

119 Not just 'the look': identity, new materialism and affective clothing

Author

Lily Lei Ye

Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, China

alxy@hotmail.com

Keywords

Identity, new materialism, assemblage, post-qualitative study, homemade clothing

Abstract

This paper explores how our sense of self-identity is shaped by homemade clothes in the context of contemporary China, taking an anti-essentialist stance towards fashion and identity. This study takes a new materialist approach to investigate the understudied research agenda, foregrounding clothing's 'agential' capacity to affect, and the fluidity of identity. Under this theoretical framework, identity is viewed as an assemblage of becoming, which is an effect of affective practices of both human and nonhuman elements. As such, identity is not fixed and inherent, and cannot be captured in neat typologies. The analysis of this post-qualitative study focuses on the memory evoked by homemade clothing and the feel of wearing homemade garments. Positioned outside the linear, take-make-dispose fashion system, homemade clothes not only shape our sense of self and fashion through its material agency, but can sustain both environmental and human well-being, resisting postmodern consumerism.

Introduction

This study was inspired by the author's involvement in a charity clothing exhibition, curated by Chinese designer, Ma Ke. The exhibition was held at *Wu Yong (Useless or 无用) Home* under the theme of 'Seeking the Most-Storyed Homemade Garments' in Beijing between October 2016 and April 2017 (see Fig. 1), which reflects the current ethical concerns in global fashion, and Ma Ke's intention to draw attention to the loss of the emotional bond or the long-term connection between the garment maker and the wearer of clothes in the age of industrialised mass production and consumption (Hui, 2015), highlighting the fashion industry's negative impact on environmental and social sustainability. Indeed, the sustainable challenges the fashion industry faces have never been greater or more complex, according to the Pulse of the Fashion Industry Report 2017. It is therefore not surprising that issues about the relationship between clothing, people and sustainability have drawn growing interest in the field of fashion studies.



Fig. 1 Poster of 'Seeking the most-storied garments' Exhibition.

A close look at previous discussions on fashion or clothing and identity reveals that most of them have been undertaken, explicitly or implicitly, using representational approaches, which emphasise the image and 'the look' created by the fashionable garments, and the discursive and semiotic aspects of clothing. These approaches, however, fail to fully account for the complex materiality and vitality of garments (e.g. Smelik, 2018; Bruggeman, 2014; Ruggerone, 2016). Furthermore, many existing studies of sustainability in relation to fashion or clothing are explored within the conventional production and consumption model of the mainstream fashion industry, focusing on fashionable garments. The consideration of homemade clothes and their impact on identity and sustainability is sparse (Holroyd, 2017) and deserves more attention.

This paper attempts to fill the research lacuna in existing literature by exploring how our sense of self-identity is shaped by homemade clothes in the context of contemporary China, taking an anti-essentialist stance towards identity, and highlighting the positive thoughts and feelings evoked by clothes. Different from the conventional point of view to fashion and clothing, this study takes a new materialist approach (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) to investigate the understudied research agenda, foregrounding clothing's 'agential' capacity to affect that has been neglected by existing literature, and the fluidity of identity. Furthermore, the study analyses how homemade garments can help promote sustainable consumption and well-being, bringing fresh insights to the discussion of people, fashion clothing and sustainability. In the next section, a justification for the choice of theoretical framework will be offered.

Theoretical Framework

Emphasis on image, spectacle, and the semiotic aspects of clothing has fuelled the study of fashion over the last few decades. These approaches, however, fail to fully account for the affective dimension of garments and the vitality of the body. In contrast, this study takes a new materialist approach (e.g. Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Barad, 2007; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012) to investigate how homemade clothes define and shape our individual sense of fashion and identity. Under this theoretical framework, identity is viewed as an assemblage of becoming, comprising both human and nonhuman elements such as homemade garments, foregrounding the affective dimension of clothing. As such, identity is not fixed and inherent, and cannot be captured in neat typologies. In addition, the new materialist approaches to clothing, fashion and identity think beyond Cartesian dualism between body and mind.

Though this study moves away from fashion's focus on images and the representational approaches to the study of clothing and identity, it is impossible to deny the importance of the representational dimensions of fashion and clothing in relation to individual identity. Whilst this study emphasizes the affective quality of homemade clothes or clothes' ability to evoke emotion, memories, imagination, and issues of identity (Gibson, 2014; Findlay, 2016), it is important to acknowledge that such affect cannot be completely separated from discourse, narrative, interpretation and representation (e.g. Wetherell, 2013). By attending to both affect and narrative, human and nonhuman elements, this study recognises that individual's identity is constituted through intra-actions (Barad, 2007) within the assemblage of affective flows, and is presented in the form of narrative articulated by the individual. As Taylor (1989) asserted that people, as 'self-articulated animals', make sense of life through articulating and reflecting upon their experiences and feelings. A description of the methodology which guides this study will be put in place in the next section.

Methodology

In line with the new materialists' philosophy, the post-qualitative approaches to research (St. Pierre, 2011; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) deal with qualitative data differently, which 'attends to how affect and the researcher permeate the research process at every stage' (Mazzei, 2013: 777). Under this paradigm, research data is not passively analysed, interpreted and presented by researchers, but it has the capacity to affect researchers and stimulate their thoughts during the process of interaction with research data (Maclure, 2013). During this phase, the author was guided by the research aim and question, the theoretical underpinnings and existing literature.

Alongside other dress stories and a reflexive approach, autoethnographic accounts are the main source of data for this paper (Ellis & Bochner, 2010). The autoethnographic approach allows the author to reflect on previous experience as a

means of inquiring. As such, the nature of data collection becomes a process of data generation weaving together a rich tapestry of research conversations, discussion, images, symbols and other embodied memories. The findings are open to further reinterpretation by the readers. I look for the 'resonance' (Conle, 1996) or dissonance readers may have with the stories presented in this study so that they can expand their understanding of experience known or unknown to them and join the dialogue around issues of clothing and identity. The findings and discussion of the research data will be presented in the next section.

Affective clothing and the sense of self

This section illustrates the relationship between homemade clothing and self-identity, highlighting how the sense of self is constructed through the affective encounters with homemade clothes. As mentioned earlier, identity is an effect of affective forces generated within the assemblage that comprises both human and nonhuman elements, including homemade clothing, memory and body. The analysis focuses on how a sense of self is constituted through affective encounters with homemade clothes, including the memories evoked by homemade clothes as well as 'the feeling of being dressed' (Ruggerone, 2016).

Homemade clothes, memory and identity

Existing research has noted the close link between memory and identity. Memory is crucial to self-identity formation (Jenkins, 2004; Lawler, 2008), and serves as both a phenomenological ground of identity, and the means for explicit identity construction (Antze & Lambek, 1996: xvi, cited in Hockey, *et. al.*, 2013). As examples of affective clothing, homemade clothes have the capacity to stimulate owners' or wearers' memories that can prompt affect and sustain self-identity (Peters, 2014). My red top handmade by my mother (see Fig. 2) is emotionally invaluable to me, which could be understood as an example of an affective relationship between homemade clothes and their owners.



Fig. 2 The photograph of the red top made by the author's mother in 1987.

My mother made me the red top in 1987 to celebrate my entrance to university, which has witnessed my personal growth and preserved memories of the highs and lows in my life. As such, I have developed an inseparable emotional bond with this top over the years. Until now, this red top has been with me for over 30 years, wherever I go. Since it was made, I have worn this top at least four times a year. Yes, I still wear it whenever possible! I like it the best of my clothes because it brings back memories of important occasions and transitional moments in my life. The red top has become an integral part of my life transitions, such as becoming a university student, graduating from university, getting a job, going abroad, marrying and having a family. These memories evoked by the red top, form an important part of my autobiographic narratives and help me sustain a sense of continuity of the self (Giddens, 1991), which are essential to my past and present self. My accounts also support Peters' (2014: 76) observation that 'the emotional engagement that results from the mnemonic qualities of an object can effectively contribute to an object's longevity'. I am deeply attracted to this top because it was touched by my mother's warm hands, reminding me of my mother's love, devotion and tenderness that are intimated and celebrated in the Chinese poem *A Traveller's Song*¹:

*The thread in the hands of a fond-hearted mother
Makes clothes for the body of her wayward boy;
Carefully she sews and thoroughly she mends,
Dreading the delays that will keep him late from home...*

My feelings towards the red top resonate with the 'mental sense of linkage' between mother and daughter found by Raunio (2007), which was illustrated in one of the dress stories studied by Raunio:

My blouse pleases me because my mother has made it - my mother,

¹ A Traveller's Song (遊子吟 (Yóuzǐ Yín)) is one of the most famous classical Chinese poems, by the Tang Dynasty Chinese poet 孟郊 (Mèng Jiāo). The full translation can be found in <http://www.ruiwen.com/wenxue/youziyin/105382/html>

actually, makes quite attractive clothes. In addition, I have adopted my mother's ways of thinking on style, so the blouse feels like me (p.69).

Like the blouse mentioned in the dress story, my red top is not only a symbol, but embodies the relationship between mother and daughter. Ma Ke used the metaphor of 'spiritual umbilical' to describe the red top that is a 'symbolic and tangible bond' (Raunio, 2007: 69) between mother and daughter, underlining the affective power of this clothing.

As mentioned earlier, my red top was exhibited at Wu Yong (Useless) Home in Beijing between October 2016 and April 2017 as a part of a charity clothing show themed on 'Seeking the Most-Storied Garment', curated by Ma Ke, a Chinese designer. More than 50 handmade clothes were selected for the exhibition, including mnemonic garments such as my red top, a half-century old small cotton padded jacket, a Qing Dynasty wedding dress, a dress featuring a big flower seedling that a grandmother left behind, a dark red cashmere overcoat, and an indigo-dyed cloth made by a mother's warm hand. These garments are examples of the way in which special emotional bonds were made with objects that were associated with significant experiences, complementing the purely functional and representative role of the cloth. Every piece of these clothes is a 'living object' that embodies culture, family values, emotions, memories and past experiences. Myself and another five guests were invited to share our 'dress stories' with the public at the opening ceremony of the exhibition. The golden thread connecting these stories was family bond and love. These dress stories or personal narratives of memories about homemade clothes, as a particular form of linguistic articulation, offer us a way of understanding the self in relation to family and loved ones, through which we make sense of who we are (Taylor, 1989).

All of these clothes were kept from disposal for their capacity to evoke personal memories and emotions, speaking of the owners' loving relationship to their family members. As explained by the owner of a small cotton padded jacket that was made by her mother:

I'm glad I have kept some old clothes. They were ordinary, but they were precious to me. In the future, I would like to make clothes for my children according to the times, though we no longer need to make our own clothes because of poverty. However, despite the good living conditions nowadays, nothing is as considerate as those unforgettable hand-made clothes ... I treasure this small jacket with full blossom pattern, which is a way of appreciating my mother...

For the owner of the small cotton padded jacket (see Fig. 3), keeping some 'ordinary' old clothes is also a way of appreciating her mother's love. Owners and wearers of these 'remembered and cherished clothes' make efforts to preserve them because they are 'tangible reminders of past experiences' (Raunio, 2007: 70) as well as 'companions to our emotional lives' and 'provocations to thought' (Turkle 2007: 5), which link the owners' past, present and future.



Fig. 3 A small cotton padded jacket appearing in the 'Seeking the most-storied garments' Exhibition (Source: Useless, Wuyong, 无用民衣社)

In the next section, the relationship between the affective clothing and the sense of self will be illustrated through discussing the material experience of wearing homemade clothes and choice of what to wear.

Clothing choices, feelings of being dressed and identity

Concern with the relationship between clothing and identity is not new. It is, however, argued that existing sociological studies on clothing has put on too much emphasis on image and the symbolic aspects of it with a focus on the interpretive and representational dimension of clothing, but the experience of the individual wearing the clothing as well as the affective capacity of it remains uncovered (e.g. Candy, 2005; Findley, 2016). Moreover, in the literature review, Ruggertone (2016) discovered that many existing studies have been undertaken explicitly or implicitly within the dualistic Cartesian framework (e.g. Entwistle 2000, 2001; Woodward 2007). All these works treat the body as a passive element that is controlled by the mind, 'through which the individual creates the self that then needs to be reflected/represented by and in the (dressed) body' (Ruggerton, 2016: 586).

This study, however, takes an alternative position to explore this research agenda through a 'new materialist' lens, foregrounding the affective capacity of clothing and

body. As mentioned earlier, I like my red top and wear it whenever possible. And I feel comfortable, happy and proud whenever I put it on. By attending to affect, I argue that my own experience of choosing to wear the homemade red top and the feelings of wearing it can be understood as an affective encounter between my body and the red top which stimulates a process of mutual becoming with a positive outcome (Ruggertone, 2016). In other words, it is the power of the red top that makes me feel good when I wear it, and the positive feelings I experience towards the red top attracts my attention to this cloth and informs my clothing choice. It is worth noting that the good feeling of being dressed is a pre-cognitive or affective one that was formed through interactions between my body and the red top. In this way, the dichotomous thinking model of mind-body and the concept of mind over body is challenged. In approaching the research agenda in this way, I rejected the dualist assumption that decision making originates in the mind of a Cartesian subject, and posited a non-dualist understanding of the embodied self that is evolved from the felt experiences of affects generated in interactions among both human and non-human bodies.

Another key point to make here is that homemade clothes are able to help the wearers create a sense of authenticity or being true to oneself. According to Taylor's (1991: 29) Ethics of Authenticity, 'being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own'. As mentioned earlier, I am deeply attached to the red top made by my mother. I favour it because the top fits not only with my body, but also with my true self. In other words, this red top evokes a sense of authenticity, security and sincerity in me. Analytically, this experience resonates with van der Laan and Velthuis' (2016) observation that individuals feel comfortable in clothes that fit with both their bodies and their own perceptions of their identity.

Furthermore, homemade clothes such as the red top endow me with an identity associated with sustainability and empowerment, acknowledging sustainable practice involves both the material and emotional durability of objects such as homemade clothes (Chapman, 2005). The red top made by my mother in 1987, has been offering me a very satisfying and sustainable experience of clothing and fashion. The special emotional connection between the cloth and me makes the red top irreplaceable and not as easily disposed of as the other clothes. In order to extend the durability of the top, I have paid particular attention on how to care for it (Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011), e.g. handwashing and air-drying after washing it. Besides, I have not purchased any clothes for more than 2 years. The affect of homemade clothes stimulates me engaging in ethical consumer practices (Harrison et al., 2005) such as wearing homemade clothes and altering old clothes into new outfits. 'These forms of consumption support internal means of meeting needs, such that satisfaction is not sought through the purchase of clothing, but rather through our unique contributions to it' (McGrath, 2012: 19), sustaining both environmental and human well-being as well as resisting postmodern consumerism.

To sum up, this section illustrates that homemade clothes, as an example of affective clothing, not only provoke memories of the past and subsequent emotions, but stimulate positive feelings of wearing the garments, with far-reaching implications for one's understanding of the self as well as environmental and human well-being.

Concluding remarks

Much research on fashion and identity has adopted a discursive and semiotic perspective and has been more focused on image or 'the look', spectacle, and the representational dimension of clothing and fashion, thus overlooking the complex materiality and vitality of garments and body. In contrast, this paper takes a new materialist approach to investigate the relationship between our sense of self-identity and homemade clothing in China, foregrounding clothing's 'agential' capacity to affect, and the fluidity of identity. Under this theoretical framework, identity is viewed as an assemblage of becoming, which is an effect of affective practices of both human and nonhuman elements such as clothing. For this particular study, sense of self is generated through affective encounters with clothing and embodied meaning-making, challenging dualism between human and non-human bodies, or body and mind. As such, identity, here, is not fixed and inherent, and cannot be captured in neat typologies.

Furthermore, the analysis of this study focuses on how homemade clothes provoke and preserve memories as well as the material experience of dressing. It demonstrates the ways in which clothing affects the self through stimulating wearers' memories and allowing wearers to sustain a deeper emotional connection with their clothing, which leads to an extra care and prolonged use of the garments. Positioned outside the linear, take-make-dispose fashion system, homemade clothes not only shape our sense of self through its material agency, but could sustain both environmental and human well-being, resisting postmodern consumerism. Finally, it calls for applying the concept of 'emotionally durable design' (Chapman, 2005) in sustainable fashion design practice, shifting the focus on resource conservation, to fostering the durability of relationships between people and garments, with far-reaching implications for sustainable design and consumption (see also Fletcher, 2010; McGrath, 2012; Holroyd, 2017; von Busch, 2018).

References

- Barad, K. (2007), *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bruggeman, D.S. (2014), *More than meets the eye. Dutch fashion, identity and New materialism*. PhD thesis. Radboud University.
- Candy, F.J. (2005), The fabric of society: An investigation of the emotional and sensory experience of wearing denim clothing. *Sociological Research Online*, 10(1), 1-17. doi: 10.5153/sro.965
- Chapman, J. (2005), *Emotionally durable design: objects, experiences and empathy*, London, Virginia: Earthscan.
- Conle, C. (1996), Resonance in preservice teacher inquiry. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33(2), 297-325. doi: 10.3102/00028312033002297
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987), *A thousand plateaus — capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dolphijn, R. & van der Tuin, I. (eds.). (2012), *New materialism: interviews & cartographies*. Michigan: Open Humanities Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T.E., & Bochner, A.P. (2011), Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Art. 10. doi: 10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589
- Findlay, R. (2016), Encountering clothes, imagining selves. *Cultural Studies Review*, 22(1), 78-94. doi: 10.5130/csr.v22i1.4913
- Fletcher, K. (2010), Slow fashion: an invitation for systems change. *Fashion Practice: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & Fashion Industry*, 2(2), 259-266. doi: 10.2752/175693810X12774625387594
- Gibson, R. (2014), *The memory of clothes*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Giddens, A. (1991), *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late-modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Harrison R, Newholm T, & Shaw D (eds). (2005), *The ethical consumer*. Sage: London.
- Hockey, R., Robinson, V. & Sherlock, A. (2013), Worn shoes: identity, memory and footwear. *Sociological Research Online*, 18(1), 20. doi: 10.5153/sro.2897
- Holroyd, A.T. (2017), *Folk fashion: Understanding homemade clothes*. London; New

York: I.B. Tauris.

Hui, C. (2015), Dirty fashion: Ma Ke's fashion 'Useless', Jia Zhangke's documentary Useless and cognitive mapping. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 9(3), 253-270. doi: 10.1080/17508061.2015.1082746

Jenkins, R. (2004), *Social identity*. London: Routledge.

Lather, P. & St. Pierre, E. (2013), Post-qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(6), 629-633. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2013.788752

Lawler, S. (2008), *Identity. sociological perspectives*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mazzei, L.A. (2013), Materialist mappings of knowing in being: researchers constituted in the production of knowledge. *Gender and Education*, 25(6), 776-785. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2013.824072

MacLure, M. (2013), Classification or wonder? Coding as an analytic practice in qualitative research. In R. Coleman and J. Ringrose (ed.) *Deleuze and Research Methodologies*, 164-183. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

McGrath, A. (2012), Fashioning sustainability: How the clothes we wear can support environmental and human well-being. Paper presented at the environment sciences senior thesis symposium. Berkeley: University of California.

Niinimäki K.& Hassi. L. (2011), Emerging design strategies in sustainable production and consumption of textiles and clothing. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 19(16), 1876-1883. doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2011.04.020

Peters, E. (2014), The mnemonic qualities of textiles: Sustaining lifelong attachment. *Craft + Design Enquiry*, 6, 75-94. doi: 10.22459/CDE.06.2014

Pile, S. (2010), Emotions and affect in recent human geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35(1), 5-20. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-5661.2009.00368.x

Raunio, A. (2007), Clothed landscape of memories. *The Design Journal*, 10(2), 62-72. doi: 10.2752/146069207789272695

Ruggerone, L. (2016), The feeling of being dressed: affect studies and the clothed body. *Fashion theory*, 21(5), 573-593. doi: 10.1080/1362704X.2016.1253302

Smelik, A. (2018), New materialism: A theoretical framework for fashion in the age of technological innovation. *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 5(1), 33-54. doi:

10.1386/infs.5.1.33_1

St. Pierre, E.A. (2011), 'Post qualitative research: The critique and the coming after', in Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *Sage handbook of qualitative inquiry* (4th ed.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage, pp. 611–635.

Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of the Self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, C. (1991), *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Turkle, S. (2007), *Evocative objects. Things we think with*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

van der Laan, E. & Velthuis, O. (2016), Inconspicuous dressing: A critique of the construction-through-consumption paradigm in the sociology of clothing. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(1), 22-42. doi: 10.1177/1469540513505609

Von Busch, O. (2018), *Vital vogue: A biosocial perspective on fashion*. New York: Self Passage.

Wetherell, M. (2013), Feeling rules, atmospheres and affective practice: Some reflections on the analysis of emotional episodes. In: Maxwell, C. & Aggleton, P (eds) *Privilege, agency and affect*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.