



**THE *CHINGLISH* REVOLUTION**  
**HOW EMERGING CHINESE FASHION BRANDS**  
**SPEAK ENGLISH.**

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Thesis submitted for the title of

Philosophiae Doctor

April 2016



## Acknowledgements

Ringrazio la mia famiglia. Mia mamma, mio papà e mia sorella per la pazienza con cui mi hanno supportato, accompagnato e sopportato, durante questo percorso ricco di insidie ma anche di soddisfazioni.

Ringrazio Cristina Lambiase, senza la quale non avrei mai intrapreso questa strada. Ringrazio Rubens la cui guida, supervisione e amicizia è stata fondamentale per la realizzazione di questa tesi. Ringrazio il Dr. Pelet e la Prof.ssa Mora per i preziosi commenti che mi hanno permesso di migliorare di molto la qualità del lavoro. Ringrazio tutte le persone che ho incontrato presso l'Università degli Studi di Udine e altrove, e che mi hanno offerto aiuto e sostegno. Ringrazio le persone che ho incontrato in ambito lavorativo e che mi hanno permesso di crescere professionalmente.

Ringrazio i miei amici. Quelli d'infanzia, che in questo giorno assistono alla mia terza discussione, quelli del felice e mai dimenticato periodo universitario, e quelli che ho incontrato più tardi ma è come se ci conoscessimo da sempre. Ringrazio chi è stato al mio fianco, a volte da lontano, ma sempre presente, e che mi ha offerto amicizia e amore.

I am thankful to the academic professionals that I have had the honour to meet and to work with. To Klaus Heine, to whom I owe my watershed experience in China. I am thankful to all my dearest friends from Shanghai. I am sure we will meet again, again and again.

Je remercie Jean-Éric.



*My apologies to great questions for small answers.*

*Wisława Szymborska*



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## General Introduction

*My traditions come from both the East and the West. That's the new China.*

*Masha Ma, Chinese Fashion Designer!*

China is a hot topic. Is it also a fashion setter? For several reasons China is expected to become a global fashion centre. First, by virtue of its steady economic growth. Mead (2011) argues that Italy, fifty years ago, became a fashion centre benefiting from the market growth centred in the United States. Likewise, China's economical growth lets foresee the arrival of Shanghai as a world-class centre of fashion, 'because fashion follows money' (Mead, 2011, p. 563). Second, by virtue of its shift in political orientation. Since the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2011), the cultural and creative industries have been included as key points for the economic and social development of the Country (Wuwei, 2011). Since then, 'Creative Industries' has become one of the ten popular phrases in China's mainstream media (Wuwei, 2011). Third, by virtue of a new economical configuration. Due to

the collapse of Chinese exports since the 2008-2009 financial crisis (Jing, 2011), many Chinese companies have shifted their strategy: while before they served the global market as original equipment manufacturer (OEM), especially supplying foreign countries, they are now seeking to become original brand manufacturers (OBM), serving branded products to both the domestic and global markets. Also in the fashion industry, Chinese companies increasingly aspire to build brands (D'Astous et al., 2004; Schlevogt, 2000) and to go global (Lindgren, 2015). Fourth, by virtue of its global media exposure. Not a single day goes by without that the global media reports and reads about China (Roll, 2008). Blumer (1969) suggests that 'Fashion always seeks to keep abreast of the times' and the 21st is recurrently addressed 'as the Chinese Century' (Martin-Liao, 2008). Thus, the media buzz that surrounds the Country might facilitate the positioning of China as fashion centre. Last but not least, the increasing role of the Country as a political power in the international scenario lets foresee it will assume a new role also as cultural influencer. Diana Crane (2000) argues that 'changes in clothing and in the discourses surrounding clothing indicate shifts in social relationships and tensions between different social groups'. The growing weight of China in the global political net of powers should reflect in a major role played by the Country in shaping the narratives and the discourses surrounding clothing.

However, the rising interest from both China and the global market on the rise of Chinese creativity and fashion industries does not immediately translates into the establishment of international fashion brands. Actually, the relationship between China and branding is a matter of debate itself. It was the 2004 when, in a well-known declaration, Shelly Lazarus, chairman of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, declared that China has not brands (as cited in Wang, 2008). Since then, much has happened. In 2014, the multinational networking and telecommunications equipment and services company Huawei was the first Chinese brand to enter the Best Global Brands report issued by Interbrand (2015), the leading consultancy company in branding. In 2015, in the same report, the number of Chinese brands included was two: Huawei (ranking 88th) and Lenovo

(ranking 100th). Despite the fact that much of the Chinese spectacular economic growth can be attributed to the textile and apparel sector (Zhao, 2013), so far no Chinese brand from the fashion industry has been included. However, the pace of change is fast. The first fashion brand claiming a Chinese identity and opening a store in Paris was Shiatzy Chen in the late seventies. Short after it was followed by Blanc de Chine, established in 1989, and Shanghai Tang, founded in 1996. Recently, a wave of young designers of Chinese origins has taken part to international fashion shows.

Against this backdrop, purpose of our study is to investigate on the emergence of Chinese fashion brands in the international fashion system. In order to do that, we first account for a paramount overview of fashion theories, enriched by a description of the history of fashion in China. We focus on the fashion system theory suggested by Kawamura, as it offers a study on the first case of Asian designer being internationally successful: the Japanese Revolution. We cross literature from fashion with the utmost research on branding, specifically drawing upon the country-of-origin stream of research. The research design is made up of two main stages and two qualitative methodology approaches: Grounded Theory and Qualitative Cluster Analysis. In the first stage we develop a framework in order to identify Chinese fashion brands participating in the fashion system. In the second stage we identify common patterns of access to the fashion system. Results are compared with the antecedent case of the Japanese Revolution, i.e. the wave of successful Japanese designers in the 1980s.

Findings suggest that Chinese fashion brands are emerging. However, they do not access the fashion system as they actually rise within it: most of the designers have studied in a Western country, preferably in the US and in the UK; two fashion institutes emerge as pivotal: Parsons - The New School of Design in New York and the Central Saint Martins institute in London. Finally, their use of the Chinese-asset is limited. Unlike the Japanese, who had dramatised their foreign and exotic identity and accessed the fashion system through an *exoticisation*

process, Chinese designers apply to the educational system of the main fashion capitals placed in the West, especially in the US and in the UK, and access the system through a *naturalisation* process.

**PART I**  
**OVERVIEW ON**  
**FASHION AND FASHION BRANDS:**  
**A Cultural/Geographic Perspective.**



**SECTION I**  
**FASHION - The West vs Rest Issue**





# Chapter 1

## Is there a Western bias?

In the Italian language the term *moda* defines a statistical concept: it is the value that appears most frequently in a set of data. It also defines a social concept: the behavior adopted generally and uniformly by groups of people in a certain period of time and in a particular field of action (Mora, 2011).

The majority of the European languages use the term *moda/mode* to both define the statistical concept and the social phenomenon: *moda* in Italian, *mode* in French, *mode* in German and *moda* in Spanish. Anglophone speakers use the term *mode* for the statistical concept and the term *fashion* for the social one, though the

term mode can be used as a synonym for fashion. Hence, *moda/mode* and fashion define the value that appears most often within a universe of reference, both in the mathematic and social domain, regardless of the area of interest: e.g., action, thought, moral belief, music, art, leisure, science, religion, or politics. The domain in which fashion operates is very extensive and it is not confined to the area of apparel (Blumer, 1969). Nevertheless, to date the terms *moda/mode* and fashion are mostly associated to the specific domain of clothing.

The association between *moda/mode* and fashion and clothing dates back to the 15th century, when the french term *mode* first appeared in the ‘Dictionnaire de la mode au XXe Siècle’ (Remaury, 1996) describing it as a collective manner of dressing. The etymology of mode might be rooted in the term *modus* which means manner in English and *manière* in French. While, the etymology of fashion originates from the Latin *facio* or *factio* which means making or doing (Barnard, 1996; Brenninkmeyer, 1963).

A number of further terms related to the clothing domain is available: apparel, dress, garments, clothing, mode, custom, style, vogue, trend, look, taste, fad, rage and craze. Some attempts have been made by scholars to distinguish between one another. Specifically, style and vogue may be used as synonym of fashion but style also denotes conformity to a prevalent standard while vogue highlights the temporary nature of the popularity of a certain fashion (Kawamura, 2005). Brenninkmeyer (1963) defines mode as a synonym of fashion; clothing as originating from cloth and meaning a piece of woven or felted material made of wool, hair or cotton, suitable for wrapping or wearing and also defining the distinctive dress worn by members of any profession; dress comes from the Middle French *dresser* that means to arrange whereas its English counterpart ‘dress’, indicates the principal outer-garments worn by women or the visible part of clothing; costume refers to the mode of personal attire of a nation, class or period. Barnard (1996) distinguishes between clothing and fashion, as the first term is about function and the second about meaning. Similarly, Kawamura

(2005) defines clothing as material production and fashion as symbolic production.

Fashion is a social phenomenon under constant evolution. Thus, it is not possible to provide one single definition. Within the limits of this thesis we focus on the domain of clothing. Moreover, before introducing our theoretical framework we account for a paramount overview of the main fashion theories that have been developed through history.

## **1.1. Overview on Main Fashion Theories.**

Despite the prominent role that fashion has in the everyday life of people, early studies on the phenomena can't be tracked until the nineteenth-century. During this period the Industrial Revolution led to a number of factors that had a direct impact on it. The population was increasing as it was the division of labor; technologies improved and productivity soared; the commerce expanded and a new social mobility became possible; moreover, the invention of the sewing machine made it possible to manufacture large quantities of clothes at cheaper prices, driving to the growing democratisation and widespread of new mode styles throughout Europe. It is in this context that fashion changes took place at an increasingly rapid pace and a new interest in the topic aroused (Kawamura, 2004). The construct was now investigated by different disciplines that comprise anthropology, history, political science, philosophy, sociology, psychology and economic studies. We focus on the social science approach.

Studies can be categorised into three main phases: since the eighteenth to the nineteenth-century intellectual discussions by renowned thinkers of other disciplines; during the nineteenth and early twentieth-century the contributes by the early theorists; and since the 50's of the twentieth-century the theories

proposed by contemporary scholars.

## **Intellectual Discussions**

The French Philosopher **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1780) defines fashion as a negative force that destroys virtue and masks vice (Rousseau, 1750). Adam Smith observes that the human desire for ornament is ubiquitous and has no limit (Smith, 1976) and that it forms an important part of the relationship between the various ranks of society: his general version of fashion focuses on the transmission from the rich to the poor (Smith, 2015). The author also investigates on the relationship between fashion and moral sentiments: he argues that when fashion coincides with natural principle, it enhances our sensibility to discern what is morally good or bad (Baldini, 2008). Kant (1724-1804) associates fashion with vanity and insanity: the former because there's no a functional value in following fashion; the latter because it implies the servile endorsement of those who has a higher authority (Baldini, 2008). Likewise, Nietzsche (1844-1900) posits fashion as a the result of a servile and immature mind: he argues that the more fashionable a man is, the more immature he is, and that women are generally more immature and as a consequence more fashion conscious than men (Baldini, 2008). Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) draws on the relation between mode and modernity. He argues that fashion is the hallmark of modernity by virtue of its transitory and constantly changing nature. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) introduces the relationship with the two extremes of frivolousness and death. He states that the most typical characteristic of fashion is its necessary denial of the natural course of things. That is, old-fashioned stuff is preserved from being discarded and it is promoted as something entirely new, it is rescued from becoming obsolete and consumed by death (Bretas, 2013). The author also pinpoints the anticipatory role of fashion. He argues that, due to its close connection to the sensibility of women, fashion is disseminated with cues of what the future is about to bring (Baldini, 2008).

## Early Theorists

However, early systemic works on fashion appear only since the nineteenth century, especially in the field of studies of psychology and sociology.

In its seminal work “The Psychology of Clothes”, **John Carl Flügel** (1930) suggests that scholars investigating on the clothing domain, agree on at least one basic assumption. That is, clothes satisfy three fundamental needs of the human being: protection, modesty, and decoration. Drawing on this conclusion and on Freud’s model of the human psyche, the author accounts for a thorough analysis of why we wear clothes and why clothes vary so greatly. He distinguishes between fixed costume, which changes slowly in time, and modish costume, which changes rapidly. The second is what we investigate here under the term of fashion. With reference to the latter, Flügel tackles the following questions: why does fashion exist and how does it disseminate. Flügel argues that the *raison d’être* of fashion is competition. More specifically, social competition and, though at a less manifest extent, sexual competition. Imitating people we admire is an essential trait of human being. Thus, people from an inferior social status imitate the clothing style of people from a higher social status. People of higher social status follow two ways to avoid imitation, either they promulgate sumptuary laws or change style. The second route fuels the mechanism of fashion: a new style is introduced until it will be imitated and a newer one will be reached for. This double movement works only in a context of social fluidity: social classes of lower status need to believe they can aspire to ascend the class ladder. Otherwise, a strongly hierarchical society hampers the aspirations and with them the imitation tendencies. Flügel also underlines that initially the interest for fashion involved only a restricted coterie (i.e. the court and the main capitals) and that it was with the introduction of the bourgeois and democracy social models, that the fashion phenomena spread throughout the whole society. However, he argues that the fashion mechanism won’t be fuelled once the democracy will be fully realized. Furthermore, he contends that generally, each individual experiences the both sides of being imitator and imitated. Flügel also investigates on how do a fashion

originates. He contrasts the idea that the modish costume comes as a suggestions by mysterious authorities based in Paris. He argues that a fashion item is first proposed by the restricted circle of producers and afterwards it is endorsed by a group of influencers that will wear those styles. Nevertheless, before a style turns into a fashionable item, it must be accepted and favoured by a great amount of people. Hence, it must resonate with the *zeitgeist* of that period. Flügel argues that the work of producers first and the influence of early endorsers afterwards is not sufficient for a style to become fashion, unless it meets the ideals of that epoch.

## **Classic Theorists**

Imitation is the core theme that explains fashion also in the thesis of most classic sociologists.

In the 1890 the French sociologist **Gabriel Tarde** publishes “The Law of Imitation” (Tarde, 1890[1993]), in that he first illustrates the imitation theory. The author argues that imitation and innovation are two basic elements of the society: the human being, who is by his essence a social being, imitates ideas, customs, behaviours and social values; especially, he imitates innovations in order for them to be disseminated, and once they have been imitated, they are innovated again. This leads to a constant cycle which can be found also in the fashion phenomenon. He makes a further distinction between imitation-tradition (custom imitation, ancestors’ imitation), which ensures the connection between generations, and imitation – fashion (imitation of contemporaries, of strangers) which ensures the cohesion between the same generation. The author also contends that when the imitation-tradition prevails, the society believes more in its country, whereas when it is the prestige of the epoch to be higher, the imitation-fashion prevails.

Drawing from the evolutionary perspective that dominated the scientific debate during the second half of the nineteenth-century (e.g., Darwin, 1858 - On the Origin of species), **Herbert Spencer** (1876[1967]) investigates fashion in the perspective of the social evolution. The basic assumption of his theory is that

organic and social systems progress similarly: institutions emerge and persist when they provide the best organisational pattern to facilitate the survival of the population in their natural and social environment and, over time, a natural selection of institution occurs. He identifies and investigates a list of fundamental institutions, among the which the ceremonial one also accounts for an explication of fashion. Spencer recognises that human interaction is mediated by symbols and ceremonies that structure how individuals are to behave toward one another. He argues that the concern for symbols and ceremonials is greater in those societies where the degree of political centralisation and social inequality is higher. Whereas, the less a society is politically centralised and unequal, the less people will be concerned about symbols and ceremonies. Based on this argument, he contends that the transition from the militant society (where the government dominates on citizens' life) to the industrial societies (where citizens experience greater freedom) drives the emphasis from the ceremonial to a new phenomenon that is fashion. In the same page with the general view of that time, he argues that fashion is an imitation process, and that it can be justified either by reverence or emulation. While the former is meant to show respect, the latter is meant to affirm parity. Spencer notes that societies are moving toward the increasing freedom of citizens and interprets fashion as the positive mark of the transition from military to industrial societies.

In 1899 the American economist and sociologist **Thorstein Veblen** (1899[1949]) publishes the widely recognised treatise “The Theory of the Leisure Class”, conceptualising and analysing the functions of the ‘conspicuous consumption’. Inside of this perspective, he appoints a prominent role to fashion. Veblen theorises that, in the modern society, the businessmen who own the means of production employ themselves in useless activities that do not contribute to the economy and to the material production of those goods and services that are useful for the functioning of a society. Indeed, they engage themselves in unproductive practices of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. The role of fashion is to signal the membership to the leisure class, by wearing dresses

that hamper any working activity. Veblen is pioneer when he starts his argument on fashion by making a distinction between clothing and dress. He defines the former as a material good that serves the purpose of physical comfort and the latter as a material good that serves the purpose of reputable appearance. Reputability is, in his analysis, co-incident with the pecuniary strength of the household (social unit) in question and, to a greater extent, of the social class. He argues that the dress, originating in the principle of adornment, constitutes an economic fact, as it is an index of the pecuniary strength of its wearer who is member of an economical class. Moreover, Veblen makes a distinction between the wearer and the owner of the dress, for they are not necessarily the same person. Under the patriarchal organisation of society, where the social unit is the man, the dress of the women is an exponent of the wealth of the man; in modern society, where the social unit is the household, the woman's dress represents the wealth of the household to which she belongs. Hence, the dress is worn by the woman but its owner is either the man or the household. Moreover, Veblen recognises that as soon as the price of the goods declines, their consumption is no longer evidence of pecuniary strength and falls out of favour. Hence, the dress needs to be replaced by a newer one, to the extent that 'no outer garment may be worn more than once'. Here resides, a further characteristic of fashion, that is novelty. Veblen argues that 'Fashion does not demand continual flux and change simply because that way of doing is foolish; flux and change and novelty are demanded by the central principle of dress and conspicuous waste. Concluding, Veblen outlines a theory of woman's dress, constituted of three cardinal principles. First, expensiveness: apparel must be uneconomical; it must afford evidence of the ability of the wearer's economic group to pay for things that are in themselves of no use to any one concerned - to pay without getting an equivalent in comfort or in gain. Second, novelty: woman's apparel must afford evidence of having been worn but for a relatively short time, as well as, with respect to many articles. Third, ineptitude: it must afford evidence of incapacitating the wearer for any gainful occupation; and it should also make it apparent that she is permanently unfit for any useful effort, even after the restraint of the apparel is



removed. In the same track as other authors, Veblen believes that dress is a vehicle by which to assert superior status in relation to one's peers within the leisure class, as well as collectively displaying the superiority of this class over all others. Moreover, influenced by the evolutionary perspective of Darwin, he believes that in the future men and women would progress beyond the restless changes of dress styles, and that in their place would emerge a set of relatively stable costumes like in ancient Greece, Rome, China, and Japan. On the stationary fashion of Eastern countries we will return again.

**William Graham Sumner** (1906) defines fashion as a mores of lower level. The author publishes the work “Folkways”, where he introduces the two concept of folkways and mores. He argues that the folkways are the traditional ways to satisfy an interest: they exist in fact and extend over the whole of life; they are “right”, because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral ghosts. When the elements of truth and right are developed into doctrines of welfare, the folkways are raised to another level, they become Mores. The mores are folkways to which a philosophical and ethical element has been added: they win utility and importance and become the source of the science and the art of living. Sumner contends that there are a number of mass phenomena which are on a lower grade than the mores, lacking the elements of truth and right with respect to welfare: these are fashion, poses, fads, and affectations. While, folkways are norms for routine or casual interaction, the mores are social norms widely observed and considered to have moral significance. Fashion is a step between mores and folkways: on the one hand it is a form of dominance of the group over the individual; on the other hand it lacks the elements of truth and right that contribute to the wealth of the society and that define the mores. Also in the analysis of Sumner we find reference to the imitation process, when he argues that ‘what nobles invented, generally in order to give especial zest to the costume of a special occasion, that burghers and later peasants imitated and made common’. Finally, the author notes how fixity of mores is extreme in Asia. Even though - as he suggests - ‘when a long period of

time is taken into account, changes in the mores are perceptible in the Eastern countries as well'. A prompt that will later find close attention in the stream of international fashion studies.

**Ferdinand Tönnies** is a German sociologist. In 1912 he introduces the two concepts of *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft*. Inside of this theoretical perspective he further operates a distinction between custom and fashion. The authors argues that *Gemenischaft* defines the traditional and rural community, whereas *Gesellschaft* defines the modern urban society. While, to the former belongs custom, to the second belongs fashion. Both custom and fashion are an expression of social will, i.e. the general will that serves to order and regulate individual will. However, the two concepts must be strictly distinct from one another. The nature of custom is to be archaic, fixed, heavy, serious. It has the endurance of religious practices and develops in time. The nature of fashion is to be fluid, superficial, an ever-new desire for change; it develops in space and serves to document wealth as well as taste. Fashion is a custom which has become perverted into its contrary, a factor and symptom of the dissolution of custom. Fashion is chiefly the case in cities where *gesellschaft*, i.e. society, spreads. In the words of the author (Tönnies, 1912):

Society wants movement, and indeed accelerated movement. It must dissolve custom in order to develop a sense and taste for the new, for imported goods. It relies on individual incentive, particularly on youth's curiosity and the love of finery, and on the desire of exchange and procure what pleases. Here all attachment or loyalty to what is passed down, what is one's own, what is inherited, must yield. Commerce has a dissolving and destructive effect everywhere. Trade and commerce, urban life, the growth of cities, the power of money, capitalism, the division of classes, general bourgeois life, and the striving for education - all of these aspects of the same developments of civilisation, favour fashion and impair custom.

Tönnies, in the same page as other authors of the same period, posits fashion as

a product of modern society and highlights the strong relationship that fashion has with the urban life of growing cities. This tie between fashion and city will be object of investigation again in further studies held in the field of fashion.

In 1919, the American anthropologist **Alfred L. Kroeber** conducts an analysis with the purpose to identify a principle of order in the civilisation progress. In order to provide empirical evidence of the phenomenon, he decides to focus on the changes that occur in fashion. Now, his study is known as the first research on fashion that employs a quantitative approach. Within an extent of time which goes from 1844 to 1919, the author collects eight measurements referring to the figure of women's full evening gowns. Results indicate evidence of a an underlying pulsation in the width of civilised women's skirts, which is symmetrical and extends in its up and down beat over a full century. Kroeber suggests that, though details, trimmings, pleats and ruffles alter rapidly from one year to the next, and leave an impression of chaotic and uncontrollable fluctuations, underneath the chaos, the major proportions of dress change with a slow majesty, in periods often exceeding the duration of human life, and from time to time with the regularity of an enormous pendulum. Based on these findings, Kroeber draws to the conclusion that a principle of order can be identified in the social change. Moreover, he argues that social change is driven by social forces. That is, the principle of civilisation determinism scores against individualistic randomness. For example (Kroeber, 1919):

A designer born with an inextinguishable talent for emphasising what we may call the horizontal as opposed to the vertical lines of the figure, [...] might have possess ten times the genius of a Poiret or Worth: he would yet have been compelled to curb it into the channels which they followed, or waste it on unworn and unregarded creations. [...] No matter how isolating one's point of view, how resistant to a social or super-individual interpretation, how much inclined to explain the general from the particular and to derive the fashions of a world from the one focus of Paris, the fact remains that a succession of human beings have contributed successively to the same end.

With this contribution Kroeber anticipates later studies of the twentieth century that will explain fashion as a collective creation. Moreover, in the same track as other scholars, the author stresses how, since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, fashion variations have distinctly become more rapid and extreme. This leads to the following consideration: it is not possible to suggest the existence of a law of social (fashion) change; however, it is not possible to dismiss the inference of the existence of general regularity in social (fashion) change either.

The German sociologist **Werner Sombart** (1863-1941) investigates on women's fashion in Breslau and shows how it is linked to the genesis of Parisian fashion. By tracing the connections with the economy, he concludes that the consumer plays a minimal role in the creation of fashion which lies, indeed, in the hands of the capitalist producers (Sombart, 1967). His contribution highlights once more the strong relationship between fashion and modern society and he identifies three main characteristics of this connection. First, the democratisation of fashion: it is not limited to the court society but it increasingly extends to the whole population. Second, the fast tempo of fashion: goods are made of light materials that can be easily substituted with cheaper versions and changes in the mode of dress happen with greater rapidity. Third, the role of the producer: the entrepreneur actively promotes the change by means of *ante litteram* marketing stimuli, like promotion and withdrawal of older goods. Moreover, Sombart (1967) tracks the relationship between the capitalism of modern societies with the spread of luxury which, ultimately leads to the flourishing of new fashions. He argues that around the thirteenth century, a 'hedonistic aesthetic conception of woman' began to emerge, in opposition to the religious and institutional restraints limited to procreation of the earlier times. Liberated women began to decorate the courts of Europe introducing not only liberated sex but also a fast for wealth, glitter, conspicuous consumption, and grand entertainments. This led to a growing demand for fine design, rare materials, and craftsmanship to serve the cultivated tastes of courtiers. The bourgeois followed the taste for fashion and extravagance set by the court and

favoured the spread of these fashions to the whole society (Adams, 2012). Since the author defines luxury as the favoured child of capitalism, this analysis stresses once more the direct relationship between fashion and modern society.

The first comprehensive study on fashion is the work by **Georg Simmel** (1957[1904]), a German sociologist and philosopher who is thought to be one of the founding fathers of sociology. He defines fashion as an imitation and differentiation process that happens within social classes. While he draws on the same themes stressed by others authors of the nineteenth-century, the thorough approach of his analysis makes him one of the major classic contributors. Indeed, to him it is generally attributed the first fashion theory: the trickle-down theory. At the heart of his work there is an understanding of human being and society based on dualism (Simmel, 1957[1904]):

Man has ever had a dualistic nature. [...] The whole history of society is reflected in the striking conflicts, the compromises, slowly won and quickly lost, between socialistic adaptation to society and individual departure from its demands. [...] The former represents the idea of generalization, of uniformity, of inactive similarity of the forms and contents of life; the latter stands for motion, for differentiation of separate elements, producing the restless changing of an individual life. [...] Each in its sphere attempts to combine the interest in duration, unity, and similarity with that in change, specialisation, and peculiarity.

The dualism of Simmel reflects in the contemporary strain of the individual between the need for social acceptance, which leads to imitation, and the desire for individual freedom, which leads to differentiation:

Imitation, furthermore, gives to the individual the satisfaction of not standing alone in his actions. Whenever we imitate, we transfer not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for the action from ourselves to another. [...] Conversely, wherever prominence is given to change, wherever

individual differentiation, independence and relief from generality are sought, there imitation is the negative and obstructive principle. The principle of adherence to given formulas, of being and of acting like others, is irreconcilably opposed to the striving to advance to ever new and individual forms of life.

It is in this perspective that, according to the author, fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by which individuals seek to combine social equalisation with the desire for individual differentiation.

Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation; it leads the individual upon the road which all travel, it furnishes a general condition, which resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time it satisfies in no longer degree the need of differentiation, the tendency towards dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast.

While depicting imitation and differentiation as the core basis of the fashion phenomenon, Simmel also provides an explanation of what the target of imitation and demarcation is: specifically, imitation and differentiation are a mark of belonging and exclusion between social classes.

Fashion is a product of class distinction. [...] Fashion signifies union with those in the same class and exclusion of all other groups. [...] The fashion of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them.

The analysis of Simmel pinpoints two further arguments. First, he contends that primitive conditions of life favour a correspondingly infrequent change of fashions. Since primitive populations are characterised by a high inner cohesion and a sharp separation from the external, their socialising impulse is much more powerfully developed than the differentiating impulse. Indeed, segregation by

means of differences in clothing is expedient only where the danger of absorption and obliteration exists. Where these differences do not exist, where there is an absolute antagonism between not directly friendly groups of primitive races, the development of fashion has no sense at all. Fashion plays a more conspicuous role in modern times, because the differences in modern standards of life is much more strongly accentuated and, the more sharply these differences are, the greater it is the opportunity for emphasising them at every turn: whatever is exceptional, bizarre, or conspicuous, or whatever departs from the customary norm exercises a peculiar charm upon the man of culture, entirely independent of its material justification (Simmel, 1957[1904]). Hence, while defining fashion as a trait of human being based in the dualism of his nature, Simmel also contends that fashion has a greater role since the modern times, i.e. since when a greater emphasis on differentiation has led to the rapid increase of fashion changes. Specifically, the higher variability is vested in the middle classes, and for this reason the history of social and cultural movements has fallen into an entirely different pace since the *tiers état* has assumed control: fashion, which represents the variable forms of life, has since then become much broader and more animated (Simmel, 1957[1904]). Second, he argues that within a fashion circle, fashions claiming an exotic (i.e. external) origin rise a special appeal, since the exotic origin of fashions strongly favour the exclusiveness of the groups which adopt them. In his words, ‘there exists a wide-spread predilection for importing fashions from without, and such foreign fashions assume a greater value within the circle, simply because they did not originate there’. Drawing on this perspective he takes the example of Paris and stresses how Paris modes are frequently created with the sole intention of setting a fashion elsewhere. The illustration of this mechanism of fashion is a milestone in fashion studies and goes under the name of trickle-down theory: a hierarchical process whereby individuals with high status establish a fashion trend that will be imitated by lower-status individuals; until high-status individuals will differentiate themselves by initiating a new trend. Following studies on fashion will draw on this basis in order to either contest the theory or advance it, by applying it to gender and age relations, beyond the social class dynamics.

The classic theories we have presented insofar may vary to some extent but they all agree that fashion is a process of imitation. This process lies in the distinction between social classes. Mobility among social classes has fastened and increased in Europe since the advent of the Industrial Revolution and this has led to the growth of the fashion phenomenon. Hence, classic theorists define fashion as a social imitation process and a product of eighteenth-century European modern society. Contemporary studies of the twentieth century challenge this imitation theory and suggest new perspectives. Earlier contributions were mainly theoretical and discourse-oriented, while contemporary scholars design empirical researches and employ various methodological inquiries. Now we turn to the contemporary theorists.

## **Contemporary Theorists**

In 1969 **Herbert Blumer** publishes his seminal work “Fashion: From Class differentiation to Collective Selection”, a watershed study that marks the line between classic and contemporary theories. In the introduction of his work he invites sociologists to take into serious consideration the topic of fashion and to move further from the class imitation theory. The author carries out a study in the fashion industry of Paris and draws to the conclusion that fashion is the result of a collective selection process. First, managers of the fashion houses select a restricted group of items that will be shown to the buyers. During the fashion shows the buyers will select those items that they believe will suit the most the taste of the public. Finally, the choice of the public will fall on a even more restricted number of items which will account for the new fashion. As a consequence, the fashion mechanism is a continuing process of collective selection from among competing models. Selected models will be the answer to yet indistinct and inarticulate new tastes. Blumer does not discard entirely the role of the elite in the fashion process but he put it as a part of the mechanism rather than the cause. He argues that not all prestigious persons are innovators and that innovators are not necessarily persons with the highest prestige. Indeed, the elite



itself has to select between models proposed by innovators. As a consequence (Blumer, 1969):

The fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and emulation but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to lie abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world. [...] The transformation of taste, of collective taste, results without question from the diversity of experience that occurs in social interaction in a complex moving world.

Blumer also identifies six main features of the fashion mechanism. First, its historical continuity: the new fashions always grow out of their immediate predecessors. Second, its modernity: fashion always seeks to keep abreast of the times, it follows the utmost innovations in fabrics and ornamentation as much as in fine arts, public events and political happenings, in order to express the zeitgeist of the time. Third, the role of the collective taste: tastes are formed in the context of social interaction, responding to the definitions and affirmations given by others, to the extent that people experiencing similar environments develop common tastes. Fourth, the psychological motives: Blumer discards those arguments that explain fashion as the result of psychological motivations. He argues that psychological motivations are to be found in all human beings whereas there are many societies in which fashion is not to be found. The presence or not of the fashion mechanism in other societies will become later the base for several debates, also in regard to Asian countries, including China. Finally, Blumer identifies six further essential conditions for the development of the fashion mechanism. First, it is required a movement of change: for example the domain of the sacred can not comprise fashion as its established rituals do not accept change. Second, new models must be incessantly proposed in order to prepare the set for the competitive selection. Third, there must be the opportunity to choose between competing models. Fourth, the choice must be irrational-driven, i.e. where choices can be made between on the basis of objective test, there is no place for fashion.

Fifth, it is required the presence of a prestige figure who selects one over another competing model. Sixth, the field object of fashion must be open to the emergence of new interests, new participants and new social interactions.

The shift of focus from class differentiation to collective selection brings to a shift of emphasis from the social status mobility of the nineteenth-century to the social identity fluidity of the contemporary societies. Two major contributions in this perspective come from the sociologists **Fred Davis** (1992) and **Diana Crane** (2000).

**Davis** (1992) argues that society is not 'hierarchically organised' as it used to be in the nineteenth-century, and that there is a lack of consensus on what all groups, classes and coteries look at. The society is increasingly fragmented and a condition of polycentrism prevails. The consumer has a wide array of possibilities to choose from and his choice is a mean of self identity expression. Identities are forever in ferment, seeking for balance between paradoxes, ambivalences, and contradictions. Fashion, specifically, addresses the ambivalences that pertain to gender roles, sexuality and class identity. The business of fashion is the trading of identity ambivalences. Davis posits the increasingly fragmentation of the fashion leadership and cycle. Several fashion leader address several segments of fashion follower based upon different responses to their personal seek for identity expression. Moreover, major fashion cycle that used to last 3/5 years are now substituted by a plethora of micro-cycles whose length is shorter. Davis associates fashion with language while also underlining that its meaning is ambiguous: clothing is a code but it is under-coded, especially when fashion is in a new cycle. The authors claims that clothing in Western society is always far from precision and explicitness, that it is ambiguous and semantically indeterminate. Even more considering that some combination of clothes or styles manifest a different meaning depending upon the identity of the wearer, the occasion, the place, the company, and to some extent also the wearer's and the viewer's mood. In the last analysis, fashion contributes to the redefinition of social identities by continually

attributing new meanings to artefacts.

**Crane** (2000) works on the same track. She compares the fashion mechanism of the nineteenth century with that of the twentieth century and argues that while in the past 'the bases for exclusion were inferior social class status and lack of conformity to a specific gender ideal, in the present the exclusion is more likely to be based on age and sometimes race'. She contends that in class societies, the meaning of most items of clothing were readily understood in different social classes, whereas in fragmented societies, clothing worn by a specific social group or segment will be interpreted in different ways by members and non-members of each group. That is, post-modern cultures and their manifestation by means of fashion is a chaotic aggregations of codes that are not universally understood. To use her expression 'Clothing as a form of communication has become a set of dialects rather than a universal language.' Drawing on the language metaphor she distinguishes between open and closed texts. Closed texts define garments with fixed meanings, whereas open texts define garments that continually acquire new meanings. Open texts are most common in fragmented societies where different social groups express different meanings still using the same type of garment. The source of meaning lies in the plethora of social groups which make up for the fragmented society. Social groups develop an alternative clothing code to provide a means of speaking about themselves. Eventually, these alternative codes are assimilated by fashion, if only as stereotypes or caricatures, and are likely to acquire new meanings. Crane identifies a major sources of meaning that is to be found in street style and youth subcultures. She contends that youth subcultures produce street styles that become popularised by the media and marketed by industry. To some extent the age has substituted the class as marker of social status. Accordingly, she suggests to substitute the trickle down concept with the bottom up construct, as now fashion spreads up from the street rather than descending down from the court. Based on this perspective the author also claims that in the new scenario old cathedrals of fashion, like Paris, London, Milan and New York, decrease their hegemony (Crane, 2000):

In the past, fashion as a form of global culture radiated from a centre to peripheries, which were located largely, although not entirely, in Western industrial countries. Today, as in many other forms of global culture, fashion is dominated by, but has no clear centre in, Western culture while at the same time it continually absorbs influences from non-Western cultures.

Both Davis and Crane use the metaphor of language to define fashion as a mean to communicate self identity. Indeed, a major approach in the analysis of fashion during the twentieth-century was to see it as a language, organised in a formal way and using a definite grammar and syntax (Corrigan, 1997). Main scholars drawing upon this interpretation are **Barthes** (1983[1967]) and **Baudrillard** (1993[1976]).

**Barthes** (1983[1967]) argues that fashion is a language. As the transition from clothes to fashion is driven by the employ of words and images describing the garment. Yet, the vestimentary code is different from the linguistic one as it does not evolve, rather it changes, both in form and meaning. To the extent that an item which last year signified 'casual' may turn to signify 'dressy' the year after. To drive the change is a small group of fashion insiders, including the fashion editors who are in charge to associates the words and the images to the garments. Barthes distinguishes between the 'written garments' and the 'real garments'. He posits that a study of the 'real garments' would be a study on the production of the clothes rather than the way in which they mean. For the 'real garments' do not mean anything. Along with other thinkers he argues that fashion is a phenomena of neomania and that as such it probably appeared in our civilisation with the birth of capitalism.

**Baudrillard** (1993[1976]) develops a genealogy of sign structures consisting of three orders: imitation, production and simulation. In the first case, appearances masks reality. In the second case, appearance create an illusion of reality. In the

third case, appearance invent reality. The author postulates the distinction between dress, fashion and post-fashion corresponding respectively to the premodern, modern, and post-modern stage of society, which ultimately corresponds to the orders of imitation, production and simulation. Accordingly, the premodern stage is characterised by costly materials owned by privileged classes that symbolise rank in dress. The technological developments of the modern stage brings from dress to fashion: the value does not resides in the dress anymore but in the symbolic meaning that is associated with it. The post-modern society rejects the last link between signifier and signified: fashion became fashion for its own sake, it quits its role as a form of communication and becomes a form of pleasure for the sake of pleasure.

**Bourdieu** (1980) and **Lipovetsky** (1994) provide two further contributions. The former defines fashion as an expression of social power. The latter associates fashion to democracy.

**Bourdieu** (1980, 1984) accounts for a sociological investigation of culture and provides an insightful analysis of fashion as a cultural product. The author introduces the concept of field, defined as the set where agents and their social positions are located. He pays particular attention to the field of cultural production and, within this area, he sets his focus also on the specific cultural field of fashion. He argues that the fashion field is characterised by the struggle between dominating and dominated actors, between the established and the challengers. The object of domination is the symbolic power to legitimate aesthetic norms. The quality of a garment itself is not related to the innate characteristic of the object, but to the symbolic properties as they are defined and supported by the social field. He argues that the assessment of the aesthetic value regards the bourgeoisie, while the working class is more concerned with realistic and functional ‘value for money’. What leads the preference toward one garments over another is difference. According to Bourdieu, fashion and design depend on making distinctions, as the ability to make distinctions is of utmost importance in

consumer society. An element which marks distinction is taste. Thus, taste is a key element in the construction of the self-identity. Marketers struggle in the development of distinctive cultural status in order to increase prices, while at the same time, cultural status is driven by the successful commercialism of the selling. He also underlines that the structure of the field remains stable as all the actors challenge the system while still accepting and endorsing it.

**Lipovetsky** (1994) interprets fashion as a positive remark of democratic societies. He argues that the fashion phenomena was initiated in Europe in the fourteenth century and that it has constantly increased its pace since, along with the growth of personal freedom. Indeed, according to the author, fashion is the living engine of personal individuality, rather than a form of sclerotisation of the capitalist society. To the extent that, the growing availability of fashion choices enabled by mass-production, turns consumer into more complex individuals able to cope within a consolidated and democratically educated society. To date we can not speak of a fashion but rather of multiple fashion styles, which are expression of an unstable, superficial, ephemeral and newness-driven democratic society.

An innovative perspective in fashion theory defines it as an institutional system. In this regard, the fashion sociologist **Kawamura** provides a seminal work (2004). First, the author makes a distinction between the two concepts of clothing and fashion. She argues that the former pertains to the material production whereas the second pertains to the symbolic production (Kawamura, 2004):

Clothing is material production while fashion is symbolic production. Clothing is tangible while fashion is intangible. Clothing is a necessity while fashion is an excess. Clothing has a utility function while fashion has a status function. Clothing is found in any society or culture where people clothe themselves while fashion must be institutionally constructed and culturally diffused. A fashion system operates to convert clothing into fashion that has a symbolic value and is manifested through clothing.

This argument lies in the same page of Barthes' distinction between 'real' and 'written' garment. Nevertheless Kawamura underlines that the focus of Barthes is actually on the clothing system rather than on the fashion one. While he is concerned with the way fashion magazines depict clothes, an analysis of fashion should focus on the institutions it is made up of. Accordingly, Kawamura argues that fashion is an ideology: i.e. a set of beliefs socially determined where it is not relevant whether they are true or false. Who accounts for the construction of the social belief of fashion? The work by Kawamura seeks to answer this question (Kawamura, 2004):

Fashion is a system of institutions, organisations, groups, producers, events and practices, all of which contribute to the legitimisation process that turns clothes (*material production*) into fashion (*symbolic production*). [...] These institutions together reproduce the image of fashion and perpetuate the culture of fashion in major fashion cities, such as Paris, New York, London, and Milan.

Any item of clothing is capable of being turned into a fashion as long as it is endorsed by the fashion system. Specifically, the fashion system provides two ways for getting the required legitimisation: first, taking part in seasonal fashion shows held in the major cities like Paris, London, Milan, and, New York; second, getting access to fashion journalists, editors, advertisers, marketers/merchandisers, and publicists. According to this perspective, the fashion system requires an essential condition to exist: a multi-level class society, which leads to competition among classes, which leads to social mobility. Kawamura contends that the fashion system is a result of the modern system that began in Europe in the 1868. In order to provide evidence to her thesis, the author accounts for an analysis of the Japanese Revolution: that is the successful entrance of a bunch of Japanese designers in the fashion centre of Paris. A seminal work that we will later use as a track to build our analysis of Chinese designers accessing the international fashion

system.

## 1.2. Two Stream of Thoughts

The review of fashion theories presented in the previous chapter suggests what the renowned scholar on Chinese history Antonine Finnane has clearly pointed out: ‘fashion studies are powerfully informed by the privileged association of fashion with Western modernity’ (Finnane, 2008). Nevertheless, a number of contributors also accounts for a more inclusive and universal definition of the construct. Indeed, a major distinction between two streams of thoughts can be tracked: on the one hand, scholars who believe that fashion is a inner human phenomenon which pertains to all times and cultures; on the other hand, scholars who contend that fashion is the result of eighteenth-century modern industrial society. Who draws upon the second approach implicitly assesses to fashion a European (Western) origin. Thus, since the twentieth century fashion studies are concerned to understand whether it is correct to associate fashion to Europe or whether a revision of the construct is necessary.

Below we provide a selection of the main contributions of the authors that belong to the first group. Simmel (1957[1904]) clearly pointed out that fashion does not exists in tribal and classless societies. Flügel (1930), while drawing a line between fixed costume and modish costume, suggests that the latter (read: fashion), is linked to a particular type of society and culture: the one where change happens very rapidly in time, that is the West. Blumer (1969) argues that there are many societies in which fashion is not to be found: he largely removes fashion from the domain of traditional societies and strongly posits it as an out-standing mark of modern civilisation. Sapir (1949) argues that in the primitive World there are slow-non-reversible changes of style rather than the often reversible forms of fashion found in modern societies. Lipovetsky (1994) contends that modern fashion, in the sense of the ‘systematic reign of the ephemeral’, is a European



invention ‘scarcely existing before the mid fourteenth century’. Boucher (1987[1967]) marks the beginning of a distinctive Western fashion system since the fourteenth century. More recently, Kawamura has suggested to distinguish the fashion phenomenon from the fashion system and has defined the latter as a product of the modern system that began in 1868 with the institutionalisation of fashion. Similarly, Kawamura highlights that ethnographical case studies of non-Western population often use the term ‘dress’, ‘cultural/ethnic dress’ or ‘costume’, rather than ‘fashion’. Indeed, according to the author fashion ‘as an institutionalised, systematic change produced by those who are authorised to implement it, is to be found only in the West’. Drawing on the distinction made by Barthes (1983[1967]) between real-garment and written-garment, Skov (2003) discusses on the distinctive use that journalists make about the two terms: ethnic and fashion. The same exotic garment is defined as ethnic in the case that the designer does not belong to the field of fashion production (e.g., the use of jellabas by the Japanese fashion designer Comme des Garçons in 1989), while it is defined as fashion in the case that the designer belongs to the fashion field (e.g., the use of jellabas by the French designer Yves Saint Laurent in 1993). This dichotomy can be tracked in the wider phenomena described by the scholar under the term of “self-exoticisation”. Skov argues that designers who do not belong to the fashion field are expected to work on their distinctiveness in order to gain visibility and recognition. That is, instead of echoing the global aesthetic already set forth by the fashion field, they are supposed to contribute with novelty elements which usually draw upon their national and exotic aesthetic. We will discuss further the concept of self-exoticisation in the second part of the thesis.

A few contributions also pertain to China. When commenting on the Mandarin robes, Braudel (1967) states that they are customary rather than fashionable, as they scarcely change in the course of centuries, like the Chinese society itself. Bell argues that fashion began in the West at the time of the first crusade and that it steadily accelerated its pace since. On Chinese dress customaries he clearly states that (Bell, (1976[1974]):

With no doubt there were variations in Chinese dress from dynasty to dynasty [...] but [change there] occurs at the speed of a rather hesitant glacier.’

Moreover, in order to account for the fashion changes that took place in ancient civilisations, including China, he introduces a separate term, that is ‘micro-fashion’. In her comprehensive study of Chinese fashion history, Antonina Finnane provides evidence of how the Western societies have long been negating the role of fashion in China. She reports the extract of an article published in 1913 in the New York Times, which is quite impressive in this regard, as it starts with the following rhetorical question: ‘The fashions in China? It never occurred to you, perhaps, that there were any!’ (as cited in Finnane, 2008). The scholar argues that, though Europe and China have had different historical trajectories with regard to fashion, the historical experience of the former should not negate the experience of the latter. Indeed, she contends that fashion can be identified in many periods of history and in many places. Yet, she also stresses the distinction between fashion and fashion industry and defines the latter as the outcome of the European Industrial Revolution (Finnane, 2008):

Fashion, surely, can be identified in many periods of history, and in many places. It is related to taste, consumption and urbanisation. It entails short-term vicissitudes in vestimentary choices, and indicates the presence in particular societies of dynamic relationships between producers and consumers. In other words, fashion is distinguishable from a fashion industry, which is a modern phenomenon grounded in the industrial revolution. China did not have a fashion industry before the twentieth century.

In the late decades of the twentieth century several authors have strongly contested this understanding of fashion and have provided evidence of the fashion phenomenon from traditional and non-Western societies. An active advocate of this second stream of thoughts is Jennifer Craik (1994, 2009). The author claims that the current understanding of fashion is conventional, evolutionary and

imperialist. She argues that (Craik, 1994):

While Western elite designer fashion constitutes one system, it is by no means exclusive nor does it determine all other systems. Just as fashion systems may be periodised from the late Middle Ages until the present... so too contemporary fashion systems may be recast as an array of competing and inter-meshing systems cutting across western and non-western cultures.

More specifically, while investigating on the Bolivian bowler hat worn by the Cholas (the mestizo population who has mixed Spanish and Indigenous blood), she draws to the following conclusion (Craik, 2009):

It is absurd to view the fashion impulses of preindustrial societies as fundamentally different from those of contemporary societies. [...] Preindustrial, industrial, colonial, and modern societies have all engaged in a play between customary, fashionable, and assertive forms of clothing the body.

On the same page, Cannon (1998) argues that 'since fashion is normally seen as a more recent and specifically Western development, its role in the creation of style among smaller-scale societies is generally unrecognised'. On the one hand, he recognises that 'the processes of fashion comparison, emulation and differentiation are more noticeably apparent in the rapid changes that characterise the systems of industrial production'. On the other hand, he also contends that those same processes are observable or at least inferable in most cultures. Moreover, he argues that 'fashion is an inherent part of human social interaction and not the creation of an elite group of designers, producers, or marketers'. Hence, he suggests to elaborate a more inclusive definition of fashion, that comprises the systematic changes in style occurring in all cultures. The author provides evidence of the existing fashion phenomenon in native cultures by analysing the demands of Canadian native customers for the goods sold by European traders in northeast and western Canada during the 17th century. He

argues that customers were very specific in demanding certain types of cloth, colours, materials and that native's tastes were highly volatile and subject to change at any time. In Cannon's words (1998):

The fur trade is an example of the fashion-driven demand for goods that can develop among small-scale, non industrial societies. [...] Native demand for beads, cloth and other items of apparel exhibits all the criteria of fashion. Consumption of these goods was substantial and clearly subject to the tastes and desires of consumers rather than suppliers.

Niessen (2003) claims that fashion was defined a priori as a Western phenomenon and that this perception persists. A fact that is evident on the disciplinary boundaries of the subject: while Western fashion is the focus of fashion studies, non-Western fashion is the focus of anthropologists. In the same track, persists a distinction between fashion and tradition, a classification that implies and preserves the boundary between fashion and anti-fashion, to which corresponds the further dichotomy Western and non-Western. The author suggests to overcome this bias by adopting the word 'fashionalisation'. The term was coined by Polhemus and Proctor in 1978, to describe the conversion process that turns anti-fashion into fashion. That is, the process by which the system of fashion incorporates material and ideological forms from the ranks of non- or anti-fashion. Niessen draws on this distinction in order to underlie how, ultimately, both fashion and anti-fashion, participate to the fashion process. Indeed, although only the successful forms fall under the fashion's conventional definition, the forms themselves come from both the fashion and anti-fashion domain.

Despite the fact that the definition of global fashion implies a Western perspective: 'Fashion is global: but Western' (Niessen, 2003), the author points out that 'the term fashion globalisation denotes the process by which non-Western dress systems are pulled into fashion's vortex as a result of the spread of Western fashion/political dominance'. Thus, moving from the construct of fashionalisation

proposed by Polhemus and Proctor, she stress how both fashion and anti-fashion (Western and non-Western) forms, are, de facto, part of the fashion process and fashion studies should account for both (Niessen, 2003):

The great divide between East and West is artificial. [...] The globalisation of fashion is an empirical fact, is of long standing, and does not pertain just to the Western clothing industry.

Ultimately, the author argues that the fashion cycle, made up of the adoption of a style followed by its discard, is found in both the traditional and modern domains of anti-fashion and in both the Eastern and Western cultures.

### **1.3. Orientalism**

Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient - and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist - either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism.

Said, 1978

In 1978 Edward Said published a groundbreaking essay on Orientalism. A construct that he defines as a style of thought based upon the artificial distinction that separates the 'Orient' from, most of the time, the 'Occident'. The author moves from the assumption that Orient is not an inert fact of nature. Indeed, it is a creation of the Europe. It is the 'systematic discipline by which European culture has been able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, military, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively'. The author recognises the existence of a geographic and cultural reality which goes under the term of Orient. Nevertheless, his focus is not on the lives, histories and customs of those people who live in nations that are located in the East. Rather, his focus is on the created consistency of ideas that for many generations have

been regularly created and repeated since the late eighteenth-century in the West, and that have contributed to the strengthening of European self-identity.

Orientalism has shaped the body of fashion studies as well. The previous chapter has highlighted how early studies placed fashion within the boundaries of the European and Western civilisation, whereas more recent scholars strongly advocate a more inclusive revisitation of the term. The whole debate on non-Western fashion should be understood also under the light of the aforementioned Orientalism construct. In this regard, Finnane, Niessen and Koda provide interesting insights.

Finnane (2008) remarks that the Western perspective on the East had a shift of direction since the eighteenth century: that is, whereas missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth century were keen to find similarities between the two cultures, literature from the nineteenth century showed a contrary instinct: 'Chinese had come to be seen as the opposite to whatever Europeans were'. For example, in the mid sixteenth-century the Portuguese Dominican Gaspar da Cruz wrote that 'Chinese women wear long petticoats, like the Portugal Women, which have the waist in the same manner that [Chinese] have' (Boxer, 1967). Two centuries later, in 1843, Père Eugène Estève, argued that Chinese costume was based on principles opposed to that of European dress (Finnane, 2008):

While European men doffed their hats to show respect, the Chinese kept theirs on; Europeans wore black for mourning, Chinese white; Europeans used pockets, Chinese a purse; Europeans cultivated a full head of hair, Chinese shaved their heads.

During the nineteenth century the most commented feature of Chinese appearance was the foot binding practice. This custom became the focus of European attention as it served to the purpose to downrate the Chinese degree of civilisation, at least in the light of Western standards. Indeed, the commentaries on foot binding reflected the novel idea that 'the status of women in a society was a

primary index to the standard of civilisation in that society. John Barrow defined foot binding as a unnatural, inhuman and evil custom that brings to real deformity and ‘miserable tottering gait’ (Finnane, 2008). Finnane associates this shift of perspective with the rise of the Britain: that is, the attitude has changed when the centre of dissemination of knowledge of China has moved from the Continent to the British Isles. Likewise, Said had identified the beginning of the Orientalism system of thought in the late eighteenth century, and had linked it mainly to the British and French cultural colonialism.

Perception of Chinese fashion was strongly informed by this European hegemony. To the extent that people in China was faced with a dress dilemma: how to reduce the difference between Chinese and Europeans, while at the same time insisting on their nationalist identity. Ultimately, Chinese fashion habits were transformed along with the implicit acceptance that China simply had no fashion. Niessen provides a fashion interpretation of Said’s theory: she argues that the Western definition of fashion was constructed on cultural alterity, i.e. on the otherness provided by the East (Niessen, 2003). The dichotomy fashion/anti-fashion is based upon the Orientalist nature of the Western fashion system: Eastern clothing was fashionised as the East was orientalised.

Martin and Koda (1994) define Orientalism as the ‘historical term used to describe the West’s fascination with and assimilation of the ideas and styles of the East’, and provide a rich account of representations of the East in Western costume through history. Nevertheless, they also draw upon Said’s treaty and suggest that Orientalism is a fabrication of the West: on the one hand, the West periodically excludes the East from its cultures in favour of its own moral and culture; on the other hand, the allure of the East is based upon its impenetrability to the West. The two scholars argue that, while the contaminations from East to the West are rich and widely documentable, they still happen within the boundaries of Western terms (Martin and Koda, 1994):

Any presumption of body supremacy and racial prerogative would seem to be mitigated by a constant Western history of assimilating global dress. Of course, the process of assimilation was on the West's terms and safely within the West's own percent.

Fashion as a object of study is powerfully affected by the Western perspective. A fact that has been noted by the father of the Orientalism theory, Said (1978). Our purpose is not as ambitious as to advance a new perspective on either fashion or Orientalism. Rather, we work within the boundaries already set by the Orientalist school, aware of the limits that it implies.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Is It the Time of China?**

The overview on fashion theories illustrates that there is no agreement on the definition of fashion. Similarly, there is no agreement on the definition of China. Thus, before accounting for a description of the Chinese fashion history, we need to spend a few words to set the boundaries of the term. Within the limits of this work, by using the name China, we actually refer to Greater China: a convenience term employed to address the People's Republic of China, comprising Mainland China together with its special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau, and the Republic of China in Taiwan, as a single unit. The reasons for this geographic and political map will be clearer in the History Overview.

The choice to include the whole territories that have developed under Chinese influence, is based on the macro perspective of the thesis. While investigating on

the emergence of Chinese fashion brands within the international fashion system, our focus is set to an higher level than that of the single country-unit. Indeed, the cultural, social, and economical entity of Greater China is analysed in comparison to the supra-national entities of the European and Western fashion systems. Thus, the inclusive approach of this work does not entail any political position and it is based on the grounds of a macro-international perspective. Finally, we use of the term ‘China’ rather than ‘Greater China’ to keep the text fluid.

Once we agree on the definition of China, there is still lack of agreement on the position that the country holds within the ranks of the global fashion history. Indeed, as we mentioned before, fashion is widely recognised as a Western phenomenon. Nevertheless, China accounts for a long history to which corresponds a long tradition of clothing habits. This chapter provides a brief overview of Chinese history, linked to the main features and turning point of the Chinese clothing history. Especially in the light of the turbulent relationship with the West and the Western clothing habits.

## **2.1. History Overview of China**

China is known as one of the World’s most ancient civilisations. Its history dates back to the 2000 B.C. and boasts an uncommon degree of cultural continuity until the present date. Its historiography can be roughly sketched into three main clusters: the Ancient period, the Imperial period and the Republican period.

### **The Ancient Period**

The **Xia** dynasty gave birth to the first settlements of Chinese urban sites in the provinces of Anyang and Henan - the cradle of the Chinese civilisation. It was followed by the **Shang** dynasty that ruled over much of the Chinese northern territories until 1500 B.C. Two major contributions of this period were the development of the writing system and the use of bronze metallurgy. The

following and last prehistoric dynasty is called **Zhou**. Much of the Chinese culture, literature and philosophy developed during this period. The break of the dynasty line brought to a sub-distinction between the phase of the Western Zhou and the phase of the Eastern Zhou. The latter further divided into two stages: the **Spring and Summer** period and the **Warring States** period. The former was characterised by a decentralisation movement. Local princes increasingly earned power and independence to the extent that by the end of the period, China consisted of hundreds of states. This was also the time when the main Chinese schools of thoughts blossomed, among the which the Confucianism and the Taoism. The latter was characterised by a centralisation movement: the seven main states battled each other in order to win supremacy. During this war period several new territories were annexed to the Zhou dynasty. The dynasty ruled over the states until the 256 B.C., but it was a nominal role that lacked of substantial power. Finally, the king of the Qin State was able to submit the other six powers under his rule and in 214 B.C. he proclaimed himself the First Emperor: Shi Huangdi, a formulation previously reserved for deities.

## **The Imperial Period**

The first **Qin** emperor established a centralised, nonhereditary bureaucratic system, and standardised the legal codes, the coinage, the writing and the school systems. After his death a new dynasty imposed itself: the Han. The **Han** dynasty initiated a period of cultural flourishing, technical and commercial advancing and military expansion. The confucianism, previously opposed by the Qin, became the official ideology of the dominant class. Literature and arts flourished. The paper and the porcelain were invented and the commerce through the silk road intensified. The empire extended Westward and also annexed some territories from Vietnam and northern Korea. Corruption brought to the collapse of the dynasty in the 220 A.D. Nevertheless, the Han ethnicity had set the basement of the Chinese culture and still today it accounts for the majority of the Chinese population.

After the Han dynasty, the era of the **Three Kingdoms** followed. The empire was subdivided into three reigns, ruled by three princes, all of them claiming legitimacy over the whole Empire: Shu Liu Bei from the Han dynasty, Cao Cao from the Wei dynasty in the North, and Sun Qun from the Wu dynasty in the South. During this period the popularity of Buddhism increased. The Cao dynasty conquered the Han territories and proclaimed the **Jin** dynasty. Short after, because of barbaric invasions from the North, the empire was divided between North and South. Only in 589 A.D. Wen unified the territories again, proclaiming the **Sui** dynasty. Despite its very brief duration it was a fundamental dynasty often compared to the Qin one, as it led to the reunification of the Empire. It was followed by the **Tang** dynasty that ruled from the 618 to the 907 A.D. and accounted for one of the most flourishing times of Chinese history. After the economical, political and military decline of the glorious Tang, Turk and Mongol invaders from the North led again to the fragmentation of the Empire: five northern dynasties and ten southern kingdoms were established. The **Song** dynasty was able to conquer back the lost territories and to establish a period of peacefulness and prosperity. It is commonly subdivided into two phases: Northern Song period (960-1127) and Southern Song period (1127-1279). Indeed, the Song court was forced to abandon North China in 1127 under the pressure of the Nomadic populations. In 1279 Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, founder of the Mongol Empire, deposed the Southern Song dynasty and established the **Yuan** one, the first alien dynasty to rule over the whole territory of China. Their government was tolerant, they relied on the Chinese bureaucratic system and assimilated many aspects of the Chinese civilisation. Nevertheless, Chinese never accepted the dominance of the Mongols who they believed to be barbaric and uncivil. This is also the time when Marco Polo travelled to China. Constant hostility between Chinese rebels and Mongols successors for the throne led to the final supremacy of the Chinese peasant Zhu Yuanzhang who established the **Ming** dynasty (1368-1644). In this period the capital was moved from Nanjing to Beijing and the Mongolian territories were brought back under Chinese control. This dynasty marked a period of expansion, through military activity, geographic explorations,

commerce, literature and arts. The decline started due to the excess of expenses. An inner conflict arose between functionary and eunuchs, while external enemies set ready to threaten the stability of the Empire.

The Manchus, a Tungusic population formerly known as Jurchen, who inhabited the northeastern part of the Ming territory, after unifying their many tribes, claimed and established an independent state. Contemporarily they moved to the conquest of the Chinese throne. After a long conflict that lasted more than half a century and brought to economic decline, the Manchus eventually supplanted the Ming; they moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing and established the **Qing** dynasty (1644-1911). It was the last imperial dynasty and the second non-Han to earn control over the whole territory of China. During this period the Empire consolidated and extended, reaching and including the Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal and the Xinjiang region. Likewise previous non-Han dynasties, they adopted the Confucian norms of the traditional Chinese government. The relationship with the Han population was conflictual. On the one hand the Manchus assimilated much of the Chinese culture and governance institutions, that they recognised as superior; on the other hand a distinction between Manchus and Han persisted.

The establishment of the Manchus dynasty affected also the goodwill toward foreigners from Western countries. Until the seventeenth century the relationship with the West had been mostly positive and fruitful. Later, the economic decline, along with the increasing demands from Western part, deteriorated the relations. The Manchus dynasty strived to maintain the traditional order, never accepting innovations and driving the Empire to economic and political backwardness. When the influence of foreign ideas and appetites grew, they were not ready to cope with it. In 1840 the hostility burst into a War, after defined as the **Opium War**: the Imperial Court wanted to hamper the traffic and use of opium that at that time had become a serious social plague, while British soldiers, who were responsible for its importation from India, defended it. The latter won and in 1842 the Treat of Nanjing was signed, under which the British Empire got the

concession of Hong Kong and the control over five more trade ports.

The weakness of the governance, the economic decline, the war humiliations and recurrent natural floods drove the Empire to chaos and famine. In 1850 a popular revolt burst into the **Taiping Rebellion** (1851-1864): an eccentric movement based on christian, communist and confucians grounds. The rebels successfully raided through much part of the Chinese territory, until they were finally defeated by the government with the aid of foreign military. During this period foreign countries took advantage of the weakness of the Empire and China lost control of great parts of its territory: Beijing and Guangdong (Canton) were seized by the anglo-french troops (1857); Russia got privileges on the nearby Manchuria (1857); Japan got the Ryukyu archipelago (1879); France occupied Vietnam (1884) and Macau became a concession of Portugal (1887). Finally, in 1891 the Sino-Japanese war resulted in the control of Japan over Taiwan.

Since 1861 the Imperial court was held by the regency of Empress Dowager Tzu-Hsi (also known as Empress Cixi), who ruled for almost half a century, despite the claims of legitimate successors. Her governance was strongly conservative and her relationship with Western powers ambiguous. In 1898 a new popular revolt burst: the **Boxer Rebellion**. They were a secret society who had the purpose to fight both the Manchus regency and the foreign influence through the use of white armies. The Empress previously asked for help to foreign powers but afterward sided with the rebels. When the Western alliance won, the Boxer protocol was signed, in which the Chinese territory was divided into areas of Western influence. Finally, in 1911 a further rebellion movement guided by the oversea revolutionary Sun Yatsen led to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. On the 1 January of 1912 the **Republic of China** was declared.

## **The Republican Period**

The early years of the Republic were characterised by instability: local lords ruled over their territories with private military forces, leading to the so-called

**Warlord Era.** The unsafe economic and political situation were the humus for the development of nationalistic sentiments. A growing number of students and intellectuals held a demonstration on May the 4th of 1919 to protest against the government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, that favoured Japan. This event marked the beginning of the **May Fourth Movement**, also defined as New Culture Movement, whose purpose was to discard traditional Confucian values and to embrace innovative ideas selectively adopted from Western culture, namely science and democracy.

In the same year Sun Yatsen was able to organise the military armies and to set the Chinese Nationalist Party (Zhongguo Guomindang). After the death of Sun Yatsen, the party had stable control over the Republic under the guidance of Jiang Jieshi. Nevertheless, an inner division was about to explode. The stream of thought who was more strongly directed toward the communist ideology, developed independent military bases (soviet). While attacked by the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Red Army of the Communist Party retreated from the Jiangxi Soviet toward the Shaanxi region, initiating the so-called **Long March**. This historical event marked the ascendancy of the Communist leader Mao Zedong. When the Second World War burst, China sided with the Allies, against Germany and Japan. The Nationalist and Communist parties, that had shared the power during the conflict, separated again at the end of the War. At the end of the 1949 most of Chinese territories were under the control of the Communist Party, whereas the Nationalist Party was forced to retreat in the Island of Taiwan. Since this moment the destiny of the two lands followed different paths: the Nationalistic party ruled over the Republic of China in Taiwan, while the Communist party established its governance over the mainland territories of the newly proclaimed **People's Republic of China**.

The leader of the the new People's Republic was Mao Zedong. In 1958 he launched the **Great leap forward** social plan with the purpose to accelerate the modernisation of the State through collectivisation. The unsuccessfulness of the

plan together with the mass executions and a number of natural disaster led to an impressive loss of lives. In the same years the relationship with the other Communist Country, the Soviet Union, was deteriorating, as China accused them to betray the doctrine. In 1966 with the purpose to preserve the true Communist ideology against the rise of any bourgeois and confucian element, the leader launched the **Cultural Revolution**: millions of people were persecuted and displaced on ideology grounds. Zhou Enlai, the minister for foreign policy and economy during the leadership of Mao Zedong, was able to attenuate the severity of the governance. He advocated peaceful coexistence with Western Countries and he was the first to set forth the Four Modernisation plan. In 1976 both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were dead and the **Gang of Four**, the last representers of the most conservative communist party, was defeated and blamed for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. China was ready for a new start. Key figure of the new China was Deng Xiaoping, whose influence expanded between the 1978 and the 1992. He enacted the **Four Modernisation** plan, focusing on the improvement of four key sectors: agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology. Moreover, he worked for the transition of China from a planned economy to an increasingly open market economy, later known as 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Moreover, he relaxed and intensified the relations with the West, especially with the US. Since the beginning of the reforms era, living standards improved and freedom increased.

Today China is one of the World's fastest-growing country (China Country Profile, 2015 September 4). The recent economic slowdown registered in 2015 (S.R. 2015 March 11) has not affected his economic leadership, and the Country still accounts for one of the most thrilling economies. Since 2012-13 the leader of the Country is Xi Jinping. The main themes of his leadership are centralisation of the power and economic reform to boost market forces. With a population of 1.4 billion and steady economic growth, China offers the World's potentially largest consumer market for fashion (China's Fashion Industry, 2014). A market which entices the interest of both foreign and domestic entrepreneurs.



## **2.2. The History of Costume and Dress in China.**

Silk and hemp were the early fabrics of Chinese clothing culture (Steele and Major, 1999). Evidence of sericulture can be found already in the neolithic villages of north China. Since then, silk was produced in large quantities and worn by both aristocrats and a wide range of civilians, at least in special occasions. As for hemp, it was the common garment for the peasants and for the poor. It was replaced during the Song dynasty by the import of cotton from India, along with the use of ramie. What was absent in Chinese culture was wool. On the one hand, it was regarded as the style of the barbarians, as it was the main fabric of the barbaric populations coming from the North, like the Mongols. On the other hand, for warmth, Chinese depended on padded clothing, padded with silk floss or cotton, and clothing trimmed or lined with fur. The wool will become an issue of high controversy when it will take the shape of the Western suit, target of both adoption and rejection by Chinese population since the eighteenth century. However, wool was widely accepted once it became the fabric of the much popular Sun Yatsen suit. As we will further discuss.

Despite the fact that much literature describes the Chinese traditional clothing as timeless and unchanging, a deeper analysis of its history offers the proof that Chinese dress has changed greatly over time. Based on this perspective, Steele and Major (1999) provide us with a detailed tracking of the main changes occurred. Moreover, unlike other scholars, their analysis dates back already to the ancient period. We propose below an extract of their brief though alien summary of the Chinese dress at the time of the early dynasties (Steele and Major, 1999):

Artefacts from the Shang (c. 1550 - 1050 B.C.) and the Western Zhou (c. 1050

- 780 B.C.) depict men and women of the ruling class wearing robes with narrow sleeves, belted with a sash. By the Warring States period (481-221 B.C.) sleeves were fuller and robes shaped so as to wrap with a spiral effect. In the Qin (221-206 B.C.) robes once more had narrow sleeves, and men wore trousers underneath. During the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - 220 A.D.) sleeves were broad, and elite men replaced their trousers with a skirt. During the Wei (220-260) and Jin (265-419) dynasties men (but not women) flaunted enormous sleeves and tied aprons around their waists. Generally, members of the elite wore some kind of long robe, while peasants wore trousers and short jackets.

In the late sixth century A.D. the Sui dynasty saw the beginning of a new style of female dress, marked by a high waistline. Its silhouette was similar to Empire dresses of Napoleonic France, although its construction differed, since the Chinese fashion consisted of a separate skirt and bodice. By the same time Chinese women had also adopted a low décolletage, which shocked moralists, just as it did in Europe many centuries later.

The same authors argue that clothing was a matter of great importance in Ancient and early Imperial China (Steele and Major, 1999):

It was an instrument of the magical aura of power through which the emperor ruled the world; in addition it served to distinguish the civilized from the barbarous, the male from the female, the high from the base, the proper from the improper - in short, it was an instrument of order in a society dedicated to hierarchy, harmony, and moderation, a society in which chaos was to be feared above all else.

Clothing was key especially but not exclusively for Emperors. Since they ruled the Earth on Heaven's behalf through the Heaven Mandate, they were supposed to dress appropriately all the time. Nevertheless, also common people was supposed to dress appropriately, according to gender, age and place in the social hierarchy. To the extent that, throughout the Imperial history, sumptuary laws were

promulgated regulating the cut, colour and decoration of the robes. Though they were regularly violated.

Most part of the symbolic vocabulary that characterised the Emperor's attire was developed during the Song period (1200 A.D.). The most important element was the dragon. For it represented a sacred symbol since the early stages of the Chinese civilisation and several rulers had claimed draconic ancestry in order to justify their Heaven Mandate. Other symbols included the phoenix for women, the depict of the Mount Kunlun, representing the pivot of the Universe, at the edge of the robe; the twelve sacred elements, comprising the sun, the moon, the seven stars, the dragon, the pheasant, the sacrificial cup, the water, the weed, the grains of millet, the flames, the sacrificial axe; and finally, the fu symbol representing the good and devil forces. All of them were either embroidered or woven into the imperial garments. The use of colours was also regulated. For example, Emperors were supposed to wear yellow during the height of summer, in order to ensure that the seasonal energy radiated throughout the realm (Steele and Major, 1999).

As mentioned, civilian dress changed over time and according to hierarchy, gender and age. In general terms, two elements played a key role in the overall appearance: the hair and the hats. According to Confucianism, Chinese people was supposed to bound their hair. On the contrary, long, unbound, and unkempt, hair was associated with barbarians and witches. Likewise, the use of the hat was highly regulated. Common people would have hardly dared to wear the official hat that was meant for bureaucrats. For example, during the Han dynasty, officials wore elaborated hats indicating their rank, while scholars wore simple hats.

During the early Tang dynasty the style was the same of the Sui dynasty, though more exuberant and elaborated. This was the period when China reached its maximum heights in wealth, territory and civilisation. Self-confidence made the Country open and receptive to new ideas, products and technologies. Despite the fact that foreign influences had been entering China for centuries through the Silk Route, during the Tang dynasty the absorption of new styles was stronger than

ever. For example, the modest and protective hat with long veil wore by equestriennes during the early Tang age, was soon replaced by a ‘curtaing hat’ with a shorter veil, that was typical of the Turkish nomadic women and men. Likewise, the representation of a mythical animal at the centre of a round medallion surrounded by pearls, which was a common Persian design, became a regular pattern for Chinese silk garments. The ideal of beauty itself changed. Since mid of the eight century, the use of shawls had replaced the low décolletage and the new female beauty was plump and voluptuous. A trend that according to Steele and Major, may have been influenced by that of Central Asia kingdoms, like the size of some Uyghur princesses exemplifies. The same authors suggest that this desire for foreignness might have been supported by the fascination for exoticism along with a claim for freedom. In Chinese society dress, like everything else, was regulated. Clothes immediately indicated wealth, class and, in the case of women, marital status. The shift to foreign attires had the advantage to relax rituals and social constraints. Finally, toward the end and decline of the Tang dynasty a new controversy fashion began: the foot binding practice.

During the Song dynasty the women wardrobe became more modest, made up of full robes and over-dresses. The Yuan dynasty, founded and ruled by Mongols, was characterised by more close-fitting garments, suitable for their nomadic and horse-riding style of life. When the Empire was back in Chinese hands, under the governance of the Ming dynasty, also clothing styles looked back to previous Chinese dresses.

The transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty marks the increasing influence of a third player: the European West. A relationship that has been characterised by both acceptance and rejection throughout the most recent history and that still informs contemporary Chinese fashion. Hence, we provide below a more detailed description of the Chinese fashion since the Ming dynasty, with a particular focus on the controversy relationship with European and Western influences.

## **Ming Style**

The Ming dynasty marked the return of the Chinese ethnicity and Chinese style over the close-fitting tunics favoured by the Yuan dynasty. Mongol influences could not be eradicated entirely, but especially the style of the glorious Tang dynasty was favoured. In this period the centres of cultural production, fashion included, were the Southern cities of Suzhou, Hangzhou, Yangzhou and Nanjing, the capital. Steele and Major (1999) suggest that in 1590 Suzhou was the Paris of China. Likewise, Finnane (2008) describes the fashionable atmosphere of that time by quoting Gu Qiyuan (1528-1628) and Xu Dunqiu (1614). Gu Qiyuan recalls that ‘Thirty years before, they [styles] changed only once in ten years’ while now ‘not three of four years pass before some new style is apparent’. Xu Dunqiu argues that while before people wore hats of black gauze and cloths of white cotton, around the 1614 everyone wore coloured clothing. Wu Jen-Shu identifies three tendencies (Finnane, 2008). First, the fascination with the exotic. In this period, the horse-hair skirts from Korea and the military-style tunic from Northern nomads gained momentum. The latter developed into the *Yesa*, the common attire worn by well-to-do men during the sixteenth century. Second, the appropriation of antiquity through citations of styles from previous dynasties: e.g., the Han cap, the Jin cap, the Tang cap. Third, the ‘new and strange’ (*Xinqi*) clothing: that is, the new style inventions that probably emerged from the courtesan milieu of the southern cities and from the military environment. In 1570s Chen Yao, for the first time, used the word *Shiyang*, literally meaning ‘The pattern of the day’ (McCabe, 2014). A term which clearly recalls the concept of fashion.

As for foreign contacts, the whole Ming dynasty was substantially isolated. The ruling class was more committed to enjoy the wealth of the state rather than to improve cultural and technological achievements. Nevertheless, this was also the time when the Jesuit Matteo Ricci settled in China with the purpose to convert Chinese people to Christianity and to bring European thoughts and science in the Country. Although the dynasty was slow to adopt foreign innovations, at that time

the influence of the West seemed limited, unimportant and benign (Steele and Major, 1999). This was even more evident at the early stages of the Qing dynasty, when employing European missionaries at court was a source of dynastic pride. A sentiment that will strongly change direction at the turn of the nineteenth century.

## **Qing Style**

The Qing age is considered a much less exciting period for fashion and very little has been written upon, especially in regard to the early years. The ruling dynasty, who governed over China since the 1644 up to the 1911, was foreigner: they belonged to the Manchus ethnicity. Despite the fact that, by the time of the conquest, the Manchus civilisation and attire had been greatly influenced by the Chinese culture, substantial differences still persisted. From the Last Emperor of Rawsky (1998) we read that Hongtaiji, one of the founders of the Qing dynasty, believed that the “wide robes with broad sleeves” of Ming China might have led to the loss of identity and martial spirit among the Manchus. Hence, he issued a code of clothing regulations for Manchu tribesmen. Moreover, the new ruling dynasty issued clear instruction on how Han Chinese should appear: men were forced to shave the front of their head and wear a long queue, as the Manchus did; the wide sleeves of the Ming dynasty robe were replaced by close-fitting sleeves matched with horse-shoes cuffs-shaped; a conical straw or bamboo hat with red silk cords was worn by officials in the summer and fur-trimmed hats of blue satin were worn in the winter; while the single long robe remained the garment for educated men. To dress according to Qing style was mandatory in formal occasions and for men. On the contrary, women were allowed to dress according to their Chinese style and in informal occasions men were allowed to wear their own style. Chinese and Manchu men increasingly looked alike, while Manchu and Han women looked very different. By and large, the former wore a long robe while the latter, the Chinese women, wore a shorter robe (resembling a jacket) matched with a skirt. Under the skirt they wore trousers. In the case they were unmarried or peasant women, they only wore the trousers. However, the most

sharpen distinction was in the feet: Chinese women still bounded their feet while Manchu women never did.

Since the late nineteenth century a new style was spreading: the European one. Some Chinese men adopted Western suits and hats along with leather accessories and shoes. Women modernised their clothing by shortening the skirts and enriching their jackets with fashionable high collars. By mid of the nineteenth century, Western style had become fashionable. Already in the late eighteenth century the imports of wool from England had increased and Western items like clocks and watches were familiar. This is manifestly witnessed by the Yangzhou based fiction 'Dreams of Wind and Moon' (Finnane, 2008). Throughout the whole novel references to Western items multiply: the main characters look at Western paintings, wear fashionable clothing (xinshishi, lit. 'new time style') fabricated from Western cloth, wear watches, smoke tobacco, pay by Western coinage. The Western dress, that was associated with modernity and internationalism, increasingly became a socio-political issue. After the defeat in the 1895 Sino-Japanese war, Kang Youwei, leader of the reformers claimed that (Finnane, 2008):

At the present moment, the myriad nations are all in communication and are as one moving toward veneration for oneness. It is just in our country that clothes are different, so that sentiments cannot be close and friendly relations between nations cannot be achieved. [...] In Europe and America, men all cut their hair a hundred and more years ago. Over the last few decades they daily have new machines and refinements in the military arts. So if everyone cuts his hair, the whole nation will be soldiers.

This speech marks the beginning of a long course stream of thoughts that will associate dress to militarism until the late twentieth century. As Finnane (2008) points out the 'armed forces were the vanguard of the vestimentary change in China'. In 1902 a New Army was created and the style of the uniforms resembled the one of the German army, which had served as model also for the Japanese. Loose trousers and jackets were replaced by the body-fitting style of the Westerns

along with leather shoes.

In sharp contrast with the modernity of the Western suits and uniforms, the **Manchu long queue**, that had become customary also for Chinese, became a further issue of discussion. Chinese overseas led the way in the queue cutting movement. In 1895 Sun Yatsen, the leader that will later establish the Republic, cut off his queue, followed by a long line of fan. On the contrary, the Qing court defended its customary until the very end of the dynasty. They issued some regulation in regard to the length of the queue, with the purpose to get closer to the general trend. However, in more traditional contexts like the army and the schools, the practice of cutting the queue was strongly opposed. Just before abdication the last emperor promulgated rules that granted freedom on how to cut the hairs. Short after, the new-born Republic issued regulations against the use of the queue. To the extent that policemen were in charge to cut them off. However, the queue issue was not settled yet. In the following years, along with the growth of negative sentiments toward Western powers, the queue came to be identified as part of the Chinese culture and assumed nationalistic significance.

On the woman side, the most dramatic vestimentary change was related to the **foot binding**. A practice that had begun in the declining years of the Tang dynasty and had continued, at least in the most remote areas of China, until mid of the twentieth century. Although there is a lack of salient research in the topic, most scholars believe that early examples of the practice can be tracked back to dancers at the Song court and professional female entertainers in the capital. Since then it steadily spread, from the homes of the elites to those of the poor. The motivations for foot binding might rest in the identity anxiety, driven by the differentiation between male vs female and Chinese vs Non-Chinese. Indeed, the moment of highest spread of the practice coincided with a specific cultural and political situation. On the one hand, the diffusion of the Neo-Confucianism that placed an ideological emphasis on female inferiority. On the other hand, the various foreign populations regularly raiding and invading China, and driving the country to



national identity un-confidence. Later, the foot binding practice came under attack. On the one hand, the Qing dynasty, whose Manchus women did not bound their feet, issued regulations in the attempt to forbid it. On the other hand, the increasing contacts with the European West, whose attitude was strongly negative toward the foot binding, contributed to dismiss it as a backward practice. By the early nineteenth century the debate was intensifying and by the end of the century some organisations had developed with the purpose to eradicate the practice, like for example the Natural Foot Society. In the long run the counter effect was that, husbands who had before favoured feet bounded women, were now abandoning them, looking for new modern brides. Against this backdrop, a new generation of women was now looking for new footwear styles, in order to replace the previous and any longer suitable lotus shoes. They had two main options: either to choose Western leather shoes or to adopt the platform shoes of the Manchus. The latter were soon discarded after the collapse of the dynasty and the rouse of anti-Manchus nationalistic sentiments. On the contrary, the high heels of the Western style gained momentum, as they had the advantage to give the visual illusion of a smaller foot walking like a swan.

The last years of the imperial dynasty were dense of dress events also. Finnane (2008) suggests to define **Xinhai** the style that characterised the years leading from the last imperial dynasty to the establishment of the Republic of China. Indeed, the revolution that occurred in 1911, was named Hsinhai, as it occurred in the year of the Hsinhai (辛亥), meaning ‘stem branch’. Main features of this style were the narrow cut of the clothes, the shift from brilliant to delicate and dark colours, the use of leather shoes. Moreover, a new item was gaining momentum: the mandarin collar. Its origin is obscure. First records date back to the Ming period. But during the Ming and most of the Qing dynasty the robes and the jackets of the robes were rounded-necked. The so-called ‘stand-up’ collar became popular during the early twentieth century. Its moment of highest adoption dates between the 1905 and 1913, at the top of the Xinhai fashion. After those years it never achieved the same diffusion, though it never disappeared either. Still today

it is known as a representative icon of the Chinese dress.

Throughout the nineteenth century the political turmoil between Han Chinese, Manchus and Westerners had resulted in a revolution of the vestimentary code, driven by a complicated net of political ideologies. At that time, the new trends were mostly adopted by the educated families, while the mass of the population still wore traditional clothes. Nevertheless, the dress choices of the elite represented an evident signal of what direction the national wardrobe was heading to. By the end of the Qing dynasty, the rupture with the previous styles had become apparent and in the following years further revolutions were about to come.

## **Republican Style**

On January 1912 Sun Yatsen was elected provisional President of the newly established Republic of China. By that time he had already cut off his queue and adopted a Western suit. In the same track, in that year, the government had issued a dress regulation according to which the frock coat and top hat were the proper dress for male representatives of Chinese society. As Finnane points out (2008) no Chinese option was suggested for high formal wear. The Western suit became the male dress for the officials of the Republican administration and soon after also for the most cosmopolitan young intellectuals. However, less formal situations and less progressive minds favoured the Chinese alternative: the changpao (long robe). It was the dress worn by non-labouring men throughout the Qing dynasty and its dominance persisted up to the early years of the Republic. As a result, on the one hand the highest elites wore the Western suit, while on the other hand it was the changpao that visually dominated the scene.

As for women, fashion drove on a double line as well. The wedding photograph of Sun Yatsen with his wife Song Qingling provides evidence of the spread of Western fashion also among women. Indeed, the bride was dressed in the last European fashion, that included a tailored jacket and a skirt, a cameo pendant, a

wide lace collar and a wide-brimmed hat worn at a smart angle, along with high-heeled shoes. However, most part of the population still wore the Chinese style, that in those years consisted of some variations of the Chinese jacket blouse with skirt or trousers. Finnane (2008) defines ‘May Fourth style’, the mode that characterised women dress in the late teens and twenties. In those years jackets, trousers and skirts shortened. Moreover skirts were favoured over trousers. Pants had become calf-length, and the jacket was now a wrapper blouse (scoop-hemmed) buttoned up on both sides from underarm to throat, showing off the curves of the body. In the early 1920s, Song Qingling also consistently wore the Chinese skirt and wide-sleeved jacket-blouse typical of the May Fourth era.

The rise of the Nationalist party marked a new change of direction in the vestimentary scene: the previously favoured and desired Western style was now ready to be replaced by new Chinese alternatives.

Around the 1920 Sun Yatsen was driving its efforts to the development of the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and its appearance followed the political strategy. He discarded the Western suit, though he did not embrace the Chinese robes either. He adopted the Zhongshan Zhuang, later known as Sun Yatsen suit. Some scholars suggests that the leader chose a Japanese military uniform himself and asked to a shop owner to alter it, and that he strategically collaborated to the making of the alterations (Finnane, 2008). Others suggest that its robe was based on an already existing Chinese student’s dress, itself based on a german-style Japanese military uniform (Scott, 1958). Ultimately, its robe looked like the civilian version of a military suit. It immediately became the signature dress of the Nationalist Revolution (Finnane, 2008). By the early thirties the Western suit had been abandoned, though it persisted in financial circles and among employees of Western firms.

Likewise, women had their new national choice: the **qipao**, also known as Cheongsam. The two terms suggests two different origins. The former indicates a

relation with the previous Qing dynasty: qipao literally means ‘banner’ gown and the Manchus were known after the name Qi, i.e. ‘banner’ population. The latter is a Cantonese term which means long robes. Finnane (2008) argues that the development of the qipao is grounded on at least two factors. On the one hand, it is a retro trend, as others were available at that time, whose roots can be tracked in the long robes of the Qing dynasty. On the other hand, historical evidence also suggests that this style had been borrowed from the men’s use of the long robe (changpao), and not only from a look into the past. Strong advocate of this style was Song Qingling, wife of Sun Yatsen. She was among the most photographed women of the time and her endorsement contributed to make it a success. She first appeared wearing a qipao in 1925 and since then it became her standard form of dress, until well after the liberation (Finnane, 2008). However, it must be noted that at that time the most fashion-conscious women desired to wear Western styles clothes, high-heels and make-up. Despite the political load that these items carried.

In those years a further issue that targeted women appearance was the breast binding practice and the introduction of brassieres. Women were faced with the choice to abandon the little vest that had been flattening their chest for centuries, and to either adopt natural breasts, wear western bra or wear a new Chinese cotton sweatshirt. Unlike their counterparts in Europe who had immediately embraced the new underwear, Chinese women did not show a significant preference for it. Most of them, who considered the little vest unfashionable, turned to the last invention by the Chinese Zhenfang Cotton Knit Factory: the hanshan (cotton sweatshirt). Finally, the short hair cut that was fashionable in European capitals, the bob, was a further object of debate. On the whole, a woman who wore short hair, make-up and a short skirt was defined as a modern girl, term that first appeared in a Chinese text in 1927 (Shih, 2001). However, as Finnane suggests, these issues should not be entirely read under the light of the acceptance or rejection of Western influence. Indeed, they entailed gender and sexual anxieties that characterised European debates also.

This vestimentary order broke during the years of continuous war that went from the anti-Japanese conflict (1937-1945) to the Civil War (1946-1949). These events led to the replacement of the Chinese gown, unsuitable for the warfare state, with trousers and military uniforms. Soldiers, peasants and cadres were the iconic social classes that inspired the dress of the time and their trousers and uniform-styles were adopted by men and women alike. When the Communist party came to power and the People's Republic of China was established, under the guidance of Mao Zedong, the vestimentary regime followed the same path toward sobriety. Unlike other rulers, the government did not issue dress directives. However, the Communist propaganda strongly emphasised the social standing of workers, peasants and soldiers: it was quite clear that the appropriate way to dress should evoke the proletarian ideal, hence being simple and modest (Finnane, 2008). Gender distinctions were abolished under the ideology of equality between men and women. Though this equality translated in the dominance of the male.

Against this backdrop, the Qipao and Sun Yatsen suit, which had flourished under the light of a East meets West *zeitgeist*, resulted anachronistic. The Sun Yatsen suit survived in the new form of the Mao suit (though it is still called Sun Yatsen suit in China), enriched with stronger references to the traditional trousers and tunics of Chinese peasants. The leather shoes were replaced by the traditional Chinese black cotton shoes. As for the qipao, it almost disappeared. To some extent, it was the symbolic representation of the bourgeois class that was under strong attack from the Party. In that period it was possible to see a qipao only in few cases: worn by the highly-skilled bourgeoisie, whose help was still necessary to the government, and in case of missions abroad. Otherwise, women of high social status wore a Lenin suit. In this scenario the emerging colours were blue, green, or grey and the cut of clothes varied very little. One exception in the early 50s was the bulaji (Chinese transliteration of the Russian term *platje*), inspired by the dress worn in China by Russian women. A kind of frock whose line distinctively recalled the European style and that could be made of printed cloth. A

further exception were children. They could wear bright colours, especially red, the hue that in China had been associated with happiness and that now embodied the values of the Revolution. However, also children mostly wore grey shades and clothes resembling those of their fathers. The cotton rationing and cloth shortage were also responsible for this gloomy landscape.

Throughout the years of Mao Zedong's hegemony the attitude toward fashions had moments of relative liberal debate and peaks of harsh repression. During the One Hundred Flower movement, that in 1956 encouraged the citizens to openly express their critics, also fashion emerged as an issue. The drab look of the Chinese society of the time was under the sight and complain of the mass population. Moreover, it was object of derision by foreign countries, who called China 'blue ants' and blamed it for the suppression of their personal appearance. Nevertheless, when the movement was harshly repressed, also any attempt to bring back colours hampered. Few years later, when Mao Zedong announced the launch of the Great Leap Forward, the proletarian virtue permed the society to the extent that any 'bourgeois' fashion disappeared. At the time of the Cultural Revolution, launched by the Great Leader in 1965, fashion became a special site of attack. The Red Guards, groups of young supporters of Mao, publicly tore out the clothes of those women who were caught wearing too long, or tight, or otherwise fashionable clothes, or who wore long or permed hair. The most noticeable attack by the Red Guards was held against Wang Gauangmei, wife of President Liu Shaoqi. In 1963 she had worn a qipao and a pearl necklace, while on a state visit in Indonesia. Because of this event, during her later interrogation, she was publicly humiliated by being forced to wear a too little qipao, high-heel shoes, and a necklace made up of ping-pong balls.

Another woman, the wife of Mao Zedong (Jiang Qing), had an active role and an ambivalent attitude toward the fashion scenario of the time. On the one hand, she was a strong advocate of austerity in dress. On the other hand, evidence was provided that she had worn fashionable western clothing. Moreover, on the one

hand, she was an authoritative example of sober dress and had a strong influence on the population. On the other hand, in 1974 she launched her own fashion design, that, despite a production of approximately 80.000 items, was never endorsed by the mass. The design, that was supposed to resemble the clothing of the Song dynasty, de facto evoked a western-style shirtwaist dress. Though unsuccessful, this event focused the attention on a major problem of Chinese fashion: while men had their distinctively Chinese garment that was the Mao suit, women did not have their own national option. Ultimately, the fashion venture of Jiang Qing was an attempt to fill that gap.

After the death of the leader Mao Zedong, the rebirth of fashion slowly found its way out, as it 'was one of the many areas in which the opening of a dialogue between China and the rest of the world occurred' (Finnane, 2008). The process could not be but slow as the previous historical events had strongly impacted on the population. Attitude toward the new fashions varied greatly, according to age, gender, generation and social class. However, the younger generation was ready to lead the path toward the reconnection with the international fashion scene. Initially, the change interested colour, fabric and cut more than styles and types of clothing. However, later it expanded.

Fashion changes were more evident on the woman side, as women had to reconcile with their forgotten femininity: they now wore again skirts and the most daring mini-skirts; the qipao had a second though brief renaissance; the trousers embraced again the 'hoodlum' styles like the bell-bottom ones; prints were colourful and hair were permed; the use of sun-glasses spread. As for men, the emerging white-collar middle-class endorsed the white shirt, while the ruling class showed ambivalent choices. Exponents of the old guard, like Deng Xiaoping, still wore the Sun Yatsen suit, while new leaders endorsed the western one. The mass of the population followed the latter trend. Since the end of the 1980s the trend toward formal style and western suit was so evident that 'it was not uncommon to see migrant workers wearing western suits or sport jackets as they worked on

construction projects' (Wu, 2009). Wu suggests that the popularity of the western suit was grounded on the desire of China to modernise: 'Wearing the western suit was viewed as a fast and easy way to modernise.' (Wu, 2009).

Also from the perspective of the textile and apparel industry the change was dramatic. Textile was a key node of the four modernisation process. While in 1970 China accounted 'for less than 5 per cent of clothing exports from developing economies, by 1980 the same share had more than doubled up to 10.1 per cent, and the government was beginning to promote ventures overseas in search of new markets (Finnane, 2008). Moreover, in 1979 the first issue of the first Chinese fashion magazine was published. In 1980 the first modelling class was started. In 1984 the ballet dancer Li Yanping held the first individual fashion show of the country. In the same years, Zhang Zhaoda (Mark Cheung), who will later become one of China's most famous designers, drew his sketches by browsing foreign fashion magazines that his relatives sent him from abroad. Fashion Universities, degrees, departments, factories and publications flourished. What Chinese wore as fashionable at that time, had been internationally fashionable a decade before. Nevertheless, as Steele and Major (1999) suggest: 'what they were wearing was less significant than what they were not wearing - the boring old Mao uniform of many years past'. 'On the whole' - as Finnane (2008) argues - 'people in reform-era China wanted to be citizen of the World'.

The government condemned the enthusiastic embracement, especially by the youngest, for foreign cultural values and dressing styles. It repeatedly issued censures and campaigns against the 'spiritual pollution' coming from the greater East Asian region and from Western countries. In the early eighties the stronger source of cultural influence was Japan, later followed by South Korea. Both countries also had a proxy role as translator of Western values. Especially in the case of South Korea, much of the Country's culture was a national reinterpretations of cultural myths, fashion and fads coming from the West, particularly from the US. Against this backdrop, it was pivotal also the role of



Taiwan and Hong Kong as mediators between mainland China and the rest. Alongside the craze for foreign influences there was space also for domestic styles. For example, in those years it spread the Hanfu movement, which was directed at reviving and popularising the Han dress. A further remarkable trend of that time is the Ha movement: a dress practices cultivated by a minority of teenagers operating within particular subcultures, though its basic elements influenced the fashion scene to a greater extent. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new retro style was developed and promoted: i.e. the tangzhuang (Zhao, 2013). A garment that was the result of a State program, whose purpose was to establish a national dress for the 2001 edition of the APEC Summit. A Tangzhuang craze followed during the 2001-2002 period.

Europe also had a direct impact. In 1979 the French designer Pierre Cardin was the first European fashion designer to hold a show in China. The Western style appealed especially the young bourgeoisie. Finnane (2008) describes the European dressed woman as sophisticated and having a certain tone: 'they are educated, and talk about Milan Kundera. They might sing American folk music, but on the whole prefer European to American culture.' Indeed, European labels came to dominate the fashion landscape of China in the nineties. The change was evident also from the media industry. The fashion magazines that had not evolved during the eighties, significantly improved their appeal in the following decade. Since 1988 'Fashion', the former Chinese main lifestyle magazine, had undergone into a partnership with Esquire. In the same years Harper's Bazaar, National Geographic and Elle opened their Chinese subsidiary. Vogue, that will officially open later, was making in those years its appearance in Guangzhou (Zhang, 2006 October 16 ). Ultimately, the fashion concept itself became a European one or, more generally, a Western one. To the extent that, 'shorthand references to past fashion eras - the twenties or the sixties, for example' were not about 'Ye Qianyu and Red Guards respectively' but about 'Chanel and hippies' (Finnane, 2008).

As a consequence, while on the consumer side the gap with the international

fashion scene was rapidly shortening, on the industry side, the way to go was still long. The huge growth in the textile sector was not supported by the birth of local fashion networks. Many clothing companies did not have a design section at all (Zhang, 2006) and, in most of the cases, entrepreneurs did not pursue any fashion branding effort. However, the debate on fashion, branding and fashion branding, to which this project contributes, fuels the business scene of the twenty-first century in China.

## **2.3. The Chinese Contemporary Fashion Scene.**

In December 1983, the State abandoned the rationing system of cloth coupons and the Chinese garment industry took off (Zhao, 2013). Two main kind of enterprise led the growth: the Township and Village Enterprise (TVE) and the Foreign Funded Enterprises, both introduced with the purpose to entice competition in the Chinese market (Zhao, 2013). By 1999 the foreign-funded textile and apparel firms accounted for 28.7 percent of the national output. Indeed, despite the introduction of the quota system under the GATT agreement in most of the Western countries, it was the export that fuelled much of the growth. To the extent that during the 1990s decade China was the main source of textile and apparel for the US (Zhao, 2013). In 2001 China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and it was supposed to enjoy the full benefit of quota-free trading. However, by that time both the US and EU had issued safe-guard laws in order to prevent the skyrocketing of Chinese imports. Free trading actually started since 2008 and it reflected in the strong increase of textile and apparel imports from China (Zhao, 2013). However, China held the position of Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEMs). To which corresponded the position of Original Brand Manufacturers (OBMs) held by developed countries. A critical distinction because to the latter belongs the most lucrative part of the process (brand, design, distribution and marketing). In a recent analysis of the Chinese

fashion industry Zhao (2013) argues that ‘despite the increasing participation by Chinese suppliers in the higher-value-added processes’ Chinese enterprises ‘can not charge premium for the additional services they provide. They are simply providing more services for minimum or no cost to the OBM buyers’. On the same track, Wu argues that ‘in the globalized apparel supply chain, China’s fashion designers have been largely ignored or have functioned only as ‘ghost’ designers for fashion brands produced in China’. However, exports have become increasingly sandwiched by falling demand from Western countries and rising productions costs. Thus, OEM suppliers that before had served international corporate buyers increasingly turn their attention toward the domestic market (Zhao, 2013).

Since the late 1980s the Government had also promoted early efforts to establish and nurture a nascent Chinese fashion industry. Wu (2009) argues that a bunch of designers working for State-Owned Enterprises had actually achieved notoriety through the help of State-Owned fashion media and can be considered the first generation of Chinese fashion designers. However, the State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) were not the most receptive and market oriented companies, and due to heavy losses they were gradually dismantled. Private and foreign enterprises gained momentum and the market was appealed by modern fashion designers. Trends from state-owned factories eventually faded out (Wu, 2009). Nevertheless, the role of the government extended far beyond the control of the state-owned enterprises. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, more than thirty national and regional design programs were set up, along with research institutions and associations. In 1979 the ‘Shanghai Clothing Research Institute’ was established. In 1981 a fashion conference on colour was held in Shanghai and thereafter a National Textile Fashion Color Research Centre was founded. In 1986 the Shanghai Garment Trade Association was founded to function as a liaison between Chinese and Western fashion industries and between the government and apparel companies (Wu, 2009). In 1993 the State instituted and partially funded the China Fashion Association (CFA) to assist and regulate the fashion industry.

In 2001 the China National Textile Industry Council replaced the former China State Textile Industrial Bureau. In 1994 the 'Chinese Famous Brand Fashion' group was established, while in company with the Chinese Historical Clothing Research Association a Chinese 'famous brands' magazine was issued (Finnane, 2008). After the reform and especially since the 1990s, countless fashion events, contests, festivals, fairs, shows and exhibition took place, most of which were organised by state-funded service entities (Wu, 2009). More recently, in 2001 the President Jiang Zemin promoted the foundation of a national association for the promotion of Chinese brands internationally. Finally, it's worthwhile to mention the elevation of status of the creative industry introduced in the last Five-year Plan (Wuwei, 2011).

It was pivotal in the formation of the Chinese fashion industry also the state-based education system. Wu provides a detailed account for it, by both highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. The early education programs were strongly focused on drawing skills and art. The aspirant designers who attended Chinese universities received little training on cutting and sewing, and were closer to the figure of the painter and artist rather than to that of the fashion designer. Above all, they did not receive training on business and branding, two key elements to successfully run a fashion label. However, things quickly changed by means of at least three phenomena. First, the training acquired by overseas students. Second, the skills acquired by employees of international fashion companies based in China. Third, the rejuvenating of the education system through exchange programs as clearly pointed out by Wu (1999):

From the point of view of institutions of higher education, clothing design was a Western concept, and thus they actively involved themselves in foreign exchange programs and activities. Clothing-design teachers visited or studied abroad in order to bring back more advanced pedagogical ideas and skills. [...] Many of these educators were simultaneously designers, critics, scholars, fashion writers, event organisers, and founders of a variety of fashion programs and organisations. And they owed much of their success to their

overseas experiences. Applying new ideas and methods to various fields, their international experience eventually benefited the transformation of China's traditional apparel industry into a modern fashion system consisting of manufacturers, retailers, advertisers, designers, models, journalists, and editors. Since the 1990s, foreign exchange activities in higher institutions, as well as in the industry as a whole, have continued to multiply. [...] In the new millennium, partnerships with other high institutions outside of China have also become commonplace.

The efforts made were not vain and a second generation of Chinese fashion designers emerged. Since they emerged from the system of regional and national fashion design contests, they were initially screened on the grounds of fashion illustrations skills. In so doing, college students were favoured over state-employees of state-owned companies and the new fashion designers were more individualistic-oriented and enjoyed greater freedom. The major theme of this period was China. A process of self-exoticisation led most of the designer of the time to draw upon a East meets West signature. As Wu (1999) suggests:

Inspired by the domestic media's enthusiastic portrayal of the proliferation of Chinese elements on the Western runway and the example set by Hong Kong fashion designers emerging on the world fashion scene, most mainland designers at the time were firmly convinced that the path to international fame and recognition lay in China's rich sartorial history. [...] Early attempts by Chinese fashion designers to become players on the stage of international fashion were predicated on the idea that the more their designs appeared Chinese, the more international appeal their designs would have. The Chinese media encapsulated this sentiment in the slogan 'the more national, the more international'. A sense of patriotism also contributed to the desire of designers to showcase Chinese culture and aesthetics, which also contributed to the spread of Chinese styles on domestic runways in the 1990s.

Among the most renowned designer of that time we recall Hu Xiaodan, Zhang Zhaoda (Mark Cheung), Liu Yang and Wu Haiyan. In 1995 Hu Xiaodan set up a

fashion show held after the title ‘Moving Forbidden City’, in which he dressed models to look like different architectural elements of the historical site. In the domestic circle he was criticised because its style was detached from the contemporary fashion scene. However, his show was welcomed at many international exhibitions in the main world capitals, including Paris, New York, London, Tokyo and Dusseldorf. The first Chinese fashion week was promoted by the CFA and held in 1997. Zhang Zhaoda (Mark Cheung) won the award and he is often defined as one of the pioneering Chinese fashion designer. Liu Yang was included in the ‘Chinese fashion designers’ Top Ten list in both 1995 and 1998’, by virtue of a signature that combined Chinese and Western elements, along with a charismatic and eccentric personality. A further Chinese fashion designer who enjoyed great success and recently received international exposure is Ma Ke, China’s ‘Top Ten Fashion Designers’ in 1995. The designer established two brands, Exception and Wuyong (useless), and showcased the latter at the Paris Haute Couture Week in July 2008. Moreover, she has recently received international exposure, after that the First Lady Peng Liyuan wore her label Exception while she was accompanying her husband, the President Xi Jinping, on the first state visit to Russia (Moore, 2013).

While the competition with Western brands was increasing, the Chinese giant-names in the clothing and apparel retail industry endorsed the aforementioned Chinese famous designer to enhance their brand image. Liu Yang signed a contract with Romon in 1998 and later with the well-known Youngnor. Wu Haiyan signed with China Garment Group Limited and Zhang Zhaoda (Mark Cheung) was hired as Chief designer for the Shanshan Group. In those years it was common for retailing companies also to hire foreign designers or to offer Western-styles garments for the domestic market. **Ochilry**, for example, is a company registered in Hong Kong and founded in 1999 by a mainland businessman. It targets Chinese working women (Junqian, 2012). Despite its domestic market positioning it echoes a global brand image. As we read from the official website: ‘Ochirly’s derives from the Chinese ou shili, which means

‘European fashion charm’ and it ‘set out to introduce European style into the Chinese market’ (ochirly.trendy-global.com).

In the early years of the new millennium a new wave of Chinese fashion designers was ready to set up its own fashion brands. Yifei Chen, an internationally renowned artist who had made a fortune by selling oil paintings to Western industrialists, invested in a wide array of art-related projects, fashion included. He hired a bunch of fashion designer who later successfully set up and run their own businesses. In 1995, the launch issue of Chinese Vogue declared Wang Yiyang, Hu Rong, Zhang Da, and Wang Wei, as China’s new force design (Wu, 2009). All of them had worked for Yifei Chen. Now they account for the bigger share of the designer market in China and their brands address the most sophisticated target of the Chinese audience. In 2002 Wang Yiyang launched ZUCZUG, a brand designed for ‘white-collar women, who lead a fashionable and urban lifestyle’ (Wu, 2009). Zhang Da founded Boundless in 2005, after winning the Mittel Moda contest in Italy. His signature avoids both Chinoiserie and Westernized styles and pursues a borderless balance between fashion and art. His collections have been showcased at the Victoria and Albert Museum on London. Hu Rong launched Decoster in 2000, and its design is inspired by the City of Shanghai and its inherent East vs West conflict (www.chinafashionbloggers.com). Indeed, while the high-end market has been exclusively dominated by global luxury brands, the growing urban middle class offered an enticing niche market for local designers (Wu, 2009). Today, eponymous stores of these brands can be found in the most renowned malls of China, like Xintiandi Style, in Shanghai. Steele and Major (1999) provide some examples of Asian designers that have become increasingly well known since the 1980s: Vivienne Tam, Yeohlee, Han Feng, Amy Chan, Anna Sui, Zang Toi, and Nautica’s David Chu. Though, most of them were actually born in the US.

A number of Chinese fashion brands that targets the premium segment of the international market can also be tracked. For example, JNBY and Bosideng.

JNBY Finery Co. Ltd is a company established in 1994 in Hangzhou that besides operating more than 700 retail stores nationwide, distributes its products globally to more than 20 countries including Spain, France, United Kingdom, Canada, United States, Russia, UAE and New Zealand (JNBY China, 2015). While the original acronym stands for Jiang Nan Bu Yi - which means "clothing from the southern Yangtze River Delta", the brand name for international markets is translated as "Just Naturally Be Yourself". Moreover, on the one hand, each garment comes with a Made in China label. On the other hand, the company's manifesto does not set the focus on any Chinese element, rather sets it on the use of natural materials (JNBY Canada, 2015). Bosideng International Holdings Limited is a down-apparel brand launched in mainland China in 1994. In 2013, it accounted for 37.8% of the PRC down apparel market in terms of sales (Company Profile), and can be considered the leader in its sector in China. The brand has recently addressed overseas market, namely UK and Italy. It operates stores in both London and Rome (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Bosideng - D-La Repubblica, November 2015.



Also the luxury segment counts a number of Chinese brands. Shiatzy Chen is a high-end fashion label founded in 1978, in Taiwan, by Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia. The brand draws upon the East meets West concepts: it ‘embraces the inner soul of the East, injects the outstanding craftsmanship of the West’ and has the aspiration to build the ‘New Look of China’. Each garment carries a label written in Chinese which states: ‘original intention’. It foremost serves the most prestigious personalities of the Asian elites. However, already in the 1990s the brand had set up a studio in Paris which today operates as boutique (Quartly, 2005 January 27). Ne-Tiger is the brand founded by Mr. Zhang Zhifeng in 1982, and is now a renowned Chinese luxury brand ‘committed to the revival of the Chinese luxury culture’ with the purpose to ‘Integrate Antiquity to the Present, Converge Chinese and Western’ ([www.netiger.com](http://www.netiger.com)). Its high-end product targets top celebrities, especially in the art and performances environment. Although it does not operate stores in Western countries its clientele includes international high-profile customers like, recently, Princess Marie of Denmark (Ne-Tiger, Personal Communication, 2015 January).

Blanc de Chine was founded in 1986 as a design workshop and in 1990 as a retail group by Kin Yeung. In the words of the chairman we learn that it was his aspirations to ‘create a collection of apparel that would not only reflect the outward aesthetic of Chinese designs but also a certain spiritual aspect of the Chinese culture’ (Steele and Major, 1999). The brand name itself recalls China as it refers to the ‘White of China’ a term that, as we read from the official website ‘reflects the admiration of the 18th Century French connoisseurs’ for the Chinese porcelain’ and ‘it symbolises a time when the West was looking to the East for beautiful and luxurious creations’. They stresses the East meets West narrative through the sentence ‘So Ancient, So Modern’. The brand has been running a store in New York since 2006, although it has recently been closed (Rogers, 2006, January 15).

A Chinese luxury brand which received wide international exposure is Shanghai

Tang (Park and Yim, 2007; Heine and Phan, 2013). It was founded in 1994 by tycoon David Tang, whose purpose was to establish the first internationally renowned Chinese luxury brand. In 1996 the major share of the brand was acquired by the Compagnie Financiere Richmond SA, and in 1997 a 12.000 square-foot space boutique was opened in Madison Avenue, New York. Sales did not meet expectations and the store was relocated in a less ambitious space. The business finally took off after the 2001, when Raphael Le Masne De Chermont was appointed new CEO and he endorsed Joanne Ooi as Chief Designer. In a former interview, Joanne Ooi had clearly pointed out what it was the weakness of the brand (Yim and Park, 2007):

It's an overpriced Chinese emporium that has no credibility with local Chinese people, let alone with fashion people. Its very narrow market is high-end tourists. It's a once-in-a-lifetime destination shopping experience, a kind of fashion Disneyland. Plus, it's unwearable and eccentric.

Under her new guidance, the brand enjoyed greater acceptance among foreign customers and among Chinese elites who worked in an international environment. Zhiyan et al. (2013) suggest that 'Shanghai Tang helps the Chinese to address tensions between personal identity, aspiration, and suitable social roles in the international arena':

'I buy Shanghai Tang because it's a global brand. Its designers are Western. I think this dress appeals to Westerners, and its distinctive Chinese features will make me stand out'.

The appealing of the Chinese luxury market has recently initiated a new phenomena: Western companies setting-up Chinese brands. This the case, for example, of Shang Xia, a lifestyle brand founded in 2008 by the french maison Hermès in collaboration with the Chinese designer Jiang Qiong Er. The label's manifesto is to preserve and promote ancient Chinese craftsmanship techniques, through a modern interpretation. The company is independent in regard to design

and creativity, while economical backdrop and quality control are held by the Hermès company. The Shang Xia and Hermès stores in Shanghai are located on the same venue, one aside the other. A Shang Xia boutique was opened in Paris in September 2013 (Wendlandt, 2013).

The scenario so far illustrated demonstrates the increasing liveliness of the Chinese fashion industry. A dynamism upon which is grounded the growing aspiration of Chinese designers to develop famous brands for the international market.

## **2.4. East and West Meet.**

The international influence of the Chinese aesthetic is actually not new and can be tracked throughout history. Martin and Koda (1994) suggests that Chinoiserie, Japonisme and Turquerie are recurring phenomena in the decorative arts and culture of the West (Martin and Koda, 1994). Moreover, they argue that textile and apparel are the most prominent object of economic transaction and cultural dissemination, by virtue of their light weight and easiness to move and because the ‘foreignness and exoticism’ are more easily forgiven in the clothing category: ‘perhaps because we tend to think of clothing as less fixed to place and less calibrated to long life’. Design contamination between East and West are intrinsically embedded in the tradition of both. The Silk Route which favoured the encounter of millions of people from ancient Civilisations over a period of several centuries was pivotal in the spread of fabrics, skills, designs, and fashions. Silk itself is claimed to be one of the most important contribution of China to the clothing World’s industry.

In the late thirteenth century the Venice merchant-traveller Marco Polo embarked in a long travel toward Asia where he spent almost a quarter of century. When he came back he provided a detailed account of the marvellous he had seen

along the route up to China, collecting them in the book “Il Milione”, translated as the “Book of the Marvels of the World”. This marked the beginning of a growing interest by Europe in the East. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the two main source of cultural mediation were the traders from the British, Dutch, Portuguese and French Empire, and the pilgrims and missionaries committed to promulgate their cultural and moral codes. The reciprocal influence is apparent, for example, in the habit to drink tea in England and to smoke tobacco in China that still persists. In the realm of dress, according to Martin and Koda, at that time ‘the Western wardrobe was vastly enriched by the sumptuous stuffs of the East that brought new pattern and possibility to Western dress’. Likewise, Finnane suggests that the ‘well born European dressed in silks and satins woven in distant Suzhou’. During the nineteenth century the universal expositions brought under the gaze of the European public items like silk from China, Kimonos from Japan, and shawls from India. This initiated a business of adaptation and copying of Eastern designs on many kind of object category. Although, ‘the imagining of China was always more fanciful than real’ (Martin and Koda, 1994). Literature on art and history isolates two specific moments during which Asian culture had a prominent role in influencing the West. These are known under the terms of Chinoiserie and Japonism.

Chinoiserie is an artistic current that emerged in Europe since the seventeenth century and had its peak in the eighteenth century. It is characterised by Eastern influences in painting, architecture, furnishing and decorative arts. Though many of the elements were taken from Chinese culture, many also came from Japan and India. Initially, imports of goods and gateway of culture were the demands for luxury of the aristocracy class. Mayor (1941) argues that ‘What [European] liked in Chinese art is quite clear. The age of absolute monarchy respected the stylised and exquisitely finished art of vast and ancient kingdoms whose court ceremonial was even more elaborate than that of Versailles’. Porter (2002) argues that ‘by the 1730s, a Chinese room, decorated with imported paper and screens, plump figures of the laughing buddha, porcelain vases on the mantelpiece and blue and white

plate lining the walls, was de rigueur in respectable country houses'. Martin and Koda suggest that 'to wear Chinese dress at home was not a frivolous and fanciful gesture; it was an imperial act, signifying worldly knowledge'. The Chinoiserie style accounted for much of the ornate and fanciful aesthetic held at the court of Louis XV. However, the taste for porcelain, silks, wallpapers, lacquerware and tea sets spread to every level of the society, especially through cheap imitations made of alternative materials. This foreign aesthetic met and merged in Europe with the heights of the late baroque and rococo artistic currents. The main feature of Chinoiserie was the loss of perspective in favour of flat design motifs with no shadows. The first building classified as Chinoiserie is the Chinese Pagoda at Kew Gardens, near London, erected in 1762. The Chinoiserie current faded by the early nineteenth century, along with the class that had made it possible. According to Mayor (1941) the passion for the Far East 'did not return to European art until about 1870, when Japanese prints began to be collected in Paris and gave artists like Degas and Whistler notions of composition which, for the first time in centuries, had nothing to do with Raphael'. It was the time for Japonism.

In 1854, after twenty years of isolation foreign policy, Japan opened its ports again to the international trade. This led to an immense flow of goods moving from the East to the West, that would play an essential role in determining modern art and design (Martin and Koda, 1994). Some of the features include the already mentioned use of flat areas with no shadows nor perspective; the use of strong colours and composition freedom, i.e. the subject could be placed elsewhere from the centre. Major influences could be tracked firstly in the Impressionism art current, and afterwards in the development of the Art Nouveau and Cubism. The term also defines a French Style, which in England had its counterpart in the Anglo-Japanese style, characterised by manifest influences of Japanese aesthetic and culture. Martin and Koda provide a few example of the Japanese craze that occurred in those years: in 1862, E. Desoye opened a shop of Japanese curios at 220, rue de Rivoli, Paris; in 1875, Arthur Lasenby Liberty was selling the new and exotic-style works of art and fabric on Regent Street in London; Emile Zola was

represented by Édouard Manet as an Occidental contemplative who emulates and commands Japanese aesthetics.

One century later, in the eighties of the twentieth century, a second wave of interest in Japan resurged. It was the so-called Japanese Revolution, that led a bunch of Japanese designer to successfully access the Parisian fashion system. Some of the most renowned names were Hanae Mori, Issy Miyake, and later Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons. They provided the first case of Eastern aesthetic to enter the European fashion system in the modern era. An antecedent upon which we develop our study of emerging Chinese fashion brands. Thus, we will later account for a richer description of this phenomenon.

Eastern elements in Western fashion can be tracked also through much part of the twentieth century: at the beginning sporadically and afterwards with more resonance. The French couturier Paul Poiret, who was greatly influenced by China, already in 1906 had designed a Confucius coat. During his career he often quoted Chinese elements like medallions and ‘frog’ style fastenings. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the political scenery drew particular attention to China. On the one hand the hippy movement widely adopted exotic styles, among the which also the motifs from the Far East played a minor role. On the other hand, young westerners who endorsed social and communist ideologies, subscribed to the worker’s style epitomised by the Mao suit. In those years, the magazine ‘Time’ described the latest fashion trend as ‘Mao à la Mode’. As Steele and Major suggest ‘Beyond proletarian style, there is revolutionary chic, which for many westerners is a sexy look’. In the 1976 the French designer Yves Saint Laurent produced a collection inspired by Imperial China and in 1980 he launched the new fragrance ‘Opium’, that marked a new wave of fashionable Chinoiserie (Steele and Major, 1999). Western interest into the East can be tracked also through the nineties. Famous international fashion designers drew their inspiration from China: it is the case, for example, of the Chinese inspired ensembles by Jean Paul Gaultier and by Giorgio Armani in 1994. In those years museums held

international exhibition of Chinese historical clothing one after another (Finnane, 2008). Although present throughout the 1990s, the passion for so-called Asian chic occurred in waves (Jones and Leshkovich, 2003) and counted two main peaks, in the 1992/1993 and in the 1997/1998. The earlier coincided with the release by Janet Jackson and Madonna of music videos inspired by Asian images along with the international success of high-grossing Asian or Asian-themed films, such as *M. Butterfly*, *Indochine*, *Heaven and Earth*, and *The Wedding Banquet*. The latter coincided with the release of best-seller Asian-themed books like *Memories of a Geisha* and with the popularisation of the Dalai Lama, who became a celebrated pop-culture figure. It was also the time when Shanghai Tang, one of the earliest attempts to establish an international Chinese luxury brand, was founded.

Recently, a new wave of interest in China has emerged. Reasons for this include a designer's personal interest in China as a source of inspiration (Wu, 2009), along with the ever growing economical and political role of the country within the World's map. The most recent evidence for this is probably the exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art 'China: Through the Looking Glass', which explored the impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion. The four-month exhibition closed on the 7th September of this year, registering a total of 815,992 visitors. A figure that exceeds attendance to the Costume Institute's former top show, the "Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty" held in 2011 (Bobila M., 2015 September 8). However, despite the growing interest toward China, Chinese fashion designers still fail to gain international recognition.

## **2.5. Is It The Time of China?**

While both China and its textile and apparel industry have become increasingly globalised, the influence of Chinese fashion designers on the global market fails to make an impact. Scholars suggests a number of factors that have hampered the

emergence of Chinese fashion brands on a global stage. We cluster them according to three main categories.

## **Semeiotics of Fashion**

Finnane (2008) argues that the semeiotics of fashion is weighted against China. Wu (1999) argues that in the eyes of young Chinese designers, any new Chinese aesthetic discovered by the new generation of Chinese designers only will add another form of originality and exoticism to Western fashion but will not be a dominant force in global fashion and quotes the words by designer Zhang Da who states that ‘the power [of fashion] is in the West. All of us need to exhibit in Paris in order for the World to see... Westerners come to China for the market, but Chinese go to the West for recognition’ (Wu, 2009). Zhao (2013) posits that while Chinese newcomers represent a threat to established powerhouses in the global fashion industry, at the same time, the existing hierarchy in the global field of fashion poses significant constraints to Chinese fashion designers. Especially in the 1990s, designers often drew upon their Chinese national character, pursuing a self-exoticisation strategy that, within the international audience, led to short-term fads of exoticism. The designer Liu Yang clearly discusses this point: ‘It was hard for our fashion to enter the international marketplace in the past. One of the important reasons is that we misunderstood the meaning of national character, through, for example, drawing Chinese paintings on the surface of a Qipao. However, if national character can be incorporated in one’s design without a decent understanding of international fashion trends and aesthetics, why doesn’t one just regard jade clothes sewn with golden thread unearthed from Mawangdui (an ancient Chinese tomb dating from 168 B.C.) as fashion?’ (Wu, 2009). Nevertheless, to embrace the Western aesthetic leads to a negative effect as well: i.e. being addressed as Western copycats. Ultimately, ‘Chinese fashion designers have to confront not just with the association of their trade with the lowly regarded caifeng (domestic perception), but also with the stereotype of them being copycats of Western designers’ (Zhao, 2013).



## **Fashion Industry**

Severe deficiencies also affect the Chinese fashion industry. These include the education, the media, and the facilities system. One of China's 'Top Ten Fashion Designers of 1995', Ma Ke, commented: 'our experience, our education, and our past have all served to restrict our imaginations' (Wu, 2009). Moreover, the state's monopoly on the major events and media coverage 'inhibited the growth of talented unknown designers because of the lack of a free and competitive environment. The pressure to conform to mainstream aesthetics also stifled creativity' (Wu, 2009). As previously discussed, the education system has recently changed, and joined with international standards. However, there's one more gap to be filled yet, that is the lack of globally literate management talent (Zhao, 2013). The same author reports the portrait made by the designer Yuan Xing who argues that the immature fashion media, the legacies of China's past, the underdeveloped supporting industries such as high-quality fabrics, dyeing and printing and the lack of an adequate consumer base, are all factors that hamper the development of strong Chinese fashion brands. The fashion critic Bao Mingxin (Wu, 2009) argues that:

As a cultural phenomenon, fashion needs to be cultivated in a specific environment. The reason Paris has become the world's fashion centre is that it has sophisticated consumers and a fashion circle consisting of artists, designers, photographers, fashion models, retailers of shoes, hats, leathers, furs, accessories, and fabrics. In this environment, fashion designers need teamwork rather than working in isolation - that is, to collaborate and cooperate with many other people. It is a misunderstanding or merely naïve to attribute the prosperity of the fashion industry to the individual success or failure of fashion designers.

Simply put, aspiring Chinese fashion designers are 'fish without water' (Zhao, 2013).

## **Country-of-Origin Effect**

We will provide a more detailed account for this concept in the next section. Here we underline how the image of China may have an influence on the export performances of Chinese branded apparel and garments. Finnane (2008) quotes the following complain by a designer: ‘take a Western garment we make in our factories, with the same sort of materials, the same worker, the same machines: stick a top-ranking fashion label like Dior on it, and it sells it for eight to ten thousand; stick Binbin on it, and you’ll get two’. Reinach-Segre (2005) argues that ‘China, by definition, is fast fashion’: i.e. cheap and imitative fashion, whose image poses an obstacle to the reception of China as fashion hub. Likewise Zhao (2013) stresses that ‘the characterisation of China as a fast fashion system essentially caricatures China as flooded by a sea of unoriginal, cheap, knockoffs and counterfeits of Western fashions’. Indeed, Zhiyan et al. (2013) report the words of a manager who laments that ‘the Chinese government should enhance the export of Chinese culture through movies, songs, art, and traditional events’, and adds that South Korea should be taken as an example, as ‘it is one of the world’s top ten cultural exporters’. As a result, the familiar image of low price and low quality, the lack of international marketing skills upon which to draw, poor understanding of the needs of foreign consumers, all contribute to hamper the bloom of the Chinese international fashion industry (Zhao, 2013). So far, clothing production in China has not necessarily signified creating fashion (Reinach-Segre, 2009).

However, the World is waiting for a top-ranking Chinese fashion brand.

Today, the Country offers one of the largest clothing markets in the world, it exports more textile and apparel products than any other country and, contrary to the popular belief that Chinese exports are cheap and low-end products, they cover a wide range of quality and price levels, including moderately priced and high-end products (Zhao, 2013). Indeed, Chinese companies aspire to build fashion brands (D’Astous et al., 2004; Schlevogt, 2000) and to go global

(Lindgren, 2015) and a lively debate on the possibility and necessity for China to establish its 'domestic' international fashion brands has grown far beyond the domestic borders:

Let's face it: the Middle Kingdom is hot.

Chadha and Husband, 2006

The 21st century belongs to the Chinese. China will be big and strong. Untroubled by ugly reality. Look forward. Be optimistic. Put on a great show.

Martin-Liao, 2008

I just thought to myself, that if you agree that China will eventually be the largest economy in the World, it was time to start a brand that was quintessentially Chinese David Tang, as cited in Park (2007)

Now the world is waiting for a Chinese global designer. In a few years, that could be'.

Scribes of The Orient, 2008

New Chinese culture can circulate globally and construct new global meanings worldwide.

Zhiyan et al., 2013

Given its hard work and opportunities, Shanghai will surely be able to establish its own image as a city of fashion and culture.

Zhang, 2005

The Chinese fashion industry is a powerfully informing case study to advance research on fashion studies and it is a contemporary issue that calls for further investigations. Based on these grounds our study aims to analyse whether and how Chinese fashion designers access the international fashion system. However, this issue can not be tackled unless we also take into consideration the stream of research on the development and management of brands. More specifically, due to

the geographical viewpoint of this work, we need to focus on the country-of-origin effects that have an impact on brands. In the next section we present a brief overview on brand management for fashion designers, in the light of the country-of-origin perspective.

## **SECTION II**

### **FASHION BRANDS**

#### **The Country-Of-Origin Issue**

The purpose to investigate the emergence of Chinese fashion brands calls for a clearer definition of at least two concepts: fashion ‘brand’ and Chinese ‘brand’. Although this work does not focus on branding strategies, in the next two chapters we provide a brief overview of the concept of brand and fashion, also according to the geographical perspective of the (Chinese) country-of-origin of the brand. This will provide the basis to develop a framework to identify the object of study: Chinese fashion brands.



## **Chapter 3**

### **From Fashion to Fashion Brands.**

While there is a lack of agreement on the definition of brand, it results even more complex to define what a fashion brand is. Indeed, the process of brand creation in fashion is a challenging and complicated matter. However, it is important to provide a brief overview of the concepts of designer brand and fashion brand, before accounting for the geographical perspective that is the focus of this study.

Brand is a over-defined term (Stern, 2006). At its simplest, it is defined either as a legal statements of ownership (Crainer, 1995) or as the mark adopted to designate legal ownership (Broadbent and Cooper, 1987). The American Marketing Association defines it as ‘a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or

group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors' (American Marketing Association, 1960). However, several definitions have been proposed over time (cfr. De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998).

As for fashion, the establishment of the earliest brand can be tracked back to the end of the 19th century and it is usually associated with the watershed work by Charles Frederick Worth. At that time dressmakers were mere suppliers, whereas he was the first couturier to impose its taste. To the extent that he is considered the prototype of the celebrity fashion designer (Tungate, 2004). In the 1970s, Italian designers from Milan like Giorgio Armani, Gianni Versace, Gianfranco Ferré and Valentino set up a new business model: i.e. ready-to-wear. Instead of offering a cheaper version of French Haute Couture they provided high-design but affordable fashion and addressed the mid-bourgeois emerging at that time. Their success inspired scores of imitators and lower-priced alternatives which have driven the 'ready-to-wear' category into the high-priced end of the pyramid (The Designer's Brand Structural Change). Segre-Reinach argues that the ready-to-wear fashion is now supplanted by the fast fashion model (as cited in Crane and Bovone, 2006). Fast Fashion is low cost and low price apparel that remains on the shelves for a shorter period of time than the traditional clothing industry (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010) and which transforms trendy design into articles that can be bought by the masses (Sull and Turconi, 2008). However, also within this new scenario, designers have a role in the management of brands: partnerships between fast fashion (e.g., H&M) and designers (e.g., Alexander Wang) are all but new.

On the one hand, fashion brands begin as labels named after their founder and for a period of time they are intrinsically linked to their designer (Henderson, April 2004). On the other hand, brands enhance their brand image by endorsing famous designers. Thus, brands and designers are tightly connected. Based upon this ground, we do not operate any distinction between designer brands and brands. Throughout our analysis, we use the terms 'Chinese designers' and



‘Chinese brands’ interchangeably. And, accordingly, our list of Chinese fashion brands is made up of both brands and designers brands, though the latter category accounts for the biggest share. Within the limits of this work, we consider a fashion brand a ‘name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify goods’ (American Marketing Association, 1960) from the apparel and garment industry. Moreover, since we focus on fashion brands and designer brand of Chinese origin, we now provide further consideration on the geographical identity of the brands.



## Chapter 4

# The Country-Of-Origin of Brands.

Once we have set the limits of the term fashion brand, we also need to set the limits of the term *Chinese* fashion brand. Simply put, the expression indicates the geographic and cultural origin of a trademark operating in the apparel and garment industry. However, a long tradition of studies suggests that the country-of-origin of a brand is less clear-and-cut than it might be expected, and that implies more than what it might be believed. Indeed, it is a subject of investigation by itself.

The country-of-origin effect (COO) construct has been object of study since the 60's (Schooler, 1965; Reiersen, 1996). Early studies investigated on the question whether consumer purchase decisions are affected by country-of-origin cues. Firstly, focusing on the country-of-manufacture (COM) (Samiee, 1987), later distinguishing between country-of-design (COD) and country of assembly (COA)

(Ahmed and d'Astous, 2008; Godey *et al.*, 2012) and finally identifying the multiple country affiliations of a product (Chao, 2001; Ettenson and Gaeth, 1991). However, recent studies shifted the attention from the product to the brand level (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; O'Cass and Lim, 2002; Usunier, 2011), arguing that since the production chain involves multiple country contributions, investigations should be focused on the perceived country-of-origin of the brand (COB). Only recent findings have suggested that multiple country-affiliation, already registered in the manufacturing of the product, can also be tracked in the development of the brand image: e.g., a co-branded product is essentially a hybrid brand with two COOs (Fong *et al.*, 2014; Heine *et al.*, 2015).

In a study conducted on fashioned T-Shirts, D'Astous *et al.* (2004) found that Chinese consumers' perceptions of country of design and country of assembly are much more positive for products made in highly industrialised countries than for those made in newly industrialised countries. Wang *et al.* (2004) and Marsha *et al.*, (2004) profiled the target of Chinese consumer who prefer to buy imported fashion brands. According to their study they are characterised as follows: they have a unique lifestyle and an hedonistic shopping orientation, they are not necessarily from the highest income group, but they are big spenders on clothing and are willing to pay higher prices for brand, quality and image. More recently, O'Cass and Siahtiri (2013) showed that Chinese young adults prefer fashion clothing brands with Western origins over those with Asian origins: they argue that the levels of consumerism, status consumption and decision-making styles are major contributors to how Asian young adults perceive the brands, and in this sense Western fashion brands communicate status and wealth better than the Asian ones. Results from consumers of Western countries are less clear and cut. Whereas Wong and Ahuvia (1998) found that Western consumers are more likely to judge each product independently, regardless of the brand, manufacturer and COO, in a more recent study in the fashion product category Phau and Leng (2008) found that Australian status-seeking teenagers prefer foreign luxury fashion brands over domestic ones, unless the foreign country is China. However,

studies have also shown an increasing appeal for local cues. In a research of foreign brand advertising in China, Jiafei Yin (1999) discovered that more than three-quarters of them favoured combining the global with the local. Recent studies have shown that foreign brands are increasingly less appealing to Chinese consumers as compared with the growing appeal of Chinese brands and prices (Zhiyan *et al.*, 2013). Scholars suggests that especially the “young emperors”, the generation born after 1978, is increasingly comfortable with Chinese culture and patriotic in their consumption choice (Ngai and Cho, 2012; Hedrick-Wong (2007). An emerging stream of research on brand building for emerging countries has shown that localness can be an asset: while studying internationalisation strategies for Chinese brands, Chailan and Ille (2015) argue that in an era of global branding and sourcing, companies from emerging countries should try to emphasise the brand’s local origin, drawing on the concept of “reverse globalisation” which consists of exporting localness to the world (Turner, 2003). They also suggest to surpass the local vs global brand paradox: since locally rooted brands with a worldwide dimension are conceivable, companies from emerging countries should mix global and local cues, developing into hybrid brands.

While the country-of-origin of a brand is difficult to assess, it proofs to be strategic for the success of the brand. Indeed, while brands are increasingly hybrid, their localness is increasingly welcomed, even when it comes from developing countries that do not enjoy a positive country-image. Thus, within the limits of this work, it is pivotal to address the following question: how is it possible to assess the (Chinese) country-of-origin of a brand? A preliminary phase of the study will be devoted to the development of a framework to identify Chinese fashion brands.



**PART II**  
**FOCUS ON**  
**CHINESE FASHION BRANDS:**  
**Analysis of an Emerging Trend.**





# **SECTION I**

## **PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY**

In the next chapters we illustrate the theoretical framework upon which the object of study, i.e. Chinese fashion brands, has been investigated. Thereafter we formulate the Research Questions and we present the methodology plan.



# **Chapter 5**

## **Chinese Fashion Brands in the Fashion System.**

Before we have presented a comprehensive overview of the main theories that explain fashion and we have provided a brief overview of the concept of fashion brand, also in the light of the geographical perspective. In this chapter we define the concept of Chinese fashion brands against the backdrop of the fashion theory adopted for this analysis: the fashion system theory. Thereupon, we present the research questions of the thesis.

## 5.1. The Fashion System

Literature from fashion theory suggests that there are at least two major currents of thought. On the one hand, fashion is understood as the result of the industrial society which has developed in Europe since the eighteenth and nineteenth century. On the other hand, fashion is defined as a inner human phenomenon which pertains to all times and cultures. Our work draws upon the ‘fashion system’ theory which belongs to the former current thought and has been suggested by the fashion sociologist Kawamura (2005). The author posits fashion as a result of modern society, characterised by increasing population, increasing urbanisation, improvement of technology and productivity, the spread of democratisation and the growth of social mobility (Kawamura, 2005):

There are conditions necessary for a ‘fashion system’ to exist and operate, and those are a multi-level open class system, within which more than one class is able to participate in fashion change in dress, and the possibility of mobility from one class to the next; and the presence of competition between at least two classes. In addition, change and novelty must be positively valued in within the cultural group in question.

The scholar defines the ‘fashion system’ as a system made up of institutions, organisations, groups, producers, events and practices. All of which are in charge of the gatekeeping process. This process filters and disseminate fashion information, through affirmation, reinterpretation, and rejection of individual works (Powell, 1978). The dissemination of fashion information is a crucial stage: indeed, an object is first manufactured and then it is transformed into fashion through the process of dissemination (Kawamura, 2004):

Between designers and the public, there exists institutions and gatekeepers who transmit and filter the information and materials intended for consumers. They participate in the cultural process of dissemination by selecting and rejecting

the content and determining what will come to the attention of the various public. They have the authority to define, promote and spread fashion.

Ultimately, there exists a clear distinction between the concepts of clothing and fashion: while the former is a material production, the latter is a symbolic one. In order to turn clothing (material) into fashion (symbolic) it is necessary to be legitimised by the gatekeepers of the fashion system.

The institutions in charge of the dissemination and legitimisation process (read: gatekeepers) have changed over time. The earliest form of fashion dissemination were fashion dolls: they were made of wax, wood, or porcelain and changed clothes with the season. During the eighteenth century, they were dispatched every month throughout Europe from Paris. By half of the eighteenth century dolls were replaced by fashion plates. In the 1780s the first illustrated fashion magazine was issued. During the nineteenth century, World's exhibitions were organised and involved also fashion fairs. In 1910, the first institutionalised fashion show was held in France (Kawamura, 2004). To date, according to Kawamura, the system provides two ways for getting the required legitimisation: 1) taking part in seasonal fashion shows held in Paris, London, Milan, and, New York; 2) getting access to fashion journalists, editors, advertisers, marketers, merchandisers, and publicists (Kawamura, 2005). The principal fashion gatekeepers, responsible for the global transmission of fashion are: 1) newspaper journalists, 2) fashion magazine editors, and 3) publicists, both in the print and in the electronic media (Kawamura, 2004).

The picture above illustrated posits fashion in the hearth of Europe and in the centre of the West. Indeed, according to Kawamura the main hubs of the gatekeeping process are located in the fashion capitals of Paris, Milan, London, and New York. Recently, Tokyo has been recognised as an increasingly important fashion centre. However, despite the success of the Japanese designers in the 1980s, the city has failed to develop a strong credibility beyond the Asian market

(Kawamura, 2004; Skov, 2003).

By employing the fashion system theory as a basis for our framework, we also subscribe to this Western and Eurocentric definition of fashion. Rationale for this choice is twofold. First, our work addresses the relationship between the ‘establishment of fashion’ (the hubs of the fashion system) and the ‘new fashion players’ (Chinese designers); thus, it is informative to rely on a fashion theory able to distinguish between the two entities. Second, this theory has been already employed in studies similar in scope. Indeed, by applying the fashion system theory Kawamura (2004) has formerly analysed the phenomenon that led, in the 1980s, a bunch of Japanese designers to successfully access the Parisian fashion system. A phenomenon also known as the ‘Japanese Revolution’. Since the Japanese designers were the first Asian designers to access visibility and gain success in the European fashion system, they provide a powerfully informing antecedent. Before turning to the final definition of the object of study, we provide a brief account of the Japanese Revolution from the fashion system perspective.

## **5.2. The Japanese Antecedent**

In April 1970 the Japanese designer Kenzo Takada, known as Kenzo, run his first fashion show in Paris. He was the first to bring to the West ‘what was not considered fashionable in Japan’ and turn it fashionable in Paris (Kawamura, 2005). In 1977 Hanae Mori was able to become the first Japanese designer to be accepted as a member of La Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne. At the beginning of the 1980s a new generation of Japanese designers, who benefited of rewarding feedbacks from the Paris prêt-à-porter system, emerged. They were Rei Kawakubo, Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto, the representatives of a new aesthetic current, known as ‘Japanese Avant-Garde fashion’. As a whole, this wave of successful Japanese designers is known as the Japanese Revolution.

How did they succeed to access the Eurocentric fashion system? Various scholars have argued on the dynamics undergoing that success (Koren, 1984; Koda and Martin 1987; Coleridge, 1989; Evans and Thornton, 1989, 1991; Craik, 1994; Kawamura, 2004; Skov, 2003). Koda and Martin account for a thorough description of the craze for Japan style since the emergence of the Japonism movement in the nineteenth century. Evans and Thornton (1991) investigate on the different features of the Japanese design. Coleridge, as president of Condé Nast International, provides an insider perspective. Craik (1994) contends that Japanese design is perhaps the most radical force that has been capable to penetrate Western fashion. The relationship between the Eurocentric fashion system and the Japanese success has been thoroughly investigated by Kawamura (2005) and Skov (2003). Both the scholars agree on two pivotal factors that contributed to that success: the need for novelty of the fashion system, combined with the exoticisation process actively pursued or passively experienced by designers. We now further explain these two concepts.

## **Newness**

The literature review on fashion theories that we discussed in the first chapter, already highlighted the key role played by change in fashion. Indeed, according to the European perspective, grounded in the industrial revolution, the growing pace of change itself is a founding element of fashion. Here we stress the contribution made by Kawamura (2004) and the direct implication with the emergence of Japanese designers. The scholar argues that ‘the idea of newness is a vital element in fashion’: novelty is given the highest priority, innovation of new products is welcomed and encouraged, while content stability is fatal. Accordingly, Japanese designers are accepted in the Parisienne fashion system by virtue of their evident aesthetic unconformity to everything showcased until that moment: ‘they have shocked fashion professionals in the West by showing something none of them had seen before’ (Kawamura, 2004). As a consequence, the two systems are engaged in a symbiotic relationship: the fashion system needs Japanese designers in order to nurture its restless need for novelty, and Japanese designers need the

fashion system in order to be legitimised as fashionable. The author also adds that ‘using the Japanese ‘race card’ is no longer anything new. Since newness is the essence of fashion, it has become more difficult to come up with Japanese-inspired designs that journalists and editors in Paris have not seen (Kawamura, 2004)’.

## **Exoticisation**

The second widely discussed concept that has contributed to the Japanese Revolution is the exoticisation process. Fashion designer need to be legitimised by the fashion system. Japan does not have an institutionalised system to legitimate fashion designers (Kawamura, 2004). Thus, designers seek for legitimisation in Europe, namely Paris. The Parisienne fashion centre legitimises new designers by virtue of their novelty elements. The foreign identity of the designers and their uncommon aesthetic becomes a positive asset. With the purpose to increase chances to be endorsed, foreign designers stress their foreignness. On the one hand, the system endorses exotic elements, on the other hand designers stress their exotic allure: that is, to the exoticism process corresponds a self-exoticism process. The Japanese Revolution provides an informative example of this mechanism. Indeed, on the one hand the press coverage has widely labelled and grouped Japanese designers based on their nationality (Kawamura, 2004). On the other hand the source of Japanese design inspiration has come from elements of the Japanese culture, such as kabuki, Mount Fuji, geisha and cherry blossoms. Ultimately, ‘Japanese designers are expected to be Japanese’ (Kawamura, 2004). Once the legitimisation has been achieved, designers can benefit of the Paris label in two ways: either they base in Paris and use their native country Japan as the secondary market or they base in Japan and come to Paris to showcase twice a year. In both cases, the national identity of the Japanese designers is crucial to access the system:

What made these Japanese designers unique was not merely the clothes they designed but their position and status as non-Western fashion outsiders. The



marginality of these Japanese has become an asset.

Kawamura, 2004



Fig. 2: Rei Kawakubo – Autumn/Winter, 1983/1984.

In a field that is predominantly Western, the Japanese designers began to use their ‘race’ card to be acknowledged by the French, and they discovered that there were considerable financial benefits that they could bring back to their own country and also to other parts of the world. With the Federation’s approval they became insiders.

Kawamura, 2004

The most extraordinary thing about the media reception of Japanese designers in the 1980s was the way in which Western fashion writers embraced the stereotypes of Japanese national culture. [...] When writing about Japan, they presented myriad general references, eclectically jumbled together: theatre, dance, religion. [...] Historical allusions indicated that what was new in Paris was already old in Japan - that the fashion collections were a kind of national costume.

Skov, 2003

Worth of attention is also the fact that the exoticism process overwhelms designers, despite their consensus (Kawamura, 2004):

Kawakubo and many other are not satisfied with the label 'Japanese'. Miyake has been trying to create a new fashion genre that is neither Japanese nor Western (Koren, 1984). Neither does the younger generation of Japanese designers want to be labeled as one of those successful Japanese designers, but inevitably the fashion professionals constantly remind the public that they are Japanese, and it is Japanese fashion that they are looking at. Although as unfortunate as it may be for the Japanese designers, their heritage is their very strength and weapon in Paris.

Asian designers now look at the exoticisation path followed by the Japanese and believe it to be the way to go in order to establish international brands (Skov, 2003):

In my talks with local fashion designers about whether Hong Kong could 'make it', there was general agreement that the way to realize ambitions in international fashion was to 'do something Chinese'. For them this was the only conceivable way to turn their distance from the fashion centres into a competitive edge that could be exploited in the international marketplace.

Indeed, in the early twenty-first century, the new generations of Chinese fashion designers produced various forms of exoticism for Western consumers (e.g.,

Vivienne Tam) and were torn by the criticism of facile exoticisms, fictional identities, and Orientalism (Reinach-Segre, 2009).

At the time when Japanese designers entered the Paris ready-to-wear system, Japanese companies were already big-players in international textile and garment production. Likewise, East Asian designers try to win international acclaim because Western designers brands already source their clothes through East Asian production network: ‘expertise in global fashion production is already concentrated in East Asia’ (Skov, 2003). However, while at the time of the Japanese revolution the manufacturing of clothes was already located in East Asia, the production of fashion was still under legitimisation of the European fashion system.

The Japanese may have shocked the world of fashion, [...] but they, in fact, are still under the validation of the French system.

Kawamura, 2004

Against this backdrop, our analysis of emerging Chinese fashion brands focuses within the field of the fashion system.

### **5.3. Research Questions**

A Chinese fashion brand is a ‘name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify goods’ (American Marketing Association, 1960) from the apparel and garment industry, whose identity is Chinese according to the framework we will later illustrate, and which has applied for legitimisation to the institutional system of fashion which is in charge to turn clothes into fashion (Kawamura, 2005). Purpose of our study is to identify Chinese fashion brands that participate in the fashion system and to analyse their access strategy to the system, also in comparison with the previous Japanese

antecedent. Against this backdrop, we formulate the following research questions:

**Phase one:**

**Mapping Chinese fashion brands within the Western-centric fashion system.**

**RQ1:** How do we assess the country-of-origin of a fashion brand?

**RQ2:** What are the Chinese brands that participate in the fashion system?

**Phase two:**

**Analysing Chinese fashion brands' entry-strategy to the Western-centric fashion system.**

**RQ3:** How do Chinese brands access the Western-centric fashion system?

# Chapter 6

## Research Design and Methodology

The structure of the methodology follows the structure of the three research questions and it is made up of three main phases.

**Primary purpose** of this research is to develop a framework in order to assess a country-of-origin to fashion brands. Despite the long tradition of studies on country-of-origin effects, it was not possible to retrieve any available framework from previous literature that enabled us to frame fashion brands according to their country-of-origin. However, findings in this stream of research suggest us two key points upon which to ground the analysis. First, recent studies suggest that the country-of-origin should be investigated at the brand level. Second, the country-of-origin of brands is increasingly hybrid. Thus, it is evident that it is not possible to assess a country-of-origin based upon manufacturing location. And it is evident

that multiple country-affiliations should not be ignored. Nevertheless, the object of investigation of this project is Chinese fashion brands, and to assess the 'Chineseness' of the fashion brands is pivotal.

In order to do that, we relied on the qualitative methodology of Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is a general method for developing theory that is grounded in data systemically gathered and analysed (Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It explicitly involves 'generating theory and doing social research as two parts of the same process' (Glaser, 1978). Data analysis involves the identification of concepts, sub-categories, categories and how they relate to each other (Sikolia *et al.*, 2013). Concepts develop during actual research, through continuous interplay and comparison between analysis and data collection. The emerging theory is then presented as propositions or as a narrative framework (Urquhart, 2012).

Data Collection - We selected all the brands that participated in the Autumn Winter Women Prêt-à-Porter Fashion Week held in New York in 2013, for a total number of 160 brands. The reason why we focused on the New York calendar is that it accounts for the highest number of brands and for the highest number of diverse country-of-origin, thus providing the higher number of country-affiliation records. For each brand we collected the top 10 pages retrieved from Google. In order to accurately retrieve the data we used 'Google Scraper': a tool developed by the University of Amsterdam. We had a total of 1142 records, as we had to eliminate those records which did not refer to the fashion brands or designers. From a qualitative point of view, the records included both owned media (mainly official website and social media) and earned media (third part e-commerce platforms and fashion news from magazine, journals, etc.).

Data Analysis - The data collected were transcribed into a word processing program to provide a basis for the data analysis. A four-step technique, based on data coding, sorting, constant comparison, and theoretical coding was used to

study the collected data. We employed a selective code approach, in which only one core variable was selected to lead the coding process, namely the country-of-origin affiliations. We re-read the transcript and selectively coded any data related to the core variable. Subcategories were sorted into concepts. These concepts were grouped and re-grouped to find higher-level commonalities and to ensure theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation was achieved through the constant comparison of the resultant abstractions to the previous codes. In this phase, some codes were redefined in order to provide a more precise description of the data, while others were grouped in larger categories. The process was continued until no further properties or dimensions were emerged and it covered all the potential variations. A framework made up of five main categories has emerged. Namely: biography of the designer, concept of the brand, headquarter location, manufacturing location and financial support.

**Second stage** of the research is to identify the Chinese fashion brands within the field of the fashion system. Kawamura defined the fashion shows held in Paris, New York, London, and Milan as the main centres of the fashion system. Hence, we focused on the calendars of the fashion shows held in those cities. We employed the aforementioned framework in order to assess a country-of-origin to each brand taking part to the shows.

Data Collection - We selected all the brands that had taken part to the women prêt à porter fashion shows held in Paris, New York, London, and Milan during the Spring/Summer Fashion Week held in February/March 2013. Namely, we had a total of 404 designers (160 in New York; 78 in London; 69 in Milan; and 97 in Paris). We focused on the women ready-wear industry because in terms of fashion and dress, femininity is a much more elaborated and visible domain than masculinity and most fashion media (magazines, advertisements, websites, columns, videos, writings) primarily target girls and women (Craik, 2009). We focused on Milan, London, Paris and New York because these are the main hubs of the fashion system (Kawamura, 2004). We run the same analysis for all the

Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer fashion weeks held in 2013 and in 2014, in the four main cities. However, most of the designers and brands had not changed.

Data Analysis - We selected each brand that had a Chinese property in at least one of the five categories of our framework: biography of the designer, concept of the brand, headquarter location, manufacturing location and financial support. We had a total of 39 brands. We adopted two further selection criteria. First, we discarded those brands that showed a Chinese property in one only category, when this category was either the manufacturing location or the financial support. This choice was taken in order to exclude well-known European brands that manufacture in China and other formerly European brands that are now financially supported by Chinese companies, as for example Krizia, an Italian fashion house recently acquired by a Chinese company (“Krizia Brand Sold to China’s Shenzhen Marisfrolg”, 2014). Second, we excluded those fashion brands that did not participate in the fashion week at least twice during the biennia taken into consideration. This choice was taken in order to exclude those designer labels that had not developed into stable brands. We finally obtained a list of 20 brands.

**Third purpose** of the research is to analyse the access-pattern that Chinese fashion brands have followed in order to access the fashion system. After collecting an empirical database of information for each brand, we operated a qualitative cluster analysis.

Data collection - For each of the 20 brands we obtained an empirical database collected from multiple sources. We submitted a questionnaire via e-mail directly to the mail contact of the companies or through their press agency. The response rate was low (15%), hence further information were collected from other sources: official websites, blogs, online and offline magazines, journals, periodicals, company presentations, media coverage, direct interviews to store managers. Moreover, we adopted participatory observation by attending two fashion shows. We participated in the fashion shows held by two Chinese fashion designers



included in our final list: Uma Wang at the Spring Summer Fashion Week held in Milan in 2013 and Masha Ma at the Spring Summer Fashion Week held in Paris, in the same year. Using different data sources and data collection methods ensured the validity and reliability of the data, thereby increasing the probability of credible findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Upon this dataset we operated a qualitative cluster analysis in order to identify common patterns of access to the fashion system.

Data Analysis - Cluster analysis is the discipline of finding groups in data (Kaufman, and Rousseeuw, 1990). Groups are called clusters. Grouping is operated by means of the degree of proximity. We identify two kinds of proximity: dissimilarities (which measure how far away two objects are from each other) and similarities (which measure how much they resemble each other). Cluster analysis can help frame thematic analysis and interpretation: it provides a useful mean of investigations as it presents data in clearly defined clusters in two-dimensional space, rendering a quick and easy visual tool for interpretation (Guest and McLellan, 2003). As suggested by Richards and Richards (1995):

Categorizing is never just an end in itself, and is rarely recommended merely as a means of tagging all data on a topic. Rather, its goals are often the discovery and ordering of ideas and themes; and the storing of growing understandings, the linking of ideas to data, cross-referencing, sorting and clarifying. Qualitative researchers are urged not merely to derive and use categories but to do so in particular ways.

Data collected from the multiple sources were transcribed into a word processing program to provide a basis for the data analysis. The first step in preparing the coded data for cluster analysis was to generate a binary ( $m \times n$ ) matrix. We selected a binary matrix in which the respondents represent the rows in the matrix and the codes are the columns, because we were not interested in determining the weight of each code for each respondent (i.e., frequency of application). We run a theory-driven analysis, by using the former framework on

country-of-origin affiliations as coding reference. In this phase of the study, the financial support category was not included because it was not possible to retrieve accurate data on the funding resources of all the brands. This is especially true in the case of designer brands that account for the most part of our list (90%). Even though this choice might lead to incomplete results, it has not altered the findings with inaccurate data. Cluster analysis and in-depth familiarity with the raw data allowed us to identify three main clusters in regard to the use of the Chinese-asset and one major pattern of access to the fashion system.

Finally, during the Ph.D program I had the chance to spend a period of six-months in Shanghai. I was involved in a international project on the subject 'Country-of-Origin effects for luxury brand building in China'. The project was coordinated by the Asian Campus of the Emlyon Business School (France) in collaboration with the School of Business of the East China Normal University (China). The resulting work was presented at the Global Fashion Management Conference held in Florence in 2015. The opportunity to be based in Shanghai and to work in a research environment translated into a chance to improve the quality of the dissertation. Indeed, I had the possibility to collect further data on Chinese fashion brands on site. Shanghai is recognised by most of the scholars as the capital of fashion in China (Finnane, 2008; Zhao, 2013; David, 2006). Thus, focusing on this city proves to be particularly significant. We conducted participatory observation at Xintiandi Style, a prestigious Shopping Centre in Madang Road in central Shanghai (Lindgren, 2015), between October 2014 and March 2015. In the same period we conducted in-depth interviews to Chinese fashion designers. More specifically, we contacted all the fashion designers who had been scheduled in the calendar for the 2014 Autumn Winter Shanghai Fashion Week. The process resulted in 3 interviews to renowned Chinese designers and snow-balled into further 3 interviews to other personalities involved in the fashion industry in China. The interviews were conducted between December 2014 and March 2015. Four of them were held in shopping malls of Shanghai, two of them at the address of the person's company. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The content was analysed through an open-coding process, until semantic saturation was achieved and key themes had emerged. Since this part of the project was not initially planned and due to the quantitative limit of six interviews and two participatory observation, we include it as a further contribution to the general plant already discussed.



**SECTION II**  
**PRESENTATION OF THE**  
**RESULTS**



## **Chapter 7**

# **Mapping Chinese Fashion Brands**

### **RQ1: How do we assess the country-of-origin of a fashion brand?**

After selecting 160 brands from the Autumn Winter Fashion Week held in New York in 2013, collecting 1143 records by employing the Google Scraper tool, and analysing them through the qualitative method of Grounded Theory, we identified five main categories that are meaningful in order to assess a country-of-origin to a fashion brand. Namely: biography of the designer, concept of the brand, headquarter location, manufacturing location and financial support.

**Biography of the Designer:** this category accounts for information regarding to the place of birth of the designer, his ancestry, nationality and citizenship; the country where he spent his formative years, i.e. his education background, professional and travelling experiences. As it will be evident later, nowadays the personal background of designers is more and more multinational and multicultural. In the second stage of the mapping process, in order to assess the ‘Chineseness’ of the brand, we developed a four stage evaluation model which comprised ancestry, place of birth, education background and place where they are based.

**Concept of the brand:** this category accounts for information regarding to the brand identity. Intuitively, it refers to the country-affiliations reported in the company literature of the brand. For examples, how designers (or brand managers) define the style of the label: does it evokes any affiliation to one or more national cultures? It also includes country-affiliations that explain the narrative of each specific collection and inspiration, or that are associated to well-known international but locally funded awards (e.g., CFDA, Council of Fashion Designers of America). Whereas the motifs of a collection change show after show, core elements are supposed to remain stable over time and define the intrinsic signature of the label. For the second phase of the study, in order to identify the prominent country-affiliation, we relied on the brand’s narrative as it is expressed in the about page of their official website.

**Headquarter Location:** this category accounts for information on the location where the head office of the brand is located. Despite its clear-and-cut definition, reality is more complex. More and more brands are operatively spread through multiple countries. Moreover, cues about the headquarter locations may be strategically managed as branding lever: especially in the context of the fashion system, brands tend to associate their headquarter with one of the four main fashion capitals. In the second phase of this work, we will assess the country-of-headquarter of the brand, based upon the information available on the official



website of the brand. If information are not provided, we search on other media owned by the brand (Facebook Page, Twitter, Instagram or Pinterest Account, etc.).

**Manufacturing Location:** this category accounts for information regarding to the places where the manufacturing factories of the company are located. Often it comprise multiple country-contribution. For instance, textile and manufacturing are two different stages of the production process that might be sourced from two different companies located in two different countries. The manufacturing process itself might entail different stages, located in different places. Thus, assessing a country-of manufacturing is more about identifying the prevalent country-contributor. For the second stage of the analysis, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, it should be noted that we did not include in the list those brands whose ‘Chineseness’ was limited to the manufacturing location. This choice was taken in order to exclude well-known European brands that manufacture in China. Indeed, based upon our theoretical framework our scope is focused on the symbolic production (fashion) rather than on the manufacturing production (clothes) of emerging Chinese fashion brands. In order to fulfil the requirements for the second phase of the analysis and to identify the prevalent country-contributor for our list of brands we have faced a further issue: misleading information. The manufacturing location is a sensible cue for brands in the fashion industry and often it is either conceived or altered. Despite the fact that we heavily relied on secondary information from media coverage, we focused on direct interviews reported in well-known journals of fashion business. In a few cases it was possible to receive direct information from people involved in the brand’s promotion and sales. Finally, when information on textile sourcing and manufacturing location were different, we focused on the latter.

**Financial Support:** this category accounts for information on the financial supporters of the brand. Also in this case it might comprise multiple contributors from different countries. Actually, it is more and more likely that the identity of

the brand does not match with the identity of the financial supporter. It is the case for example of well-known European brands recently acquired by Chinese companies (e.g., Krizia). It is also the case of recently funded Chinese brands, set up, supported and managed by Western holdings (e.g., Shang Xia). As mentioned in the methodology chapter, after screening the financial information of all the brands, those that were Chinese only in regard to the financial support were not included in our list of emerging Chinese fashion brands. Though it is important to be aware of this further case and to mention them, it is not significant to include them in our analysis on access-strategies of emerging Chinese fashion brands to the fashion system. As they are not emerging and they already participate in the fashion system. Accordingly, we did not include the financial category in the stage of the qualitative cluster analysis.

## **RQ2: What are the Chinese brands that participate in the fashion system?**

The five categories above mentioned, all provide cues of the country-of-origin of the brand. Yet, none of them is self-sufficient to assess it, as each brand is the result of an original country-mix. Hence, mapping the presence of Chinese fashion brands means mapping the presence of those brands that manifest a variable degree of “Chineseness”. Within the limits of the Western-centric fashion system and based upon the aforementioned framework, considering the selection restrictions illustrated in the methodology paragraph (see Chapter 4), and the further limits discussed in the presentation of the five categories, we identified the following 20 Chinese brands (see Table 1).

### **Chinese Fashion Brands in the Fashion System.**

List from the Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter Fashion Weeks held during 2013 and 2014 in New York, London, Paris and Milan.

3.1. PHILLIP LIM	JASON WU
ALEXANDER WANG	JEN KAO
ALTUZARRA	ROCHA BY JOHN ROCHA
ANNA SUI	MASHA MA
BRANDON SUN	RYAN LO STUDIO
DEREK LAM	SHIATZY CHEN
ELLASSAY	UMA WANG
GROUND ZERO	VERA WANG
HAIZHEN WANG	VIVIENNE TAM
HUIZHAN ZHANG	YANG LI

Table 1: Chinese Fashion Brands - Final List.

We present below a summary description of the twenty brands identified. For each brand we provide an essential profile comprising information on the five categories above mentioned and described.

#### **3.1 PHILLIP LIM**

Phillip Lim was born in 1973 in Thailand to Chinese parents. He and his family immigrated to Orange County, California, when he was one year old. He studied finance at the California State University. Wen Zhou grew up in a rural town outside of Ningbo, China, and immigrated to New York at 14; at the age of 21 she launched her own textile-manufacturing company (Bee-Shyuan, 2011 September 14). In 2005 Phillip Lim and Wen Zhou co-founded the fashion brand 3.1 Phillip Lim, the former was in charge of the Creative Direction, the latter of the business model. The label is based in New York. Most of the manufacturing process is based in China and the initial financial support was provided by personal

financing by Wen Zhou (Bee-Shyuan C., 2011 September 14). The concept of the brand does not pursue country-affiliations to China. Rather it echoes a classic style.

3.1 Phillip Lim's *raison d'être* is providing beautiful everyday classics accented with a sense of madness. The result - cool, easy, chic looks for men and women that embody youthful elegance and personal style. The company's vanguard vision of designer clothing, accessories, and footwear at a contemporary price point opened up the once dormant entry - level designer market. 3.1. Phillip Lim has established itself as a respected business model and is seen as a pioneering force in the industry. Today the brand is available in over 400 boutiques and department stores across 50 countries, with flagships stores in New York, Los Angeles, Seoul, Tokyo, Singapore and Hong Kong. - 3.1. is about clothes that refine instead of define. A refinement that's a bit classic in attitude, but imparts a sense of individual style, without looking or feeling forced. Confident, chic, and most of all, effortless.  
[www.31philliplim.com](http://www.31philliplim.com)

## **ALEXANDER WANG**

Alexander Wang was born in 1983 in San Francisco (California, US), to Taiwanese-American parents. He attended for two years the fashion institute Parsons School of Design - The New School. In 2005 he launched his eponymous label which is currently based in New York. As for manufacturing, the Business of Fashion reports that Alexander Wang utilise family connections to source production from China (The People Shaping the Global Fashion Industry, 2015 December 13). In 2012 the New York Post reported a \$50 million lawsuit against Alexander Wang for running a sweatshop in Chinatown, Manhattan (Carrega-Woodby, 2012 March 5). As for financial support, it is a family business (WWD CEO Summit: Q&A with Alexander Wang, 2013 October 30), owned by his mother, his brother, who is chief financial advisor and his sister-in-law, who is chief principal officer. The official website of the label does not comprise a brief description of the label. We used the keyword 'Alexander Wang signature' to

retrieve the top 10 results from google using the Google Scraper tool by the University of Amsterdam. We conducted a survey of the terms employed to define the label. The three most employed terms resulted to be: model-off-duty, sporty, downtown cool. Besides one reference to ‘French Chic’ and one reference to American Sporty, no clear country-affiliations were identified. The designer has recently collaborated with the fast fashion brand H&M and with the luxury fashion brand Balenciaga (Pham, 2013 January 14).

### **ALTUZARRA**

Altuzarra was born in 1983, in France, to a Chinese-American mother and French father. In 2000 he moved to US and studied at the Swarthmore College. In 2008 he launched his eponymous label, currently based in New York. He started manufacturing in France and Italy (De Rosée, 2014 March 29). Recently a minority stake of the brand has been acquired by Kering and Altuzarra ‘now benefits from access to new fabric manufacturers and factories as well as business information, connections and advices’ (Kering takes a Minority Stake in Altuzarra Fashion Brand, 2013 September 6). The official website of the label reports information on the French and Chinese descent of the designer and claims French sophistication and American pragmatism to be two features of his signature.

Altuzarra is a luxury women’s ready-to-wear brand launched in New York by Joseph Altuzarra in 2008. Altuzarra was born out of the desire to make the sophisticated modern woman feel seductive, strong and confident. - Since its inception, Altuzarra has been consistent in establishing and refining its hallmark style – both subversive in nature and fiercely feminine, it merges authentic French sophistication with American pragmatism and ease. *Modern. Seductive. Sexy.* - Born in Paris to a Chinese-American mother and French father. His multicultural upbringing and keen interest in French culture including art, ballet and film are key influences throughout his collections.  
<http://altuzarra.com>

## **ANNA SUI**

Anna Sui was born in 1964 in Detroit (US), to Chinese parents. Her family had been running businesses in the French colony of Polynesia since 1930 and she received French education (Blanks, 2015 September 19). She attended the fashion institute Parsons School of Design - The New School and launched her eponymous label in 1981. The brand is based in New York. Anna Sui manufactures in the US, she is a strong advocate of the New York Garment district, to the extent that she co-founded the Save the Garment Centre, a campaign aimed “to promote, preserve, and save New York City as the fashion capital of the World” (<http://savethegarmentcentre.org>). The concept of the brand does not pursue a specific country-affiliated signature:

Anna Sui's collections take you on a creative journey that is unparalleled in the world of fashion. Mixing vintage styles with her current cultural obsessions, she effortlessly makes hip and exuberant original clothes. Whether Anna's inspiration is Victorian cowboys, Warhol superstars or Finnish textile prints, her depth of cultural knowledge is always apparent. "When I'm interested in something, I want to know everything about it," she says, "I need to know what's behind it all. I really enjoy that process." Anna's constant search for new ideas and challenges keeps her ahead of her times. She's a true trendsetter to whom stylists and editors look for direction. The boundless energy and creative ingenuity of her runway presentations always make her shows a high point of New York Fashion Week.

<http://www.annasui.com>

## **BRANDON SUN**

Brandon Sun was born in New Jersey, in 1982, to Chinese descent. His grandparents left China during the revolution and his parents were born in Taiwan (Davis, 2015 February 12). He studied at the fashion institute Parsons School of Design - The New School and launched his eponymous label in 2011. The brand is based in New York and he manufactures in the US, as reported by his former PR agency (Gregory Mills, Personal Communication, 2014 August 19). The brand

presentation stresses American roots:

Brandon Sun began his fashion career after graduating from Parsons School of Design where he was honored with the coveted “Designer of the Year” title and the Gold Thimble. Previously, he won the National Scholarship from both the CFDA and the YMA and held internships with Jeffrey Chow and Calvin Klein. After his graduation, Brandon began working with two of the most distinguished American luxury brands: J.Mendel and Oscar de la Renta.

Within five years at J.Mendel, Brandon rose from Design Assistant to Designer and worked closely with Gilles Mendel; honing his technique in couture, tailoring, ready-to-wear and fur. In 2009, Brandon joined Oscar de la Renta as Design Director for the fur division, bringing a modern edge while learning from one of America’s most celebrated brands. Through 2010 and 2011, Brandon collaborated with American Legend for the re-launch of the renowned Blackglama ad campaign featuring Janet Jackson: What Makes a Legend Most?

In February 2011, Brandon Sun began to carve his own world by launching a signature collection of luxury fur accessories with distinguished international retailers such as Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue, BoontheShop, Savannah, Hirshleifers, and others. In February 2012, Brandon Sun presented a collection of ready-to-wear and fur during Mercedes Benz Fashion Week, introducing his vision for an insouciant sense of style.

<http://www.brandonsuncollection.com>

## **DEREK LAM**

Derek Lam was born in San Francisco in 1967 to Chinese parents: his mother comes from Hong Kong and his father comes from a family of Chinese immigrants. His grandparents owned a shop of wedding dresses and his parents had a tailor's shop (Cannata, 2010 July 14). He attended the fashion institute Parsons School of Design - The New School. In 2003 he founded his own New York-based brand, together with his partner Jan-Hendrik Schlottmann. Most of the

manufacturing is located in Asia, but the shoes collection is produced by an Italian family-business (O'Connell, September 12). The majority stake of the brand was owned by the London-based luxury goods group Labelux since 2008 until the 2012, when the label was sold back to the founders Lam and Schlottmann (Mau, 2012 November 7). The concept of the brand evokes American sportswear:

Derek Lam is a leading New York fashion designer known for his modern approach of blending minimal designs with feminine sensuality. The label's acclaimed runway collections are defined by Lam's distinctive take on luxury, anchored in the tradition of classic American sportswear.

<http://www.dereklam.com>

### **ELLASSAY**

Guoxin Xia was born in China in 1968 (Creating Brand Names in China, Prepare for the Future, 2010 April 11). He graduated from Tianjin Polytechnic University with an undergraduate degree in design and a graduate degree in apparel. He worked for a textile company in Shenzhen from 1993 to 1995. In 1996 he set up Ellassay, his own women's clothing brand. In 1999 he founded Shenzhen Ellassay Fashion, to which Ellassay now belongs. The headquarter of the brand is Shenzhen and the manufacturing location is China. In 2004 Jean-Paul Knott, former director of product development at Yves Saint Laurent, was appointed brand design consultant. In 2009 the brand was boosted by a 150 million Yuan investment, resulting from a strategic alliance established with The Carlyle Group, a private global equity firm based in the US (Ellassay - Brand Profile, Accessed: 2016 January). The brand targets urban women of higher-income, aged between 25-40 years. It aims to become 'a worldwide leading Chinese fashion brand', by bringing international fashion to China and Chinese fashion to the world.

**Ellassay women are as pearls in the water: so wise, soft, implicit and glamorous.** Pearls are the best comparison of Ellassay style: gentle, elegance, clean and noble. The beauty of these precious is a form of nature. It shines



though carrying along the unique flavor of women. Ever since 1995, Ellassay, with its graceful, trendy and reliable modern urban style, has started its way of spreading out the charm of the characteristic design. The trademark fought its way out of Shenzhen, to Guanzhou, and then Beijing and Shanghai and... Women who wear Ellassay are confident, independence, wise, stylish. They are all love this country and each is living a harmonious life balancing both the traditions/modern theology and the reality/fantasy.

**The match of elegance and implicit, the combination of quality and fashion.** Elegant contour and fine details combine with delicate color and special imported materials, in such way that Ellasay illustrates the gentleness and grace of urban women. In the romance and luxury of neoclassicism, Ellasay full fills women's dreams, a dream of being someone who's stylish and graceful but with self-conscious. The beauty of a Oriental Lady is a kind of aspire. It is beyond the look and wisdom and has become something mysterious. The way that a Oriental women move is so peaceful and of easement, which is very different from those unrestrained European women.

**Jean Paul Knott** - Jean Paul Knott joined in YSL at the age of 19, he has now become a renowned top International fashion designer at the of 36. This Frenchman witnessed the Year of Sino-French Friendship and Cooperation, he well understands the history, current situation and development trend of International fashion market and China's fashion market, and he has a overall understanding of the difference, holds the original opinion, with promotion of Association of Sino-French Fashion Exchange, ha has fullfilled co-operation with China, which he is full of curiosity and anxious for. In April, 2004, Jean Paul Knott formally became the global product consultant of Ellassay ready-to-wear. As a first-class designer, Knott speaks highly of Ellassay: the brand of Ellassay is aiming at oriental women who are so feminine and serious about their careers, they have received excellent education, have International thinking, they are independent with their careers; meanwhile, they are elegant and gentle, representing the new generation of China's female intellectuals in the background of globalization. For future, Jean Paul Knott believes that Ellassay will become internationalized eventually with further and detailed co-

operation. In the future, besides introducing European fashion culture for Chinese women, Ellassay will bring the unique images of the Chinese women to world stage, who are wise, elegant and beautiful. Ellassay will have a fine prospect in the future.

<http://www.ellassay.com>

## **GROUND ZERO**

Philip Chu and Eri Chu are two brothers born in Hong Kong. The former studied Fashion Design and Management at Middlesex University in London, the latter graduated in graphic design in Hong Kong. In 2003 they founded the brand Ground Zero. The head office is based in Hong Kong (Ground Zero, 2016). They have a workshop in Hong Kong and their whole team is working there, ‘as the production is cheaper, faster and the city has a lot of fabric suppliers’ (Eri & Philip Chu, 2010 October, 14). The concept does not pursue any country affiliation.

Ground Zero’s design inspirations come from everywhere. The design concepts are always conflicting and contrasting. When the duo combines these elements together, they create a quirky yet beautiful concoction. [...] Ground-Zero has developed its signature style - bold and unique graphic prints intersect with irregular-cut, silhouettes. The brothers keep directing and pushing boundaries to take ground-zero to where it should truly lie, by merging humour, recognition and creativity, to bring fashion design into a new horizon.

<http://www.zerolaboratory.com>

## **HAIZHEN WANG**

Haizhen Wang was born in Dalian (China) and studied at the Central Saint Martins in London, after completing a BA in Design Technology at the London College of Fashion. In 2010 he founded his eponymous label in London. To date he manufactures in the United Kingdom, however he is currently evaluating options to manufacture in China: ‘there is great interest in him and his work and

some good factories are interesting in supporting him and to help him grow' (Gregory Mills, Personal Communication, 2014 August 19). The description of his label has recently been updated. The previous edition echoed a direct reference to the UK background, whereas the current version recalls a classic tailoring style with no immediate country affiliation.

Grounded in the intellectual approach, Haizhen Wang's designs express the reinterpretation and heritage of the classical British tradition, the process of the being, and take the neutral, or unisex as the cutting-edge.

<http://www.haizhenwang.co.uk> - Official Website, 2014

Signatures: Masculine femininity with architectural references. Classical tailoring, bold design joined with precision and impeccable quality.

Trademark Piece: Masculine, tailored jackets with an edge.

<http://www.haizhenwang.co.uk> - Official Website, 2015



Fig. 3: Haizhen Wang - SS16 Fashion Show Invitation.

A further information we learn from the promotion of the 2016 Spring Summer fashion show held in London is that the exhibition is supported by both the

Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China and by the British Fashion Council. Moreover, it is organised and co-organised by the Shanghai Fashion Week Organizing Committee, the Shanghai Fashion Designers Association, the Shanghai International Fashion Centre, and the Shangtex Group.

### **HUIZHAN ZHANG**

Huishan Zhang was born in Qingdao, China. He left the country at the age of seventeen. He lived in New Zealand, Paris and finally London. He studied at the Central Saint Martins. In 2010 he graduated and established his eponymous label in London. A report by the Telegraph provides information on the business strategy of the company: 'With true entrepreneurial spirit, he has bought a factory in China specializing in machinery creating other types of lace and beautiful loop techniques reminiscent of old couture touches, which his mother runs for him. Zhang is a pioneering example of a luxury brand manufacturing in China and leveraging the best of its skilled craftsmanship - made in China to exacting standards, with Chinese artisans and sold globally.' The article concludes by stating that 'Britain is lucky to have him as one of our own' (Issa, 2013 December 6). The brand pursues a manifest East meets West signature:

As a Chinese-born, London based designer, Huishan has mapped out his signature style, finding insertion and direction through his national identity. Creating a luxurious brand where eastern heritage meets western influences. His collections create romantic, sophisticated and ageless philosophy with strong lines, feminine details and directional design.

Prestigious stockists, Brown and Joyce picked up Huishan Zhang's first collection. By his second season, London V&A museum had selected his couture "Dragon Dress" to become a permanent piece in the T.T Tsui Gallery - making him the first Chinese contemporary fashion designer to receive this honour. Continuing this success, Huishan was awarded "Chinese Designer of The Year" by Numero China in 2012. Going into Spring/Summer 2014 Huishan Zhang won the iconic Dorchester Fashion Prize and the collection

was picked up by Barney's in the USA. [...] Huishan was named in the BOF 500 as one of the people who are shaping the Global Fashion Industry.  
<http://huishanzhang.com>

## **JASON WU**

Jason Wu was born in Taipei (Taiwan) in 1982. He moved to Vancouver at age nine. He studied at the Loomis Chaffee School, in Connecticut, and spent his senior high school year at SYA, in Rennes (France). He also spent a period in Tokyo studying sculpture. His carrier in the fashion business started when he engaged with the toy company Integrity Toys, working as freelance designer of doll-clothes. He enrolled at the Parsons - the New School of Design, though he never graduated. In 2006, with the earnings from the toy company, he launched his eponymous label in New York. It was positively received and won several prizes: worth to mention are the Fashion Group International's Rising Star award in 2008 and the nomination for the Council of Fashion Designers of America - CFDA, in 2008. His label was quickly endorsed by American celebrities, including the First Lady Michelle Obama. Jason Wu manufactures over 90% of his clothing collection in New York's Garment District, while the shoes and handbag collection is manufactured in Italy (Official Website). His signature claims American and European influences.

Jason Wu has emerged as a leading global talent based in New York with a distinctively feminine esthetic. Through merging classic American sportswear elements with an uptown chic attitude he has created a supremely womanly and unapologetically glamorous sensibility.

He is influenced by many sources including the classic photography of Guy Bourdin, the works of Charles James and Jacques Fath. He also finds inspiration on his travels to Asia, Europe and Latin America as well as an array of artists including Rene Gruau and Helmut Newton.

<https://www.jasonwustudio.com>

## **JEN KAO**

Jen Kao was born in 1981 in Los Angeles, from Taiwanese ancestry. She studied at the Parsons - the New School of Design and in 2007 she set up her eponymous label in New York. She manufactured in the New York's Garment District. Her signature does not pursue any country-affiliation.

Since the launch of her eponymous label in 2007, Kao has established herself as a designer that blends antonymous ideas to alter perceptions of the expected. She uses minimalist and maximalist concepts; detailed geometric prints are cut in clean silhouettes, while tech fabrics are redefined through both precise tailoring and fluid draping. Through fabric manipulation and experimentation, her collection continually inspires others to abandon their visual preconceptions.

<http://www.jenkao.com>

We included the label Jen Kao in the list because it corresponded to the selection criteria: i.e. the designer's biography is rooted in Greater China and she performed a fashion show in a major capital of the fashion system at least twice. However, the brand has been closed after the last collection Spring Summer 2013 (Poor Health Caused New York City-Based Designer Jen Kao to close Label, 2013 October 1).

## **ROCHA BY JOHN ROCHA**

John Rocha was born in Hong Kong in 1953, from Chinese and Portuguese descent. He moved to London in the 1970s to study fashion at the London's Croydon School of Art. Afterwards he moved to Ireland, where in 1980 he established his 'Chinatown' label. The Chinatown label folded during the recession in 1988 and he went to Milan to work as designer (Coming Home: John Rocha plans to spend time in Hong Kong after retiring from fashion circuit, 2014 August 31). In the early 1990s he went back to Ireland, where he established his eponymous label. In 1993 he was awarded Designer of the Year by the British Fashion Award. Both him and his daughter Simone, who is a designer herself,

manufacture in a family run factory in Italy (Donaldson, 2013 March 23). His signature claims a distinctive and experimenting style. The designer has recently retired. His daughter is a designer as well: Simone Rocha. She is not included in the list as she was born in Dublin and her Chinese roots go back to the third generation.

### **MASHA MA**

Masha Ma was born in Beijing in 1985. She studied at the Central Saint Martins in London. In 2008 she launched her eponymous label, currently showcasing twice a year during the Paris fashion week. She imports her textile from Europe but she manufactures in China: she owns a shared manufacturing workshop with two other Chinese designers, all based in Shanghai (Huang, 2012 March 7). As we learn from her words 'I am now on the schedule for Paris Fashion Week. I can do this because we have our own manufacturing facility now in China, they can do small quantity and they can make my runway pieces in a hurry' (Huang, 2012 March 7). While her signature endorses international themes, she also draws upon her Chinese background:

Masha Ma is a Chinese fashion designer. After her graduation with M.A degree of Women's Wear from Central Saint Martins in 2008 and worked under Alexander McQueen, Masha has been presenting her AW and SS collection on Paris Fashion Week Calendar each year. Ma's femininity is always an effortless combination of modernity and elegance with elaborate line and opulent textiles. Working with her near trademark white at the core, the construction and cut that is fast also becomes synonymous with her name. While MASHA MA collection is mainly developed in China and Europe, the diffusion line, MA by MA STUDIO, has been launched in January 2013.

Bold yet intricate in her unraveling of the feminine form, Masha's designs have attracted the attention of publications such as Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, W Magazine, Pop, Evening Standard and Le Monde, etc.

<http://www.masha-ma.com> - Official Website, 2015

The official website clearly emphasises a double headquarter: Paris and Shanghai. Most of the labels and brands associate themselves to one specific headquarter, preferably located in one of the main capitals of the fashion system, namely New York, London, Paris, and Milan. On the contrary, Masha Ma has decided to communicate a double headquarter, highlighting its presence in both Europe and China (See Fig. 4).

Recently, the website has been update. In the new version the homepage puts the emphasis on the Paris headquarter. However, information reported in the about page remind about the second base in Shanghai.

Reputed as one of the most representative Chinese fashion designers of the new generation, Masha Ma is a Central Saint Martins graduate having worked with Alexander McQueen before establishing her namesake label in 2011. Her company has branches and ateliers in both Shanghai and Paris where she presents her collections during Paris Fashion Week. Her signature designs are an effortless combination of modern femininity, futuristic graphics in opulent materials. The bold construction and cuts of the Masha Ma collections have attracted the attention of the international fashion industry as well as numerous stars and celebrities.

<http://www.masha-ma.com> - Official Website, 2016



# MASHA MA

PARIS - SHANGHAI

General: info@masha-ma.com  
Press Asia: press@masha-ma.com  
Press International: morgane@rmo-comms.com  
Sales Asia: sales@masha-ma.com/ jack.z@masha-ma.com  
Sales International: christopher.v@masha-ma.com  
Career: Recruit@masha-ma.com

COMING SOON

Fig. 4: Masha Ma - Official Website, 2015.

MASHAMA PARIS

29/03/16 10:19



Fig. 5: Masha Ma - Official Website, 2016.

## **RYAN LO STUDIO**

Ryan Lo was born in Hong Kong. At the age of sixteen he moved to London, where he attended the London College of Fashion (Ryan Lo Interview, Accessed: 2015 December). His debut collection was held in spring/summer 2013 and

sponsored by Fashion East, an initiative established by the Old Truman Brewery in 2000 to nurture emerging young designers. The following exhibitions were sponsored by NewGen, an internationally recognised talent identification program supported by the British Fashion Council. He is based in London. It was not possible to retrieve data on the manufacturing location. He mentions his Hong-Kong origin, but does not draw upon country-affiliations:

A hyper-romantic clothing line in a super-real world by the dreamy designer. Romantic fantasy is a consistent theme in the life and work of fashion designer Ryan Lo. The Hong Kong-born designer with a love for all things dreamy is riding high on the seas of change to prove he's a force to be reckoned with.

Official Facebook Page

## **SHIATZY CHEN**

Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia was born in 1951 in Changhua, Taiwan. She learned her trade by working at her uncle's factory. In 1978 she and her husband Wang Yuan-Hong, a businessman in the textile trade, founded Shiatzy International Company Limited. The business is now run by the son Harry Wang. The company's biggest factory is in Taiwan, while the Shanghai factory, which can produce an average of 19.000 garments per season, is responsible for supplying Shiatzy Chen locations outside of Taiwan (Ma, 2012 November 9). Most of the textile is produced in Italy. The label clearly draws upon an East meets West signature.

Steeped in wealth of culture, SHIATZY CHEN embraces the inner soul of the East, injects the outstanding craftsmanship of the West with the delicate nuances from the East, transcending through essence of thousands of years of history to create the eternal aesthetics. With a committed attitude on quality, SHIATZY CHEN tailor-makes classic looks that withstand the test of time and leads fashion to the unknown future.

Launched in 1978, SHIATZY CHEN created the "New Look of China"

through its fashion house in Taipei. SHIATZY CHEN's distinctive fashion label was born as the "New Look of China" that transformed designs interpreting Chinese history and culture into unique stylish avant-garde silhouettes and styles. A phrase "original intention" is printed in Chinese (原创) on each label and deftly sewn into the collar, echoing the brand's philosophy that fashion is not merely a trend but the reflection of the inner self and everlasting tastes.

From the texture, luminosity, and movement of the fabric to the intricate and elaborate embroidered patterns and techniques, Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia (aka Shiatzy Chen), the Creative Director and brand innovator of SHIATZY CHEN, demands flawless artistry. Through her dedication and arduous work ethic, Wang-Chen Tsai-Hsia is determined to develop new designs by infusing traditional aesthetics with new techniques to pursue perfection. SHIATZY CHEN strives to push the boundaries of the poetic East and the crafts of the West in creating classic creations that last from generation to generation.

<http://www.shiatzychen.com>

## **UMA WANG**

Uma Wang was born in Hebei (China). She studied at the Shanghai Textile University and later at the Central Saint Martins of London. She launched her eponymous label in 2005. The exhibition at the White Show, which promotes young designers in Milan, was her first step toward international fame. She is based in Shanghai. During an interview to the Store Manager of a boutique that sells Uma Wang's clothes in Italy (Prevedello, Personal Communication, 2013 October), we acknowledge that the manufacturing of her label is shared between China and Italy. An interview made by the Italian luxury consultancy company Pambianco reports the same note: 60% of the manufacturing is located in China and 40% in Italy (Uma Wang: L'Opportunità di Sfilare a Milano, 2014 September 19). The concept of the brand clearly, but not solely, points to China. The visual background of the official website also stresses the connection with Milan.

Before launching her eponymous label in 2005 in London, Uma Wang studied at China Textile University and Central Saint Martins. She also designed for Chinese labels for 20 years, where she developed her signature knitting technique and defined her own style and aesthetic.

Since launching the brand, Uma Wang has received critical acclaim for her shows and presentations in Shanghai, London, Paris and Milan. She has become a leader in the Chinese fashion industry by consistently producing high-quality products and collections that always balance fashion with functionality. Uma Wang is particularly skilled in mixing and matching different fabrics and textures to create simple but strong garments with subtle detailing, and it is these unique abilities that has positioned her to become the first internationally successful Chinese designer.

<http://www.umawang.com>

## **VERA WANG**

Vera Ellen Wang was born in New York City in 1949. She is from Chinese descent: her parents were born in Shanghai and came to the United States in the mid 1940s. She founded her eponymous label in 1990, in New York. To start she relied on financial backing from her father (Vera Wang Biography, 2015 December 18). She manufactures the majority of its bridal collection in company-owned workrooms in the United States (Official Website). While the diffusion lines are manufactured by Li & Fung, a Hong Kong based global outsourcing giant, that coordinates a IT network of more than 60 management offices and 15.000 independently owned factories around the world (The Democratization of Fashion: William Fung and Vera Wang on the Implications of Going Global, 2011 April 13). Her Chinese background does not emerge in the concept of the brand.

A native New Yorker who spent her career at the forefront of fashion, Vera Wang began a sweeping makeover of the bridal industry in 1990 with the opening of her flagship salon at the Carlyle Hotel in New York City. Today, the salon continues to showcase collections known for sophisticated drama,

feminine detailing and a modern approach to bridal design.

<http://www.verawang.com>

### **VIVIENNE TAM**

Vivienne Tam was born in Guangzhou (China), in 1957. At the age of three she moved to Hong Kong, where she studied at the Polytechnic University (Vivienne Tam, 2004). She launched her label in 1993 in New York. She established a work space on West 38th Street, but her her clothes were made in Hong Kong. She travels regularly to Hong Kong and China, where factories manufacture her designs. Her brand identity clearly recalls a East meets West style, to the extent that she is renown for her revisitation of the Mao suit.

Born in Canton, China, Vivienne Tam moved to Hong Kong when she was three years old. Her bi-cultural upbringing in the then British colony was the first stage in the development of her signature East-meets-West style.

In 1994, Vivienne Tam launched her signature collection of Eastern inspired clothing with a modern edge on the New York runways. In 1995, she introduced the influential "Mao" collection that triumphantly crossed over from the fashion world into the art world. Then in 1997 Vivienne Tam launched the venerable Buddha collection. The public and celebrities around the world quickly embraced both collections. Some of the images became so popular that scores of designers even adopted the look into their designs. Pieces of the collections were ultimately incorporated into the permanent archives of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, The Museum of FIT and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

<http://viviennetam.com>

### **YANG LI**

Yang Li was born in Beijing in 1987 (Kapoor, 2015 March 26). He moved to Perth (Australia) at the age of 10 (Young and Talented Yang Li, 2013). Afterwards he lived in London, where he attended the Central Saint Martins

(Cordero, 2012 December 6). In 2010 he launched his eponymous label in Paris. Since then, he has regularly showcased his collections in the city. Its business is self-financed (Givhan, 2014 October 26). It was not possible to retrieve data on its brand identity from the official channels (website, social media, direct contact). We used the keyword 'Yang Li designer' to retrieve the top 10 results from google using the Google Scraper tool by the University of Amsterdam. We conducted a survey of the terms employed to define the label. The three most employed concepts are: quite/tranquil, sporty, subcultures.

Below we present a table which summarises and organises the information so far depicted, according to the framework of our research and based upon the rationale suggested in the detailed description of the five main categories.



	Year of Foundation	Fashion Week	Biography Ancestry	Biography Born	Biography Education	Institute	Concept of the Brand	Manufacturing Location	Headquarter
3.1 PHILLIP LIM	2005	NY	Chinese	China	U.S.	California State University	No Country Affiliation	China	New York
ALEXANDER WANG	2005	NY	Chinese	U.S.	U.S.	Parsons - The New School for Design	No Country Affiliation	China	New York
ALTUZARRA	2008	NY	Chinese	France	U.S.	Swarthmore College	French/American	France/Italy	New York
ANNA SUI	1981	NY	Chinese	U.S.	U.S.	Parsons - The New School for Design	No Country Affiliation	U.S.	New York
BRANDON SUN	2011	NY	Chinese	U.S.	U.S.	Parsons - The New School for Design	American	U.S.	New York
DEREK LAM	2003	NY	Chinese	U.S.	U.S.	Parsons - The New School for Design	American	China	New York
ELLASSAY	1996	NY	Chinese	China	China	n/a	East meet West	China	Shenzhen
GROUND ZERO (PHILIP CH)	2003	P	Chinese	China	UK	Middlesex University	No Country Affiliation	China	Hong Kong
GROUND ZERO (ERI CHU)			Chinese	China	China	Hong Kong			
HAIZHEN WANG	2010	L	Chinese	China	UK	Central Saint Martins	Chinese Designer/UK Style	U.K.	London
HUIZHAN ZHANG	2010	L	Chinese	China	UK	Central Saint Martins	East meet West	China	London
JASON WU	2006	NY	Chinese	China	U.S.	Parsons - The New School for Design	American	U.S.	New York
JEN KAO	2007	NY	Chinese	U.S.	U.S.	New York University/Parsons - The New School for design	No Country Affiliation	U.S.	New York
ROCHA BY JOHN ROCHA	1980	L	Chinese	China	UK	Croydon School of Art	No Country Affiliation	Italy	Ireland
MASHA MA	2008	P	Chinese	China	UK	Central Saint Martins	Chinese designer	China	Paris/Shanghai
RYAN LO STUDIO	2013	L	Chinese	China	UK	London College of Fashion	No Country Affiliation	n/a	London
SHIATZY CHEN	1978	P	Chinese	China	China	n/a	East meet West	China	Taipei
UMA WANG	2005	M	Chinese	China	China/UK	Donghua University/Central Saint Martins	Chinese designer	China	Shanghai
VERA WANG	1990	NY	Chinese	U.S.	France	University of Paris	No Country Affiliation	U.S.	New York
VIVIENNE TAM	1993	NY	Chinese	China	China	Hong Kong Polytechnic University	East meet West	China	New York
YANG LI	2010	P	Chinese	China	UK	Central Saint Martins	No Country Affiliation	n/a	London

Table 2: Chinese Fashion Brands - Detailed List.





## **Chapter 8**

# **Analysing Chinese Fashion Brands**

In the first phase we developed a framework to identify Chinese fashion brands participating in the fashion system. In the second phase we mapped the presence of Chinese fashion brands taking part to the fashion shows held in the four main fashion capitals of the fashion system. The result was a list of 20 brands. In this stage we run a qualitative cluster analysis with the purpose to identify and highlight similarities and differences between brands. The purpose is to pinpoint common patterns of access to the fashion system.

Data so far collected draws the following picture. All the designers have Chinese ancestry (since one label accounts for two designers, the final count for biography is 21). Most of them (14) were born in Greater China; seven of them were born in a Western country, namely six in the US and one in France. Most of

them (15) got their Bachelor or Master's degree from a Western institute, namely eight of them in the US and seven of them in Europe (six in London and one in Paris); two of them studied both in China and London (Uma Wang and Philip Chu from Ground Zero) and four of them in Greater China (Guoxin Xia from Ellassay, Eric Chu from Ground Zero, Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia from Shiatzy Chen and Vivienne Tam). In regard to the concept, half of the sample does not claim any country-affiliation while half of the sample makes explicit reference to at least one country. That is, nine brand out of twenty claim an international signature with no country-affiliations; six brands mention Chinese-affiliations and five brands draw their signature upon Western country-images (three to America, one to France/America and one to the UK). The sample divides equally also in regard to the manufacturing location: ten designers manufacture mainly in China while eight brands manufacture mainly not in China; it was not possible to retrieve accurate data in regard to manufacturing location for two brands.

Most of the brands have their headquarter in a Western country: ten in New York, four in London and one in Ireland; four of them are based in Greater China; one brand claims a double headquarter location, namely Paris and Shanghai. They show their collections as follows: eleven in New York, four in London, four in Paris and one in Milan. Finally, the greatest number of fashion brands taking part to seasonal fashion shows were established in the last decade: 25% was established from 1978 to 1999, 75% was established after the 2000.

This general picture suggests that the presence of Chinese designers participating in the fashion system has increased since the turn of the millennium. Moreover, two important features have emerged. On the one hand, a different use of the Chinese asset. On the other hand, a clear commonality in regard to the personal background of the designers. In the following paragraph we account for a description of the main clusters identified: the first focused on the Chinese-asset; the second focused on the personal background.

## 8.1. The Chinese Asset

After assessing a Chinese-Non Chinese property to each of the four categories (biography of the designer, concept of the brand, headquarter location, manufacturing location), we operated a qualitative cluster analysis and three different patterns emerged in regard to the use of the ‘Chinese-Asset’. Namely, designer level, product level, brand level. The three clusters are illustrated in Fig. 6 and further discussed.

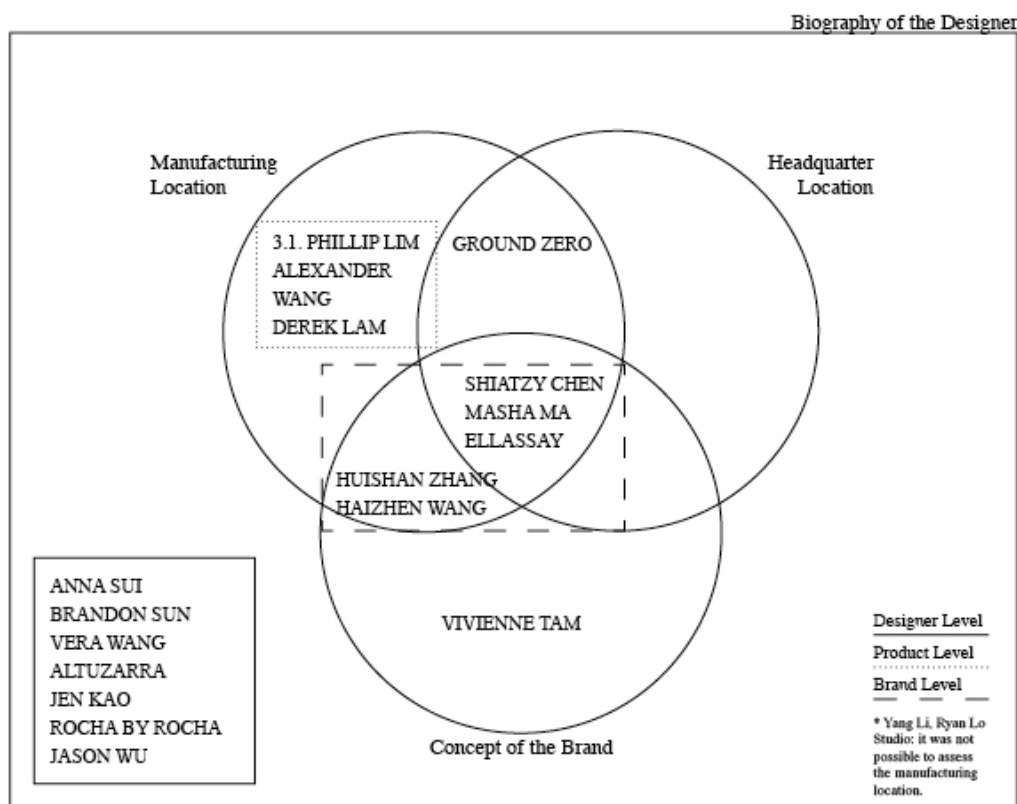


Fig. 6: Chinese Fashion Brands – Clusters.

### Designer Level

This cluster comprises designers who have a Chinese biography, as they either have Chinese parentage or were born in Greater China, to which does not correspond a Chinese country-affiliations at any further level.

This is the case of Anna Sui, Vera Wang, John Rocha, Jason Wu, Jen Kao, Altuzarra and Brandon Sun: all of them have Chinese parents and some of them were born in China; yet, none of them manufactures mainly in China; none of them has based the headquarter in China and none of them mentions Chinese country-affiliations in the core values of their brand concept. The same pattern can be found in the first generation of designers who set up their businesses in the 70's and 80's, who were born in Western countries and whose connection to China is limited to the ancestry; and it can be found in the youngest generation of designers who set up their businesses in the early 2000s, who were born in China and moved afterwards to enrol in prestigious Western fashion schools.

For instance, Anna Sui and Vera Wang belong to the first group. Anna Sui is a Chinese/American designer who was born in Detroit to Chinese emigrants. She is based in New York and her signature pursue a fancy aesthetic. She firmly manufactures in New York and is the co-founder and main supporter of the “Save the Garment Centre”, a campaign ‘to promote, preserve, and save New York City as the fashion capital of the World’ (<http://savethegarmentcentre.org>). Similarly, Vera Wang was born in New York to Chinese parents. She created an international business of haute couture bridesmaid and wedding gowns and, as stated in the official website of her brand she ‘collaborates with leading global partners, directly employs more than 200 people and manufactures the majority of its bridal collection in company-owned workrooms in the United States’ ([www.verawang.com](http://www.verawang.com)). Jason Wu belongs to the second group. He was born in Taipei and in 2006 he founded his eponymous label based in New York. He received world’s attention and approval after the endorsement of the American First Lady Michelle Obama. He claims a distinctively feminine aesthetic by merging classic American sportswear elements with an uptown attitude and he clearly states that over 90% of the collection is manufactured in the New York City's Garment District, while his handbag and shoe collection are 100% handcrafted in Italy ([www.jasonwustudio.com](http://www.jasonwustudio.com)).

Designers who belong to this cluster were born and raised within the Western fashion system or were born in China and attended prestigious schools in the US and Europe. What they have in common is that all of them quitted any connection to their Chinese backdrop, no matter how strong their Chinese identity was, ancestry or nationality related.

## **Product Level**

To this cluster belong Alexander Wang, Phillip Lim and Derek Lim. They were born in the US to Chinese parentage (Phillip Lim moved at the age of 1), they enrolled in American schools, set up international brands that pursue international or international/American signatures and do not claim any reference to China at the brand level. Yet, their Chinese roots proved to be a key factor of success for their business development.

Alexander Wang is a representative of the affordable luxury business model, whose strategy was possible thanks to his family connections in China that provided him with low cost but high quality manufacturing resources:

Wang was supported in his venture by his family: his brother is chief financial advisor, his sister-in-law acts as chief principal officer, and the designer was also able to utilize family connections to source production from China.

Alexander Wang, 2015 March 9

Likewise, Phillip Lim and his business partner Wen Zhou were facilitated in their venture by Chinese connections. Indeed, Wen Zhou had direct connections in China, which enabled them to produce high quality products at low costs.

Although many young designers may contemplate creating more affordable clothing, most lack the necessary connections with manufacturers — such as those in China, where Lim manufacturers his goods — that are able to produce a high quality product at low cost. “How do you keep the type of margins that

make everyone happy and deliver goods that look impeccable with a certain type of quality?" Lim asked, rhetorically. "We were lucky because Wen had those relationships with the factories.

Phillip Lim's Four P's: Partner, Price Point, Production and Positioning,  
2015 October 5

Zhou's manufacturing knowledge has been crucial to growth. She's a fabric geek and refers to bolts of textile by their industry abbreviations. Most 3.1 Phillip Lim pieces are made in China (some shoes and accessories are made in Italy, and a handful of items are produced in the U.S.). Being able to speak Mandarin with Chinese-factory reps is an asset, but Zhou says an in-house atelier that can produce the first sample of each piece is more important: "By having the first perfect sample to be sent out to copy, you set the standard. But if you don't have anything for the factories to follow, then it's up to their interpretation. That's like having someone else design the garment.

Bee-Shyuan, 2011, September 14

Derek Lam was born in San Francisco and he is of Chinese parentage. His parents had a business that imported clothes from Asia and his grandparents run a successful garment factory in San Francisco. To date, he manufactures both in Italy and China, pursuing an affordable luxury model as Phillip Lim and Alexander Wang:

I have no qualms about working with outside resources, unconventional resources, if I felt the intrinsic integrity and the value stayed to the level I expect for a luxury product. We have an amazing factory that does small leather goods for us out of Asia. [...] Our knitwear is done in China. [...] You can do very light knits there now. Looking at people like Phillip Lim and Alexander Wang, we see that fashion can be made in Asia.

A Bold Expansion for Derek Lam, 2009 September 18

Designers who belong to this cluster have raised within the borders of the Western culture while still making an asset out of their Chinese ancestry. Indeed,

despite their deep American background their Chinese roots have had a role in developing their businesses model as they were able to get access to competitive resources for the product development. This might be explained by the construct of Guanxi, a cultural and social phenomena that has strong implications in Chinese society and that might be defined as a relational network that contains implicit mutual obligations, assurances, and understanding (Park and Luo, 2001).



Fig. 7: Alexander Wang - 2014 Spring Summer Collection.



## Brand Level

This cluster comprises those brands that manifest a Chinese identity on multiple layers, including the concept of the brand. Shiatzy Chen, Masha Ma and Ellassay are the three brands to which corresponds a Chinese identity in each of the four categories (designer and concept of the brand, manufacturing and headquarter location).

Launched in 1978, Shiatzy Chen created the “New Look of China” through its fashion house in Taipei. Shiatzy Chen’s distinctive fashion label was born as the “New Look of China” that transformed designs interpreting Chinese history and culture into unique stylish avant-garde silhouettes and styles.

[www.shiatzychen.com](http://www.shiatzychen.com)

Pearls are the best comparison of Ellassay style: gentle, elegance, clean and noble. The beauty of these precious is a form of nature. It shines though carrying along the unique flavor of women. Ever since 1995, Ellassay, with its graceful, trendy and reliable modern urban style, has started its way of spreading out the charm of the characteristic design. The trademark fought its way out of Shenzhen, to Guanzhou, and then Beijing and Shanghai and...

<http://www.ellassay.com/en/main.htm>

Masha Ma is a Chinese fashion designer. Her collections have been featured in leading publications such as Vogue, Elle, Harper's Bazaar, Pop, French Playboy.

[www.masha-ma.com](http://www.masha-ma.com)

Uma Wang and Huishan Zhang both claim their Chinese identity, though the former manufactures both in China (60%) and in Italy (40%) and the latter is based in London.

Uma Wang is particularly skilled in mixing and matching different fabrics and textures to create simple but strong garments with subtle detailing, and it is

these unique abilities that has positioned her to become the first internationally successful Chinese designer.

[www.umawang.com](http://www.umawang.com)

As a Chinese-born, London based designer, Huishan has mapped out his signature style, finding insertion and direction through his national identity. Creating a luxurious brand where eastern heritage meets western influences.

[www.huishanzhang.com](http://www.huishanzhang.com)

Brands that belong to this cluster have transferred their Chinese identity into a branding asset: i.e. their Chinese identity is part of their brand identity.



Fig. 8: Masha Ma - 2014 Fall Winter Collection.

## **8.2. The Western Background**

As mentioned before, the overall picture highlights one significant commonality regarding the personal background of the designer. Indeed, one characteristic associates most of the brands: i.e. they were established by designers who have attended prestigious fashion schools based in the West. 85% of the listed brands are actually designer brands founded by designers who got their Bachelor or Master's degrees in a Western institute. Within this data, a further differentiation emerges between the role played by the US and by Europe.

### **US Background**

Eight out of the eleven brands, that showed their collections at the New York fashion week, are run by a designer who was either born in the US (Alexander Wang, Anna Sui, Brandon Sun, Jen Kao, Vera Wang, Derek Lam) or immigrated during the early stage of their life (Phillip Lim moved to the US when he was one year old and Jason Wu moved to Canada at the age of 9). Moreover, five of them have studied at Parsons - the New School of Design and one of them has attended a post-graduate programme at the same school; two of them studied in other American institutes. Vivienne Tam is the only designer who was born in Hong Kong and graduated from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, who set up her business in New York and regularly showcases her collections during the New York Fashion Week. Ellassay is the only brand that regularly shows its collection in New York as member of the Fashion Shenzhen project (sponsored by the Shenzhen Garment Industry Association, Shenzhen Economy, Trade and Informatization Committee, and the government of Shenzhen) and it is based in Shenzhen, China (Fashion Shenzhen Spring 2014, 2013 September 16). Altuzarra, though born in Paris to a Chinese-American mother, got his bachelor degree in America.

Against this backdrop, it is evident that the 73% of the designers taking part to the New York fashion system are actually either born or early immigrated in America. Moreover, most of them graduated from Parsons - The New School of Design.

## **European Background**

Eight out of the nine brands, that showed their collections in Europe, are designer brands whose designer was born in China and studied in Europe (Haizhen Wang, Huishan Zhang, John Rocha, Masha Ma, Ryan Lo Studio, Yang Li) or both in China and Europe (Ground Zero, Uma Wang). Namely, six of them got their Bachelor or Master's degree in London, one of them (Uma Wang) studied both at Donghua University (Shanghai) and in London and one of them (Ground Zero) is a duo-designer brand, where Philip Chu studied in London and Eri Chu in Hong Kong. Moreover, five out of the eight designers who studied in London attended the Central Saint Martins institute. Shiatzy Chen is the only brand based in Taipei, set up by the Taiwanese entrepreneur Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia, that regularly showcases its collections in Paris. Finally, despite the fact that most of the designers studied in London, not all of them present their collections in the UK fashion capital: indeed, Ground Zero, Masha Ma, and Yang Li participate in the Paris fashion weeks and Uma Wang in Milan.

Thus, most of the brands (90%) participating to the European fashion system (London, Paris, Milan) are actually designer brands whose designer was born in China and got his Bachelor or Master's degree in an institute based in Europe, with a key role played by the Central Saint Martins of London.

### **8.3. Access Patterns to the Fashion System.**

The analysis so far illustrated draws toward a clear picture: 1) Chinese designers are emerging: 75% of the brands were set up after the 2000; 2) Chinese designers, unlike the Japanese, do not use their Chinese identity as an exoticism asset to access the system: only five out of twenty brands manifest, to variable extent, their Chinese identity; 3) on the contrary, Chinese designers access the fashion system by applying to the Western educational system: eighteen designers out of twenty have attended a Western educational institute. Moreover, a greater role is played by the US and the UK, and a major distinction has emerged between the two countries: in the US Chinese designers access the system through the immigration process that characterises the US society; whereas, in the UK Chinese designers access the system by applying to the tertiary-school programs. Finally, two institutes have emerged as pivotal: Parson - The New School of Design in New York and Central Saint Martins in London.

Ultimately, Chinese fashion designers are emerging but they do not access the fashion system as they rise within it by applying to the educational system of the major Western fashion capitals: namely, New York for Chinese-immigrants and London for Chinese-born. Thus, Chinese designers do not access the fashion system through an *exoticisation* process. On the contrary, they access the system through a *naturalisation* process.

### **8.4. Further Interviews**

During a six-months period in Shanghai I had the chance to interview three Chinese fashion designers, who had participated in the former 2014 Autumn Winter Shanghai Fashion Week. Namely, Jonny Fu, Xinyuhu and Zero from

Contentitor.

Jonny Fu belongs to the earlier generation of Chinese designers: he studied in Hong Kong and, despite some international experience, working for Chanel and Guess, he can't speak English. During the interview he was accompanied by a friend that translated for him. His eponymous label manufactures menswear and his signature targets artists involved in the show business in China. When we met, at the Grand Gateway Plaza mall, he had just relaunched his brand after one year of closure. The theme of his last collection was inspired by birds. Zero is the designer who launched the fashion brand Contentitor. She got a degree in architecture before stepping into fashion. She manufactures woman wear and pursues an eccentric style. She targets women but as she explains to us, her garments are often chosen by homosexual men. The core concept of her signature is confusion, i.e. 'the overwhelming amount of information we experience daily' (Contentitor, Personal Communication, January 2015). She runs 20 store throughout China and plans to expand in US. Moreover, she plans to re-orient her business on e-commerce. Xinyuhu, is the younger of the three designers interviewed. When we met she had just got her Bachelor degree at the London College of Fashion. She welcomed me at the prestigious Yifeng Gallery - where her store is located - a high-end shopping centre which, along with top ranking luxury brands, hosts the work of young Chinese artists in non-commercial exhibitions. Her signature is defined by geometry:

In this season of XINYUHU 2015 S/S, Hu again explores the art of mathematics. Combining Pythagoras' theorem of triangle to her established style of geometric elegancy, Hu uses colour blocks that follow fractal symmetry and hyperbolic geometry but then breaks their visual organisation to achieve a balance. With the use of digital modelling, Hu creates a 3-D visual effect to her fabrics. This unique concept of 3-D pattern with geometric lines is the highlight of this season's design.

In September 2014, Hu was invited to attend 'Design by Shanghai' and was

featured in London Fashion Week. This October, the much anticipated first flagship branch will open in Yi Feng Galleria, the Bund.

Xinyuhu, Personal Communication, 2014 November 27

In the same period I had the opportunity to interview three further persons involved in the fashion industry in China. Namely, Yonglei Ma, Geneviève Flaven and Vivian Xiao. Yonglei Ma is lecturer and programme director of the Bachelor Degree in Brand design and management at the Design School of the East China Normal University. I had the chance to present her the project and to discuss it with her class of ca. 10 students, aged between 19 and 23 years old. Geneviève Flaven is co-founder and CEO of Style-Vision Asia, a global trend agency based in Shanghai which provides consulting services for product innovation and creative branding also in the fashion industry. Vivian Xiao worked for the widely renowned Chinese fashion brand MaKe Exception de MixMind before starting her experience at Crossover. By her own admission, she is devoting her career to support the emergence of Chinese fashion brands. Indeed, Crossover is a project established in order to create and nurture creative collaborations between China and the UK. It is made up of two companies: Crossover, which is the one that was established the first and that is meant to help English brands to develop in the Chinese market; and Crossover East which is meant to help Chinese designers to grow in the UK and European market. The project was founded by Dr. Cherry Chen, who was born and raised in China and later studied and got a Ph.D degree in Manchester. From the analysis of the interviews, five key themes emerged.

## **Social Environment**

Johnny Fu and Yonglei Ma consider Chinese culture a restraint to the emergence of fashion brands in the country. Jonny Fu recalls that at the beginning of his career he had to fight against the hostility of his family, who did not want him to pursue a fashion career, and the suspicious attitude of the society toward artistic ambitions. Yonglei Ma suggests that Chinese people is not keen to think about the expression of an individual taste or identity. When establishing a company, they

focus on the organisational aspects, rather than on the research and development of a special concept and signature.

## **Industry Environment**

During the interview to Xinyuhu, the designer asked whether I did know some Italian company that manufactured textile for menswear. Afterwards she explained that it was difficult for her to work with Chinese companies. Due to both quantitative and qualitative reasons. Since she was at the very beginning of her career, she was able to place only little orders. While most of the companies were equipped and willing to work only for big quantitative. Moreover, most of the manufacturing factories would complain about design-related requests, such as extra-embroideries or else. They would argue that is not necessary and would refuse to work on it. At the time of the interview she was sourcing her textile and manufacturing her collection in the UK. However, she was looking for suppliers in Italy, because she considered Italian manufacturing the best for men's tailor. On the same track, Jonny Fu suggests that companies from China lack of trustability. And that this hampers the possibility to grow internationally, because buyers from international markets are scared that Chinese designers might change their style or that they could just disappear the year after.

A further factor that hampers international growth is mentioned by Zero from the brand Contenitor. While discussing on the Shanghai Fashion Week, she explains that so far the fair is all but international. And that most of the buyers attending the show are already her clients. Nevertheless, she plans to expand overseas, in New York. Due to her eccentric style, much appreciated by gay audiences, according to her and to some of her partners and clients, the brand might work very well for the US market. In order to do that, she plans to follow the strategy of the multi-brand store. Moreover, while we were meeting at the prestigious mall Xintiandi Style, where her boutique is located, she let me notice that the brick-and-mortar stores were getting more and more empty and that she was planning to focus her future strategy on e-commerce.



## **The Chinese Asset**

On one point all designers agree: there is a lot of interest in China. After pointing out the trustability issue, Jonny Fu also stresses that from the side of the international market there is a lot of interest in Chinese designers. On the same page, Zero from Contenitor explains us that since one year she has been receiving a lot of proposal for collaborations. However, most of the people who contacts her does not really have a plan. Attempts to collaborate fade before starting. Vivian of the Crossover East project shares the same opinion: today there is increasing interest into Chinese designers. When asked whether they fear that their Chinese identity might affect negatively their performances in the international market, they all agree that this is not the problem. Indeed, being Chinese is a positive asset. They do not receive negative feedbacks on grounds of negative country-of-origin effects. On the contrary, they receive proposal for collaboration on grounds of their Chinese identity.

## **Internationally Chinese**

The six designers all pursue a personal style, in which Chinese elements are included to different extent. For example, Xinyuhu lists the Chinese elements she has used in her last collection (inspired by Picasso), while Zero from Contenitor draws upon a quite international style. In her words:

When I worked as an architect, I tried to evoke Chinese traditional culture. But when it comes to fashion, it is just not possible. The centre for fashion is still in the West.

Contenitor - Personal Communication (2015, January)

Any of them pursues a distinctive Chinese identity. On this regard, it is worth the analysis made by Geneviève Flaven, CEO of the trend consultancy company Style-Vision Asia. She suggests that it is part of the job itself, for a designer, to be aware of all the features and styles expressed by numerous cultures and to blend and mix them in order to produce newness and innovation. However, Chinese

designers also agree on a further point: they should collaborate with each other in order to develop a common taste. This would not mean to draw upon Chinese aesthetic, it would mean to address the international stage through a common effort. Finally, they all are quite optimistic about the future and believe that China will soon provide international fashion brands. Vivienne from the Crossover East company suggests that it might take five years. She draws the attention on how much has already happened in the past few years, and how much is likely to change in the near future.

### **China-UK Axis**

Since the educational system of London has proved to play an important role in the emergence of Chinese fashion designers, we believe worth of deeper attention the case of the Crossover project. The company was set to support English designers entering the Chinese market. And it was later followed by the establishment of a second company, Crossover East, meant to help Chinese designers entering the UK market. Again, as resulting from the third stage of the analysis, a UK-China axes emerges. The interview with Vivian Xiao led to some interesting insights.

The project is meant for Chinese, and to a further extent Asian (Japanese and Korean) brands. The discriminant is limited to the place of birth. It is not required to develop a brand identity which evokes Asian culture. At the time of the interview the Crossover East project was supporting eight fashion brands. Among the ones, Haizhen Wang and Annakiki. The former is the Chinese designer we already mentioned in the analysis chapter, who showcases and is based in London, and currently exports also in Russia and the US. Annakiki is the designer that, in the words of Vivian is now one of the most successful in the Chinese market: she currently runs seven independent stores, including one in Lafayette, Beijing.

Vivian suggests that the hardest challenge for Chinese designers is cultural. First, they do not speak the language. Second, while they express their own

culture, there's high chance that foreign consumers won't understand what they mean. She stresses that there is no lack of quality. On the contrary, Chinese manufacturing now offers higher quality than Europe. What Chinese designers still lack is branding and marketing skills, above all on an international perspective. Moreover, she stresses the high interest that buyers have for Chinese designers and the need for Chinese designer to collaborate and express a common essence.

European designer brands who want to access the Chinese market face cultural and marketing challenges as well. Vivian suggests that Chinese and European consumers are very different. Today, the market niche for independent designers in China is little. Still, it is growing. Hence, to be patient, both for Western or Eastern designers, is pivotal. When they support a UK designer to access the Chinese market their first task is to select the most suitable multi-brand stores. In China the figure of the buyer is in its infancy. Thus, they usually directly contact the store owner and propose him the collection. One example of multi-brand store for independent designers is Wolee, located at Xintiandi Style Mall, in Shanghai. Despite expectations, they do not support brands also on the e-commerce channel. When asked on the effectiveness of Tao Bao, the main e-commerce platform in China, she suggests that it depends on the brand's strategy. Tao Bao stores are not managed by the brand directly, however operation managers of the platform are required to follow the brand's regulations. A good practice is to provide the items to the same price and, in any case, to not allow discounts higher than 10%. The Crossover project provides support especially on the side of media coverage, i.e. they endorse Chinese celebrities, cover girls, organise PR events, parties, after parties, cocktail parties, etc. Finally, they offer their deep and wide knowledge of the Chinese market. For example, most of the Western companies focus on the first tier cities, like Shanghai. But the distribution of wealth in China is far more complex than that. There are other cities that would be worth of attention, like for example Wenzhou. Hence, to know the market is both challenging and pivotal.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Chinese Fashion Brands**

#### **Speak English**

After providing a paramount overview of the main fashion theories, we adopted the fashion system theory suggested by sociologist Kawamura as theoretical background of the thesis. Rational for this choice is that the same theory was employed to investigate the first case of Asian fashion designers accessing the Western-centric fashion system: the Japanese Revolution. We discussed the antecedent case of the Japanese designers and highlighted two key factors of their success: newness and exoticism. Furthermore, we enriched the fashion system theoretical framework with literature from the country-of-origin stream of research. Namely, we stressed that the country-of-origin of brands is increasingly

hybrid as it increasingly entails multiple country-affiliations. Thus, a specific framework should be developed in order to assess a (Chinese) country-of-origin to the brands. Accordingly, the first stage of the analysis developed a framework to assess a country-of-origin to the fashion brands. It resulted in a framework made up of five categories: biography of the designer, concept of the brand, headquarter location, manufacturing location and financial support. We employed this framework in order to identify Chinese brands participating in the fashion system: i.e., we selected all the brands that had taken part to the women prêt à porter fashion shows held in Paris, New York, London, and Milan during 2013 and 2014, both for the Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter collections. This process resulted in a list of 20 brands. Most of the brands were set up after the turn of the millennium, suggesting that a wave of Chinese designers is emerging. For each of them we collected further data and run a qualitative cluster analysis in order to highlight significant differences and commonalities. Firstly, we identified three different approaches in the use of the Chinese-asset: designer level, product level, brand level. In the first case, the Chinese element is part of the biography of the designer but it does not reflect in any further layer of the brand development. In the second case, the Chinese identity of the designer reflects in direct connections with manufacturing facilities in China. In the third case, the Chinese-asset is employed to develop a distinctive brand identity. Secondly, we identified one major commonality which accounts for the main entry strategy that Chinese designers adopt to access the fashion system: i.e., most of the designers have studied in a Western country, preferably in the US and in the UK. In the US context, designers were actually either born or early immigrated in America. In the UK context, designers were actually born in Greater China and later moved to Europe in order to get their Bachelor or Master's degree. Two fashion schools have emerged as main legitimators institutes: Parsons - The New School of Design in New York and the Central Saint Martins institute in London.

While fashion constantly seeks for new elements in order to maintaining itself, newness and exoticness are two key elements that account for this constant need

for change. In the 1980s, the Japanese designers were able to access the fashion system by virtue of their manifest newness and exoticness. That is, when they appeared for the first time their identity and their aesthetic was very different from that of the main fashion players of the time. On the contrary, in the case of China, only six out of twenty brands define themselves as Chinese and, in most of the cases, this label does not go beyond the description of the identity of the designers. Thus, Chinese designers do not draw upon their Chinese identity to access the fashion system: i.e., they do not draw upon a newness and exoticness strategy. Moreover, Kawamura reports that most of the Japanese designers who were successful in the Parisienne fashion system studied at the Bunka School of Fashion in Tokyo. Whereas, most of the Chinese designers that have recently gained momentum in the fashion system have spent their formative years in a Western country. Thus, while in the 1980s the Japanese designers got their fashion education in Japan and only later accessed the Western-centric fashion system, to date Chinese designers grow inside the Western perimeter of the system, since the early stages of their formative experiences. As a consequence, their own identity, to some extents, grows inside the Western milieu and naturalises through the lens of the Western culture. Thus, we suggest that Chinese designers do not access the fashion system by virtue of an *exoticisation* process, as it had been the case of the Japanese designers. On the contrary, Chinese designers access the fashion system by virtue of a *naturalisation* process.

We can suggest a number of reasons that have led to the shift from the exoticisation process to the naturalisation one. First, drawing upon the analysis by Reinach-Segre (2009) on the emerging partnerships between Italians and Chinese, we might argue that it is the result of a complex net of ‘conflicting negotiations’ between Western [Italian, in her analysis] and Chinese partners. A negotiation which, on the side of the Westerns [Italians] partners is aimed to ‘maintain control, not only of production, but increasingly, of distribution and consumption’ over the international market. The perceived superiority in style of Western [Italian] designers is the asset through which they obtain greater advantages in the

partnership. Thus, it is not the starting point but the final goal to achieve, and it has, as a side effect, a 'sort of naturalization' of [Chinese] 'taste' to the Western one. Second, the previous wave of Asian designers has certainly diluted the foreignness appeal of any Asian competitor coming later. Contaminations between East and West have been recorded throughout the whole history. However, when the Japanese accessed the fashion system in the 1980s, the European consumer market was quite unused to the Asian loose and two-dimensional fit. Today, the great vestimentary distinction between the East and the West has already been endorsed, and would be less effective as a mean of originality. Already Kawamura suggested that 'using the Japanese race card is no longer anything new' (2004). Third, the personal life of designers is increasingly multi-national and multi-cultural. Chinese designers can not draw upon their Chinese identity, as their own identity is much more complex than that. At least, this is true for those Chinese designers who apply to the Western educational system and partially absorb elements of the Western culture. Consequently, the seek for an original vision can not draw upon the solely national-identity. Rather, it should be the reflection of a plural identity, resulting from multi-cultural experiences. Fourth, the lack of a Chinese fashion establishment might drive Chinese designers to move abroad since the earliest stages of their carrer. In his chapter devoted to the changing geographies of fashion's world cities, David (2006) argued that the 'new China is most often interpreted as a potentially dominant player in the global garment industry' and still in 2006 he quoted the discourse held by the then mayor of Shanghai Xu Kuangdi, who pledged that 'one of the planning goals for the first decade of the twenty-first century was to build the city into the "world's" sixth fashion centre, alongside London, Paris, New York, Milan and Tokyo'. However, as long as we maintain the distinction between fashion and clothing, and by fashion we mean the production of symbolic value, we should argue that the economical and political growth of the Country has not reflected into the empowerment of a local fashion system. The Chinese designers we have interviewed share the same viewpoint: they themselves complain about the lack of international breath of the Shanghai Fashion Week (Contentitor, Personal

Communication, 2015 January). Thus, a threat to the emergence of Chinese fashion brands is the lack of a Chinese institutional system that supports the designers since the early stages of their formative years up to the launch of their labels through a internationally renowned and prestigious platform. Despite the fact that there have been efforts on this side. For example, the brand Ellassay showcases its collection in New York as member of the Fashion Shenzhen project, sponsored by the Shenzhen Garment Industry Association, Shenzhen Economy, Trade and Informatization Committee, and the government of Shenzhen. Similarly, the last fashion show held by Haizhen Wang in London was co-organised by the Shanghai Fashion Week Organizing Committee, the Shanghai Fashion Designers Association, the Shanghai International Fashion Centre, and the Shangtex Group.

However, if newness and exoticism are not the key success factor, what explains the emergence of a bunch of Chinese fashion designers, especially after the turn of the new millennium? This work fails to uncover the whole net of mechanisms that accounts for this phenomenon. However, we can advance one suggestions. With a population of 1.4 billion and steady economic growth, China offers the world's potentially largest consumer market for fashion (China's Fashion Industry, 2014). A figure that widely justifies the interest of the fashion system in the Country. While China increasingly accounts for the main share of the global's fashion consumer market, it increasingly makes sense to "*naturalise*" Chinese fashion designers that will later address the growing demand coming from the Chinese consumer market. For example, by addressing the "young emperors", the generation born after 1978 which is increasingly comfortable with Chinese culture and tradition, and much receptive to Chinese brands (Heine and Gutsatz, 2015). Thus, nurturing the emergence of Chinese designers and fashion brands to address the emerging Chinese consumer market, might respond to a an economic interest.

Finally, our findings drive the attention to a special relationship that has emerged between the US and the UK, and China. The sample is fairly divided



between the US and Europe: half of the sample accesses the fashion system through the US side (11 brands) and the other half from European countries (9 brand). In the US, 6 out of eleven designers have studied in New York. In Europe, 6 out of nine brands have studied in London. Two formative institutions emerge as pivotal, namely Parsons - The New School of Design in New York and Central Saint Martins in London. Against this backdrop, anglophones countries emerge as a privileged channel for Chinese designers to access the fashion system. However, there is an important distinction between the US and the UK. In the former case, the access to the fashion system is immigration-led: i.e. most of the designers were either born or immigrated to the US in the early stages of their life. In the latter case, the access to the fashion system is tertiary-school led: i.e. most of the designers were born in China and moved to a European country at the time to get their Bachelor or Master's degree. Thus, the US Channel is reserved to those designers that either were born or early immigrated in the US. While the UK channel is followed by Chinese designers who were actually born in China. This consideration overshadows the role of the US as legitimator centre for Chinese-born designers and highlights the one of the UK. Ultimately, a special axes emerges between London and China.

More specifically, eight out of nine of the brands that show their collections in Europe are designer brands whose designer was born in China and studied in Europe (six of them) or both in China and Europe (two of them). Six out of eight of them got their Bachelor or Master's degree in London, one of them (Uma Wang) studied both at the Donghua University (Shanghai) and in London and one of them (Ground Zero) is a duo-designer brand, Philip Chu studied in London and Eri Chu in Hong Kong. The hegemony of the UK education system to access the Eurocentric fashion system is apparent. This data is even more significant if we consider that not all of them showcase at the London Fashion Week. Indeed, three of them (Ground Zero, Masha Ma and Yang Li) showcase in Paris and one of them (Uma Wang) showcases in Milan. This suggests that London plays a privileged role as formative hub. Specifically, a special role is played by the

private fashion institute Central Saint Martins. Indeed, five out of the eight designers who studied in London attended this school. This suggests the existence of a privileged partnership between the Central Saint Martins institute and the institutions that hold control of the fashion system. Moreover, it suggests a positive appreciation by Londoner institutions toward Chinese designers. Actually, the interests of UK in China extend beyond the formative stage. On this regard, it is powerfully informative the partnership between China and the UK that has developed into the Crossover project. A project whose aim is to help UK designers to access the Chinese market and that has recently developed into the Crossover East project, whose aim is to help Chinese companies to access the UK and European market. The establishment of a win-win axis is apparent. A further informing fact is that the 2015 has been named as the UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange. Manifesto of the Exchange is the following:

2015 is an important year for UK-China relations as it sees the launch of the first UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange.

Following the UK-China Summit in London last June, the 2015 UK- China Year of Cultural Exchange showcases the very best of British culture in China and of Chinese culture in the UK.

This exchange was formally announced when Premier Li Keqiang visited the UK in June 2014 and comprises of two phases. The UK season in China runs from March to July and is led by the Cultural and Education Section of the British Embassy and the Chinese season in the UK is led by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and runs in the second half of the year.

The British Prime Minister's visit to China in December 2013, the High Level UK-China People to People Dialogue in Beijing in April 2014 and the UK-China Summit in June 2014 all demonstrate the growing strength of UK-China relations with creativity and cultural exchange as a central theme.

The 2015 UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange provides an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and build new links between individuals and organisations in the arts and creative industries, as well as between governments.

[www.britishcouncil.cn/en/programmes/arts/2015YOCE](http://www.britishcouncil.cn/en/programmes/arts/2015YOCE)

The UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange has been among the partners of the Spring Summer Fashion show held by Haizhen Wang on the 17th of September 2015 in London.

Bilateral and institutional cooperations between countries are not new for any nation. However, the fact that most of the Chinese designers showcasing during the European fashion shows are connected to the London educational system is informative. A special research project would be necessary to uncover the reasons for this. We can suggest some hypothesis. The long time relationship which goes back to the colonisation time in the eighteenth century might account for a part of the explanation. A further explanation might be, informative as much as naïve: the hegemonic role of the English language. In terms of the number of learners of foreign languages, English is the most popular foreign language in China, with Russian and Japanese ranking second and third respectively (Rining Wei and Jinzhi Su, 2012). In 2006, part of a national survey published by the Steering Group Office for Survey of Language Situation in China registers that out of those with junior secondary education qualifications or above, 67.4% in China had studied at least one foreign language and that, among the people with foreign-language learning experience in Mainland China, as many as 93.8% had studied English (Rining Wei and Jinzhi Su, 2012). Chinese students might choose London over other destinations in Europe, both because they study English and already know the language and also because living in the UK might improve their linguistic skills. Of course, these explanation can not be exclusive: Britain was not the only Western country to set up colonies in Greater China and also other countries in Europe offer English courses along with a English-friendly

environment. Further explanations should probably be investigated at the level of the role that the UK plays within the Eurocentric fashion system, and that makes the country a special hub to pursue a fashion career. Deeper analysis conducted at a historical, social, political and economical level might lead to further insights. However, it goes beyond the limits of this project.

Ultimately, our work suggests the following picture: since the turn of the new millennium Chinese fashion brands are emerging. However, they do not access the fashion system by means of a newness and exoticisation process, as it had been the case at the time of the Japanese Revolution. Indeed, they access the fashion system by means of a naturalisation process, grounded in the educational system of the West. More specifically, Parsons - The New School of Design in New York and the Central Saint Martins institute in London have emerged as privileged legitimators hub for aspiring Chinese designers. However, from the US side the process is immigration led: i.e., designers should be either born or early immigrated to America. Whereas, from the UK side the process is tertiary-school led: i.e. designers are born in China and move to Europe to get their Bachelor or Master's degree.

Against this backdrop, we argue that Chinese fashion brands are emerging and they access the fashion system by means of a naturalisation process grounded in the Western-educational system, especially based in the anglophone countries. Ultimately, the current wave of emerging Chinese fashion designers speaks English.



## General Conclusions

China is a hot topic. Is it also a fashion setter? We attempted to answer this question by investigating the emergence of Chinese fashion brands within the international fashion system. Our findings suggest one major conclusion: Chinese fashion brands are emerging but they do not access the international fashion system as they actually rise within it, by applying to the Western educational system. Moreover, they are mostly influenced by anglophone countries, namely the US and the UK.

This overall picture suggests that China as fashion centre still fails to emerge. Chinese designer who want to successfully pursue a fashion career should apply to the Western educational system. However, despite the limited role played by China as fashion legitimator centre, Western legitimator centres increasingly endorse Chinese designers. This interest is not driven by a need for exotic and newness, as it had been the case for the Japanese. Indeed, Chinese designers do

not use their foreign national identity as an asset to access the system. On the contrary, they access the system through a naturalisation process which makes their national identity complex and multicultural. Thus, what drives the interest of the system is likely to be grounded in the rising economic and political power of China, which to date offers the biggest domestic consumer market for fashion (Zhao, 2013). Ultimately, the Chinese identity of Chinese designers is actually an asset. But it does not work at the level of the brand's image. Rather, it involves strategic alliances re-shaping the network of power of the fashion system. More specifically, New York and London play the major role as legitimator hub for Chinese-descent and Chinese-born designers. To the extent that the current wave of Chinese fashion brands expresses an increasingly international identity, powerfully influenced by an anglophone cultural milieu.

As long as fashion expresses the zeitgeist of the time (Blumer, 1969) and reveals relationships between fashion groups (Crane, 2000) these findings open to inspiring-full horizons. Is fashion leading toward a Cino-English scenario?

## **Limits and Further Research**

China is a complex cultural, social, and political universe. In order to simplify our object of analysis, we addressed the country as a unquestionable given construct. For example, we did not operate any distinction between Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Due to the global dimension of the scenario under investigation, a too detailed analysis might have caused the loss of the general picture, together with the most significant findings. However, it would be interesting to extend this work to a deeper level of analysis, by addressing the cultural differences that co-exists within the convenient term of Greater China.

Fashion is a complex phenomenon which continuously develops into different forms (Simmel, 1957[1904]; Baudrillard, 1993[1976]; Davis, 1992; Crane, 2000; Craik, 1994; Kawamura, 2004). This research is based upon the theoretical approach which understands fashion as a institutional system and the results here listed must be read in the light of this theoretical perspective. However, employing

a different theoretical approach could lead to different results. New communication technologies and an increasingly global market threaten the leadership of the historical hubs of fashion. Indeed, while the fashion system theory is increasingly object of critic, Chinese fashion brands that target the international market and do not apply to the fashion system can already be tracked. As it was evident from the paramount overview of the Chinese contemporary fashion scene. Thus, extending this research by adopting other fashion perspective could be powerfully informative.

Said (1978) argues that anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient - is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism. We strongly agree with this proposition and we are aware of the orientalist limits of this work. We also believe that there was no chance to escape this limit, as who writes is Western. We can not honestly commit ourselves to depart from the European and Italian culture that characterises our mindset. It would be neither possible or realistic. However, we believe that this work contributes to the broader theme of Chinese fashion brands and fashion theories, by providing one point of view, that is the Western (read: Italian) one. Further investigation on the same topic from different perspectives, would be much recommendable and would widely enrich this stream of research.

Finally, methodology limits affect this study. Above all due to the prominent use of secondary sources. In the length of time devoted to this project it was not possible to establish all the connections that would have been necessary to access direct information from the designers themselves. However, information were cross-checked through multiple sources in order to assure their validity.

We believe that further studies should investigate on the new network of power that emerges within the fashion system. What historical, social, economic, or political reasons justify it? The variable of time should be included in the analysis. It could explain the reasons that account for the different path followed by the



Japanese and the Chinese designers. Moreover, further studies should investigate deeper on the role that London plays within the European context. What makes the city a privileged hub for Chinese designers? Finally, we believe that it would be necessary to address the same topic of emerging Chinese fashion brands, beyond the limits of the fashion system perspective. On the whole, how far is China from becoming a fashion setter? What does this tells us about the *zeitgeist* of our time?

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