiquitous *qipao* and dragon, Exception's design handwriting avoids oriental clichés, instead offering 'a distinctly Chinese philosophy'; a minimal aesthetic, with oversized, asymmetrical garments in carefully considered textiles (Welters and Mead 2012: 34) presented in minimalist stores. Exception is headquartered in Guangzhou, has over 100 stores in China and an estimated annual turnover of more than 900 million RMB (US\$ 150 million), yet retains its identity as a niche brand, one that does not mimic western fashions, avoids trends and aims to deliver unique, considered pieces for discerning modern Chinese customers (Hung 2012a). Working in an industry heavily criticized for its anti-environmental practices, Ma Ke is known for promoting sustainability and her work incorporates the traditional dyeing, weaving and embroidery techniques of Chinese ethnic minorities, particularly the Dong of southern China.

Fashion photographer Chen Man also looks to the traditions, history and diversity of China to inspire her ultra-modern work, and in this practice she sees herself as unique: 'In the past, Chinese artists have always looked abroad for inspiration as opposed to looking domestically [...] All the rules have been set. I'm one of the first people to actually look to China for inspiration' (Raphael 2014). As one of China's leading fashion photographers,



Chen's work spans the commercial and the avant-garde. By the time she graduated from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art, she had already showcased her bold, experimental use of colour with a digitally enhanced cover shot for Shanghai-based *Vision* magazine. The year 2013 saw the publication of *Chen Man 2003–2010*, a retrospective of Chen's work. Citing Nick Knight as one of her inspirations, Chen uses digital technology to transform her subjects into 'futuristic cyborgs of Asian beauty, representing the computerised sensibility of China's accelerated art scene' (Raphael 2010). Chen works at an acknowledged point of hybridity between East and West, one which she feels she can execute without danger of cultural essentialism or, in her words, 'cheesiness' due to the fact that she is Chinese born, bred and educated: 'I mix tradition with modernity and make it kitsch' (Raphael 2014). The 2009 issue of *Vogue China* features a creative collaboration between Chen Man and Du Juan, '60 Fashion Moments of China', which charts the last century of Chinese fashion identities denoting one key image per decade. Through the styling, the use of iconic backdrops (e.g. Chairman Mao's portrait in Tiananmen Square) and the colour palette Chen creates striking imagery, yet this editorial created by a Chinese production team and aimed at a primarily Chinese audience could be interpreted as reinforcing the West's idea of a static, mono-faceted Chinese fashion identity.

Chen's practice explores Chinese thinking through western technologies; she cites her use of Chinese faces and modern Chinese backgrounds as at the forefront of contemporary photography practices (Miyaniishi and Sakuraba 2012) and this approach and aesthetic has been endorsed by the fashion industry – her work featuring in titles including *Vogue China*, *Elle* and *Harper's Bazaar* as well as in campaigns for Nike and Adidas. Chen has also been recognized by the international art and design elite, and has exhibited in Beijing, Shanghai and London's V&A. *i-D* magazine commissioned a series of twelve of Chen Man's images for their 2012 'Whatever the Weather' pre-Spring covers. Chen cast many non-professional models to showcase 'the breadth of beauty in China today' (Raphael 2014) and

explored and celebrated images of contemporary Chinese beauty. These images, whilst ultra-modern in finish, reference Chinese history and tradition and Man sees this binary opposition as central to her work: 'I feel like this is like my responsibility, not to repeat history but to create the new image for modern China' (Miyanishi and Sakuraba 2012). Chen's use of post-production techniques and her choices of subject and background have, according to the 2013 *i-D Online* website (page now deleted), 'revolutionised the way China and the rest of the world thinks about beauty'. Chen acknowledges her Chinese heritage as providing the philosophy behind her creations; her design philosophy: 'I believe in the idea that the universe, the earth and everything that lives in it are all part of one whole' (Raphael 2014) sits within Confucian notions of creativity which see it as embodied in modest alterations of existing practice within a universe in which everything already exists (Radclyffe-Thomas 2011).

Fashion designer Huishan Zhang recognizes that he is starting his career at a key moment in the Chinese fashion industry's development; one at which Chinese consumers prepped on European fashion houses are eager to engage with designers who share their cultural heritage. Transitioning through Asian American fashion designers such as Alexander Wang and Philip Lim (both New York-based designers) Zhang feels the stage is set for the launch of homegrown Chinese fashion designers:

It's time for a Chinese designer, for everybody to work together to show the world how much we are capable of and how much we can do. The world is open to China as well. It's a really good time – everyone is in China already, so many Vuittons, so many Guccis. Now the Chinese want to see something that actually belongs to them. (Blanchard 2012)

Despite his nationalistic assertions, Zhang left China to study fashion design first in New Zealand and later at London's prestigious Central Saint Martins college – a beacon for many aspiring designers worldwide and alma mater of his fashion idols John Galiano and Alexander McQueen.

Zhang is representative of a new generation of Chinese fashion designers who seek to exploit the interplay of western and Chinese cultures and their constructs of creativity – marrying technical skills honed through work experience at the Dior haute couture atelier, with design elements that symbolize his understanding of Chinese tradition with a nod to the modern Chinese luxury consumer, and a stated aim to embrace a new model of quality Chinese fashion-production. Zhang followed in the fashion footsteps of his heroes when he was given the coveted Brown's boutique windows during London Fashion Week 2011 to showcase his fashion vision – one described as 'original and exquisitely made' and 'new and exciting' by Brown's' womenswear buyer Françoise Tessier (Hume 2011). Zhang is keen to leverage what he sees as his ability to cross two creative cultures; in interviews he talks about Chinese parenting (Blanchard 2012) and without exception fashion journalists focus on his Chinese heritage and the East–West interplay in his work, as exemplified in a piece by *Business of Fashion* editor Imran Amed which talks of Zhang's fashion design as a 'balance between Chinese aesthetic and pattern-cutting, and Western levels of quality and craftsmanship' (Amed 2011).

Zhang's designs explicitly reference Chinese culture and fashion history, with cuts based on *qipao* dresses and Zhongshan/Mao jackets and decorative detailing featuring Chinese dragons – a symbol whose potency for his design sensibilities he explains thus:

In China the dragon represents power, strength, good luck and is regarded as a deep rooted symbol of the Chinese culture. In Western society, the dragon is considered as a symbol of China. It's the perfect emblem to marry the cultures

portrayed in my collections, highlighting the main values behind every garment and every woman who wears them [...] power, strength and culture. (Amed 2011)

Zhang is regularly featured in *Vogue China's* social pages, and interestingly whilst he has featured in *Vogue China* and *Ray Li* (a high circulation Chinese-language fashion magazine), his profile may be higher in the international fashion press: *Women's Wear Daily* rated his 2013 Autumn/Winter collection 'among the strongest outings so far in London this season' (Fairchild Publishing 2013). His work has also been recognized by his fashion industry peers; Zhang was awarded the 2013 Dorchester Collection Fashion prize. But his ambition is to move beyond fashion and to become a 'leading Chinese lifestyle brand'; Zhang recognizes that the Chinese market is changing and sees his future creating products to satisfy the needs of what he calls 'a modern new Chinese lifestyle' (Blanchard 2012).

Hailed as CSM's 'first mainland Chinese success story' (Zhang comes from Qingdao) by fashion journalist Marion Hume (Hume 2011), Zhang's college experiences echo many Confucian heritage culture designers who leave Asia to study fashion design overseas and experience a kind of 'creative culture-shock' working within the western fashion education system (Radclyffe-Thomas 2011; 2014). As Zhang puts it:

The Chinese and Western ways are very different. The Chinese want to see the result, they don't care what the process is. The West, they care about the result but they want to see the whole process of research and inspiration. (Blanchard 2012)

There is evidence of cultural essentialism in western art and design education that tends to exoticize the non-western and focus on cultural differences whilst simultaneously homogenizing international students (Sovic 2008).

Case study research with Confucian heritage fashion students studying in London revealed how a new generation of fashion students are embracing their cultural heritage and enjoy transposing it against the more traditionally disseminated (western) models of fashion (Radclyffe-Thomas 2011). In in-depth semi-structured interviews students talked about the different approaches to creative practice they experienced in their home cultures and in London, and how whilst these divergent practices can initially be confusing, ultimately they see their own strengths in their ability to combine practices and design elements from East and West. Just as Chen Man and Huishan Zhang have divergent views about the dangers/benefits of engaging with the western system, the students in my case study were ambiguous about how design work is affected by studying in another culture. Some expressed a belief that by entering another culture students would abandon their home culture's aesthetic and instead adopt a western aesthetic: 'I think (most) people who want to come to Europe they will very like try to be a European'; whilst others felt their home culture's aesthetic is always a reference in their design work – consciously or subconsciously – and several students said they worked successfully to combine cultures: 'It's more different from the EU student or Home student, because I can combine with the *East* and then *West*... I think teacher really like *that* project'. In common with the students in the case study, Huishan Zhang recognizes the creativity to be found by combining cultures and has stated that 'The whole brand is like a presentation of myself. The Chinese part is from my blood and the European/Western influence is from what I'm experiencing' (Blanchard 2012). Within the broader fashion industry, a series of design partnerships seek to leverage East-meets-West branding to exploit the aesthetic and heritage of both cultures; jewellery brand Qeelin trades on just such a concept.

### **Concluding comments**

Much as the social and cultural elites of 1930s Shanghai 'considered it their privilege and duty to define the meaning of being modern' (Dong 2008: 202), Chen Man has declared 'It's an adventure to define the expression of contemporary Chinese fashion' (Nowness 2012). Western fashion brands have relentlessly pursued expansion into the Chinese market, but more recently domestic brands are looking to claim some of this market share, and also expanding internationally: 2012 saw Chinese brand Bosideng open on London's fashionable South Molton Street. Rather than accepting this one-way fashion traffic, Angelica Cheung's *Vogue China* promotes Chinese creatives; Huishan Zhang has vocalized the desire for the Chinese market to embrace fashion by Chinese designers, and the possibilities of moving beyond established fashion hierarchies; designers like Ma Ke operate at the diametric opposite of fast fashion, embracing craft techniques and sustainable practices; whilst models like Liu Wen have become familiar to fashion consumers worldwide representing multiple fashion brands and shot by internationally renowned photographers such as Chen Man.

Each of the Chinese fashion creatives discussed in this article have spoken of how their Chinese heritage and identity informs their work and furthermore how their ability to combine East and West gives them a creative edge in the contemporary fashion industry; they recognize the important influence of their Chinese heritage on their work but their work also represents alternatives to any clichéd notions of Chineseness. The rise of a domestic fashion culture reflects the profound socio-economic changes in China, and the success of local fashion titles is indicative of increased demand for Chinese-produced content and allows increased 'diversity of social identities for emulation' (Tay 2006: 10). Producing its own content on the Mainland and in Hong Kong, *Vogue China* is 'a melange of Western and Eastern creativity published for a Chinese audience produced by an international team and existing on a global platform' (Radclyffe-Thomas 2012).

With the development of the Chinese fashion industry, increases in mobility – both virtual and physical – between East and West and with ideas of authenticity – whether real or imagined – mediated through fashion product and imagery, it becomes less relevant to reference fashion against western norms and ever more problematic to define what is a Chinese fashion identity. Brands like Kwong Sang Hong (one of the first cosmetic companies in China founded in 1898), still features its Shanghai *Xiaojie* ‘two girls’ imagery on its packaging and marketing materials, but is this Chinese culture essentialized or heritage embraced? There is a government driven and nationalistically oriented desire to claim a modern Chinese identity and as this article has shown, fashion can play an integral role in defining that. As the future Chinese fashion industry develops in diverse directions at both mass-market and luxury levels, providing fashion media to engage a range of consumers from the luxury-hungry UHNWI (ultra high net worth individual) to the Chinese hipsters XQX (Xiao Qing Xin: small and fresh), the future is open to provide the multiple fashion identities that a contemporary fashion system can support. And the rate of change for the twenty-first-century Shanghai *Xiaojie* may be rapid, after all as Angelica Cheung put it: ‘in less than a decade China has gone from Karl Marx to Karl Lagerfeld!’ (Chang 2010).

### Images (free positioning in the text)

Figure 1: Half page landscape: Exception de Mixmind store, Xintiandi, Shanghai 2014.

Image credit: N. Radclyffe-Thomas

Figure 2: Quarter page landscape: 'b+ab x Angelababy' by Chen Man, I.T. store, Xintiandi, Shanghai 2014. Image credit: N. Radclyffe-Thomas

Figure 3: Huishan Zhang Spring/Summer 2015. Image credit: Huishan Zhang Co Ltd

Figure 4: Huishan Zhang Spring/Summer 2015. Image credit: Huishan Zhang Co Ltd

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## Notes

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

<sup>2</sup> *Qipao* or *cheongsam* is a slim-fitting Chinese woman's dress with a mandarin collar, diagonal front opening and side slits associated with Shanghai in the 1930s and Hong Kong in the 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> Liu Wen featured in H&M's Autumn/Winter 2012/13 marketing campaign 'New Icons'.