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**Uniformities of Fashion: A Critical Reading of Women's  
Clothing in Altermodern China**

**By**

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2019



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines key features and particularities of women's fashion, specifically the cheongsam, which is frequently taken as representative clothing in present-day China. In locating fashion within the contemporary cultural and political context, i.e. understanding the sartorial as situating a set of visible codes and structures of meaning, the thesis characterizes various complexities of Chinese female identity, as well as broader social, economic and political complexities, the significance of the Chinese fashion market in the global economy is analyzed, demonstrating how global brands and styles heavily influence Chinese consumer trends, and yet, equally, how the Chinese fashion system is itself formed of its own internal logics and emergent trends. Adopting the theoretical term 'altermodern', China is positioned in terms of its rapid modernization, which presents its own rhythms and logics that cannot be wholly understood in terms of a Western discourse of modernity, postmodernity and the global. As part of its analytical method, the thesis makes reference to Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System*. While this work is now arguably out of date, its underlying thesis of fashion as a 'system of signification' retains pertinence, and crucially, in this thesis is updated in two important ways. Firstly, in outlining the contemporary, altermodern context of China, the notion of a fashion 'system' is greatly expanded, here taking on board new trends in global trade, new technologies (with social media presenting whole new systems of signification and exchange), and the hybridity of designs and consumption of fashion. Secondly, in looking to Barthes' later work, and in particular his interest in the 'Neutral', a key argument of this thesis is of a certain 'neutrality' of fashion. This is by no means to suggest of anything banal or insipid. Barthes' interest in the Neutral radically expands his understanding of signification, breaking away from binary oppositions to instead pay attention to more fluid gradients or intensities of difference and exchange. Notably, he is also heavily influenced by Asian philosophies, including a keen interest in

Taoism, which provides an important bridge for this thesis in taking on a specific Chinese perspective. While accepting much of the arguments that show how global-local contexts lead to identifiably postmodern and hybrid aesthetics, this thesis also makes a specific argument that for women in contemporary China the flux and mix of available clothing and designs is experienced in a *neutral* manner. In other words, rather than position new production and consumption trends in China only in terms of 'hybridity' (which leans towards a Western bias and a binary logic of host-recipient), there are more fluid ways in which we need to understand how women engage in fashion in China today. As a key 'figure' running through this study is a complex notion of 'uniform'. A literal uniform, the Mao suit, is examined, and shown to represent a specific 'dream' of social freedom. This is set in contrast to the Cheongsam (banned under Mao's leadership), which has gone through multiple evolutions. As a cultural device it represents a rich set of connections, linked to a new, modern China, which offers a more complex 'dream' of both a collective and individualized freedom. The cheongsam is the central example of the thesis. It is shown to be infused within the dominant, largely homogenized fashions of globalization, characterized here as a kind of 'uni-form' (i.e. the univeralisation of trending styles). Yet, equally, the 'fluidity' of the cheongsam, being both flexible and distinctive, presents its own fashion system of more subtle gradients. It is presented, then, in this thesis as both a highly visible example of contemporary, hybridized fashion in China, and as a tool for understanding the more general, everyday 'neutralities' of how women – in choosing what to wear - articulate new identities in contemporary China.

# Uniformities of Fashion: A Critical Reading of Women's Clothing in Altermodern China

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## Introduction

Clothing, with all its attendant attributes and fashions, is a marker of society. As such, clothing does a good deal more than simply clad the body for warmth, modesty or comfort. How we dress is a technical device, a means or form of signification, which articulates the relationship between a particular body and its lived milieu; the space occupied by bodies and constituted by bodily actions. In this way, clothes construct a personal identity, and our various fashions are a way of both influencing identity and capturing a collective sense of identity within particular time periods. The research presented in this thesis is concerned specifically with the relationship between Chinese fashion and changing female identity. It examines key features and particularities of women's fashion in present-day China, so taking into account recent economic enhancement. In responding to both contemporary circumstances and examining the recent history of China, as read through an analysis of fashion, emphasis can be placed on the emergent feminism of China, in cultural and political terms. Thus, in locating fashion as an indicator of cultural and political expression, i.e. understanding the sartorial as situating a set of visible codes and structures of meaning, the thesis characterizes various complexities of Chinese female identity, as well as broader social, economic and political complexities as they pertain to East-West cultural differences. The significance of the Chinese fashion market in the global economy is analyzed, showing how global brands and styles heavily influence Chinese consumer trends, and yet, equally, how the Chinese fashion system is itself formed of its own internal logics and emergent trends.

The research presented here is placed in the context of what has been termed 'altermodernity' (see Chapter 1), whereby China is positioned with respect to its rapid modernization, so presenting its own rhythms and logics that cannot be wholly understood in terms of a Western discourse of modernity, postmodernity and the global. Chinese contemporary female clothing borrows greatly from the growing

field of transnational global fashion trends. The interplay of both local and global leads us to focus on a range of 'movements', of distinct historical movements (as we might describe of feminism) and historical periods (and 'breaks' between these periods), as well as literal movements of people, goods and consumer trends. This, then, is to consider issues ranging across and between economics, gender politics, feminism and social roles. A key consideration, for example, is the phenomena of hybrid transnational/ national designs, particularly noted in this study with the case of the cheongsam.

An associated interest for this thesis is 'identity', which must be understood as complex and contested. To identify with an idea, a thing or a person might suggest of a straightforward declaration, i.e. to claim one's own belief or acceptance in association with something external. However, as with the word 'representation' there are varying levels to which we can understand how meaning is constructed. While we can assert to self-identify in someway, it is also the case that identifications are placed upon us. The most obvious label placed upon us, for example, is that of gender, which is bestowed upon us as both a biological and social construct. Upon and through which the *layering* of fashion provides all sorts of nuances to how we relate to and read gender, and of course how it is either reinforced or challenged. A notable background to the thesis are considerations of female identity as a complexity of specialized techniques and ingrained knowledge. In the context of China, these enable and/or require women to negotiate different responsibilities, social roles and means of self-expression. Here, identity includes unconscious/conscious dispositions and the taken-for-granted preferences that are evident in women's sense of the appropriateness and validity of their taste for cultural goods and practices, as well as inscribed on to the body through body techniques and modes of self-presentation.

## Chinese Fashion Thinking – A Literature review

It is well known that fashion is increasingly international and multi-cultural, and that many designers worldwide have taken inspiration from traditional Chinese clothing and decorative elements, especially the Cheongsam (Steel and Major, 1999; Ling, 2007, 2009; Zhang 2018; Wu, 2009). In conjunction to which, a considerable amount of literature has been published on Chinese clothes generally, but with particular interest on the Cheongsam, which continues to play a significant role in the context of both Chinese fashion history and contemporary fashion trends.

China is commenting on the significance of heritage at a time of enormous change in aspects of economic, politic, and cultural. The Cheongsam, for example, is a sign of Chinese culture in China (Ling, 2009).

“While the image of China in the Western Consciousness has often assumed an almost mythical nuance, multiple manifest-stations of Chinese culture have been traversed and contaminated by Western influences. From the fusion and hybridity that these cultural encounters originate, the notion of “identity” and “authenticity” are continuously rearticulated to acquire new layers of meaning” (Ling, 2009, P).

Ling suggests that the cheongsam is an expression of hybridity of west-east culture, and particular stresses in relation to dress in 1930s. It's also interesting that this typical Chinese dress is the outcome of culture of Western-Chinese in National Period 1920s, which is implied in her account. The origin of the Cheongsam, emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup>, could be traced to invading culture by Manchu (Northeastern China)(Bao, 1998). During the establishment of the republican government, when a general movement towards female emancipation began, then the cheongsam became immensely popular. Interesting “that the 1920s cheongsam was a result of western influences on Chinese dress, though it was seen as the typical Chinese dress or *oriental* outside of China (Ling, 2009). So this thesis, drawing in part upon the argument of Ling's research, considers further the representative dress and related social-cultural-political meanings in Mainland China after 1950s.

Chinese clothing, after the Opening-up, is heavily influenced by the western fashion (Zhang 2018; Finnane, 2018; etc.), which is to suggest that cultural borrowing helps shaping Chinese fashion. The representative example of in China is the appearance of hybrid dress, particularly the changing faces of the cheongsam. As Hazel Clark observes, 'essentially the cheongsam had helped to affect a "feminized" image which paralleled the similar development of female fashion in western countries' (Clark, 2000, 159). Despite being discarded (as discussed in chapter 2) in Mainland China after the 1949, and being finally banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the cheongsam is adopted in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan as a sort of everyday dress; a sign of belonging, similar to those western styles that in turn influenced the cheongsam and its various manifestations (Ling, 2009; Lee and Khuen, 2012; etc). We can see the Cheongsam acts as a 'lens' projecting and re-focusing the image of China and the situation of Chinese women as seen through the eyes of the West.

So, this thesis will analyse the changing meaning of cheongsams (more than merely a piece of garment), goes back to the 'neutrality' of this garment. As discussed in Chapter 1 (and followed up in the final chapter), the character of cheongsam can be seen to be highly differentiated in terms of taste, social identity. E.g. The cheongsam as worn by Suzie Wong is a symbol of the prostitute and submissiveness, and reflects the wearer's sexy and erotic identity (Ling, 2007, 2009). Yet, the cheongsam when worn by first-lady Peng Liyuan, is a sign of national identity and postmodernity, or more formal expression of national identity by wearing an easily identifiable item of national costume, though this garment is frequently associated with the eroticization of the East in Western eyes. As such, the theory of performance of the dress by Arnold (2011) and Evans (2013) will be utilized to examine this garment's constantly shifting notions and flux meanings.

Written from within the Western context, studies by Steel and Major (1999), Tam (2006), and Wilson (1997) have positioned the cheongsam as a product of '*East meets West*'. Steele and Major (1999), for example, explore the evolution of Chinese dress from the Imperial era to the modern China of the 1990s. However, as Ling (2007)

argues, the cheongsam's close link with the political background and cultural meanings has been rarely considered. Ling, in the book *Fusionable Cheongsam* (2007), responds to cheongsam's complex representations by tracing the social and cultural history of China via the cheongsam's hybridity and evolution. Ling's standpoint is that the cheongsam is a combination of West and East, as originating from the 1920s. In *Fusionable Cheongsam* (2009), She stresses the cheongsam is a hybrid form as illustrated by various mediated examples, i.e., the mixed-race actress Nancy Kwan who played Suize in the film *The World of Suize Wong*, or Maggie Cheung who starred in *The Mood for Love*. These two actresses portray sexy-exoticism, communicated through both the elegance of the cheongsam and its primness, as a structured, fitted garment. These examples characterize the exotics, hybridity and femininity of this garment, and by extension its wearers. Following some of the logic of this, this thesis similarly considers the broader significations and 'philosophy' of this dress, but, also, as noted further below, explore matters further in terms of a 'neutral' characteristic, and consider this dress as a shifting social uniform for Chinese women, changing over time.

The analysis and history of Chinese *contemporary* fashion has had less coverage and influence in international spheres. The dominant western researchers typically regard fashion as something markedly Western (Finnane, 2007). Yet, in *The Changing Clothing in China* (2007), Finnane challenges this western-centric view and points out Chinese fashion is a signifier to Chinese politics.

Fashions are Chinese life in the late imperial era even if a fashion industry was not then apparent. In the early twentieth- century the key features of modern fashion became evident, particularly in Shanghai, and rapidly changing dress styles showed the effects. The volatility of Chinese dress throughout the twentieth century matched vicissitudes in national politics (Finnane, 2008, p1).

It is true that Chinese women's clothing has frequently matched or reflected national politics, and continues to do so. Clothing is a sign of a political society especially in the country of explicit political orientation. Finnane's argument is based on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> representations of Chinese dress as traditional and unchanging. The Cheongsam,

as an example, is taken to represent both a sense of continuity (given its distinctiveness as a design), yet also development and change (with the garment being re-invented many times). Besides the cheongsam, Finnane also describes male clothing, and in detail with the Zhongshan Suit (Sun Yat-sen suit) and the clothing in May Fourth era; and the military style (Maoist style) jacket popular in the Cultural Revolution, which later gave way to the variegated, globalized wardrobe of today. In short, in the context of changing clothing styles in Chinese modern history, Finnane connects China's modernization and international visibility with variations in clothing, offering a vivid portrait of the multifaceted, subtle, and contradictory ways of fashion in China (Finnane, 2008). It is at the same level of analysis – in working through and between individual garment styles and social, economic and political accounts – that this thesis seeks to operate. Then, building on Finnane's observations of Chinese fashion history, this thesis develops a cultural-political concept of fashion, which is called *social uniform*, which in turn examines how clothing changes and communicates with respect to cultural-economic shifts, and how these 'uniforms' portray the image of Chinese women's identity or their social role, as well as macro dimensions of Chinese society.

Regarding Chinese clothing, the cheongsam is a well-worn topic, even outside of China. Lee et al. (2012), in *the Mood for Cheongsam*, provide us with the psychical and social landscape that has often escaped the attention of mainstream historians from the perspective of Singapore. Through the National Museum's collection of Cheongsam, they are able to discern the underlying trends in which Chinese women and the cheongsam rose in public profile in Singaporean society after the Second World War. In contrast to the 'de-fashioned' clothing (i.e. Maoist genderless dress of the 1950s-1970s) in Mainland China, Singapore's cheongsam is a relatively uninterrupted pace of evolution under the different political-cultural circumstances. Indeed, the cheongsam's development in Singapore after the 1950s takes into account a major shift in women's identity, charting the movement from being traditional homemakers to modern working women (as a result of the country's changing political, economic and social ambiance).

At this point it is worth remarking on the explicit use of the word 'cheongsam' in this thesis. The Cheongsam is normally referred to as *Qipao*, though increasingly the two words are used interchangeably. However, cheongsam is not merely *Qipao*.

Cheongsam is a typical, traditional, genderless, one-piece dress associated with the country, as part of its 'national dress'. The design of the cheongsam has gone through many changes and histories; its history can be traced to 600 years ago. It has been integrated into or adapted for all number of ways, influenced by the society and culture. While *Qipao*, is considered the traditional/ rigid style of dress for women. *Qi*, 旗, refers to the name of a minority who ruled China in the Qing Dynasty(16<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> ); *Pao*, 袍, means a gown; so *Qipao*, 旗袍 states the gown of *Qi* women. Nowadays, *Qipao* is an exclusive dress for women. Cheongsam, on the contrary, is more neutral, so that various components can vary, e.g. high and short vented collars; differing sleeve lengths; thick or thin seasonal styles; different materials as soft cashmere, heavy brocade, or flowing silk; etc.. For the purposes of this thesis, the use of the word 'cheongsam' has been preferred over that of 'Qipao' as it affiliates more closely to the underlying research topic of the neutral.

Cheongsam is evocative of the working through of modern and globalized culture; it takes on changing forms and designs, with different materials, different sleeve lengths and styles, and overall different lengths and shapes and patterns. It shows us a full image of a more fluid set of possibilities, helping to break with the binaries of genders, cultures, and contradictory positions.

Taking another tact, from a design perspective, the book, *China Fashion*, by Christine Tsui (2010), draws insights from primary research through interviews with a number of prominent contemporary fashion designers in China. Following Chinese fashion history, Tsui situates these designers into three major phases: pre-liberation (pre-1949); the fashion forbidden period (1949-1978); and post-Mao era (1978-). Her emphasis is on analyzing the characteristics of Chinese fashion designers, how the qualities of their designs are formed; and how they will likely affect future trends in the domestic and global market. China's growing economic power is an established fact, but a question remains as to why Chinese brands have so far been unable to

translate success at domestic to universal recognition. It is Tsui's investigation on the chronological stages of Chinese fashion, the uniformity of fashion in different political periods, that inspires the concept here of the female 'social uniform', to mean that which is worn by the majority of women, to convey a spirit of the wearers, and yet also the fluid meanings of different social uni-forms.

Likewise, Wu et al (2013), in *From Chinese brand culture to global brands*, provides in-depth examples of successful Chinese brands that are reaching a global audience by working upon Chinese culture and history. Suggested in various cases, a distinctive Chinese aesthetic would seem poised for global success. Wu et al. (2013) start with three case studies: the pop star Jay Zhou; the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony; and the Luxury Clothing Brand Shanghai Tang. The products of Shanghai Tang combines iconic elements of Chinese culture with stylish fashion for the present globetrotting shopper (Chua and Eccles, 2009). Shanghai Tang is a successful Chinese-inspired brand. As Wu concludes, 'Shanghai Tang includes a range of goods, from wearable and affordable luxury to bespoke tailoring for suits and dress, all of which convey the image of a modern Chinese lifestyle. Initially, the product line included Chairman Mao wristwatches, Cheongsam, silk panamas' (Wu, 2013: 119). In describing this West-East fashion brand, Wu explains this as 'distinctive cosmopolitan identity projection through Chinese culture codes and global fashion resources' (119). In this thesis, the dress of Shanghai Tang will not be a focal point, as it is examined sufficiently by many academics such as Wu (2009) Ling (2007), etc.. However, the purpose here is to provide a critical reading of this garment (and its different versions). A significant departure is to draw upon the insights of Chinese philosophy as much as western fashion theory (more of which is discussed below, with reference to the use of theory in the field of architecture; and further consideration is given in the final section of Chapter 1).

Fashion, to some degree, has the ability to turn yesterday's insignias into tomorrow's products (Evans, 2000; Wu 2013). Shanghai Tang, then, re-actualizes the yesteryear (traditional and historical) emblems for its fashion statement, and expresses dynamical and stylish Chinese lifestyle for global marketplace. Yet, in the

altermodern China (this term will be outlined fully in Chapter 1), which is to foreground its specific economic development in recent decades, Chinese fashion is re-shaping or re-constructing, influenced heavily by the global fashion system. The representative Chinese dress, cheongsam is not only a symbol of tradition, it is more a negotiating of a West-East binary, or a sign cultural renaissance, an expression of Chinese women, and a mirror of the social-political dynamics.

Drawing on the insights of these various studies, we can question how fashion has mirrored the social and cultural changes that have taken place in modern China. We might even ask to what extent fashion has *contributed* to those changes. So, along similar grounds to the investigation of *Chinese Fashion History: from Mao to Now* (Wu 2009), which offers a comprehensive account of modern Chinese fashion from 1978 to the present (whereby the post-Mao era witnessed the birth of the Chinese market economy, and with it the reawakening of Chinese fashion), this thesis provides a fuller, up-to-date account of the Chinese fashion (see Chapter 3). Western fashion and traditional designers, for example, will be discussed in terms of the luxury marketing, and local brands' cultural understanding, but then leading to a 'neutral' image of the flux and mix of the fashion system(s).

In this broader study, Chinese fashion, with a particular case study of the Cheongsam, is investigated as a cross-section of insights drawn from in numerous other studies (Wei, 2013; Zhang, 2008; Clark and Hazel, 2000; Guo, 2008; Chang, 2009; et al). Together, these studies add a detailed account of how a fashion garment has worked through periods of change. However, while these studies tend to refer to the technical skills, culture and history associated with the cheongsam, they are less concerned with a latent philosophy and aesthetics. This is a line of enquiry that this thesis seeks to pick up more explicitly, which aligns with a few specific studies that offer some comparison of West and East (Steel and Major 1999, Tam 2006, Wilson 1997 et al); that argue from specific historical and culture views (Ling, 2007, 2009, 2017; Tsui, 2010; Finnane, 2008; Wei, 2013; Clark and Hazel, 2000; et al); or describe its role in foreign countries (Lee et al 2012), and/or as maintained in the manner of fusions and the erotic (Ling, 2007, 2009). In this study, the Cheongsam is placed

within the context of the wider luxury brand context, or 'eco-system', which is highly prevalent in key urban areas across China. In doing so, the relationship between the cheongsam and other fashion styles of Chinese women is understood in relation to social status and larger political shifts within culture, as well as West-East cultural interconnection from the point of view of globalization.

However, it is important to note, set against the various literatures outlined here, this study offers a certain shift in emphasis, which, in brief, relates to the critical concept of the Neutral. Primarily, as will be outlined, the term of the 'neutral' is in reference to the work of Roland Barthes (2005), which in turn provides a useful re-writing or updating of Barthes' well-known study *The Fashion System* (which is discussed in detail in Chapter 1). However, as a brief insight into this term, reference can also be made to the more recent work of François Jullien (2007), and in particular his book *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*. A point to make here is that his term of 'blandness' works in many ways as a synonym of Barthes' Neutral (something which is picked up in detail at the close of Chapter 3). In accounting for traditional Chinese aesthetics (for example in Chinese ink paintings), Jullien notes of a contrast between flavor and blandness. An ink painting, he suggests is bland, but not in the sense of dull, or boring. Rather the opposite. There is a plentitude (a many), and a sense of *all things being equal*, all elements are mutually together. He writes: 'nothing here strives to incite or seduce; nothing aims to fix the gaze or compel the attention. [...] The Chinese critics traditionally characterize this in the one word: *dan*, the "bland"' (Jullien, 2007, p.37). Blandness in the Chinese tradition, according to Jullien's interpretation, 'characterizes the real in a way that is complete, positive and natural' (Jullien, 2007, p.45). In this account, flavor 'constitutes a limitation, for it excludes all other becoming. It will never be anything more than that particular flavor, the given flavor, compartmentalized in and restricted by its insuperable particularity'. By contrast, he writes, 'when no flavor is named, the value of savoring it is all the more intense for being impossible to categorize; and so it overflows the banks of its contingency and opens itself to transformation (Julien, 2007, P42). It is this 'value of savoring' (of enjoying, appreciating) that is significant to the account explored here of Chinese

women's clothing in contemporary China, and notably the contemporary significance of the cheongsam within the broader 'landscape' of fashion. Much of the prior writing on Chinese fashion and the cheongsam has the tendency to draw out particular garments as distinct 'flavors', but which, following Jullien's logic 'excludes all other becoming'. What is of more interest is how clothing might operate in a 'flavorless' manner, in that space in which there is greater transformations and possibilities. This is the zone of the neutral, and arguably the matter of fashion in itself, as an ever changing set of codes and possibilities. Thus, in this study, the cheongsam and other clothing within the social setting of China will be presented as 'uniforms', as units through which changes are possible, and cheongsam particularly becomes a metaphor of such neutral apparel.

In order to position the importance of adopting the critical term of 'neutrality' for the thesis, it is helpful to step outside of the specific fashion literatures discussed above. Indeed, a parallel for the critical approach taken here can be found with David Wang's *A Philosophy of Chinese Architecture* (2017). His underlying research question asks: 'What *is* Chinese architecture?', which he seeks to answer 'through the lens of Chinese philosophy' (1). His argument is that unlike a long history of 'architectural theory' literatures of the Greco-European tradition, there is no comparable 'line of theorizing in Chinese ideas'. He suggests there is no Chinese architecture prior to 1840. Obviously, this is not to suggest there are no distinctive architectural styles associated with China. His point is that there has been no comparable *discourse* around architecture. The year 1840 is significant as this marks the First Opium War, which Wang takes as 'China's entrance into the way of being called *modernity*' (2). Critically, it is a modernity that comes in the form of European 'railroads, gas lighting, piped water, and entire planned urban sectors' (2). This thesis, adopting the term 'altermodernity' (discussed at more length in Chapter 1), asserts a more layered reading of China's modernity, but nonetheless, Wang's contention for the importance of this period in setting a new critical discourse in China (in asserting architecture as a construct) is significant and echoes the underlying argument of this thesis for fashion, that the generally available critical discourse is one that typically bypasses Chinese philosophical and cultural thinking.

As Wang writes: 'The point is that the very beginning of architecture as a theoretical object of concern in China was informed by European ideals. Hence what is *Chinese* about Chinese architecture remains elusive' (2). While the materials under consideration here are very different to the field of architecture, there is a similar attempt under way to reposition how we think about what is *Chinese* about Chinese fashion. Importantly, this is not to suggest of an essentialist quality of 'Chinese-ness' – rather it is to attempt to offer a critical perspective that is not simply placed upon the history and context of China, but rather works *out from* this context, with a focus upon contemporary conditions of thinking. Wang's historical point is precisely to comment upon things today, since 'as architects in China grapple with what contemporary Chinese architecture ought to be, they are confronted with generating architectural theory in a philosophical tradition that does not offer a lineage of such ideas to draw from. All of it is *de novo...*' (1). Yet, equally, according to his account, the 'past is always present in a culture's ways of being' (2). This goes both ways, on the one hand there are deep-seated aspects of a cultural past that remain present, but equally historical events can shape later developments. In contemporary China, Wang sees a new path being forged, but which also looks back. There is, he suggests, 'something of a revival of old ways ... taking place in China', but that this is equally paired with a call for a *different* criticality (3). Here, Wang draws upon the argument of a Chinese architectural scholar, Jianfei Zhu, who looks to reform the idea of the critical 'by bringing in a "relational" perspective, so that the agenda is no longer critique as confrontation or negation of the opposed other, but critique as participation with and possible reform of the related other, including agents of power, capital and natural resource, in an ethical organic universe' (Zhu cited in Wang, 2017: 3-4). Again, while the parameters of fashion are very different to architecture, the parallel to be drawn here is of an underlying 'relational' perspective, which gets past 'critique as confrontation'. It might be suggested that drawing directly upon two French thinkers, with Barthes and Jullien, it is only to repeat a non-relational perspective. Yet, it is precisely their interest *combine* philosophical systems, or to translate between in some way, that opens up a means to at least think across or from a new perspective. In the case of Barthes, it is also

significant that his text *The Fashion System* has cast such a leading semiotic 'shadow' upon critical approaches to fashion. Taking a 'neutral' reading of that text (as provided in Chapter 1, see also below regarding 'Aims, Value, and Method'), we gain a way of re-entering a semiotic approach to fashion that is deconstructed through the philosophical thinking and economic and political context of modern China.

## 'Uniform' – A Conceptual Device

In this research, clothing is understood in terms of its symbolic value, as reflecting and reflected in the society and political discourse. In looking to dominant fashion trends and clothing as worn by the *majority* of women, this thesis adopts the use of the term 'uniform'. The cheongsam, for example, is taken as a significant item of 'uniform' with respect to both Chinese fashion history and contemporary consumption. Notably it plays a conspicuous role in both global and local fashion markets. Hence, symbolic and communicative values of dress will be considered with respect to cultural differences, confusions and fusions between East and West, with shifting women's sartorial trends in China operating as a metaphors of changing configurations of consumer culture, aesthetic interests, and social beliefs and change.

Importantly, the reference here to 'uniform' is to be understood a complex and conceptual term. A literal uniform, the Mao suit, is examined, and shown to represent a specific 'dream' of social freedom (Wu, 2009; Tusi, 2010, etc.). This is set in contrast to the Cheongsam (banned under Mao's leadership), which has gone through multiple evolutions. As a cultural device it represents a rich set of connections, linked to a new, modern China, which offers a more complex 'dream' of both collective and individualized freedom. It is shown to be infused within the dominant, largely homogenized fashions of globalization, characterized here as a kind of 'uni-form' (i.e. a distinct *form* and the univeralisation of trending styles). Yet,

equally, the 'fluidity' of the cheongsam, being both flexible and distinctive, presents its own fashion system of more subtle gradients. It is presented, then, in this thesis, as both a highly visible example of contemporary, hybridized fashion in China, and as a tool for understanding the more general, everyday 'neutralities' of how women – in choosing what to wear – articulate new identities in contemporary China.

Uniform also relates specifically to the context of *women's* fashion in China. Here the term evokes ideas or at least raises questions about uniformity, conformity and homogeneity. The female body, as a physical form, is 'trained' to manifest particular carriages, movements and gestures. The body is a natural form that is culturally primed to fit its occupancy of a chosen social group – not least through what we wear and desire to wear. Body trainings create certain possibilities (such as special skills, knowledge, and physical disciplines), and constrain a range of body habits that are expected and taken for granted in a particular cultural background. They form part of an identity, borne through a series of habits, prohibitions and transgressions. Bodies are worn through technologies of movement, restraint, gesture and protection. The habitus occupied by the body – not least through the 'techniques' of clothing – impose or extend various expectations, conventions and skills as being essential for operating in specific technically organized environments (Craik, 2003). Thus, bodies are *made up* in both senses of the term, constructed through the acquisition of body techniques, and known through the ways in which they are made presentable. Techniques of fashioning the body are a visible and primary denotative form of acculturation, that is to say, we use the way we wear our bodies to present ourselves to our social environment and social role, mapping out codes of conduct through our fashion behavior. The level of 'denotation' is noteworthy, relating to the way in which fashion can operate at a 'neutral' level while nonetheless providing a high degree of signification and means of 'writing' the body (more on which is discussed in Chapter 1).

Fashion in this study is taken then as a technology of civility, in other words, as sanctioned codes of conduct in the practices of the self and self-presentation. The body is trained to perform in socially acceptable ways by harnessing movement,

gesture and demeanor until they become second nature. Nonetheless, there is a tension between unstructured and untrained impulses (license and freedom) and structured and disciplined codes of conduct in the dynamic creation of declarations of the limits of the habitus of the body. The dual approach of locating female identity within female “uniform dynamics” and political-cultural revolutions, as well as describing women’s social role in a cultural combination of East and West is novel in the field of Chinese feminism (and is outlined further in Chapter 2). In addition, this thesis examines how global fashion culture impacts on Chinese women who are equally influenced by the heritage of Confucius patriarchy. Since cultural globalization and cross-cultural themes transcend national boundaries within and outside of China, Chinese women’s social role can be seen to shift and change. The importance of clothing with respect to these changes cannot be underestimated; hence the interest taken here in what is considered *social* uniform. Thus, oscillating around this term are various themes and concepts such as the female body, Chinese feminism, globalization, hybridity, orientalism, and Chinese aesthetics and ethics (including Confucianism, Daoism, *Zhongyong*, or ‘neutralism’). These themes and concepts are integrated to form a ‘short history’ of Chinese fashion. China has long been acknowledged a politics-oriented culture (not least due to its Confucius heritage and continuing communist leadership). However, focusing on fashion in China helps uncover a variety of social, economic, cultural and political strands, making for a rich reading. Although fashion is typically understood to offer a rather fleeting sense of history, the fact its production and consumption represents a complex nexus of industry, commerce, personal desires, historical and political symbols, and modern/traditional designs, makes fashion – and its varying ‘uni-forms’ – a vital site of cultural meaning. Of course, as part of the narrative of contemporary China, western culture has been encouraging Chinese women to walk out of the frame of tradition. However, rather than read this as merely an imperializing force, it is clear China presents its own fashion trends, identities and (uni) forms, all of which are of interest to this thesis.

## China in its Geopolitical Context

There are 1.4 billion reasons why China may succeed, and 1.4 billion reasons why it may not surpass America as the greatest power in the world. A great depression like that of the 1930s could set it back decades. China has locked itself into the global economy. If we don't buy, they don't make. And if they don't make there will be mass unemployment. If there is mass and long-term unemployment, in an age when the Chinese are a people packed into urban areas, the inevitable social unrest could be – like everything else in modern China – on a scale hitherto unseen. (Marshall, 2016: 61)

This description of China's current and future global status is quite common. Notably, it is a characterization from a western perspective, with a 'them and us' dichotomy ('If we don't buy, they don't make'). China is frequently positioned as 'other' within global politics. Arguably, there are some practical reasons for this division, on both geographic and political grounds. Marshall's account takes the 'geo' (geography) of 'geopolitics' very seriously. His book, *Prisoners Of Geography* (2016), provides an account of how important the geographical boundaries and resources of the world's major countries are when understanding their actions and placement within wider local, regional and international politics. Scale is one important factor in understanding China. Even as far back as the time of Confucius (551-479 BCE), 'there was a strong feeling of Chinese identity and of a divide between civilized China and the "barbarous" regions which surrounded it' (Marshall, 2016: 38-39). Crucially, it is an identity that even in this early period is shared among a population of around sixty million people. Today, of course, China is well known for having the largest national population of around 1.4 billion people. Around 1 billion people are actually concentrated in the North China Plain or 'heartland' of the country, 'despite it being just half the size of the United States, which has a population of 322 million' (38); hence the concern noted above that any economic decline would be greatly felt given the density of population. As Marshall suggests, the sheer scale of China's population is both is greatest asset and weakness.

China maintains a great deal of confidence as a major power due to its geographical features. There is little or no threat from the north, which is largely quite barren; the

Himalayas (despite the tensions over Tibet) form a natural barrier with the next largest country, India; and the route up through Xinjiang, despite notable tensions, proves a key trading route out to waters west of China, whereby the country 'intends to become a two-ocean power (Pacific and Indian). To achieve this China is investing in deep-water ports in Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – an investment which buys it good relations, the potential for its future navy to have friendly bases to visit or reside in, and trade links back home' (Marshall, 2016: 60). As Marshall notes, while China is building up its naval power within an international context, and continuing to apply pressure with regards to Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan and the numerous small islands in the South China Sea, China is increasingly applying 'soft power' in an attempt to 'pull the South-East Asian nations away from the USA' (59). Largely, this amounts to economic development. The building of a railway, for example, through the permafrost, mountains and valleys of Tibet was thought a near impossible task. Yet this exists, with Xinjiang linking with Lhasa through the Kunlun range, so bringing in consumer goods and people to Tibet. At the time of writing, the world's longest sea-crossing bridge (34 miles) has opened up, connecting Hong Kong and Macau to the Mainland Chinese city of Zhuhai. This is a highly significant construction, not merely for the ambitions of its engineering, but for how it brings Hong Kong (the once former British colony) into the mainland of China. Journey times that previously took 3 hours, have been cut to thirty minutes, making whole new areas open to commuters (and tourists).

In 2013, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, in a key, defining speech, drew a direct line between economic development and social and cultural cohesion. Furthermore, his argument was based on a *long view* of history. Speaking in the capital city of Kazakhstan, symbolic of the 'centre' of Asia, he remarked how, for more than 2,000 years, people in the region have been able to look both east and west, and to co-operate despite 'differences in race, belief and cultural background' (cited in Frankopan, 2015: 520). It is this vision of co-operation that he then states as China's 'foreign policy priority', which, as Frankopan (2015: 520) explains, is to 'make economic ties closer, improve communication, encourage trade and enhance monetary circulation'; thus leading Xi to make his much repeated announcement for

a new 'Silk Road', 'One Belt, One Road'. This is of course grand rhetoric, and one that is intended as a global statement. It is a view of global interactivity that takes its cue from a longer history, but also moves away from a narrative that has persisted about imperial forces against China. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw imperial interventions from Europe that fractured the country into different spheres of influence. Marshall describes this as a still persistent 'humiliation', and as a narrative that the Communist Party has repeatedly used; 'it is in part true,' he notes, 'but it is also useful to cover up the Party's own failures and repressive policies' (40). However, such a view does not match necessarily with China's contemporary outlook. It is not to say there are not significant issues and problems (though these matters lie somewhat outside of the scope of this thesis). The key point is that China is and always has been very prominently engaged in global trade, not least with a vital role within the ancient Silk Road. As Marshall notes, the 'Chinese were great sea voyagers, especially in the fifteenth century ... But these were money-making exercises, not power projections, and they were not designed to create forward bases that be used to support military operations' (52).

The relative protection of China's natural geography and its emphasis on trade rather than power (beyond its own national boundaries), which Marhsall outlines in his account of China, are important underlying principles for this thesis, which looks at how fashions are brought into and consumed within China, but very much as part of a global economy. As will be discussed in the subsequent chapters, western and Chinese fashions need to be examined in both local and global contexts, which also gives rise to ideas about hybridity and fusions. However, as will be outlined further in Chapter 1 and 3, such concepts are frequently framed within postcolonial discourse, which often suggests of an imposition from one side to the other, and generally seeing a western dominance. Venn (2000) refers to the idea of 'occidentalism' to describe of a condition that goes beyond a First/Third world imbalance. The 'Third World', he writes, is no longer 'contained within the older colonial space; the relationship of the global and the local [has become] deterritorialized' (3). Thus, he goes onto explain:

Edward Said established some time ago that colonial discourse was not just about the discursive construction of the colonized 'other' but that it was intrinsic to European self-understanding, determining how Europe and Europeans could locate themselves – as modern, as civilized, as superior, as developed and progressive – only by reference to an other that was represented as the negation of everything that Europe imagined or desired itself to be (Said, 1985). Today, similarly, the postcolonial world is present everywhere, but it is filtered for the 'West' through the representational devices of consumer culture and the tourist gaze... (Venn, 2000: 3)

Venn's argument is that the narrative of modernisation has become a standardised one; 'because of the universal scope of the project of modernity and the global research of European colonization' (4). He presents a critique of modernity, but which arguably still remains trapped within its frames of reference. The assertion of the 'universal scope' of modernity actually remains contested. One of the key concepts used in Chapter 1 is that of 'altermodernity', to suggest of differing tracks of modernisation. This perhaps allows for a *different* kind of 'orientalism', or a *re-orienting* of our views of local-global politics.

It is true, of course, that consumer culture and the tourist gaze has taken on a key significance in locating non-western contexts, and can be shown to extend or re-trace certain imbalances that stem from colonial histories. However, with respect to China, there are two key points to make. Firstly, it is reasonable to take a rather longer view of the impact of luxury goods. It is easy to look to the dramatic influx of contemporary brands into China (more of which will be discussed in Chapter 3) as some kind of dominance of the west, but equally this can be turned around to show the growing dominance of China:

Western fashion houses like Prada, Burberry and Louis Vuitton are building huge new stores and seeing spectacular sales figures across the Persian Gulf, Russia, China and the Far East (so that, with delicious irony, fine fabrics and silks are being sold back to the place where silk and fine fabrics originated). Clothing has always been a marker of social differentiation, from Xiongnu chieftains 2,000 years ago to the men and women of the Renaissance five centuries ago. Today's ravenous appetites for the most exclusive brands have a rich historical pedigree – and are an obvious indicator of the emerging new elites in countries whose wealth and importance are rising. (Frankopan, 2015: 517).

Taking the view that luxury goods have long been traded to demonstrate wealth etc., it perhaps becomes less appropriate to point to the travel of western brands to the east as only a one-way traffic. In fact, there is a way in which these brands can only survive because of the support of the East (Degen, 2009; Rovie, 2018).

Secondly, it is worth reminding that China was never colonised by the west in that way we can consider of India and places in the Caribbean etc. Putting aside its history with Japan, Mainland China has not been taken over fully from an administrative point of view (other than in the case of Hong Kong and other islands and coastal areas). The British, for example, had control of Weihaiwei in the province of Shandong in 1898, but this was effectively a trading arrangement. While Weihaiwei was a strategic port for the British, its position on the northeastern peninsula of the province, being some distance from the capital of Shandong, made it 'politically negligible in the larger context' (Stevenson, 2011: 145). Trading groups such as the East India Company certainly had an influence, including with a base in Singapore. But, trading interests were uneven. While the East India Company were interested in tea and silk from China, the Chinese were less interested in what the East India Company produced (and so only really wanted to exchange for currency). Of course, there was one product of great interest, which was opium. Rather than use up cash reserve in trade, the East India Company were then keen to sell this addictive drug, which led to the tension between Britain and China with the Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1850s. As a growing industrial power, Britain took an advantage over China (and in this way gained Hong Kong). Essentially, however, this war was around questions of 'free trade' – not entirely dissimilar with tensions that exist today, particularly between the United States and China. Thus, rather than argue for deep-seated cultural and political impact, that might be thought to shape national identity and subjectivities, the history of China relates much more to questions of economics and exchange. And it is the more 'flowing' notion of exchange that can be seen to recur in the debates outlined in the chapters that follow. If branded goods from the west are today's 'opium', the effects, arguably, are

similarly less of a *cultural* imperialism, than a sheer material fascination (which is put to use in terms defined by the local context).

The received view has generally been that as China opened up to trade in its coastland regions, these areas greatly prospered, while the inland areas were neglected. As Marshall notes: 'the prosperity engendered by trade has made coastal cities such as Shanghai wealthy, but that wealth has not been reaching the countryside. This has added to the massive influx of people into urban areas and accentuated regional differences' (40). However, this picture is steadily changing. With the growth in high-speed (and affordable) train links and other major infrastructure, the Chinese government is 'building networks carefully and deliberately to connect to minerals, energy sources and access to cities, harbors and oceans' (Frankopan, 2015: 516). In turn, this is leading to the 're-emergence' of China's western provinces:

...many businesses have started to relocate to cities close to the Dzungaria gate – the ancient entry point in the country's west through which modern trains now pass. Hewlett Packard has moved production from Shanghai to Chongqing in the South-West, where it now produces 20 million laptops and 15 million printers per year, shipping millions of units by train to markets in the west. Others, like the Ford Motor Company, have followed suit. Or there is Foxconn, a leading IT manufacturer and key Apple supplier that has built up its presence in Chengdu at the expenses of its former facilities in Shenzhen. (Frankopan, 2015: 516)

This thesis is written from a perspective taken as much from the west of the country than the east. Indeed, my own location as an academic at Southwest University in Chongqing means that many observations made in the course of this project are drawn from the very places Frankopan notes here, of Chongqing and Chengdu. Nonetheless, it is also important to note, that this thesis is situated in the experiences of the dense, urban areas, where economic growth is very high. There are, of course, many questions that could be examined with regards to the varying economic levels of city and villages in China etc., but this is not the focus of this study. Instead, in looking at fashion (and often quite high-end products), this thesis is concerned with a specific sartorial context, but one that is rapidly expanding and

deepening. Again, to quote Frankopan, the government resources being put into the One Belt, One Road vision is striking, and highlights how 'China is planning for the future'. The country is currently shifting towards a higher skilled, higher paid economy, but still needing to manage a very large population.

Elsewhere, the traumas and difficulties, the challenges and problems, seem to be birthing pains – signs of a new world emerging before our eyes. While we [here meaning the 'west'] ponder where the next threat might come from, how best to deal with religious extremism, national law, and how to build relations with peoples, cultures and regions about whom we have spent little or no time trying to understand, networks and connections are quietly being knitted together across the spine of Asia; or rather they are being restored. The Silk Roads are rising again. (Frankopan, 2015: 521).

While the larger geopolitical structures and relations are not the primary focus of this thesis, and while, indeed, this study may 'only' be dealing with matter of clothing and fashion of contemporary Chinese women, the significance of a newly 'fashioned' China within the global context is undoubtedly an importance underlying theme and presence.

## **Aims, Value and Method**

This thesis is concerned with the period of the People's Republic of China, 1949 to the present. It focuses on the relationship between the social uniform and female social roles, and provides an understanding of Chinese women's fashion consumption in light of recent socio-economic and political conditions. It will further demonstrate the discontinuity of clothing and women's changing identity in contemporary China. As such it uses clothing to trace larger socio-political shifts within the popular culture, as well as West-East cultural inter-relations in the context of economic and cultural globalization. A 'fashion system' (as outlined in Chapter 1) embodies and circulates sartorial denotations and connotations, and prescribes acceptable codes and conventions, and sets limits upon clothing behavior. An

underlying assumption is that the fashioning of the body is a feature of all cultures although the specific technologies of fashion vary between cultures. In focusing on the context of China, the thesis adopts a hermeneutic approach. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines it, hermeneutics is a methodology of interpretation, 'concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts'.<sup>1</sup> The range of 'texts' in this case is wide, including written texts (not least the literatures outlined above, and a range of critical and empirical studies), an array of visual materials, as well as artefacts and objects of fashion and other associated phenomena (such as advertising, social media and film). Broadly speaking, the methods or approach of this thesis are semiotic, so understanding fashion through an exchange of signs and meanings, which can change, but which also become 'weighted' in certain ways over time or due to certain events and readership (more of which is discussed in Chapter 1 with the re-reading of *The Fashion System*). Such an approach in effect is seeking to understand a bigger picture and trends through the examination of the particular. It is a form of *inductive* enquiry, to draw outwards from evidential particulars towards a wider understanding. Unlike the deductive argument that presents 'total support' for its conclusion, the inductive offers some degree of support or adequacy for truthful conclusions. The aim here is essentially to establish legitimacy for new critical readings of women's fashion in contemporary China – with a specific aim to offer that reading from within a Chinese perspective (to offer a *different* criticality pertinent to today, as discussed above). The prospect is to then enable further, future research and critical thinking in this field.

Hermeneutics is always beset by the so-called 'hermeneutic circle', whereby we seek to understand the whole through the individual, yet in order to understand the individual we need to know of the whole. The approach taken in this thesis is to regularly shift between the whole and particular, or at least to lead the various interpretations through and from different perspectives and scales. Thus, as much as individual garments and design aspects might be referenced, so too are the macro dimensions of Chinese society, economy and politics. Again, the aim is not to secure

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, entry on 'Hermeneutics', available online <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/>>

some form of final proof or truth, but to provide new, credible narratives that help establish a more meaningful and challenging set of interpretations for forward going scholarship in the context of Chinese fashion.

This project seeks to offer insights into how social uniforms change as part of radical socio-economical shifts, and, in particular, how changing uniforms reflect the Chinese female body image and women's role within society. Over nearly 70 years (1949-present), changes in clothing have been related to key political and economic events and are clearly responses to broad social upheavals. Within these changes, the cheongsam appears and re-appears in different ways, signaling each significant historical moment in the context of the economic-cultural globalization. Thus, the cheongsam as one key example of this thesis, assists the overall critical appraisal of the context and contemporary issues regarding women's social role and the rise of feminism within China. Indeed, the cheongsam is taken as a metonymy of fashion to reflect Chinese female aesthetic taste; a sign of cultural renaissance of China; a *neutral* reconciling of East-West cultural exchange; and the hybridized consequence of globalization, but which is nonetheless culturally specific and made local.

As part of its analytical method (outlined in Chapter 1), the thesis makes reference to Roland Barthes' well-known study *The Fashion System*. While this work is now arguably out of date, its underlying thesis of fashion as a 'system of signification' retains pertinence, and crucially, in this thesis is updated in two important ways. Firstly, in outlining the contemporary, altermodern context of China, the notion of a fashion 'system' is greatly expanded, so taking on board new trends in global trade, new technologies (with social media presenting whole new systems of signification and exchange), and the hybridity of designs and consumption of fashion. Secondly, in looking to Barthes' later work, and in particular his interest in the 'Neutral', a key argument of this thesis is of a certain 'neutrality' of fashion. This is by no means to suggest anything banal or insipid. Barthes' interest in the Neutral radically expands his understanding of signification, breaking away from binary oppositions to instead pay attention to more fluid gradients or intensities of difference and exchange. Notably, he is also heavily influenced by Asian philosophies, including a keen interest

in Taoism, which provides an important bridge for this thesis in taking on a specific Chinese perspective. While accepting much of the arguments that show how local-global contexts lead to identifiably postmodern and hybrid aesthetics, this thesis also makes a specific argument that for women in contemporary China the flux and mix of available clothing and designs is experienced in a *neutral* manner. In other words, rather than position new production and consumption trends in China only in terms of 'hybridity' (which leans towards a Western bias and a binary logic of host-recipient), there are more fluid ways in which we need to understand how women engage in fashion in China today.

## Thesis Overview and Research Questions

Beginning with what is distinctive about the Chinese female sartorial context and fashion trends, as well as an overview of the global and local 'fashion system' (as a composite of systems of signification, dissemination and marketplace), this thesis explores aspects of Chinese women's fashion in terms of social 'uniform', uniformities of design, and gender issues. Working through the shifting national, international and transnational intersections with contemporary China, the chapters, outlined below, examine the dynamic nature of female fashion, identity and history, as framed with respect to the wider social, cultural and political discourse. The underlying research question asks:

What does a critical reading of the historical significance, design features and environments of female fashion (notably the cheongsam, Maoist unisex clothing, and western clothing) tell us about the social status and identity of Chinese women in today's China?

In responding to this question the thesis relies upon three main critical terms, as discussed above. Firstly, it presents the case of China today in terms of its

'altermodernity', which is to foreground its specific economic development in recent decades, which can be understood with respect to broader, global patterns of development and interdependency, but which must equally be considered within its own, 'alternative' terms and circumstances – which as discussed above, is not an overtly post-colonial context, but one marked by long term global trade (more of which is considered in Chapter 3). Secondly, the thesis adopts the term 'uniform' as a key critical device to understand certain forms of dress as 'techniques' of identity and social conformity or challenge. However, as discussed above, beyond the general meaning of the word as denoting a pattern of sameness and typically signifying certain hierarchical positions, and as reference to a garment that one knowingly wears (willingly or otherwise), the term 'uniform' for the purposes of this research is somewhat more flexible and conceptual. One specific example of uniform, as already noted, is the consideration here of the Mao suit, which while clearly uniform in its design and widespread use can be shown to develop a complex ecology of meanings. In many respects 'uniform' for this thesis refers to clothing that might not commonly be seen as a uniform. The cheongsam, for example, is not readily identified as a uniform, but here it is read as a *form* that has specific connotations and symbolism. It is a distinctive, uni-form in terms of its design pattern, and as worn it becomes a 'uniform' that transcends specific cultural boundaries, or at least allows one cultural rendering to lead to another. In considering hybridity, for example, it is necessary to have components that are distinctive enough to be hybridized. Similarly, western clothing, which feeds into China en masse after economic reform, can hardly be thought of as uniforms in the strict sense, but nonetheless, present a way of dressing that arguably leads to highly circumscribed styles and looks. In terms of global consumption, uniform is also meant here in terms of 'uniformities', of the growing *homogeneity* of global fashion – or what we might think of as a 'uni-fashion'. Uniform, then, relates to a complex reading of fashion and its various systems. Thirdly, and in conjunction with the term 'uniform', the thesis draws upon the critical term of the 'neutral', which as noted above, is adapted from the writings of Roland Barthes, and as placed within the terms of Eastern philosophical writings (of which Barthes was particularly interested). The neutral is used here to counter the general reading of hybridized fashion, with a

view to setting out a culturally specific account, one that potentially recalibrates the very significations that we take to be imbued in the clothes we wear – particularly, for example, how we might read the adoption and adaption of western clothing within China, or the wearing of a distinctively ‘traditional’ Chinese design such as the Cheongsam.

In order to develop the reading through these three main terms, the thesis is structured across four main chapters, and followed by a conclusion. Chapter 1, ‘Fashion and Complexity in Contemporary China’, sets out the main historical, economic and theoretical backdrop to the whole thesis. It describes Chinese unique female ‘uniforms’ as combining with women’s identity through clothing with reference to China’s ‘altermodernity’. In doing so it seeks to locate the *complexities* of fashion in contemporary China, to comprehend the present global fashion ‘system’ vis-à-vis a Chinese fashion system, and to clarify the phenomena of the hybridity of the cheongsam. In setting out aspects of a fashion system, the chapter provides a short account of Barthes’ well-known, but old study of *The Fashion System*. It is argued this retains some methodological, interpretive pertinence, but certainly only by extending what is meant by ‘system’ (notably beyond merely the analysis of language). The chapter concludes with a re-reading of the Barthes’ *Fashion System* through his later interest in the ‘neutral’. This gives way to an alternative reading of contemporary female fashion in China. Developing various supplementary research questions, this chapter asks what the similarities and differences are between the Chinese fashion system and global fashion system; how global brands influence in China; and how, in the context of globalization, Chinese women identify themselves via sartorial means.

Chapter 2, ‘Made in China: Uniforms, Fashion and Feminism’, provides critical appraisal of the context and contemporary issues regarding women’s social role, gender, and the rise of feminism in China. Broader narratives of personal and collective ‘freedom’ are evoked through the analysis of three main periods or historical ‘breaks’. It begins with the Mao suit, followed by the influx of western clothing after China’s economic reforms in the 1970s, and then focuses on the

contemporary, hybridized cheongsam. Through these historical narratives, key critical questions emerge as to what the relationship is between the female uniforms and the female social status in contemporary China, and why the cheongsam disappeared during the Mao period, 1949-1978. The fact that women wore the unisex Mao jacket rather than 'feminine' clothing such as the cheongsam raises key questions about fashion, identity and politics. There are arguments, certainly made at the time that the unisex Mao jacket reflected women's political enhancement. Yet this narrative changes dramatically with economic reforms. More generally we can ask how fashion reflects different political and social-cultural moments, and in turn the nature of Chinese feminism. Chapter 3, 'Brand Neutral', extends the analysis of present-day women's clothing and associated new identities. Specifically, the chapter examines feminism and women's roles within a mass, global market of fashion. It contemplates the influence of new hybrid forms of 'traditional' dress and the influence of global popular culture on Chinese female body image. The cheongsam is discussed as a notable symbol of Renaissance of Chinese culture, as confronting the strength of global influence. The significance of the cheongsam is then developed in detail in the final chapter, 'The Case of Cheongsam'. This chapter shows how the cheongsam stands in for specific values and beliefs for Chinese women, and operates as a sign of cultural complexity and nationalism. The garment, through its numerous iterations, relates to how Chinese women identify themselves via clothing in the globalized fashion world and in response to the context of a patriarchal society. Underlying this chapter is a critical question about how we should deal with, or try to reconcile, the conflict of different cultures and different values systems. This is to ask, for example, about the role of traditional Chinese dress as being *fashionable* within a broader international frame, and whether or not its significance does or does not break out of an orientalist account of East and West. Overall, as taken up in the conclusion, we need to consider how we confront the strength of global culture, the enduring shadow of patriarchy, and, with respect to this thesis' particular reading, how we might make use of Eastern philosophies and discourse (as much as Western philosophies and critical theories) in understanding and *representing* the experiences of Chinese female women. Beyond its hybridity, for example, the cheongsam might well be used to illustrate the concept of the

'neutral' as the experience of women, located both locally and globally. If what we wear is what we *are*, then it is important we understand (or at least aspire towards the principle that) forms of dress are as much a means of 'writing' identity (and multiple identities) as they are the codification of rigid identity.

# Chapter 1: Fashion and Complexity in Contemporary China

*Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.*

— Coco Chanel

This chapter sets out the overarching contemporary context for the thesis, which explores key features and peculiarities that characterize women's fashion in the context of present-day China. In locating fashion as an indicator of cultural and political expression, i.e. understanding the sartorial as situating a set of visible codes and structures of meaning, the chapter seeks to establish various complexities of Chinese female identity, as well as broader social, economic and political complexities as they pertain to East-West cultural differences. Notably, the significance of the Chinese fashion market in the global economy is analyzed, which is both to understand how global brands and styles heavily influence Chinese consumer trends, and how the Chinese fashion system is itself formed of its own internal logics and emergent trends.

In the Introduction to this thesis the term 'uniform' was introduced as a key critical device. As will be developed through the various chapters this term is used to refer to a succession of *defining* styles in China, examined in specific respect to women's fashion. As discussed in the Introduction, in the contemporary context, which predominately we can characterize in terms of global, postmodern fashion trends (so offering a variety of styles and trends), we might think the notion of the 'uniform' is somewhat redundant. Arguably there has been an informalisation of clothing, not least in the workplace, where we would otherwise most typically associate the uniform. Nonetheless, the idea of a singular ('uni') form of dress (as we will see, for example with styles from the Mao period in China, in Chapter 2) is not something we would quickly recognize on the street or workplace. Nor would we necessarily

consider ourselves to be putting on a uniform when choosing from a variety of clothing, whether from our own wardrobe or when shopping. However, the concept of the uniform employed in this thesis can be taken at a more metaphorical level. It refers to systems and structures of fashion (understood as both the mediation of abstract brands and styles and the actual *wearing* of fashionable attire) as informed by (and informing upon) a whole series of historical, cultural, social, political and economic factors. A key argument of this thesis is that today's fashions in China – while highly varied and explicitly informed by global trends – are nonetheless specific to the country. There is a *way of dressing* for women in China that is distinctive and bears upon the aforementioned factors, or conditions. Postmodern styles can themselves be read as a defining 'style', as orchestrated through a certain homogeneity that comes from the dominance of key brands and markets. Also, it can be shown that how women dress in China can be defining of ways of positioning oneself within broader social and economic structures – so relating to specific national or local factors and pressures. As much as we might be drawn to the 'look' of fashion, there is always a way that clothing 'works' for (and against) women in contemporary China. It is at and across these various levels that the 'uniform' is taken on as a device for a critical reading of contemporary female fashion in China. Note, however, while the term is developed explicitly across the remaining chapters, in this chapter it is put to one side in favor of first establishing what we really mean by the *contemporary* context of Chinese female fashion. In doing so, the chapter, seeks to offer some initial understanding and frames of reference regards the aforementioned factors (i.e. the historical, cultural, social, political and economic), and also sets up some key critical terms, such as hybridity, neutrality and altermodernity, that help establish the main critical trajectories opened up by the thesis.

The chapter begins with an overview of modern, or rather 'altermodern' China, which in part is to summarize the historical, economic and political context of China, as it leads up to its present situation as a major global power. Reference to its 'altermodernity' is to foreground the need to consider China within its own terms of its modernization and its interfacing with the forces of globalization. There has

generally been a shift in how we relate to globalization around the world, and for the need to acknowledge different approaches and effects; to allow for different temporalities of modernity. This overarching context then leads into a consideration of the contemporary conditions of women's fashion in China. This section seeks to foreground a set of different aspirations and behaviors, which in turn presents various possibilities for the development of new cultural identities. This brief account of how women in contemporary China engage with fashion (which will be expanded on in the subsequent chapters) is then contextualized further with reference to the complexities of the 'fashion system'. This term is initially to reference the work of Roland Barthes, from his famous text *The Fashion System* (1967). An important philosophical contribution is his structuralist reading of fashion, as an 'arbitrary' system of meaning making, but which as a network of meanings can become significant for normalizing ideas and aspirations. The structuralist reading is evoked as an underlying approach to this thesis, but is modified in two important ways. The section provides a wider reading of 'system', adding, for example, how the complexities of globalization and new technologies play an important role in the defining and circulation of fashion in contemporary China. Added to which, in the final section, which opens with an account of the concept of hybridity (which emerges as a dominant idea within debates of globalized fashion), the chapter introduces the 'neutral' as a key critical term. This picks up on Barthes' own use of the term, both in *The Fashion System* (where he refers to fashion as a 'fake' lexicon) and in his later work, specifically his late lecture course, *The Neutral* (2005). However, explicit reference is also made to traditional Chinese philosophical doctrines, which can be said to still intersect with contemporary everyday life in China. Together, this reading of the neutral is presented as an alternative means of reading hybridity in ways that break with hierarchical ideas of host and guest, and the broader binaries of East/West, local/global, and modern/traditional. This, then, seeks to establish the underlying theoretical context for the thesis as a whole.

## Altermodern China

To understand Chinese women and fashion in China, it is pertinent to first identify underlying characteristics of the country. China, officially known as the People's Republic of China (PRC), is a unitary sovereign state with the world's largest population, which currently stands at 1.4 billion people (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). The magnitude of the number is even more impressive when compared to the overall global population that is approximately 7.6 billion people. In other words, China represents 20% of the global population, which means 1/5 of this world is a resident of China (Statista, 2018). Despite this massive number, however, the annual growth rate of the Chinese population declined drastically over the last decades, moving from almost 2% in 1960 to the current rate of 0.43%. This is expected to further decrease over the next years reaching in 2035 a negative rate, typical of most OECD countries (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018; Cristina 2018). Recognized as a global 'super-power', the country has a relatively small youth population. This is partially due to China's one-child policy, which was an controversial population control program that came into effect in 1979 and only phased out in 2017 (China Daily, 2017). Thus, at the time of, since breaking with the one-child policy, the family unit can now expand, which, despite predictions for negative growth by 2035, means the Chinese population has the potential to boom in the next decades, so expanding its youth population, which in turn offers a greater potential market for fashion brands. Also pertinent is not just the size of the China's population within the bounds of its own country, but also the spread of the Chinese population around the world, whether as migrants or simply as tourists. It is evident, for example, that in the high-end shopping mall or luxury brand shops in London or Paris, there is usually now at least one seller who can speak Mandarin, ready to then meet and assist Chinese customers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The official language of China is Mandarin. There are various ethnicities that have populated the country. The ethic group of Han composes about 91.6% of entire Chinese population; the rest of the population consists, nonetheless of another 55 ethnic groups (Chen, 2017; Cristina 2018). Mandarin becomes the official language of the whole People's Republic of China only after the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chen, 2017). It is worth noting, the majority group of the Chinese population is over 50, a group who typically do not speak English.

In addition to these measures of China's scale and wealth, it is also important to acknowledge its long history. Chinese culture, as accumulated over thousands years, is recognized for its depth, vibrancy and complexity. It is a legacy that continues to inform the country's society and customs, despite China now undergoing rapid modernization (which of course includes a growing adoption and adaptation of westernized ideas and styles). The early civilization of China dates back to the Xia Dynasty, which lasted from 2100 BC to 1600 BC. From that period, the history of China is characterized by the alternation of several dynasties, but the most important was the Han Dynasty, whose reign started in 202 BC and lasted for more than 4 centuries. This period is regarded as the golden age of Chinese history, especially in art, religion, politics, and technology but also in the economic sphere. One of the major achievements of the Han dynasty was the opening of the 'Silk Road', which dramatically increased the trade and economic prosperity of the empire and led to cultural exchange with Western countries (Donda, 2014, Cristina 2018). Today, under the slogan of 'One Belt One Road'<sup>3</sup>, the 'Silk Road' is being re-imagined and updated (the word 'belt' being a notable reference to technical modernization). It forms a major part of the country's economic strategy, to re-build and re-position its *global* economic role. Within which, the role and significance of fashion and design more broadly cannot be underestimated.

It is also worth pointing out a specific historical period that was so defining of China as a communist country. A group of revolutionaries in southern China led a successful revolt against the Qing Dynasty in 1911, which ended the country's last feudal system. As will be discussed at length in Chapter 4, the cheongsam originated from the Qing period (1636-1912), regarded then as neutral/unisex clothing. Its re-emergence as elegant wear in contemporary China is inevitably imbued with this

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<sup>3</sup> The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road or The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a development strategy proposed to focus on connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries, primarily the PRC (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One\\_Belt\\_One\\_Road\\_Initiative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Belt_One_Road_Initiative)). This contemporary initiative evokes the Silk Road as an ancient network of trade routes that connected the East and West. It was central to cultural interaction between them for centuries. The Silk Road refers to both the terrestrial and the maritime routes connecting Asia with the Middle East and southern Europe. The Silk Road derives its name from the lucrative trade in silk carried out along its length, beginning in the Han dynasty (207 BCE–220 CE). Trade on the Silk Road played a significant role in the development of the civilizations of China, opening long-distance political and economic relations between the civilizations. (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk\\_Road](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk_Road)).

history, and yet interestingly becomes a distinctly feminine form of clothing. The revolution that broke the Qing Dynasty led to its own very distinctive ‘fashion’ (discussed in details in Chapter 2). This revolution is known as Xinhai revolution and marks a significant event in Chinese history, being the foundation of today’s Republic of China (Chen, 2017). In 1911-1949, the republican period was characterized by the antagonism between the nationalist Kuomintang of China’ (KMT)<sup>4</sup>, the governing party, and the Communist Party of China (CPC), the opposition group. It was an unstable political climate that exploded in 1949 with the Civil War, at the end of which the National government were defeated and forced to retreat to Taiwan (the KMT taking effective control of Taiwan).

By October 1949 the PRC were left in control of Mainland China, under the enigmatic leadership of Mao Zedong. In Mao’s era, women’s clothing is *just a piece of clothing*. This is non-fashion, labelled as the ‘black-grey-blue period’, in which both men and women wore the same ‘political neutral uniform’. This historical period is characterised by the hero worship of Mao, which we can read from the ‘grey and blue’ female clothing. After the death of Mao in 1976, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping between 1978 and 1997, China makes a marked transition from a planned economy to a mixed economy with an increasingly open market or market-oriented economy. During this time, Deng Xiaoping announced the official launch of the ‘Four Modernizations’ programme, which saw the beginning of a vast range of reforms relating to agriculture, defence, industry and technology. The programme increased the role of market mechanisms in the country and reduced the government control over the Chinese economy (Lu, 2012,). It is key time in which greater acceptance is made of western ideology and advanced technology, which in turn, as will be traced subsequently, has a direct progressive impact on Chinese women’s fashion.

The relatively rapid growth of the Chinese economy over the last four decades has been in contrast to wider international economic trends, certainly against the

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<sup>4</sup> The Kuomintang of China’ KMT; often translated as the Nationalist Party of China is a major political party in the Republic China on Taiwan, based in Taipei and is currently the opposition political party in the Legislative Yuan. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuomintang>

growth patterns of the West. Of course, while China has relied on economic growth for its development, the negative impact on resources and then environment has been well documented. The generation of wealth and a growing middle class comes at a 'cost', which gradually raises wider ethical concerns, not least for those benefiting from the expansion of a consumer market. Moreover, certain sectors of society were not sufficiently benefiting from the economic development as proven by the widening gap between those living in urban and rural areas. Under the government of Hu Jintao<sup>5</sup> (2002-2012), the PRC began to implement policies to address issues of the equitable distribution of resources. As part of which, more than 40 million farmers were displaced from their land, typically for economic development. For the vast majority of PRC's population, however, living standards have improved substantially and freedoms increased, even if the control of the Communist Party remains tight (Donda, 2014, Cristina 2018).

The politics of China takes place within a framework of a semi-presidential socialist republic, run by a single party, the previously mentioned Communist Party. State power within the PRC is exercised through this political group, the Central people's government and their provincial and local representation (Donda, 2014). The current President, Xi Jinping<sup>6</sup>, took power in March 2013. Since then, Xi has introduced several measures to enforce party discipline and to ensure internal unity. He has tightened restrictions over civil society and ideological discourse, and significantly has supported Chinese traditional cultures with the view to their internationalization. He seeks to expand China's Eurasian influence through the launch of the aforementioned One Belt One Road Initiative (China Daily, 2017). Xi Jinping's tenure of President has proven successful. Indeed, regarded the rising star of Chinese politics, he has even changed a ruling to allow him to remain in power beyond 5

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<sup>5</sup> Hu Jintao, born 21 December 1942' is a Chinese politician who was the paramount leader of China from 2002 to 2012. He held the offices of General Secretary of the Communist Party from 2002 to 2012, President of the People's Republic from 2003 to 2012 and Chairman of the Central Military Commission from 2004 to 2012. He was a member of the Politburo Standing Committee; China's *de facto* top decision-making body, from 1992 to 2012. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hu\\_Jintao](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hu_Jintao)

<sup>6</sup> Xi Jinping , born 15 June 1953) is a Chinese politician currently serving as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xi\\_Jinping](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xi_Jinping)

years (a time limited period that had been established after Mao's death to mitigate against future 'cults' of leadership). During recent decades, the Chinese economy has experienced an astonishing and sharp growth, which projects the country to become the world's largest economy by purchasing power parity (PPP) and second by nominal GDP (International Monetary Fund, 2018). For comparison of GDP and PPP between China and United States see Figure 1.1.

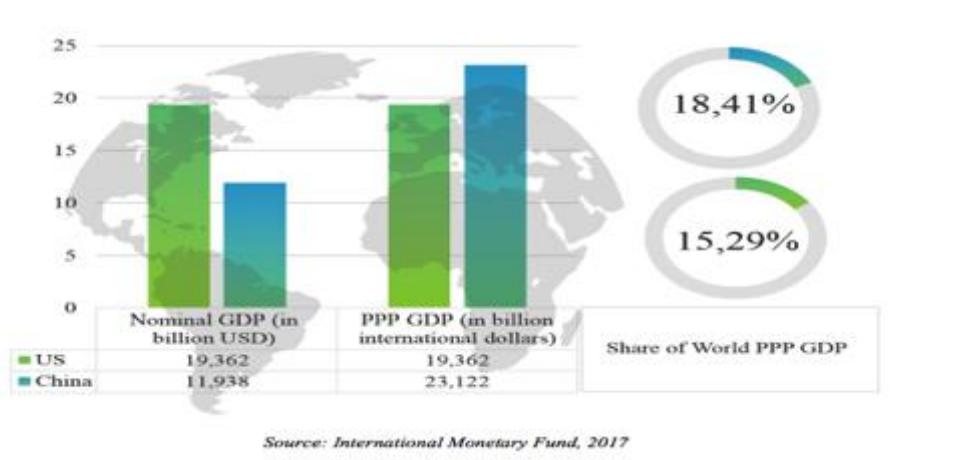


Figure 1.1: GDP between China and United States  
Source: International Monetary Fund, 2018

Moreover, up until 2015, China was the world's fastest-growing economy, with average growth rates of 9.9% over the last 30 years (McKinsey & Co., 2018). Since the introduction of the economic reforms in 1978, China has become the world's manufacturing hub, with the secondary sector representing the largest share of GDP. However, in recent years under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China's modernization has propelled the tertiary sector, which, in 2013, became the largest category of GDP with a current share of 52.6%, with the secondary sector still accounting for the 39.9% of the country's total output. Meanwhile, the primary sector's value in GDP has contracted dramatically since the country opened to the world, now representing just 8.8% of the country's GDP (China Daily, 2017).

It is acknowledged that the annual per capita income in Chinese urban areas has seen significant rise over the last decades. Between 1995 and 2013, it increased dramatically from £500 to £3000. However, being an emerging economy, China faces

a large number of developmental challenges. One of the most pressing issues remains income inequality, especially the disparity between the country's urban and rural areas. In 2013, the annual per capital disposable income of urban households was nearly three times that in rural areas (International Monetary Fund, 2017; Cristina 2018). Aside from the urban/rural inequalities, a large income gap still exists between eastern coastal provinces and western or central parts of the country. In economically advanced coastal cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai, the average per capita annual income is almost twice the average income of most cities in central and western regions of China. In the context of this thesis, these economic factors impact on how individuals are able to engage with fashion, and that inevitably includes a great deal of variety. Nonetheless, the overriding trend – understood both nationally and internationally – is of growing wealth and the expansion of markets. Indeed, with rising disposable incomes and growing urbanization, there has been a substantial increase in demand for apparel. Indeed, Chinese fashion consumption is among the most important sectors, accounting for almost 30% of world sales (McKinsey & Co., 2018). In 2017, the Chinese fashion market in China was worth about RMB 700 billion. By 2020, it is accepted it could be worth in access of RMB 1.5 trillion (McKinsey & Co., 2018). With respect to global brand success in China, Chinese women's demand for fashion and accessories is expected to continue to expand and become increasing sophisticated.

The recent successive decades of globalized fashion in China, powered by changes in consumer behavior, is notable from an exponential growth in fashion companies taking up presence in the country. In demographic terms, younger generations started to spend more on clothes and apparel, mostly young women living in first tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Shenzhen. Not only is there a growing supply of fashion brands etc., but also the same economic developments have led to an increase in social occasions and events that demand increased engagement with fashion purchasing (Rovai, 2018). In short, the Chinese consumer needs more fashionable clothes suitable for a wider range of different situations. For firms, this transformation has meant a chance to influence and shape customer preferences (Doctoriff, 2012).

The full range of western brands is not fully represented in China, which means these brands retain a certain cachet. In turn these brands feed the desires and aspirations of Chinese female consumers, who are moving towards a lifestyle where there are more special occasions demanding formal, fashionable outfits. As is the case elsewhere, fashion plays a social role, connecting with individual life goals and social mobilities. A notable market segment is women between the ages of 20-40 who can be shown to spend the highest proportion of income on clothing. Significantly, these young wealthy female customers remain captive to foreign luxury brands. As one designer, Liang Mingyu, founder of a local brand *Mingyu*, remarks:

Although most of our consumers seem to becoming increasingly fashion-conscious and differentiated, the native brands are not quite leading the way for China's consumers, especially these generations post 1980s, who are influenced by western culture and fashion shows (Liang, 2018).

It is fair to say, young Chinese designers, increasingly trained in Europe, tend to pay more attention to Western styles, rather than identifiable styles for Chinese women. Nonetheless, in recent years the fashion industry in China continues to develop an increasingly local identity, with big international fashion players launching collections specifically devised for the Chinese market, and with new local brands starting to emerge with a new generation of designers, post 1980s who have studied fashion design in the West. As such, the current status of China's fashion industry nationally and internationally brings into view a key critical reading for this thesis regards China's modernity. During China's rapid economic development and periods of conflicting political change, the struggle between traditional and modern appeal becomes evident. So, in a sartorial way, questions emerge as to how to handle or balance seemingly incompatible groups, how, for example, to balance between the forces of globalization or localization; forces which suggest two-contradictory/interdependent processes operating simultaneously (Smith, 2008). On the one hand, global fashion brands are spreading worldwide; on the other hand, the Chinese state and local governments, as well as some small communities,

continue efforts to maintain particular cultural, societal customs and beliefs. Here the concept of 'alter-modernism' (and the associated term 'hybridity', discussed towards the end of this chapter) becomes pertinent in thinking critically about different temporalities and trends within fashion, as they scale according to local, national and international frames. Local productions, for example, can incorporate elements from outside sources, such as international fashion culture, which then allows for the perception of the local in the context of the global, and vice versa.

Artists and designers are looking for a new modernity that would be based on translation: what matters today is to translate the cultural values of cultural groups and to connect them to the world network. This reloading process of modernism according to the 21<sup>st</sup> century issues could be called alter-modernism, a movement connected to the colonization of cultures and the fight for autonomy, but also the possibility of producing singularities in a more and more standardized world. (Bourriaud, 2005, Art association of Australia & New Zealand Conference)

Alter-modernism, proposed by Bourriaud, is defined as an attempt at contextualizing art made in the context of globalization as a reaction against standardization and commercialism (Archived 2008). The term is alert to the prior dominance of western culture, suggesting those pre-existing accounts are perhaps no longer the model on which to relate to developing countries. One of the critical ideas bound up in the phrase 'alter-modernism' is the idea of *alternative* modernisms, which is both to assert the idea that processes of modernisation occur at different times and speeds around the world and that these different modernisms can appeal to quite different aims and desires. In brief, it is not sufficient to think of China's development of its fashion industry as simply a later echo of developments in Europe. Instead, as this thesis seeks to show, we need to get in amongst the actual histories, objects and effects of fashion making and consumption in China to properly understand what is going on and where its (alternative) futures might lead. This requires a series of layered readings of context, objects and engagements – which in this case is explored specifically according to women's fashion in contemporary China.

As part of understanding China's altermodernity, we need to emphasize the co-existence and fusion of styles, drawn through the process of the globalization, and highlight the contextualized translations relating to art and culture in different backgrounds. This includes a reading of China as itself a series of alternative modernisms (as suggestive with the above, albeit brief account of China's economic and political modernization). The altermodern criticizes previous accounts of modernism, as skewed, more or less, in terms of singular cultural-hegemonic forces. China, of course, has never been colonialized in the full sense of the term. It can, however, be seen to be increasingly shaped through Western cultural imperialism, through the deepening engagement with Western products, technologies and customs (Wu, 2007; Zhang, 2018; etc.). The typical reading then would be of cultural space that is increasing defined by imitation (and a sacrificing of traditions) and bound to monopolies of new material culture. However, this is not the case of modern China. There are obvious examples of Western hegemonic forces. The Apple iPhone is famously 'designed in California', while made in China, and indeed the 'made in China' tag is ubiquitous around the world. But there is equally the emergence of new, powerful market players indigenous to China, for example, Taobao and WeChat (which are discussed in a later section). China has many sides, many alternative viewpoints, from which we need to situate our reading of contemporary consumer circumstances. And, as the preceding accounts suggests, the trend is for China to only play a greater role in both serving and influencing future demands.

It is worth noting, the phenomenon of inter-influencing that comes of 'altermodernity', which internally to China relates as much to the relationships between different ethnic-groups, allows for a re-consideration of both modernism and tradition. For contemporary China, there is seemingly a 'renaissance' of tradition (as examined in Chapter 4). A notable example is the re-emergence of the cheongsam as a highly fashionable garment for women. Similarly, the Mao suit for men has been popularized through its re-making and re-modeling. The most significant sign of cultural renaissance is that traditional ink painting and calligraphy are emphasized in primary schools. In these cases, the term 'alter-modernism' draws attention to forces of 'translation' in art and design, regarding how symbols of culture can be re-purposed to reflect, for example, counter ideas of

'anti-globalization' or 'post-colonization', and calls on respecting a certain 'cultural-equality' in the modern inter-cultural world. The term 'alter-modern' becomes useful in explaining, or even better at describing how we might exist (or seek to exist) in the new context of both global and local forces. For the purposes of this thesis, in looking to an *altermodern China*, there is perhaps the hint of a third way for understanding Chinese women's fashion. As discussed towards the end of this chapter, this is to consider a shift in perspective away from thinking about hybridity (being a typical reading of global, contemporary tends) toward something of a 'neutral style' of fashion – or rather a neutral *reading* (and 'writing') of fashion (rather than to suggest of a specific form of 'neutral fashion'). The point to be made is that we can place both the local and global, the traditional and the modern, within a less hierarchical system or model of understanding, which arguably the Chinese context allows for quite readily, due to how it combines its own sense of a long, rich history and rapid, at times seemingly insatiable, drive towards the new.

## **Female Fashion: Attitudes in Contemporary China**

After China opened its economy to world trade in the 1980s, the success of international markets and the apparel trade has not only contributed significantly to China's modernization and globalization, but also helped re-invigorate Chinese fashion industries and cultural protection. The influx of global fashion and brands has enabled women through sartorial means to *re-fashion* female identities. As Diana Crane (2000: 1) writes: 'Clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity'. By examining clothing choices, she adds, we can consider 'how people interpret a specific form of culture for their own purpose, one that includes strong norms about appropriate appearances at a particular point in time as well as an extraordinarily rich variety of alternatives'. Thus, clothing can be taken to be 'one of the most visible markers of social status and gender and therefore useful in maintaining or subverting symbolic boundaries' (Crane, 2000: 1).

One specific choice that women can make in their clothing is between traditional and modern styles (or indeed, their combination). For China's government, the west-east dynamic of cultural inter-change and interaction has been viewed to increase national self-consciousness and a desire for the recognition of Chinese culture and fashion design on the world (Finnane, 2005). Inevitably, the concern is over the loss or dilution of Chinese cultural identity. Immediately, then, it can be seen that choices women might make over the selection of foreign fashion styles connects directly with questions of nationalism. In China, the state plays a leading role in *both* economic and cultural administration, which impacts on the diversification of clothing styles (Finnane, 2005). The government, for example, can be interventionist, directing and facilitating Chinese fashion industry development, as well as affecting individual consumers (Sun, 2014; Zhao, 2013; Liu, 2017). For example, the local fashion companies, promoting Chinese culture, can apply for funding from the Cultural Minister, so aiding the protection of intangible cultural heritage. On the one hand, the government has significantly improved opportunities for local fashion brands to compete with global fashion brands; on the other hand, however, the government limits fashion designers' creativities and innovations due to the close integration of national recognition (Wu, 2015; Zhao, 2013, Liu, 2017). A very good example is one of the most famous designers, Wu Haiyan (a professor of fashion design in China Academy of Fine Arts), who educates and influences lots of art students, and tends to uphold Chinese fashion in traditional ways. Nonetheless, Wu Haiyan presents her works as a combination of western and national culture. Admittedly, in amongst the hybridity stemming from a globalized world, cultural interchange and global interaction is un-balanced. Indeed, cultural heritage is not easy to be recognized as a dominant trend in the global fashion system (Liu, 2017).

In taking up Crane's (2012) observation that dress is a visible marker of social status and gender, combined with the fact that China is known to be a politics-oriented country (i.e. that all matters of economics, culture, education, and even fashion are shaped through a single political system), it is inevitable that women's sartorial choices typically *reflect* underlying social-political-cultural constructs in China.

Though in more liberated countries, women's dress can be understood temporally and spatially as representative of a specific doctrine. To put it rather simply, to understand female clothing in China, is to understand China on some level. There are strong alignments, for example, between understandings of social structure, nationalism, cultural heritage and female costume (both past and present). Chinese female clothing reflects female identity as embedded in a nationalist context of contemporary China. Dress has thus been metaphorical as well as indicative of both women's social position historically and within the increasingly complex contemporary context of China and its nationalism. As noted above, under the present state leadership of President Xi, there has been strong renewal of the national narrative. This calls on historical, cultural inspirations of the past (not least the grand narrative of the Silk Road) to inspire and motivate Chinese people to continue to work towards China's modernization and globalization (Liu, 2007). Akin to the enigmatic, but no less influential notion of the American Dream, there is arguably a 'Chinese Dream'. This is not based on the same capitalist notions of both a free economy and a free political system, but nonetheless, sees development as based upon ideas of wealth generation and a capacity for consumption. It is at this level we can begin to understand the new *uniformities* of Chinese fashion. There is an opening up of styles and possibilities, but equally there remains a strong socio-political framing that shapes attitudes and requirements. For Chinese women, 'ethnic clothing' (i.e. clothing that is strongly associated with China and regions within the country, as well as specific techniques of making) offers a symbol of identity and a basic means of communication. As a form of cultural conformity it operates as a social-political 'uniform'. Thus, through the combination of increasing economic success and a dominant national self-consciousness, Chinese women have seemingly increased their desire for a national dress, to represent a home spirit and a female identity that is based upon elegance. In turn this sits alongside increasing confidence in encountering the West (Liu, 2017).

For some insight into the behaviors and views of this audience, reference can be made to an exploratory study conducted by Southwest University of China in 2017,

which surveyed over 400 Chinese women via questionnaire.<sup>7</sup> In seeking to comprehend Chinese women's clothing attitudes specific to ethnic identity, this survey included measures to assess Chinese women's cultural pride and ethnic self-identification. The construct of cultural pride was measured based on various themes, relating to how Chinese women considered heritage/traditional dress and culture as helpful or expressive of women's status in China; how western culture influences or challenges traditional feminine concepts; and how the global/local fashions effect on female identity in China. Participants were asked to assess the social opportunities that relate to wearing national apparel (as with casual wear or specific events, celebrities, festivals, weddings, holidays abroad, etc.). The survey cannot be considered systematic or fully representational, however the number of respondents is not insignificant and perhaps allows us to extrapolate some basic ideas and attitudes. The survey was conducted online with participants being invited by email. From a target of 660 recipients, 437 responses were completed (a response rate of 66%). All participants were female, between the ages of 20-60, with 40% in the age range of 20-30, and 60% in the age of 30-60. More than half of the respondents stated their annual household income as between £50k—£100k, 20% stated between £10k-30k, and 10% less than £10k. The majority of participants held a BA degree, and 20% a postgraduate degree. The following table presents some of the key results.

Table 1: quantitative research models

	Yes	Very likely	Likely	No
Cultural background plays most important in life	38.3%	44.34%	22.23%	12%
Very much attached to native culture	27%	39.4%	9.23%	3.34%
Very proud of ethnic background	26.22%	73.43%	2.45%	0
Like traditional dress because the leaders and celebrities wear it	12.29%	39.21%	32.11%	26%

<sup>7</sup> This survey is investigation conducted by third-year students, through a course is called Marketing Investigation of the Fashion Trend of Costume Market, which explored the influences from traditional culture, utilitarian, functionality, and self-expression as traditional/cultural identity.

Distance to myself from my ethnic identity	13.34%	9.22%	58.25%	26.5%
Wear Cheongsam or Han-clothing styles in special occasions	26.35%	28.39%	23.2%	15%
Influence by western culture and adore global brands	36.28%	28.98%	18.99%	0
Like both western—luxury clothing and cheongsams	37.89%	53.22%	3.33%	3.22%
Share my wearing experience of traditional clothing to friends and families	26.88%	51.23%	12.96%	5%
Only like delicate-ordered cheongsam	15.5%	18.53%	46.23%	6.8%
I get western-education and I only like western clothing	13.92%	38.35%	28.89%	16.8%

Overall, from the previous table, this survey finds that higher levels of income and education (notably educated within China) correlate to greater interest in ethnic identity and cultural heritage. While, the more influenced by western culture (including receiving a degree from abroad) the more likely there is interest in global brands. Of course, purchase price is also a key factor. It can be identified that cultural pride reinforcement and cultural pride-related variables, when measured through knowledge and educational backgrounds, have a direct influence on Chinese women. Cultural pride reinforcement and cultural pride variables are positively related to young women studying abroad, who also like western culture.

Anxieties over cultural assimilation (which means one culture being absorbed by another culture) are common in all situations in which traditional designs interact with wider globalizing forces. China is known as one of the ancient civilizations, with thousands years of tradition and an inevitably rich history of cultural accumulations. As noted above, there is a degree of top-down control or guidance over the

production and retailing fashion goods. That is to say, in China, both in the past, and even now, the government plays a role in the management of the Chinese fashion textile industry, including concept guidance, women's purchase intention, and manufacturing. However, equally, there is a demand-led aspect, in which, between the narratives of globalization and cultural pride, female purchasing intentions have shown increasing interest in traditional Chinese dress. As a result, in order to meet Chinese women's requirements, some contemporary Chinese local fashion designers and global brands have sought to work with Chinese-specific characteristics and traditional clothing. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, the Cheongsam is widely used in Chinese weddings and celebrations. It has also been used, at least symbolically, at international events too.

## Fashion systems

Having put into context the overarching conditions of contemporary Chinese fashion, and having identified macro economic and political factors, and some suggestion of contemporary female attitudes, it is necessary to turn to ways of reading and situating the phenomena under consideration. This section, then, seeks to place fashion within an interrelated set of 'systems', which is both to consider some methodological or interpretative principles, but also to further relay the contemporary conditions or *sites* of fashion and its meaning for women in present day China.

Roland Barthes (1983) gives perhaps the most well known account of the 'language' of fashion in his book-length study, *The Fashion System* (1983). It is exemplary for its *structuralist* analysis of consumer culture. At the time of writing, in the early 1960s, Barthes was already well regarded for his account of semiology, particularly its application to popular culture (noted, for example by his book *Mythologies* (1957) as well as *Elements of Semiology* (1964)). Although *The Fashion System* is now an old study, and is situated in a very different time period (of the late 1950s and early 1960s), a period when the fashion industry was certainly very different to how it is

now, it retains some methodological pertinence for this thesis. Drawing upon a reading of linguistic structuralism, Barthes shows the discourse that surrounds fashion to be 'structural' - i.e. that fashion, specifically the interchange of garments, in terms of colors, length, and combinations etc., has (like language itself) *no absolute meaning*. Instead it is how fashions are combined and *structured* (according to a system or set of choices) that meaning is made, changed and/or sustained.

In leading to a reading of clothing that operates as both a form of 'language' and 'speech', or in other words a system (as in grammar) and its performance, Barthes identifies three interrelated levels or structures:

There are for any particular object (a dress, a tailored suit, a belt) three different structures, one technological, another iconic, the third verbal. These three structures do not have the same circulation pattern. The technological structure appears as a mother tongue of which the real garments derived from it are only instances of "speech". The two other structures (iconic verbal) are also languages. But if we believe fashion magazines, which always claim to discuss a primary real garment, these are derived languages, translated from the mother tongue; they intervene as circulation relays between this mother tongue and its instances of speech. (Barthes, 1983: 5)

From this account we find the circulation of fashion relies in large part on activities of transformation between elements and structures, from one code to another code. Crucially there is no fixed starting point, but rather each reinforces the other, or rather one can carry the other. As Barthes presents in *Mythologies*, we can consider different orders of signification. In an advertisement, for example, the 'innocent' denotation is the carrier of an underlying connotation. The one makes the other seem 'natural' or given. In his study of fashion, Barthes' three-part system is characterised as 'real', 'image' and 'language':

From the real to the image, from the real to language, and from the image to language...for the first translation, from the technological garment to the iconic garment, the principal shifter is the sewing pattern, whose design analytically reproduces the stages of the garment's manufacture; to which should be added the processes, graphic or photographic, indented to reveal

the technical substratum, of a look or an affect: accentuation of a movement, enlargement of a detail, angle of vision. For the second translation, from the technological garment to the written garment, the basic shifter is what might be called the sewing program or formula: it is generally a text quite apart from the literature of Fashion; its goal is to outline not what is but what is going to be done; the sewing program, moreover, is not given in the same kind of writing as the fashion commentary; it contains almost no nouns or adjectives, but mostly verbs and measurements. (Barthes, 1983: 6)

The 'real' is defined by certain technical understandings of the making of clothing, but these designs are then taken up by a visual language of clothing, which is equally technological (through graphic and photographic means). Between these different levels language is quite different to the language we associate with the *description* of 'fashion'. Fashion is *made* of different levels of significance, but crucially, the notion of fashion applied to clothing is not necessarily definable. It cannot be pointed out in any direct, indexical sense. Barthes explains that the speech of fashion is a language to express these garments, but does not constitute an 'origin' of the fashion:

... We might be attempted to include within the basic shifter all fashion terms of clearly technological origin, and to consider them so many translators form the real to the spoken; but this would ignore the fact that the value of a word is not found in its origin but in its place in the language system; once these terms pass into a descriptive structure, they are simultaneously detached from the origin and their goal; in them the creative act is not perceptible, they no longer belong to the technological structure and we cannot consider them as shifters. (Barthes, 1983: 7)

Following Barthes, the 'origin' of the garment, the 'real', is detached from its goal or outcome *as fashion*. For example, the Chinese cheongsam (which is examined in detail in Chapter 4) is based on a specific technical design. It is also an object in fashion magazines or shows, through which it can deliver messages derived from original cheongsam and its adaptation. The photographed or videoed dress, no longer show us the patterns or design drawings or the nature of handmade buttons, but rather presents as 'language' of the garment that is based upon not the garment in itself, the garment with a system of its own significance. That is, the garment is

between things and words, rather it becomes itself a *system* of meanings and connections. In this respect, Barthes refers not just to the linguistic system but also the 'vestimentary' system (Barthes, 1983).

Evidently, the fashion industry is not merely about the clothes and aesthetics, but is rather intersected by various social and political narratives and discourse. The cheongsam, for example, has its significance altered through its association with the Chinese first lady, Peng Liyuan, who has become recognized as a female political model by wearing the postmodern cheongsam (see Chapter 4). She has frequently adopted a stylish Cheongsam-look that we can see from numerous fashion magazines covers and important runway shows in the Chinese fashion market. Of course, when worn by Peng Liyuan there is immediately an overtly political dimension, and arguably a nationalist one. She is photographed not simply in stylish outfits, as we might see from glossy magazines, but she is seen standing next to world leaders and other key political figures (figure 1.3). As a result the 'language' of the Cheongsam is carried in other ways, further developing its place within systems of signification. Again, as suggested through Barthes structuralist account, fashion can function as 'empty' signifier through which meanings can be carried. In doing so, such prominent figures can influence popular culture but also the fashion industry itself.



Figure 1.3: Mao's jacket and cheongsam on the political leaders on the APEC 2014.  
Source: [http://js.ifeng.com/travel/tips/detail\\_2014\\_11/12/3141142\\_0.shtml](http://js.ifeng.com/travel/tips/detail_2014_11/12/3141142_0.shtml)

Thus, in thinking through this so-called 'vestimentary' system, and as will be examined in the subsequent chapters, we can seek to better understand fashion and its meanings by working through its various iterations, combinations and also by showing how styles can be re-cited at different times and for different purposes. Indeed, this is the underlying approach to fashion undertaken by this thesis. It is a flexible system of meaning, but which has specific weightings, causing some meanings to be emphasised and sustained. Yet, there is no *essential* meaning that cannot be changed, or at least modified. Another good example is Mao's Yat-Sen Suit Jacket, which has been able to shift from its original explicitly political context to the consumer, postmodern context of the present-day fashion industry (as will be examined in Chapter 2). This piece of clothing is strongly associated with Mao's modernity. The sophisticated heritage of traditional clothing is interrupted in 1949 through Mao's policies. As Chairman of the Communist Party, he became associated with this now famous jacket with neutral colors and simple lines as a *symbol* of the proletariat. In thinking again of the underlying interest in the 'uniform', in the period of Mao's regime, clothes were seen just as uniforms, a situation that lasted until the 1980s, until China's Opening –up policy (Open to the world) proposed by chairman Deng Xiao Ping. Today, the Mao jacket is worn with much less frequency, but equally has been appropriated by high-end designers. It is no longer symbolic of the

proletariat, but rather is ironically symbolic. President Xi, Vlimir Putin and Barrack Obama seen together in Figure 1.3 are each dressed in such a suit, certainly without the same strong connotations of a proletariat 'look'. Perhaps the most striking example is Hilary Clinton, who wore a high-end designed Mao suit, all blue, during her presidential campaigning in 2016. The shift in gender in this case is another reminder of the flexibility of the legibility of fashions. None of these political figures can be associated with the older ideologies of the proletariat, and yet the 'look' of this suit undeniably retains something of its provenance. Both formerly and now in the present context, the suit is worn as a symbol of political *freedom*, yet with very different ways of understanding the concept. In Mao's period, freedom comes from being the same (from removing hierarchy, being free together), while in its present day iterations the suit displays a sense of freedom through individual style and wealth (Clinton, for example, looks striking, her 'own woman', in such a styled outfit and the standing collar). There was, however, a lot of 'bad' press surrounding Clinton's 'Mao Suit', which was read-off as masculine, and as an 'evil' dictator (The Washington Times- Thursday, Oct 20, 2016).



Figure 1.4: Hilary Clinton on Mao's jacket.

Source:

<https://www.inquisitr.com/4504848/hillary-clinton-doubts-legitimacy-trump-election-russian/>

To go beyond the *language* of fashion that preoccupied Barthes, it is necessary to pluralise his account, to consider a broader set of systems. The technological system he refers to pertain mainly to the production of clothing, but our contemporary

technological base has dramatically broadened both for the production and 'readership' or consumption of fashion. Indeed, the global fashion system is comprised of an ever more complex set of elements. In the specific context of China, there is the predominance of the tag line 'made in China' (but with shifting ideas of what it means to make *for* China); there is a sizeable industry of counterfeit fashion apparel, which foregrounds questions about authenticity and its meaning for individual identity; and there is a very different technological landscape in which we now engage with and circulate ideas about fashion, notably for example with the massive online retailers such as Amazon and Taobao (in China) and social media, specifically the rapid growth of WeChat in China. These various elements are contemporary 'systems' of fashion, or at least alter the reach and dynamics of the early fashion system that Barthes describes. In the international world of fashion, the contemporary apparel *system* is truly global. Beyond the linguistic analysis of Barthes, our present day system or systems presents new complexity and shifting patterns, even being a source of confusion that can be used to mean either content or process, which involves virtually all aspects of contemporary life (Nystrom, 1928: 4).

In addition to the Barthes' structuralist account, we also need to remember that fashion is generally always structured through technical and economic management systems. It is a temporal system that by its very definition always needs to update, to be fashionable. Globalised fashions are defined through popular trends, as ongoing practices in clothing, footwear and accessories, all of which involves transformation and innovation, with respect to both time and place. There are fashions in all areas of cultural production. The simultaneous insertion of many new styles, together with aspects of production and the selection made by innovative customers, conceivably determines fashion trends based on specific lags of time (Mazel & Stiebel, 2015). Fashion is inevitably a complex social phenomenon involving often conflicting motives, such as creating an individual identity, being part of a group, emulating fashion leaders and rebelling against or resisting conformity (Lipovetsky, 1994).



Figure 1.5: global fashion brands hierarchy

Source: from the book of Casagrande, *Digital marketing strategies in the china fashion market: the diesel brand case study*, 2018.

Casagrande (2018) investigates the up-to-date fashion market as a hierarchy of fashion brands and presents a fashion pyramid. The top tier brands are a minority, but nonetheless occupy a privileged position. We can see all are the biggest selling international fashion brands, including, CHANEL, ARMANI, GUCCI, HM, ZARA. This diagram suggests of top-down and trickle-up forces at play, so that mass-market products can lead to modifications of higher end brands, and of course the top brands are quickly echoed further down the chain. A key distinguishing feature of the five market segments is price and volume. However, in addition to this vertical structure, it is important to consider the different geographic and cultural contexts. When we talk about existing global fashion markets and prominent fashion weeks, we typically refer to New York, London, Paris and Milan. These capitals of fashion are highly influential for the whole world. The fashion system is global, but it is also western-centric. Yet, in China there are other fashion shows and nodal points gaining in importance and popularity as a consequence of the increasing distribution of fashion and luxury labels. These include the Beijing and Shanghai fashion weeks. The most important China Fashion week, in Beijing, is an international fashion event established in 1997. It hosts professional contests, exhibitions, and fashion forums, which showcase fashion collections from various designers. To date worldwide,

nearly a 1000 fashion shows have been held, with 3200 designers having contributed from countries such as Japan, Korea, France, Italy, USA, etc. (Casagrande (2018).

In terms of the global fashion system, China is the biggest emerging market in the world, the pace of growth of emerging markets, particularly China, has taken on particular significance at the expense of traditional players in the more developed countries. The strong growth of the global fashion system has been driven for the first time by more than half of the profits originating from areas outside Europe and North America, which, until recently, have always represented the traditional and most influential markets for the global fashion industry. Comparing the fashion market growth of emerging countries to developed countries, the growth rate between 2015 and 2016 show that the highest-growth countries were India and United Arab Emirates, due to the downturn of China in that period. However, they were still far behind in actual size compared to China and the United States (Casagrande, 2018).

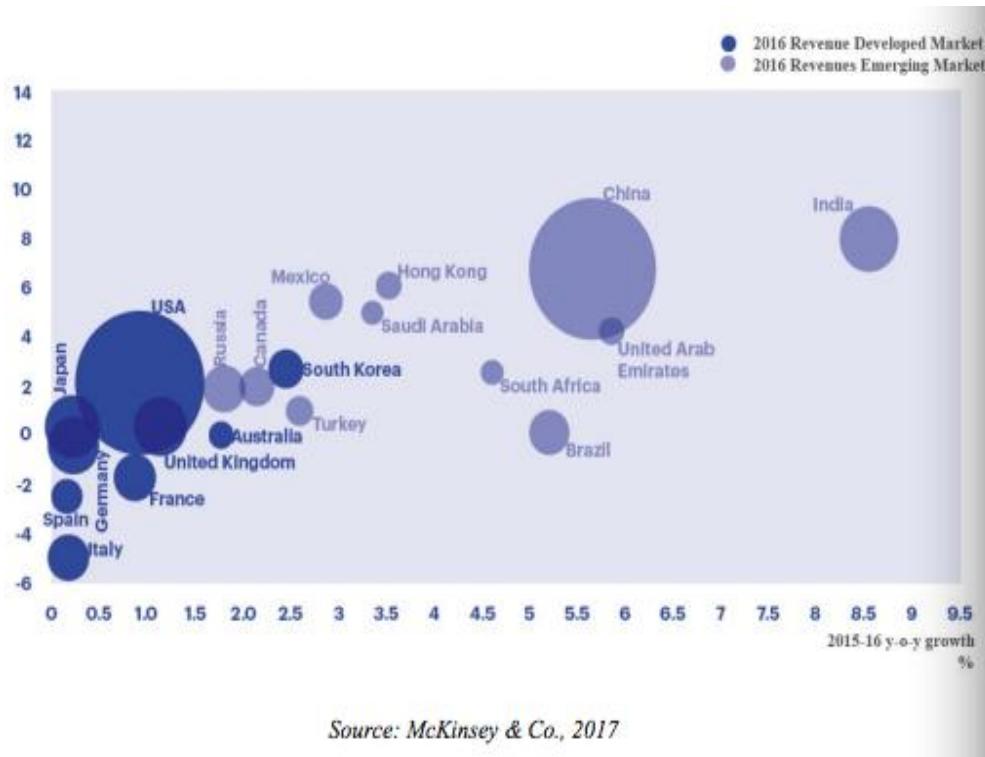


Figure 1.6: fashion market 2015-16 growth difference

Source: from the book of Casagrande, *Digital marketing strategies in the china fashion market: the diesel brand case study*, 2018.

According to recent McKinsey statistics (2018), and investigated by Casagrande (2018), the worldwide fashion industry is expected to increase. However, this growth is not spread evenly across all regions, actually it is primarily driven by emerging countries into the East and South. Emerging countries across APAC, Europe and Latin America are forecasted as particularly strong growth markets in 2018, with growth rates estimated to range between 5% and 7.5% (Boston Consulting Group & Global Fashion Agenda, 2017; Casagrande, 2018). Meanwhile, 'the economic outlook in a mature Europe is relatively steady, and the fashion industry sales growth is likewise expected to remain at the unassertive but steady 2 to 3%' (Casagrande, 2018: 56). Crucially, China, the Middle East, and Latin America are the markets that will be the main drivers of the fashion industry's growth in the coming years, and China is the market with most potential for the future (Deloitte, 2017, Cristina 2018). As part of this strong growth, we can begin to discern a shift in the identity and confidence of the Chinese fashion industry. Cheap labor costs have long been considered the main factor behind Chinese economic power, driving the country to the status of the 'world's factory'. However, the situation is changing. Since 2011, the wage of Chinese laborers has significantly increased and the central role of China in global manufacturing is at risk. Cheap labor is no longer the USP of China (Casagrande, 2018). The apparel industry has been strongly affected by this inclination, with the result that several fashion companies have closed. China's traditional competitive advantage based on low labor cost is progressively vanishing, but that equally suggests of new opportunities, particularly from the rise of purchasing power and relative size of the middle class demographic. The Chinese government seeks to strengthen the country through talents all over of the world, for investing in technological innovation, specialization and quality upgrades in order to help its manufacturing sector to remain globally competitive (Wang, 2010). This characterizes the country's broader economic strategy to move to higher skilled, higher paid work. During the time of writing this thesis China took the move to stop importing and sorting Europe's waste, including for example the recycling of plastic. This poses a problem for the West, which had come to rely on China for managing huge qualities of waste. In the context of Xi's vision of 'One Belt, One Road', the aim is to trade in

new technologies, high-end services and also take more of a lead in areas of design and innovation. Potentially, this marks a key shift in the perception of China as a manufacturing country. The ‘Made in China’ tag has become ubiquitous, yet arguably there is a growing sense and need to understand what it means to be ‘made *for* China’. It is fair to say the interest of and gains made by international fashion companies within the context of the Chinese fashion market (having enjoyed the benefits of previously low-waged labor *and* strong market demand) has drastically increased over recent years, making China among the most important and strategic countries. But, importantly, as China grows to be one of the world’s largest fashion markets, international labels are exploring several strategies in order to engage local customers. Even as growth slows in Chinese luxury demands, the economies of scale are significant; there is a sizeable, sophisticated pool of luxury shoppers in China. Yet, nonetheless, brands need to take a new approach to keep the Chinese women interested (McKinsey & Company, 2017). As such, international fashion brand have begun to design products specifically conceived for the Chinese consumers particularly for Chinese women, and often decide to release their global collections first in China.

Alongside a maturing fashion industry there remains a parallel ‘system’ of counterfeit products. As the saying goes, if you want to be original, you should be ready to be copied (attributed to Coco Chanel, 1970). Indeed, the fashion industry is predicated on reproducibility. The above pyramid diagram is a case in point. The movements up and down the pyramid are essentially all about forms of copying and adaptation. This is endemic to the phenomenon of fashion at its core. Again, taking a structuralist perspective, there is no fundamental essence to fashion, only its continual iterations and exchange. Counterfeiting can be understood, in this respect, as an inevitable outcrop of the fashion *system*, which, as will be noted below, can also be seen to be echoed with new, social technologies. To get a sense of scale, in 2015, China’s official Xinhua news agency estimated that over RMB 300 billion in fakes were available on Alibaba’s e-commerce website Taobao (China’s equivalent to Amazon, both in size of operation and means of retailing). The problems of counterfeit products are quite serious due to fact that the counterfeiters’ products

and markets are increasingly sophisticated, exploiting procedural loopholes and continually seeking to invalidate legitimate patents and trademarks (The US-China Business Council, 2016). According to the 2017 Situation Report on Counterfeiting and Piracy, the copied market of fashion good cost brands 9.7% of their total sales every year (European Union Intellectual Property Office, 2017; Casagrande, 2018). The role of China in this trade is most significant. According to the 2016 Global Counterfeit Report of the US Chamber of Commerce, China is estimated to be the source for more than 70% of global counterfeiting, amounting to more than 285 billion USD every year. In the counterfeit products market, more than 40% of it regards fashion and luxury products, with a consequent enormous damage for international companies (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2016). It was very common to find these counterfeit goods in the central streets of the main Chinese cities, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen etc., but in recent years, China takes more cooperation with external companies including intellectual property rights protection, so the counterfeit products are gradually lessening. The platform Taobao, for example, was the main Chinese e-commerce platform to sell the counterfeit fashion goods (Casagrande, 2018). However, Alibaba (the parent company of Taobao) has become more cautious, and is now working against counterfeit goods, having begun to use sophisticated technology, including artificial intelligence, to detect counterfeit products. In 2017 the system allowed the Chinese company to block more than 380 million suspect listings (The New York Times, 2017). Alibaba is trying to change the perception of its e-commerce platform. But the counterfeit products still change a bit looking as we can see the figure below, the Chanel-like bags without Chanel logo are still existed in China.

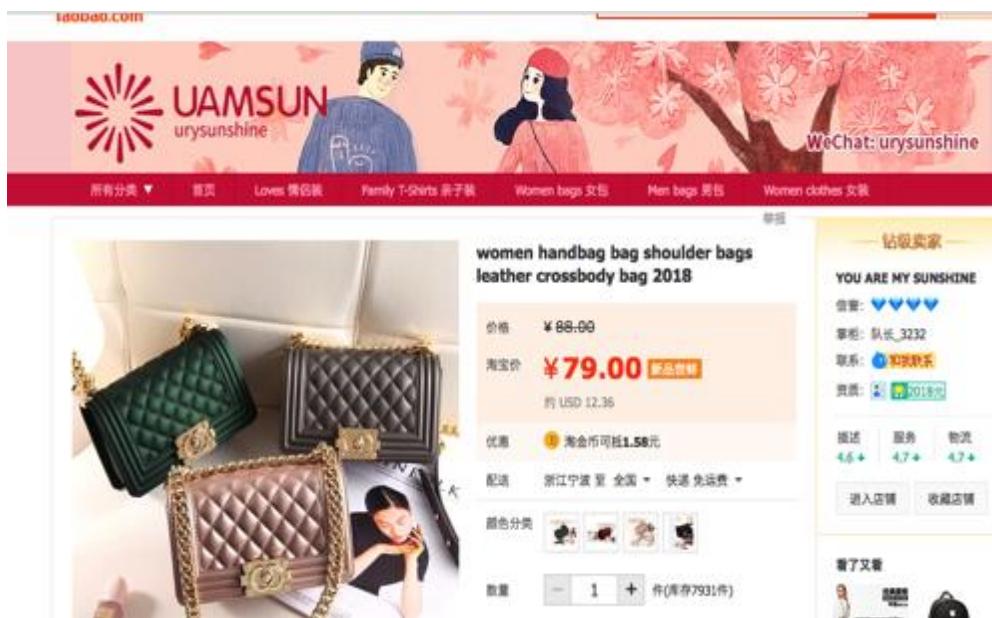


Figure 1.7: counterfeit Chanel Bags sell on Taobao.

Source: Taobao.com, accessed by 08/06/2018.

Putting aside the legalities and economics of counterfeiting, the scale of this phenomenon perhaps tells us something more about the desires and needs of individuals. There is a desire to access goods more easily. It is not necessarily that people need to possess original, authentic products, when perhaps a cheaper alternative offers just the familiar ‘appearance’. As the founding designer of Mingyu, a Chinese fashion brand, remarks: ‘You will notice that more Chinese young women are buying foreign brands like Luis Vuitton, Chanel, no matter it is real or counterfeit, instead of local brands’ (Liang, 2018). Indeed young Chinese women are increasingly responding to what’s around them with more freedom and open-mindedness (Williams, 2016). This maps to the broader trend in the West for celebrities to not only wear high-end clothing, but to deliberately mix and match expensive fashion brands with mass market elements; the hierarchical pyramid has arguably flattened. The incorporation of counterfeit items is arguably not so different. Indeed the ease of exchange across the Internet is a symptom of the inherent fast temporality of fashion. Garments are worn and discarded with greater ease now through secondary selling, and the prevalence of social media to record the ephemerality of fashion is equally a part of the experience. The Chinese social media platform WeChat<sup>8</sup> can be

<sup>8</sup> WeChat, in Chinese WeiXin, which means micro messages, cannot be simply defined as a social network, a

said to combine all of these elements. It is a multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app developed by Tencent. In fact, it is one of the world's largest standalone mobile apps with over 1 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018). It provides a means to pay for almost everything in China (flights, hotels, bills, bank-transfer, wages etc.). Significantly, it operates an informal micro banking operation, away from the established banks in China and is fast becoming a major threat to traditional banking (Yang, 2016). Inevitably, perhaps, it is very convenient for purchasing both real and counterfeit products. But the app represents more than a simple exchange mechanism. Like all social media, it offers a means to project one's lifestyle and interests. So, while it is indisputable that WeChat is platform suitable for selling counterfeit products it is equally appealing to marketing managers of established and establishing brands. A huge number of users share daily their photos, videos, thoughts, money, diary, business, and follow other users. The opportunities are obvious for a business to establish a relationship with individuals, by promoting fashion brands, sharing messages, or even giving direct information about events, sales and discount to their followers.

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cheap APP or an online marketplace: it is the perfect combination of all these digital platforms for fashion. Wechat pay's main competitor in China and the market leader in online payments was Alibaba. And in 2017, Tencent reported that Wechat had overtaken Alibaba with 600 million active we-chat mobile payment users versus 450 million for Alibaba Alipay.



Figure 1.9, Dior official account in We-chat in China.  
Source: Wechat Dior official account.

A good example is Dior (figure 1.9), which enjoys an excellent reputation among Chinese consumers. Dior was one of the first brands that joined the WeChat community and in 2017 the company decided to transit from its subscribe account to a new service account to benefit completely from the new service-oriented feature offered by the WeChat platform that allows firms to communicate quickly between consumers and sellers, and establish a more straight and resourceful relationship with them through direct messages, targeted promotion and a more virtual and digital-oriented experience (Casagrande, 2018). Through this service, Chinese customers can use their smartphone to visit the exact reproduction of the real boutique, and gain instant information about a product, to choose and buy clothing and bags, as they might in a shop in Italy or London. Thus, the very space in which counterfeits might trade is now equally being occupied by established brands. The

social nature of this space is a further important component of the overall 'system' being described in this section. Barthes' early study of the discourse of fashion has arguably only expanded through the global system and notably the exchange platforms of new technology. This, then, is the structural context of the fashion industry that the thesis is concerned with. It is both a really existing, practical space of fashion and its exchanges, but also represents a methodological, or interpretative basis for examining fashion through its movements, translations, exchanges and adaptations.

## **From Hybridity to Neutrality**

The picture that has been given so far of present day China and the fashion system that intersects with it, is a picture of complexity and of multiple points of view. While fashion, by its very nature, is always changing, this contemporary, globalised context has given rise to ever greater exchange and copying. In turn, this leads to increased interest in and experimentation with hybrid forms. The term 'hybrid' is originally used in biology, referring to the offspring of two plants or animals of different species or varieties. Latterly it is used often to refer to cultures or languages, to describe the phenomenon a *mixed* character, made by combining two or more different elements. The term is pertinent when looking at the potential of new cultural identities in respect to new trends and opportunities within Chinese women's fashion. As Nederveen (2001: 223) notes, 'with the acceleration of globalization and networking, we are rapidly entering into the world of hybridization. The fields where hybridization occurs have proliferated over time and space'. Specifically, we can understand that both politically and economically 'China is a hybrid system of market socialism, while many capitalist countries are in fact based on the practices of state capitalism rather than pure market economy'. Nederveen's point is that the previously stark distinction between socialism and capitalism has become blurred, even overlapping. 'Culturally, we are already living in hybrid societies in which our everyday lives are, very much normally, surrounded with hybrid cars, fusion dishes, racially mixed marriage and families, all kinds of artistic

inter-mixtures, and so forth. It is no exaggeration to say “nowadays there is no end of the travel and spread of hybridity” (Nederveen, 2001: 223).

What underlies debates of hybridity is the concept of culture and cultural identity, which typically suggests of both distinct cultural groups and yet equally the fluidity of cultures – the idea that cultures can exchange, borrow, adapt.

Harmony on diversity means to respect harmonious coexistence. Considering the fact of the diversity cultures of the world, harmony in diversity requires us to recognize their diversity and complementarity while seeking harmonious development. The pursuit of cultural homogenization will eventually lead to cultural endangerment. We need to be confident of a nation’s culture and to respect other countries’ cultural identities (Li and Chen, 2018: 122-123).

Considering the Chinese Cultural identity, it means the way of life, beliefs, values and desires, artifacts and practices produced and consumed by Chinese people, along with the institution necessary for the production of those artifacts and practices. Culture also refers us to notions of cultural identity and difference to describe who we think we are, which group we are members of, and which groups we are not members of.

However, in the present altermodern China, Chinese fashion, on the one hand represents one of the ways in which cultural identity is constructed and communicated, i.e. communicating and reproducing the same beliefs and values of cultural groups; on the other hand, likely reconciling with the global cultural homogenization. So, in the context in a globalized scene, various studies have examined hybridity in terms of how elements of culture, race, language, and ethnicity fuse together to form new hybrid identity for newcomers and the dominant, host culture (Krady, 2005; Croucher and Kramer, 2017; etc.). Such accounts of cultural ‘fusions’ frequently assert how newcomers to culture continually build upon what they are exposed to, integrating components of the dominant culture into the knowledge base, so that the dominant culture is influenced by newcomers (Gadamer, 1975; Kramer, 2000; Croucher and Kramer, 2017). These relatively optimistic

accounts are different from Kim's (2008; 2012) description of de-culturation, accultural, and inter-culturation, whereby it is argued that newcomers are encouraged to abandon cultural knowledge while learning new cultural knowledge. However, Kramer (2000) argues that cultural fusion is less of a binary process, in that newcomers are more flexible cognitively and affectively. Smith and Leavy (2008: 1) suggest cultural globalization generally leads to one of three outcomes: differentiation, assimilation, or hybridization. They explain the overall process as follows:

Cultural hybridization refers to the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices.... A flexible relationship between the local and global produces the hybrid. The identities are not assimilated or altered independently, but instead elements of cultures are incorporated to create a new hybrid culture. The creation of a hybrid identity is a twofold process involving the interpenetration of the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism. The local and the global interact to create a new identity that is distinct in each context. (Iyall Smith and Leavy, 2008: 1)

The assumption would seem to be that hybridization is a normal and usual process the world over; purportedly, as they put it, a 'flexible relationship between the local and global'. The reference they make to 'particularism' is suggestive. It is written as if a straightforward form of selection, but what is not said here is how the 'particular' is legitimated within or from a culture. Thus, again, the positive, optimistic reading of hybridization refers to a willing exchange and adaptation of cultural elements, leading to the idea of a cosmopolitan society where all divisive boundaries and discriminating distinctions decrease. Of course, the longer view of globalization reveals more tension and layering. History tells of many promiscuous interactions of the East and the West, of the so-called Orient and Occident, which in some respects problematizes these categories in the first place. Taking these various views into account, the common point is that the coming together of cultures is a *process*, and generally an uneven process at that. One outcome is that a multicultural approach

(whereby cultures can co-exist, but not necessarily interact) is often more evident than cultural adaption. Again, questions emerge regarding the status and dominance of cultures as they do or do not interact. With respect to China, which until relatively recently experienced the fastest-growth of developing counties, there are clear signs of a process of fusion through which western cultural traits are widely adopted, yet equally, given the dominance of a singular ethnic majority, the dominant culture maintains its strong identity. The particularities of the mandarin script, for example, make it difficult for newcomers without knowledge of the language. Nonetheless, the visual culture of China is increasingly influenced by outside inputs.

The overall argument is that the forces of hybridization, with its inherent circulation of fashion cultures and brands (both local or global), can be said to interact to create new fashion identities, or rather new identities for those who partake in the new fashions. Pertinent to this thesis, one of the aims is on how Chinese women's clothing is being hybridized with respect to the internal and external influences in the context of the cultural globalization. Hybridity, taken as a *sign* of cultural fusion comes to signify the 'encounter, conflict and blending of two ethnic or cultural categories which, while by no means pure and distinct in nature, tend to be understood and experienced as meaningful identity labels by members of these categories' (Lo 2002: 199). In China, the garment as a socio-cultural sign is simultaneously reflecting forces of both globalization and modernization, and this duel process has brought symbols of different cultures together and provided ample opportunities for the concurrent activation of two or more cultural representations. When cultures take in elements of global influence, they are doing so within the context of their local lives and creating a new hybrid, and individuals are experiencing a bilateral intermixture (Gilroy, 1993). With the development of China's comprehensive national strength and the international influence, promoting Chinese culture has become the key strategy for reinforcing cultural exchanges and projecting China's new cultural construction (Li and Chen, 2018). The Cheongsam, for example, which has gone through much variation, is a complex sign of Chinese cultural phenomena. Indeed, as will be examined in Chapter 4, the Cheongsam's history is really a history of cultural hybridity of west-east cultures, which is still the

case even now (Ling, 2009). A recent 'cheongsam exhibition features dresses worn by the Soong sister' held by Li Qian in June of 2018, (figure 1.10). It demonstrates that traditional clothing (or rather the representation of traditional culture) is itself a result of acting in a global sphere. The Cheongsam or hybrid Cheongsams, in the face of global cultural fusion, embodies a new identity for Chinese women. We might say, the hybrid cheongsam is a metonymy in the complexity of Chinese female identity and society. Hence, the 1930's cheongsams (as seen in figure 1.10) make for a distinct comparison to today's modernized cheongsam. The former is more inclined to western culture because Song Meiling (who married the president Chiang Kai-shek) was educated in the USA since the age of 5, so her life style and fashion taste is more westernized. As seen with the cheongsam in the 1930s, it is tighter and more body-shaped than those of the late Qing period. Today's cheongsam is more inclined to traditional culture, as a sign of a return to pride in China's ancient history and cultural essence.



Figure 1.10, cheongsam exhibition features dresses worn by the Soong sister  
Source: <https://www.shine.cn/news/metro/1806106092/>

Following China's opening up of the economy in the 1980's, Chinese traditional culture hits a dilemma. In this thesis, a piece of clothing becomes a trace of complex social-dynamics, often with contradictory forces. The local-global dynamic, for example, promotes the development of cultural essentialism. Historically, fashion and China may have seemed incongruent, particularly when thought of in the global

context (Finnane, 2007). Finnane suggests Chinese women's clothing is more about a sign of the political environment. Chinese women are used to employing clothing to express themselves appropriate within this context, to reflect their social-political identity and lifestyles (Wu 2009; Ling 2007, 2009). But in the contemporary multi-cultural world, women have new questions about what to wear; how to balance internal-external cultures; how to re-build one's social identity; how to deal with the conflicts under the challenge of post-colonialism; and how to re-identify themselves. These questions are the implicit questions underway in this thesis. In the context of recent change, as stems from globalization and China's increasing modernization, hybrid forms offer a neutral and beneficial approach. The ability to negotiate across barriers between cultural, spiritual, and identity is an asset (Smith, 2008). So hybrid fashions and the intermixture of clothing contain elements of the local and global, so influencing wearers who have an understanding of both local knowledge and global cosmopolitanism. Those crossing barriers help make visible new hybrid identities; as fully illustrated by female clothing. There is a progressive account to be made in respect to contemporary Chinese women's fashion. China's long history is largely shaped by patriarchy, yet in the contemporary context there is an opening to western liberal feminism, partial identities, multiple roles, and pluralistic selves. It is not to say that clothing is the only way of understanding these changes, but certainly clothing is a visible form of expression of new identities. So, in part, we can read fashion as reflecting the changes taking place, but also we can explore how fashion itself acts as a device for change.

Arguably, a false dichotomy of West and East might well be revealed through hybridity and exchange, whereby a new identity that seemingly only has the capacity to occupy two forms is actually shown to encompass another form. 'Physical borders of states assume discrete identities,' Smith and Leavy (2008) write. As such, 'people who experience double consciousness also experience a two-ness that is distinct from either single identity contributing to the duality, and, finally, the dichotomized sex and gender identities do not encompass the full range of sexed or gendered identities'. However, the suggestion is of an alternative too. 'It is possible,' they argue, 'for a hybrid identity to emerge as a category that defies borders. (Smith and

Leavy, 2008: 6). The westernized cheongsam, or the Orientalized western-dress, for example challenges existing borders, particularly those of political and ethnic communities. A question remains however as to whether, or at least in what regard these garments then constitute a 'category that defies borders'. One of the problems in evoking the term 'hybrid', which as noted stems originally from the biological sense of an evolution of forms (that comes of combining elements), is that it frequently leads to questions about hosts and recipients. There is rarely a sense of equilibrium of exchange and/or combining. As a natural (biological) force and functional social fact, hybridization has long been an unavoidable and indispensable process when territories and boundaries meet, when different people with different values and lifestyles interact. Inevitably, hybridity is a realized politics of difference, which arguably, even when eliding differences still foregrounds those differences. We remain stuck with an antagonistic view of culture. With respects to the fluidities of fashion and also, as will be explored in more detail below, with respect to a specific 'neutral' aesthetic of Chinese women's fashion, this contested sense of culture, albeit hybrid, does not necessarily best define the experience of change and renewal taking place for how women dress in contemporary China. As Hardt and Negri have argued, the postcolonial and the postmodern have maintained a certain dominance, a 'united attack', as they put it, 'on the dialectics of modern sovereignty and the proposition of liberation as a politics of difference'. Indeed, they note of an inherent problem that postmodernists and postcolonial theorists alike tend to 'give a very confused view of this passage (from modern national to postmodern, post national-imperial sovereignty) because they remain fixated on attacking an old form of power and propose a strategy of liberation that could be effective only on that old terrain' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 145-146).

The tensions inherent to debates of hybridity bring us back to the idea of the altermodern (and altermodern China) at the start of this chapter, as well as the mention of uniforms, or rather uniformities. Bourriaud's account of altermodernities, while optimistic, is nonetheless predicated upon pre-existing power structures and hierarchies. When something is borrowed or adapted from another culture it carries over a dominant reading. Hybridity in this sense deals in

competing *uniformities*, or we might say stereotypes. These can be bent or re-situated, but the underlying suggestion is of predetermined systems of signification. However, such an account of 'hybridity' in China is perhaps not wholly appropriate. The final consideration of this chapter is to alter this reading somewhat, to argue for a more 'open' or 'neutral' system. This is still to understand the garment as a 'socio-cultural sign', but to take the logic of the arbitrary nature of the sign to its fuller conclusion. An outcome that is arguably more pertinent in the context of China (as will be outlined). In part, this brings us back to Barthes' *The Fashion System*, which shows how Fashion (as a discourse) signifies itself; that it alters clothing by making them seem natural, to be signified as definite elements within an overall lexicon. Barthes describes this discourse as 'a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings; a mediating substance of an operative order' (Barthes, 1967). However, rather than focus on these structured, 'veiled' outcomes (how the systems gets 'weighted', such as we might suggest with hybridity), the point is to stay with the movement of the system, to understand the 'lightness' of fashion, so as to understand *how* it can change and adapt. We might consider this, as it were, *the unbearable lightness of fashion*. This is to be a key way to understand contemporary fashion in China. Moving beyond the system of the 'sign', reference can be made to specific Chinese philosophical constructs: Zhongyong and Wuwei.

While Barthes' *The Fashion System* is a resolutely structuralist text, published as late as 1967 (in the original French, and 1990 in English translation), by the time it came out he had already started to move on in thinking and approach. As Samoyault notes, 'the texts and questions that now occupied him were quite different. Structuralism still seemed a good method (preferable to hermeneutics), but his interest in dissemination and the plurality of meaning led his research in other directions' (2017: 306). Of particular note is Barthes' growing fascination with Asian philosophies and culture around this time, which begins to influence his work significantly, both implicitly and explicitly (Samoyault, 2017: 306-307). His 'great revolution of this period' was his shift 'from writing to reading, which brought to an end the subversion of the codes of academic textual interpretation applied to the classics and suggested that meaning was now infinitely dispersed, in all directions' (307). The

shift to 'reading' needs to be understood as much a form of 'writing', that as we read we write (albeit conceptually, virtually); it is a productive reading, but which is more ambiguous as to *who* is actually writing (the 'subject' begins to be un-made).

Samoyault characterises his shift in thinking in terms of a deepening interest in 'absence', in the ideas of networks of meaning that led Barthes to foreground 'apparently elastic notions as dispersion, the remainder, the leftover' (307). This is made very clear in his famous essay, 'The Death of the Author' (Barthes, 1967, 49-55), which opens by problematizing the 'voice' of writing (making an example of Balzac's *Sarrasine*). We never know who speaks, he argues, 'for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin. Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes' (Barthes, 1967, 49). Furthermore, these ideas and the theme of absence is something Barthes equates strongly with Asian philosophies. Significant for this thesis, Samoyault notes that 'Barthes finds another form of absence in the empty subject of Classical Chinese thought'; it is an absence not in a negative sense, but with a positive charge (as we might consider the significance, for example, of the spaces, the pauses in Japanese flower arranging). This has a significant impact on ideas of power and subjectivity. In engaging in the reading of various Asian texts, Barthes comes to contrast the '*wishing to grasp* or *wishing to impress* of the full subject, the master of the spoken word (the person who *takes* the floor or grabs the microphone in big public meetings), with the Zen master – a model to which Barthes sought increasingly to conform ... - who sets up the idea of a *not-wishing-to-grasp* inspired by Lao Tsu: 'He does not exhibit himself and will impose himself" (Samoyault, 2017: 308).

The realm of fashion in contemporary China, specifically, in this case, regards to women, can usefully be seen as a form of 'reading' (in Barthes sense of the term). This still allows for the phenomenon of hybridity, but there is a subtle difference in the *production* of fashion. It need not only be understand at the point of manufacture or marketing, nor in terms of a 'heaviness' of history and geopolitical constructs. There is also a way in which fashion gets articulated through its wearing. We can also pay attention to the idea of the subject that 'flees'. On the one hand

this might be to consider how identity is lost, undone by the new forces of globalization etc., yet in Barthes' terms, in which he privileges ideas of pleasure and play, there is also the means for the loss of identity to be a liberation. In the case of women in China, this might be taken as a potentially radical prospect. What are more difficult, however, are implications of '*not-wishing-to-grasp*'. A philosophy of humility is difficult to place. It does not assert itself, it does not seek to establish itself or anything in particular.

Methodologically this poses problems, but raises a critical question about how we frame readings -of East/West cultures. It is easy to read Chinese fashion trends as being overwritten by the West, by globalization forces (that blow in from the West). Yet, perhaps there is altogether a different kind of *reading* – a *neutral* reading (as writing) – that is taking place. In *The Fashion System*, Barthes actually already refers to a neutralization at the 'heart' of fashion. It 'incessantly torments its body of signifiers' to render 'every Fashion lexicon illusory' (209). He goes on to explain (with the example of the binary of morning and evening wear) that

...no sure sign corresponds to the signified *morning* and *evening*, since they can sometimes have distinct signifiers, sometimes a single signifier; everything happens as if the Fashion lexicon were fake, composed finally of a single series of synonyms (or, we might say, of one immense metaphor). Yet, this lexicon seems to exist, and this is the paradox of Fashion. (Barthes, 209)

What begins to emerge, then, is a more radical notion of hybridity. Unlike the typical meaning of hybridity discussed above, which de-constructively retains its original terms even when asserting a new term (and typically weighed on one side by a dominant element), the reference here to neutrality is to relate directly to Barthes' paradox of fashion, even to take him at his word of an inherent *fakeness* of fashion. The argument made here is that with Chinese philosophies (and their attendant value within everyday Chinese culture) there are certain precepts that are more attuned to the radical nature of the fashion system that Barthes identifies. In turn,

this may lead us to read the consumption of fashion in China today in a different way.

To recap, a reading of contemporary women's fashion in China can lean towards a more 'readerly' account, to understand that the take-up of both old and new styles and garments functions *within* a network of meaning, which is to be continually *productive*, rather than a mere means of consumption. This is to accept the phenomenon of hybridity, but not necessarily its more binary mechanism. There is, however, a need to acknowledge an arguably non-assertive 'style', the idea that consumption in China might simply look to be consumption, when in fact it is a form of expression and the generation of new meanings. This in turn relates to a hard to define, and perhaps rather fragile new subjectivity, which in this thesis is explored in terms of professional, young women in China. The potential is for a new 'fleeing subject', which might be said to go both ways, and at the same time, to be both the generation of a new Chinese subject, but also one that detaches from the local setting. It is the 'illusory', 'fake', or rather neutral status of fashion that opens up these possibilities. Towards the end of his career, Barthes (2005) turned directly to the question of the 'neutral', in a dedicated lecture series, which he defines 'as that which outplays the paradigm, or rather ... everything that baffles the paradigm' (Barthes, 2005:159). As Barthes describes it, the Neutral escapes or undoes the paradigmatic binary oppositions that structure and produce meaning. Instead he looks to ideas of intensities and gradients of meaning, of ambiguities. This remains for him a structuralist project, but which is infinitely richer in 'tones'; it is, in effect, to get at the *immense* lexicon suggested in *The Fashion System*.

Barthes' attempt to deconstruct or escape from binary configurations has profound ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic implications, not least with respect to how we read west-east ideological 'conflicts' as experienced by Chinese women. A key point, however, is that, since Barthes makes explicit the strong influence of Chinese intellectual traditions, including for example Lao-tzu (Laozi) who writes the *Tao Te*

Ching<sup>9</sup>, we can as much draw upon philosophical and *everyday* ideas from within the Chinese tradition itself. Lao-tzu refers to the idea of *wu wei*, which literally means non doing or no action. The Taoist spirit that encourages *wu wei* [无为] means unforced, to let the things take their own course, and respect for each other. This Taoist notion of the neutral is an implicit part of everyday life in China, a basic form of wisdom, which Chinese women, for example, will negotiate in daily life, or applied to the cheongsam or Chinese fashion system. Taoism advocates maximum harmony. Balance, prosperity, and spiritual attainment can be found by following the ways of nature, of the 'way'. If a boulder is in one's way in a river you may go around it, or even just wait, as in a thousand years it will have worn down to a pebble and be washed away. *Wu wei* is not to interfere unnecessarily and to work with the flow of things around you. While you might not literally wait a thousand years before acting, there is a way of understanding one's actions in the world as being interrelated, to go beyond one's own subjectivity. In the opening of *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-tzu gives a pithy account of the neutral, of a multiplicity in all things:

The Tao that can be told of  
 Is not the Absolute Tao;  
 The Names that can be given  
 Are not Absolute Names.  
 (Tao-Te-Ching, Translated by Lin Yutang)

There is, then, no one thing we can point to, which in part equates to the notion of the arbitrary sign of structuralism; that meaning is found only within a network of signifiers, with a system of communication. Yet, the Taoist neutral (as with Barthes' interest in such philosophies) has to be understood firstly – within the context of China - as an everyday, common notion. It is not a theoretical idea, the preserve of

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<sup>9</sup> Laozi is the name of a legendary Daoist philosopher, the alternate title of the early Chinese text better known in the West as the *Daodejing*, and the moniker of a deity in the pantheon of organized "religious Daoism" that arose during the later Han dynasty (25-220 C.E.). *Laozi* is the *pinyin* romanization for the Chinese characters which mean "Old Master."

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/laozi/> The Tao Te Ching is a wonderful inspiring book that can be used for meditation purposes, light or deeper reading, intense philosophical debate and Taoist spiritual teaching.  
<https://www.wuweiwisdom.com/introduction-to-the-tao-te-ching/>

critical theory and scholarly debate. Secondly, it goes beyond binaries of language (the designations of one word rather than another), beyond attempts to secure meanings. It is also outside of dialectical thinking, which was what drew Barthes' interest. Unlike hybridity, for example, which can be seen to follow the typical thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis equation, the neutral refers to a more fluid set of possibilities, even being able to tolerate contradictory positions. In the specific context of women's clothing, for example, rather than see specific fashions as a 'sign' of balance, say between west/east, local/global, and tradition/modern, a neutral reading will move through all positions together, west-east, local-global, and tradition-modern. Turning to a specific Confucius text, we can understand the focal point as less of how terms are *operative* in relation to or against one another, and more how terms move *between* themselves in the first place. In *Zhongyong* [*The Doctrine of the Mean*], the title of one of the Four Books of Confucian philosophy, the neutral (as a form or intensity of flow between elements) is referred to as the 'mean' (which not unhelpfully chimes with the western mathematical term of 'mean' as the average *division* of all terms). It is stated:

When joy, anger, sorrow and pleasure have not yet arisen, it is called the Mean (中 centeredness, equilibrium). When they arise to their appropriate levels, it is called "harmony" 和. The Mean is the great root of all-under-heaven. "Harmony" is the penetration of the Way through all-under-heaven. When the Mean and Harmony are actualized, Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions, and the myriad things are nourished.

(*The Doctrine of Mean*, "Zhong Yong"<sup>10</sup>)

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<sup>10</sup> *Zhongyong* 中庸, "Doctrine of the Mean", is a Confucian Classic and part of the Four Books (*Sishu* 四書). It is actually a chapter of the ritual classic *Liji*, was extracted from this book and treated as a separate book from the Song period 宋 (960-1279) on. There are several opinions about the authorship of the *Zhongyong*. It is traditionally attributed to 子思 (Kong Ji 孔伋), a grandson of Confucius. Cui Shu 崔述 (Qing) doubted this because of linguistic evidence. The text seems, as modern authors also stress, at least partially to have been compiled during the Former Han period 前漢 (206 BCE-8 CE).

The concept of "the mean" is a core idea of Confucianism. It says that in all activities and thoughts one had to adhere to moderation. This would result in harmony in action, and eventually in a harmonious society. Pure harmony without wandering from the central tone (an image from the field of music), and standing in the centre without leaning towards one side would keep all social positions stable. A man in a high position must not be arrogant, otherwise the people would rebel. Simple-minded persons in high position must not think of their own profit, otherwise the social structures would be disrupted.

Source: <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Classics/zhongyong.html>

Again, we encounter ideas of harmony and appropriateness. Importantly, however, these are not to be translated in overly moralistic ways. The ‘mean’ here is neutral. It is not a containment of elements, nor a hierarchy, it is a way or flow. Heaven and Earth are the two poles of Taiji’s Yin and Yang, for example, but these are not binaries. They combine each in the other; bent neither one way nor the other, the yin yang represents unchanging (Fogel, Joshua A, 2001). Eno notes how these ideas are ‘a characteristic feature of ordinary, everyday spontaneity’, adding that ‘our ordinary experience, rather than elusive or esoteric wisdom, is the raw substance of Dao’. He goes onto explain that ‘the word glossed with the compound term *Yong* is encountered in a related sense in a key passage of Daoism “seeing things as Equal. Which reads things cannot have any completeness or impairment—all are in the final analysis comprehended as one’ (Eno, 2016:23). This notion of ‘oneness’ is again a figuring of the neutral, it is to suggest again of Bathes’ *immense lexicon*, which is to allow for a more fluid reading of the interrelationships of all things. The Neutral, or *Zhong Yong*, supplies us a third way, or way between. It represents moderation, rectitude, objectivity, sincerity, honesty and priority (John, 2008). In going on to look at specific garments, notably the cheongsam (in Chapter 4), as worn by Chinese women, it is to acknowledge multiple readings that exist concurrently.

Having already considered some specific variables earlier in this chapter as impacting on the experiences of contemporary Chinese women, with regards to the relationship between globalization and the construction of female identities, whether transnational or hybrid, it is possible there is a neutral way to best respond. Vila (2003) outlined three definitions of hybridity and identity: the border crosser, liminality, and a ‘third place’. Hybridity crisscrosses geo-political, cultural, sexual, and symbolic ‘borders’ and it is where the local and the global interact that we see Chinese women creating a new, distinctive identity. However, Vila is critical of excessively optimistic visions of hybridity. Instead, while recognizing and accepting the existence of an inevitable level of hybridity at the border, Vila emphasizes the power of the border to divide and to reproduce identities that reinforce the border, often even while being apparently hybrid. Keeping traditional culture and customs (Confucianism, Daoism, etc.), and resisting disdain for local culture is a new neutral

identity often stereotyped as overwhelming majority of Chinese contemporary women in general and particularly of those young ages who are influenced by western culture deeply.

Roland Barthes' interest in the Neutral is explicitly linked to his interest in Asian philosophies, and it offers a significant new lens through which to read his earlier account of the fashion system. But, to reiterate the point, to take these ideas forward to the actual existing context of modern China it is pertinent to take directly from the Chinese writings, which have a more genuine connection to everyday life, in a way that critical theories do not. Lao-Tzu proposes a concept of Dao, of a way that seemingly translates word by word, but it is not a 'real' way, it is a concept of a whole world, it is a conceptual way. The philosophic poem is written in a performative way, to open out the neutral, to be understood it via the *analytic dialectics* and *Zhong Yong* (neutral).

When the people of the Earth all know beauty as beauty,  
 There arises (the recognition of) ugliness.  
 When the people of the Earth all know the good as good,  
 There arises (the recognition of) evil.

Therefore:

Being and non-being interdepend in growth;  
 Difficult and easy interdepend in completion;  
 Long and short interdepend in contrast;  
 High and low interdepend in position;  
 Tones and voice interdepend in harmony;  
 Front and behind interdepend in company.

Therefore the Sage:

Manages affairs without action;  
 Preaches the doctrine without words;  
 All things take their rise, but he does not turn away from them;  
 He gives them life, but does not take possession of them;  
 He acts, but does not appropriate;  
 Accomplishes, but claims no credit.  
 It is because he lays claim to no credit  
 That the credit cannot be taken away from him.

-----*Tao Te Ching Chapter 2.*

With Lao-tzu everything is a combination between poles; the two poles supplementing each other: beauty/ugliness, good/evil, being/non-being, difficult / easy, long /short, etc., be transformed and linked together. This dynamic is not binary, but rather of a running scaling. It provides us a holistic perspective on things before acting. The traditional Chinese notions of Wuwei and Zhongyong echo that of Barthes' neutral, and encourage us to view a balanced and harmonized way, amidst seemingly conflicting forces. This is a hybrid and multi-cultural world, but it is *formed* of a third way, or a neutral way, a harmonious or benign way. This neutral way admits cultural fusion and difference, but more looking forward to future and to respecting different culture. It involves moving beyond mere passive acceptance of a multicultural fact of multiple cultures effectively existing in a society and instead promotes dialogue and interaction between cultures. It is based on the different cultures and dissonance and critical dialogue with cultures. In the fashion world, the example is of the globalized cheongsam, illustrating hybridity as a resulting in a double consciousness and two-ness; it is of 'movement' rather than a 'result' of a dialogue. Hybridity can be said to equate to a 'thing' (a result), while the neutral is referring to a process, of the on-going moment of exchange and interaction.

Dubois (1996) refers to the idea of 'Double consciousness', which is distinct 'because it explicitly embodies multiple identities instead of crossing identity group boundaries. Groups or individuals that occupy this space experience a kind of two-ness, as two identities trying to exit within one person'. This is the place of the neutral. It is to attend to the *mean*, the way between elements, to diligently navigate the 'fakeness' of fashion in its multiple positions. Thus, overall for this thesis, a key proposition (despite the difficulty of this word in this context) is that Chinese women, contemporarily, while exposed to hybrid fashions, which navigate between the global and local, nonetheless occupy a 'space' within both cultural groups. This space of two-ness holds a challenge and a privilege. Ling (2009) argues how it is possible to create a synthetic emancipation of Chinese women, but that Chinese women's cultural identity and gender equality needs to be developed further. The point here is that such development cannot necessarily be seen to go in a straight line, since the 'space' of these negotiations is in fact multiple – and that multiplicity is in fact a

radical space, a space of ‘burning activity’ to adopt Barthes’ description of the Neutral.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to present an overarching context to women’s fashion in contemporary China. For the purposes of this account the focus has been on establishing the broad economic and political context of China, which was outlined at the start of this chapter, under the overall heading of ‘altermodern’ china. A key argument is the need to understand the relatively recent and rapid modernization process in China (and its relationship to globalization) within its own terms, rather than to see China as somehow leading towards a singular form of development, which we might formerly associate with the West. The point of the altermodern is to accept different temporalities, conditions and aspirations. In China’s case there is an ambitious economic strategy, which provides a confident, and potentially progressive situation, which is then reflected in how women can seek to engage with fashion. As with the effects of globalization, there are recurring questions about the negotiations of the local and global, and of hybridity. In this respect, the chapter presented an account of the ‘fashion system’. In part this was ‘methodological’, drawing on Roland Barthes’ early structuralist study to set out a way of ‘reading’ the medium or discourse of fashion, as something that continually allows change and yet also fixes upon certain significations. Fashion provides a means to reflect and to seemingly make ‘natural’ the complexities of China’s modernity. On the one hand this is to adopt a fairly straightforward semiological account, whereby fashion as an arbitrary system of signification is a container for broader social meanings and exchange. It makes things ‘visible’ and seemingly ‘natural’. However the ‘fashion system’ is also extended in this account, with reference to a more complex environment or ‘ecology’ of meanings, which includes the significance of new technologies in communicating ideas and in actually defining fashion at different levels. The new complexities of modern, globalized China enables an ever more fluid process of cultural change and hybridization, which is then discussed in the final

section, above. While hybridity is a significant phenomenon within present day China, an argument is made that the foregrounding of inherent power structures is not necessarily the most appropriate way to read contemporary women's fashion in China. A shift is made from hybridity as a key theoretical model to neutrality. In part this is to update Barthes' account of fashion (using his own theorization deconstructively) and to bring into the frame Chinese intellectual thought as a way to describe an everyday experience or sense of encounter of worldly fashion. Overall, then, the chapter sets out the broader brushstrokes of what it means to be engaged in fashion in contemporary China, and how we might seek to 'read' its phenomena. What has not been covered, however, is a detailed consideration and exploration of *women's* fashion and its uniformities. Nonetheless, having set the scene, the subsequent chapters now seek to provide this in-depth account.

## Chapter 2: Made in China: the Fashioning of 'Uniforms'

Having set out the context of contemporary China for women's fashion in Chapter 1, so having considered recent developments of the fashion industry and also an 'expanded' fashion system, which relates to different local and global factors as well as notions of hybridity etc., this chapter develops an understanding of 'uniform' (and uniformity) as already outlined in the Introduction (and discussed briefly at the start of Chapter 1). Often, fashion and feminism seem to occupy opposing positions, at least where fashion is understood as the dominant (patriarchal) cultural form. The act of 'being fashionable', as Coward (1984: 29) has argued, 'is always the acceptance of the prevailing ideals'. Although, equally, of course, many subcultures are defined by clothing styles and adornments (Hebdige, 1979; Kawamura, 2012). In the context of Chinese culture, looking both historically and to the present, the social roles and status of women in China can be considered in part through reference to the clothing that is worn. This chapter pursues this interest with reference to a 'genealogy' of two signature garments, the Mao suit and the cheongsam, which are also drawn into a consideration of a wider range of contemporary clothing trends and brands. The chapter sets in train a layered reading, which is discussed in terms of how we *fashion* certain types of 'uniform' or rather how these uniforms or styles of clothing also capture something about the 'fashions' of politics and ideology. This is discussed in the opening sections of the chapter, after which particular focus is given to the Mao suit, both as a historical garment and as something that has a contemporary re-figuring. Following which, consideration is given to how western styles and brands entered into the Chinese market following the opening up of the economy in the 1980s (which is then examined and developed in more detail in Chapter 3). Running through all of this development has been the longer history and persistence of the Cheongsam, which is looked at in detail in the final chapter, Chapter 4. Both the Mao suit and the Cheongsam (linked through the passage of the opening up of the economy to global trade) present layered histories that are traced in this chapter and those which follow. Importantly, *between* both these garments it

is possible to locate ideas about conformity and freedom of expression. In terms of Maoist ideology, the suit originally represented a shared form, offering generalized, united expression (for men and women). The suit represents the aspiration for social freedom – a *uniform* freedom for all. As will be outlined below, the critical theorist Susan Buck-Morss (2000) writes of the dream world and catastrophe of socialism's modernist vision (which notably she sees echoed in capitalist ideology, more on which below). The 'dream' associated with the Mao suit is one of 'sameness', of a purported horizontal society. It is a freedom *from* difference and inequity. Catastrophically, however, it proved not to be a freedom *for* individuals. It is little surprise that during the Maoist regime the cheongsam was banned. Indeed, by contrast, the revival of this garment, along with the influx of western brands and goods in the late and post-Cold War period represents a turn towards *personal* freedom and expression. Through both these garments (both distinct individual styles), we witness the *movement* of the fashion system outlined in the previous chapter. Fashion operates as a form of double coding (akin to the second order system of signification Barthes presents in *mythologies*), whereby the 'innocent', just-as-it-is patterning of cloth can take on and carry a whole other set of meanings. In the case of the Maoist suit and the cheongsam we find the more literal uniform of the former (a social uniform to control freedom), gives way in the latter to a uni-form of liberty (its singular style or cut, examined in Chapter 4, is articulated through a wide variety of outfits, giving rise to an often glamorous and personalized styling). Of note, however, despite any personal freedoms associated with the cheongsam, it must be understood as being placed within the context of the uniformities of global trade and local consumerism (see Chapter 3). There are a number of ideas and layers suggested here, which this chapter now seeks to begin to unpack.

In bringing together the specific reading of 'uniform' with an understanding of both fashion and feminism as articulated in China, the account offered here picks up upon two lines of enquiry. Firstly, and most centrally, it concerns issues of gender, moving from a 'genderless' political 'freedom' to contemporary gendered 'empowerment'. Secondly, consideration is made of contemporary 'Chinese' dress with respect to the

wider global conditions, which in turn relates to issues of orientalism. The ‘made in China’ tag is ubiquitous in the labeling of clothes and goods around the world, but which arguably is read as merely the site of production that *fits in* with the desires of elsewhere. The well-known phrase for the Apple iPhone, ‘designed in California, assembled in China’, epitomizes the asymmetrical relationship of global trade of designs and fashions. However, there is also a way in which we need to allow for specificities of consumption in China, to understand how meanings and aspirations are also ‘made in’ China, i.e. that are culturally specific. Different meanings of dress are constructed through their interaction and use, generating membership of the different cultural groups.

During the last 70 years of radical change in Mainland China, we can observe key changes in female sartorial trends. These can be divided into three main changes or ‘breaks’, characterized by specific ‘uniforms’: Firstly, unisex clothing (of the Mao period), secondly, the influx of western Clothing during economic reform, and thirdly the contemporary cheongsam (a form that has a long history, and which sees a notable revival in our contemporary period). In presenting these three types of ‘uniform’ – the military-unisex clothing of 1950s-1970s (in this chapter); western clothing and luxury brands after 1980s (Chapter 3); and the hybrid cheongsam of 2000s-present (Chapter 4), the thesis seeks to reveal an underlying process of change in Chinese feminism and female identity. In doing so, ‘uniform’ is to be understood as a conceptual term, applied to what is worn by the majority of Chinese women, as signifying, in different times, Chinese culture and Chinese women’s roles and identity. Set against specific socio-economic and political conditions, Chinese women activate these uniforms. The clothing they wear actualizes their identities. In acknowledging this interdependence, the uniforms can be considered as an elaborated body technique through which a range of individual and social statements can be articulated. These different uniform systems and feminism adapt to the requirements of distinct periods. Of course, this is not the same thing as to argue that women are also knowingly articulating specific ideas and identities through their clothing. This is where the intersection of feminism within Chinese fashion is more critical.

## Economic Dreams

In her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000), Susan Buck-Morss presents an account of capitalism and socialism as being less binary than might be expected. Setting apart the explicit political rhetoric, she highlights how both political forms were concerned with industrial modernization. This was the 'driving ideological form' common to both. As such, she writes of the construction of 'mass utopia' as the *dream* of the twentieth century, but which today has all but been undone. It is worth quoting Buck-Morss at length, as her astute analysis of the shift from the heavily politicized Cold War period to our more individualized contemporary echoes much that is argued for in this thesis:

As the century closes, the dream is being left behind. Industrial production has not itself abated. Commodities are still produced, marketed, desired, consumed, and thrown away – in more areas of the globe, and in greater quantities than ever. Consumerism, far from on the wane, has penetrated the last socialist bastion of Mainland China to become, arguably, the first global ideological form. State legitimacy continues to rest on the ideal of rule by the people put forth by "modern" political theories that are now several centuries old. But the mass-democratic myth of industrial modernity – the belief that the industrial reshaping of the world is capable of bringing about the good society by providing material happiness for the masses – has been profoundly challenged by the disintegration of European socialism, the demands of capitalist restructuring, and the most fundamental ecological constraints. In its place, an appeal to differences that splinter the masses into fragments now structures political rhetoric and marketing strategies alike [...] Commodities have not ceased to crowd people's private dream worlds; they still have a utopian function on a personal level. But the abandonment of the larger social project connects this personal utopianism with political cynicism, because it is no longer thought necessary to guarantee to the collective that which is pursued by the individual. Mass utopia, once considered the logical correlate of personal utopia, is now a rusty idea. (Buck-Morss, 2000: ix-x)

Her reference to China is interesting, suggesting of a new global ideological form. However, China's 'socialist' form of capitalism is still perhaps rather distinct. Where Buck-Morss' analysis perhaps comes undone slightly is in suggesting of the abandonment of larger social projects. The seemingly unrelenting industrial,

commercial and urban development in China, witnessed with the dramatic growth in power stations, factories, shopping centers and high-rise dwellings, is marked by a more top-down, planned economy, as much as feeding the desires of a growing middle-class. The economic renewal outlined in the Introduction and Chapter 1, and the buoyant rhetoric of the current government, cannot be described as ‘political cynicism’. If anything, China is currently reimagining its *dream* of mass utopia. For example, one recent ‘factoid’ that often gets cited (based on studies by the US Geological Survey and data from *International Cement Review*) is that China has used more cement in three years (between 2011 and 2013) than the US did in the entire 20th century<sup>11</sup>. Regardless of the accuracy of this claim, it echoes many statements on the magnitude of China’s recent and on-going programme of development. However, Buck-Morss’s reference to the splintering of the masses, of a more fragmented, personalized ‘dream-world’ (underpinned by the commodity) does equally pertain to the experiences of contemporary China. It is a country of growing consumption and one that is increasingly extending its own local brands and interests. Rather than think of a singular ‘global ideological form’, there is a way in which, like a kaleidoscope, such a ‘form’ is refracted in different ways according to context.

An important consideration in Buck-Morss’ account is of what, for the purposes of this thesis, might be described a ‘neutral’ reading of East and West ideology and economics. By focusing on a common aspiration to lead to a ‘mass utopia’ (i.e. to improve society en masse, through largely industrial means and scales) she ‘neutralizes’ the political divides. Her argument is drawn out explicitly in an earlier publication, in a short article reflecting on the collapse of communism, after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Buck-Morss, 1994). Here, of added pertinence, she makes a deliberate and interesting connection to her reading of ‘history’ in relation to the *form of fashion*. Her starting point is the seemingly unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall. The Cold War, she notes, represented a ‘monstrous accumulation of power, with unimaginable destructive force at its disposal’, yet somehow this dismantled itself

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<sup>11</sup> Cited from Insider’s ‘17 facts that sound fake but are totally true’, available online: <<https://amp.thisisinsider.com/true-facts-that-sound-fake-2018-1>>

'from within and seemingly without agency' (11). She is at pains not to deny a genuine opposition movement, but essentially the suggestion is that the 'Cold War system imploded. Without war, without revolution, without cultural renaissance, it simply came to an end' (11). This leads her to argue, heuristically, for a way of understanding history in terms of fashion. 'I do not mean to trivialize the utopian impulse, the desire for universal freedom and social justice that lies at the heart of what we have long called history,' she writes, 'but rather, to suggest that the temporal notion of transiency, fading, and loss that lies at the fundament of fashion is today a more faithful ally of this impulse. Fashion, with its insistent focus on material existence, may prove to be a matter of the utmost consequence, while the Hegelian notion of history, wherein surface events are interpreted as having a deep and rational meaning, would appear fickle and arbitrary in comparison' (11). The specific connection she seeks to make is with structural Marxism. Which, again, to quote her at length, is explained as follows:

The revolutionary establishment by Marx of history as a science necessitated breaking away from the continuity of historical narration – based on class struggle or any other developmental principle – and replacing it with a method that Balibar calls periodisation, the distribution of history 'according to the epochs of its economic structure'. Balibar writes that this 'division into period ... replaces historical continuity with a discontinuity, a succession of temporarily invariant states of the structure.' These discontinuities do not announce themselves directly. They occur beneath the surface of that chronological sequence of political events with which historical narratives are traditionally preoccupied. Proper periodisation, then, involves finding the 'right break'; the one that makes the structural changes in history legible – or perhaps better said, makes them legible as history (since the time of the structure is something different from that of history). My claim is that fashion is symptomatic of such transformations. Structural discontinuity becomes manifest when the specific way the economic base is articulated within the ideological and state apparatuses is experienced as being out of date.

(Buck-Morss, 1994: 12)

In the case of this thesis, the focus on fashion is of course literal, but equally we can usefully understand how garments such as the Mao suit, western luxury designs and the cheongsam 'occur beneath the surface' of the chronological sequence of political events and they give us a means of locating the 'right break', or at least align with significant breaks in history. In this chapter and the two that follow, these garments

are read as significant 'breaks', as Balibar describes. They are instances of 'legibility', and indeed a form of 'writing' of history in that they continually return and refigure. For Buck-Morss, her interest is in reading both capitalist and socialist production relations as less distinct than we typically argue. In their 'really existing' forms, she suggests, with *both* being of an industrial mode, perhaps they are not so conceptually apart. In both cases there is a 'living off the accumulated 'surplus' of a wage work-force, produced structures of social relations susceptible, not only to economic exploitation, but to authoritarian political and social forms' (13). Relating such an argument to contemporary circumstances, in which we focus now on the relations of consumption rather than production, the boundaries are seemingly even more porous. This is not to say the political conditions are the same between China and other countries, but the experiences of consumption are perhaps less distinctive than we might suppose. For the global traveller, the 'uniformity' of consumption is quite evident. The circumscribed consumptive space of the airport, for example, is a *neutral* 'ideological form' as Buck-Morss might consider. This is a very obvious example, but a structural 'sameness' can be argued to stem back further:

In all variants of industrial society, each of the three elements of the mode of production – economic, political and ideological – has taken on similar forms: the economic forms of accumulated surplus, mechanised labour, and mass production; the political/legal forms of parties and nation-state; the ideological and cultural forms of mass society. To recognise these elements as *common* to the various industrial social forms is not to endorse a theory of convergence between 'socialism' and 'capitalism', but rather, to describe their shared historical limit. The 1970s witnessed the end of an epoch within the industrial mode in *both East and West* - the decade marked economically by 'stagnation' in the former, and by 'stagflation' in the latter. A certain kind of industrial production became visibly outmoded. The rust belts that emerged in East Germany and Poland cannot be distinguished in a material sense from those that blotted the landscapes of Britain and the United States; the industrial contamination of water and air had the same chemical composition, whether it was produced under socialism or capitalism. The difference within these two systems has not been in the nature of the crisis, but rather in the nature of the response. (Buck-Morss, 1994: 14)

In understanding this 'response' there is a need to examine the economy in *both* an abstract and real sense. It is in the latter sense that Buck-Morss sees the value of thinking through 'fashion'. 'Structuralism examines the mode of production as a

theoretical abstraction,' she explains, 'whereas fashion is concerned with the concrete things of the world' ((Buck-Morss, 1994, 15). She is very critical, for example, of the term 'post-industrialism', which becomes popular among various postmodernist theorists. As an abstract term it explains a structural shift towards consumerism, but is also 'a euphemism for the fact that global communication networks have made it possible to divide the labour (and spread the pollution) of the same industrial production over a geographical area that crosses so many jurisdictional boundaries that no institution - party, state, or union - has the power of political control' (Buck-Morss, 1994, 14). So, how can 'fashion' properly help according to Buck-Morss?

It is an existential concept, the temporality of which is not that of history as causal explanation. Fashion is a way of experiencing history, not as a causal continuum but as *discontinuity*, not as sequence but as fading. If it is a hermeneutical tool for making evident certain discontinuities or shifts within the structure that are themselves imperceptible, it tells us only *that* such a shift is happening, not what will be the result. But the philosophical defence of the concept of fashion is that it has its origin in precisely that industrial mode of production to which it is analytically applied. We are not dealing here with parallel but non-contiguous 'objects' of inquiry, one synchronic and one diachronic, as structuralism commonly argues. Fashion is the product of industry in a sense that is structural and historical, both at once (Buck-Morss, 1994, 15).

The temporality of fashion seemingly gives us access less to a 'grand' history as an *experiencing* of history. In other words, fashion cannot explain an overarching narrative, but it can 'show' us history in its making and *passing*. Indeed, it is as much the discarding of fashion that is significant. The rapidity of fashion directly equates to the tempo for capitalist production, 'in all of its aspects – factory speedup, technological innovation, market turnover – so that the inner dynamics, the "time" of the mode of production, was itself under the sway of fashion' ((Buck-Morss, 1994, 15). Furthermore, the temporality of fashion includes:

the incessant piling up of goods, a new erotics of change (Benjamin calls this the 'puzzling need for new sensations'), and a relentless dismissal of the 'outmoded'. In the nineteenth century, fashion was seized upon by commercial interests as a marketing strategy. But fashion was never merely that. It was the

temporal effect, both structurally and historically, of the convergence between capitalist social relations and industrial production forms. Indigenous to the new mode of production, it became emblematic of its temporality, imbricated within the discourse of history to the point that to be 'advanced' (as a country, a culture, a military force) meant, simply and clearly, having the latest things. ((Buck-Morss, 1994, 15)

Thus, fashion can be thought of as not only *something* that we can study and look at, but also as a *form* that enables us to offer analysis. A key point that emerges from Buck-Morss' account is that fashion identifies or embodies a discontinuous temporality, which takes us back to the account given in Chapter 1 on the Neutral. Instead of a prescriptive and largely binary account of culture that is common through structural semiotics, fashion in itself opens up a more fluid 'system' of meaning that, as outlined in Chapter 1, is arguably more true to Roland Barthes' interest in fashion and ways of reading.

## **Uniform, Uniformities and Gender**

In conjunction with the economic utopian dream recounted by Buck Morss (and her adoption of a temporality of fashion), an underlying premise of this chapter is that the changing economic fortunes (and ideology) of China over the latter half of the twentieth century to the present can be associated with specific forms of dress and 'uniformities' of fashion. And specifically, this can be read in terms of gender. Women's social status and economic development are closely related (Duflo, 2012). Christopher Breward (1995) indicates that clothes have always played a pivotal role in defining a sense of identity and society, particularly when concerned with body politics. In the process of economic development, Chinese women's status is dynamically changing. By focusing on female fashion of specific periods of the twentieth through to the twenty-first century, we can see developments in what I have suggested as 'uniforms' in the global/local market (cheongsam and luxury clothing); and how the cheongsam becomes a uniform and an indicator of women's social status.

Writing in the 1980s, and notably in the western context, this idea of fashion as uniform is neatly summarized by Rosalind Coward (1984: 27-36) in the opening lines of her essay 'Being Fashionable':

One thing that fashion is quite categorically *not* is an expression of individuality. By definition, fashion implies a mode of dress, or overall style, which is accepted as representing up-to-dateness. Fashion, of course, is not necessarily the same thing as clothes, which are often used in individual ways. Being fashionable is different. It is always the acceptance of the prevailing ideals. (Coward, 1984: 29)

In many regards this position, regarding how fashion is implicated in the 'prevailing ideas' and in the dominant socio-economic and political conditions, still holds today. However, two main points need to be noted. Firstly, the fashion 'landscape', or 'fashion system', as suggested in Chapter 1, has evolved in a number of ways, not least with regards to technological change. The idea that fashion is not an expression of individuality might be argued against if we view the explosion in social media imagery to be a forum for individual tastes and expressions. It has certainly been the case that amateur models and 'Vloggers' have ended up becoming key 'influencers', bypassing the usual industry protocols. Furthermore, the outpouring of 'selfies' can be seen as a mass form of self-expression, which often is a space in which individuals reveal their fashion interests and styles. Equally, however, these same techniques and phenomena can be argued to be an expanded 'system' of 'being fashionable', which to take Coward's line, is not merely individual expression, but about forms of conformity. Social media is often described as an 'echo chamber', whereby we congregate in social networks that only reflect our own views and interest and so reinforce patterns of behavior, and in terms of fashion, patterns of consumption. Writing in the 1980s, Coward is open to the fact that the top-down, conspiratorial industry account of what is and is not fashion, is already breaking down. It is the case that while the fashion industry thrives on rapid change, and change itself is not necessarily coming from the industry. 'Values often come,' she notes, 'from the use of clothing in subcultures – ear-rings copied from gay signals, pastiches of fashion from the street parodies of punk. Take also the series of Third World styles which have passed through the West' (Coward, 1984: 33). However, despite these

'semiotic' changes, there are more 'general pressures', she suggests that lead towards 'being fashionable', and which are 'above and beyond particular subgroup statements' (34), i.e. beyond the statement of only certain individuals, but rather become more generalized *patterns* of fashion and its reception. And what is more this 'general level of fashionability' is also subject to change: 'In the [nineteenth] century, for example, the term "a lady of fashion" might have signified "wealthy". To be fashionable now is, I think, to express a readiness to keep up with prevailing sexual ideas' (34). Coward's underlying argument is that women's liberation has opened up expressions of sexuality, which becomes more prominent than displays of wealth, or at least these combine as 'sophisticated sexuality'. This also allows a shift towards women wearing 'male' clothing: First there was army gear, then dungarees and boiler suits,' and which is followed, she notes, 'by more unisex sporty clothes – track suits and jodhpurs, and more recently dress suits, and then thirties gangster styles' (34). Again, fitting with the account in Chapter 1 of a complex fashion system, the meanings and *materials* of signs become ever more complex and open to both uniformity and difference. Reflecting on the shift to unisex clothing, for example, Coward writes:

Undoubtedly these are powerful signifiers of freedom of movement, meanings of work (dungarees etc.) or freedom of the street (gangsters). The clothing represents an attempt to reclaim the street and work for women. But other elements combine with these fashions to add other significations. There have been the unlikely bedfellows such as jodhpurs and stiletto heels, the latter the ultimate symbol of female oppression and restriction. (34)

Of course, once clothing is combined in new ways there is often the creation of new meanings and connotations. The seemingly non-feminine garment of the Jodhpur once worn by women, and glamourized in media forms etc., becomes an expression of the female form, which, in Coward's description, is accentuated through its combination with the high heel shoe. The high heel itself is something that has been fashionable in different ways in different times. At the time of writing, in the 1980s, Coward is not alone in decrying the status of the high heel, yet later, in the 1990s, and certainly more recently the high heel has been read as much as an expression of female power as it is oppression. The UK pop band, Spice Girls, famed for asserting

so-called 'Girl Power', wore a wide and elaborate range of footwear; while female politicians are often seen to wear high heels. Indeed the now UK Prime Minister, Theresa May is well known for once wearing leopard print 'kitten heels' at a Conservative Party conference.

Coward goes onto argue that the 'cross-dressing' or hybridity of styles has above all else signified 'daring': 'The essence of fashionableness currently is to dare to wear the extraordinary, to look as if you don't care and still remain attractive' (35). We need to remember this account is taken from the mid-1980s, and furthermore from the western context. It serves to remind of the idea of historical disjunction, as discussed above through Buck-Morss' account. It is interesting that Coward refers to women wearing masculine styles as a means of 'daring', and suggestive of a shifting unisex code. I will return to these matters below in discussing the significance of the Mao suit, which was, in a very different setting, also a unisex styling or 'uniform'. However, reference here to this essay by Coward is also useful in reminding of a specific western perspective, which leads to a second, key observation. The development of styles in relation to the development of feminism in the West (leading, arguably, to an expressive 'daring', even of a de-gendered set of forms) cannot be said to map directly upon the Chinese context, where it is fair to say there has been a much less explicit 'feminist discourse'. As such it is easy to view China as lagging behind the West, however this is again where it is perhaps important to adopt a reading of the 'altermodern' as a way of adjusting critique and expectations. In the West, there is generally an account of three main waves of feminism, or even more recently now four waves of feminism (Munro, 2013; Korsholm, 2017). Thus, traditionally 'literature define feminism's first wave occurring from 1849-1920s, the second wave in the 1960-1970s and third-wave in the 1990s, involving feminists who were born after the 1960s' (Korsholm, 2017: 3). More recently, with the advent of high profile campaigns such as #MeToo, there has been renewed interest in socio-political and legal concerns that can be found at the start of the feminist history, but which is combined with new technological means and de-hierarchical structures.

As is typically understood, the first main phase of feminism (in the West) refers back to the suffrage movement from the end of nineteenth through to early twentieth century, leading to the vote for women (in the UK in 1928). This phase centers upon equal rights, seeking social, legal and economic equality. With some of these issues seen to be resolved, at least legally, the second phase (from the 1960s) turns to wider culturally based inequalities and raises questions about the female 'experience' (as being different to men), and includes an emphasis on sexual liberation (which in part relates to developments in contraception). As Munro (2013: 22) explains, 'Second-wave feminists coined the phrase "the personal is political" as a means of highlighting the impact of sexism and patriarchy on every aspect of women's private lives'. By the 1990s there is the emergence of third-wave feminism, which is 'heavily influenced by academic investigations of queer theory' (Munro, 2013: 23), which is a critique of binary understandings of 'male' and 'female'. There is greater attention to more individual 'mircopolitics'. In many respects the emphasis upon individualism is related to the rise of consumerism, and the phrase postfeminism is often used. Like the 'post-' of postmodernism, there are multiple positions that can be viewed. There are two main readings of postfeminism: firstly the idea of an end of feminism (including an anti-feminism and an argument that feminism is no longer relevant). Secondly there is the view that there is a new stage of feminism, which acts upon what has gone before, but which has many different perspectives, not least needing to attend to wider differences around the world and between people. One of the critiques within postfeminism is a previously western-centric viewpoint. The so-called fourth wave of feminism might be seen as yet another manifestation of postfeminism, but equally has been seen as a return to the larger movement of feminism (notable with first and second wave feminism). It is a return to a concern over the deeper structures of inequality within society. Arguably there has been a lot of focus on high-proliferate cases of gender discrimination and abuse in western countries, but in turn there has been media coverage in other countries too, such as India. Nonetheless, with respect to the context of China, as pertinent to this thesis, this dominant account of the history of feminism is not entirely appropriate. As already noted, the discourse around feminism *per se* is not prevalent in China, and the overarching history of the country is strongly patriarchal. Nonetheless, in China,

the communist revolution under Mao makes for a very rapid change with regards to the ideology of male-female equality (even if it is not always experienced as such). In general terms, the legal and political definitions of social relations in China have been maintained; indeed the country is still communist. However, unlike the second-wave of feminism in the West, in China it is less the case that female 'experience' is given voice. Instead, then, with the rise of today's strong consumerist culture, China might be said to have jumped to a more post-modern, individualistic account of gender politics, which no less is *displayed* in individual styles and use of fashion. Importantly then, while female attitudes and behaviors in contemporary China might be *seen* to portray some similarities to those in the West, the lack of a deeper enquiry and discourse around a female experience (and the personal politics that it represents) makes it inappropriate to describe China in the same terms of western feminism (which typically would be to suggest it is moving along the same path, albeit belatedly). It is not really in the scope of this project to make further claims for a Chinese feminism, but nonetheless, this thesis works within this view that any account of women in China needs careful contextualizing. What follows, then, is an attempt to offer a more detailed historical account, developed mainly in relation to the Mao suit (and in the next chapters, with respect to the influx of western brands and then the many instances of the cheongsam).

### **Changing Uniformities**

Broadly speaking, the recent history of women in China can be explored with respect to three chronological stages or phases of sartorial codes. Between 1950-1980, as will be explored in the section which flows; there is a turn to a unisex and military uniform, which universalizes a more masculine characterization. Then, from 1980-2010 (as discussed towards the end of this chapter and more fully in the next), western clothing enters into the market and influences the dominant trends. Alongside which there is the re-emergence of the cheongsam, which had been all but banned during Mao's regime. This period gives rise to cultural fusion and greater sense of femininity; qualities, which are further extended in a third, contemporary

stage, from 2010 onwards. In this case, as examined in Chapter 4, we encounter increasing examples of a hybrid Cheongsam, which leads into this thesis' account of neutral clothing, which is a means to account for a more fluid *fashioning* of women's lifestyle and clothing. Inevitably, in trying to understand feminism in China, it is necessary to relate to the wider context of cultural globalization of recent decades. Chinese new feminism has been influenced gradually by western culture, but equally still differentiates from it, presenting its own particular characteristics. The point, then, is that Chinese feminism cannot be fully grasped without observing its deeper roots in modern Chinese history and culture, as well as a continuing struggle for gender equality that is a form of anti-Confucianism.

Modern Chinese feminist movements in the PRC can trace their origins through the May Fourth 1919 Movement and the establishment of the Communist-regime in 1949. The male reformers of the late Qing, Republican, and May Fourth eras promoted women's liberation as a source of transformation and modernization; women's education and emancipation were viewed as sources of strength for China so long as they did not undercut male privilege (Chen, 2011, 34). Thus, the evolution of contemporary Chinese feminism is usefully seen by reference to the dynamic between local activism and global feminist movements (Kaufman, 2012). While the Chinese economic miracle is widely publicized and debated on the international stage, what is generally neglected is China's domestic scene in which there have been notable social changes, which are in fact inseparable from the country's exponential economic growth. In particular, the Chinese women's rights movement, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, has played a crucial role in China's rapid development. It is important to reiterate and emphasize that unlike western feminism initiated by grassroots activists, modern Chinese feminism begins as state policy. Since the Communist Revolution of 1949, women's rights have been driven by the party ideology, with the idea that women's equal participation in the economy and society was necessary to advance the nation. Despite numerous changes and China's ensuing transition to a capitalist market economy, this ideology largely remains, so underpinning women's rights in China. In the past two decades, however, contemporary Chinese feminists have begun vocally challenging Marxist state

feminism. As such, Chinese feminism has its own historical context, which differs from that of the West. Generally speaking, the Chinese women's movement, conditioned by state socialism and reform-era openness, was boosted by the preparations for three formative stages in the 70 years of the PRC, being: the rise of political position in Maoist era; economical improvement after Opening-up; and ideological emancipation refer to freedom of consumption too. These three stages are embodied through the three styles of uniforms as suggested above.

In situating this research around questions of female fashion in contemporary China, a particular interest is what can be understood as women's social uniforms. Importantly, as outlined in Chapter 1, reference here to 'uniform' is not meant as a formal, designated outfit (as might be required by a workplace or schools). The notion of uniform is more conceptual, and more akin to the point made by Coward (noted above) that fashion is *not* an expression of individuality. Rather fashion is a form of uniformity, or styling that is maintained by its own system of significations. So, while women in contemporary China will not be seen all wearing the same outfits, there is a way in which clothing will be indicative of productive or occupational roles within the economy. As some researchers put it, 'adorning oneself can reflect connections with the system of production characteristic if the particular economy with which one lives' (Roach and Either 1979: 13; Barnard, 1996). It is at this level that 'uniform' is to be understood, so reflective of certain economic situations that women live in, as well as one's status and beliefs within that economy. Inevitably, in China, as in any other fast growing consumer societies, economic-social-political advances manifest visible signs of prosperity through possessions (Chao and Myers, 1998; Wei and Pan, 1999). Indeed, fashion consumption in recent years in China is seen as part of a consumer revolution (Stearns, 2006), and this revolution is strongly driven by luxury brands.

Examining uniforms in the literal sense, though exposing what is 'extraordinary' about their ordinariness, Craik claims that uniforms worn in extreme regimes or in developing countries seeking modernity and international recognition are often highly elaborate, being a demonstration of actual or desired power (2015, 129).

Finnane (2008) claims, for example, that the instability in Chinese clothing relates to the rapid turnover of political regimes. As Chinese women's gender roles changed, according to political edicts, so their social 'uniform' would change; with women in different uniforms acquiring new social meanings. We often define uniforms in terms of costume, as clothing to perform a particular role. In this sense, the costume is not for the acting or pretending of something, but for doing. So for example, uniforms denote (not connote) similar appearance, distinctiveness of a group, i.e. or uniformity within a group. And uniforms function as a means for the delineation of hierarchy, status, authority and value, that is, by detailing difference in externally imposed behavioral codes and in generating responses of others to those codes.

The school uniform is a clear example of a function for belonging to a set school, and enabling clear identification, which in turn can be used as a means to control. The behavior of individual school children while out in the street, for example, can enable quick identification for the wider community. School uniforms are also taken to be a means of offering a level playing field, so that children at school are not seen to have more than another; everyone is the same, which it can be argued helps reduce distractions at school. In Craik's investigation a teacher remarks on the value of the uniform: 'I see an almost magical change in the student body. My talk of the ease with which they dress in the morning, and all the kids seem calmer and more mild-mannered.... Perhaps uniforms draw us all into a false security and well being that only conformity can give' (Craik, 2013, 130). While Craik's account looks specifically at disciplinary problems and antisocial behavior, it reveals wider social and cultural considerations. For example, in China, the school uniform has been drawn into broader debates about protecting Chinese culture. Here the argument is that Chinese primary students ought to wear traditional forms of dress as a means to protect Chinese tradition (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1, traditional dress on Chinese girls

Source: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/20/c\\_137193041.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/20/c_137193041.htm)

It is perhaps worth pointing out this image is of female students, being suggestive of a particular gendered use of the uniform for social conformity. And indeed, contemporary debates about uniforms often evoke rhetoric around the culture of individualism that relates to gendered attributes of uniforms and normative femininity. This is explored further in the next section in terms of the women's uniform shirt of the Mao era, which must be recognized as part of the encoding of a Chinese female uniform, with its message about dress in terms of regulation, restraint, discipline, practicality, identity, political status, social role. Thus the 'uniform' takes on many different forms and functions, which change over time, and which arguably, impact upon women very specifically. As Craik writes:

While uniforms reveal continuities between vestimentary and masculine training, girls and women in uniforms problematize these normative assumptions. Uniforms for women are of two main types: quasi-masculine uniforms associated with instilling discipline, confidence, and particular skills to operate in the public sphere; and feminized uniforms that promote physical and emotional training in attributes of nurturing and helpmate. Although female uniforms function as a code of discipline and some attributes of ideal femininity, the role of the uniform in relation to acquiring codes of sexuality is radically aberrant (Craik, 2013, 139).

The counter argument, of course, is that fashion is not a uniform, it is not a loss or reduction of identity. Instead, fashion is your personality, a reflection (on the outside) of 'who you are' (Barnard, 2014, 91). Yet, the reading taken here, is that fashion is full of 'uniforms' of one type or another. In other words, there is always a system of meaning that comes with fashion. Different clothing will be found within different economic and social circumstances, associated with varying political practices and cultural formations. Clothing will vary according to nationalities, class and subcultural dress codes (Craik, 2003). Thus as much as we can speak of the meanings attached to explicit (literal) uniforms (such as with the Mao suit explored in the next section), there are all manner of forms of dressing that relate to social and cultural *uniformities*. There is a degree of homogeneity, for example, associated with global consumer trends and sometimes a rigid codification of 'local' or national dress as compared with imported brands.

Returning to the broader issue of gender, it is useful to refer to Rouse (1989; 108) and Barnard (2002; 117) who imply that fashion and clothing are instrumental in the process of socialization into sexual and gender roles; they help shape people's ideas of how men and women should look. Importantly, it is not the case that fashion and clothing simply reflect already existing sex and gender identity, but that they are part of the process by which attitudes to and images of both men and women are created and reproduced by the clothing. That is to say, the wearers' identity or gender identity is generated by the dress. It is interesting in this respect to refer to the case of the cheongsam as worn by *both* men and women in the 1920s (Figure 2.2), yet now only worn by women, which demonstrates to us an image of gender equality in the patriarchal society. As a historical record, this image quickly reminds us that even the Chinese cheongsam (which today is so strongly associated with the female body) can be seen as a more 'arbitrary' form, i.e. allowing for changing set of meanings, not least in connection with gendered boundaries. We might claim that Chinese female uniforms (which mirror the social and political situation) can be a mask or a marker of sexual identity. For example, the unisex style of the Mao's jacket, or hybrid Cheongsam (1930s) both can be – and at least has been – worn by

men and women. As shown in Figure 2.2, a couple wear a similar piece of gown, with the same hard collar and long length, but the only difference is that the garment on the female on the left is more shaped to the body and is brighter, while on the right, the male's garment is loose and darker. Yet, still, this image is a reminder of the 'neutrality' of clothing, by which clothing can be an 'open container' of meaning, allowing for shifting meanings. Thus, dress and the codes of gender change, or at least *can* change enormously.



Figure 2.2: Chiang Kai-Shek and His wife Soong Meiling, 1940s  
Source: from the center of research of Second war in Chongqing.

According to Ling (2009), the cheongsam had an indissoluble link with the fabrication of a social structure prizes female identity, China's modernity, and women's pursuit of the new. Based on Ling's consideration of the hybrid cheongsam in 1930s, the uniformity of the present cheongsam, for example, is the most heavily gender-coded garment (as compared to Maoist clothing) as discussed in Chapter 1. Furthermore, different visions prompt new identities for wearers in an altermodern China (as will be discussed in Chapter 4). It is somewhat a written code. So, Cheongsam, as a uniform in this thesis, worn by Chinese women, the obvious high-tight-straight collar more or less conveys serious and private attitude of women, also demonstrates

precisely how this garment. It carries a series of social structures to meets the public with a sign, significance, which is thoroughly dependent upon women's gender identity and lifestyle.

The wearing of uniforms constitutes central body techniques in the actualization of persona and the social orders. And indeed, we know that uniforms are extremely effective indicators of the codification of appropriate rules and their internalization (Craik, 2013). However, the term 'uniform' in this thesis, as outlined already, has to be understood in an expanded sense. It is not merely to refer to the literal uniform or costume, but rather to a whole set of common codes and the sharing of meaning through clothing. The Mao suit (discussed below) and the Cheongsam (examined in Chapter 4) are arguably special cases of uniform. The former is a literal uniform that seeks to be un-seen (to simply be what everyone wears in a everyday setting), yet becomes an iconic form (making it highly repeatable and citable). The latter is not so obviously a uniform, even if historically, as in Figure 2.2, it offers a uniformity of dress between men and women. Yet, similarly, this garment takes on iconic status, though much more explicitly associated with femininity. Each garment, in terms of their iconicity, offer the means of being a 'uni-form', i.e. a way of being a singular, distinctive form, yet one that can be endlessly remade and replayed. The significance of which is not merely of their endless remaking, but of their weighted significations; their ability to carry meanings beyond themselves. For example, the cheongsam has become a form of 'state dress' for high profile women in China, particularly when visiting abroad. What follows, in the next section on the Mao suit, is a reading of this sort of sartorial signification, which is both historically grounded, but also re-fashioned in the contemporary (or indeed, is ever a contemporary phenomenon, as a perpetual re-reading, re-fashioning).

## **Mao Suit and Collective 'Freedom'**

In the following two images (Figures 2.2 and 2.3) we see first Chairman Mao and then his wife, Jiang Qing. In both images, we see them wearing the iconic 'Mao suit',

with its high-buttoned, rounded collar and double-breast pockets. Typically, the suit would be made out of cotton material, which was durable and military in style. It was a suit for 'everyone', a suit for the workers, made by the workers, with all effectively being representatives of the communist state of China. Of course, what is most significant about these two images, certainly for the purposes of this thesis, is the ambiguity over gender. The Mao suit was worn by both men and women, and more crucially was intended not merely as a unisex garment, but a means to de-emphasize gender altogether. Indeed, to look at both these images, the gender of the individuals is not immediately obvious. Or perhaps more accurately, as will be noted below, there is a certain erasure of female visual attributes, leading to a common (masculine) form. While this form involves various aspects of dressage (including hair style and hats etc.), the suit, with its ample cut and plain cut, is highly significant.



Figure 2.2, Chairman Mao in his famous 'Mao suit', 1970  
Source: the book of the *Mao Zhu Xi Yu Lu*.

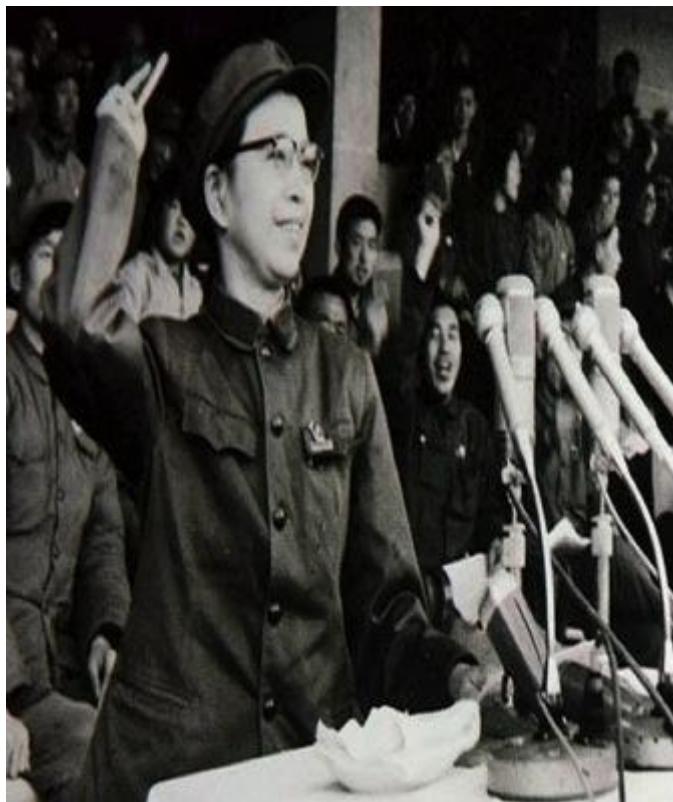


Figure 2.3, Chairman Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, wearing the 'Mao suit', c. 1970

Source: The book of *Cultural Evolution*

In 1949, the Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, took control of China after several decades of foreign aggression and civil war. Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and in taking up office as Chairman took to wearing what is known in the West as the 'Mao suit', as shown above. Given the widespread iconography of the Chairman (with large scale portraits in most cities in China, and with his image circulating internationally), along with the regularity with which he wore the suit, the garment rapidly gained popularity, acting as a key symbol of political expression for the communist party (Verity, 2002). The suit itself, which is utilitarian in style, like worker overalls and with 'useful' pockets etc., conjures an image of the ordinary 'man', of the humble worker. Equally, it suggests a military style (as a buttoned suit with high collar), which connotes industriousness, regularity and discipline. However, once the suit is copied with the majority of men and women wearing it across China, it starts to affect the every idea it symbolizes. It literally is a suit of the 'everyman'. In terms of Buck-Morss' account of 'dreamworlds', the suit is a symbol of 'universal freedom' and social justice. It is a

means of suggesting equality (through sameness) and of a flattened hierarchy (all being the same 'rank').

Finnane and Sun (2018) rightly point out that the idea of dressing the same in the everyday in the early decades of the People's Republic of China 'is a persistent theme' (15). They remind of the need for caution in assuming too much of what actually people were wearing during this time. 'The case for dressing 'the same',' they point out, 'is rarely made in detail. Rather, it is presented in general works about Chinese history or politics, and consists mainly of references to the homogeneity of dress during the Mao years' (15). And in this case, the references are mainly of the Mao suit. Finnane and Sun's own study refers to a greater 'cultural flow' of associations, imagery and goods. The 'People's suit' they note is not 'fully equivalent to the "Mao suit". The latter term is best thought of as designating a rather large category that embraces and confuses several forms of simply jacket and trousers, including the Lenin suit' (26). Nonetheless, within this broader categorization, there is a general trend for what they refer to as 'simple' jackets and trousers, which are very much in the service of signifying political ideas about sameness and utility. The account offered here is mindful of what Finnane and Sun note is a straw man argument, that overly general references to the idea of 'sameness' can be used to build a case against the proposition. Thus, the account here can be understood as a contemporary reading rather than one that is specifically trying to offer historical evidence. The case is that the Mao suit (rightly or wrongly) has come to be read as a certain symbol of dress, both for what it signified at the time, but also as an enduring symbol, or what Barthes might term a 'myth' for today. Finnane and Sun also note how the case against 'sameness' in terms of dress in the Mao years is often pursued via close studies. Such cases then rest 'on evidence that variety, nuance, agency, gender, class and resistance are evident in the actual clothing worn, photographed and remembered by people who lived through those years' (15). As such, 'scholars engaging in this debate have in fact revealed the limits of conformity in dress at any one period of Maoist China'. Nonetheless, they go onto point out that despite arguments continuing 'to be mounted against the paradigm of homogeneity, it is some time now since that paradigm was dismantled' (15). It is

certainly the case here that a variety of small details are picked out from some of the photographs below, which are used to deconstruct the ideas of gender associated with the Mao suit, but it is the *combined* effect of both an enduring narrative of homogeneity and of many (micro) breaks within that narrative that is important.

To explain a little further it is useful to reference a scholarly exchange, cited by Finnane and Sun, between a sociologist, Li Yinhe, and Harriet Evans (in 2001). The former remarks as follows:

From the 1950s through the 1960s up until the end of the Cultural Revolution, the vogue was as follows: men and women were all the same, women did what men did, demanded equality between men and women, and blurred the boundary between the sexes . . . Women at the time concealed their female characteristics. No women wore makeup, and they dressed on the whole in clothes devoid of any sign of the second sex. They dressed up like men, by and large showing no sexual differentiation. This was the tendency in the first thirty years. (Cited in Finnane and Sun, 2018: 16)

In response, Evans takes a contrary view. 'If you look carefully at photos [of the 1950s to 1960s]', she suggests, 'the girls all have little flowers, little pigtails and so on, and in pictures, including propaganda pictures, images of women still have a certain femininity.' (Cited in Finnane and Sun, 2018: 16). Finnane and Sun make a point of the fact that Li, unlike Evans, grew up in Mao's China. Yet, rather than simply suggest her commentary be given more weight, they outline a nuanced historical argument:

In her youth [Li] was making decisions about what to wear in an environment that later scholars might seek to reconstruct but of which they will have had at best marginal experience. We know from the scholarly studies . . . that Li's statement cannot be taken as an empirically accurate description of the full sum of vestimentary choices. Nonetheless, it has its own historical weight as a statement about the remembered meanings of dress practices of a time when Li, like many of her contemporaries, was probably making choices about fabric and personal adornment within the narrow limits of what was available. Clearly, these marginal choices, which have since been used by scholars as evidence of a sustained interest in femininity and beauty during the Mao years, did not remain foremost in Li's memory, and they may not have been foremost in her experience (Cited in Finnane and Sun, 2018: 16).

The historical accounts are complex. The sustained references to the monotonous, homogenous and androgynous styles of the Mao period are significant, not because they are true or false, but that they form the paradigm within which meanings are both made and resisted. As Finnane and Sub put it: 'a drab, androgynous uniformity in fact coexisted with a subversive, gendered variety; ... memories are faulty, and fail to retain detail, or alternatively, memories are shaped more by the present than the past' (17). Crucially, within this paradigm the idea of the flattening of hierarchy associated with this clothing is particularly significant in terms of gender. As early as 1919, as leader of the communist party, Mao made clear his view on the gender differentiation in dress, or rather the aspiration to remove differentiation:

If a woman's head and a man's head are actually the same, and there is no real difference between a woman's waist and a man's, why must women have their hair piled up in those ostentatious and awkward buns? Why must they wear those messy skirts cinched tightly at the waist? I think women are regarded as criminals to start with, and tall buns and long skirts are the instruments of torture applied to them by men. There is also their facial makeup, which is the brand of the criminal, the jewelry on their hands, which constitutes shackles, and their pierced ears and bound feet, which represent corporal punishment. Schools and families are their prisons. They dare not voice their pain, nor step out from behind closed doors. If we ask, how can they escape this suffering, my answer is, only by raising a women's revolutionary army. (Cited in Finnane, 2009, 23)

It is clear, then, that leading up to the Cultural Revolution<sup>12</sup> - as Mao's ideas grew in popularity – the climate soon becomes unfavorable for garments such as the Cheongsam and indeed any form of gendered dress or forms of distinctive status (that comes from deliberate elegance and luxury). In effect, the cheongsam is banned throughout the time of Mao. The wife of the Vice-President, for example, was held up in public disrepute for wearing the garment (Finnane, 2008). Thus, the cheongsam is hardly seen during this time. Women were discouraged from wearing

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<sup>12</sup> The Cultural Revolution, formally the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 until 1976. Launched by Mao Zedong then Chairman of the Communist Party of China its stated goal was to preserve 'true' Communist ideology in the country by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society and to re-impose Mao Zedong Thought as the dominant ideology within the Party. The Revolution marked Mao's return to a position of power after the Great Leap Forward. The movement paralyzed China politically and negatively affected the country's economy and society to a significant degree.

(source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_Revolution))

anything that drew attention to them as women. In short, gender in dress between 1960s-1970s is greatly de-emphasised.

Mao's view on gender forms the background of an initial phase of feminism in China. His claim that women had no need to dress up was indeed a claim that women are equal to men; and by extension that girls should be educated in schools like boys, and, crucially, that women could play an equal role in politics (Ling 2007; Wu 2007; Finanne 2007). Thus, in the Maoist period, women's social status is explicitly a form of political status, since the communist party paid particular attention to women's power. In order to generate women's enthusiasm to support the communist revolution, the Party organized different associations including women's organizations to recruit party members, opened various public forums to promote socialism, mobilized students' and workers' movements in big cities, and encouraged women to participate in social and military events (Zheng, 2016, 89).

During this period, Mao established the Marriage Reform Law to enshrine women's rights in law. The national law sought to address obvious concerns faced by women in regard to marriage and family life: it abolished forced marriage, bridal dowries (i.e. the giving of money by the groom's family for a bride), concubines, and child betrothal (in which a young girl is raised by another family to become a designated bride). It protected women from feudal practices, and the law also extended the representation of women by guaranteeing them equal rights in the ownership and management of family property, as well as the equal right to request for divorce, and allowed Chinese women to keep their own family names (Hu, 2016). The Marriage Reform Law was designed to create a 'new democratic marriage', remove patriarchal oppression, and construct a new image of women. The effect of these changes dramatically improves Chinese women's social status; allowing them, for example, to more easily enter the workforce and educational opportunities (Hu, 2016). In many ways, these changes echo those that had already been taking place in the West, but clearly there are very different underpinning political ideologies. Set against thousands of years of patriarchal rule of China, whereby women were not seen to need to study or be intellectual etc., Mao's vision for women's liberation was

profound. He believed that women could hold up ‘the half of the sky’ and would alleviate the shortage of labor in cooperatives and communes. Some scholars have argued that the motivations for changes to women’s rights movement at this time were not rooted in idealist beliefs of human rights but rather pragmatic considerations of political development (Hu, 2016, Zhang 2017). Nonetheless, the effect of these new state policies was to radically change the economic and social status of women in China.

Thus, women took on key roles in both the private and the public fields, including exercising ‘political authority in local governments and served in high-ranking offices’ (Chinese Daily, 1953); and there was the establishment of the National Women’s Federation. These are substantial social and political changes, but nonetheless, as a running thread throughout this time is the Maoist *unisex* uniform. It visualized the underlying philosophy of both gender equality and communist politics. It was *not* about expressing individuality in dress, and as such helped women to steer a course through male-dominated professions. In other words, women’s identity is de-emphasized by an already existing code of dress. Unisex dress offered a particular means for the construction of women’s identity as genderless, allowing for the emergence of high-powered professional women. By contrast, a ‘powerless’, feminine look was looked down upon. ‘Cheongsam, western suits, tight pants – in the space of a night turned into the “four olds”, and were swept into the dustbin of history by the “iron boom” of the proletariat. The only thing worth wearing is the one form of glamour, which took off like a storm, was the yellow army uniform’ (Zhang, 2003, 11; Fianna, 2007, 236).

As already suggested, the value of this jacket was its symbolism of a collective regime, as a uniform for the ‘battle’ that communism took to the world’s competing ideologies. This uniform signified attributes of discipline and reliability, and which subsequently enhanced women’s political equality to men. According to Wu (2009: 78), there was no expectation of the doctrine of ‘men to dress looking like men and women looking like women’. Yet, of course, it is not straightforward to describe this garment as genderless or unisex. Its military style of Maoist uniform, unflattering to

woman's body, and issued in only grey-blue color, 'regulates' the woman's body (and mind) towards a collective sign of masculinity. Rather than genderless, then, we might refer to a form of 'cross-dressing' (of women dressing as men, but not the other way round). Ling (2009) shows how the recent history of Chinese fashion is marked by a profound symbolic tension arising from the desire, if often repressed, of one sex emulating the clothing and associated gender paraphernalia of the other. Even the feminine cheongsam, as we saw above, found its origin (or equivalence) in men's clothing. This originally unisex form of dress changes however to become distinctive of the female gender. In part, we can see this shift happening due to the suppression of the garment during the Mao period. Indeed, read deconstructively, the rhetoric of the Mao regime asserting genderlessness, equally evokes gender differences. To refer back to Mao's 1919 statement of male/female differentiation, it is almost that we have a list of the various features and stylings of female fashion and femininity. It need not be understood, however, as 'essential' qualities, but ways of 'dressing up' as a woman – a form of 'body' and sartorial rhetoric. Here we might think of Judith Butler's famous study, *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she argues that gender is a kind of improvised performance. Her account, which is based on a study of structuralism, understands the various shifts in meaning through a system of signs (which can include the complexity of cross-dressing as a sign-system within a sign-system). In the case of Mao, his account, albeit simplistically, is a form of 'fashion system' that he seeks to work against, but which nonetheless is *made apparent* by its suppression.

Arguing in a similar way, Welters and Lillethun (2007: 96) claim that the female form 'is both an intimate and social object: intimate in that ... it comes to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for female identity; social in that it is structured by social forces and subject to social and moral pressures'. This 'object' of the female body is no less significant in the Chinese context, which is of course rich in symbolic meaning and the pivot for numerous cultural and individual anxieties. The 'unisex' Maoist jacket and the original unisex cheongsam, both 'dress' the Chinese women's body in ways that nonetheless must relate to issues of gender and structures of power and meaning. Welters and Lillethun's (2007; cf. Douglas, 1973; 1984) account of the two

'bodies' (intimate and social) constitutes a totality of women's experience. It is an embodiment of not only the physical body (biological, individual) but also the social body (demanded by our culture). The latter gives meaning to the former, shaping our understanding of embodiment, which is summarized as follows:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories though, which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. (Douglas in 1973: 93; Welters and Lillethun, 2007, 96)

Thus, according to Douglas, the body is a highly restricted medium of expression that expresses the social pressure brought to bear upon it. Crucially, then, a woman's 'way of being' in the body is shaped by the social situation imposed upon the women's identity and constrains it to act in particular ways. Indeed, the body as conditioned by a particular uniform becomes a symbol of the whole political-social situation. Of course, such an account privileges the social over the physical, yet the latter should not be underestimated. Indeed, in the following images, we can read off various physical elements and attributes in ways that re-orientate how we might view gender and genderlessness.



Figure 2.4: A women in a Mao suit in 1970s.

Source: the book of *Chinese Cultural Revolution*.

In this image 2.4, we see the Mao suit as – at first sight – a seemingly genderless garment. It ‘forms’ the body as a military, disciplined body. There is order and utility to the image (with the neat collar, the rolled up sleeves and the bag across the shoulder). This ‘solider’ is ready to obey and act. However, there are telltale signs of the woman as woman. Wisps of hair can be seen from under the cap, her hands are small (and ‘delicate’) and the belt pulls her waist tighter. Mao’s suggestion that ‘there is no real difference between a woman’s waist and a man’s’ begins to unravel. Indeed, Mao’s view of ‘no differentiation’ between men and women is difficult to uphold in reality, with clothing always being ‘written’ as much through its cut as through the body and gestures of the ‘author’ the garments. In the following image, for example, the *women* in the foreground seem to emerge almost in defiance of their uniform clothing. Set against a sea of indistinct faces, the woman closest to the camera offers a very striking image. Her clothing creases as she holds her fist up, it must yield to her female body. Her young, clean face is balanced (it is ‘uniform’, as in

symmetrical) and her platted hair seemingly defies Mao's railing against ostentatiousness.



Figure 2.5, Mao suit in 1970s.  
Source: the book of *Chinese Cultural Revolution*.



Figure 2.6, the unisex Mao suit  
Source: <https://news.qq.com/a/20090705/000469.htm>

The image of the Mao suit is further developed in this photograph (Figure 2.6), in which we see it *accessorized* with a belt (most notable with the woman in the foreground to the left, but also with the woman in the foreground on the far right). Again, with the woman on the left, we see her hair out from under her cap, but it is

the belt that is most striking, accentuating her waist and in stark contrast to how the suit hangs down straight on the male form in the center of the picture. The belted Mao suit is a 'look' that can in fact be associated with Mao's wife, who arguably creates a 'trend'. Regardless of this or not, it is hard to deny the significance of the female waist as a sign of 'woman', which cannot be suppressed by the rhetoric of a man, regardless of his words of equality and equivalence.

As with Finnane and Sun's (2018) account, there is a double narrative of the Mao suit, a combined effect of its persistence as a symbol of sameness and androgyny, as well as it being a site of contest. What cannot be denied is that this form of clothing is explicitly political. It is 'cited' through its use as a political symbol (of solidarity). Thus, while some may wish to argue that women's fashion or clothing is *apolitical*, particularly in Western discourse (Edward, 2010: 191), it is rather the opposite in China in this period. Politics here is both with a capital 'P', in respect of a party politics, but also a little 'p', whereby there is a contesting space with regards to the expressions of gender. Despite the evident androgyny, there is a female (visual) identity that cannot be repressed. Through this, of course, the political narrative of equality is important for the development of women's rights in China. In this way, then, the Mao suit offers a layered set of meanings and is worn in differing ways (historically and in the present). In some respects, this garment jars with Buck-Morss's account of using the term 'fashion' as a way of reading history, as being of breaks, of being discontinuous. The garment is a way of accessing a particular period, and seemingly stabilizes our reading of this time. Yet, equally, the double (and simultaneous) reading of the Mao suit as *both* sameness and a site of contested meaning (as being in itself a 'deconstructive' uniform), helps highlight how Buck-Morss's account of history as discontinuous and in flux can actually operate. If a little simplistic, it is as if change can come from within stasis, merely by the way in which one chooses to wear or accessorize an outfit. To put it more seriously, Davis (1992) suggests how fashion's ambivalence is a way to 'fix' identity that fashion does not produce *permanent* symbolic solutions. Rather its symbols are too short-lived and its ambivalence too deeply rooted. Nonetheless, in the modern, globalized world, clothing comes to play a part in how we deal with ambivalence, because

clothing frames our embodied self, it seems to 'serve as a kind of visual metaphor for social-identity' (1992:25). The use of the Mao suit might be very explicit in its attempt to assert a certain symbolism, but the shift (or break) in its meanings reveals the fragility (and potential discontinuous nature) of political narratives. Of course, ironically, while the 'uniform' of the Maoist period purportedly had nothing to do with gender (in that the aim is to remove the importance of gender differences), it nonetheless has a strong significance for the development of the feminist movement for China. Yet, equally, when we see the garment evoked today, with contemporary renderings of the Mao suit, we see it as just one of many symbols all jostling for meaning in a postmodern surfeit of imagery. When a woman wears the Mao suit today it is a playful, ironic statement. It says little about gender. Today's version is, then, perhaps truly genderless, yet arguably offers less for a feminist politics.

## After Reform: New Fashions, New Freedoms

While the Mao period can be associated with the first stage of feminism, and that we can identify the Mao suit as a significant form of dress associated with this political development, it can equally be said that this era, for women, offers little understanding and no engagement with fashion. Clothing was not 'fashionable'; rather it is utilitarian, unisex and (militarily) uniform. Of course, this unisex uniform reflects or is related to women's position in society, and is part of the experience of women's political and social equality. But, it is an experience that is effectively premised upon anti-fashion. Women are expected to wear masculine unisex clothing rather than *feminine* clothing. Of course, any simplistic assumption that the style of fashion-uniform reflects the spirit of the times can be challenged, but fashion is not unaffected by shifts in social life, nor can we say it does not itself affect political life. The fact that (uni) forms change is to acknowledge that different times have different 'looks', whether through radical differences (as with the Mao suit, set against the ban on the cheongsam) or modifications (whereby, for example, we see femininity reemerge within the constraints of the Mao suit). Clothing is intimately bound up with social life (Crane, 2000). Thus, the complexity of fashion in

contemporary China is not only produced out of economic, political, technological conditions, but also impacts on these conditions, and offers aesthetic means of shaping social, political and cultural ideas.

The political-economic conditions change significantly after Mao's death in 1978. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership China's economy is opened up to international trade. And today, as a consequence, after 35 years of economic globalization, China is the second largest economy (World News, 2016). As Finnane remarks this new stage (after 1978) called for modernization in the areas of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. It meant that China looked outward, to learn from the West, leading modernization and globalization after 30 years of relative seclusion (Finnane, 2008).

Based on Finnane's observations, the Opening-up policy of 1978 can be seen as a great success for China's economy and the manner of policy implementation has resulted in immense changes for Chinese society. 'Economists estimate China's GDP growth from 1978 to 2017 at between 9.5% to around 16.5% a year. The GDP is tenfold. The after-reform's China is widely seen as an engine of world and regional growth' (Government's Report, 2013). Thus, Deng Xiaoping's 30 years Opening-up and Reform Policy enabled China to experience massive transformations. It also changes fashions. Chinese women quickly 'free' themselves from the constraints of asexual dress codes and embrace new ways to express themselves in fashion. Chinese women's interests in beauty products and color (suppressed during the Mao period, but also by the lack of availability in technologies of fabrics and cosmetics etc.) are fulfilled by the post-socialist party state of China and its entrance into global capitalism. Hui (2014) observes this phenomenon, suggesting that Chinese women 'were given the opportunity to wear colorful outfits with diverse styles. They finally had the choice to express their personalities and individualities through fashion and consumption' (2014: 38). It is true that Chinese women, influenced by the western culture, began to think about self-expression, and show their attitudes via clothing, i.e., the western style of clothing, jeans, T-shirts, and the hybrid cheongsam (explored in Chapter 4).

Of course, a prominent change that comes of this new economic stage (after the Opening-up of 1978) is the influx of many western luxury brands, which seemingly fulfill a strong desire among Chinese consumer demands (Oswald, 2012). Today, we commonly see, for example, Louis Vuitton bags on the arms of Chinese women, or Prada dresses marketed to China, with the cheongsam collar (Figure 2.7). The impact and development of luxury goods in China is explored in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice to say, the country's long history, as a 'great' trading nation is quickly evident with its renewal of connecting with a global market. Today, China remains at the forefront of the consumer marketers' interest, and with a market of 1.3 billion people, the country has become the largest consuming society in the history of mankind (Niklas, 2015). The Data from Fortune Character Institute (2016) shows that China's luxury spending in 2015 was \$16.8 billion, and Chinese shoppers account for nearly half of the global luxury market. This trend has been going up year by year. While it is difficult to say exactly why luxury brands have been so successful in China (beyond the fact that it is a huge market place, in terms of sheer numbers), the key point to note is how quickly the 'look' of Chinese women's fashion changes with the new political-economic change (the developments within which will, again, be explored in the next chapter in more detail).



Figure 2.7:Dolce & Gabbana SS 2016  
Source: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/>

In stark contrast to the Mao period, Chinese female shoppers today exhibit a highly fashion conscious approach, with very strong demand for luxury fashion. And given that the majority of such purchases are of foreign imports, the PRC has come to see western culture as penetrating every walk of life. A phenomenon that can be considered by some as forms cultural ‘invasion’ or acculturation. Against which, the Chinese government has asserted some (in) visible rules to try to prompt a decline in foreign luxury goods and to protect domestic brands. For instance, introducing high taxation on imported luxury fashion brands and cars; the promotion of cultural heritage including traditional clothing of minority women; and support for more local designers and companies who propagate the essence of Chinese culture. As will be outlined in the next chapter, these measures can be said to present a further, new shift in China’s relationship to fashion, with the ‘made in China’ tag (associated with the country’s massive export of cheap goods) being mitigated by a growing interest in higher quality goods being made at home (made in and for China).—

As mentioned, after the Opening-up, Chinese women began to modernize their dress practice by combining or ‘fusing’ aspects of Eastern and Western styles. We might consider this an expression of globalization, as examples of the *communication* of west-east culture. In turn, this relates to a new female politics, of the body (in how it is adorned), women’s (national) identity, and women’s role in contemporary China. Here we can begin to refer to a new uni-form, of globalised fashions, but which is adapted and contextualised with the specific setting of contemporary China. Therefore, globalization as communication is not the mere reception of a dominant meaning by a subordinate (local) culture. It is rather the constructional or de-construction of meaning as the interaction between different values and objects. In short, globalization may be conceived as a problem of communication in that it develops homogenized styles. For example, as outlined in Chapter 1, the new global fashion brands (from the West) have been able to take a dominant role internationally. Yet, this process has also produced differing attitudes and beliefs for the wearers.

True communication requires the overcoming of culture difference, as based on different values and the sharing of meanings based on sharing of values. Perhaps we might suggest that fashion *as communication* offers a very fast means of exchange and sharing. In China, for example, the shape and cut of clothing rapidly changed to echo styles from elsewhere:

Skirts, jackets, and trousers were all cut closer to the body. Skirts were shorter and constructed more like western skirts. Jackets often acquired a fashionably high collar, a feature still associated with Chinese dress. Young women developed a hybrid style, either a matching jacket and trouser or Cheongsam in the 1920s. (Wu, 2009, 86)

From Wu's observation, we can see that new economic imperatives, made clear in modernization, enabled close attention to be paid to the textile and clothing industries, which, characteristically, are starting points for an industrializing economy seeking to penetrate world markets. The development of these industries, in conjunction with a relaxation of controls on the conduct of daily life and a sudden exposure to international fashion, was quick to effect a change in clothing culture in China but required a psychological break with the immediate past. Arguably, globalization and modernization effectively overcame these inhibitions, leading to the spread of Western fashion in China. Jeans, leather jackets, high heels, miniskirts, tracksuits, and runners are now ordinary items of dress on Chinese city streets. As Maynard (2010) puts it, the fashion of globalization has become a contemporary fact of life; all of us whether in Europe or Asia, are caught up in an immeasurable network of transnational relations and interlinked arrangements of consumption. Although, what this means, is that the western style clothing transcends geographical boundaries.

Today, the younger generation, born years after the Cultural Revolution, feel little allegiance to the Marxist State Feminism that had dominated earlier social discourse. Women, post-1980, are well connected with western culture as they learn English, study abroad, watch western film, etc. They are open to foreign ideas, and more willing than their predecessors to challenge the status quo. This, however, has led to

renewed conflict, which, arguably, suggests that despite opening up, a new individual (consumer) 'freedom' in contemporary China, the earlier achievements of the women's movement have suffered. It is notable, for example, that the state intervened (and detained people) at a peaceful protest against domestic abuse on International women's Day on March 8, 2015. Equally, however, these developments are symptomatic of genuine engagement. Indeed, feminist organizations such as China's Women's Rights Action Group are not arising out of nowhere. This group is responsible for promoting government policies on women, and protecting women's rights within the government. Now the new focus is on women's self-discovery; and the group launched the Four Self Campaign consisting of: "self-respect, self-confidence, self-improvement, and self-reliance" (Tania Branigan China, 2015-03). Their cause reflects the commonplace concerns of the domestic population. While they share ideologies with feminist movements in other parts of the world, they function within their unique cultural context, because China now is still a patriarchic society. It is a fact that 98% of leaders in China are men not women.

Thus, not only does the opening up of the economy bring new fashions and luxury goods to the country, it brings new political demands and voices. Feminist activist groups remain cautious, however, choosing not to appear too 'radical' at the risk of alienating the larger population. And though women's rights have gained traction among the generation now enjoying greater western culture influence, the widespread stereotype of feminists as threatening extremists is ever present in China (Zheng, 2018). There are, then, differing 'freedoms' at stake in contemporary China, which are both expressed and masked by the multitude of different styles and choices of women's fashion in China. Economic advancement has opened up the variety of choices in women's lifestyles. Chinese women, today, are free to choose whether to be feminine or masculine, or even androgynous. A survey, conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2015, showed that the majority of the women responding in both rural and urban areas considered that they had an equal voice or a decisive vote in making decisions on the family's investments (70.5%—a 36.3% increase from 2005), home purchase (80.1%---a 27.4% increase), and agriculture production (76.2%---a 14.8 % increase). Zheng (2016) investigated that

most women (82.4%) could not be reconciled to achieving nothing, and 80% express they would choose to work even if their husband could earn enough money or if their families had a large fortune. The economical higher status liberates the individual from tradition and enables women to make choices that create meaningful self-identities. These are all changes that are expressed or at least related to the new styles of (largely Western) fashion that are seen in the streets of China today. But, the variety and play of fashion can equally be viewed a new form of uniform, which, while complex and non-uniform in a literal sense, reveals tensions about cultural identity, individualism, and issues of national and global productive forces. As will be explored in the next two chapters, we can begin to see how Chinese women, in the context of the economic globalization, can re-identify themselves both through new global forms and more traditional and local styles. But that, as with the account given in this chapter, the changing trends must equally be understood within a specific cultural context. A view of the changing styles of women's clothing in contemporary China has to be allowed to be read from a Chinese perspective as much as it can be viewed from afar.

## Conclusion

Feminism in China can be seen to have arisen from very rapid change, unlike in the West. Its most notable change occurs under the Mao regime, yet equally, when looking at smaller details (of clothes, accessories and gestures) we can also discern minor fractures and discontinuities of the prevailing ideology. Fashion has a distinct temporality of quickly shifting patterns and changes. While it might seem at odds with the longer arch of history and its various periodization's, fashion suggests a way of understanding how change does in fact occur. It might still be the case that specific fashions reflect the times in which they are associated, but fashion itself, as a phenomenon, as a constant parade of changes, is symptomatic of the constant shifts that occur in culture and interactions of culture and communication. So, while there are dominant narratives and structures, e.g. Maoism and economic liberalism, each of these are not impenetrable from the smaller forces that act upon them,

which includes what we wear, what we choose to wear and how we are seen to be wearing things.

As explored here, under Mao's leadership, and then the new government with its economic reforms, Chinese women have undergone significant progress concerning their liberation, and which is totally different to a western experience. As Zhang (2016) argues, Chinese feminism is 'ambivalent and controversial linguistically and conceptually'; in the context of a dynamically developing China, feminism is either 'women's rights or power-ism connotes the stereotype of a hunger for power' or a less threatening 'soft female or feminine-ism' (Zhang, 2016, 89). Chinese feminism is firstly a political desire for equality in the patriarchal society, such as we find with a feminism *through* the politics (and dressing-up) of Maoism; secondly, under new economic conditions, *feminine-ism* means that women have a right or freedom to 'dress-up' such as discussed with respect to new 'luxury' styles. For Zhang 'soft female or feminine-ism' means a Chinese feminism connected to women's negotiating power via appearance. In a patriarchal and hierarchical China, sartorial choices are a means of access to the symbolism of status; different classes have their own clothes, which cannot be easily subverted. Hence, to understand the spirit of the times and the political-social-economic circumstances by analyzing fashion, we need to bring various factors (social structures) together for analysis.

By considering the 'uniform' in relation to Chinese feminism in modern and contemporary China (1949-), this chapter has sought to attend to various interrelated aspects. Firstly, focusing on the uniform of Mao offers a way of unpacking the concept of the uniform itself and also exploring a specific terrain of Chinese women's identity, and its political-social-economical underpinning. As we see, particular social-political uniforms change radically, they are associated with different times, but within them we can still see the 'signs' of modification or reformation. Secondly, the swift shift to a new economic context gives rise to new political freedoms, which lead towards greater individualism, as opposed to a socialist informed feminism. Despite these radically different contexts, there still remains a *continuum* of fashion, that while fashioning and re-fashioning itself in

various ways (as if to echo the conditions of the day) is not necessarily directly imposed upon. Fashion, like a river that flows, will work around what is placed in its way. It can be used to divert or carry the message of the day, but still it continues to flow. This, again, is a 'zone' of experience that we might begin to understand as *neutral* (which will be taken up further in the next chapter). To refer back to Buck-Morss' account, given at the top of this chapter, our approach to history is typically to find the 'proper periodization', as she puts it. The idea is that we look to make history *legible* by understanding its structures. One of the problems is that such legibility is often overstated or imposed even by our readings, by fixing the flux or transformations of history. Buck-Moss's claim, to repeat, 'is that fashion is symptomatic of such transformations. Structural discontinuity becomes manifest when the specific way the economic base is articulated within the ideological and state apparatuses is experienced as being out of date' (Buck-Morss, 1994: 12). In other words, as we look backwards (at what has already happened), we see the changes, but these changes cannot so easily be seen from within. Furthermore, like fashion, were we to line-up a whole series of fashion trends on a single rail, history has a way of looking quite different as it unfolds, as well as a means of repeating itself. There is a 'structural discontinuity' at stake in both fashion and history, which means we need to attend to its conditions at all times and to not always show the joins, or rather to find a 'language' that is more expansion (or neutral). With regards to this thesis, a particular need of 'expansion' is the perspective we can place on the cultural context of China in terms of changing patterns of women's fashion. As Derrida remarks: 'all experience is the experience of meaning' (Derrida 1981: 30). The examples of 'uniforms' of this thesis are differing and deferred aspects of women's identity. They reflect the ambivalence of different situations of China, and are a form of medium for locating the everyday, and social order of women's lives.

## Chapter 3: Brand Neutral, or the 'Blandness' of Local-Global Fashions

The previous chapter provided historical context to women's fashion in China, and set out further consideration of one of the keywords of this thesis, 'uniform'. In doing so, it considered how issues of gender and feminism differ in China compared with the West. The typical stages of feminism for the West do not map directly upon changes in China. Following which, while the opening up of the economy has seen a huge rise in the consumption of Western fashions and luxury goods, any narrative of China 'catching up' with the West is too simplistic. The concept of the uniform in the thesis is deployed to relate to certain trends or shared phenomena, and which, crucially, are not to be understood as mere sartorial choices, but rather as entwined with cultural patterning, as being contextualized within socio-political and economic conditions. Having provided some of the narrative of the middle of the twentieth century (of China's relative seclusion under the Mao regime) in the previous chapter, this chapter now picks up from the effects of the opening up of the economy. It provides the contemporary context, which reflects the new forces of globalization that China has steadily opened up to since the 1980s onwards. In doing so, the chapter presents the case of how luxury fashions have played a dominant role in women's fashion, which in itself can suggest of a uni-form set of styles and interests. In other words that singular (uni-form) trends are consumed globally, multilaterally. However, it can also be shown that within this consumption context, women in China also present their own ways of relating to these global brands. This is not necessarily articulated in an explicit, but rather more neutral fashion. Again, the meaning of neutral here refers to a 'system' of meaning that is more open and fluid than might typically be understood; that certain signs and symbols of Western goods, for example, are not necessarily consumed in the 'legible' ways as they are in the home contexts. Also, importantly, the contemporary consumer context is giving rise to new, home-grown fashions and experimentations, some of which are explored in the latter half of this chapter.

## Brand Neutral



Figure 3.1: from the Website, access 30/10/2018  
[https://m.sohu.com/a/258758767\\_117993/3?pid=000115\\_3w\\_a](https://m.sohu.com/a/258758767_117993/3?pid=000115_3w_a)

At the time of writing a meme was to be found on social media in China of young women lying face down surrounded by luxury possessions (Figure 3.1). The image shown here is typical of this meme. Like many 'glamorous' images on social media (such as with selfies etc.) there is a very deliberate staging and careful coordination or manipulation of colours and tones etc. In this image there is an obvious theme of pink, for example. While the woman appears to have fallen from her car, it is obvious the items around her and their selections have been deliberately set out for the photograph. The expensive nature of the car and all of the various luxury goods (the Hermès bag, cosmetics, sunglasses, etc. ) surrounding the woman signify wealth and even decadence (i.e. that it is reasonable to let such expensive items be left strewn about the floor). Indeed, one reading of this image is of a superficial narcissistic display of one's possessions. Yet this meme was defined by the female figure lying face down, as if 'crashing to the ground'. But in fact the woman has assumed a very deliberate pose, *as if* she is falling. As much as there is a display of

opulence, this is also ironically displayed. It is as if the female figure has too much of value to be able to keep herself upright. 'Too much of a good thing'!

The humor of this social media meme is worth keeping in mind when reflecting on the dramatic rise of luxury consumption in China. There is no doubt that luxury goods are greatly desired by the Chinese consumers, yet this recent meme can be taken as a kind of *neutralizing* of brand. It pushes the 'image' of brand to its limit. It is a hyper-display of conspicuous consumption, yet equally it portrays a certain 'death' of consumption (symbolized by the 'incident' of the fallen woman). This neutralizing of brand, or a site of 'brand neutral', can return us to Chapter 1, in which I consider how we might update Barthes' study of the fashion system, whereby we need to consider fashion systems in the plural. The meme is, for example, a clear example of the role of social media in circulating ideas and images of fashion. The image is also an example of how the legible 'units' of fashion can be a source of infinite circulation, that their original significations are open to re-writing in various ways, and here as *both* a sign of opulence and a sign of its undoing. The neutral, then, as befits the reference to Taoism (and the interconnectedness of things) in Chapter 1, leads us to a way of seeing that is multiple and fluid. As will be discussed in this chapter, in reference to Jullien's (2004) thesis of 'blandness', we can begin to think of things less in opposition to one another, but, rather, able to '*abide within plenitude*' (24). It can be added, however, the fact that this meme appeared in the context of China is, of course, significant in itself. It represents a particular cultural response, which here I am suggesting presents a certain kind of 'play' with brands and the ownership and status of brands that is arguably quite different to other contexts (NB. Jullien's grounding of the 'bland' or neutral in China's traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, is surely no accident).

It is undoubtedly the case that Chinese consumers are becoming a leading force in the global fashion marketplace, and that among the rich in China there is longevity for luxury brands. A recent report shows that Chinese consumers spent \$121bn on 32% of the global luxury goods in 2017, and will reach 40% by 2024 (Boston consultant company, 27/10/2018). The data, corroborating the meme photograph,

demonstrates the success of global fashion companies in China, especially luxury brands. This is a 'world' full of western brands, i.e., the most popular high-end brands in China being Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Gucci, Armani, Christian Dior, Cartier and Hermes; and with Western cosmetic brands such as Estee Lander, Lancôme, Lamer, being ubiquitous. Set against this background of global brands penetrating China is an image of the negation of traditional and 'local' trends. However, China's domestic fashion industry has its own historical and socio-cultural relevance, which will be exemplified later in this chapter with reference to four famous Chinese designers.

Brand neutral is also, then, intended as a critical response to the Chinese fashion status quo, as a response to the *spectacle of global uniforms*, which emerges in part as a fusion of global luxury and local brands in China. This chapter, and the next, is a response to what might be described as false dichotomies between traditions versus modernity, local versus global, west versus east. The chapters (and indeed the thesis as a whole) can be taken as a challenge to an otherwise common simple, linear, and oppositional thinking. This chapter in particular seeks to acknowledge that different fashion systems have been, and are located in China and West countries, and that these have been developing in conjunction, competition, collaboration, and independently from the European fashion system. By exploring the scene of Chinese politics-oriented fashion market through the example of the four Chinese designers, it also seeks to challenge deep held assumptions about the distinctiveness and dominance of the West, which in turn problematizes persisting dichotomies like local and global.

As already set out in Chapter 1, the 'neutral' scene of Chinese fashion is to read less as a postmodern condition, and more as altermodern. China's modernization of the economy, or political organization and social discourse (including the developments of feminism) has taken place over a relatively short period of time and according to its own specific trajectories and motivations. In looking between or across both East and West brands (and consumptive trends) it is important not to be drawn into dichotomous accounts, nor to unnecessarily repeat certain postmodern interests.

Reference to 'ethnic fashion', for example, can be problematic for holding too rigidly to their own system of meaning (as discussed in chapter 1), which emphasises insular structures and significations. Ethnic fashion, as defined by Joanne Eicher and Barbara Sumber (1995: 300), refers to the clothing 'worn by members of one group to distinguish themselves from another by focusing on differentiation'. However, if we refer to a category of ethnic fashion, the implication is that it is *not* western fashion. Yet, why is western fashion not a subset of ethnic fashion? The word fashion in much research refers to European fashion (trends), like blues jeans, the business suit, T-shirt, simple dress, etc., which have been adopted by the rest of the world due to certain processes of economic and cultural globalization (Eicher and Sumberg 1995; Maynard 2004; Eicher, et al., 2000; Lilethun et al., 2012, Gansen and Craik 2016). Normally, this kind of 'worldly' fashion is called 'western fashion' for Chinese people, as China has only come to adopt this global (western) fashion in recent decades. It has to be remembered, then, that from the perspective of China, this form of fashion begins as a marginal phenomenon, as an 'ethnic' fashion from the West. Its rapid taken-up, however, leads to it being a type of uniform, a means of representing at the larger global entity of Western fashion.

Nonetheless, and perhaps inevitably, when East meets West, a new form of 'fusion fashion' emerges. This mixture of traditional dress with contemporary fashion trends, to a certain extent, is embedded in the Chinese traditional culture, and it too can be said to ground international fashion (Jose Teunissen, 2005; Gansen and Craik 2016). Notably, although fashion's globalization has become a well-established topic of research, even a clichéd one (Skov 1996; Maynard 2004; Teunissen 2005; Eicher et al. 2000; Rabine 2002; Niessen 2003; Monden 2008; Riello and McNeil 2010; Gansen and Craik 2016; et al), since the 1990s case studies from different geographical areas, especially in China, are rarely assembled in a single setting for the purpose of cross-cultural comparison. While it is not in the scope of this study to offer such a comparison, this chapter does offer some distinct examples of alternatives, to show how fashion trends in China are complex and evolving. The complexities of fashion need to be maintained. As considered in the previous chapter, occupational clothing (the Mao suit) can be seen to convey different meanings across different times,

spaces and manners. Indeed, the two signature garments examined in this thesis – the Mao suit of the previous chapter and the cheongsam explored in the next – appear a layered history, which destabilize any so-called culture of conformity, as well as relate in complicated ways with regards to signs of Chinese feminism. We understand the *zeitgeist* through the analysis of the various ‘social uniforms’. The Chinese female clothing is refracted through recurring cycles of ‘new’ styles that differentiate from others, followed by adoption of socially accepted styles by followers. In the present ‘altermodern’ China, the various antinomies of fashion can be signified as a way of differentiation versus identification (Zhang, 2018). In the fashion system, in order to be perceived as different or fashionable, a style should be different enough from the old style and should have been forgotten by society for a long enough period of time that it appears to be new or at least ‘re-fashioned’ once again. For example, the use of historic elements of the cheongsam in present fashion, or the western fashion trends in different seasons, illustrate the mechanism of the spirit of the new fashion culture. This new image of new traditional dress, represents a symbol of desired lifestyles, which are imbedded in detailed apparel brands or design, therefore expressing new cultural trends of the ‘fashioned’ world.

In returning to the meme image of luxury consumption in China and the western cultural influence more broadly, we can ask how/ why such apparel brands or design reflect Chinese women’s lifestyles. We are not talking about a single piece of clothing here, but of the social uni-form or uniformity of Chinese women. Ocass (2013) debated how the culture of origin of brands has capacity to help or hinder the consumers’ ability to obtain the significance they seek. As such, a brand’s origin embeds deeply within the broader context of consumerism and is a vital factor in the pursuit of economic independence. Considering the appropriation of luxury consumerism of Chinese women, we can question what kind of culture and/or status Chinese women seek via luxury consumption. While this question might have been most pertinent in the West until the 1990s, the situation has moved on, indeed today these consumers manipulate brand identities through customization, appropriation and layering. With these issues and questions in mind, the next section draws upon various examples, i.e. images, investigative reports, and

interviews (second hand), to take account of the impact of recent trends in China. Then, the following section presents examples of famous local designers to take the case of 'brand neutral' in China a step further.

## Responses to Global Luxury brands



Figure: 3-2, Fashion brands in shopping mall in Chongqing.  
Source: taken in Jie Fang Bei, Chongqing, 20/10/2018 by the author.

In the context of a multi-cultural globalized world (at least with regards to consumerism), Chinese youth represent a generation who desire a life that increasingly looks toward ambitions, and embracing luxury consumerism (Zhang and Kim, 2012). We know that most young adults in China are open to Western culture and are influenced by western art, music, and literature via the movies, western brands, and western books and education (Kwan et al., 2003; McEwen et al., 2006; O'Cass, 2013; Tungate, 2005). This demonstrates a shift for Chinese people towards a 'global culture'. When we look specifically at Chinese women within this context, we can suggest of a new trend or a new 'uniform' that is heavily based upon western brands. As discussed in Chapter 1, the influx of Western businesses since the

opening up of the economy in China has inevitably led to fashion designers and retailers seeking to capture (and prompt) the changing tastes of Chinese consumers, especially younger adult consumers who are hungry for brands.

As described, the gradual trend has been from 'Made in China' to 'Made for China' (Cheung, 2011; Ngai, 2005; Segre, 2005; Cristina, 2018; etc.), which, strangely and humorously, is shown in the meme photograph discussed above. However, what are the responses that women make to the trends that surround them and why and how do they appear to be placing increasing importance on material goods, particularly luxury products (whether imported or made locally)? This section seeks to elicit some answers to these questions with close reference to a series of interviews that were conducted with a range of women in Chongqing, a major city within the Southwest of China (Qiong, 2017). As has been traced in the previous chapter, there is clear contrast between contemporary China and the Mao era (1949-1978), which has quite rapidly led to remarkable change concerning sartorial choices and availability. According to Ocass (2013) the majority of Chinese women increasingly associate success with the consumption of luxury brands and place a high priority on possession of status-laden brands. Following Ocass, status brands, for many, can be understood to help create and express identity and underpin desires for self-fulfillment. Yet, equally, consumers can be very discerning. For some, as Ocass (2013) shows, the purchase of luxury clothing is intended as a form of 'inconspicuous' consumption, with importance placed more upon knowledge rather than wealth. This more nuanced reading of Chinese women's consumption is suggested by the aforementioned interviews. In an attempt to gain greater insight Qiong's (2017) study interviewed over 30 professional women, aged between 18-30, with varying backgrounds relating to fashion, literature, language, business, history, arts, etc. Participants included, for example, students, academics, businesswomen and designers.<sup>13</sup> It is clear from the design of the study that the working assumption

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful for access to Qiong's (2017) study, which remains unpublished, but which the author has kindly shared. To give some context and overview, the study used open-ended interviews; each of around one hour in length and so provides some fairly detailed responses. While in part the study was originally interested in the different attitudes and behaviours related to purchasing of luxury brands and counterfeits, of more significance to

was that Chinese women associate with strong branded elements of fashion clothing and its expressive nature makes it particularly important in a society where consumerism is high and status seeking is a priority (Zhang, 2016, Tuzi 2016, et al). The investigation was limited, then, in terms of the range of economic status, with generally all respondents having relatively high incomes or disposable wealth (whether personally or from family). However, the study was not attempting to make claims for a wide population, but instead was focused on those already engaged in luxury brand consumption. Putting aside the underlying assumption that wealth and luxury brands are linked in some way, for the purposes of this thesis, the study offers some suggestive (though by no means conclusive) findings and insights around Chinese women's clothing. Furthermore, it provides some direct insights regarding the re-contextualization of the cheongsam as an indicator of social convention (more of which is explored in the next and final chapter). Importantly, the value of the study is its 'contemporary' nature, offering some broad brushstrokes when considering the relationship between consumerism and the individual; or put another way, for thinking about consumerism as a way of life. The rise of consumerism in China, in recent decades, can be seen as a 'consumer revolution' (Wu, 2009; Bonnie, 2013, Cristina, 2018, et.al). And it is this 'revolution' that forms the backdrop to Qiong's study.

The participants were women who came from Chinese first tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chongqing, where one can find the exclusive stores selling international luxury brands from the likes of Prada, Armani, Chanel and Hermes. Equally, one can also find copied dresses or local brands in abundance in the high street, and local small shops, flea markets, and web selling. It is evident from the analysis that participants were generally able to distinguish cheap clothing from genuine luxury dresses based on differences in price, the distribution channels,

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this thesis is its exploration of the interests and attitudes towards local/ ethnic brands for Chinese urban women. So, for example, the interviews sought to identify what kind of meanings are attached to luxury and/or ethnic clothing. Notably, in order to compare between the global luxury brands and local ethnic brands, the cheongsam was taken as representative of ethnic clothing. Overall, the study covered the themes of brand identity and styles of life, attitude to the western or local brands, and the access to luxury consumption, etc.

and the quality of the product itself. As noted above, a picture emerges of both an interest in fashion knowledge as much as the wealth associated with the fashions.

A specific theme that emerges is that of ‘conformity’. The female interviewees of a higher status (financially and educationally), for example, are more likely to purchase the expensive goods, i.e., luxury brands, quality clothing or ethnic clothing, but it does not follow directly that the tailored cheongsam or business suit is unaffordable to those of a lower social status, some of whom would order one or two such garments for weddings and important occasions. More broadly, the shopper of luxury brands and the cheongsam demonstrates a certain cultural conformity. One participant, for example, expresses a desire to dress similarly to ‘successful’ women, such as the First Lady and television presenters, who frequently wears the cheongsam. Another participant notes a preference for western luxury brands over that of Chinese clothing, yet refers to how (western) luxury brands can combine with the cheongsam. Again reference is made to the First Lady, who is described as wearing a ‘cheongsam-looking dress’ to international events. A further participant, when asked why they liked luxury brands, refers to the ‘elegance’ of global luxury brands, which you can be ‘admired’ for wearing.

What emerges more generally from the various comments across the interviews is that no matter whether the participant prefers either luxury brands or traditional clothing, they typically emphasize *social conformity* over individual needs; so normally choosing a product that is widely used by a social group; making an effort to keep in tune with their social needs. The implication is that for a number of Chinese women the interest is more towards the social necessity of clothing than a personal intent. This also means some women are not simply searching for luxury-high-quality cheongsam or luxury brands, but also for further products within their social group. More precisely, the respondents make a brand choice since they want to be similar to their peers or wider social groups. Chinese women further face the choice over whether to purchase a genuine or copied item. For those with less financial resource, it may not be possible to afford a luxury item, but could purchase a cheap version and still conform to their social group. In thinking again of the ‘brand

'neutral', we might think of the 'image' of the product being more important than the item itself (whether authentic or not). This again, speaks to the meme photograph, discussed above, in which the items on display are already images, already signs that operate over and beyond the items themselves. We can understand these as signs of variation in product evaluation, attitude, purchase intentions, or purchase behavior (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). Despite their variation, the communal conformity plays an important role in shaping an individual's decisions toward product choices based on the influence of others.

There is often an assumption that consumer who purchase counterfeit goods are of a lower social status, with a strong interest in fashionable goods in order to conform or to access a social group. This relates to 'status consumption', which is defined 'as the motivation process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others' (Goldsmith, Eastman, Calvert & Flynn, 1996, p47). Status-consumption goes some way to explain the behaviors of Chinese women, whose cultural background is based upon collectivism rather than individualism. Inevitably many Chinese women can be said to seek status to obtain a position or rank given by others in the society. Within which there is an idea of how enhancement can be made through conspicuous products. However, the price of a good is not always clear. Many wealthy consumers, who can afford higher priced goods, can equally be found to buy cheaper counterfeit items. There is a playfulness of 'mix and match'. Arguably, this can be found more among a wealthier group, who are less concerned with proving their social status, but generally, given the widespread phenomenon of copied and/or counterfeit goods, there is less social anxiety about the exact provenance of an item. Instead, there is greater turnover of what an individual possesses and wishes to possess. One of the things that have to be remembered about China, in contrast to the West (certainly western Europe), is that it presents many 'everyday' opportunities for ordering, tailoring and manufacturing goods. Where an item of clothing in one context is seen to be too expensive, there are plenty of opportunities elsewhere to

order a similar item, whether a counterfeit or simply to order an individually tailored piece, but which is much cheaper. This is where the infrastructure of 'Made in China' (i.e. a multi-faceted and multi-layered environment for manufacture) not only can work towards the idea of 'Made for China', but indeed down to the level of individuals, 'Made for you'. Overall, then, we have to consider the way in which fashion in China is not just prone to change as all fashions are, but that there is socio-economic and technical context that promotes a rapidity and fluidity of sartorial change.

Some researchers define fashion consciousness as a personal degree of involvement with the styles of fashion products and fashion-conscious consumers are characterized by a deeper interest in fashion brands as well as their physical appearance (Nam, 2007; Cytman, 1982). Furthermore, luxury brand items comprise both interpersonal and personal meanings, and these kind of social and identified meanings are interrelated (Vigneron & Lester, 1999). Sometimes, interpersonal oriented motivation is much more externally driven and represents the consumers' desire to impress others. The personal orientation such as self-satisfaction and materialism are internally determined and reflect the self-fulfillment achievement. Also, the literature often conceptualizes brand experience as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli (Brankus, 2009). Again, this means brand experience includes the psychological and internal consumer reactions. Hence, the hedonic dimension of the tailored dress and western luxury clothing could provide the subjective emotional benefit such as sensory gratification and inner pleasure. A copy may fail to provide such experience due to the low quality and fine details associated (yet, often, as suggested above, counterfeit luxury brands provide as much or at least sufficient satisfaction). However, a further important reason for the interest in luxury brands among Chinese women is cited as their 'unique style'. This is in contrast to the European context in which many luxury brands can simply standout as expensive versions of what is otherwise common. So, for instance, a designer handbag – as an object – is simply an expensive version of an item that is very commonly seen (and which otherwise has a predictable form within the wider 'landscape' of accessories).

However, in China, while luxury brand accessories are now ubiquitous, they nonetheless exist within a *different* landscape, one that is made up of other signifiers and forms (with a different cultural heritage). This can lead to comments that luxury brands are favored less perhaps because they are brands, but because they offer unique styles. They are as distinctive as many westerners think the cheongsam is unique. Here we encounter an orientalist effect. It is all too easy to look to the cheongsam as distinctive and communicative of its own 'idea', while the goods from the west, the 'influx' of luxury brands, only have a homogenizing force. Yet, from a different perspective, luxury goods can seem as 'exotic' as the cheongsam, and in turn engender a desire for their subtle shifting trends and possibilities (more of which is discussed in Chapter 4).

## Designed in China

The picture that starts to emerge in considering the various responses to luxury brand goods is of a complex, and at times contradictory landscape or 'ecosystem'. This section considers a further important layer. Not only is there a variety of ways in which foreign luxury good have been consumed and copied, so extending what we might understand about the manufacture and supply of fashions in the country, but there is also a growing culture of 'design'. This section turns to the emergence of what we might refer to as that which is 'designed *in* China'. The context to this phenomenon, marked out in the Introduction of this thesis and Chapter 1, is China's dramatic economic growth and shifting geopolitical status. It has become common, for example, that dedicated 'fashion weeks' are held annually in Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu among other cities. These events taken together signify a shift in point of view, or at least a widening of view points, whereby international fashion industry comes to pay attention to China's own design talent. However, contemporary Chinese fashion design is in the very early stages (Yee and Yin, 2006, Bonnie, 2013). Indeed, influenced mainly by western styling, there is still a pressure for designers to simply copy from foreign brands, and so for grassroots designers the fashion landscape is still difficult to navigate (Farrar, 2011). JuanJuan Wu argues,

'China's fashion designers have been ignored or have functioned only as "ghost" designers for fashion brands produced in China' (2009a, 127). As the world's leading global apparel manufacturing industry, China has been attempting to position itself as a major force in design and manufacture, particularly over the last ten years. 'The two main ways that China aims to achieve their fashion success are through education by promoting young, emerging designers and through the development of economic strength in both domestic and international markets by instituting effective and collaborative marketing strategies' (Bonnie, 2013, 197).

Chinese fashion researchers, Finnane (2008), Zhao (2013) and Wu (2009) among others, capture some of the shifts taking place, showing how mainstream fashion products are changing to reflect the social and political milieu of present day China. To add to the picture offered by such research, the following provides a brief overview of four notable designers working in China, Zhang Zhaoda, Wang Xinyuan, Wu Haiyan, and Liang Mingyu, each representative of contemporary practices, as presented by the 'Four Designers' exhibition in Fashion Beijing and the Forth Beijing Festive Expo in October 2018. The picture that emerges from looking at the work of these designers is one of hybridity, of the working between tradition and modernity, and also pertaining to present-day interests and theatics. The purpose of looking at these four designers is not so much to examine their individual choices and strategies, but also *how* their choices relate to cultural fusion and connect to a broader perspective of art. According to the *Magazine of Fashion Beijing* (October 2018), the 'Four Designers' exhibition, in which these designers were shown together, was a mirror reflecting three decades of the fashion history of China's first generation designers; as well as reflecting the journey of a cross-history, cross-culture, and cross-geography (China Daily, 1/11/2018).



Figure 3.3, Wang Xinyuan, exhibition in Beijing, 28/10/2018.

Source: Zhang Desheng

Wang Xinyuan, known as the 'king' of Chinese fashion, was awarded 'Chinese greatest fashion designer' by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural 1997. From his exhibition in the October 2018 Beijing Expo we can see a bold use of traditional Chinese painting or calligraphy (white signifies silk paper, black - Chinese ink, and red - stamp) – see Figure 3.3. Here, we see his works displayed in front of a Chinese calligraphic display, which provides a link to traditional culture. Furthermore, in presenting his fashion show at the Great Wall of China (Figure 3.4) we can read him as a patriot *artist*, rather than simply a fashion designer. Wang was educated in Suzhou Silk University in 1981, and later studied in Hong Kong and received the Silver Award in Hong Kong designer competition 1987. In Figure 3.4, we see a carefully choreographed mixture of China: delicate cut, luxury fur, and body-tight design, the Great Wall of China and ancient dragon dress designs. We can consider Wang's fashion design as being at once a part of contemporary fashion, while also steeped in Chinese tradition, giving a sensation of his love of the country in the context of the globalization.



Figure 3.4: Gratewall Show in 1987, from Wang Xinyuan.  
Source: Zhang Desheng

If we read Wang's fashion design as the result of the Chinese tradition and culture, then Wu Haiyan too can be said to express traditional aesthetics, in this case by using traditional materials such as Chinese silk and cotton (Figure 3.5). Wu is a fashion designer and professor of China Academy of Art. She bases her designs on Chinese lifestyles and traditions. The auspicious Chinese red and purple, circular clipping and silk material, and the cheongsam-look, displays an image of Chinese traditional ethnic red and purple.



Figure 3.5: Wu Haiyan, exhibition in Beijing, October 2018  
Source: Zhang Desheng

Liang Mingyu is also representative of a contemporary fashion designer working with aspects of tradition. She is well known, for example, for playful re-versioning of the Mao suit (as discussed in Chapter 2), as seen in figure 3.6.



Figure 3.6: Red Star of Mao Zedong, from portfolio of Liang Mingyu  
Source: Zhang Desheng

From her works of the Red Star of Mao, we can suggest it is more artwork than fashion product. Liang always use her designing to demonstrate the spirit of the time and concerns of people, i.e., these Mao's red stars, colorful jackets with tight closed collar, totally different to the real Mao's jackets, but still remind Chinese people of the Maoist history. These garments are given a whole new 'orientation' through her interpretations. The use of bold colours and exaggerations of the garment's principle design elements gives rise to playful, even comic, and undoubtedly ironic renderings. As with other couture designers, these garments were never intended to be worn away from the catwalk, but can clearly be understood as signaling a new confidence and openness for fashion designers working in China. Throughout her career, which spans now several decades, Liang Mingyu has shown a consistent interest in China's Southwest ethnic arts, totem culture, the meaning of the life and nature, and more generally the gathering together of the arts of painting and sculpture. In Figure 3.7, for example, we see her work of 'sculpted fashion', in this case a sculpture of an elephant made from hundreds of pieces of recycled jeans donated by Liang's friends and from factory excess stock. We can see from the image, the life-sized elephant is wrapped in the recycled jeans with wrinkles and bones of steel and a red fetus dangling from its belly. She makes use of the original features of the jeans – the pockets, cuffs, and different colors - to stimulate a mixture of commonplace and haute couture methods. This installation was first shown to the public at the fourth international Fashion and Lifestyle Expo held at Beijing Exhibition Hall 26<sup>th</sup> -29<sup>th</sup> October, 2018. Its purpose clearly goes beyond the display of clothes. As Liang said, 'I plan to make more animals and exhibit them to the whole world, I hope my works can ensure for more care for the Earth and its inhabitants' (Liang, 27 Nov, 2018, P20, China Daily). As a fashion designer, Liang's use of the elephant as a symbol and physical presence provides a commentary on the responsibilities of humans towards nature, and the explicit use of recycled materials draws attention to pollution caused by the fabric's manufacturing process (Cheng, 2018, China Daily). While her previous works are a means to express traditional Chinese culture, in particular an ethnic minority group culture from Liang's home city, Chongqing, this recent work is infused with a concern for the environment (China Daily, 27 Nov, 2018). Specifically, then, rather than

seeing the installation of her work as fashion in any straightforward sense, we can understand her engagement with fashion as a form of performance. In this case, a performance concerned with animal protection, a contemporary means to demonstrate something of the Chinese aesthetics of *harmony* and *balance*.

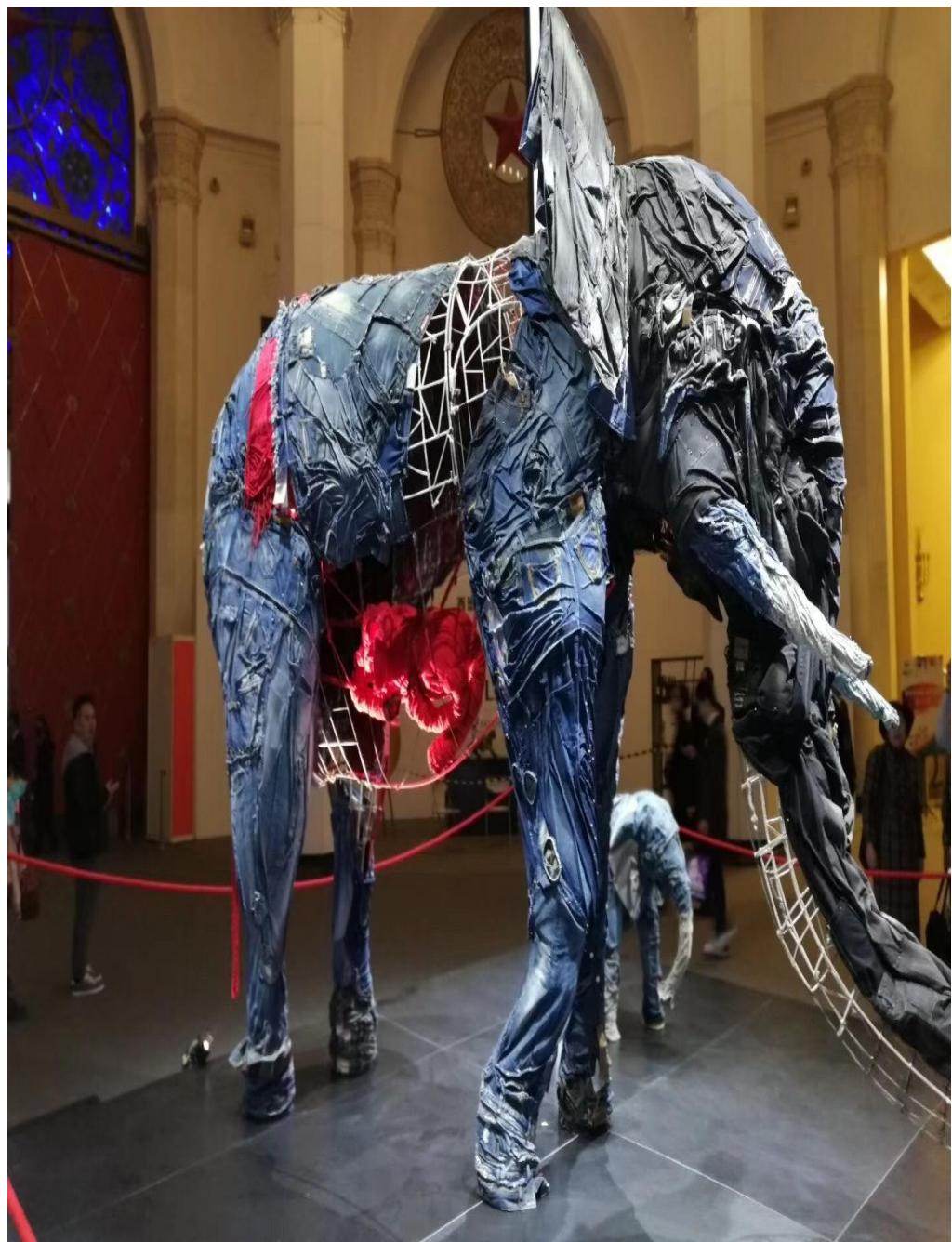


Figure 3.7: Liang Mingyu, Elephant, October 2018, Beijing  
Source: Zhang Desheng

Zhang Zhaoda, the fourth member of the Four Designer exhibition, also evokes 'nature' in his designs. He incorporates, for example, in Figure 3.8, mountains and rivers, plants and stones, clouds and flowers upon silk garments, and his successful use of color gradient demonstrate his love of the environment and the Yangzi River and Yellow River. He combines these aspects within the folds of his designs, working 'landmark' oil painting upon cloth, to convey the colors of nature (Fashion Beijing, October, 2018).



Figure 3.8, Zhang Zhaoda, Beijing fashion Exhibition, October 2018.  
Source: Zhang Desheng

In looking across the collections of these four designers, famous now within China, and indeed thinking about the manner of display too, we can argue for the emergence of a 'new spirit of design'. The tendency of these particular designers to draw upon traditional Chinese art forms, and indeed to blend these forms in their handling of clothing design, would suggest something different to 'modern' design. Instead, the interest in and modification of traditional aesthetics, with references, for example, to Chinese landscape and imagery, as well as the use or even appropriation of bold symbolism (such as the Great Wall of China or the figure of the elephant), might lead us to label these designers as 'postmodern'. Nonetheless, given the compression of time in which China has been seen to rapidly change, economically and culturally, terms such as 'modern' and 'postmodern' need to be handled with care. Where we see the influencing context being the high consumerism of (western) fashion within China, the irony and hybridity associated with postmodern design does seem pertinent. As does the mixing of high and low culture. In the case of the Four Designers, the clothes on display are presented in many ways more as art than fashion, and so there is a slippage in their status. As part of which, it is not easy to determine the status of the design as 'clothing' per se, particularly in the case of Liang Mingyu and Wang Xinyuan.

However, there is a complication in how we read these designers as 'postmodern', which typically refers to a collapse in 'order', or a pluralizing of ideas, politics and 'systems'. One factor militating against this reading is the relatively narrow economic and political conditions. This works in two ways. Pushing in one direction is the dominance of consumer culture, whereby the Chinese fashion market is dominated by foreign luxury brands and the fast fashion of H&M and Zara. Yet, we also need to account for the fact that the four designers noted here are facilitated in their work in many ways by China's circumscribed ideological structures. It is a fact, for example, that national and local government play a strong role in promoting traditional cultural aesthetics by organizing the kinds of fashion shows where these four designers can present their work. This is not to suggest state control of design, but does represent a conditioning factor. Leading on from this, contemporary Chinese

designers could be argued to show an interest in tradition as a voluntary return to the trope of the 'orient'. This is to suggest of a form of what might be termed self-orientalizing, or at least a re-contextualizing of a Chinese traditional aesthetic within contemporary, 'postmodern' China. Dirlit (1997), for example, refers to the emergence of a 'complicity of the "Orientals"' (109), which as Ha (2000: xi) explains, 'through a process of "self-Orientalization", the Chinese have, in fact, incorporated Euro-American perceptions of Asians in the construction of their self-image and national consciousness'. Inevitably, following the original account of orientalism from Said (1979), Chinese fashion is variously orientalized as 'exotic'. As far back as 2,000 years ago or more, as Rome intersected with Central and Eastern Asia, there were many in Rome, including Seneca, who considered Chinese silk garments to be 'a cipher for exoticism and eroticism' (Frankopan, 2015: 18). Indeed, in this period, Chinese textiles were already part of a luxury economy, although interestingly running from East to West, rather than West to East. As Frankopan notes: 'Writing in the second half of the first century AD, Pliny the Elder resented the high cost of the luxury material simply to "enable the Roman lady to shimmer in public". The inflated prices were a scandal, he moaned, a hundred times the real one' (18). It is worth considering how today the same kinds of arguments can be made about the inflated prices of western luxury goods. Yet still the connotations of the exotic and erotic remains as if coming from the East, not the West. Western luxury goods are not 'read' as exotic, but rather as materially and culturally superior. Yet, it is largely the same global network of trade, the so-called Silk Road stemming back two millennia, that enables the flow of goods today.

Importantly, we need to understand orientalism as a form of 'discourse', which 'like any other language, also finds itself constantly appropriated, re-worked, and re-accentuated in the utterances of others. And these others ... can be the others that Orientalism speaks for and about' (Ha, 2000: xii). At the core of the orientalist debates is the division of 'oriental' and 'occidental', which crudely maps to East and West. These latter terms are of course far from stable. Thus, while East and West 'can be used as references to geographical spheres, cultural and racial categories, economic and political regimes or ideological systems', there are numerous

subtleties and ambiguities. 'Even their usage a geographical designations, which may seem the least problematic, the parts of the world known as "East" and "West" do in fact assume ever shifting boundaries' (Ha, 2000: 2). The key point of orientalism, however, as a critical term, is the nexus of power and knowledge. According to Said's (1979) account, it is the West's investment (defined through a vast archive and discourse) in an orientalist frame that means that the East is never without a prior form of representation. And the argument is that this framing is one-way, that it is a form of representation from the West of the East (which the East can itself assume), but that the East has not prescribed a similarly powerful construct of the West. This imbalance of representation is the crux of orientalism, and leads to the concept of the 'Other' as being outside of the dominant discourse, without a voice (or a voice that is equally heard). However, the strength of Said's important study is also arguably its weakness. As Ha notes, '[o]ne of the most frequent criticisms of Said's analysis of Orientalism is that it produces a monolithic, essentialist and ahistorical characterization of Orientalist discourse' (2000: 17). What we fail to get from this important study is consideration of the *possibility* of alternatives. Nonetheless, the programme of research that Said's *Orientalism* sets in train could be considered precisely the exploration of alternatives. The underlying argument of this thesis, in adopting the critical term of the neutral, is in part a means of 're-orienting' ourselves in how we relate to and read off the China context. It is to re-orientate in the sense of 'navigation', to work through the new complexities of global/alternmodern China. But it is also to be aware of 'oriental' identity (whether imposed or self-invoked). Returning to the specific context of new designs in China, the fact that ethnic 'Chinese' design has inspired output from global designers adds to the effect of positioning these designs as 'other', while simultaneously allowing them to maintain a cultural currency. 'Ethnicity' as a category of design work (like the category of 'World Music') creates a plethora of new designs but based upon 'stable', traditional styles. Scholars offer a variety of opinions on such non-western fashion. As Craik (2009, 19-20) suggests:

There is a powerful perception and myth that non-western cultures have stable and unchanging clothing codes, perhaps driven by the synchronic

approach to ethnographic case studies and an apparent desire to cleave discernable differences in taxonomy between artificial binary categories of “us” and “them”(Craik , 2009, 19-20).

In the case of the Four Designers at the Beijing Fashion Exhibition of 2018, however, the binary categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are less emphatic, yet the Chinese aesthetic components still penetrate the works. Undoubtedly, the historical and cultural context of Chinese culture is a part of the framing of the Chinese-produced fashion, but we cannot deny the influence from the globally prevalent fashion trends on China. The first generation designers noted here are important examples to emphasize that what draws upon traditional dress is hardly genuinely traditional, and is even adopted for specific social and global political means (for example, to make a statement about animal rights). Arguably, the reference to a Chinese traditional aesthetic, even ‘essence’, is also a cultural ‘tactic’. The ‘re-appropriation’ of what has often been appropriated (through a Western orientalism) might be understood as a resource that Chinese designers have found useful. In a new, bold China – as discussed in Chapter 1 – there is a way in which designers are strongly evoking the cultural symbolism of China, but not necessarily in a retrograde and subservient way. The new designs are not mere trinkets being sold to the foreign visitor, for example. Rather these are confident statements of a culture that is familiar to the wearer, to those living in China and brought up with its historical understanding, yet equally ‘new’ or ‘alternative’. This is ‘China’ for the Chinese: meaning a form of local design that engenders a sophisticated cultural reading of its own.

As outlined in the Introduction and Chapter 1, China cannot be said to have been colonized in the strict sense, though of course that does not then mean the internal cultural and economic structures evolved without external influence. Again, the early history of the Silk Roads (Frankopan, 2015) over 2,000 years ago is testament to a very rich, global trade and exchange: ‘We think of globalization as a uniquely modern phenomenon; yet 2,000 years ago too, it was a fact of life, one that presented opportunities, created problems and prompted technological advances’ (2015: 12). Today, of course, we refer to global and hybrid cultures, a hybrid world

in the era of digital marketing and multi-cultural orientations. And this has been seen to operate at different levels, performing differently, for example, between generations. On the one hand, the wearing of culturally coded designs by an older generation can be read in terms of national or ethnic traditions. On the other hand, however, it is visually apparent that Western luxury and cheap high street fashion has penetrated China's everyday, which as discussed above is a form of 'global' culture that is seen amongst a younger generation. In both cases, we begin to see a broadening of the processes of appropriation, hybridization, and redefinition of traditional and local products. The different 'faces' of the cheongsam, for example, which will be considered in the next chapter, epitomizes the fluidity of these processes and the exchange of designs (indeed the next, and final chapter, offers a close reading of the complexity and layering of meanings that is being described here, and in the previous chapters).

Again the term 'altermodern' presents itself as a useful term. It is not merely referring to a collapsing or hybridizing of styles (as we might consider with 'postmodern'). Instead, it is a reflexive term, suggestive of a particular local-global context, with its own 'time' of modernizing forces (which we see writ large in China's state-run infrastructural developments), and its blending of place, ideas and styles, notable with *both* the influx of western consumer goods and the emergence of new Chinese designers. In the altermodern, tradition is not to be thought of as an unchanging trope of the past, but, on the contrary, is a *dynamic* encapsulation of the fusion of global trends and successive innovations. Furthermore, the growing confidence of Chinese fashion provides us with tangible examples of how imaginations and beliefs are expanding, which as a very open 'system' of significations leads us to a more 'neutral' and mutual image of Chinese people's everyday fashions. The altermodern landscape of designers and consumers in China leads us to 'brand neutral', to a movable and scalable 'fashion system' that is particular to China. Or, put another way, picking up again on the concept of (self-) orientalisation, this neutrality of fashion in China can perhaps only be 'read' from within. It requires a field of vision (or dress) that is *situated* within the complex layering this chapter (and the previous one) seeks to show. When view from outside

of China, it is perhaps too easy to make binary readings of outside/inside, west/east, new/traditional, fashionable/derivative (with the first of each of these terms forming a complicity of authorizing, domineering terms, *West over East*). In this sense, the representative fashion exhibition of the four designers in Beijing in 2018, was not merely a show, but a demonstration of sartorial desires at a given moment in altermodern China. Here, desirability is based on a wide-range of (at times contradictory) values, be it social, political, cultural, nostalgic, exclusive, open, environmental, national, and transnational etc. – Values that are suggestive of a growing fluidity of meaning within China, despite the grander narratives imposed from outside of a rigid, politically constrained environment.

Thus, rather than play into the largely western account of how ‘loaded’ sign-systems (from brands, cultural products and discourse) create a flattening of meaning in China – as a ‘mash-up’ of multiple meanings – the term ‘altermodern’ becomes helpful. In the case of the Four Designers, we find complex visions of both national and global imagery, which can be taken as a distinct re-thinking *through* fashion, and in terms of their economic and cultural positioning as a form of ‘renaissance’ (for Chinese culture) via fashion. Nonetheless, we cannot downplay the wider fashion marketplace, the global brands, especially the luxury goods or the cheaper high street brands such as H&M and Zara that have penetrated in China. It is against this that new designers arguably want to emphasize the influence of tradition (as a means of something distinctive, as a cultural tactic). In contrast to the first generation of these four Designers, the second generation of fashion designers has been greatly impacted upon the western culture (and education), which frequently leads toward the international designs and market strategies. In this sense, there is something of a crossroad as to the development of Chinese fashion design.

Beyond the first generation of the Four Designers discussed above, the second generation of Chinese designers are gradually gaining attention, not only at home but also on the international scene. As investigated by Hazel Clark (2018) that ‘Knowledge of the international field of fashion is key to career development of young Chinese designer; more of those who can afford it are taking the opportunity

of an overseas education at a well-known fashion school. The majority of Chinese fashion designers have received an overseas fashion education, have won international design awards, have worked outside of China (Clark, 2018: 214).

Fashion in China has reached a very interesting stage in terms of design as well as consumer sentiment, because they have both been seen undergoing a transitional period. Clark (2018) claimed that it is largely mythic national identity that remains pervasive in fashion identification today by examination that the Chinese heritage on the fashion designs, reputation and promotion. These young designers represent a new generation of Chinese fashion, each demonstrating practices of both adopting and absorbing from a western gaze and local characteristics, re-absorbing of the trends of westernized traditions in present China. The most successful marketing fashion brand 'Jifen' (Figure 3.9) in China founded by Frankie Xie, who has received his master degree in Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo, and worked for Kenzo in Paris, now has owned more than 80 shops across China. He is in the group of second generation of fashion designers. His collections have shown in Paris, London, New York and Milan fashion weeks reflecting contemporary fashion trends and opposed to Chinese aesthetics. Excepting Frankie Xie, the other fashion designers, i.e., Zou You, Masha Ma, Qiu Hao, Zhuang Huishan, etc., share a foreign education, modern style and prolific activities in international stage, and sophisticatedly reflect the aesthetics of international fashion other than Chinese.



Figure 3.9, Jifen collection in SS 2019

Source: <http://www.chinasspp.com/News/Detail/2018-11-2/428056.htm>

The other group of new designers, emphasize upon traditional aesthetics. The best example is the luxury Haunt Couture brand NE.TIGER founded by Tiger Zhang, 1982, which is a member of the second generation of Chinese fashion designers. In Figure 3.10, we can see his designs are presented as reflecting the Chinese national spirit; the colorful colors, shapes and silky materials are influenced heavily by the Chinese sartorial history especially the cheongsam. Another example of traditional sartorial aesthetics fashion designers is Guo Pei, whose work reflects Chinese heritage in appearance and production. Her designs for Rihanna include an exquisite yellow silk gown, which has gained a great deal of attention internationally (Clark, 2018). Ma Ke, who designs for Chinese First Lady-Peng Liyuan, whose works really reflects the traditional culture and signifies the national identity.



Figure 3.10, collection of NE.TIGER.  
<https://brandinginasia.com/designer-spotlight-chinas-ne-tiger/>

The young designers have had foreign professional experiences or sustained contact; some become less dependent on Chinese sartorial culture and more dependent on recognition from within the field of fashion; and some more develop the utilizing of Chinese traditional aesthetics and hand skills to demonstrate how fashion can be an art, i.e., LE.TIGER (Clark, 2018). There are various motivations and contextual factors that surround the work of recent Chinese designers, from both the first and second generation. These are cultural, political, economic and commercial. The self-identification with Chinese traditions and aesthetics is a part of the make-up of China's newly emergent design community, but it is in concert with other factors, including a more global perspective that comes from both the influx of western goods and a growing international education. The re-orientation of China's fashion 'system' that comes of these varying influences, trajectories and contradictions arguably gives rise to specific appreciation of hybridity, or more interestingly, as this thesis contends, a form of 'neutral' fashion; a mixture and fluid scene of multiple brands and fusion goods existing harmoniously in the different time and space. The reading being offered here is to be understood as taking a perspective from *within* China (to try to read directly from what is *seen in China*, rather than to look to China from afar), but equally is a view that is elaborated by critical thinking that sits outside of China (drawing, for example, on the ideas of the French writers Barthes and Jullien). This 'inside-out' perspective gives rise to a radical vision of fashion that is less weighed down by signs and symbols, as might typically be viewed by western accounts.

The title of this chapter, 'Brand Neutral', is to acknowledge the prevalence of brands in China, but equally to suggest of a kind of flattening of meaning across brands. In the middle of the city of Chongqing, for example, in the pedestrianised area of Jiefangbei (Figure 3.11), with the People's Liberation Monument at its centre, there is an array of high-end fashion stores (Prada, Burberry, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, etc.). Jiefangbei is undoubtedly a highly prosperous area and the site of the old city, which plays to tourists and pleasure-seekers alike. Nonetheless, straight across from the opulent storefronts of the wealthy western brands, is another shopping centre. In the window is a sign for a Haagen-dazs ice-cream parlour and KFC, situated at its

front, but behind which is a department store of modestly priced fashions, accessories, home-ware and cosmetics. The arrangement one finds here in the centre of Chongqing is not uncommon in and around many of the major cities of China. And, typically, in the various cafes and restaurants of these commercial quarters you will a wide range of people sitting drinking and eating in a whole variety of outfits. Commonly, for example, jackets, jumpers and trousers will include slogans and emblems incorporating western characters and words. As with the fad in the West for Chinese character tattoos, unreadable to the causal viewer (and often even the person sporting the tattoo), the various western phrases and logos on the clothing that 'ripple' through the streets of Chongqing and other such locations, are mere visual patterning that move in amongst the tremendous variety of sartorial styles, whether old, new, retro, or hybrid. 'Designed in China' is on one level, then, a deliberate making of Chinese-styled fashions (motivated through the work of notable designers within the country, and those of working elsewhere, but identifying themselves as Chinese). But equally, clothing designs (and choices) are constantly being made and re-made by individuals on a daily basis. All of which combines to make for the contemporary landscape of a Chinese fashion 'system' (or systems).



Figure 3.11, Jiefangbei, Chongqing, China  
Source: Zhang Desheng.

## Conclusion: Global, Local, Multiple

Fashion is indicative of social circumstances. The different visions present a status quo through a production of aesthetic or cultural beliefs that serve to structure the reception and consumption. Yet, equally, these same structures can be re-purposed, appropriated and replaced in varying ways. China's long history is largely shaped by patriarchy, yet in the contemporary context there is an opening up to western liberal feminism, complex identities, multiple roles, and pluralistic selves. It is hardly to say that clothing is the only way of understanding these changes, but certainly clothing is a visible form of expression of new identities. So, in part, as discussed with the uptake of luxury brands among a growing middle class and of a younger generation, as well as the alternative visions of couture designers *within* China, we can read fashion as reflecting the changes taking place, and consider how fashion itself acts as a device for change.

This chapter has considered a new 'mobile' image of 'uniform' or uniformity of fashion in China. It was shown, for example, that luxury brands and fast fashions remain a dominating force in the Chinese fashion market (2016, Wang). Yet, these western brands combine with local goods, leading to a culturally specific consumption by women in China. Furthermore, while Western brands bring certain notions of identities to Chinese culture, Chinese designers and consumers are responding with their own influences and/or by assimilating Chinese design through a westernized lens. The multi-cultural influence and enhanced-economic status contribute to a certain uniform (not least brand uniformity). This kind of uniformity in the fashion world is typically understood in terms of conformity and homogeneity, but within this there are more flexible gradients in operation. The 'value' of such uniforms is reflected in and refracted by the specific political-social-economic circumstances. It is a value system that is changing as a consequence of an increasingly global economy. The consumption by individual wealthy women in China, for example, undeniably demonstrates women's growing social role and economic independence. They are treating luxury brands not simply as brands *per se*, but also as a means of developing self-identity and communication of social standing,

which is an important part of maintaining position in the Chinese culture, and a representation of Chinese feminism.

No different to anywhere else, the Chinese fashion system comprises not only manufacturing and the provision of certain styles of clothing, but also marketing and cultural processes. As Barthes (1990) argued, all of these elements serve to produce fashion and in doing so structure almost all experiences of everyday wear. What is unique, however, is just how the elements and structuring devices all align, which inevitably relates to culturally-specific conditions. The structural circumstances of the Four Designers, for example, is such that their work is indelibly connected to specific renderings of Chinese aesthetics and traditions, but through which, equally, they are able to provide new and even contested visions of 'what to wear', or 'how to be'. Alternatively, the uniformity of 'global' clothing – i.e., the richly marketed luxury brands and the cheap fast fashion of the likes of H&M and ZARA, can suggest of a globalizing, homogenizing force. Furthermore, the actual articulation of these fashions within the specific cultural context of China gives rise to its own meanings and values. This new style of 'uniform' in contemporary China has been an important feature in the development of Chinese women's own sense of identity and participation within public and professional activities; marking out their difference from others and acting, so offering a significant indicator vis-a-vis shared values and community boundaries.

However, at the same time that the 'significance' of luxury goods is related here to the demarcation of a new, progressive status for women, it is not to say that a sign-system endemic to the luxury brands is itself a liberating force. The quest for luxury and the 'tactility' of luxury can be seen historically to be significant to definitions of luxury, because, by its definition, luxury goes beyond merely practical necessity (Smith, 2002). Yet, in accounting here for contemporary Chinese fashion, what is being considered is not so much the literal purpose of luxury purchasing, but an understanding of a floating 'uniform' (or sign system) for Chinese women. The 'neutral' landscape of fashion characterised at the end of the previous section is an outcome of the economic renewal of China, stemming from the end of the 1970s.

The suggestion is that, unlike the developments in many western countries, the success associated with the consumption of luxury brands in China represents a *new* identity. Of course, conspicuous consumption, as ironically displayed by the meme discussed at the start of this chapter, is widely associated with a desire for self-fulfillment that transcends any one country, and, as is certainly the case in China, is often most visible among young adults. This new consumerism is undoubtedly rooted in the forces of globalization, which China opened up to with the reforms of 1978. As Pieterse (2015: 21-22) explains, 'Globalization crosses boundaries of government and business, media and social movements, general and academic interest. As a political challenge, it crosses the ideological spectrum and engages social movements and politics at all levels. It involves a paradigm shift from the era of the nation state and international politics to politics of planetary scope.'

Importantly, as outlined variously in this thesis, China has experienced very rapid development over the last 40 years. China's globalization involves a relatively more intensive interaction, which acts as a prism in which major disputes are refracted: questions of capitalism or socialism, gender inequality, cultural hybridity, new identity. Crucially, the new socio-economic circumstance of a globalised China gives grounds for a more fluid, hybridised fashion system, which in turns allows for a new affordance of cultural communication. 'Brand neutral', as a layered phenomenon explored in this chapter, is a state of being for the Chinese fashion 'system' (or systems). Rather than suggest the interactions of western and local brands as being somehow a series of 'negotiations', which relies upon binary oppositions, the argument is for something more diffuse and multiple. And rather than use the language of the postmodern, which in itself creates a underlying set of distinctions (with 'post-' suggesting a before and after), the reference to altermodern China is intended to suggest an alternative time and space, which can both incorporate western consumerism, but also allow for difference – both in terms of how such consumer culture is actually consumed, and how it can combine with 'other', Chinese fashions. What this chapter leads towards, then, is a more multi-perspective and holistic approach.

Of course, the fashion world is frequently framed as global fashion culture, or alternatively referred to as transnational culture. Here the global is always in relation to the local. ‘The global culture,’ writes Kraidy (2005: 31), ‘is inherent to the contemporary zeitgeist, and the global youth generation linked by the language of global popular culture celebrates diversity and thrives in an increasingly interconnected world.’ In this respect, China can be seen as merely one of the ‘rest’, and indeed to be seen as still lagging behind – from a western point of view – international politics and culture (Zakaria, 2008). Unquestionably, the trend of growing worldwide interconnectedness has led to problems relating to either clashing notions of cultural difference or the sense of cultural hegemony. So, while there are evident benefits from globalization, the downsides are much debated. As Melange and Pieterse (2015: 43) describe it: ‘Modernization has been advancing like a steamroller, erasing cultural and biological diversity in its way, and now not only the gains (rationalization, standardization, control) but also the losses (alienation, disenchantment, displacement) are becoming apparent. Stamping out cultural diversity has been a form of disenchantment of the world’. However, without diminishing such accounts, this chapter (and this thesis) is concerned less with the specifics of fashion’s globalization, than with the way in which such forces manifest *within* China, and particularly in relation to women’s fashion in China.

Fashion, we might say, is always an ‘order’ made out of disorder; a conversion of certain material realities, made into sharable ‘myths’, as performed through a blurring of the memory of past fashions or external systems to make for new currencies (Barthes, 1992). There are multiple fashion systems in the international market, operating under different logics and notions of temporality, all of which are perceptually being reconsidered and constructed in complex hybrid encounters with each other through verbal (and highly visual) ‘conversations’. The construction of fashionable dress and identity in China is just one such encounter that demonstrates the complexities and richness of the many fashion discourses present in China. While accepting sartorial uniformity (as based on globalizing forces) and the countering of defined resistances (of traditional and ethnic designs), the contention of this chapter is that there is ‘something else’ at stake. Breaking with the language of hybridity (of

crossover, fusion, global mélange), all of which has its place, there is an alternative viewpoint to be upheld. It is ‘alternative’ when read from the West, but equally it is ‘everyday’ from an indigenous point of view from within China. It is a ‘neutral’ point of view, to take Barthes’ term, or indeed one of ‘blandness’, to take that of Jullien. As he writes, blandness ‘pays little heed to the borders our various disciplines like to draw among themselves. As the embodiment of neutrality, the bland lies at the point of origin of all things possible and so links them’ (Jullien, 2004: 24).

It is worth noting Jullien’s interest in the ‘bland’ (which correlates closely with Barthes’ interest in the neutral) is directly related to a reading of Chinese aesthetics (or we might suggest East Asian aesthetics in the case of Barthes). The ‘merit’ of the bland flavor, for Jullien, is in ‘not being fixed within the confines of a particular definition (and in thus being able to metamorphose without end)’ (23). It is a motif that he notes recurs continually in Chinese culture, and is a ‘beneficiary of each of the three schools of thought (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism)’ (23). From a western point of view, ‘to value the flavorless rather than the flavorful ... runs counter to our most spontaneous judgment’ (27), while in Chinese culture, Jullien argues, it is given a positive value: ‘As the Chinese have always said, if “all men are able to discriminate among differing flavors,” the blandness of the “Mean” (or the “Dao”) is “what is most difficult to appreciate”. But it is precisely this that lends itself to infinite appreciation’ (24). Thus, the ‘bland’ is far from a notion of the insipid. Instead, it comes to represent ‘all things in-between’ the otherwise fixed values we typically contend with and trade in. One might argue that fashion – as a process of continual change (as outlined in Chapter 1, in references to ‘fashion systems’, and in Chapter 2, with regards Buck-Morss’ account of the ‘time’ of fashions) – is always of the ‘bland’, is always means of continual discrimination ‘among differing flavors’. This thesis, of course, limits itself to the specifics of female fashion in contemporary China, where the reference to Chinese philosophical thinking is perhaps pertinent, but is hardly restricted to this context. More generally the ‘bland’ (recounted by Jullien, as we find too with Barthes’ account of the neutral) is a reminder that ‘meaning can never again be conceived as closed and fixed but remains open and accessible’ (Jullien, 2004: 33). We are told, then, it is wise ‘to train oneself in this art

of reading: an approach that allows for an *infusion* of meaning, a far cry from the imperious enumerations of (demonstrative) discourse and all its unrelenting classifications and distinctions' (33). Underlying Jullien's account is an important adherence to the 'concrete': 'The motif of the bland distances us from theory but does not, at the other extreme, commit us to mysticism [...] with the bland, we remain in the realm of perceived experience, even if it situates us at the very limit of perception, where it becomes most tenuous. The bland is concrete, even if it is discreet' (33).

What this chapter has tried to show is a layering of fashion phenomena, which – drawn from a sense of the existing concrete, material conditions – includes the luxury market, the emergence of China's first generation designers and briefly new designers, as well as the interlacing of more everyday consumption. Rather than pit the Four Designers, or the broader development of new Chinese young designs, against the existing landscape of luxury brands and apparel, the aim has been to describe a broader 'system' of significations; to allow all elements to co-exist, so extending the 'flavors' of Chinese contemporary fashion. As noted, this is to identify a way of reading Chinese fashion from *within*. In other words, to begin to suggest of a 'way of seeing' that, while undoubtedly connected to a set of globalised conditions – is culturally specific. The attempt is to construct a critical reading of how women's clothes are selected, worn and exchanged within the context of China, which is not overly reliant on a dominant (western) discourse about fashion. Barthes' well-known study, *The Fashion System*, written back in the 1960s is part of that dominant discourse (a founding text even). Yet a re-reading, or re-writing of this account, through the lens of Barthes' late writings on the neutral (which, as mentioned, draw influence from a range of sources, including Asian philosophy, theology and aesthetics) offers a tool to open up a critical reading of China, but one that can remain immersed within the Chinese context itself (Jullien's writings are also sympathetic to such an approach). Overall, then, this chapter has sought to offer a grounding, critical account of the contemporary fashion 'landscape' (and 'systems') first elaborated in Chapter 1. The purpose of the next and final chapter is to turn to a specific example of clothing, to explore in more detail – at the level of both design

and symbolic consumption – just how this neutral (or ‘bland’) aesthetic can be seen to ‘operate’ or manifest. What comes to light is indeed the many ‘flavors’ that must exist *between* the designated flavors of our common and often stereotypical classifications of culture. The garment in question is the cheongsam, which, on one level, is heavily loaded as a cultural sign of China, of tradition, and of gender. Yet, the analysis of its many variations and recursions (its ability to be at once a singular defined form, yet circulate in multiple ‘fashions’) again opens up a way of understanding China’s fashion ‘system’ as site of complex communication and cultural transmission (and change).

## Chapter 4: The Case of the Cheongsam

The previous chapters have introduced various complexities of fashion and gender in China, including reference to Chinese feminism and different styles of social uniforms or female sartorial uniformities. Various considerations have been given already to the historical and symbolic significance of the changing ‘uniforms’, underlying which has been an argument for a ‘neutral’ reading of fashion as an attempt to offer a new, non-western perspective on fashion in China, which in part relates to an incorporation of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. This chapter now draws upon this approach to offer sustained analysis of the cheongsam. This garment is often thought of as China’s ‘national dress’, which might evoke ideas of tradition and stability. Yet, of course, this outfit is widely seen in various manifestations. In fact, despite its ‘singularity’ as a revered form of national dress, it offers many different changes and possibilities. As such it can be taken to operate as an exemplar of ‘neutral’ apparel. As presented in this chapter, then, the cheongsam can be understood as a metonym for the complexity and fluidity of Chinese fashion, and as a further case of ‘altermodern’ China, bound up as it is within the various discourses of multi-culture, gender, national symbolism, tradition and globalization.

In following the account of the previous chapter, the cheongsam can be seen to be embedded in the ongoing experience of a mass, global market, and so intermixed within global popular culture, and especially the luxury fashion market that has been so prominent in China. Furthermore, the wearing of the cheongsam represents – as a garment with a long history and with more recent connotations of eroticism – a dual phenomenon of both orientalism and self-orientalism. The cheongsam must also be viewed as a hybrid form, which, in extension to the study of the Mao suit in Chapter 2, comes to operate as a ‘sign’ of both ‘freedom’ and subservience, so relevant to the longer view of women’s political and cultural liberation. However, the Cheongsam is arguably all of these things and more besides. It is a sartorial form that has allowed for many different changes and exchanges. In structuralist terms, the cheongsam is neutral. It allows for the movement of meanings, it is a *means of*

signification as much as it is a signified itself. Despite its seeming simplicity of design, it is a garment that is at once historical, hybrid, contemporary and gendered. The fluidity of this garment as 'open' signifier, returns us – in the context of Chinese fashion – to the notion of fashion as 'neutral', as continually generative and re-generative.

An account of the cheongsam is developed here through the analysis of various versionings, and worn by both celebrities and ordinary women. As has been suggested previously, the contemporary cheongsam has been westernized, or hybridized, which is again something that is examined in more detail here. This introduces, then, a layered system of signification. The chapter begins by locating the cheongsam as a sign of so-called 'cultural renaissance', which is to refer to a new economic and cultural confidence of China, which has become evident over the last decade (not least with President Xi taking up office and bold statements such as the One Belt, One Road initiative). Further to this, as part of a closer reading of the material garment itself, the cheongsam is classified into four main groupings, the traditional, postmodern, hybrid and kitsch. The focus is on the latter three versions, which circulate both within China today and through global networks of meaning. The cheongsam – as signifier - can be seen to move in and around the various tensions of tradition versus modern, of feminism versus patriarchy, of Chinese culture versus western culture (East/West)(Ling, 2009). More pointedly, we might say the modernized Cheongsam re-calibrates a series of false dichotomies, both through a playfulness and layered symbolism. Picking up on the account of discontinuous history discussed in Chapter 2, it is arguably more appropriate to consider how clothing can offer multiple and even conflicting meanings, which contribute to diverse social and cultural readings. All of which leads to the 'neutral' cheongsam, as a site of the *production* of signification, rather than a stable signification in itself. Thus, in the final section, the cheongsam's neutral character and the pertinence of a neutral identity for Chinese women is discussed. Again, against the literal use of the word neutral (to suggest something bland, or flavorless, or insipid), neutral here refers not to a simple on/off, binary system of signification, but a complexity and fluidity of meanings and forms, or the full spectrum of

'blandness' or 'flavorless' of the things (which easily fall out of our discourse due to the lack of categorization or meaning). The cheongsam has not just changed suddenly in the postmodern environment. Rather, it has *always* been a changing form. This is part of its design, both a means to somehow retain its own distinction, yet also be of a changing and fluid outcome. The neutral is a way of understanding not just the full range of meanings, but also the 'emptiness' of meaning, or the 'spaces' that must exist to allow us to make meaning. The neutral is a container into which we can hold and produce meanings. For example, Barthes speaks of gradients and intensities, as we might think of a gradient of colors. We are never going to be able to name *all* of the shades of colors, but we can see their differences. In being a distinct form (equivalent to a distinct color), the cheongsam provides a definite 'cut' or special 'collar', yet there are infinite 'shades', infinite gradients or intensities.

## Cultural Renaissance

Globalization is usefully approached as communication, in terms of the different values and aesthetic tastes held by different groups around the world, all generating or negotiating different significances. Through which, the globalization of fashion has facilitated the circulation of images and objects of design that enable many different readings and understandings. This flow of communicative value is vividly displayed with the cheongsam. The garment can be seen to mean diverse things to different cultural groups, or derived through the interconnection of cultures. As outlined in the previous chapter, Chinese consumer desire for globalized products arguably comes at a cost of delimited native culture, identity, and history (Zhao, 2007). Thus, politically, traditional or 'cultural' clothing, which includes the cheongsam, has the means to take on significant symbolic value, especially within international contexts. This is evident, for example, with state events or major political and cultural events, whereby prominent dignitaries wear the cheongsam. In these cases, it dignifies a political character of this dress. In this sense, the Cheongsam indicates a Chinese female aesthetic taste, and crucially links to a sense of 'cultural renaissance'. As such many in China consider wearing the Cheongsam as wearing a 'sign', of respecting the

national culture and displaying a love for the country. China now is finding ways to protect its cultural heritage, against the context of postmodernity.

The Cheongsam, also called Qipao, has a long history in China. It is a typical, traditional, one-piece dress associated with the country, as part of its 'national dress'. The design of the cheongsam has gone through many changes and has been integrated into or adapted for all number of ways for the fashion market (combining western and eastern elements). Its various components can vary, but include the front pieces of yijin (衣襟); both high and short vented collars; differing sleeve lengths; thick or thin seasonal styles; use of soft cashmere, heavy brocade, or flowing silk. The origin of the Cheongsam is much debated in scholarly circles, with three main opinions being held. The first is that the Cheongsam relates back to the clothing of Qing Dynasty (Zhou, 1984). The second opinion holds that it comes down from the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD) or Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC-771BC) (Yuan, 2002; Bao, 2004; etc.). The third view is that that the cheongsam is an adaption of western style dress during the Republic of China era (1920-1930) when people were open to western cultures, and so is a result of hybrid of traditional Chinese costumes and Western costume, which accentuates the waist and body figure (Bian, 2003; Wu, 2008; Ling, 2009; Etc.). It is the case, for example, that the cheongsam offers a more defined body-shape and was popularized by Chinese socialites and upper class women in 1920s and 1930s in China. And there are two styles: the Beijing style and Shanghai style. Traditionally, usage in Western countries and Hong Kong mostly followed the Shanghai style, which is more feminine and erotic, emphasizing the women's bodyline. The variable accounts of the origin of the Cheongsam are worth keeping in mind, suggesting that this is in fact a form that is by its very 'origin' of a shifting nature. As it works through modern and globalized culture, it takes on changing forms and designs, with different materials, different sleeve lengths and styles, and overall different lengths and shapes and patterns. The Cheongsam has of course also been integrated into many western designers' collections, and popularized by both western and Chinese celebrities.

A dominant account of the Cheongsam is that it evokes exotic Chinoiserie and eroticism (Ling, 2007; Chang, 2009). Ling (2009, 2017) shows how, in sustained ways, far from being of mere value as a piece of clothing associated with Chinese women, its consumption and perception is constantly influenced by the global popular media and different cultural exchanges within the global world, including political contexts. Ling has particularly analyzed the active, multi-layered process of engagement between wearers and tailors, and the depths and complexities of this dress from the perspective of hybridity as seen in the contexts of the territories outside of mainland China (i.e. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore). All of these observations are important and inform much of the account here. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the cheongsam is explored with respect specifically to Chinese women in Mainland China, and the different visions and fluid meanings that circulate in this context.

Foreign influences have become omnipresent in China. Typically one will see everywhere the globally recognized brands and suppliers such as MacDonalds, KFC, Coca-Cola, H & M, ZARA etc. Chinese reactions to Orientalist discourse, and to Western representation of itself more broadly, have always been uncertain. In recent decades, as China shifted to a Marketing-Oriented economy, the country has come to advocate modernization and westernization, effectively espousing a Eurocentric/Americanism vision of the world. This has been to position China on the side of the progressive and powerful West, rather than on the side of a backward and oppressed East. A shift in confidence is discernable in more recent years as China's programme of development has yielded a growing middle class, as with a shift to increasingly higher tech industry. The decision in 2017, for example, to stop receiving the West's plastic for recycling is an example of China's shifting economic status and strategy. As the world's second largest economy (closing in on America's long-term economic dominance) and as the world's second 'Super power', China is increasingly asserting a stronger, more confident image. There is a certain parallel here with the Mao period (1950s -1970s), which, while taking an anti-Western position, advocated a rediscovery of Chinese culture. In this case, it meant values set against westernization, proposing a 'return to China' as a better alternative. Today, a

'return to China' is not predicated on a rejection of Western values and influence, but rather is confident enough to allow for some kind of interplay. Nonetheless, there is a definite sense of revival. This is perhaps no better sensed than with President Xi's 2013 speech in Astana, in which he very explicitly reinvoked the image of the 'Silk Road', and his contemporary versioning of this as 'One Belt, One Road'. It was a declaration of a duty to uphold order and cooperation and can be understood as both a foreign and an economic policy. Given the various difficulties and changes around the world, the various political, economic and technological uncertainties, and a potential retreat by some countries from the global system (e.g. with the British decision to leave the EU, or America's protectionism under the Trump administration), Xi's vision could be viewed as a rare, progressive statement among contemporary world leaders. Of course, the One Belt On Road initiative has not been without its critics, with many countries receiving loans finding themselves indebted to the Chinese government etc. This thesis is not the place to discuss this matter in detail, but as an overarching narrative and political and economic framing, the re-visioning of the Silk Road is an important element of how China – at all sorts of levels, whether in trade, industrial strategy, education, and cultural heritage – is actively promoting something of a 'renaissance'. In the 1980s, the critical theorist Fredric Jameson offered his distinctive account of postmodernity, as the emergence of a collapse of order, a flattening of knowledge and geography. He suggested it a period in need of a new kind of cognitive mapping, in order to make sense of the new world order, the forces of globalization and its deterritorialization. Today the slogan, 'designed in California, assembled in China' is arguably a remnant of what came to pass through the postmodern. Things have changed rapidly in recent years. We might suggest the cognitive mapping Jameson spoke of is complete and that the global scaling of the world that the image of the Silk Road presents is something that we are now much more equipped to handle. In this context, the re-imagining of a cultural good, such as the cheongsam, is not necessarily to be viewed simply as a form of nostalgia or cultural 'tactic' (as would be understood in postmodern and postcolonial discourse). Rather, the evocation of contemporary 'fashion systems' (as outlined in Chapter 1, and developed in Chapter 3) prompts us to consider new significations and interconnections.

The discourse of a ‘return to China’ (in the Mao period) and ‘cultural renaissance’ today is to an extent premised on internalization of orientalist representations, since China is portrayed (by itself) in terms very similar to western descriptions of the country, as traditional culture and fashion, only valorizing them as superior rather than inferior. However, such abstract accounts need to be tempered by actual material properties. The Cheongsam, it can be shown, reflects intercultural borrowing and fusion whether in the size, cut, material, and shape. In *Chinese Cheongsam*, Bao Mingxin (2014) divides the modern cheongsam into two styles: basic and modern. He argues that through investigation and comparison of the cheongsam in the Shanghai Textile museum, Chen and Zhang (2013) offer a ‘measurement and statistic of the 20th century cheongsam chest and waist’, whereby: the gap between the chest and waist changes from -1.5--- -1.7cm in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to 3.5---10cm in the 1940s. The gap difference of chest and waist gradually increases, but the more recent measurements of the contemporary period, -10~ 10cm, show the up-to-date cheongsam to be mutable and open to change (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Measurement and static of the cheongsam chest and waist

Time	Waist	Chest	Waist-chest	Sliding
Beginning of 20 <sup>th</sup>	39.0	46.0	-7.0	-1 ~ -7.0
	38.0	40.5	-2.5	
	37.0	40.0	-3.0	
	39.0	42.0	-3.0	
	38.5	40.0	-1.5	
20s -30s of 20 <sup>th</sup>	40.5	40.5	0.0	0.0 ~ 2.0
	38.0	37.0	1.0	
	40.0	39.5	0.5	
	41.0	39.0	2.0	
	39.0	39.0	0.0	
30 <sup>th</sup> -40s of 20 <sup>th</sup>	41.0	37.5	3.5	3.5 ~ 10.0
	41.0	36.0	5.0	
	40.0	33.0	7.0	
	42.0	32.0	10.0	
	39.5	36.0	3.5	

<i>Beginning of 21th 2000-2017</i>	39.5 43.5 45.0 42.0 41.5	37.0 35.5 47.5 42.5 32.5	2.5 10.0 -2.0 -0.5 -10.0	-10 ~ 10
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In fact, the newer cheongsam seemingly marks a return to its origin, whether traditional or westernized. These changes begin to suggest of a 'neutral' style, an ability to shift back and forth, allowing for a range of 'gradients' or 'flavors'. To some extent, this process is indeed accompanied by multi-culture influence, that is: traditional–international-neutral. More specifically, the cheongsam's shape's history is 'A---H---X---A + H + X + mutual', which is shown below (Figure 4.2):

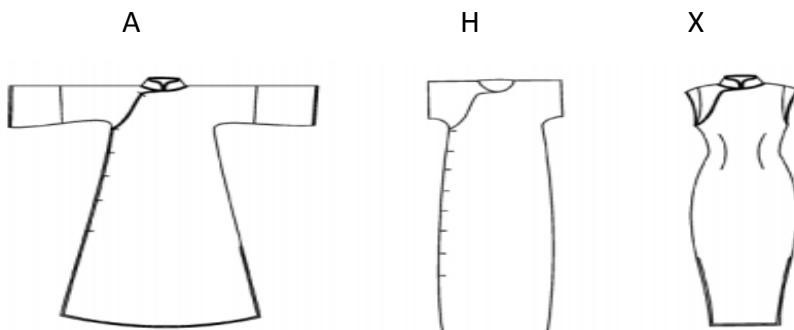


Figure 4.2: Three types of cheongsang  
Source: Zhang Desheng

The majority of China's domestic designers know that Chinese clothing favors flat design and loose fitting styles. Western clothing stresses the cut and shape of the body. As Wang (2012) examines, the traditional Chinese cheongsam is made of straight lines, slits on both sides, with almost the same width and lap. It is known that Western fashion is based on a tailored body, whilst in the East the body is a site of draping. Therefore, under the western influence, the cheongsam takes on a different modeling structures; it changes from a two-dimensional structure (straight) to a three-dimensional structure (curve), which is A to X in Figure 4.2. The variation of cheongsams, and the shift towards the more western style signifies changing aesthetic attitudes, but which does not necessarily follow a straight line, a simple progression. There is a shift from the elegant feminine cheongsam in the 1920s to masculine unisex shirts of the 1960s, before then the postmodern feminine

cheongsam associated with the global brands from the 1990s onwards. This represents a wave of women's expression and body politics. As Fainanne (2008) argues, every stage in China's history has its own political-social dress, and shows different political-social-cultural significances, and even the wearer's self-identity and self-expressions. The same argument underlines this thesis, and is characterized here as 'uniforms'. The social uniform cannot be defined, and confined to the wearing of specific clothes as such, nor to any one individual's selection. Instead it is to suggest of patterns, significations and trends that occur across a given time. Thus, the case of the cheongsam as a form of cultural renaissance is not to be found solely at the level of the garment, although, as suggested above, the material qualities do harbor a certain 'semantics' (as in units of measure and meaning) which can be emphasized or deemphasized in different ways, in accordance with the traditional and the modern takes on the garment. When this is then placed in the broader frame of explicit economic and political narratives (as with China's recent and massive development programme), there begins to emerge a 'patterning' in and through design.

As suggested above, the inscription of renewal or return is partly effected through the internalization of orientalist representations. In the previous chapter, this was explained as a form of 'self-orientalism', whereby orientalism is not simply the autonomous creation of the West, but rather that the East itself participates in its construction, reinforcement and circulation in terms of Chinese fashion (in many respects Said' original formulation of orientalism already accounts for this internalization, as part of the hegemony of the Orient as a construct, that can only be perpetuated by its internalization). There are two approaches we can associate with self-Orientalism. Taking a historical approach, the self-produced images of the Orient are heavily influenced by Western conceptions through their commodities, i.e. 'Oriental'-looking clothing: Cheongsam, Mao-jackets, etc. Specifically, Western Orientalist knowledge has been internalized and self-inscribed by the East, and becomes inseparable from Western ideas. Consider the history of the Cheongsam: it was banned in Mainland China during 1950s-1980s, but it was still normal dress in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other countries. Indeed, after the Opening-up Policy in

the 1980s, Western opinions significantly influenced perceptions, whereby eventually Chinese women adopted the elegant Cheongsam as a national dress. Consequently, Chinese culture has experienced profound discontinuities as a natural result of practical choices of a re-appropriated past significantly filtered through western fashion ideology. At such a point, Orientalist discourse cannot be approached as precisely the consequence of Western influence, but rather the combination or fusion of Western/ Eastern changing socio-cultural and ideological conditions. In this respect, the cheongsam has proved a powerful tool to present a convincing national identity, and can be considered an outcome of transnational exchange and encounter (Ling, 2017). The successful case is the fashion line of Shanghai Tang, which is a clear example of a self-conscious decision to work with both traditional Chinese clothing culture and western elements, i.e., the silk cheongsam and Mao's Jacket combined with western shirts or suits (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: SHANGHAI TANG in Beijing Airport January 2019  
Source: Feng Jie

Another approach considers self-Orientalism as a profound consequence of the Orient's striving for modernity. According to Shih (2001), China's modernization through to globalization was interpreted as inferior to Western standing, ever placing the 'Orient' at a disadvantage. It is true that in the context of globalization, the interpretation and representation of global culture is firmly entrenched in the predominant framework of Euro-American conceptions of the world, but a self-aware 'orientalism' of designers has enabled a unique and different identity, which draws upon a sense or 'myth' of an ancient, historical, and unchanging identity. This is a strategy of development (of being 'modern') through the construct of the Orient. In this regard the cheongsam, as a sign of self-orientalism, deconstructs an East-West binary. In effect, China needs to assert a new 'visibility' to counter the invisibility of an orientalist frame (Zhang, 2006; Some and Hedge, 2012). In contemporary China, then, the growing strategy for 'Chinese Cultural protection', while marked by the promotion and reinvention of traditions is directly linked to economic development, and the gradual increase in the importance of creative industry, which of course includes fashion design and marketing.

While self-orientalism relies on using the tools of western perception to represent one's own culture, the 'renaissance' of China's culture re-invests the various imagery and significations for a 'home' audience. A very good example of this is the "Chinese New Year Spring Festive Evening Party", which is broadcast annually on the evening of the Chinese New Year, featuring singers, presenters, and performers all typically wearing traditional Chinese dress, such as the cheongsam and Mao-jacket (see Figure 4.4). The cheongsam is commonly seen on China's state TV channel, CCTV 1. Of course, it is well known that China Central Television (CCTV, formerly Beijing Television) is controlled by the Propaganda department of China. As such the New Year festival performance is state-controlled. The image shown here is of two singers wearing a cheongsam and Mao jacket. The red peony design on the cheongsam refers to the national flower, while the Chinese blue is also a connotation of nationalism. The cheongsam here is not exotic, rather it is merely smart, and elegant. It is a form of 'costume' for the performance, but equally is something a member of the audience might themselves be wearing while watching the TV, celebrating the

New Year. In this respect, the cheongsam is not out of the ordinary. Nonetheless, orchestrated as part of the state TV programming for the New Year, it is also a form of political dress, a means of communicating a traditional form as a means to uphold contemporary cultural values.



Figure 4.4, Mao jacket and the cheongsam in celebrating of Chinese New Year 2018

Source: Feng Jie

However, while the narrative of cultural renaissance forms an important backdrop to the enduring significance of the cheongsam, the formal, 'traditional' styling of the dress is only one aspect of how it is reiterated. The section that follows in fact identifies four main categories of the contemporary cheongsam, which offers a more complex picture, and leads again to the account of a neutral, hard to define form. In part, we can consider a form of cannibalization in the various designs of the cheongsam; a form of cultural appropriation upon itself. Cultural borrowing is the adoption or use of the elements of one culture by members of another. According to critics of the practice, cultural appropriation differs from assimilation, or cultural exchange in that the 'appropriation' or 'misappropriation' refers to the adoption of these cultural elements in a colonial manner: elements are copied from a minority culture by members of a dominant culture, and these elements are used outside of their original culture context — sometimes even against the expressly stated wishes of representatives of the originating culture. Problematic examples of the latter-mentioned process often distort the original meanings of a certain symbol to

exotic fashionable depictions. Designers however, defend such accusations by calling it 'inspiration' while dismissing the importance of what certain cultural symbols might entail. However, rather than the cheongsam being culturally appropriated, it is its *form* that is continually adapted and 'borrowed', leading not only to new Cheongsam designs, but also *cheongsam-like* designs (i.e. variations on the form). In the last few years, for example, we see a range of different elements recast, such as the hand-made, tailored versions of the First Lady's Cheongsam, as well as the cheap and high volume produced version, which are sold in tourist spots and on websites. In some cases designers are seeking to acknowledge the history behind certain symbols and forms, while in other cases this is seemingly not of importance. The cheongsam can shift easily between a form of heritage and a form of fashion. We might ask, for example, when viewing the cheongsam as worn by the Chinese First Lady when the meeting with the President of France, is this a matter of fashion or heritage? In some respects it is both. It is an 'image' that circulates in amongst both an East-West visual culture (as a form of fashionable statement), but it is equally an example of self-Orientalizing, and as such an upholding of a tradition. As will be considered below, in the section that follows, this is a postmodern instance of the cheongsam, a form of 'double coding' and in some respects a mode of 'cultural drag': It is to wear the dress less as a garment and more as an image (she stands elegantly in a blue-white Cheongsam, standing deliberately in front of the Chinese flag). Thus, we find the cheongsam is both heavily loaded in terms of its symbolism and appropriations (and is drawn within the current narrative of Chinese cultural renaissance), and yet its ability to shape-shift also suggests a highly malleable form. It is to this changing nature that this chapter now turns.

## Traditional, Postmodern, Hybrid, Kitsch

The account above of a new confident China and a narrative of cultural renaissance largely refers to the 'idea' of a *traditional* or 'authentic' cheongsam. Were we to locate such a garment it would likely be at vintage markets, second hand-shops or

traditional tailor shops (dealing in old, beautifully constructed and embroidered pieces). This can be viewed as one of four ‘versions’ of the cheongsam. The second, also referenced above, is the *postmodern* cheongsam, associated above with that worn by President Xi’s wife. While this is a fairly authentic version of the dress, it is inserted into a very specific context on the global, political stage. It is used deliberately as a signifier of China (it is similar to how Trump’s wife mostly wears American brands). The postmodern cheongsam is an ‘ironic’ or double-coded version. It is a deliberate symbol, as much as it is tailored piece of clothing. The third version is the *hybrid* cheongsam, which is found for example on the catwalk, or with high-end fashion that experiments with the garment. Inevitably, the hybrid cheongsam filters through to retail. The hybrid cheongsam also relates to garments that are modified or partial in design, so influenced by the cheongsam, but not quite a cheongsam. Finally, an extension of the hybrid and changing cheongsam is the *kitsch* cheongsam, which is of a lower quality, but can be fashionable and playful. It is mostly worn by a young generation. In each of these cases there are varying aspects of ‘uniform’. The traditional and postmodern, as discussed above, help codify a visual rhetoric about Chinese culture and can (though not always) operate as a uniform of tradition, or at least the ‘citation’ of tradition (as in the case of the First lady). The hybrid cheongsam, given its experimentation, is perhaps less obviously related to the idea of uniformity. Yet, its placement within high fashion and consumerism means it can be associated within the uniformities of global consumption. It relates to the common, uniform mechanism of high-end fashion that must update regularly, most be ‘current’, and so by extension, in women’s wear, creates a social pressure for being seen to wear the latest trend or the new fashionable outfit etc. The kitsch cheongsam is similarly part of consumerism, and while playful and disposable, often draws upon the orientalist tradition, to adopt the exotic and erotic connotations of the garment. This is not a uniform at garment level, but nonetheless, as mass-produced items perpetuates certain simplistic significations. Regardless of the various differences between these categories of the cheongsam, they present ways of understanding social meanings and identifications.



Figure 4.5, Chinese president and First lady visit Pakistan 2016  
Source: Zhang Desheng

The difference between the traditional (authentic) and postmodern cheongsam can be subtle. In fact, it is not necessarily the difference between actual garments, but rather how and when they are worn, how they are 'performed' within certain situations. As we can see in Figure 4.5, Chinese First Lady Peng Li Yuan, wears the traditional cheongsam on a visit to Pakistan in 2016. The formal dress of these two elite First Ladies articulate different responses from different social groups and cultures, with distinguishing features of certain sartorial codes and currencies of clothing. Here, then, we see the China's First lady wearing the authentic cheongsam, balanced by the Pakistani First Lady wearing traditional Muslim clothing. These outfits immediately establish the cultural identity of the respective wearers due to the fact these outfits are part of general discourse around traditional forms of dress. In both cases these are symbolic clothing, helping to frame the coming together of different nations (which is not signified by the outfits of the two men in the photograph). The cheongsam on Xi's wife here attests to clothing's ability to register clear meanings. It establishes an unambiguous role of identification with China. Similarly, Peng Li Yuan wears the cheongsam when visiting the USA in 2017 (Figure 4.6). Again, the outfit helps define an image, the image of China in the international

context. Again, it is noticeable that the two men wear near identical suits. This kind of national garment emphasizes nationalism and tradition in a specifically gendered, and feminine manner.



Figure 4.6: First lady visit USA 2017

Source: Zhang Desheng

The shift from traditional to postmodern is arguably defined by the shift towards the (postmodern) cheongsam as spectacle or image. It is the shift indeed towards a deliberate communication of a code, the explicit use of clothing as mediator of a more intangible or virtual property such as cultural heritage and value. The hybrid cheongsam might similarly be said to relate to image, in that it deliberately works with a visual 'semantics' of design to help fashion new renderings and adaptations. However, the hybrid cheongsam is more ambiguous in its actual 'coding' – it is not presented as a neat form of message, which typically is the case with the postmodern cheongsam. The ironic, double coding of the postmodern cheongsam requires a more direct and arguably binary set of meanings in order to maintain its 'play' within a certain situation. In other words, as a form of 'citation' it is necessary to read off the actual source, in order to make sense of its alternative placement.

The hybrid cheongsam can be situated within more of a transnational context – to define new possibilities *through* the international exchange of forms. Nakayama and

Krizek (1995) propose that transnationalism is a form of new international communication, notable for its openness of discursive formations. Depending on how experimental hybridity might be, it is the case that some might even question whether different styles of Cheongsams can still be called a cheongsam (Wang 2018; Zhou 2018). In this respect, the hybrid cheongsam relates back more particularly to issues of design, rather than rhetoric as we see with the postmodern cheongsam. Or, again, as noted, we need to distinguish the postmodern as less a specific garment, but more its placement and citation in a certain political or rhetorical situation. Again, we can begin to find it difficult to finally define the border between what is authentic or not. In many respects we might argue, by default, *all* cheongsam are inauthentic. Indeed, as a consequence of cultural fusion and postmodernity, Wessie Ling's claim is that the cheongsam's 'origin' is in its fusion and hybridity (Ling, 2007). It is perhaps more appropriate, then, to look to what *becomes* of the cheongsam rather than what it *is* – i.e. to look to its placement and passage through cultural settings and complex fashion systems.

One distinction between the postmodern and the hybrid cheongsam is the placement of the former in a wider visual rhetoric (such as the political spectacle of a state visit) and the latter within a less circumscribed site of meaning. Typically, we might see the hybrid cheongsam on the (western) fashion catwalk (see Figure 4.7). This is, of course, a very coded space, in terms of how it functions, who will be watching and how it is gendered etc. Yet, it is a less narrative space (it does not generate a news item, for example, as does a state visit). The focus within the confines of the catwalk or the fashion show more broadly, is upon 'stories' of the clothes and their materials themselves. As an international, or transnational space it is less defined as a 'place' – the flow of meanings of styles and citations are more ambiguous. The hybrid cheongsam gives rises to a greater sense of the 'floating signifier' – the differing elements of meaning within the clothing design will play across one another, not as a form of double coding necessarily, but a more pluralized coming together. This is of course a product of postmodernism more generally, of the acceptance of different forms and meanings being able to collide and mix. The postmodern has allowed for a collapse of symbolic hierarchies and a blending of

cultural forms, especially between popular culture (Skov, 2018; Featherstone, 1991; etc). The postmodern aesthetic has leant itself easily to fashion design, which arguably has always held the ability and desire to shift forms. Thus, there is a difference being suggested here between the irony of the postmodern cheongsam (as a deliberate form of coding) and the hybrid cheongsam, which while equally a product of postmodernity, presents styles that 'travel', that suggest decentredness and instability; that are more plural in their 'play', rather than the play of oppositions (western system/Chinese system; global/ local; past/ present). There is more focus on communication with the former, while the latter is more focused upon aspects of design itself. It is also the case that the hybrid cheongsam is more likely to feed into everyday designs and the retail market, being as it is more closely related to the business of fashion.



Figure 4.7: hybrid cheongsam in Louis Vuitton, SS 2011.  
Source: Vogue.com

Hybridity, then, involves the fusion of some hitherto relatively distinct forms styles, and involves a play of identities, typically from cross-cultural contact (Kaidy, 2005; see also: Zhang, 2006; Wang, 2013; Wu, 2009). The modified, hybridized cheongsam re-works recognized styles, structural molding and details. For example, in Figure 4.8, by utilizing shoulder pads, zipper, and western-style clothing accessories, the transformation of the main structure is altered from a loose to a tight-fitting style, and from the planar shape to curved surface. Thus we see the modern, modified cheongsam as the product of both western and Chinese dress cultures. Western garment molding methods including easing, cutting, and set-in sleeve, transform the outer profile from traditional cheongsam shape to western, so from 'A' to 'H' and

further to 'X' (Chen, Zhang, 2013). In Figure 4.8, we can see, all of these shapes and changes as the result of a transnational culture, as fusion and speculation between East and West. Popular western fashion culture is drawn into the mix as a consequence of capitalist exchange, through the mechanization of production, and from the circulation of designs and meanings in the popular press and media. Again, to echo Ling's (2009) account, the cheongsam is precisely a 'form ' of fusion and hybridity.



Figure 4.8: new hybrid cheongsam in China, from website of Taobao.  
Source: Zhang Desheng

Apart from the fact that hybridity foregrounds the material design aspects of the cheongsam, the plurality that comes of fusion (or at least potentially comes of fusion) also has significance for how meanings are distributed, shared and owned. It is possible, for example, for different meanings from the same garment or instance of garment to be encountered in different ways, by different groups. Generally speaking, the account given here suggests how the cheongsam design (or designs) has become increasingly less constrained. It reflects, more or less, not only individual motives, but also broader social and cultural identity understanding. The 'uniformity'

of the cheongsam as a ‘singular’ design concept or genre, allows for an array of different ‘shapes’ of meaning and ownership. A good example of this is the talk show host Jinxing who appears on Shanghai TC (Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9: Jinxing on cheongsam in Chinese talk show.  
Source: Zhang Desheng

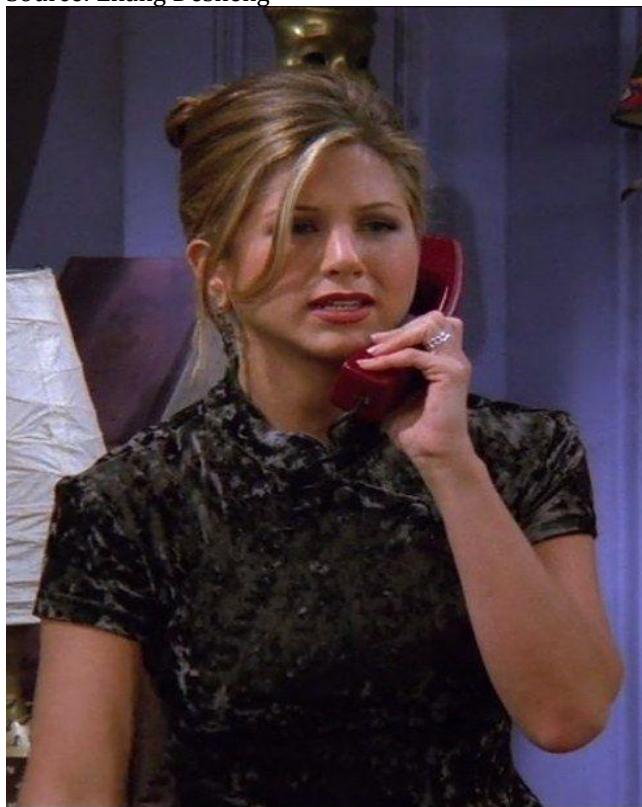
Significantly, Jinxing was a transsexual dancer, but now is the presenter of Jinxing Talkshow. This thesis has not sought to enter into debates of sexuality and sexual identity as such, remaining instead within the more overarching debates of gender. However, in this case, it is notable that the traditional dress of Cheongsam can be taken as a means of mediating an ‘alternative’ sexuality, or at least is a means of not problematizing the issue. A key feature of the cheongsam is of course the high collar, which in this case has the advantage of feminizing the neck region, and more generally the shapeliness of the garment accentuates curves associated with the feminine form. This raises the idea that the cheongsam is not simply a predominately female outfit in contemporary culture, by matter of habit, but is also a means of defining the female body. It is part of a feminine ‘technique’. It is also, in terms of the plurality of hybridity, a form that extends the possibility of not only presenting a hybrid, plural aesthetic, but also allows a plural politics. It allows for

'other' to be seen. This argument can be extended in a different direction, in terms of how the cheongsam can be seen to travel between (national) cultures. A case in point is the appearance of the cheongsam in the hit television series, *Friends*, which was broadcast in the 1990s in America (and around the world). On several occasions the fashion savvy character, Rachel Green, played by the actress Jennifer Aniston, is seen to wear the cheongsam, in varying styles. Two versions can be seen in the following two figures, Figures 4.10 and 4.11. In this case, the garment can be taken as a 'pure' signifier of 'fashion' and 'fashionableness', so supporting and embellishing the character. In the first case the cheongsam is relatively traditional, but inevitable as a citation within the TV programme (for a character living in central New York) it is a postmodern iteration. Arguably, is it not marking a specific point about Chinese cultural dress, but instead the cheongsam plays a more floating signifier. It is 'vaguely' ethnic as a design, but set against her fellow friends, the outfit is about defining the character of Rachel. The plurality of the form is not explicit, but nonetheless allows the ease with which it can be adopted in different settings. The further example, in Figure 4.11, the cheongsam is more of a hybrid form. The choice of cloth is unexpected, as is the color etc. The focus here is, again, not necessarily upon the cultural value of the garment, but how that cultural value (when decontextualized) allows for a more open signification, which in the case of this particular character is about presenting as a young, fashionable woman in the 'melting pot' of New York city (and is a means of distinguishing the character strongly from her less fashionable friends).



Figures 4.10: Cheongsam in the TV Friends

Source: Zhang Desheng



Figures 4.10: Cheongsam in the TV Friends

Source: Zhang Desheng

Finally, there is another version of the cheongsam that cannot be ignored: the kitsch cheongsam (Figure 4.12), which is widely consumed in China. It can be described generally being of poor quality (in terms of materials and manufacture), and often to be amusing and of a playful interest. It can also be seen to be worn by westerners. This version can be seen, for example, to incorporate kitsch designs such as printed lettering, including humorous or crude words (hell, heaven, simple, angry, etc.). Again, we can understand this version in the context of postmodernity, where by ironic texts become common, not least on T-shirt designs. However, this version of the cheongsam is distinctive as kitsch (rather than the double-code postmodern cheongsam described above) in term of being mass produced, cheap and frivolous. It is a version of the garment that is more associated with fast fashion and is about novelty and fun.

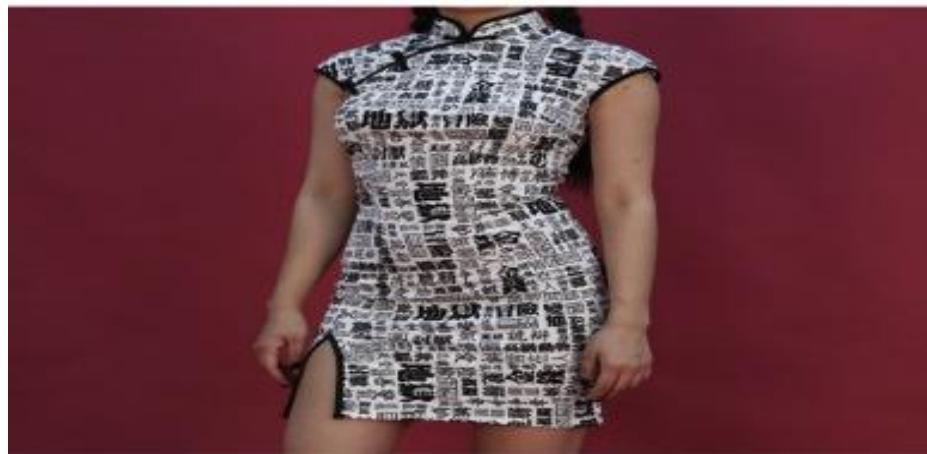


Figure 4.12: kitsch cheongsam, from Taobao website.

Source: Zhang Desheng

The modernist writer Hermann Broch (2002) explains the essence of kitsch as the imitation of an immediate predecessor with *no regard to ethics*. Similarly, kitsch has been described as fake art, or expressing fake emotions, whose purpose is to deceive someone into thinking deeply and seriously (Scruton, 2014). Yet, the kitsch garment has an undeniable mass-appeal. For example, the kitsch garments in Figures 4.12 and 4.13, are taken from the Chinese online shopping website 'Taobao', which shows the items having sold more than 3000 pieces in a year. The fact that websites such as these show such information is an interesting component of the 'fashion

systems' introduced in Chapter 1, and certainly in this case highlights certain popularity for the kitsch cheongsam.



Figure 4.13: cheongsam T-shirt, from Taobao.  
Source: Zhang Desheng

This item, shown in Figure 4.13, uses the distinctive red hue of the Chinese national flag to signify something about national identity and incorporates the characters 中国女孩, which translate as 'Chinese girl'. This is a form of playful, ironic 'labelling' that is seemingly empty in meaning, yet not uncommon with T-shirts etc.

As has been suggested the various versions of cheongsams outlined here, no matter whether traditional, hybrid, westernized, or kitsch, all by and large need to be situated within a postmodern frame. In fact there are not always clear distinctions between the various versions described here, not least since, as has been remarked, the citation and/or performance of the cheongsam as it is worn and the context in which it is worn can allow for various different interpretations and readerships. As we come to see, hybridity involves different meanings not only across time but also

across cultural contexts, which typically receive little gatekeeping or acknowledgement. Often the mixing of elements and styles can pass unnoticed and be taken for granted or welcomed (without any great scrutiny). As Bauman (1992: 102) remarked, it is the world of post-modernism that claims a 'permanent and irreducible pluralism of cultures'. Nonetheless, the point of outlining these specific cases is to show how flexible this garment has become. Unlike a pair of jeans, which are undoubtedly ubiquitous and can be styled in widely different ways, it is a garment that is paired with other elements, with an ensemble being able to change in numerous ways and to be adaptable to a wide range of situations. Yet, the cheongsam is more of a 'complete' outfit, yet seemingly can take on a wide variety of guises and meanings. Its inherent plurality gets us back to a consideration of the cheongsam as 'neutral'. It is a reminder of how fashion can be both full of meaning and open to meanings at the very same time. In this respect the cheongsam is both *architectonic* (it presents a specific aesthetic structure) as well as a sort of *meta-garment* – a form of clothing that equally helps us comment upon the structure and effects of clothing.

## Conclusion: Neutral Cheongsam

While we know that costume in China is strongly related to politics (Fainane, 2007), it is still the case that the cheongsam has a very wide range of meanings and occurrences. However, rather than attempting to pin down specific significations of the various versions and instances of the cheongsam, it is perhaps more useful to consider the cheongsam as a 'continuum' of sartorial meanings, which are all part of the way in which the garment functions in China. As Ling (2017) argues, the cheongsam is characterized by adaptability, versatility, and inclusiveness, and is facilitated by nationalism and the consumer culture. However, it is not simply that it is a highly flexible form, but rather something more than that. It is as if it is a 'blank canvas', upon which various meanings are layered, endlessly inscribed by the cultures that possess it; both meaningful and meaningless, stable and unstable. This is the 'essence' of the cheongsam, which, in part, makes it possible to draw the

garment into the recent national narrative of cultural renaissance, as outlined at the start of this chapter. Indeed, we can see the cheongsam as a symbol of tradition that feeds the recent rhetoric of a ‘Chinese Dream’, which, like the ‘American dream’, looks both back to tradition and to future prosperity, and that operates as ‘myth’. President Xi’s use of the phrase ‘Chinese Dream’ (since around 2016) is not only about economic development, but also spiritual lifeblood of the nation. According to the theoretical journal *Qiushi*, the Chinese dream is about Chinese prosperity, collective effort, socialism, and national identity (China Daily, 2016). But it is also founded as upon symbols and myths. Indeed, the Chinese Dream draws on the inheritance of China’s fine traditional culture; upon aesthetics of traditional Chinese fashion, art, literature and philosophy, which are a feature of traditional cheongsam, but readily manifest too upon contemporary designs (Figure 4.14).



Figure 4.14: pattern on traditional cheongsam

Source: Zhang Desheng

In Figures (4.15, 4.16, 4.17), we see the design of cheongsams hanging in shops during the time of writing this thesis. The motifs directly reference Chinese watercolor landscape ink painting and rhetorical patterns, which signify the bringing of luck and prosperity to its wearer. The patterns indicate a landscape at the hem, and ‘floating’ sky lines (as we might find in a traditional ink painting). Even in contemporary China these traditional designs and emblems are constantly being reinvented by local fashion designers with the aim to meet a particular consumer

interest. Traditional Chinese art offers a blending of forms, emphasizing the harmony of the heaven, earth, and people. However, we need to be careful how we read these particular garments. These photos suggest 'literal' neutrality – one that merely illustrates neutral ideas or symbols (as drawn from East Asian arts and philosophy). The patterns and motifs here are 'about' tranquility or nature etc. But there is also a more subtle meaning of neutral that needs to be located, which we can understand through all of the various versions of the cheongsam considered above – i.e. we can locate a more *general*, underlying ability of the cheongsam to produce meaning, endlessly. The traditional patterns (flowers, pants, animals, etc.) shown in these photos, while contemporary designs, are positioned in female clothing stores in China's old streets and tourist centers. These cheongsams (Figures 4.15, 4.16, 4.17) were displayed in one of the old streets of Beijing. Yet, we can look beyond these specific products to suggest of a 'neutral' cheongsam – as the underlying mediator of all the variety of the garment. However, the references to traditional arts and philosophy are useful to reference.



Figure 4.15: photo from old street shop, Beijing, August 2017  
Source: Feng Jie



Figure 4.16: photo from clothing shop in Beijing, August 2018

Source: Feng Jie



Figure 16: Take photo from a shop in Beijing, August 2017

Source: Feng Jie

In traditional Chinese philosophy, harmony and balance are key concepts. Lao Tzu considered all is consisted of Yin and Yang, and all is interconnected, referred to as 10,000 things. We might imagine this to mean that even if we look in a specific

direction or act upon a singular object, all else around us is in flux and relates to our singular points of view or action. 10,000 Things is then to refer to a multitude of ‘other’ elements (the number suggestive of more than we can cognitively compute, and could as much be described as an infinite number of interactions). We find, for example, in the Tao Te Ching, the following account:

Beauty is, what dry grass calls the first sprinkles of rain; the first warm breeze of spring that touches the bat's wings awakening it from deep hibernation; the sound of a mating call; the protection of a home; the feeling of friendship; the cheers of accomplishment; the welcoming smile of a stranger; the satisfaction of every profound yearning that disturbs each and every creature, every microbe, every cell, every molecule, every single atom and particle.  
(Tao Te Ching,)

For Lao Tzu, beauty emerges because it is the very movement of Qi and the very substance that quickens the entire universe, bringing life to everything. In one word, in Daoism, beauty is harmony; balance, is an original simplicity. Yet, as of the 10,000 Things, it is not a singular, pure thing – but always as a form of harmony a bringing *together* of elements. It is in this sense that we need to start to understand the cheongsam as neutral, as endless. While it is presented as a definite form, it *is* of no fixed version.

However, as ‘social uniform’, one of the aspects of the cheongsam is its incorporation of Confucianism, which advocates elegance and manner. There is a conflict here, between a Daoist, free-flowing understanding of the garment and the more structured, mannered nature of Confucianism. In the case of the latter, women’s beauty is characterized as submissive, relating back to ancient China and patriarchal society. Of course, such a description is at odds with contemporary experience, not least as it is influenced by western feminism. However, in keeping with the 10,000 Things, there is a way in which the cheongsam is all of these factors (old and new) all at once. The garment is elegant or frivolous; it is high fashion or popular culture; it is feminine, submissive, or striking and refined. The Cheongsam is then a *material* rendering of Chinese aesthetics, which unlike a western conception of aesthetics is more open and changeable. It is not about what is printed on the

cloth necessarily or the exact cut, but rather it is the fuller continuum of the form that flows through many instances, whether at state visits, in the everyday, whether formal or kitsch. It is a form of national dresses in China, yet is also everyday dress; it is symbolic and practical.

So, the cheongsam's revival is not merely as a symbol of cultural renaissance and confidence, but is as much a *neutral* expression. It is a means of dressing with a plurality of meanings. The changing styles of the cheongsam are not just a hybrid process, combining west-east cultures, but a function of its ongoing shifting status. Its instability yet inclusiveness yields an ambivalence that is perhaps more common to fashion more broadly than we might typically consider. Indeed, if the cheongsam is a metonym of fashion more generally – at least in China it is as a 'uniform' code (as a structured design) whose modifications seem constantly to enable a movement within and among countless symbols; allowing for not only the discontinuities of fashion, but of how we make up our own identities and shared narratives (as discussed in Chapter 2).

The cheongsam as a perpetually modifying style has been readily adapted to the shifting cultural politics of globalization and alter-modern China. It can bring symbols of different cultures together and provide ample opportunities for the simultaneous activation of two or more cultural representations. It is easy to see conflict between western-dominated consumption on one side and a return to nationalism on another. We can respond to debates about altermodern China, composed of two distinctions, two tendencies: universalism or localism. The former is based on the 'imitation' of western culture and includes its ideology and dress; the latter wishes to protect traditional culture. Framed in this way, China is described as facing a dilemma about how to balance future developments. Yet, this is not necessarily how individuals experience things, nor how they are expressing themselves in terms of what they choose to wear. The cheongsam as a meta-garment helps to remind us of the constant variability of all fashion, and as a distinct outfit it is just one of many one can witness on a day to day basis. The same mechanism that allows the

cheongsam to alter and adapt, to shift 'horizontally' (rather than establish a hierarchy of fashion) is the same mechanism that can be seen across all manner of styles, outfits and combinations that populate the everyday in contemporary China. This is the neutral fashion of the everyday. It does not mean it is without meaning, without differences, but that the differences are constantly negotiated and constructed.

The fashion and gender identities in contemporary China are being challenged and contested in various ways, as Chinese women transform their circumstances and social conditions. In altermodern China, women's thoughts or identity have adapted to an increasingly inter-cultural world. In such a 'fashioned' world, wearers tend to have both local and global identities. Local identity is one that puts faith in local traditions and customs; it recognizes the uniqueness of local historic communities (Arnett, 2002). A global identity is a positive effect of globalization, which recognizes commonalities rather than dissimilarities amongst people around the world and shows interest in global events. The notable example is Shanghai Tang, which employs a sentimental 'eastern' style for its brand image, merchandise, and retail environment. The cheongsam-like design from Shanghai Tang, which is open, hybrid, oriental *and* occidental, is a feature of global fashion and contemporary merchandising. It is an international luxury brand that focuses on Chinese-inspired fashion, accessories, and home decoration products in a globalized multi-culture of consumption. This brand, undeniably, is successful for satisfying both Chinese or non-Chinese purchasers for its fusion and hybridity. However, the occurrence of inter-influencing between the different ethic-groups allows a re-valuing of tradition and modernism. For contemporary China, there is seemly an inclination towards the renaissance of 'tradition', i.e., the Fashionable 'authentic' Cheongsam for women and the Mao suit for men, which circulate in both fashion and art; and which hark back to traditional ink-painting and calligraphy for example. Nonetheless, reference to the neutral provides the potential to reconcile these complexities, or to allow for a strategy of co-existence (which arguably is already sustained by many in the everyday). The neutral evokes 'letting the things takes their own course; and respecting each other' (Tao Te Ching). It is to suggest of allowing for a *full* meaning,

which is to include the *emptiness* of meaning- the spaces that must exist to allow us to make meanings in the first place; the container into which we can hold meanings. Thus, again, as Barthes speaks of gradients and intensities (as we think of gradients of colors), we can acknowledge that we can never *name* all of the colors, despite the fact we can see their differences. The cheongsam similarly provides a definite 'cut', yet there are infinite gradients or intensities. Indeed, it is its 'fullness' as an empty or ever changing garment that then enables us to observe a wide range of social and cultural phenomena that forms and formulates around it.

## Conclusion

The overarching aim of this research has been to set out a *new* critical reading of women's everyday fashion in Contemporary China. The purpose of which has been to offer a thesis of what has been termed the *uniformities* of fashion. As has been outlined throughout, the use of the term 'uniform' has not been literal, but metaphorical for different 'systems' and meanings of fashion as they have developed in modern and contemporary China, with a particular focus on understand is present-day trends and circumstance. To offer a schematic account, the thesis has sought to:

- Establish legitimacy for critical readings of women's fashion in contemporary China through a hermeneutic approach, working through different perspectives, scales, macro/micro dimensions of Chinese society, economy, culture and politics. In part this can be understood a visual hermeneutics, pertaining as it does primarily to an aspect of China's visual culture. Key inputs have been from visual materials, but also a reading of a wider 'visual' discourse of fashion and clothing in the country, both historical and contemporary. This has been to explain the sartorial as situating a set of visible codes and structure of meaning, so to characterize various complexities as they pertain to East-West cultural differences and to illustrate how a Chinese 'fashion system' is formed of global brands and styles as well as its own internal logics and emergent trends.
- Utilize the 'social uniform' as a conceptual device in terms of its symbolic and commutative values with respect to cultural differences, confusions and fusion between East and West; to comprehend the changing configurations of consumer culture, aesthetic interests, and social beliefs and change. Here, 'uniform' can be understand in multiple ways, relating to literal uniformities such as with the Mao suit (discussed in Chapter 2), but more significantly

relating to issues of homogeneity within global consumerism (despite its profusion of choices). The uniform, then, is not simply the clothing in itself, but as much a more conceptual and/or experiential understanding of dressing within a 'regime' of styling (from the 'genderlessness' of communism to the need to partake in a culture of styling notable with contemporary fashion and the associated social/professional circumstances of living in contemporary China). This exploration has involved analysing the differing relationships of uniformities of Chinese female fashion after the 1950s and its rhythms for 'female identity' and the lived milieu (including the 'uniform' of the cheongsam, Maoist jacket, and global luxury brands). Insights are offered into how social uniform changes as part of significant social-economic shifts as well as how changing 'uniforms' reflect the Chinese female role within society in the context of altermodern China. This has been to locate female identity within a female 'uniform dynamics' novel to the political-cultural developments in the country and associated discourse of Chinese feminism, especially as influenced by the growing field of transnational global culture and equally the heritage of Confucius patriarchy in the context of the 'altermodernity' and globalization.

- Present the philosophical concept of the 'neutral' as a means to re-orientate how we approach the thinking around fashion in general, but particularly in the context of contemporary China. The notion of the neutral is drawn from the work of Roland Barthes, who while well known for his theory of semiotics (including his notable volume *The Fashion System*), offers a much more nuanced account of 'systems' of significance in his late writings, particularly in terms of the neutral. This work is echoed in the more recently translated works of François Jullien, whose term 'blandness' operates in a similar way to (a) present a massive broadening of hermeneutic 'categories' or 'intensities' of meaning; and (b) situate directly within East Asian philosophy, aesthetics and history. The terms of the Neutral and the Bland, then, provide powerful means to re-inhabit critical, theoretical discourse as well as remaining opening to new contexts and perspectives. Through the adoption of these

terms, the thesis portrays a certain *neutrality of fashion*, exemplified, for example, by the highly visible ‘fluidity of the cheongsam’, which is well known as hybridized, flexible, adaptive, and inclusive, and breaks away from binary oppositions to instead pay attention to more fluid gradients or intensities of difference and exchange. This provides a view of how local-global contexts lead to identifiably postmodern and hybrid aesthetics in altermodern China. The flux and mix of available clothing and designs is experienced in a neutral manner, to reconstruct an image of general everyday ‘neutralities of how Chinese women wear and experience fashions today.

### A New Critical Reading

With respect to the main areas of the thesis as outlined above, the three critical terms of this thesis are **altermodernity**, **uniform** and the **neutral**. Each of these terms interconnect and help structure and develop the overarching thesis. Firstly, then, the thesis presents the case of China today in terms of its ‘altermodernity’, which is to foreground the country’s own *specific* economic development in recent decades, as understood with respect to broader, global patterns of development and interdependency. The term ‘altermodern’ is used crucially to assert the point that there are different modernities, different temporalities of modernization, occurring around the world, despite there equally being globalized, interconnected processes of change and development. China’s specific political development from the 1950s (with the communist founding of the People’s Republic) followed by the relatively ‘late’ liberalization of the economy, which is still to be understood as state-led (socialist) capitalism, gives rise to (a) a very recent and dramatic programme of modernization (which is still ongoing, notable with huge urban infrastructural programmes and large scale market developments, both physical and digital); and (b) a unique cultural context that is seemingly *both* full of new opportunities and choice for individuals (as consumers) and heavily controlled and regulated at a political level. This makes for an ‘alternative’ kind of modernism for China, as well as alternating effects of modernization. The temporality is also significant. Change has occurred

rapidly and in a very concentrated manner. The developments regarding equal rights for men and women in the Mao period were significant and rapid (in comparison with the developments elsewhere in the world), but these changes are still heavily influenced by a longer history of patriarchy. The context of contemporary China, for women, is complex and layered. It is both an alternative modernity when compared with the West, but also has differing effects within the country, which can be picked up through the analysis of fashion, as much as other phenomenon. Yet, as suggested in Chapter 2, in a reading from Susan Buck-Morss' account of 'Dreamworlds and Catastrophe', fashion offers a pertinent case due to its own complex and fast changing temporalities. The fractures and disjunctions of fashion, when *drawn together* – as has been attempted in this thesis – is a means to (re-) formulate new constellations (as one might think of the images of a kaleidoscope, which shift with each turn). Fashion, then, provides us ways into the 'cracks' of history and change, to help us build new pictures and narratives about our everyday lives.

As noted, the thesis also adopt the key term of the 'uniform' as a critical device to understand certain forms of dress as 'techniques' of identity and social conformity or challenge. However, beyond the general meaning of the word as denoting a pattern of sameness and typically signifying certain hierarchical positions, and as reference to a garment that one knowingly wears, the term 'uniform', for the purposes of this research, is more flexible and conceptual. One specific example of uniform, the Mao suit, which while clearly uniform in its design and widespread use, can be shown to develop a complex ecology of meanings as to Chinese women's political equality. In many respects 'uniform' for this thesis refers to clothing that might not commonly be seen as *a* uniform, but as forms that bring us together in certain ways, to *make uniform*, and to prompt repeated patterns. The cheongsam, for example, is not readily identified as a uniform, but is read as a *form* that allows specific connotations and symbolism to be mediated, relating in some cases to hybridity and/or conflicts of different cultures. It is a distinctive, uni-form in terms of its design pattern, and as worn it becomes a 'uniform' that transcends specific cultural boundaries, or at least allows one cultural rendering to lead to another. Similarly, western clothing, which floods onto the Chinese market en masse after economic reform, can hardly be

thought of as uniforms in the strict sense, but nonetheless, presents a way of dressing that arguably leads to highly circumscribed styles and looks. In terms of global consumption, uniform is also meant in terms of 'uniformities', of the growing *homogeneity* of global or local fashion, or what we might think of as a 'uni-fashion'. Uniform, then, in this thesis, relates to a complex reading of fashion and its various systems, and so forms the fundamental building block of the analysis.

In conjunction with the term 'uniform', the thesis is devised around the critical term of the 'neutral', which is placed within the terms of Eastern philosophical writings (and interpretations). It is adopted as a counter to the general reading of hybridized fashion, with a view to setting out a culturally specific account, one that potentially recalibrates the very significations that we take to be imbued in the clothes we wear. It offers an account of a 'way of dressing' (as akin to the critical notion of 'ways of seeing') to re-orientate how we might read the adoption and adaption of western clothing within China, as well as the wearing of distinctively 'traditional' Chinese designs, such as the Cheongsam. The term of the neutral is by its definition highly nuanced and 'vague' (or 'bland'). This can make it a difficult concept to work with. Indeed, referring to the neutral as a 'concept' is itself a problematic idea. Importantly, then, rather than presenting a 'theory' of the neutral, the approach (in staying true to the work of Roland Barthes) has been to allow the term to develop through the analysis, to be 'ushered in' via the case of fashion and in turn to help usher a new reading of fashion itself. In doing so, the neutral has been adopted as a means to re-scale an approach to 'fashion theory' in China. It has been to provide a new critical 'opening' that in part has been contributed to in the actual writing of this thesis, but equally it is the point of the 'thesis' to be an opening itself, i.e. that a new interpretative position is required if we are to attempt a writing of fashion in contemporary China.

## A Review of the Thesis

To summarize the critical reading of this research and to account for the development with/of the three critical terms above, the thesis was composed of four chapters, which are outlined as follows:

Chapter 1, 'Fashion and Complexity in Contemporary China', sets out the main historical, economic and theoretical backdrop to the whole thesis. It describes unique Chinese female 'uniforms' in relation to women's identity with and from clothing in the context of China's 'altermodernity'. In doing so, the chapter seeks to locate the *complexities* of fashion, to comprehend the present global fashion 'systems' and as a distinctive Chinese fashion system. It also points towards the phenomena of hybridity, notably with the case of the cheongsam. In setting out aspects of a fashion system (or systems), the chapter provides a short account of Barthes' well-known, but nonetheless dated study of *The Fashion System*. It is argued that this retains some methodological, interpretive pertinence, but certainly only by extending what is meant by 'system' (crucially it extends this beyond merely the analysis of language). The chapter concludes with a re-reading of the Barthes' *Fashion System* through his later interest in the 'neutral' (the term itself can be discerned in *The Fashion System*, so a certain deconstructive account is given). This sets up an approach for an alternative reading of contemporary female fashion in China. Developing various supplementary research questions, the chapter also covers the similarities and differences between the Chinese fashion system and global fashion system; how global brands influence and reshape a Chinese fashion system, as well as how, in the context of globalization, Chinese women identify themselves through sartorial means.

Chapter 2, 'Made in China: the Fashioning of Uniforms', builds on an understanding of the 'uniform' and 'uniformity', referring to a genealogy of signature garments, but with specific reference to the Mao suit. Critical appraisal of the context and contemporary issues regarding women's social role, gender politics, and the rise of feminism in China are covered. Key narratives of personal and collective 'freedom'

are evoked through the analysis of three main periods or historical 'breaks' (1950s-1970s, 1980s-2000s, 2010s-). In effect, the Mao suit becomes a certain 'starting point' for this thesis, which then leads to the influx of western clothing after China's economic reforms in the 1970s; followed by contemporary, hybridized clothing such as the modern-day cheongsam. Through these historical narratives, critical questions are raised concerning the changing uniformities of gender, equality, and economic (consumer) freedom. Significantly, the different 'uniforms' indicate different eras of Chinese women's identity, and their political-social-economic meanings.

Chapter 3, 'Brand Neutral, or the Blandness of Local-Global Fashions', picks up on the effects of the opening-up of the economy. Focusing on the contemporary context, it reflects on the new forces of globalization that China has steadily opened up to since the 1980s onwards. The chapter presents the case of how luxury fashions have played a dominant role in women's fashion, which itself can suggest of a uniform set of styles and interests. In this sense, the singular (uniform) trends are consumed globally, multiculturally. This constructs an image of a 'neutral' fashion system that is more open and fluid than might typically be understood, with a distinctive, culturally contextual means of engaging with the signs and symbols of western goods in ways that are not as 'weighed down' as one might think (given their province of coming from outside). The latter half of this chapter examines the various responses to the otherwise dominant western brands. This is explored via four distinctive designers in China (considered as the first generation of designers who witnessed the opening-up and 'growing' of the creative economy). Their work demonstrates the *movability* of Chinese traditional fashion, of fashion aesthetics, which is another entry into the neutral. We see the complexities and richness of a 'different' fashion system. It is a relatively 'quiet', unacknowledged discourse, which, set against the sartorial uniformity of global forces, shapes a new resistance of traditional and ethnic designs, and breaks with the language of hybridity. The chapter offers a reading of blandness or flavorless, which far from the notion of the insipid, presents a profusion of meanings, of 'all things in between' or all possibilities. Thus this chapter tries to show a layering of fashion phenomena, drawing in both a sense of the luxury market and the emergence of China's couture designers and new

designers, leading to a culturally specific 'system' of significations whereby all elements co-exist, so extending the 'flavors' of Chinese contemporary fashion. It utilizes the term of the 'neutral' and Asian philosophy, theology and aesthetics as a tool to construct a landscape of how women's clothes are selected, worn and exchanged within the context of China, which is not overly reliant on a dominant (western) discourse of fashion.

The final chapter, 'The Case of the Cheongsam', provides a further 'fashioning' of the account set out in Chapter 3, and its extension through the detailed example of a single garment. The cheongsam is presented as a specific female uniform to explore in more detail – at the level of both design and symbolic consumption – just how the neutral or bland aesthetic can be seen to operate or manifest at a *material* level. What comes to light is indeed the many flavors that must exist between the designated view of our common and often stereotypical classifications of culture. This chapter shows the cheongsam as a cultural sign of China, a tradition, and of gender, and as it stands in for specific values and beliefs for Chinese women, so operating as a sign of cultural complexity and nationalism. The garment, through its numerous iterations, relates to how Chinese women identify themselves via clothing in the globalized fashion world and in response to the context of a patriarchal society. Underlying this chapter is a critical question about how we should deal with, or try to reconcile, the conflict of different cultures and different values systems. This is again to circle back to the differing temporalities and perspectives of an 'altermodernity' (of how in a globalized world, attitudes and behaviors of the 'modern' will be played out differently, yet still interact). This is to demonstrate how traditional Chinese dress is *fashionable* within a broader international frame, and whether its significance does or does not break out of an orientalist account of East and West. This garment, in a certain sense, provides a way of considering how we might re-think the 'strength' of global culture, the enduring shadow of patriarchy, and how we might make use of Eastern philosophies and discourse (as much as Western philosophies and critical theories) in understanding and *representing* the experiences of Chinese women. Beyond its hybridity, the four versions of cheongsam (traditional, postmodern, hybrid, kitsch) are symbolic of political character within an

international context, and implied Chinese female aesthetic or cultural renaissance. Again, the chapter illustrates the use of the concept of the 'neutral' in relation to the experience of women, located both locally and globally, and opens up a way of understanding China's fashion system as site of complex communication and cultural transmission and change. The underlying dichotomies of traditional versus modernism, or feminism versus patriarchy, east versus west, are destabilized through the 'neutral' reading of this garment (which itself is taken as a metonymy of wider contemporary fashion trends and structures).

### **Contributions and Future Research**

In understanding the research in its totality, the thesis contributes in three main areas:

- (1) By locating social uniformity in terms of fashion as *uniform*, which in turn is a means of understanding fashion in contemporary China as an indicator of cultural, economic, social and political expression, as well as a reading of the 'fashioned' body and society;
- (2) Presenting a culturally specific fashion 'logics'; accounting for a fluid 'fashion system' (or systems) in *altermodern* China, and equally enabling this reading through attention to traditional aesthetics and philosophies;
- (3) Introducing and unpacking the critical term of *neutrality* (and incorporating Taoism, Confucius, Zhonyong, etc.) with respect to the study of fashion, which helps understand and interpret the new 'fashion system' in philosophical terms, with respect to aesthetics and culture specific to China.

As noted above, in adopting the term 'altermodernity', the thesis asserts a layered reading of China's modernity, so establishing a new critical discourse for the reading of Chinese fashion culture. This situates against the current, more dominant critical

discourse, which typically bypasses Chinese philosophical and cultural thinking. In working through *combined* philosophical systems, we gain a way of re-entering a semiotics of fashion; a deconstruction, *through* the philosophical thinking and economic-political context of altermodern China.

Furthermore, the research contributes the conceptual term of the social (and aesthetic) 'uniform' as a means to weigh up the symbolic value of fashion, as reflecting and reflected in social and political discourse. This is to explore dominant fashion trends and clothing as worn by the *majority* of women. The representative forms of 'uniform' (i.e., the Mao suit, western clothing, and cheongsam) are taken as significant examples and exemplars with respect to both Chinese fashion history and contemporary consumption. This is to open up an account of symbolic and communicative values, considered with respect to cultural differences, confusions and fusions between East and West, and shifting women's sartorial trends in China, so operating as metaphors of changing configurations of consumer culture, aesthetic interests, and social beliefs and change. The Mao suit is shown to represent a specific 'dream' of social freedom. This is set in contrast to the Cheongsam (banned under Mao's leadership), which has subsequently gone through multiple evolutions. The cheongsam, as a cultural device, represents a rich set of connections, linked to a new, modern China, which offer a more complex 'dream' of both collective and individualized freedom. It is shown to be infused within the dominant, largely homogenized fashions of globalization, and characterized here as another kind of 'uni-form.' Yet, equally, the 'fluidity' of the cheongsam, being both flexible and distinctive, presents its own fashion system of more subtle gradients. It presents a visible example of contemporary, hybridized fashion in China, and is offered as a tool for understanding the more general, everyday 'neutralities' of how women – in choosing what to wear – articulate new identities in contemporary China.

Fashion is taken here as a technology of civility, as sanctioned codes of conduct in the practices of the self and self-presentation. The approach locates female identity within female 'uniform dynamics' and political-cultural revolutions, as well as describing women's social role in the field of Chinese feminism. The thesis, then,

contributes a way of describing the current 'scene' of global fashion culture as it impacts on Chinese women, who are equally influenced by the heritage of Confucius patriarchy, and cross-cultural themes that transcend national boundaries within and outside of China. In utilizing the concept of the uniform (in alliance with the term of the neutral), the thesis contributes to debates of female fashion with respect to Chinese feminism, globalization, hybridity, orientalism, and Chinese aesthetics and ethics. By incorporating these themes and issues into a 'short history' of Chinese uniformity in fashion, the thesis helps uncover a variety of social, economic, cultural and political strands, prompting for the value of richer readings. Indeed, although fashion is typically understood to offer a rather fleeting sense of history, the fact its production and consumption represents a complex nexus of industry, commerce, personal desires, historical and political symbols, and modern/traditional designs, makes fashion – and its varying 'uni-forms' – a vital site of cultural meaning.

Crucially, this thesis constructs the new term of 'neutrality' for fashion theory, offered as a critical concept of the unclassifiable. It is to acknowledge that many ideas, sensations and experiences are not classified or given words and labels. 'Neutral fashion' is to challenge some of the preconceived ideas that can be imposed on China; it is to argue for other kinds of meanings that are 'lived' in China, by Chinese women, in amongst the more dominant narratives about both Chinese and global female fashion. Similarly, the term 'bland' is to suggest of *all* flavors (the otherwise flavorless, or undesignated amongst the usual set flavors), for which we do not have terms. All experiences those are hard to define as distinct flavors are to be kept open – allowed to be savored – in order that we can ask of a richer set of experiences. The flavorless of course remains difficult to explain and secure. Inevitably, the thesis runs the risk of defining something about Chinese women's fashion that in fact it cannot fully explain, but nonetheless this is itself a contribution: an opening up, or a *grounding* for an expansion of possibilities in knowledge and understanding. Specifically, it is to be open to a new, contemporary context of China. As 'altermodern', the approach to this context is not to ignore historical and political circumstances, but is to allow for alternative conditions and temporalities. It is to open to a new perspective and 'language' or system of fashion that can be

researched further. Notably, as a neutral approach or reading, and without wanting to codify traditional Chinese philosophy, the terms of Confucius and Taoism etc. are nonetheless useful as a device to disarm some of the dominant theories and rhetoric of fashion, particularly as imposed by a Eurocentric production of theory.

As with any research, there are gaps and potential flaws or blind spots. In this case, one consideration that needs to be taken into account is the fact that the study was designed to investigate the middle consumer fashion consumer urban areas (with particular access to the case of Chinese women in Chongqing, and related to Shanghai, and Beijing). As such, the thesis does not presume to offer an all encompassing study. It is not pertinent, for example, to assume a connection with China's countryside, nor with women outside of Mainland China (e.g. Hong Kong, Singapore, etc.). Consequently, any generalizing of this research with respect to broader contexts of China (or further afield) is to be cautioned. Also, the reference to specific designers (in Chapter 3) is limited to only the generation of designers (over 50) who witnessed or took part in China's economic opening-up in the 1980s. They represent 'full' experiences of China's recent modernity, so help to understand key developments in Chinese creative culture. They were educated in traditional cultural contexts, but also studied or were influenced more or less by western culture. As such, they provide interesting points of crossover. Yet, obviously, there are many fashion companies and designers in China. In order to trace further cultural understanding and patterns of growth and change, a range of interviews or investigations with young fashion designers and other successful fashion operators in China would be pertinent.

Finally, however, it is hoped that the introduction of the term 'neutral' in this research plays a more extensive role in securing a reading of fashion. It is a form of semiotics, but one that is critically aimed to read the *flow* of fashion. It is an approach that can arguably extend into many future considerations and articulations. In this case, the focus has been on women's identity, and with the aim to counter false, or at least constraining binaries of West/East and modern/tradition, local/global. The neutral is presented, then, as a 'method' of research to understand

fashion, but which can as much relate to visual art, social media, film, and broader areas of the humanities. As a hermeneutic approach, the Neutral is connected to a semiotic account of fashion, art, and visual culture more broadly, so through the various exchange of signs and meanings, but which need to be traced for their ability to change, to be weighed in certain ways. Uniformities of fashion are not posed as a rigidity of styles and dress, but rather as a complex site of meaning(s). This thesis offers an entry point to read the bigger picture of fashion trends in Contemporary China through a *continual* (many flavored) examination of the particular. Inevitably, then, further research will be needed to consider this term in respect to fashion, which is ever changing, not least in the very rapidly changing context of present-day China.

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