

15 Reflection on the identity of Chinese fashion designers and their stardom and vulnerability

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Abstract

Going through these splendid 40 years of economic growth and social development in mainland China since the 'Reform and Open Policy,' which its Central Government has uncompromisingly adopted since 1978, this paper presents the gradual recognition of the Chinese fashion designer as a creatively demanding job and highly reputed profession, the establishment of the professional community, glittering awards, shining stardom, sky-high salary and vulnerability in the market, and last but not least, the development of appropriate relationships with the media, associations, enterprises, etc. which has assisted our fashion designers to figure out their professional identity. This is a vivid miniature of how this big country has tried its utmost to transform its early status as the world factory to a place of creativity. The paper relies on the theories, methodologies and field works from a range of Chinese, French and English sources. It is also based on 80 semi-structured field-work interviews with fashion professionals working for the Chinese National Fashion Association and well-known Chinese fashion brands.

Introduction

Since the 'Reform and Open Policy' was uncompromisingly adopted by the Chinese Central Government in 1978, China has gradually stepped onto a positive stage of economic growth and social development, thus demanding many new professions such as 'fashion designer' in the Chinese and international fashion and textile industry and market. However, turning manufacturing other countries' designs merely as a world factory or a subcontractor, into designing original products as a global center of creativity for both Chinese and international markets, has obviously meant tremendous challenges for this country. In fact, it took us almost 40 years to truly recognise fashion design as a highly demanding and creativity-oriented profession, simultaneously with our gradual national transition from the former 'Planned Economy', into the latter 'Market Economy.'

Fortunately, our Chinese fashion designers have now established their community, which has included professional associations, vocational guilds, and so on. This provides them with the latest information on colour trends, patterns and styles, practical training, commercial regulations, international standards, and interpersonal connections. This has increased their understanding of the vast differences between the products of internationally famous brands, and other products. This has led to participation on international runways, and sporadically opening shops in metropolitan cities, in the hope of joining the international community of fashion designers.

This paper will illustrate the ever-changing context, and the various resources of the Chinese fashion designer. Firstly as an officially recognised profession, and secondly as a better informed community with a clear understanding of who they are and what they are during the past 40 years of economic transition and social growth of the whole country. This is shown through the pioneering efforts of three generations of designers, each of which used the spirit of the time as their resource, possessing the individual-based, profession-oriented and community-promoted identities.

Methodology

The methodology and fieldwork has been informed by French, English and Chinese texts, including the French books *la Sociologie des profession* and *Nouvelle théorie sociologique des professions* by M. Florent Champy, and *Esthetiques du Quoditien en Chine*, edited and co-written by Danielle Elisseeff. English books on Chinese fashion history and designers such as *Changing Clothes in China* by Antonia Finane and *China Fashion, the Conversations with Designers* by Christine Tsui, were also invaluable, as well as Chinese books, including *the 20th Anniversary Memorial Book of China Fashion Association*. It was mainly the two French books on the sociology of the profession that provided the most helpful tools when writing this paper, and of course, the never-ending field work of more than 80 half-structured and hard-earned interviews, firstly with the Chinese fashion designers in Paris, Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Fuzhou, Xiamen etc. and secondly with those fashion professionals working for the Chinese National Fashion Association and the well-known Chinese fashion brands. All this has eventually equipped me with lots of statistics, arguments, concepts, inspirations, and last but not least, improved my self-confidence.

I. Rise of 'Fashion Designer' as a profession again relies on the official recognition and revitalization of the Chinese clothing industry

In the first decade (1978-1988) when China began to adopt the 'Reform and Open Policy,' both governmental departments and industrial organizations on different levels played crucial roles in the development of the Chinese clothing industry by making new policies and regulations, and giving permissions that have eventually paved the way for the official recognition of 'fashion designer' as an independent profession.

Nevertheless, during most of this decade, the Chinese clothing industry was not yet listed in the National Planning, which meant that no one could get a piece of fabric, or a single cent of Chinese Yuan from the government in that particular period of time when China had just begun to step into its 'Market Economy.' In other words, it would sound ridiculous if those tiny odds and ends of sewing or insignificant daily dressing should be listed in the grand national budget. Therefore, by the end of 1986, the Chinese clothing industry was administrated by the Ministry of Light Industry merely in name, and had to depend upon its original handcraft tradition, thus surviving in a very difficult situation, owing to the lack of any financial support of the government, to say nothing of official recognition of fashion designer as an independent profession.

Luckily, China National Garment Research and Design Center came into being in 1982, with Mr. Tan An as its deputy director, who repeatedly made reports to his superior administrative authority, especially the State Planning Commission, by saying that

textile and clothing industry could build up a better image for China on the international stage and therefore must be listed in the National Planning as soon as possible. (Tan, 2008)

In 1984, when the 'Market Economy' stepped onto its right track, the Chinese government began to cancel the entire amount of over sixty coupons for all the daily necessities such as clothing, food, meat, bean-curd, oil, soap, coal, etc. that had lasted for 32 years, since 1952, for the purpose of providing the world's biggest population with equal rights to live. In this way, the choices ordinary Chinese people made for their daily clothing started to undergo profound changes and gradually replaced the stereotyped uniforms of 'blue, black and grey' colors in that ten years. What is more, even the Chinese state leaders had an insight to follow the international trend and began to pay attention to changing common people's clothing into a new look. For example, Chairman Hu Yaobang of the Central Committee of Communist Party of China at that time, not only said at a meeting that 'it is necessary to pay attention to the clothing of Chinese people and get them dressed up neatly, cleanly and beautifully' (*Beijing Times*, 2009), but also took the lead in wearing better looking suits that finally led to the 'National Suits Craze' in 1984.

In 1985, the Proposal of the Central Committee of Communist Party of China on Formulating 'the Seventh Five-Year Plan' for the National Economy and Social Development very clearly stipulated that 'The food industry, the clothing industry, and the durable consumer goods industry are the leading industries and therefore should drive the development of the entire Chinese social consumer goods industry.'

And fortunately, in the coming year of 1986, the National People's Congress of China officially adopted this proposal. Ever since then, the Chinese textile and clothing industry has been listed as a key developing industry in the National Planning, and as a result, the clothing industry finally had its official position in the Ministry of Textile Industry by the end of the same year, which would lead to the official recognition of fashion designer as an independent profession in future.

II. A Historical Glance at Chinese Fashion Designer

Nevertheless, the independent position of fashion designer had existed in China long before 1978, and as far as we know, Zhao Chunlan, the 'Father of Chinese fashion,' had already mastered the western cutting skills and cultivated several generations of Chinese tailors by the end of the 19th century. Among them, two brothers Jin Hong-Xiang and Jin Yi-Xiang co-founded the first Chinese fashion company in Shanghai at the beginning of the 20th century. Moreover, it was the first Chinese clothing company that literally used the term *Fashion* in its trade name as – *Hong Xiang Fashion Company* (鸿翔时装公司, Hong Xiang Shizhuang Gongsi) (Xu, 2010), which 'was also the first' in Chinese clothing industry 'to create the positions for a designer, a fitting model and a window dresser' (Tsui, 2010), although, according to Jin Tai-Jun, heir to Hong Xiang Fashion Company, all this three positions were once filled by the Jewish refugees in Shanghai. However, he became the first Chinese fashion designer when he had learned professional tailoring techniques from his father and other senior tailors, and his fashion drawing and design principles from the Jewish designers (Tsui, 2010).

As a result of the 'Planned Economy' before 1978, ordinary Chinese people had no choice in purchasing their daily necessities that were produced in large quantities

according to the National Planning, and the Chinese fashion companies with private ownership like Hong Xiang were either nationalised or bankrupted. Consequently, most Chinese fashion designers lost their professional design role, except for a few lucky ones who found jobs as designers for theatrical costumes.

Happily, long before the clothing industry was officially listed in the National Planning in 1986, when the careers of Chinese fashion designers finally returned to their historical position, the Shanghai Handicraft Industry Authority had officially appointed Jim Tai-Jun as a fashion designer in 1979. This was only a year after the 'Reform and Open Policy' was adopted in this country, which was a reminder not only of the financial prosperity and cultural variety of that metropolitan city, matched only by Paris and Berlin in 1920-30s, but also indicated that the government had finally begun to realise that it was high time to restore the profession of fashion designer in China.

Based on the theory of identity-making, I've realised that the step by step career development of the Chinese fashion designer could well be analysed into three levels: the designer as an individual, as a profession and as a community, which have been respectively shaped along an individual trajectory first, and then within the context and the resources of this profession and community (Paugam, 2018). In other words, it is the individual creativity, professional context and community resources that have combined in a joint effort to push forward the development of the identity-making of the fashion designer in China.

III. Support from Chinese official policies since 1979

As the Chinese government realised the importance of the recognition and restoration of fashion design as a profession, well-known foreign designers such as Pierre Cardin and Yves Saint Laurent got official permission to present their fashion exhibitions and shows in China. At the same time vocational fashion schools and academies, associations and guilds received official permission to be set up, and all these advances helped the establishment of fashion design as an independent profession.

For instance, Ms. Wu Wenying, Minister of the Ministry of Textile Industry of China in 1980s, once stressed the importance of design and branding in the development of the Chinese clothing industry, and accentuated that it was necessary to cultivate fashion designers in order to develop the Chinese fashion industry (Yuan, 2009). As a result, the first fashion design program was founded within the Beijing-based Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in 1980; the first institute was created with the term 'Fashion' in its name – Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology in 1987, from which I graduated in 2009; and the first professional association – China National Garment Association (CNGA) was set up in 1991, which held the first and history-making professional exhibition in this country – China International Clothes and Accessory Fair (CHIC) in May of 1993.

IV. Professional Training and Undergraduate Fashion Design Programs in China

In addition to the two full-time undergraduate fashion design programs in Beijing-located academies mentioned above, five others were established in the late 1980s one after another: Suzhou Silk Engineering College, Zhejiang Silk Engineering College, Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, China Textile University and Northwest Textile Engineering College. In general, these newly established fashion design

programs have been placed under the textile techniques and art departments, and greatly affected the Chinese fashion designers of first generation since 1949.

In general, most of their graduates joined the Chinese clothing industry after their graduation in the mid and late 1980s, and became a force at the core of the first generation of Chinese fashion designers since 1978. However, it should be noted that Chinese educators launched their fashion design programs before the Chinese clothing industry really understood what designers were for and what jobs they could do (Tsui, 2015). As a result, some graduates of this first generation became the first group of professors at different educational institutions, setting up fashion design training programs in this pioneering period. Other graduates were dispatched to clothing factories, their jobs were not creative, but consisted primarily of copying foreign designs. Some of them accumulated funds to build up their own studios, looking to foreign fashion designers as their dream model. However, they failed to have an independent position as qualified designers for years, either in the factories, or in their own studios while the 'Planned Market' still lingered.

In fact, this 'Job Dispatching System' as the rule of the 'Planned Market' had continued to exist until the mid-1990s. At the same time, the fashion industry and its production system were completely dominated by state-owned enterprises, and very few private enterprises existed. It was not until the mid-to-late 1980s that some joint ventures emerged in China, which brought some advanced technologies and the experience of overseas and foreign fashion brands and enterprises into Mainland China, such as the Hong Kong-based 'Jinlilai'. At the same time, the PMACT enterprises (i.e. processing with supplied materials, manufacturing with supplied drawings and samples, assembling with supplied parts and compensation trade) flourished in southern China on account of the shortage of funding and technical processes. In fact it was these enterprises that transformed China into a world factory, and increased its exports without any original samples or creativity. One of the reasons for this lamentable situation is that the designer had no position in this particular trade. As a result, the work of the graduates from these 'fashion design programs' working in the factories or processing enterprises had nothing to do with design at all, instead, all they could do was copy foreign clothes samples.

Fortunately, things changed when the Chinese clothing industry started to transform its concept and production to brand-value orientation, with the realisation that that they were in need of a group of fashion designers to create famous brands in the late 1990s.

V. Associations and the community provide Chinese fashion designers with awards, stardom and sky-high salary, and reflection on their vulnerability in the market

The China Fashion Association (CFA) was incubated from a working meal of three pioneering fashion educators and one other professional: they decided to set up a national association for fashion designers in China, considering the fast emerging Chinese fashion designers and the well-organized experiences of Western Fashion Designers (Li, 2013), that led to the establishment of CFA in 1993, with the support by the leaders of CNGA. However, its original Chinese name 'Association of Fashion

Designers' was more accurate for the purpose of enhancing the reputation of designers in the huge context of the textile and fashion industry, according to Zhang Qinghui, the Vice Chairman of CFA (Tsui, 2016). Nevertheless, CFA has attracted a large number of fashion designers and other professionals in the field as individual members, and many group members including fashion brands, fashion media, model agencies, etc. and has become a flagship within the Chinese clothing industry.

In principle, a professional organisation should be the sign of existence of any profession, which promotes the profession to the public and organises activities for professionals working in the same field. And this is exactly the case for the Chinese fashion industry at the beginning of the 1990s, when we finally got to know the position of 'fashion designer' and its importance through the awards and activities arranged by CFA, either from television or from newspapers at that time. And the winners of these fashion awards proved to be the most effective way to get designers well known to both professionals and the public.

In 1993, the 'First Brother Cup International Fashion Designers Competition' was held in Beijing (Later on called the 'Hanbo Award'), and the winner was Ms. Wu Haiyan, a representative designer of the first generation and a veteran professor at the China National Academy of Fine Arts for many years.

Since 1995, the CFA has started to select 'Top Ten Fashion Designer Awards' and a 'Golden Fashion Designer Award,' the very first awards in this field in China in order to enhance the visibility of fashion designers, which have played an extremely important role in developing the Chinese fashion industry in the following 20 years. As a result, the reputation of Chinese designers was rapidly built up and quite easily identified by the general public.

In April 1996, Mr. Du Yuzhou, Vice President of the China National Textile and Apparel Council delivered an important speech which insisted on implementation of 'Famous Brand Strategy' to accelerate two transformations for industrial upgrading – from processing type production to brand benefit type; from decentralized to social intensive manufacture.

In October of 1996, the Shanshan Group was the first clothing enterprise to give a response to this 'Famous Brand Strategy' with total understanding of the decisive role of a really creative fashion designer. So it made a bold offer of an astonishing amount of 1,000,000 Yuan as annual salary for a chief designer in a number of media. To our great surprise, by the end of that year, it hired both Wang Xinyuan and Zhang Zhaoda, two chief designers at the same time, who, historically speaking, didn't fall short of the expectations of everyone by creating a high-end women's wear brand 'LAFANCY' (Yuan, 2009), and holding two touring shows in China. According to the media, the news was like a great wave surging over the peaceful sea of the Chinese fashion industry as a whole and such promotion has undoubtedly made the public aware of the sky-high value of 'fashion designer' as a glittering profession and driven countless young people to select this profession as their first choice to study at schools and academies.

Ever since then, companies like Shanshan have certainly made up their mind to build up more famous Chinese brands with whatever expenses they could afford, and

eliminating any cheap products. Right after that big event, CFA brought up the 'Famous Designer Project' in April 1997, accompanied with the 'Famous Brand Strategy,' which has opened the series of co-operations among individual designers and different brands within the big enterprises, and obviously upgraded the salary level and public recognition of fashion designers, and the fashion industry as a whole. Besides, other companies like the Youngor Group and Sanli Group also gave a positive response to this 'Famous Designer Project' and 'Famous Brand Strategy' at the same period. All in all, the entire fashion designer community has found the right position and shining identification in the industry which in turn has helped clothing companies build up more 'famous' brands. At the same time, CFA has set up certain strategies and regulations for protecting, cultivating and promoting the community of fashion designers by combining their skills, artistry and business for the purpose of creating more fashion commodity with both artistic and creative values and meeting the business and market needs.

Organised by CFA in 1997, China Fashion Week, an event totally engaged in promoting Chinese designers and brands, came to be born and Chinese fashion designers were presented as a well-organised community for the first time. Meanwhile, all kinds of phenomenal activities led to sky-high salary hiring, and became a craze, and the star-making movement for the fashion designer was also buzzing.

However, most of these co-operations between designers and enterprises came into failure in 1998, thus quickly turning this fiery enthusiasm into cold water which led to some reflection. On the one hand, enterprises realised that they needed a group of mature designers who could feed the market needs. On the other hand, Zhang Zhaoda, hired by Shanshan, as one of the star designers at that time, published an article in December 1998, admitting the vulnerability of Chinese designers when facing the market challenge, and calling the community of fashion designers to figure out the right relationships among designers and the media, associations, enterprises and merchants (Li, 2013).

In general, most of these Chinese fashion designers at that time were art school based, and had graduated from fashion design programs which paid much attention to their artistic elaboration without product awareness, and in this way, they had been identified as artist-oriented designers before 1998. It would have been an asset to be artistic and creative while possessing a sense of commodity. Nevertheless, most of the Chinese academic environment over-emphasised the artistic values and conceptual ideas, but ignored the commodity attributes which were extremely significant when the clothes were merchandised in this country. In many cases, they gradually changed their attitude after working for clothing companies. After producing designs with little consideration of the market value for quite some time, they began to pay attention to market value, and finally re-identified themselves as product-oriented fashion designers, which they had not learned from the fashion design programs at the Chinese art academies in the earlier period.

VI. Conclusion

The paper was written from a top-down perspective, reflecting that collectivism was supreme above individualism at the time - the efforts of individual and the enterprise, meaning the fashion designers and clothing companies were a drop in the bucket

compared to national policies and economic systems. But the author, as a 'made-in-China' researcher, has always paid much attention to the individuals because it is obvious that many Chinese individuals have grown up in the years of the 'Planned Economy' and thus got used to the inertia of 'Collectivism Supremacy' which has existed not only in the state policies and company regulations, but also in the designers' personal choices and their professional careers. Therefore, during the ten years from 1988 to 1998, it was the decision of government and collective that determined the development of individual designers to a large extent. And their cognition of 'fashion designer' as a profession – their self-identification has gradually become clear and definite which should include pursuit for their artistic creativity, reaction to the clothing market and the responsibility for their clothing companies. In fact, all the designers, no matter how famous, or from which eras or countries they might be, would have to face this kind of contradiction between the sense of beauty and the necessity of practicability and try their utmost to find a balance between their creativity and the market. Especially in China during this particular period of time when the 'Market Economy' just came into being, its fashion industry just got started and all the links in its commercial chain did not function well. In this way, for the purpose of survival, the first generation of Chinese fashion designers must be equipped with responsiveness and a quick sense of judgment, plus extensive work experience in their former clothing factories, and only a few lucky talents could overcome their vulnerability and excel as star designers at all-China fashion design competitions in the years to come.

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