**Weaving Fashion Stories in Shanghai: Heritage, Retro and Vintage Fashion in Modern Shanghai**

**Dr Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas London College of Fashion**

Shanghai’s identity as a fashion city is inexorably linked to its past, both real and imagined. The contemporary fashion world East and West repeatedly references Shanghai’s most celebrated stylish era of the 1920s and 1930s whether through fashion shoots, products or branding. Fashion consumers make positive associations with brands that mediate the brand experience through storytelling (Hancock, 2009). Place marketing leverages the power of particular geographic locations to imbue certain cities with the cachet of chicness or innovation with respect to those brands founded or operating within them.

Heritage has been seen as a key driver for differentiation of international fashion brands, especially in the luxury segment and has been a popular strategy for Western brands’ entry into the Chinese market (Lu, 2008). The domestic Chinese fashion market is also adopting this marketing approach with the relaunch of heritage brands, or ‘time-honoured’ (laozihao) brands as those with a hundred year history are known. Beauty brands such as Shanghai VIVE have relaunched themselves with a brand identity firmly situated in pre-1949 Shanghai; the brand’s flagship store is situated within one of Shanghai’s key heritage buildings. Chinese heritage apparel brands such as Hengyuanxiang, a woollens producer established in 1927, aims to establish itself as a key international player in luxury branded goods (Bevole, Gofman & Moskowitz, 2012). Another Chinese brand using its heritage as a differentiation strategy is Humsuit, the tailoring firm established in 1929, whose tailoring techniques have been placed on the Shanghai Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

Brands such as Shanghai Tang, although officially a Hong Kong company, bases its entire brand identity on the celebration of Shanghai’s opulent era designing product, interiors and brand marketing communications that exploit customers’ interest in retro (复古, fugu). Many Western luxury brands have used retro-Shanghai as a backdrop to their fashion shows and marketing campaigns e.g. the fashion film that accompanied Dior’s Lady Dior Grey, and similarly Shanghai Tang has recently held its catwalk shows in Shanghai, affirming to the authenticity of the brand identity. The city of Shanghai itself has emerged as the driver of China’s retro brand renaissance including both brands that celebrate the early modern period but also those that reference Mao-era aesthetics such as fashion brand Ospop whose classic liberation (Jie Fang Jie) shoes are ‘proudly Made in China’.

Whilst the interest in heritage and retro brands appears common to both Western and Chinese fashion consumers, it has been commonly stated that for Chinese fashion consumers vintage was a stylish step too far; Confucian cultural beliefs associating pre-owned clothes with death and economic austerity (Palmer & Clark, 2005). Yet Shanghai now boasts a burgeoning vintage fashion scene with clothing and accessories sourced overseas and sold in boutiques like Lolo Love Vintage and Shanghai Code, luxury vintage consignment stores and fairs as well as snapped by Shanghai Streetstyle bloggers.

Writing in *Fashion’s World Cities* Breward (2006) pondered whether its twenty-first century renaissance might see Shanghai develop an alternative fashion city identity to those established in the West, yet contemporary evidence shows that Shanghai is branding itself as a fashion heritage city in much the same way as the historic fashion capitals of Europe Paris and London. This paper uses field research in Shanghai to explore the issues raised.

BIOGRAPHY: Dr Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas, London College of Fashion

Currently Course Leader Access Fashion Business at London College of Fashion I am a researcher, fashion design practitioner and lecturer with teaching experience in the UK, Asia and the US. As partner in fashion-forward London childrenswear company ‘Miss Fleur’ I was involved with all stages of the product-design process. As a committee member of the Costume Society in England and the Textile Society of Hong Kong, I have organised events and run study tours in Europe and Asia. My research interests are in the Chinese Fashion Industry, Cross-Cultural Marketing and Fashion Blogging.