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# The discontinuous evolution of women's fashion in China

Evolution of  
women's  
fashion

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of urban Chinese women's fashion consumption practices in light of major recent socio-historical events and to demonstrate that changes in fashion are not necessarily continuous, but rather can be discontinuous in the wake of radical disturbances.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A phenomenological study was conducted that included group interviews with Chinese women belonging to three age cohorts who experienced different radical changes in recent Chinese history.

**Findings** – This study provides insights into how fashion develops when radical economic and social shifts result in a discontinuous rather than continuous fashion evolution. In China, it can be seen that these radical ideological shifts had discontinuous effects on notions of beauty and how identity is expressed through fashion. The changes seen in the past 60 years or so – from the advent of communism in 1949 until now – cannot be explained by theories of imitation and distinction alone. The changes are also anchored to key socio-historic events, and were not necessarily an outgrowth of the period before, or class-based practices, but rather a response to social upheavals.

**Originality/value** – This study provides a nuanced understanding of how tumultuous socio-cultural events affect how fashion is experienced in China, which allows us to contribute to the growing understanding of Chinese consumer culture, and demonstrate that the understanding of how fashion evolves needs to accommodate the upheavals in society over the past sixty years.

**Keywords** China, Women, Consumers, Fashion, Historical context, Socio-cultural factors

**Paper type** Research paper



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With a population of over 1.3 billion and an economy that boasted a 7.7 per cent growth in 2013 (The World Bank, 2014), China is one of the most attractive markets for consumer products and retailers (Prystay, 2002). However, Cui and Liu (2001, p. 85) argue that, “despite China’s growing economy and burgeoning middle class, it has been difficult to address consumer demand and enact effective marketing strategies”. Chinese consumers can use brands in paradoxical ways (Eckhardt and Houston, 2002), and their relationship with products is not straightforward (Eckhardt and Houston, 2008). Many marketing scholars and practitioners still find China to be an enigma. Consumer culture in China is rapidly changing and complex, given the tremendous diversity within the country.

As Fam *et al.* (2009) point out, to understand consumers in China, a deep appreciation of local cultural values is needed. This is particularly true for luxury consumption, in which fashion plays an important role (Zhan and He, 2012). Although upper middle-class Chinese consumers are “the main proponents of China’s luxury market, their motivations for luxury consumption are not thoroughly understood” (Zhan and He, 2012, p. 1452). Zhan and He (2012) argue that even though consumer motivations for luxury products were previously examined they could not be generalized to China due to remarkable differences Chinese consumers have from their foreign counterparts.

Moreover, Zhang and Kim (2013, p. 69) argue that the swift changes that took place in the recent history of China which have led to its globalization and modernization have also:

Led to conflicts in the minds of Chinese consumers between China’s traditional foundation and fast-formed modernization. Therefore, these conflicts in ways of thinking have directly led to the formation of the unique consumerism within Chinese society which is quite different from the consumerism in western nations such as the USA or the United Kingdom.

In this paper, we seek to understand how women’s consumption of fashion in China has changed over time, and turn to important socio-cultural events in Chinese history to frame our analysis. Historically, the underlying cultural influences on fashion and appearance in China have been viewed via a model which assumes that taste in fashion evolves over time due to the ebb and flow of continuous social and cultural change, via imitation and distinction (Simmel, 1957; Bourdieu, 1984). However, the rapid and highly discontinuous socio/economic/political changes over the past 60 years in the People’s Republic of China provide an opportunity to examine what happens when the cycles of imitation and distinction are interrupted. The lower classes were unable to imitate the upper classes, and the upper classes were unable to distinguish themselves from the lower classes via fashion consumption at various points in recent history (Evans, 2006; Hui, 2014). Similarly, as we will demonstrate, it was difficult for generational imitation and reinterpretation of fashion to take place. Simmel’s (1957) and Bourdieu’s (1984) perspectives remain silent on the socio-historical context – or what happens when there are radical disturbances – in which changes in fashion take place. By providing a socio-historical analysis, we can augment these theories, and provide insight into the process of discontinuous evolution.

In this research, we examine the fashion consumption of urban, educated, working Chinese women from three age cohorts. As Hui (2014) notes, fashion and consumer culture are mediated by and connected to the radical economic, political and social transformations that took place in China over the past 60 years. The three age cohorts

represent women who have witnessed and been subjected to three different seminal events in recent Chinese history. These are women who came of age during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), women who came of age during the opening up of China to the wider world (1979-1991), and women who were products of China's one-child policy and came of age during the rapid transition from a planned economy to a free market economy (1991-2001). The findings suggest that their fashion consumption was not necessarily solely dependent on imitation and distinction but rather because of social upheavals and highly discontinuous social change, the changes that happened in Chinese women's fashion during this period are anchored to key socio-historic events. The changes that occurred over time were a response to social upheavals. Next, we give a brief introduction to the important characteristics of the three seminal events we will focus on as well as a brief introduction to Chinese women and fashion.

### **A brief history of China from the cultural revolution to the free market**

#### *The cultural revolution*

China was a closed society from the inception of the People's Republic in 1949 by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) through Chairman Mao's death in 1976. The last decade of Mao's life was arguably the harshest period for Chinese citizens: The Cultural Revolution. During this time, Mao sought to remove class differences by having all members of society be a part of the proletariat. Thus, most educated, urban citizens were reassigned to work on farms in rural areas, with their property seized, and citizens were encouraged to inform on each other for any behavior that could be interpreted as bourgeois. This period is now condemned within China, with even the Communist Party stating it is responsible for "the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the people since the founding of the People's Republic" (Tsou, 1986).

#### *The shift away from a planned economy*

After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping rose to power. Deng opened up China to the outside world almost right away. Beginning in 1978, he began to decollectivize and commodify the economies of urban and rural China and instituted a massive reorganization of both (Leung, 2002, 2003). In less than a generation, Chinese state-owned industries became privatized (Tang and Parish, 2000; Yongping, 2004) and restrictions on population migration were eased to the extent that a colossal rural-to-urban migration ensued (Hershatter, 2004).

#### *Becoming a global economic power*

The 1990s and 2000s in China were characterized by a rapid transition to a free-market economy, symbolically represented by China's inclusion into the World Trade Organization in 2001. This period saw the inception of a consumer culture in China, as represented by the entry of global brands and increased purchasing power (Davis, 2000). China "provides an unprecedented opportunity to examine the rise of consumerism in the contemporary world" as "never in the course of human history have a larger number of people gained more wealth in such a short time" (Zhao and Belk, 2008, p. 231). The changes in just two decades during this period transformed China "from a communist country toward a consumer society in which communism is considered by many to have become more rhetorical" (Zhao and Belk, 2008, p. 231).

### Women in China

What is the role of women in China from 1949 onwards? We can look toward the Maoist philosophy of women holding up half the sky for some insight. Although gender equality as envisioned by Mao was never achieved, his policy ushered in China's first governmental support of women's rights. Beginning in 1949, laws were enacted to give women equal status in marriage, education and the workforce. As communism spread throughout China, a near 100 per cent of Chinese women entered the workforce (Jay *et al.*, 2004; Leung, 2002, 2003). Both rural and urban women profited from their newly gained equality under Communism (Hershatter, 2004; Leung, 2002, 2003).

During the Cultural Revolution, the social expectations for women departed drastically from the traditional female ideal of a woman who should be obedient and "respect and maintain the patriarchal hierarchy within the kinship system" (Hung *et al.*, 2007, pp. 1037-1038) to one where she was "expected to be asexual and austere, and to work and sacrifice for the bettering of the masses" (Hung *et al.*, 2007, pp. 1037-1038). From a fashion perspective, this was represented in the "Mao suit", which was very similar for women and men.

### Chinese women and fashion

Hui (2014) points out that the currently accepted narrative in China is that during the Mao era, femininity and expressions of beauty were suppressed. Later, the economic reforms liberated Chinese women from enforced asexual dress and ideological critiques, so that they could finally embrace their femininity and express their innermost nature via fashion:

Repressed by the socialist regime, Chinese women's desire for beauty and colors was liberated by the forces of the post-socialist party state and global capital. Thanks to the economic reforms, 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 (Hui, 2014, p. 38).

Our results question this narrative, as there is evidence, both in our data and in the literature (Evans, 2006), that women did indeed demonstrate their femininity during the Mao era, via altering their Mao suits and other subtle fashion practices.

In contemporary China, many Western luxury brands, which have rushed to China to help consumers express their individuality through fashion, have failed to adapt the brand message to the culture of local consumers (Oswald, 2012). Oswald (2012, pp. 133-134) argues for the need:

To understand the factors motivating brand choice, the unmet emotional needs and wants of consumers, and the influence of Chinese history and culture on their perception of luxury and luxury brands.

Oswald, further, states that:

Specific historical and ideological conditions in China have interfered with local traditions of luxury, not only since the victory of Communism in 1949, but for the past 150 years as the result of colonial invasions, wars, and the frugal ideology of Confucianism.

Even though the first-generation Chinese *nouveau riche* were all about showing off famous and expensive brand names, this practice started to wane in the following generations of affluent Chinese consumers who seek to go beyond the generic luxury

brand associations with money and success and look further to personal expression and relationship with Western luxury brands (Oswald, 2012), and are instead turning toward inconspicuous expressions of luxury (Eckhardt *et al.*, 2014). Women's relationships with Western luxury brands differ based on their social experiences and work. While a newly rich housewife may use her luxury brand possessions to show off her husband's success, a "passionate trendsetter" would show off her knowledge of Western luxury. Those who travel regularly outside of China tend to engage with brands similarly to consumers in the West (Oswald, 2012).

With this very brief introduction to the rapid changes that have taken place in Chinese culture over the past 60 years, the role of women in Chinese society and how Chinese women relate to fashion, we can see that complex socio-economic factors have been and will continue to affect the development of fashion in China (Wu *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, Hui (2014) notes through fashion we can detect the changing political ideologies of the PRC. To that end, we aim to examine the process of fashion change in China via varying cohorts of women, and chart how the radical and discontinuous social, economic and political turmoil of the past half a century has affected our current understanding of fashion evolution.

### Methodology

We focus on shedding light onto the lived experiences of the Chinese women with a specific focus on their fashion consumption. We conducted a phenomenological study which included group interviews with 14 Chinese women who were chosen by purposive sampling. Phenomenology requires purposive sampling of participants selected based on their lived experiences (Goulding, 2005) as "the analysts seek to capture the meaning and common features, or essences, of an experience or event" (Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374).

Conducting interpretive research in China can be complicated (Eckhardt, 2004; Eckhardt and Bengtsson, 2010; Stening and Zhang, 2007). Eckhardt (2004), Eckhardt and Bengtsson (2010) believes that group interviews are highly appropriate for consumer research in China. Chinese consumers tend to engage in meaningful dialogue, in a naturalistic manner, in a group setting rather than individually, in particular when the groups are single – gendered and consist of peers (Eckhardt and Bengtsson, 2010).

To that end, we interviewed small groups of three to four women each. Having only a few informants per group made it easier for us get to know the participants better and engage in naturalistic conversation. Second, because of the number of questions and our need for in-depth responses, the groups needed to be small. Informality generates spontaneity among the informants and, thus, produces a richer exchange of information (Eckhardt and Bengtsson, 2010). As a result, not every group spent as much time on each of the questions, and some discussions were allowed to drift off topic. When appropriate, follow-up questions were asked. The informal setting proved advantageous. The informants freely exchanged information, offered personal examples, vied for the floor and sometimes argued about their answers.

### Informants

In composing the groups, we followed Stening and Zhang's (2007) and Eckhardt and Bengtsson's (2010) suggestion that, in highly stratified societies, such as China, where status is correlated with power, the composition of the informants takes on greater



significance. Thus, we chose women of high social status with personal power, who could dress as they chose, were capable of responding to our questions in a manner similar to others in their socioeconomic strata and were viewed as credible by their peers.

Informants were selected according to age, occupation, social status and understanding of image. Each had a well-developed personal appearance style and could discuss her appearance. To ensure that we captured both subtle and not-so-subtle differences among the women that may have resulted from the sociopolitical/economic shifts occurring over the past 60 years, we conducted separate interviews for the three age groups (Lee *et al.*, 2004). By dividing the age groups, we also hoped to avoid the tendency of younger Chinese participants to defer to older ones out of respect (Eckhardt, 2004).

A total of 14 women participated in the group interviews. Their age ranged from mid-20s to mid-50s, representing three age cohorts. The following is an overview of the three groups; see Table I for full details on the respondents:

- (1) *The Survivors (age, 40-59 years)*: Born during the founding of the People's Republic or shortly thereafter, they came of age (16-22 years) during the Cultural Revolution. The group consisted of Xiaoling (56), who teaches law and ethics at a university; Lei (55), editor of children's programs at CCTV (Chinese Central Television); Liu (54), financial accountant at an image consulting firm; Pearl (55), retired physician who had served in the People's Army; Huan (50), financial consultant at a European investment company; and Mei (46), a successful hair stylist and a former member of the People's Army. We call this group Survivors because of the hardships they experienced, and survived, during the Cultural Revolution, which profoundly shaped their worldview.
- (2) *The Traditionalists (age, 30-39 years)*: Born shortly before or during the Cultural Revolution, they came of age during China's rapid

Name	Age	Occupation
<i>Survivors</i>		
Xiaoling	56	Teaches law and ethics at a university
Lei	55	Editor of children's programs at CCTV
Wen	54	Financial accountant at an image consulting firm
Pearl	55	Retired physician, served in the People's Army
Huan	50	Banker, image consultant
Mei	46	Hair stylist, served in the People's Army
<i>Traditionalists</i>		
Ting	37	Fashion designer, image consultant
Yan	33	Advertising executive
Shan	30	Financial analyst at an international bank
<i>Moderns</i>		
Yoyo	27	Marketing assistant at an image consulting firm
Fan	25	Performance artist
Ying	24	Singer and disc jockey (DJ)
Shu	24	Freelance public relations specialist
Lily	21	Web site designer

**Table I.**  
Respondent  
characteristics



socio/economic/cultural changes and transition to greater personal freedom. The group consisted of Ting (37), a men's fashion designer and image consultant; Yan (33), an advertising executive; and Shan (30), a financial analyst with an international bank. We use Lee *et al.*'s (2004) terminology when naming this and next age group.

- (3) *The Moderns (age, 20-29 years)*: As part of China's one-child generation, they came of age during China's climate of expanded personal freedom and the rapid rise of the market economy. The group consisted of Shu (24), a freelance public relations specialist; Fan (25), a successful performance artist, Ying (24), a successful singer and DJ, Yoyo (27) a marketing assistant at an image consulting firm and Lily (21) a Web site designer.

### *Ethnoconsumerism*

When researching the Chinese market, care must be taken to identify and be sensitive to cultural differences. Therefore, we adopted an ethnoconsumerist approach. As defined by Venkatesh (1995, p. 27), ethnoconsumerism is "a conceptual framework [...] using the theoretical categories originating within a given culture" and "the study of consumption from the point of the cultural order in question, using the categories of behavior and thought that are native to the culture". Ethnoconsumerism not only adopts an emic (from the perspective of the culture being studied) view but also attempts to go further by developing knowledge from the culture's point of view. Therefore, "it becomes a view of the culture informed by the culture itself" (Meamber and Venkatesh, 2000, p. 97).

### *Data analysis*

During the interviews, questions were asked in the same order in all groups. To facilitate the sessions, we utilized a native Mandarin speaker who works as a translator for a multinational company. Although the conversations were translated, all of the participants could speak some English, and most were fluent. In fact, as the translator was translating they intervened when they did not agree with the translator. Responses were entered electronically, in English, into a text document as they occurred. The analysis was iterative (Spiggle, 1994), which required us to go back and forth between the theoretical and conceptual framework, data collection and analysis and formulation of the findings. In analyzing the transcripts, it became clear that we needed to collect additional information before we could draw further inferences thus, we returned to Beijing six months after the initial interviews for a second round. A hermeneutical approach was adopted to analyze the interview transcripts to identify relevant cultural practices, experiences, social histories and memories (Thompson *et al.*, 1994) in accordance with the ethnoconsumerist approach. This meant that the data analysis began with the researchers reading all texts to gain a sense of the whole picture. Researchers also read the texts together and went through an interpretive procedure by using a part-to-whole reading strategy (Thompson *et al.*, 1994). Each paragraph was analyzed individually in light of the historical and socio-cultural contexts. Emic meanings obtained from our informants were combined with our etic interpretations of the phenomena. The triangulation of informants (from different age cohorts with different occupations) and triangulation of researchers (from different age groups and research expertise) increased the trustworthiness of our research (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

**Findings**

Here, we outline the influence major socio-historical events have had on women's fashion consumption, and delineate how current theoretical explanations of fashion need to be augmented to account for our findings.

*The Survivors (40-59 age group)*

This group experienced the most drastic historical changes in their lifetimes, which had direct political, economic and socio-cultural repercussions. The women had enthusiastic discussions sharing their pre-Cultural Revolution memories compared to afterwards. Below Lei (55) describes how people's clothes pre-revolution reflected their class and ideologies:

Before that time, when I was younger, I felt people dressed according to their class or wealth situation. At that time, we divided people into parts by their ideologies. Some rich or wealthy families may be defined as capitalists. Lower class families may be as socialists. As a little child, I always wore elegant woolen clothes instead of cotton clothes. When the Cultural Revolution began, the capitalist people were criticized severely. People began to compete to be as ugly and as common as they can be. The more common you looked, the better you were considered, the backbone of the country.

As Lei relates, fashion did run on class-based distinction pre-1949, but afterwards, any form of distinction was looked down upon. Wen's (54) experiences shared below were similar to Lei's in that with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, blending in rather than sticking out, dressing simply rather than in a fashionable manner became the norm:

When I was 16 years old, I was a very pretty girl. At that time, beauty was a crime. If you were not the same as others, people would criticize you. When I was in middle school my teacher treated me very well and wanted to protect me. She said, "When you begin to work, you should never wear new clothes because you are different from others. You might easily attract focus and attention. Make yourself the same as others. Never wear beautiful new clothes". When I was a child, I cried about my beauty. For many years, I felt bad about being different from others.

For Wen, who was distinguished from others via her beauty, rather than giving her capital, her distinction detracted from her place in society. She had to use fashion to detract from her distinction, the opposite of how fashion is typically used, in Simmel and Bourdieu's view. The rest of the Survivors talked about being in the same situation as Wen or of others who experienced difficulties because of their beauty. They told of having pretty clothes and accessories when they were very young – how good they felt during that time in their lives – and how the situation changed after the beginning of Cultural Revolution which brought with it a need to eliminate individualism, materialism and anything that might be associated with capitalism:

Age 9-13 is very crucial to a girl regarding her dress. All of us in our generation, we didn't have that possibility. What we knew was to be as simple as possible, as poor as possible [...] that you present yourself as the best member of the proletariat. We are totally different from the new generations [Wen (54)].

The Cultural Revolution took place at a vital moment in these women's lives when they were coming of age. In the early teenage years, just as they were transitioning from being teenagers to young adulthood by experiencing their femininity through

consumption of fashion products, they were forced to a uniform style. Given this, we asked women how they expressed their femininity during the Cultural Revolution:

We didn't know anything about being attractive or sexy at that time [...] The most fashionable dress was an army uniform. Young girls in uniforms looked beautiful. Everyone wanted one. Young girls in uniforms looked very pretty from the Chinese point of view at that time [Huan (50)].

Changing ideologies changed the perception of what women deemed beautiful and fashionable. This represented a radical shift in beauty norms. The prior notions of beauty and femininity were redefined and redirected into new forms and perceptions, which included being thrifty, as described here by Wen (54):

My parents wanted me to practice thrift, to save money and materials and lead an economical life. When I was a little girl, around 6 or 7, I grew very fast. My parents wouldn't change my coat. So I wore one coat for many years. It got too small for me to fit in. I was eager to change into a new one. Both my teacher and my parents didn't allow me to change. Finally my mother decided to get me a new coat. I immediately hid my old coat under the bed, I lost it, so I have to get a new one. She opened up the bed – see! Your coat is here.

Wen continued to describe that when she was 13 or 14 years, she was affected by this mentality so much that she herself felt unnatural and awkward if she wore new clothes. She would rather wear old clothes and practice thrift. This fashion orientation has stayed with her. Even now she will never throw out clothes before they are totally unwearable.

When women were asked what the greatest impact they felt was as the Cultural Revolution ended, one common answer was the differences in the choice of color and the abundance of styles:

During the Cultural Revolution, people wore only blue, green, dark grey or white. After the reforms, the first thing that changed was color. People dared to wear different colors and colorful clothes. At that time, many individual traders did the clothing trade between different areas or locations. The main focus of their trading was the change in color. Also some styles changed. After the reforms, many more styles of clothes and pants changed. The most impressive change was the color [Pearl (55)].

During the Cultural Revolution, between 17 and 29 years of age, Pearl was in the military, and she wore green clothes. After the reforms, she was back to a local unit and out of the military; she was able to wear other colors and styles. She thought at that time she was finally back to being a real woman. Indeed, Hui (2014) has noted that the country's capitalistic modernization, which took place after the Cultural Revolution, is often presented as a developmentalist project of overcoming gender erasure and recovering gender difference, as evidenced here by being able to wear a variety of colors. Pearl was a doctor after the reforms, and she was so happy to be wearing different colors and styles, she became a fashion leader in her unit. What she focused on was keeping herself beautiful and appropriate to her role as a doctor.

Even though the opportunity or possibility to express one's individuality and fashion sense was restricted, the desire to look feminine and attractive was not completely eradicated, as it popped back up once the revolution was over and more personal freedom was allowed. Indeed, Evans (2006) argues that although expressions of femininity and beauty were limited during the Cultural Revolution, they were still there,

in the form of braided hair for example, and Wu (2009) adds that women's Mao suits had a different number of buttons and pockets, so they could be recognized as female.

In looking at brands, the Survivors didn't grow up having any relationship with brands when they were forming their identities; later when global brands were introduced to China and the women could afford them they could no longer form those relationships:

I don't care a lot about clothing brands but I always buy the same make-up brand [...] always buy the same glasses [...] also underwear because it fits me very well. I want to have something unique [Wen (54)].

Elizabeth Arden makeup. I don't care about shoes, bags, whatever [...] don't care [...] always go to the same brand of shoes. The style and then the quality. And, I don't care much about price. Of course, not the *very* expensive brand [Mei (46)].

For this group, while they are appreciative of the choice and variety of fashion consumption objects, the brand names are not especially important, which is in contrast to the next two age cohorts, as we shall see.

#### *The traditionalists (30-39 age group)*

This group came of age during the transition time from a planned economy to a market economy post Mao's death in 1969, when China was economically expanding and becoming more globally interconnected. They are in a way sandwiched between the old China and the new China; they carry some of the characteristics of the older age group and the younger age group, as is evidenced by their narratives surrounding fashion brands:

I never pay attention to brands. I just look for the clothes that are the perfect fit for me. I pick the clothes and then check the brand to be sure of the quality. I don't have the concept in my mind that this brand is mine. I just need to know it's a good brand, it's a quality brand issue [Shan (30)].

Louis Vuitton, Gucci, especially for bags. Because the fashion of clothes changes so rapidly, I cannot keep up. So, accessories are good and more affordable. I pay more attention to brands now, but it's not the most important thing. The style is the most important thing for me [...] matching the different clothes together is important [Yan (33)].

It's difficult to stick with one brand. I never buy expensive clothes. But I do try to buy Chinese branded clothes. Not traditional design, very international, but with the Chinese tradition inside the concept. Not expensive but good quality [Ting (37)].

Ting's comments echo those reported by Wu *et al.* (2013), who argue that Chinese women like the Shanghai Tang fashion brand because it is a mixture of Chinese traditional design and international design. Although, in general, the women in the Traditionalist group claimed not to be interested in designer brands, they all made some comments about brands, whether they preferred to buy designer labels or judged the quality by the brand. Each of them carried a very expensive designer handbag to the interview. Consumer research among affluent consumers in Shanghai suggests that this age group "purchases luxury brands for their basic recognition factor but may not engage with brands on a personal, emotional level" (Oswald, 2012, p. 133).

That is, the Traditionalists recognize that brands have signaling value, and use them as such, but do not use brands to express their unique identity.

Reflecting on how her fashion consumption has changed from her formative years until now, Shan describes how she did not care about fashion to becoming a fashion consultant:

When I was at university, I never paid attention to other people's opinion of me. I even didn't want them to think I looked good. I preferred they knew me from what I am inside. I didn't want to be pretty. I thought it was preventing them from knowing me well. After university, with more experience in working, I gradually learned the importance of my looks. Now I know it's important and it's helpful to express what you are. I even became an image consultant. But inside my heart, I don't want to care about other's opinions [Shan (30)].

This transformation is very typical of this age cohort, as post-Mao there was still hesitancy about using fashion to express one's identity. Rather, fashion and luxury goods are used to conform to the social expectations of important reference groups (Zhan and He, 2012). Shan recognizes the symbolic value of fashion but not necessarily its potential to create or express identity. This age cohort uses fashion to establish their social status and enhance their social reputation, and only recently have they begun to use it for identity expression purposes (Zhang and Kim, 2013), and Shan has mixed feelings about this transition. As Zhang and Kim (2013) point out, interdependency is the key concept to understand Chinese consumers' attitude toward purchasing luxury fashion goods, as the goods only have value when they provide a way to symbolically connect with others. This is why brands are so important to this age cohort, as they are clear signals.

Finally, when asked where they get their fashion information from, the Traditionalists mentioned fashion magazines, the Internet (their main source), TV shows like the fashion channel and movies as well as their friends. While the Survivors did not have much to say about media influence on their fashion consumption, the Traditionalists talked at length about this factor. The questions regarding the influence of media elicited the greatest differences in opinion among the groups, although all three groups mentioned the Oscars as being an important source.

### *The moderns (20-29 age group)*

The Moderns were born into an era of personal freedom and a more globally interconnected China not experienced by the preceding generations. The impacts of government regulations like the one-child policy and access to the Internet from a young age have shaped their consumption practices as well as identity formations. As Zhang and Kim (2013, p. 76) note:

Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and China's rapid economic development in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries allowed many people to become wealthy. Wealthy parents who experienced social-political-economic turbulence in their early ages such as the Cultural Revolution before they accumulated stable economic source are trying their best to give the next generation wealthy and happy lives, thinking that money is the best way to show love to their children.

Thus, the Moderns have grown up with relative privilege compared to the other two generations. Similar to the Traditionalists they are influenced by the media, the Internet in particular, in their fashion choices but have a much more international

outlook. We began by asking the informants where they got their information about fashion:

I don't look at Chinese stars, just American, European and Korean. I don't buy products because of what the stars wear but I get ideas about styles. Zhang Ziyi in *Crouching Tiger* has a good style [Ying (24)].

"I don't follow domestic stars but Japanese. I look at the Oscars, Hong Kong and Taiwanese stars" [Fan (25)].

Participants in this group discussed their interest in the fashion media – other than Shu, who preferred to create a personal style. We did not fail to notice, however, that her appearance was extremely fashion-forward, including the *au courant* designer handbag. With expanded personal freedom and access to world brands, this generation has more of a desire to create an individual style. Zhan and He (2012) also note this tendency toward individualism and its accompanying traits of materialism and hedonic consumption. The Moderns are quite different from the previous generations, in that they are aware of their personal freedom to create their own style. In contrast to the Traditionalists, who look to brands to guide their fashion purchases, to signal their place in the social hierarchy, a variety of our Modern respondents discuss their individualist take on fashion that is not reliant on particular brands:

I don't care about brands [...] I care more about what suits me. I need to know the material [...] I like to focus on style rather than brand. I read fashion magazines, have a special personality, don't follow trends, like clothes that fit my personality [Fan (25)].

"I follow my own sense, I look at girls in clubs and on the streets, I see what they wear, but know what suits me" Shu (24).

I think fashion is around everywhere. So it influences me naturally. But I would choose what is good for me, not follow all the fashions. For example, the color trends. I would choose one or two that I think I would like. I don't like clothes that don't suit me [Yoyo (27)].

The emphasis with the Moderns is on expressing individual identity. They are the first generation in the past three generations to use consumption in this way, and thus, they are navigating these new waters without the guidance of elders. Moreover, this generation is the wealthiest in contemporary China – 80 per cent of China's wealthy citizens are under the age of 45 years (Atsmon and Vinay, 2009) – and thus they cannot look to higher social classes either as they are the highest social class. This group recognizes the practical function that fashion can serve, in terms of allowing them to get ahead in China's consumer-focused culture. That is, for this group, in addition to the individual take they have on fashion, they also recognize its utilitarian function for getting ahead in the workplace in a way that our other two age cohorts did not discuss:

Because of my career, I have to focus on details of clothing. I used to read fashion magazines, follow the trends. Style and color are important. It's easy to tell someone's profession and her mood, her status of work, from her clothes. Not only from dress but hair style, face, personality, condition of her body, especially in those who do art related work, like white collar or gold collar [Ying (24)].



When I was in school, I would dress only in black and white. When I started working, I found out about many bright colors that suit me. Then I think about what to buy. I like something more traditional, not too sexy, which is appropriate in Beijing [Lily (21)].

Similarly, this group is adept at changing their fashion based on the particular social situation they will be in, highlighting how they deliberately use fashion for practical aims, with a focus on its use value rather than its symbolic value:

Depends on the audience or the song, I can wear cute, pretty clothes, fashionable stuff. For middle-aged audience, more elegant or conservative. To show respect to those over 40, to be accepted by them [Fan (25)].

“When meeting people, I wear shirts and pants. Otherwise, I prefer smart/casual. I like the image of being a strong woman” Shu (24):

My company requires a specific image, like a dress code. DJ hosting can be formal/smart or casual/smart, depending. I dress a little older when performing as I want people to think I'm more mature [Ying (24)].

Finally, we can compare the Moderns' notions of femininity and how that is expressed through fashion with the Survivors'. The Survivors had much difficulty and *angst* about expressing their femininity via fashion due to the regulations imposed by the government during the Cultural Revolution. In contrast, the Moderns have a variety of ways to express their femininity, and some of the ideals they strive for are markedly similar to the Survivors (curvy and elegant) and some reflect the confident place that women have in modern Chinese society (looking professional, being confident):

Feminine lies in the details. Ribbons, silk, black to be mysterious, white and pink or little flowers, hearts, curves. Femininity in men's eyes is different than what women think. Women think kindness and being a little sexy is feminine. Men think very curvy and elegant is feminine. Women think looking professional can also look feminine [Ying (24)].

“Feminine comes from the way you carry yourself, from eye contact, body language” [Shu (24)].

Cultural constructs such as notions of femininity are remarkably resilient, but how they are expressed, quite varied. As Williams (1982) notes, the Chinese notion of femininity is a dominant one in Chinese culture, and thus it can be reproduced in varying ways despite all the political disruptions.

## Discussion

Our aim was to compare and contrast Chinese women from varying generations to gain insight into how fashion has been shaped by socio-cultural events. We can see that radical ideological shifts had discontinuous effects on notions of beauty and how identity is expressed through fashion, and that consumers were not able to easily engage in class imitation or distinction, yet fashion still developed. During the Cultural Revolution, what had previously been valued (beauty, femininity) was all of a sudden reviled, as discussed by our Survivalist respondents who were repeatedly told to hide their beauty and dress style so that they would not stand out. Moreover, as the goal was to have a classless society, fashion was the same for all classes: the Mao suit. Fashion working as a mark of distinction used to be the case in pre-revolution China; in fact, one of our informants Lei (age 55) talks specifically about how it was a marker of class



despite being highly frowned upon. But during the Cultural Revolution, it was not possible.

The Survivors were born into freedom of choice and expressing their individuality but forced into uniformity. The next generation, the Traditionalists, experienced the opposite, moving from less freedom of expression to more. These shifts come to the fore in our respondents' relationships with brands. The Traditionalists have a very instrumental relationship with brands, as they understand the need of markers to indicate their place in society, which for them was/is very much in flux. The Moderns are much more similar to global consumer culture, in that they recognize the value of brands for expressing an individual identity, rather than just to indicate their place in the hierarchy. What will come next? [Eckhardt et al. \(2014\)](#) describe the growing preference for inconspicuous brands and consumption in China, arguing that Veblen's notion of how and why conspicuous consumption is enacted may not be applicable in contemporary China. Here, we add to this burgeoning stream of research, which critiques and augments established notions of status and fashion in China, by demonstrating a discontinuous fashion evolution.

[Hume \(2008\)](#) concluded that, when it comes to appearance, young Chinese women are more like their counterparts across the globe than their mothers and grandmothers. China's fashionable "moderns" ([Lee et al., 2004](#)) appear to be cut from the same cloth as those in Los Angeles and Paris. We came away from the interviews believing that [Hume \(2008\)](#) was partially correct in her assessment regarding Beijing's young fashionistas. Our youngest interviewees looked like their counterparts across the globe. And they evidenced some of the generation's common characteristics Hume identified: self-centeredness, materialism, placement of a high value on social and economic independence, admiration of Western fashions/celebrities and high usage of media/Internet to get fashion information. In contrast, our oldest participants evidenced no tendencies toward self-centeredness, materialism and/or interest in gaining appearance-related information via the media/Internet. Although they took pride in their appearance, they were uninterested in keeping up with fashion trends and/or spending large amounts of money on their appearance. Finally, whereas the young fashionistas eschewed Chinese designers and brands, the two older groups supported China's fashion industry.

Despite these differences, however, it was clear that strong areas of commonality among the three groups of respondents attested to underlying, culturally based norms of appearance. For example, the understanding of what makes a woman look feminine and attractive was not rooted in an aesthetic of overt sexiness, but rather emphasized elegance; having grace, softness and curves. Huan (54) said that she thinks logically – "like a man" – yet wants to look feminine. This sentiment underscored the narratives of how the older women had secretly altered their Mao suits during the Cultural Revolution and later their People's Army uniforms to show off their curves, a phenomenon also reported by [Ip \(2003\)](#), [Finnane \(2008\)](#), [Luo \(2005\)](#) and [Wu \(2009\)](#). All three groups held a traditionally Chinese concept of female beauty and sexuality ([Finnane, 2008](#); [Hung et al., 2005](#)) and a lack of ageism regarding appropriate appearance. [Evans \(2006\)](#) argues that the only difference between the Mao era and the post socialist era is that the ways in which femininity can be expressed now are sanctioned by consumer culture, which they were not during the Mao era, but what the nature of that femininity is remains the same.

That is, traditional notions of femininity have been culturally reproduced despite disruptions (Williams, 1982).

None of the women, including the Moderns, discussed weight as an important component of fashion/appearance. All of our informants desired individuality in dress. Based on the differences in the way older and younger women in Beijing look and, indeed, the appearance differences between our oldest and youngest informants, with the oldest group wearing conservative clothing, hairstyles and accessories, we assumed that personal expression among our older Chinese women would be a non-issue. Yet, each of them insisted that they dress to suit themselves. Traditionalist Ting (37) said, "if [appearance is] not fashionable, it is not very good. If it is too fashionable, I don't think that's too good [...] because of Chinese culture", indicating that Chinese women of a certain age are likely operating with a much narrower, culturally dictated frame of reference regarding individual appearance and style which reflects finding a middle way.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide a better understanding of the urban Chinese women's fashion consumption practices in light of the major socio-historical events, and to demonstrate the changes in fashion over time are not part of a continuous, evolutionary path. Simmel (1957) and Bourdieu (1984) remain silent on how socio-cultural context – in particular, radical disturbances – affects fashion evolution. Thus, we add to their understanding of fashion evolution by highlighting these factors and their consequences. Chinese culture is deeply socially, technologically and economically stratified. In addition, strong regionalism impacts how people perceive appearance. Thus, developing a solid understanding of Chinese women's fashion consumption requires a concerted effort on the part of researchers who are willing to invest time and resources to immerse themselves in the culture, making alliances with Chinese researchers who can help guide the process, and developing and using appropriate research instruments.

China will remain at the forefront of consumer marketers' interest throughout the twenty-first century, and, indeed, it may become the largest consuming society in the history of humankind. Yet, China is not and will not be an easy sell for marketers who fail to take into account how the changes China has undergone over the past 60 years is shaping Chinese consumers. Chinese women, particularly, have sustained a mind-boggling transformation that will impact their consumption patterns for decades to come. While it is true that a new generation of young, affluent, urban, Chinese women consumers are emerging who seem more akin to their counterparts in Los Angeles, Tokyo and London than to their mothers and grandmothers, they, too, have been deeply affected by the rapid, sometimes incomprehensible shifts they have seen in their lifetime.

In sum, the accepted notion of fashion evolution assumes that fashion exists due to the fact that people imitate the classes above them, and try to distinguish themselves from the classes below them. In China, during the Mao era, there were no differences in classes in terms of fashion, and thus imitation and distinction via fashion was not possible (Survivors). Then, because individuality was highly discouraged, the next generation (Traditionalists) did not know how to and did not value distinguishing themselves from others, and they still retain this communal mentality, where they use

brands to fit in with others rather than to distinguish themselves from others. Finally, the youngest ones (Moderns) do not want to imitate the previous generations of Chinese women, even those at a desired class level, as the Moderns are much more global in their outlook and tastes than previous generations, and tend to use brands for expression of individuality. Thus, the typical fashion cycles are broken. Hence, we can see that China needs a discontinuous theory of fashion evolution to explain consumption behavior over the past 60 years. We have begun to outline what this would look like here, and hopefully further research on the mechanics of discontinuous fashion evolution, both within China but also in other cultures in periods of rapid and profound social and economic change, such as post-Soviet Russia, will be conducted.

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