



Fashion and National Identity: Interactions between Italians and Chinese in the Global Fashion Industry

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Although—or perhaps because—production may be transnational, having or not having a “national fashion” is fundamental to the success of brands operating in the contemporary market. In the interactions between Italians and Chinese who together make and sell fashion, the theme of national identity clearly emerges. The capacity to produce fashion (that is, a shared aesthetic) is an explicit, positive idea (“Italy has a fashion”) or an implicit, negative one (“China does not have a fashion”) that determines both the communication choice of “made in Italy” and the working and collaborative relations between Italians and Chinese at different levels in the design, production, and distribution of brands and products. The broadening of the Eurocentric vision has diminished the conviction that westerners have sole rights to fashion. A nation’s capacity to create fashion (to be recognized as an “author country”), however, is part of a process of renegotiating hierarchies and roles according to the contexts and players concerned.

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the design, production, and distribution of brands and products.¹ The broadening of the Eurocentric vision has diminished the conviction that westerners have sole rights to fashion.² A nation's capacity to create fashion (to be recognized as an "author country"), however, is part of a process of renegotiating hierarchies and roles according to the contexts and players concerned.³

In 2007/2008, China was the theater where many Italian companies chose to be on show. The images for that year's Pirelli Calendar were created in Shanghai, featuring garments designed for Dior by John Galliano.⁴ Erminegildo Zegna set its corporate catalog in Beijing, in a sophisticated, rarefied setting, a mixture of exoticism and Orientalist recognition of the magnificent Chinese culture; the catalog was printed on paper recalling the rice paper used for Chinese ideograms. Salvatore Ferragamo celebrated the eightieth anniversary of the fashion house with a traveling show entitled "Salvatore Ferragamo: The Evolving Legend," inaugurated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai, followed by a select party where famed Italian ballet dancer Roberto Bolle performed.

The Ferragamo example represents not merely a tribute to one of the most important markets for the brand. The message, focusing on the celebration of Italian identity, is in line with a basic fashion trend that seeks to re-establish a link with its presumed cultural roots. "Italianness," set amid an identification with the Renaissance, artisan skills, and entrepreneurship, was represented in the Florentine Palazzo reconstructed ad hoc for the party and in the *tableau vivant* of the "shoemaker's workshop" organized within the show. Two shoemakers made shoes by hand "like

This paper is part of a broader project centered on the work relationships between Italians and Chinese, and on approaches to training a transnational class of workers. I conducted the research in Italy and China, between 2002 and 2009, jointly with Sylvia Yanagisako (Stanford University) and Lisa Rofel (University of California, Santa Cruz).

¹ Simona Segre Reinach, "China and Italy: Fast Fashion vs Pret à Porter: Towards a New Culture of Fashion," *Fashion Theory* 9 (2005): 1-12.

² Karen Tranberg Hansen, "The Word in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion and Culture," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 369-92.

³ Lise Skov, "Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma," in *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress*, ed. S. A. Niessen, Anne Marie Leshkovich, and Carla Jones (Oxford, England, 2003).

⁴ The Pirelli Calendar has become an annual publication that belies its origin in 1964 as a trade calendar published by the Pirelli Company's UK subsidiary. The calendar is famous for its limited availability: it is not sold and is given as a corporate gift to only a restricted number of important Pirelli customers and celebrities.

they used to do,” wearing immaculate aprons and glasses perched on their noses, in an artisan shop reconstructed as part of the exhibition’s itinerary. The advertising communications of other firms such as Sharmoon (an Italo-Chinese joint venture), the Piombo brand, and Maurizio Baldassari invoke Renaissance architecture, holidays in Tuscany, *savoir vivre*, good taste and *la dolce vita*.

These and many other examples do not communicate Italian production in China (which, if anything, still tends to be concealed because of China’s association with poor-quality products). Rather, they present prestigious Italian brands (made in China, or in Italy, or in both countries, according to the trajectories of transnational capitalism) in the equally prestigious Chinese market.⁵ From a country producing fashion for others, China (the “factory of the world”), has become, above all, a fashion-consuming country, one of the world’s most promising markets, as a result of the presence of the so-called *nouveaux riches*.

Between production and consumption, however, the question of Chinese “authorship,” or its capacity to offer a shared aesthetic, remains unresolved. The association of China and fashion seems somewhat of an oxymoron; the words “fashion” and “China” can seem incongruent, particularly when used in a historical context. The vast, solemn, unchanging Chinese empire of popular imagination is difficult to reconcile with how we think of fashion, and twentieth-century history is indelibly stamped with the image of the Mao suit. Despite a vague consciousness of something called a *cheongsam* associated with the intervening years, journalists are still commenting with surprise that China has “discovered” fashion.⁶

There are historical, cultural, and structural reasons for the lack of recognition of a “Chinese” fashion (in China, of course, there is wide-ranging production of fashion at all levels). We can only briefly mention the factors that make it difficult to see Chinese fashion, restricting our comments to the role the Chinese play once they enter into business partnerships with Italian firms.

While apparel was progressively accepted as part of the fashion regime in the West, and China became the main world producer, clothing production in China has not necessarily signified creating fashion. During

⁵ Sylvia Yanagisako, “Made in Translation: Transnational Capitalism and the New Silk Road.” Paper presented at the conference “Europe in Motion, Europe at the Crossroads: A Conference on the Politics of Circulation in Europe,” University of Chicago, Modern European History and Anthropology of Europe Workshop (2005).

⁶ Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothing in China* (New York, 2008), 291. The *cheongsam* is the tight-fitting, mandarin-collared dress familiar to many in the West.

the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976), while anti-bourgeois ideology in the West sparked young people's anti-fashions, a precondition for the emergence of a new post-bourgeois fashion, in China it led to the utopian abolition of fashion *tout court*, in favor of uniformity. Chinese fashion, therefore, has been constructed from different ideas of "Chineseness" held by Chinese tailors in Hong Kong who fled the Cultural Revolution or, earlier, by Chinese designers in Taiwan and those in the United States. In general, these designers produced various forms of exoticism for Western consumers. Vivienne Tam, for example, was born in China and emigrated to Hong Kong and then to New York. Perhaps the best example of this fictional "Chineseness" is the Shanghai Tang brand (currently merged with the Richemont luxury group), originated by a Hong Kong entrepreneur (before reunification) and distributed in chain stores in Europe and the United States, and then in mainland China.

The first mainland Chinese "fashion designers" began from nothing after 1978. Their backgrounds were in propaganda theatre or art school. For this reason, and also because of the arts tradition linked to clothing culture, they consider fashion an artistic, not a commercial, phenomenon. The marketing of clothes was the prerogative of the powerful brands managed by the state, aimed at attracting investment from abroad to acquire know-how and often placing Western fashion designers at the head of local productions.

In the early twenty-first century, the new generations of Chinese fashion designers are torn by the criticism of facile exoticisms, fictional identities, and Orientalism (to which they often yield), which they contrast with a search for an "authentic" Chineseness, their limited familiarity with the state-run industrial production, and competition with European brands. As Antonia Finnane wrote, "One impediment to the more creative deployment of historical aesthetics in fashion, and in the arts more broadly in China, is the tight grip maintained by the ruling Communist Party on interpretations of history and culture."⁷

The resulting fragmented reality of Chinese fashion (the differences between the Chineseness of mainland Chinese and those of the diaspora, the lack of collaboration between artists/designers/creators and the clothing and textile industry, and the interference of the state) makes it difficult to perceive what Chinese fashion really is. It is easier to define what it is not:

They're not totally Italian with high drama and not Japanese with understatement over strong basic structure. The Chinese deconstructionists are unique. There is pragmatism and experimentalism and a visual impact. This is why I see Chinese fashion

⁷ Finnane, *Changing Clothing in China*, 281-82.

becoming another great icon for the fashion world. There is an energy.⁸

It is in these disjunctions that the Italo-Chinese partnership takes place and that the “Italian superiority regarding style” takes shape. All Italians working in the fashion sector in China—from technicians to entrepreneurs, whether they have or lack designer competencies, and especially when they play a business, technical, or even managerial role—tend to claim a natural disposition for beauty, in the name of “Italianness,” to offset the naïveté of Chinese taste, its lack of style and discernment. In the words of Altgamma (the association of high-end made-in-Italy brands): “Our mission is to affirm the Excellence of Altgamma member companies and promote, together, the primacy of the Italian lifestyle and culture in the world.”⁹

This view is incomplete. We overturn this perspective when we speak of the Chinese as consumers. Unlike the Chinese as production partner, the Chinese as consumer is extolled. The Chinese show good taste by choosing Italian style, not by expressing their own style. The two great cultures, Italian and Chinese, face each other as equals, as in the advertising campaign of Ermemegildo Zegna, “Great Minds Think Alike,” which aligns Italian style with Chinese discernment—but only with respect to consumption. The “glorious Chinese past” concerns only one part of China and morphs into the opposite stereotype of the poor-quality Chinese imitator when the issue is running a business together. “Creativity is something you are born with, you can’t be taught it,” or “Italians have fashion in their DNA,” statements gathered during fieldwork, are explained by the need to preserve a precise balance of power within these partnerships. If style cannot be learned or taught, then only Italians can decide and command.

Superiority in style is not the starting point for a sort of naturalization of taste, but the final goal of complex, conflicting negotiations to maintain control, not only of production, but increasingly, of distribution and consumption, right down to the most remote provinces where the partners in Italo-Chinese joint ventures face each other daily. Underestimating or playing down Chinese authorship is the way these businesses handle relations with the Chinese to the Italian advantage. The Chinese are no longer production partners for exports alone, but also production and sales partners in their own country, in competition, therefore, with Chinese fashion at all levels.¹⁰ These include designers (such as ZucZuz,

⁸ Alexandra Seno, “Shanghai: The Allure of Individualism,” *International Herald Tribune*, 23 Feb. 2008.

⁹ Viewed 4 June 2009. URL: <http://www.altgamma.it>.

¹⁰ Bao Ming Xin, “A Brief History of Chinese Fashion Design,” in *China Design Now*, ed. Zhang Hongxing and Lauren Parker (London, 2008), 106-9.

Ma Ke, and He Yan) at the top level; leading state, semi-private, and private clothing companies (such as Cathaia, Youngor, and Metersbonwe) at the middle level; and the low-level market of fast fashion brands.

The “workshop of the Italian shoemaker” is therefore not a romanticization or exoticism for export in a play of reciprocal charms (red lanterns vs. Renaissance workshops). Rather, it is a necessary marketing tool during a period of global fashion, strengthened and conveyed at home (after Shanghai, the Ferragamo exhibition reached Milan) in a circular movement aimed at increasing credibility and meaning.

To conclude, the quip of the star of the movie *Come l'ombra*, a young woman from Eastern Europe (Ukraine) in search of her fortune in Milan, is appropriate: “Italy, the land of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Giorgio Armani.”¹¹

¹¹ *Come l'ombra* (directed by Marina Spada, 2006),