

CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES AND INNOVATION: THE MAKING OF FASHION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT: This study utilises the framework proposed by Franceschini and Loubere (2020) on global China as a method to investigate the intricate network of connections and innovative exchange between creatives in Singapore, Vietnam, and Cambodia, and their compelling engagement with China across various facets of the fashion industry. Against the backdrop of China's ascent as a major global player in shaping and being shaped by global trends, dynamics, and interactions, its profound influence on the creative landscapes of these Southeast Asian regions becomes apparent. At its essence, the study delves deeply into the multifaceted interactions and cultural innovations between fashion creatives in Singapore, Vietnam, and Cambodia and China across the spectrum of the fashion ecosystem, spanning from ideation to consumption. It sheds light on the historical and symbiotic relationship between these regions and China, elucidating their dynamic interplay in fashion creation, representation, and consumption. This research serves as a catalyst for exploring the evolving dynamics within the global fashion arena, propelled by the forces of geopolitics, globalisation, and capitalism. Through an examination of the intricate interplay between local and transglobal influences, it unveils the nuanced strategies employed by fashion creatives to navigate their identities and innovate their brands within the context of China's predominant presence. Drawing upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted across these regions, the study provides insights into the innovative approaches adopted by fashion creatives. It showcases how they harness cultural exchanges, transnational heritage, and cross-border collaborations to push the boundaries of creativity and challenge traditional conceptions of fashion. Ultimately, it offers a compelling narrative that not only elucidates the intricate connections between Southeast Asian creatives and China but also underscores the transformative potential of cross-cultural exchange and innovation within the global fashion landscape. By situating global China within the transglobal fashion arena, it critically examines the interconnectedness of China with the creative fashion endeavours and highlights the multifaceted ways in which China's rise impacts and is influenced by global processes of the fashion industry.

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INTRODUCTION

The pivotal role of China in global production has fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of global trade, supply chains, and economic power structures. The profound impact that a single country's economic evolution can have on the broader world economy is manifested in the post-pandemic landscape. Concurrently, complex debates have emerged concerning China's economic expansion, its geopolitical influence, and the perception of its foreign policy as a new form of colonialism. Underlying the surface of the making of fashion in the 21st century lies a web of power dynamics and cross-cultural exchanges propagated by the Middle Kingdom. China's economic transition has profound repercussions in neighbouring regions. For example, the fashion industry in Southeast Asian regions cannot be exclusively attributed to their autonomous efforts but must be contextualised within the broader framework of transnational manufacturing, international joint ventures, geopolitical considerations, Chinese investments, and the influx of transnational creative labour.

This paper draws upon the concept of "Global China as Method," as articulated by Ivan Franceschini and Nicolas Loubere (2022), to scrutinise China's transformative role within the contemporary fashion landscape. This core concept encapsulates a multifaceted understanding of China's impact on the global economy and its transformative effects. It highlights China as an interconnecting force within the 21st-century fashion landscape. To illustrate the complex interplay between geopolitics and fashion production, cultural expression within the realm of Chinese capitalism, and the regional dynamics of fashion-making, three case studies focused on Southeast Asian countries, namely Singapore, Vietnam, and Cambodia will be examined. They will provide real-world examples of China's profound influence on the fashion-making of these regions.

GLOBAL CHINA

The concept of "Global China" initially articulated by the eminent scholar Ching Kwan Lee (2017) in her comprehensive study of Chinese investments in Africa. It highlights China's transformation from an isolated nation to a significant global player. This concept underscores China's vast influence on global politics, economics, culture, and international relations, offering a fresh perspective on China's role in fashion. Recognising China as the world's leading textile producer, responsible for 98% of global output, "Global China" allows us to

explore the complexities of fashion-making, identity politics, and social dynamics within autocratic regimes.

SINGAPORE STORIES

China's extensive influence on the global fashion industry naturally extends to Singapore, impacting various aspects of fashion-making. This influence encompasses manufacturing, material sourcing, and cultural exchange, all of which contribute to the enrichment of Singapore's fashion scene while preserving its distinct identity.

Numerous fashion brands, including independent designers, depend on Chinese factories for the production of their apparel and accessories. The efficiency and scalability of Chinese manufacturing processes have allowed Singaporean brands to bring their creative designs to life in a cost-effective manner. China's substantial manufacturing capacity places it at the core of Singapore's fashion industry. Many of my fashion design interlocutors reveal their reliance on Chinese fabrics and materials to create their products. As increasing Chinese factories now accommodate small minimum order quantities per style, Singapore-based designers typically create in-house clothing samples and subsequently outsource production to China. This dependence on Chinese sources stands as a practical necessity for Singapore's fashion ecosystem.

As Shanghai and Beijing have emerged as global fashion hubs, hosting significant fashion events, attracting international designers, and setting trends, Singaporean fashion professionals and enthusiasts frequently turn to China for inspiration. During my interactions with a representative from the Singapore Fashion Council, she expressed her admiration for the success of Chinese fashion and pondered how Singapore's fashion industry could capture the local audience's interest and expand internationally, akin to the trajectory of Chinese fashion (Interlocutor A, 2022). That was the year when China's Shein expanded its presence by establishing a Singaporean firm as its de facto holding company, coinciding with its plans for a New York listing in 2022. Chris Xu, Shein's founder and CEO, also sought permanent resident status in Singapore to bypass stricter Chinese regulations for offshore IPOs (Reuters, 2024). This development underscores the trade tensions between China and the United States, with Singapore, an Asian economic hub with a substantial ethnic Chinese population, being seen as a neutral base for various businesses, including those in the fashion industry.

Beyond economic partnerships, cultural exchanges between Singapore and China have a role in shaping the fashion landscape. In 2019, the newly renovated Fashion Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum presented its inaugural exhibition, "Guo Pei: Chinese Art & Couture." The decision to feature Guo Pei, a Chinese couturier, instead of paying tribute to a Singaporean fashion designer was largely influenced by Guo Pei's international prominence and its potential to draw attention to the museum's first permanent fashion gallery. The museum justified this collaboration by highlighting that some of Guo Pei's contemporary wedding dresses were inspired by two historical Peranakan wedding ensembles from museum's Peranakan collection. This collaboration symbolises their shared commitment to preserving Asian cultural roots through fashion creation and reinventing traditions for a fresh and contemporary perspective (Ting, 2022). Museums in Singapore play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage, celebrating history, and shaping a collective identity. The rise of China has highlighted a distinct Chinese cultural identity that differs from the local Chinese community. The emphasis on the Peranakan influences in Guo Pei's bridalwear collection and the designer's innovative reinterpretation of age-old traditions "left by shared ancestors" (Yoong, 2019) has reinforced Singapore's rhetoric of Asian values (Wee, 2007) contributing to the ongoing construction of Singaporean culture and identity.

This is particularly evident with the National Heritage Board and the Tourism Board. Both has played an instrumental role in supporting fashion as part of the country's key policy on culture and heritage. Fashion as a cultural and creative industry has often been overlooked in policymaking. Even if it is addressed, visual representation is not a standard criterion in the Cultural and Creative Industry (CCI) policy. However, initiatives such as 'Made With Passion' and 'Singapore Stories' not only aim to drive continuous growth in the fashion industry and empower fashion brands but also play a significant role in preserving, promoting, and reconstructing Singapore's identity and heritage. For instance, 'Singapore Stories' promotes fashion designers through an annual fashion award, offering a mentoring programme, retail opportunities, and industry showcases (Singapore stories). Within the Singapore fashion circuit, it is generally understood that aligning with the national narrative is crucial to receiving support and recognition. Participants are expected to respond to the official annual theme with their designer collections. In 2023, the theme 'Kebaya-Reimagined' is set to coincide with the re-opening of the Peranakan Museum as part of the National Heritage Board's multinational nomination to inscribe 'Kebaya: Knowledge, Skills, Traditions, and Practices' on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity, which occurred in

March 2023. In 2022, the theme 'Fashion United' aimed to position Singapore as an innovative and multicultural fashion hub for Southeast Asia and to celebrate the unity of diverse, culturally rich, and immersive Asian fashion, promoting cross-cultural artistry. These official themes represent an effort to foster a cohesive and inclusive national identity. In turn, fashion designers have assumed a role in the construction and representation of an all-encompassing national identity.

Identity, including that of Singaporean fashion, is inherently dynamic and ever-changing. Consequently, the representation of Singaporean fashion and its designers within the local fashion circuit has remained enigmatic and contentious. Some of my interlocutors highlighted that residence status has emerged as a determinant for non-native Singapore-based designers seeking participation in initiatives such as 'Singapore Stories'. Additionally, local designers who choose to work outside the prescribed style and theme have found themselves disadvantaged in terms of participation, access to funding and resources. For some of my interlocutors, conforming to national policy appears to outweigh creativity when it comes to securing recognition and support.

PROUDLY VIETNAMESE

In Vietnam, the 'Proudly Vietnamese' campaign (Le, 2021), which promotes homegrown fashion and creative labels, stems not only from the desire for exposure but also from a complex history of conflicts and tensions between China and Vietnam that have spanned several centuries. These conflicts predate the recently escalated disputes over conduct in the South China Sea. Both countries lay claim to being significant contributors to the development and dissemination of silk along the ancient maritime routes, highlighting the cultural significance of silk production. While the dispute primarily revolves around the historical aspects of silk production, it also reflects broader tensions and territorial disputes between China and Vietnam. This disagreement underscores the complexities and intricacies of cultural heritage and its relationship to national identity and sovereignty.

Vietnam's long history of Chinese domination has led to not only cultural and political tensions but also a substantial impact on Vietnamese culture. This historical domination has left a lasting impact on the Vietnamese collective memory. Vietnamese culture has absorbed elements from Chinese culture throughout its history, it has also evolved into a unique and distinct cultural identity. Vietnamese culture can be seen as a fusion of indigenous traditions, Chinese

influences, and historical developments that have shaped the nation over millennia. (Vuong et al., 2019). For example, the strong sense of national identity and pride shaped by their unique history and struggles for independence has proliferated the 'Proudly Vietnamese' campaign. The campaign initiator has a strong urge to promote a Vietnamese fashion identity free from the connotation of Chineseness (Interlocutor B, 2022). Nationalism in Vietnam often gets intertwined with historical and territorial issues leading to authority asserting their respective countries' claims and interests. This is evident with 'I Love Vietnamese Ao Dai' parade organised by the Municipal Department of Tourism and the Ho Chi Minh City Women's Union with 3000 participants including the authority leaders, artists as ambassadors and local residents. The parade is destined to assert nationalism in the name of "honouring the beauty of ao dai in daily life" (Ha, 2023).

Despite the historical and political conflicts, the Chinese and Vietnamese governments have maintained diplomatic and economic relations. Vietnam has benefited significantly from the relocation of garment factories from China, particularly in the aftermath of the U.S.-China trade war and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the trade war, many companies sought to diversify their manufacturing bases outside of China to avoid tariffs. Vietnam's role in this diversification has been heightened, as it offers a viable alternative to China. It emerged as a prime destination due to its strategic location and robust infrastructure. This influx of investment in the garment industry has significantly contributed to Vietnam's economic growth and the increase of employment rate. Vietnam's growing textile and apparel industry has allowed it to increase its exports, particularly to the United States and the European Union (Guarascio, 2024). To accommodate the influx of manufacturers, Vietnam has invested in improving its infrastructure, including ports, roads, and industrial parks. This not only supports the garment industry but also enhances the overall business environment. While labour costs in China have been rising, Vietnam remains competitive in terms of labour expenses making it an attractive destination for labour-intensive industries like garment manufacturing.

Fashion designers in Vietnam benefit from an abundant pool of cost-effective labour, accessible local manufacturing support, favourable export tax conditions, a rapidly expanding domestic economy, and the facilitative framework of international trade agreements. These circumstances have enabled certain designers to embrace sustainability as a distinguishing hallmark of their fashion labels, primarily by capitalising on the ready availability of deadstock materials.

Vietnam's unique positioning as a hub for both material and symbolic fashion production renders it an ideal hub for contemporary designers to engage in innovative experimentation with new styles and techniques. In tandem with their creative pursuits, many contemporary Vietnamese designers are passionately committed to the ideal of achieving 100% Vietnamese-originated fashion.

Nonetheless, despite the favourable environment within which they operate, the country grapples with a notable deficiency in terms of raw materials and textile production. This lacuna necessitates an overwhelming reliance on imported materials, the primary source of which is China. While the majority of Vietnamese designers carefully select local materials for their creation, they remain acutely aware of the provenance of these materials and the complex implications for the seemingly Vietnamese brands they seek to establish. Here, the irony emerges concerning the authentic nature of their creations, which coexists with the aspirational rhetoric of "Proudly Vietnamese." This duality underscores the inescapable role played by imported Chinese materials in shaping their fashion output.

CAMBODIA – THE FUEL OF CHINESE CAPITALISM

Across the border of Vietnam, China has emerged as one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Cambodia. Chinese investment in Cambodia spans various sectors, with a focus on infrastructure, real estate, and special economic zones. Chinese investors have built hotels, shopping malls, and condominiums to tap into Cambodia's growing tourism industry. This has contributed to the rapid growth of the construction sector and the urbanisation of major cities in Cambodia. Many Chinese companies have set up operations in special economic zones (SEZs), particularly in the areas of manufacturing, textiles, and electronics. Cambodia's increasing economic reliance on China is evident in the ownership of approximately 95% of the country's garment factories by Chinese entities (Mit, 2024). The garment manufacturing sector holds a paramount position within Cambodia, serving as a cornerstone for economic expansion, job creation, and trade. This, in turn, significantly bolsters the nation's progress and its assimilation into the global economic arena.

One interlocutor emphasised that "Cambodia is fed by China" (Interlocutor C, 2022). His experience in a Chinese-owned garment factory, where Chinese supervisors were eager to share knowledge, allowed him to acquire diverse skills and secure a respectable income and career prospects. This empowered him to start his own fashion business. This narrative highlights

China's garment manufacturing industry's evolution and its profound impact on local fashion, demonstrating the connections between garment workers, tailors, and designers in Cambodia's emerging fashion industry.

Cambodia and China's mutual interdependence in textiles and apparel is evident through bilateral agreements like the Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA), effective since early 2022, which eliminates tariffs on numerous goods, boosting trade between them (Chheang, 2023). Additionally, Cambodia benefits from trade preferences under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) and the Cambodia Trade Preference Extension Act (CBTPA), which remove tariffs on Cambodian exports to the United States (Suy, 2021). The China-US trade war has led to tariffs of 10% to 25% on Chinese-made clothing and textiles, significantly impacting their cost structure. To avoid these tariffs, many U.S. companies have relocated production to other Asian and Latin American countries. Cambodia, with textiles and apparel making up about 70% of its total exports, has become a notable exporter, with the United States as one of its primary trade partners (Trading Economics).

It is imperative to underscore that Cambodia's manufacturing sector engages extensively in the "end-tail" of the garment production process. This means that Cambodian garment factories are entrusted with the final stages that occur after clothing items have been assembled but prior to their distribution. Some of these activities are quality control measures, trimming, pressing or ironing, labelling and tagging, and packaging. Cambodia as China's model ally (Hutt, 2023) has facilitated a seamless triangulation of textiles and apparel goods, with China serving as the primary source and Cambodia as an intermediary conduit, ultimately destined for the United States. Anecdotal evidence underlines the intricacies within this process. An anonymous garment manufacturing manager (Interlocutor D, 2022) shared an incident where a factory failed to remove "Made in China" labels from Chinese-imported apparel, resulting in a shipment being returned from the U.S. with fines. This highlights the complexities of the textile trade, the interplay of country-of-origin labels, and the symbolic values attached to these labels within the fashion industry.

The government's pronounced emphasis on the manufacturing sector may have facilitated the space available for the autonomous growth of the fashion creative sphere. The country's fashion industry benefits from a close relationship with China, particularly in the production of textiles and garments. The discernible urbanisation of Cambodia's capital has provided a backdrop for the burgeoning of Phnom Penh Designers Week, meticulously organised by young and enthusiastic fashion designers. These showcases are primarily hosted within Chinese-funded

real estate entities, such as hotels, resorts, and commercial complexes, with a keen focus on appealing to the Chinese consumer demographic. They use sponsored fashion shows as a means to promote their brands and new ventures. Contemporary designers in Cambodia have strategically leveraged the country's expansive manufacturing infrastructure, often drawing from dead stock materials, as the indigenous textile production sector remains scant and raw materials necessitate importation, frequently from China. There are outstanding ethical fashion practices. However, regarding sustainability, one of my interlocutors has described it as "too advance for a developing country like Cambodia" (Interlocutor E, 2022) as most designers establishment are start-ups working with available resources, many without a steady clientele. Those with a capital have worked with skilled seamstresses and pattern makers who had previously been employed in Chinese-owned garment factories. Although a considerable portion of these designers appeared to be relatively unaware of the intricate Chinese connections underpinning their operational practices, their creative activities, in essence, are intertwined with the intricate dynamics of Chinese capitalism.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of regional dynamics in fashion-making highlights the significant influence that China holds over the Southeast Asian regions, not just in terms of political and financial power, but also in its engagement with fashion-making, the renegotiation of identities, and cultural production. Fashion-making in the 21st century is intricately intertwined with geopolitics and the role of China in both regional and global contexts. At heart of this study considers the complex entanglement of global and local forces permeated by the rise of China in the landscape of fashion-making (Ling and Segre-Reinach 2021). The implication of China as a global actor has manifested into transformations in Asia-Pacific that are tightly interwoven with all aspects of life, modernities, and aesthetic formation, giving rise to the so-called Asian Century (Lee, 2020; Lee et al, 2019; Shambaugh, 2013). China's prominent position on the global stage introduces new economic, political, and social dynamics. Chinese capitalism and national policies, as well as China international relations have far-reaching effects on the fashion industry. These changes bring about interdependent transnational relationships, with new actors playing substantial roles in shaping the industry. Fashion in Southeast Asia or the global fashion industry is evolving dramatically with China as an interconnecting force, influencing and being influenced by these shifts.

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