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‘There will never be a Chinese fashion’

Staking a Claim for Shanghai as a Fashion City

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Prologue

I first thought of ‘Chinese fashion’ as a concept a few years ago when I interviewed a portentous gentleman who at the time held a very important position in the French fashion industry. He spoke disparagingly of Chinese designers coming to Paris to showcase their work during fashion week: ‘We’ve had a number of established Chinese designers showing in Paris by now, but after a while we realised that they had no talent and that no press was interested.’[1] Being many decades younger, and perhaps because of it subject to a different notion of the importance of both diversity and political correctness, I was quietly scandalized. But at the same time, the man’s sneering off-the-cuff remark made me reflect on my own attitude towards Chinese fashion. Was the fact that I hadn’t even considered it not a sign of the same prejudice?

Afterwards, I became curious about what could be classified as ‘Chinese fashion’, and how it might manifest itself on the international high fashion scene. Were there Chinese designers showing in New York, London or Milan? Or, in fact, in Paris? How come I’d never heard of any? Why was ‘no press interested’? Was it because the designers had ‘no talent’ or because other journalists and editors had as muddy a grasp of the phenomenon as I did? Was it particularly hard for a Chinese designer to establish himself or herself in one of the four fashion capitals, and if so, why?

When, in 2014, I began to research contemporary Chinese fashion in Shanghai in earnest, these were some of the questions I brought with me on my first journey. Some rudimentary research proved that only a handful of designers had representation on the main fashion websites (at the time these were Style.com,

now Vogue.com, Nowfashion.com and Businessoffashion.com), and that few, if any, got their shows reviewed in the main newspapers during fashion week (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Magazine*). I counted only a few Chinese names on the official calendars in Paris, New York, Milan and London – commonly held to be the main cities for showcasing fashion – and those who did tended to have bad scheduling slots (typically early in the morning or on the day before the majority of editors and buyers arrive in town). Perhaps predictably, the Chinese-sounding names in mainstream high fashion belonged to Chinese Americans – Anna Sui, Alexander Wang, Vera Wang.

In light of all this I have spent three years travelling to Shanghai hoping to better understand how young Chinese designers regard the Western-dominated fashion industry, and how this fashion system sees them in return. Considering the resistance mounted by people like my notable interviewee, and the fact that mainland Chinese designers don't 'need' either international press or buyers to mount a sustainable business, is making it abroad still considered an important part of a successful career?[2]

Scene 1: 1436 × Uma Wang S/S 2017 Presentation, Yuanmingyuan Road, Huangpu District

I am standing somewhere out of the light, observing, as the most fashionable editors, buyers, bloggers and media stars file into what I've been told is the most anticipated show of the season. It's running late, of course – some things don't change, regardless of whether the stage is set in Paris, in New York or in Shanghai. This being Shanghai, though, the wait is made bearable by plenty of champagne. Cliques coalesce quickly; everybody seems to know each other. I spy the designer from afar: she appears remarkably calm as assistants and well-wishers buzz around her. I see a young man in a hooded sweatshirt, shaped as if tailor-made for Quasimodo – it's Vetements, an expensive and hard-to-find fashion brand from Paris: the latest for those in the know. Someone tells me he's a famous blogger on WeChat. I see another man wearing sunglasses though we are inside; he's apparently an editor from *GQ China*, the men's magazine. I see a young girl with bright pink hair wearing bunny ears, and another with a buzz cut and huge dangling earrings. So far, so familiar. It's curious really, to have travelled so far to find a scene so similar to the one I've left behind.

Compared to Paris though, whose earliest incarnation of fashion week arose in 1945, Shanghai is in fashion kindergarten. Fashion week here started in 2001, as an

initiative hosted by the Shanghai Municipal Government and supported by the Ministry of Commerce. In 2012, China's then president Hu Jintao announced a strategy to 'build a great nation of culture',[3] which created a noticeable upswing in the attention and budget lavished on the Chinese fashion industry. Today, Shanghai Fashion Week is organized by the Shanghai Textile Group, and its main venue has for the past years been a huge tent in Xintiandi, Shanghai's most exclusive shopping district. Ticket scalpers, fashion professionals and students jostle for space outside the main entrance, but lately many designers have complained about the uniformity of the tent, and the difficulty of making it 'yours', so for the past two seasons a 'pioneer fashion and arts festival' called 'Labelhood' has also received funding to put on exhibitions and shows by up-and-coming Chinese designers. I've been told that the Labelhood shows are the only ones worth attending now – the others are 'boring, too mainstream. Nobody goes there anymore.'[4]

I'm here to find some answers to my many earlier questions, but also to better understand what makes a 'Shanghai fashion designer' today as opposed to a 'Chinese fashion designer' or just a 'fashion designer', and though this is my third visit to the city I'm still having trouble with my classifications. Is it someone born here? Or someone who studied here? Someone with a studio in the city, and employees? Or perhaps it's someone who sets up shop here twice a year to take advantage of the rapidly growing fashion scene? The designers whose shows and showrooms I have become familiar with over the past few years all fall into one of these categories, though usually not two. The designer Yang Li is an interesting case in point. Born in Beijing, he left China as a ten-year-old to spend the next decade of his life in Melbourne. At twenty he moved to London to study at Central Saint Martins, the fabled fashion school that has become a prerequisite for success in China. Since 2013 he has shown his eponymous womenswear line at Paris Fashion Week twice a year, and now he is in Shanghai to promote it. We meet at a cocktail party held in his honour at Dong Liang, a store in the city's French Concession that has made it their mission to promote Chinese designers to the Chinese customer. I'm reminded of a headline in *The Washington Post* a few years ago, hailing Li as a 'designer putting China on fashion's biggest stage',[5] but also of something an editor told me, about how Yang Li who at first didn't want to be seen as a Chinese designer now has realized that it makes good business sense to identify with China in order to sell more here.[6] After the prerequisite air kissing (the transcontinental greeting for fashion people) and small talk about the weather (rain) I ask him about what he makes of being described as a 'Chinese designer' in the West, considering that he has spent most of his life abroad. He tells me that he has begun thinking

of himself as Chinese again, that he's interested in coming here more often.[7] Later, Tasha Liu, one of the proprietors of the store as well as the instigator of Labelhood, tells me that Li's clothes are among their bestsellers, but that she never considered Li a Chinese designer, until she asked him and he replied: 'Tasha, I am. I am *Yang Li*. I was born in China so I am kind of like a spy. I am living in London, in a Western country, and I spy on their habits, their culture and experience and I want to bring them back [to China] to share them with the young generation.'[8]

But back to the fashion show, which is about to begin. Uma Wang, the designer, is the greatest pride of the Chinese fashion editors who travel unfailingly to Europe and America for the fashion weeks. With a sophisticated aesthetic and a refined image, she has been showing at Milan fashion week since 2014 and has recently been taken on as a client by Michèle Montagne, one of Paris's most revered PR agents, and for autumn/winter 2017 she will hold her first show in Paris. Later, over hot ginger tea on another rainy day, she tells me that she divides her time between a small village in Italy, where her factory is, and Shanghai, where she keeps a studio, and that though her collections are stocked worldwide it's still in China that she makes the most money.[9] Today she is showing a new initiative, a collaboration with Erdos, one of the largest cashmere manufacturers in China who are keen to be magnified by the aura that currently surrounds Uma Wang. 1436 is their most exclusive cashmere line, and Wang has made asymmetrical dresses, cardigans with trailing frills and dainty milkmaid bonnets from it. After a short promo film that shows the designer looking poetically melancholic among goats, the models file out in a semi-choreographed constellation, slowly circling the stage before eventually lining up so that the audience can get close in order to touch a fabric, check the detailing or just take a selfie.

When did Chinese shoppers, otherwise known for spending lavishly on Western luxury brands, start favouring Chinese designers? Uma Wang tells me that she was curious herself, so she started asking her clients why they were buying her clothes rather than the more well-established European brands. The answer was quite clear: once Louis Vuitton, Dior, Gucci, Hermès and other French-owned corporations started opening stores all over Shanghai and Beijing, as well as in second- and third-tier cities across the country, their exclusivity evaporated. An omnipresent brand has little appeal to the fashion jet set: now a Chinese designer with a high-fashion pedigree is proof not just of wealth, but of good taste and sophistication – a mark of distinction.[10]

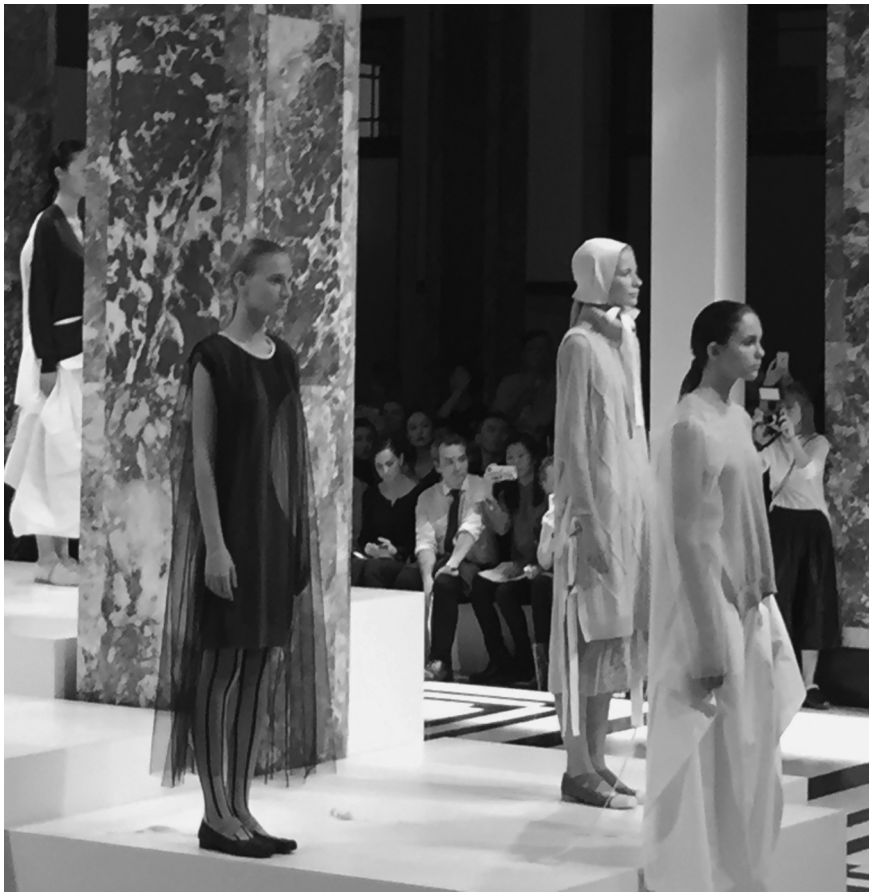

Figure 12.1 1436 × Uma Wang. Courtesy of Tian Zhiwei.

Scene 2: Tube Showroom S/S 2017 Presentations, Yuyuan Road, Changning District

Zemira Hu and Echo Zhuang, the owners of Dia Creative Communications and, since 2015, Tube Showroom, are, like all good sales agents, brisk in their manner and brimming with enthusiasm when speaking about the designers they represent. They tell me that most of them are 'sea turtles' – designers who have studied abroad only to return to China to set up shop. They are graduates from London mostly: Central Saint Martins as well as London College of Fashion and the Royal College of Art. Some come from Parsons in New York.

The showroom is brimming with activity, and unlike similar spaces in Paris the designers are all here themselves, schmoozing with potential clients and selling their collections. Zhuang explains that Chinese designers 'want to know everything. They want to know all the people; they want to know all the connections. They want to know how an order works. They really care about their product.'[11] Tube Showroom broke away from the official trade show Mode Shanghai earlier this year, and work only with Chinese designers, all of them in their early to mid-twenties with labels only a few years old. Their focus is mainly on the domestic market, though Hu and Zhuang tell me that all their designers want to be known internationally. Zhuang explains.

> They are two-way. They either start domestic and want to go overseas, or start overseas and want to go domestic. Frankly, it's about money. The buyers from second and third tier cities all come with big budgets [and] stores in China are loyal to designers. The buyers want to be in the fashion circle. They come and buy almost every piece from the designer they like; they have *large* budgets. Even Dong Liang don't usually drop designers.[12]

Zhuang continues:

> We approach designers after they've presented one season at another trade show. I apply a Corso Como[13] standard to whether their work falls in to the category for 'good design'. I ask myself, 'Would this sell in Corso Como?' When I worked there I would sometimes get the question, 'How do you know if something will work at Corso Como?' And I would answer, 'It's very difficult to explain: when you see it, you know it.'

Zhuang and Hu make contracts with the designers they represent on a season-by-season basis, extending them as they notice an ongoing and stable interest from buyers. They teach them about manufacturing and logistics in the China market, and encourage designers who are still based in Europe or America to move their production to China, as high import taxes otherwise make for prohibitively hefty wholesale prices. As we walk around the showroom, I am introduced to Steven Tai, a Chinese-Canadian designer. Hu is quick to tell me that Tai shows in London, *on schedule*. And, indeed, the first thing Tai himself tells me after we say hello is also that he shows at London Fashion Week. Later, Zhuang confirms that showing in either London, Milan, New York or Paris is part of the appeal of a Chinese designer for a Chinese buyer, as is having studied in either London or New York.

Une Yea, who has run her menswear label Staffonly since 2015 with her partner Shimo Zhou, tells me that she is keen to get a Paris showroom, though

for a show she would 'definitely' go for London, where she and Zhou recently graduated from the Royal College of Art and London College of Fashion respectively. 'I've heard that in Europe it's quite hard to survive your first or second season, but in China they are really into trying new things.'[14] Yea tells me that she decided to return to China because 'production is easier here', and because she knew she would have practical and financial support from her family, were she to start her brand here.

Family support is a common thread among the young designers I encounter at Tube. Momo Wang, the founder of Museum of Childhood, a brand defined by its childlike aesthetic (frills, straw hats, knee-high socks, pink and lilac bralettes and lots of embroidery) readily tells me about deciding to come back home to start her company after graduating with a BA in Fashion Design from Central Saint Martins (Figure 12.2). There is less competition in China, and it is both cheaper and easier to hire a team and organize production. And then there's the family factor. 'Chinese [designers] are rich people's kids. Our parents were encouraged in the seventies and eighties to have their own business; they worked very hard. They grew up poor, but now they have money, and they want to make their children's dreams come true.'[15]

Figure 12.2 Museum of Friendship. Courtesy of David Myron.

Scene 3: Angel Chen Studio, Changan Road, Zhabei District

> The Chinese want to become better, they want to learn, they want to have a more mature culture. Many years ago there was only the Chinese copycat, but now [customers] don't just want 'made in China', they want 'designed in China'. People's minds are changing. They're growing. They're eager to see what Chinese designers are doing outside of China.[16]

This is what Angel Chen, a twenty-five-year-old designer from Shengzhen, tells me while fiddling with her iPad. We're in her studio, in a high-rise near the Shanghai Railway Station (see Plate 7). Her clothes are colourful and a little zany, the sort of thing a club kid might wear to attract the attention of a street-style photographer during London Fashion Week. There are silver-spangled trousers, pink and turquoise frilly dresses, plenty of orange jackets and her bestseller – an oversized version of the coat a *bōsōzoku*, or Japanese motorcycle gangster, might wear but with heavy embroidery of Chinese characters spelling out either 'dragon', or 'I am on top of the universe'. Chen is one of the designers supported by Labelhood and Dong Liang – she has garnered a huge following of self-described 'bad kids' who religiously follow her social media feeds and buy her clothes. In fact, I saw one in action a few days earlier at Dong Liang: a young man with exaggeratedly effeminate manners in Chen's *tokkō fuku* coat and two friends in tow who spent the better part of an afternoon trying on the new deliveries of Chen's line. 'He comes here every week to buy something of Angel's', Tasha Liu told me at the time. I was surprised because he looked so young, and Chen's clothes are expensive. 'What does he do?' I asked. 'He's a student.'

Chen explains that she often looks to Japanese culture for inspiration, but that she's been looking at Chinese culture lately as well: the classic text *Shanhaijing* (Guideways through Mountains and Seas) about mountain and sea myths was an inspiration for her most recent collection. When it comes to how her brand is perceived, she echoes what I have heard repeated many times by young Chinese designers of her generation – she cares more about what the Western press say than she does the Chinese. 'The international press are much more intelligent than the Chinese. The Chinese press don't really care – there are so many fashion wannabes, and all the fashion press started about five years ago.' She continues, 'Chinese people always look forward, they look at what's happening in the UK, at what's happening in Europe, that's how they are.'

Scene 4: Fédération Française de la Couture, Rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré, 8ème Arrondissement

> There will never be a Chinese fashion. There are no fashion designers in China; they are all in Paris. We were very surprised when we started having some Chinese participants actually. We've had a number of established Chinese designers showing in Paris by now, but after a while we realised that they had no talent and that no press was interested. But still, their fame in China was such that they were totally upset when I told them that there was no purpose for them to go on showing in Paris, as it didn't bring any interest from the visitors. I feel strongly about the fact that a brand has to be relevant to the European and American press to merit being on the fashion week schedule in Paris. If the interest only comes from China or India, or wherever they come from, I think our role is to tell the brand, 'Okay, you've had your fun, but it's enough now.'[17]

This is what Didier Grumbach, affectionately and respectfully known in the fashion industry as Monsieur Grumbach, tells me one winter day in his office. At the time, Grumbach was the president of the Fédération Française de la Couture, du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode, the governing body for the French fashion industry, and though he has since retired, his presence loomed large over Paris Fashion Week for the sixteen years he spent at its helm, and still makes itself felt. His views on Chinese fashion are telling. Insinuations or outright assertions of Chinese designers as less sophisticated are recurring when discussing the topic with French fashion professionals – that is, if they know anything at all about it. Simona Segre Reinach has written about the two 'fashion stereotypes' that afflict China in relation to Italy: 'Italy as the creator, designer, and then exporter of Italian brands to China, and China as predominately the manufacturing base and consumer outlet for Western brands.'[18] The same point could plainly be made about France and Paris, or indeed any Western fashion capital. I noticed it when speaking to Western press in Shanghai, invited either to cover the proceedings, or lend an aura of internationality to them. The august fashion writer Colin McDowell, for instance, complained about Chinese design looking just like European and American fashion, 'only worse'.

That France has a lot to lose in accepting the ability of China to generate its own high fashion designers is clear – after all there is a vested interest for all players on the Paris fashion stage in keeping the city's reputation as a byword for fashion intact. With this in mind, it's interesting to observe that, with the notable exception of Shanghai-based Masha Ma and Uma Wang, the only Chinese designers on

Paris's high-profile womenswear prêt-a-porter schedule are Yang Li and Yinqing Yin, who both left China as children to grow up in Australia and France respectively. Repealing the negative connotations associated with 'made in China' is a slow process, and one that requires the development of a high-fashion aesthetic that is at once unifying enough to be marketable, but simultaneously unique enough to allow for the individual creative expression so important in fashion today. The international set of Chinese fashion editors, buyers and other industry professionals recognize the difficulty of this balancing act, and as a general rule, though proud of home-grown talent like Uma Wang, ('Uma Wang is far higher than the other designers. We are really proud of her, so we don't say bad things about her'[19]) tend to speak derogatively about Chinese designers in general. This could, perhaps, be seen as a case of self-Orientalizing – the internalization of the stereotypes associated with the Eastern 'Other'. When the Monsieur Grumbach quote above, after being published in *Vestoj*, was translated into Chinese by a number of fashion bloggers, it unsurprisingly caused a bit of a stir on WeChat and Weibo, China's two most prominent social media outlets. Many were offended and upset by his remarks, but equally as many seemed gripped by a sort of *mea culpa*, as if the remarks of this Parisian fashion authority were highlighting the shame that China has been unable to produce an international fashion star in the few years since fashion has been a cultural priority.

This brings to mind Ann Marie Leshkowich and Carla Jones's definition of Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, 'which held that colonised groups could not recognise the value of their own cultural, historical, and natural resources and therefore needed Western archaeologists, ethnographers, historians, and connoisseurs to discover and preserve this value'.[20] Though the historical relationship between China and the West is more complex than what a straightforward reading of colonialism would suggest, the cultural colonialism that is still perpetrated by the West in general, and Paris in particular, when it comes to fashionable taste and know-how is an important factor when looking at not just how the Paris cognoscenti view the Chinese fashion industry, but also how they view themselves.[21]

Scene 5: Uma Wang A/W 2017 Show, Musée de l'Armée, Rue de Grenelle, 7ème Arrondisement

It's a beautiful crisp winter day in early March, and Uma Wang is staging her first Paris show, after four years on the official schedule in Milan. She has told me about her ambivalence about changing cities, but that she has finally succumbed

to her French PR agent's arguments: Paris after all remains the world stage for fashion.

The show is held at the Army Museum in Les Invalides (which also houses Napoleon's gilded tomb), and the fashionable guests are trying to navigate the cobblestones in their high heels as best they can, while tourists look bemusedly on. The venue is impressive, as most Parisian venues tend to be: stone floors, high ceilings and gold-plated detailing. The audience are seated on simple wooden benches, in two long rows. I am whisked to the front by a genial PR lackey – how nice!

I look around and notice familiar faces. Many of the press and buyers I've got to know these past few years in Shanghai are present. But, perhaps not surprisingly, few of their high-status European and American equivalents are here. It takes time to be accepted in Paris.

The show itself is a vision in nineteenth-century Romanticism: pyjama silhouettes and cocoon shapes, long flowing robes, dusty floral prints and ruffled necklines (see Plate 8). Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris would have been pleased. The models file down the long catwalk; they are mostly white, with two or three light-skinned black models thrown in for good measure. There are no Asian models. Uma Wang comes out afterwards to take a bow, also wearing a long velvet robe; she is smiling broadly. The show over, we all file out and I notice some fashion bloggers dressed in Uma Wang, twirling around the courtyard while street-style photographers snap away.

Afterwards I check the reviews online: Uma Wang is conspicuously absent from Businessoffashion.com and Vogue.com where most of the fashion industry go to read show reviews and watch the shows, after they happened. She does, however, get favourable reviews in *Women's Wear Daily* and *The Washington Post*, where the well-respected fashion critic Robin Givhan writes: '[Wang] is among a new generation of designers who are transforming China's reputation from the home of low-quality manufacturers to a place of dynamic creativity fueled by entrepreneurs ready to compete on fashion's global stage.'[22]

I speak to a friend afterwards, a Chinese editor, one of the few who sits front row at every fashion show in Paris. I ask him about the absence of Chinese models on Uma Wang's catwalk – what's his take? He argues that the models on a designer's catwalk should be allowed to be the creator's fantasy woman, an ideal that matches the clothes and mood of the season. But, I argue, doesn't a Chinese designer on the Paris catwalk have a stake in making 'Chineseness' more appealing? To broaden the acceptable beauty ideal? But why, he argues back. Why does a Chinese designer have to make a political statement, or any kind of

statement for that matter? We discuss back and forth while our sub-par French espresso grows cold. I'm left wondering again, what makes a 'Chinese fashion designer' as opposed to just a 'fashion designer'? Is it fair to expect the few who are beginning to take steps towards respectability and status abroad to operate under some kind of politically aware banner? Do they have to advertise their Chineseness? And what is 'Chineseness' anyway?

Scene 6: Mr Willis, Anfu Road, Xuhui District

We go back in time now, to November 2015. I'm meeting Tim Lim, the fashion director of Modern Media, China's main independent publishing group, listed in Hong Kong. The publishing situation in China is as complex for fashion magazines as it is for any other type of periodical. Here no one can publish without a state-issued publication number, a *kanhao*, which is given only to government-affiliated agencies. This means that, in theory, private business is locked out, though in practice many agencies rent their *kanhaos* out. *Kanhao*-sharing is therefore a common, though intricate, affair, which, combined with the franchising of foreign media brands, makes up the bulk of Modern Media's titles. Lim has been overseeing all the fashion content of the group's thirteen lifestyle-focused titles since 2006, and is a stalwart presence on both the Shanghai and international fashion scene.

I wait for Lim, who has warned me that he's coming directly from his pilates class. The sofas at Mr Willis, a genial though somewhat conspicuous Australian restaurant, are deep and soft and I don't mind waiting. Soon though Lim hurries in, a little flustered and apologising for being late. We order coffee, and I turn my recorder on. I want to hear about Lim's experience working for Chinese titles that mainly feature Western luxury brands. How has he been welcomed (or not) into the fold? And I want to know how he has seen the industry change in Shanghai, in the decade that has passed since he moved here from Hong Kong. Lim tells me that when he started no one from China was invited to shows in Europe or in the States. 'No one cared about Asia, no one cared about China,' he tells me. 'I had to deal with PRs who were absolutely, totally racist. I would receive invitations to 'Tim Lim, Hong Kong, *Japan*. There was just a lot of ignorance. There were no Chinese models, no Chinese editors, no visible Asian designers, apart from Anna Sui and the Japanese.'[23]

Slowly things began to change, and about eight years ago, Lim became part of the first wave of Chinese editors travelling to the main fashion capitals in the

world to see high fashion. The rise of China had happened, and suddenly 'there was a real shift: people started acknowledging you in a real way, to know who you were.'[24] Lim goes on to describe how the Chinese adapted to a more outward-facing approach too. 'Before people just were not professional. They didn't know how to dress, they didn't know how to act. So much in this job is about decorum and protocol, and you just didn't know what to expect from a Chinese editor or media partner. People have become so much more sophisticated; they are educated now. You have to remember what a young industry [fashion] is in China. The learning curve has been very quick and very steep.'[25]

This sentiment is one I have heard echoed often among my interviewees, all of whom are part of the 'sophisticated, educated' clique that Lim has identified. One evening, buying cookies at a street stall I meet an older, elegant woman who introduces herself to me as Grace Han. Seemingly pleased to meet a foreigner, she invites me to tea at the Ritz. Intrigued and curious I accept. We walk together and she tells me about her work; over the past three decades she has taught Chinese models, beauty queens and young girls how to become more acceptable to Westerners. 'I started travelling very young and I noticed that foreigners look down on Chinese. The Chinese make noises when they eat, they don't know how to act when they're abroad. I knew all those things, and I realised I could make money out of teaching others.'[26] In the 1990s, Han tells me, she got her first clients, one of whom would go on to become the most famous Chinese model of her day. Business boomed. Today she gives her lessons to wealthy young women from the very table we are sitting at: the decorum and protocol that Lim stressed the importance of, Han is dispensing at a price. And the families who can afford it are lining up; they know how important it is for their young daughters (and a smattering of sons) to fit neatly into this globalised world. If you want to become someone outside of China today, you have to know how to dress and act in a way that's acceptable to us in the West.

The sea turtles know this. They go to school in London and in New York and learn, not just how to make patterns, cut fabric and put a collection together, but how to dress and act. Angel Chen, the young designer from Shenzhen, told me about her struggle to fit in when first arriving in London as a seventeen-year-old, and then going from hanging out only with other Asian students to gradually befriending Westerners, and adopting a style more palatable to her peers. ('Gradually when I was in the U.K., I started to dress in vintage; I dressed myself like a Christmas tree.'[27])

But perhaps I digress a little. I would like to return to Tim Lim, seated comfortably in the plush sofa at Mr Willis on Anfu Lu in Shanghai's Western-friendly French

Concession. We will end this scene here, with something else that Lim told me, something that has come to play a major role in the recent rise of Chinese fashion:

> People are very patriotic here. They like to support Chinese designers and wear Chinese-inspired clothing, so long as they feel that [the brand] is legitimised in a certain way. Not cheap or common. Yes, Louis Vuitton continues to be popular here, but there are always people who want to celebrate their Chineseness, and traditional Chinese values.[28]

Scene 7: Xintiandi Style, Madang Road, Huangpu District

I've just been looking at the Ziggy Chen store, located on the second floor in Xintiandi Style, one of Shanghai's most exclusive shopping malls. The clothes are dark and moody, and quite a bit Rick Owensy in style. The décor is minimal and sophisticated, and everything both looks, and is, expensive. In Ziggy Chen you find only menswear. One door down is the Uma Wang store and it's easy to imagine that while she shops at Uma's, he goes to Ziggy's next door.

After my store visit is over, Ziggy and Hiroki, his Japanese right-hand man, take me for a coffee on the plaza. Hiroki translates for Ziggy; it's obvious they have this double act down pat. Ziggy, via Hiroki, tells me that he began in fashion by starting the brand Decoster in 1999 with his wife. At the time it was one of the first Chinese designer brands, and it did well. Eventually his wife decided to retire and Ziggy too was ready to do something new. Decoster, his 'family business', was looking after itself, and Ziggy had begun travelling to Paris for inspiration. He discovered the Clignancourt flea market, and the vintage clothing and antique furniture on sale had him mesmerized. 'That was the very first time I realized what I was really into.'[29] In 2011, his new brand was born. The beginning was difficult. 'When we started, everybody was wearing Western luxury brands, and they didn't understand how a Chinese brand could be this expensive. We had some customers who came to our store, saw the price tag, and just got pissed.' He laughs. 'They started throwing stuff around, like, "What are you doing?"'[30]

But Ziggy continued, undeterred. He got an international agent and tried to establish himself in Europe and in the States, where his flea-market inspired aesthetic is more familiar. The first advice his new agent gave him was to change his brand name. In China in 2011, using an individual's name for a fashion brand was still uncommon and Ziggy had opted to call his new brand 'The Concept'. But for a company aiming to do well abroad, following the current convention of enhancing brand aura by direct association with its designer is a safe bet. As his

agent pointed out, 'Chen' is unmistakably Chinese, and 'Ziggy' easy to remember. And soon the fortunes of Ziggy Chen began to change. The brand was taken up by L'Éclaireur, one of the most exclusive stores in Paris, known for its dark and moody aesthetic. In typical status-oriented fashion, buyers look to what other buyers pick, and inclusion in one of the world's most prestigious stores can alter the trajectory of a brand. Add to this that the mood in China was shifting too.

> [Chinese people] used to love logos, but suddenly they changed. The economy went down, and people started thinking differently about value. At the same time the media was pushing for less recognizable brands. Chinese designers profited from this too; it became trendy to give attention to home grown talent. The perception of value was changing. We felt the change in customers. We stopped having customers yelling at us about the price, and started getting customers who believed in what we were doing. They're proud, like, 'Oh, China can do something different, we can create something valuable.'[31]

Scene 8: Labelhood Pioneer Fashion & Arts Festival, Yuanmingyuan Road, Huangpu District

Spending time at Labelhood is like taking the temperature of the hippest segment of Shanghai fashion. It's *hot*. It's October 2016, and for four days the next generation of Shanghai fashion is everywhere on Yuanmingyuan Road. A whole building, along with two adjacent gallery spaces, have been taken over by Labelhood's designers and cohorts. Uma Wang's show with 1436, on Labelhood's last day, is the big draw, but many of the designers I've encountered while familiarizing myself with the Shanghai fashion scene these past years have become natural components of Tasha Liu's initiative. Museum of Friendship is showcasing their nymphets on opening day, Angel Chen's bad kids flood the building on the second and Staffonly bring their heavily detailed and streetwear-inspired menswear to the catwalk on the third.

Numéro China, one of the titles Tim Lim works with, is exhibiting fashion films in one of the adjacent galleries. Sankuanz, along with Uma Wang, one of the most respected Chinese designers, who, like her, now shows in Paris, albeit on the menswear schedule, is another participant. Journalists, buyers, students and other hangers-on mill around the space all day, every day. Street-style photographers abound. It's clear why the shows in the conventional tent pale in comparison: this is where the creativity and eccentricity of Shanghai fashion is concentrated.

Considering that this is Labelhood's first season, what Liu and her partners have amassed is impressive, though perhaps not surprising. Someone had to do it. The amount of young designers who have returned home to start their brands in the past couple of years is remarkable, and they are full of determination to show what they have learned. Not willing, or, perhaps, able to fit into the rather more staid format of the official schedule, they want to make their mark on something new. There is a certain clannishness to the fashionistas here: they are all young (none seem over thirty) and they dress for attention in urban, cool kid outfits. The Dalston/Lower East Side influence is palpable. Interestingly, the shows here have no tickets or seating plan: you queue up, show the bracelet you received at registration, and in you go. First come, first serve. I hypothesize that perhaps this lack of hierarchy is due to the fledgling nature of the Chinese fashion scene; the industry is too intimate and too young to have developed a very strict pecking order. That said, here, as everywhere, the fashion week participants find ways to signal their status – there are the brands worn for one (Vetements is very popular, as is Supreme and Balenciaga, while of the locals Sankuanz is a favourite), but also the lucky few who get whisked past the queue to gain access to the show space before everyone else. This is my third Shanghai Fashion Week, and whereas no one paid me much heed at the beginning, thanks to some local press about *Vestoj*, a few articles in translation that have gone WeChat viral, a handful of talks at several small and one large venue alongside dogged interviewing with the who's who of Shanghai fashion, I find that my own status has risen. More than once I'm being whisked past the queue at Labelhood, only to awkwardly inhabit the show space, trying to look unaffected – much like I would back home in Paris. Two years after my first visit, I have become both observer and participant.

Scene 9: Labelhood Pioneer Fashion & Arts Festival, Suzhou Road, Huangpu District

Six months have passed since I was last in Shanghai, and it's time for fashion week again. For its second offering Labelhood have taken over the Bailian Fashion Center, an old disused factory building on the Suzhou Creek where you might otherwise see a stream of joggers headed towards the Bund. For four days this April, however, the quiet residential street is instead taken over by Shanghai's most pre-eminent fashion-lovers, pros and fans alike. The concrete building has three floors and countless rooms, and something seems to be going on in every

one of them. There is a coffee-shop on the ground floor, making espresso and macchiato – still a relatively new fad here. Nike has set up shop, exhibiting a collaboration with a young British designer, and Lipton Tea has taken over one room and decorated it with plastic cherry blossoms and a candy-coloured bar that serves artificially flavoured teas all day long. Converse has their corner too, set up like a makeshift photo studio, where visitors can try on sneakers and have their pictures taken against a logoed backdrop.

Alongside the sponsors, Yang Li, the Australian/Chinese designer, is visiting from London for two days, to put on a pop-up shop for his new initiative 'Samizdat' to go alongside the concert night he is also hosting, and Angel Chen is DJing another evening. Like last season, the set-up is a mixture of small-scale fashion shows, static exhibitions and performances. The designers with shows have been chosen via a panel of judges, mostly Chinese along with a smattering of foreigners. This year I have been asked to be one of them. I have also been asked to play a more active role in Labelhood; together with the editor of *Numéro China*, Karchun Leung, who has become a friend over these past years, I am hosting what we are, tongue-in-cheek, calling 'The Serious Talks Series'. This means that we, for three mornings, are a more or less improvised duet, attempting to bring some 'seriousness' or at least some refection to proceedings with the help of a selection of designer guests. On the first day we speak to designers Steven Tai, Xu Zhi and Momo Wang about 'The Siren Call of the West: Why do Chinese designers continue to court the attention of the Western fashion establishment?'

The conversation goes along what is, by now, to me, familiar lines. All three designers studied in England, at Central Saint Martins. All three make a point of being 'London-based', and they have all experienced being part of London Fashion Week at some point: Museum of Friendship showed in 2015, Steven Tai has been showing since 2015 and Xu Zhi is with the London Showrooms, an initiative that promotes London-based designers abroad. As the designers tell it, London is typically the first port of call for a Chinese designer wanting to show during one of the four main fashion weeks (New York, London, Milan, Paris), and there are currently six Chinese designers showing on schedule. Paris, by contrast, is where you aim to go – being accepted here is a mark of distinction. At the time of writing only four Chinese designers show on the ready-to-wear menswear or womenswear schedule in Paris – Uma Wang, Yang Li, Masha Ma and Sankuanz – though many more have a showroom presence with one of the myriad international showrooms that flock to Paris every fashion week (including the three on our panel).

During our conversation, Tai, Xu and Wang agree that though they are able to support themselves via the local market, having strong connections to one of the fashion capitals in the West helps elevate their brands in the eyes of domestic customers. Interestingly, having a presence abroad also helps the Chinese designers' reputation at home in another way: being a part of the select group of industry people who are able to travel – to see shows and showrooms for editors and buyers, and to present your work for the designers – is proof of your ambition as well as your economic and social status. The most important Chinese editors and buyers support their home-grown talent by coming to see their work, and designers, who often share the same showrooms, network with one another and share tips about who to work with. Informal dinners add to the feeling of being one of the 'chosen few', and, unsurprisingly, a lot of deals get made this way.

Being able 'to show' former teachers, friends and peers in Europe or the US how far you've come is also a reason why so many sea turtles are keen to present their work in the West. This is a sentiment echoed by Une Yea, of Staffonly. During our interview she told me that building a brand in China is 'easy' now – the production is cheaper and more straightforward, and the support system is already in place. But once you have a good thing going, you want to show it off. 'We really want a presentation abroad, because I studied there so I want to show how I've grown to my teachers and friends and also to the market.'[32]

Epilogue

During the three years I have spent travelling regularly to Shanghai something curious has happened – I've gone from being a bystander to being a contributor. Arriving for the first time in October 2014, I had countless questions and no answers. Today some of those questions have been answered, though many others have arisen in their place.

That the designers I've encountered in Shanghai see Paris as the pinnacle of success is clear – the city represents history and tradition and, in the eyes of young Chinese designers, remains the citadel of high fashion. Every season those who can afford it, and some who can't, travel to the city to showcase their wares and rub shoulders with peers. As of yet these are mainly other Chinese designers, though little by little a few of the more established designers are making inroads into the French fashion establishment. Becoming a recognized part of the fashion system in Paris is a slow and costly process, however. Masha Ma, one of the more well-known Shanghai-based designers, has, for example, elected to

establish her company in Paris, with which comes hiring French staff and paying taxes in the country. In return she, for the time being, has a guaranteed slot during fashion week. Uma Wang, as mentioned earlier, has a formidable French PR agent – one she shares with Yang Li. Nevertheless, becoming accepted is a circuitous process. The Chinese designers who show during Paris Fashion Week are typically saddled with bad scheduling slots, either on the first day of the week before most press and buyers have arrived in the city, or early in the morning when the fashion glitterati are disinclined to rise.

Interviews and casual enquiries with Paris-based fashion industry participants, from PR and sales agents to press and designers, confirm what I already suspect: few have any grasp of what Chinese fashion is. When pressed, the designer typically mentioned is Yang Li, though most consider him either Australian or 'London-based'. Another designer sometimes mentioned is Guo Pei, who has a studio in Beijing and who recently rose to prominence in the West due to a dress worn by the singer Rihanna to the Met Ball in 2015, organized to celebrate the museum's high-profile exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Guo Pei now shows on the Paris *haute couture* schedule, though her shows suffer from the same dearth of a high-profile Western fashion industry audience.

The Western fashion industry is loath to move on from the perception of China as fashion's 'bad guy', whether the 'bad' in question concerns production methods or aesthetic sophistication. As long as China remains inferior, Western fashion brands can compare themselves favourably, and in the process add value to high prices and an exclusive stance.

As for me, the ignorance I arrived with has, at least partially, subsided. My first visits to Shanghai were dominated by self-consciousness and self-reproach; why had I never bothered to find out what fashion in China was like? Is there such a thing as 'Chinese style'? And how should I judge the work I encountered? This last question plagued me the most, and still does. Arriving as an observer, scholar spectacles perched on nose, I know better than to judge. But unwittingly I still do. I compare the designers I encounter in Shanghai with the designers I know back home, and I find them wanting. I get frustrated and rebuke myself; why compare this nascent industry to the one in Paris, going as it has been for more than half a century? But then again, if these Shanghai-based designers are aiming for international recognition and to show during Paris Fashion Week, why not hold them to the same standards? Though if I do, I find I end up with the same prejudiced stance that I reject when expressed by a Didier Grumbach or a Colin McDowell.

Becoming an, albeit peripheral, part of the Shanghai fashion scene has added another layer to this conundrum because as you become a part of the

phenomenon you're ostensibly researching your perspective shifts. I've been asked my opinion about Shanghai designers, on and off the record, more times than I care to remember. I've been invited to judge, and to partake. A memorably illustrious moment occurred on my last trip, April 2017. Travelling as a guest of the Shanghai Fashion Week Organization, I am to host my 'Serious Talks Series' on three consecutive days, then another talk about *Vestoj* a few days later at Mode, the official tradeshow. Courtesy of Shanghai Fashion Week I am staying at the Langham, a five-star hotel with an endless breakfast buffet that has me greedily getting up much earlier than I otherwise would. In between talks, shows and showroom visits, I am invited to lunch with Lv Xiaolei, or Madame Lu as she is affectionately called. Madame Lu is vice secretary general of Shanghai Fashion Week Organization, and has done more than anyone else to raise the profile of Shanghai Fashion Week and establish the city as China's foremost stage for fashion. An amiable, not very fashionable-looking woman in late middle age she speaks no English. Nevertheless she asks many questions and is keen to converse with the help of Landon Du, the US-educated press representative of Shanghai Fashion Week, and Tasha Liu, proprietor of Dong Liang and Labelhood's initiator. 'What do you think of Shanghai Fashion Week?' 'What can we do better?' I try to answer in a way that lies somewhere between diplomacy and sincerity, and Madame Lu seems pleased.

Little by little I have noticed attitudes changing in Paris vis à vis Chinese designers, though unsurprisingly for the acceptance the designers I encountered crave, there is a long way to go. An interesting tension is that the Western fashion industry still appears to expect Chinese designers to, in some way, address their cultural heritage in their work – to conform to a Western notion of 'Chineseness' – whereas the designers I encountered in Shanghai are all reluctant for their aesthetic to be pegged as 'Chinese'. As they see it, they are 'designers' above all – to be seen as a 'Chinese designer' would be reductive and anyway wouldn't reflect the range of influences drawn on, or the complexity of Chinese cultural history. In these diverging expectations lies an important clue that goes at least some way to explain the difficulty I have had in knowing what lens to apply when judging what I have encountered on the contemporary Shanghai fashion scene, and the vague grasp that many of my peers have of Chinese fashion designers in Paris.

That Paris continues to exert allure for young Chinese designers is clear. Not surprisingly this allure has less to do with financial necessity than it does the symbolic capital that international recognition has for any designer. Paris continues to be the world's premier stage for fashion, and the air of exclusiveness that the Fédération Française de la Couture carries on honing is vital in preserving

this function. As Chinese designers continue to make inroads in the bastion that is Paris Fashion Week, an intricate negotiation is taking place on behalf of both the designers themselves and their desired audience. The 'Chinese fashion' that Monsieur Grumbach doubted the presence of already exists. But how can fashion designers in Shanghai and elsewhere in China exert the influence they hanker after, while rebuffing the preconceived (Western) idea of Chineseness? And by refusing to conform, are they shooting themselves in the foot?

Notes

1 A. Aronowsky Cronberg, interview with Didier Grumbach, 5 February 2013 as published in 'On Power', *Vestoj*, 2013, xxv.
2 For further reading, see Juanjuan Wu, *Chinese Fashion: From Mao to Now* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); Zhang Hongxing and Lauren Parker (eds), *China Design Now* (London: V&A, 2008); A. Bolton, *China: Through the Looking Glass* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).
3 Jianyang Fan, 'The Emperor's New Museum', *The New Yorker*, 7 November 2016, 31.
4 Interview with Kian Zhang, proprietor of Old Lyric and Autumn Sonata, 17 November 2015.
5 Robin Givhan, 'Meet Yang Li, a Designer Putting China on Fashion's Biggest Stage', *The Washington Post*, 26 October 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/designer-yang-li-is-putting-china-on-fashions-biggest-stage/2014/10/26/637f6f62-4ff7-11e4-babe-e91da079cb8a_story.html?utm_term=.7b15ef4fb7d.
6 Interview with Queennie Yang, editor of *Business of Fashion* China edition, 20 November 2015.
7 Interview with subject, 14 October 2016.
8 Interview with subject, 25 October 2016.
9 Interview with subject, 15 November 2015.
10 Interview with subject, 22 October 2016.
11 Interview with subject, 14 October 2016.
12 Interview with subject, 14 October 2016.
13 10 Corso Como is a renowned fashion store with a flagship on Milan's Corso Como, run by former *Vogue Italia* editor Franca Sozzani since 1991. In 2013 Sozzani partnered with Trendy International Group and Samsung Cheil to open an outpost in Shanghai.
14 Interview with subject, 14 October 2016.
15 Interview with subject, 14 October 2016.
16 Interview with subject, 24 October 2016.
17 Interview with subject, 5 February 2013 as published in 'On Power', *Vestoj*, 2013, xxv.

18 Simona Segre Reinach, 'The Identity of Fashion in Contemporary China and the New Relationships with the West', *Fashion Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 65.
19 Danielle Hu in interview with author, 26 October 2016.
20 Ann Marie Leshkowich and Carla Jones, 'What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?', *Fashion Theory* 7, no. 3/4 (2003): 281–300.
21 For further reading, see Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello (eds), *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010).
22 Robin Givhan, 'This Designer Wants to Swaddle You in So Many Yards of Sensual Velvet this Fall', *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/03/05/uma-wang-will-swaddle-you-in-so-much-velvet-youll-feel-like-a-dickens-novel/?utm_term=.50c27ba68951.
23 Interview with subject, 22 November 2015.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Interview with subject, 23 October 2016.
27 Interview with subject, 24 October 2016.
28 Interview with subject, 22 November 2015.
29 Interview with subject, 18 November, 2015.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Interview with subject, 14 October 2016.