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Global China

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## **Global China**

### **Wessie Ling and Simona Segre-Reinach**

China's influence in global capitalism has increasingly become prevalent, exceeding the limit of studies about China. The project entitled *Global China* has already blossomed in several areas, ranging from the global expansion of Alibaba (Shen 2021) to China–Africa relations (Lee 2017) to China's regional ambitions, economic development, and critical technology (Chhabra, Doshi, Hass, and Kimball 2021). In fact, in the latter regard, China is no longer considered a rising power, but a truly global actor in the context of the economy and military. The implication of China as a global actor has manifested into transformations in East Asia (Pieke and Iwabuchi 2021) that are tightly interwoven with all aspects of life, modernities, and aesthetic formation, giving rise to the so-called Asia Century (Lee, Moon and Tu 2019). While China is pursuing its own agenda of globalization, it cannot escape the fact that global matters are first constructed locally, just as, in turn, local matters take the form of global constructions (Appadurai 1996). Post-reform China is endeavored to catch up with advanced Western economies through rapid cultural policy reform to mobilize a creative and cultural economy (O'Connor and Gu 2020; Keane 2007). As such, its convergence with the West and successful engagement with fashion as consumers and producers (Riello and McNeil 2010; Finnane 2007) mark its desire for a meaningful fashion identity and cultural heritage beyond the traditional Chinese image (Zhao 2013; Segre-Reinach 2011; Tsui 2009; Wu 2009; Clark 2008).

The making of fashion is an example of the intricate and multifaceted relations of China and the rest of the world through the construction of a globally desired aesthetic. Our special issue, *Global China*, aims to highlight the complex entanglement of China and fashion-making in the transglobal landscape (Ling and Segre-Reinach 2018). This has to do with fashion in, for, with, and of China, but more specifically, we consider the idea of Global China as a concept by analyzing the emergent features in fashion and the fashion industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our aim is to mark post-reform China as a baseline to reframe the cultural and economic context of global fashion (Ling and Segre-

Reinach 2019). Thus, *Global China* encompasses a twofold concept for the study of fashion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

- a) Contemporary China is a major player in global culture. As such, China is now informing and influencing the ideation, production, representation, and consumption of fashion.

Indeed, the global fashion industry depends on China in multiple ways, from production to circulation to consumption. China as the world's factory continues to fill wardrobes across the globe, whether they are manufactured in China or made and invested by Chinese outside of China. As an emerging image-maker, its new aesthetic is filtered through a transcultural pool of creative labor, many of whose education and experiences come from various parts of the world. This creative force, together with the country's consumption power, has constructed a transglobal fashion landscape oriented by, from, to, and with China.

- b) Because of its centrality on the global map, China is seeing novel, economic, and political interactions with the rest of the world. From new alliances through the Belt and Road Initiative to national policies, state intervention, and consumption patterns, the global fashion industry is now shaped by and around China. Subject to dramatic changes, it is characterized by interdependent transnational relations in which new players take a notable share.

The *Global China* issue includes studies on inter/intracultural and transnational connections with China and comparative studies of China in fashion, ecommerce, manufacturing, museums, the creative industry, and the legal sphere. However, the heart of the issue considers the complex entanglement of global and local forces in the transglobal landscape of fashion-making (Ling, Lorusso and Segre-Reinach 2019). Stereotypes about China and Chinese fashion—whatever China or Chinese fashion might mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—give rise to debates about creativity, freedom, and authorship on the one hand and state, politics, tradition, heritage, and multiplicity on the other hand. This is particularly prevalent given the negative perception and ambiguity of China-made products, which we could not live without. *Global China* aims to

offer a way not only to dismantle the Eurocentric bias operating in fashion culture and the fashion system (Cheang, de Greef and Takagi 2021; Slade and Jansen 2020), but also to comprehend the complexity of the global flows of fashion and rebundling of the symbolic and material aspects of fashion (Wubs, Lavanga and Janssens 2020). The issue embraces contemporary Chinese studies and fashion theory with a supportive mix of empirical and ethnographic research. Five academic essays exemplifying contrasting aspects of Global China are followed by two short reports in which specific case studies are explored to illuminate new research development in Chinese fashion.

**Gu** started off the investigation of creativity and identity of independent fashion designers in Shanghai, an emerging global leader in fashion production, mediation and consumption (Breward and MacDonald 2020). “Independent fashion” in China is a prime creative field that questions the extent to which Chinese creativity could attain international recognition. Three considerations have been put forward: the availability of a symbolic space to nurture creative subjectivity; the exchange structures attached to local imaginary concepts; and a reflexive aesthetic framed in part by a sense of belonging and a symbolic space that encompass “Chineseness.”

While identity is a topic of frequent discussion among the fashion creators in China, a conscious “co-fabricated authenticity” in the construction of fashion brands has been exemplified in the digital sphere (Colucci and Pedroni 2021). The digital turn has arguably proliferated a new group of cultural intermediaries as well as novel ways of circulation and prosumption of global fashion (Tse and Tsang 2018; Rocamora 2017). **Fung** went on to unveil the conflicts apparent in the formation of brand heritage and labeling system in China ecommerce. Since the UK fashion discourse in China mainly pertains to the process of selling counterfeit British fashion goods online, online customers must face the ambivalence of piracy in the global arena.

Unrestricted in the digital sphere, Chinese mediation is vastly penetrating into the evolving relations between the Italians and Chinese in the production of global fashion (Ling and Segre-Reinach 2019; Segre-Reinach 2019). Based on ethnographic field work, **Segre-Reinach**

demonstrated the ways in which, in the Sino-Italian relationship, Italian (/European) fashion has already been mediated by the Chinese and the creative process has been deeply influenced by the power of China: in this regard, the fashion supply chain reveals itself to be a cultural chain.

In spite of the muddled realities of “made in” and “made by” in Sino-Italian fashion collaboration, **Ling** further dissected the connotations of *Made in China* in an attempt to devise a curatorial direction for a museum exhibition on China. Clearly showing the intersection of fashion and politics (Bartlett 2019), the phrase has entered into a new phrase of geopolitics, calling into question the notion of Chinese identity. Here, Chineseness is problematized in the transnational and translocal context. Unfolding within it are the uneven and persistent power relations in the transglobal landscape that we see ourselves partaking in the making of China.

Our fascination with China has brought us from the museum to the cinema. A commodity chain of fashion involving production, consumption and disposal on a transnational scale is apparent in media and popular cultures (Hui 2021), evidenced in Olivier Assayas’s 1996 film *Irma Vep*. **Metzger** noted the material substitution depicted in the film, latex instead of silk, to detect the transnational circulation of Chinese fashion. Maggie Cheung’s racialized body serves to recast social concerns associated with Musidora and her costume, but it does so in relation to increasing Chinese transnational circulation.

Further afield, the Chinese have made inroads to Africa, not only in capital investment in mining and construction (Lee 2019), but also in the manufacturing and trading of ethnic clothes across the continents (von Pezold and Driessen 2021). By tracing the history of Chinese involvement in Africa's fashion production and reviewing Chinese garment firms in Newcastle, South Africa, **Xu** has attempted to understand the implications of Chinese-funded fashion production in Africa underlining the gendered dynamics of such co-production.

The entanglement in foreign investment and international collaborations in the fashion industry has seen the emergence of fashion law (Brewer 2017) so as in China. Through a review of the developments and challenges of fashion law in China, **Cavaliere and Wu** illuminated China’s

ambition through global repositioning. The fact that the current regime of Xi Jinping is geared toward a national, sober, and patriotic style, independent from western models is to increase the Chinese domestic and international standing and reduce profits made by foreigners, thereby empowering national strength against external threats. This latest development will mark future trajectories regarding China's interplay with fashion, be it abroad or at home.

The interdisciplinary approach of *Global China* captures the country at the turning point of economic, political, and sociocultural developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is our hope to provide a foundation for future studies of fashion in, for, with, in, and of China. We are grateful for all those who made this issue possible. We want to thank the contributors as well as many earnest reviewers across the globe who provided timely, insightful, and anonymous peer assessments of the articles. Special gratitude is given to the review and production teams of the journal whose enduring support is greatly appreciated in the run-up to this publication. To Valerie Steele who has made this issue a reality from its first conception to delivery, and we thank you for your pivotal support.

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