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Re-Shaping Innovations in the Contemporary Fashion Show: Emerging Aesthetics and the Rising International-Based Chinese Designer Collective

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ABSTRACT The past five years have seen a rapidly rising “new wave” of design power created by Chinese designers who are devoted to showcasing their works within the legitimate European fashion week system – which includes the “Big Four” fashion weeks in New York, London, Milan, and Paris – to upgrade their cultural status as Chinese design collectives. In addition to showing their collections with a high-end design standard, this group of visual innovators are constantly seeking aesthetic innovations when showing fashion and have gradually been



changing and influencing the emerging generation of international-based Chinese designers by displaying and showing fashion at international fashion weeks. This paper integrates and investigates the new aesthetics in fashion visualization brought forward by a collective of emerging international-based Chinese designers who have gradually expanded their cultural influences and re-shaped innovations in contemporary fashion shows within the current global fashion ecosystem. These new aesthetics feature fashion's new affinity with immersive physical theater, a type of avant-garde post-dramatic theatre, when being shown on a global stage. Furthermore, the rising institutions at Shanghai Fashion Week have been producing and advocating for the formation of international-based Chinese designer collectives to experiment with new aesthetics via multiple forms at London and Shanghai Fashion Weeks between 2017 and 2020, both physically and digitally. This has led to systematic changes and innovations in the global fashion cultural system, in terms of both forming and shaping a new aesthetic identity of Chinese designers within the global fashion system.

KEYWORDS: fashion show, innovation, global fashion system, fashion culture, Chinese fashion designers

1. Introduction: The Rise of Chinese Designers as the Contemporary Context

Today's global fashion industry is experiencing a cultural hierarchical reconstruction due to the undeniable rise of Chinese design power on the global stage with a surge in the number of Chinese designers showing on the most crucial international fashion stages in recent decades (Tsui 2009; Smith 2018; Miller 2018; Deloitte 2018; Gaddi 2018). There is also an emerging collective of Chinese designers who advocate and endeavor to explore and stage new aesthetics in showing fashion at international fashion weeks. The number of emerging brands and the scale of fashion weeks in China have grown in the past decade as the global economic power in fashion shifts from conventional European fashion capitals to the emerging capitals in China. International-based Chinese (IBC) designer brands, in particular, are amplifying their cultural images and discursive power with rising recognition from the legitimate Western fashion system and are becoming the main contributors to changing the global image of China's design power from garments being "manufactured in China" to being "designed in China" (Deloitte 2018, 35). Presenting designs on the official calendars of the "Big Four" fashion weeks (New York, London, Milan, and Paris) has become an authorization and validation process for every Chinese designer who seeks an

effective platform to demonstrate and address the nation's cultural and commercial power in fashion (Zhao 2013).

It has been over a decade since Chinese designers began to showcase their designs within the Western fashion system (Tsui 2009). The year of 2004 was the first year that Chinese designer brands started to present their works at Paris Fashion Weeks (PFW), seen when Wu Haiyan staged her show “天人合一 Tian Ren He Yi” (“harmony between man and nature”) (Tsui 2009). In 2006, the brands that staged shows at PFW were WuYong, founded in 2006 by Ma Ke, and JEFEN, founded in 2000 by Xie Feng (Fashion Network 2009). In 2007, the number of Chinese designers presenting works increased to four and they were dispersed across three of the legitimate Big Four¹ fashion weeks: Xie Feng and Ma Ke at Paris, Guo Pei at Milan, and the commercial brand Cabbeen at New York (Tsui 2009; Fashion Network 2007). By 2017, forty-nine Chinese designer brands were listed on the official calendars for both womenswear and menswear at the Big Four (LuxeCO 2017). The official organizer of the London Fashion Week (LFW), the British Fashion Council (BFC), hosted the “C-Pop Show” in 2018 with VIP.com for the particular purpose of promoting Chinese designer brands, identifying the rise of Chinese design power on the international fashion stage as a “New Wave” in the global industry (Smith 2018; Miller 2018).

In addition to the rising number of Chinese designers being exposed on the Western fashion stage as emerging labels, a handful of IBC designers are targeting the niche market, continuously seeking innovation in their designs and showcasing fashion following the traditions of Western designers' experimentations with theatrical and performative fashion since the 1970s (Gill 1998; Duggan 2001; Quinn 2002a, 2002b, 2005; McRobbie 2003; Evans 2003; Seymour 2008; Loschek 2009; Knox 2010; Skov et al. 2009; English 2013). This phenomenon started in 2017 when designer Youjia Jin staged her first fashion performance that was officially recognized as such by Paris Men's Fashion Week's authority FCF (Fédération Française de la Couture du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers and Créateurs de Mode, also known as the French Couture Federation). This show was a form of avant-garde post-dramatic theater (Lehmann 2006; Fischer-Lichte 2014; Alston 2016; Brater and Taylor-Batty 2019), unique for its “immersive” nature (Machon 2013; Fischer-Lichte 2014; Alston 2016). It challenged the regime of theatrical fashion shows being merely on the stage, rejecting the conventional binary relationship with audiences (Fischer-Lichte 2014).

In the following five years after 2017, particularly at LFW and Shanghai Fashion Week (SHFW), the number of shows with the same aesthetic increased, staged by a collective of IBC designers at international fashion weeks, such as Xuzhi Chen, Fengyi Tan, Wanbing Huang, and Roderic Wong, through emerging institutions at SHFW or the organizational platform at LFW. These emerging

designers and organizations are impacting and systematically changing the global fashion cultural system, providing a new discourse in researching fashion, and seeking innovations to hybridize fashion by using more diversified art forms and new technologies to demonstrate Chinese designers' contributions to the contemporary fashion show within the global fashion system.

With more Chinese design students studying at international fashion colleges,² although they are small group in terms of the total number of Chinese fashion designers today (based both domestically and internationally), IBC designers play the most important role in upgrading the design power of the Chinese fashion image (Miller 2018). These emerging designers, with the application of new aesthetics when showing fashion, have formed a new innovative collective as a noticeable cultural phenomenon within the global fashion system following the “designerscape era” (English 2013, 156) that began in the 1970s and ended in the 2000s. With such rapid and significant changes brought about by IBC designers, few studies have yet taken notice; there has been little research documenting and analyzing these cultural changes and identifying the inner patterns of the Chinese design power that is emerging globally. A comprehensive picture of emerging Chinese designers and the related shifts in the global power of the fashion culture that have recently emerged is needed.

Hence, this paper is written to elaborate on the rising and noticeable cultural phenomenon of Chinese fashion design. By examining the formation of this designer collective alongside an in-depth analysis of the new aesthetics in showcasing fashion, attentive to the plurality of categories of styles and methods used to showcase fashion, this paper contributes to the fields of fashion and design studies. It does so by providing the most up-to-date analysis of the ongoing cultural changes that have systematically impacted the global fashion cultural system, as well as placing fashion in a broader discussion on the fusing of post-dramatic theater and performance.

2. Theoretical Context, Western Historical Context, and the Analytical Framework

The accumulation and gathering of emerging designers – a new group or “new wave” of design power that is creating new diversifications within original fashion systems – can be interpreted in a wider discussion of innovation theories. IBC designers are persistent in pursuing autonomy in their symbolic productions as they endeavor to explore the multidisciplinary artistic nature of fashion. Seen from the point of view of Bourdieu's theory of cultural and symbolic production in terms of the explicit logic of the process of autonomization³ (Bourdieu 1993, 112–20), which is a classic theory of cultural production that has been widely applied to design and cultural studies, some of these works – produced as “art for art's sake” (Bourdieu 1993, 40), especially those that are unconventional in their artistic

visual expressions – can be considered as intellectual and artistic productions. Bourdieu's (1993) emphasis on autonomization is crucial for understanding these works, which can provide new empirical applications for a rising cultural phenomenon interpreted by a classic theory in fashion and design cultural studies.

Arts autonomy in cultural production practices, which refers to fashion show design and presentation produced by IBC designers in this paper, is expressed by artists or practitioners who reject the legitimate principles from mainstream and commercial fashion while following “the rules handed down from their predecessors” (Bourdieu 1993, 112) and seeking for the avant-garde genre of fashion, especially those IBC designers who are experimenting with and exploring new aesthetics in showing fashion. The emerging aesthetics that are emphasized in this study are beginning to form a new designer collective advocating for similar aesthetic revolutions within the global fashion system. To further investigate this forming collective of cultural phenomena and discuss it as a potential cultural innovation in the academic field of fashion, it is also necessary to review and revisit the prior studies on fashion innovation, especially those investigating the idea of designers' experimentation in showing fashion as systematic cultural revolutions.

Fashion scholars tend not to directly apply innovations as a theoretical term, although they identify how new aesthetics are brought to visual fashion, the fashion show, and cultural iconography more broadly (Gill 1998; Duggan 2001; Quinn 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005, 2010; McRobbie 2003; Seymour 2008; Loschek 2009; Knox 2010). Evans (2003, 55–87) mentions that a “strong feeling of decadence and psychological trauma pervaded fashion collection showings in the 1990s and early 2000s.” She argues that experimental design was prolific in this period. The cultural hybridization and global cross-fertilization between Western and Eastern cultures challenged the pre-existing politically correct attitudes in the merging of fashion and art (Hopkins 2018, 228–46). This tendency was reflected in fashion shows, creating a generation of emerging designers that challenged the dominant aestheticism in the legitimate fashion system. These changes have further blurred the boundaries between art and fashion by embodying social, cultural, and political issues and phenomena, a movement begun in the 1970s by iconic designers such as Alexander McQueen, John Galiano, Issey Miyake, Rifat Özbek, Hussein Chalayan, Dries van Noten, and Martin Margiela (Gill 1998; Duggan 2001; Quinn 2002a, 2002b, 2005; McRobbie 2003; Seymour 2008; Knox 2010).

Theater and performance have long demonstrated their affiliation with the field of fashion in terms of fashion shows and performances since the rise of the “designerscape era” in the 1970s (English 2013, 156), seen through a number of designers from Japan (Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto), Belgium (the Antwerp Six and Martin Margiela), Paris (Jean Paul Gaultier), and the UK (Alexander

McQueen and John Galiano). The era of the designerscape characterized by avant-garde fashion appeared in European fashion cities, fundamentally changing the image of fashion and challenging the aesthetic regime in Paris of showing fashion featuring Romanticism and Perfectionism (Steele 1997, 2017; Duggan 2001; Fogg 2013). This designerscape proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s, and ended in the 2000s (Duggan 2001; English 2013; Fogg 2013; Steele 2017). As English mentions (2013 92), from the 1960s onwards, fashion changes accelerated at “a more rapid pace” than before. This phenomenon was embodied by the “proliferation and diversity of styles promulgated until the end of the century” (English 2013, 95). He also points out that “the ‘unprecedented visual pluralism’ shown during ‘an age of experimentation’ diversified thinking and represented dramatic technological change with the advent of the computer age, an ever-expanding communications system and growing trends in popular culture” (English 2013, 97). Although the designerscape era ended in the 2000s, numerous fashion designers are still endeavoring to utilize performance and theater as forms of showing fashion to deepen the cultural, aesthetic, and political engagements within the field of fashion.

Scholars of the designerscape era have categorized these avant-garde designers by the different boundaries that they have challenged and by their utilization of different art forms, namely performance art, installation art, conceptual art, and radical art, as well as their connections with various genres such as expressionism, deconstructivism, theatricalism, and postmodernism (Gill 1998; Quinn 2002a, 2002b; Seymour 2008; Knox 2010).

When discussing the mechanisms behind the systematic changes that have occurred in fashion culture and aesthetics as industry innovations, with the interdisciplinary nature of fashion studies, the direct application of topics of innovation is seen, but with more of a focus on business and manufacturing rather than culture and aesthetics (Pesendorfer 1995; Cappetta, Paola, and Anna 2006; Seymour 2008; Loschek 2009; Tzou and Lu 2009; Quinn 2010; Guercini and Ranfagni 2012; Mora 2006; Rinallo and Golfetto 2006; Park, Davis Burns, and Rabolt 2007; Cillo and Verona 2008; Sproles 1981; Pesendorfer 1995; Crane 1999; Phau and Lo 2004; Brannon and Divita 2015). Among these studies, Loschek’s research (2009) should be highlighted as a fashion scholar who has used Schumpeter’s innovation theory (1935) to examine the innovation in textile design techniques by analyzing the presentations of several radical designers as case studies, such as McQueen and Chalayan. The most critical contributions of Loschek (2009, 191) are clarifying the concept of innovation, how it should be evaluated, and the reasons for assessing it in the research of fashion design due to its technological significance, the aim of which is to “reduce future uncertainties using anticipatory thinking and action.” However, few scholars draw attention to or directly discuss systematic changes as

the cultural consequences of the imagery and functional changes brought to fashion shows and the fashion stage since the 1970s by iconic designers such as Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, Issey Miyake, Rifat Özbek, Hussein Chalayan, Dries van Noten, and Martin Margiela (Gill 1998; Duggan 2001; Quinn 2002a, 2002b, 2005; McRobbie 2003; Seymour 2008; Knox 2010).

Fashion scholars tend not to directly apply innovation as a theoretical term or theoretical underpinning, although they do identify the reinventing or bringing about of new aesthetics to visual fashion, the fashion show as a paradigm of a significant aesthetic, and cultural and iconographic changes (Gill 1998; Duggan 2001; Quinn 2002a, 2002b, 2005; McRobbie 2003; Seymour 2008; Loschek 2009; Knox 2010). This tendency raises a theoretical question. How can we interpret the accumulated changes in imagery brought about by the emergence of a new aesthetic within a mature cultural ecosystem when these changes are influencing and systematically transforming the whole ecosystem? Furthermore, when exploring the explicit innovation theories that can be used and applied to this field of research, scholars (Geels 2002; Greenacre 2012) mention the importance of addressing niches as an important standard when examining innovations. As Geels (2002, 135) explains, “niches are in some way insulated from ‘normal’ market selection, they act as ‘incubation rooms’ for radical novelties. They also provide the space to build the social networks that support innovation, such as supply chains and user-producer relationships.” This idea might be useful as a theoretical supplement to Schumpeter’s (1935, 2000) classic interpretations. From this perspective, IBC designers are the main characters or players within the emerging niche market of the global fashion industry, whose explorations in creating new fashion aesthetics continuously investigate how fashion can be pushed across cultural and aesthetic boundaries and connected with a broader design and art field, such as theater and performance.

The IBC designers discussed in this study, who have mainly graduated from renowned fashion colleges Central Saint Martin (CSM) and the Royal College of Art (RCA), follow the previous designers in revolutionizing the methods used to design and present shows that proliferated in the designerscape era, some of whom also graduated from CSM, such as McQueen and Galliano. IBC designers, especially those seeking to produce “art for art’s sake” (in Bourdieu’s sense) when showing fashion within the global system, view the designerscape generation as role models in bringing aesthetic and cultural revolutions to fashion and take inspiration from their creations in aesthetic revolutions, such as incorporating performance and theater in shows, seeing them as artistic traditions handed down by their predecessors like McQueen and Galliano.

This study emphasizes how the innovation in aesthetic exploration has been handed down by the collective of IBC designers, starting with the niche aesthetic revolutionized by one designer, Youjia Jin,

and then growing within the global fashion ecosystem, forming a new designer community that advocates a similar aesthetic genre and accumulates the corresponding cultural influences whereby it starts to reshape both the cultural and aesthetic innovations within global fashion. It will investigate a new era of global fashion that is being influenced and re-constructed by Chinese fashion designers.

3. Methodological Approaches

This paper elaborates on one of the core discussions of my Ph.D. project (Wang 2019): the systematic changes that IBC designers have brought to the global fashion ecosystem in terms of both bringing new aesthetics and forming a new organizational collective. This was an extensive ethnographic cultural study that lasted for over twenty-four months. Ethnographic case studies were undertaken alongside cross-cultural comparisons (Schrauf 2018), participant observations (Okely 2020), and diversified types of ethnographic and qualitative interviews (Vannini 2018), all of which are integrated into this study.

Visual ethnography and photo-documentation are explicit visual research methods that are applied to this study (Rose 2016). Participant observation and ethnographic interviews are mainly applied to this research when I undertook it. I worked as executive show producer and photographer in the subject designers' show production team whilst doing the research, worked closely with creative directors and designers to document explicit processes of creative design to productions on fashion shows and films. I recorded the production procedures through photography and videography of the shows from design to production and presentations during my doctoral project and selected the visual materials I collected in the presentation procedure to discuss the aesthetic and image revolutions brought by the IBC designers in this paper.

During the visual ethnography research using observational approaches, especially during participatory observations, and to decrease the subjectivity created by photo-documentary, the visual data collected contains video documentation not merely to record the description of subjects being narrated or to explain the rationale of each production activity, but also to record the understandings and phenomenological discussions between participatory researchers and subjects based on real experiences. As for the shows designed to explore new aesthetics in visualizing fashion produced by the emerging generation of IBC designers, they have been chosen for this study based on two criteria. The first is Tsui's definition (2009, 121) of the "three generations" of Chinese fashion designers, with the third generation (operating in the twenty-first century) considered to be more "diversified and creative" even as they "copy" Western design techniques. This is because the accumulated new aesthetics appearing in fashion shows are mainly created by the third generation, who were born after the 1980s, have hybrid educational

backgrounds (attending both Chinese and Western design colleges), and established their brands after 2014.

Consider Youjia Jin and her collaborating show director Tong Zhao. They began to utilize immersive performance and physical theater inspired by their role model designers from the designerscape era, yet they created and added new elements to re-shape the existing aesthetic revolutions. In addition to Jin's autonomous brand Youjia Jin, she and Zhao have launched an art and fashion studio named Hexagon Collective (HC), which is devoted to diffusing the aesthetic innovation they have successfully experimented with to the broader community of IBC designers. Jin became established at the Paris Fall/Winter 2017 Men's Fashion Week when she staged her first show that was officially recognized as a "fashion performance" by the FCF with Zhao. The show, "Recreation," was an immersive form of performance art featuring physical theater as a postmodern theater form. Since then, more shows engaging with the same identity have emerged and been advocated by the same generation of IBC designers, all produced by HC. The designers creating these shows are Fengyi Tan, Wanbing Huang, Xuzhi Chen, and Roderic Wong, whom I turn to in the next section.

For the explicit exploration of each of these shows, I applied the methods of visual ethnography to study "Recreation" as well as Jin's second performance, "Way Out," at the Spring/Summer 2018 LFW. Following the presentation of these two shows at fashion weeks, I analyze the aesthetic revolution with which they challenged the existing forms of contemporary fashion shows. In [Table 1](#), I specify the forming collective of design and cultural innovation according to the visual analysis methods I used, such as content analysis, film analysis, historical analysis, structural analysis, and iconography (Leeuwen 2007).

The following core analysis begins with Jin and Zhao, using content analysis and iconography as the main analysis methods. Jin and Zhao departed from the aesthetic revolutionary traditions as a cultural norm handed down from their role models, McQueen and Galliano, and in doing so expanded their new aesthetic to the broader fashion system within the same generation of Chinese designers. What has emerged is a collective of IBC designers applying this type of new aesthetic genre to their shows at different international fashion weeks, especially at LFW and SHFW.

4. Core Analysis

4.1. *New aesthetics in fashion shows: From conventional to avant-garde*

The influences of European role model designers from the designerscape era on IBC designers are mainly seen in discourse and communication through "role model authority" (Leeuwen 2007, 93) as a part of the emphasis on legitimation. Role models tend to adopt "a certain kind of behaviour, or believe certain things" (Leeuwen 2007,

TABLE 1.

Data structure and categorizations used in this paper.

Designers	Shows	Organizers	Production company	Data structure and analysis methods
Youjia Jin	A/W 2017, "Recreation"	The French Couture Federation	Hexagon Collective (London)	Visual Ethnography, Content Analysis, Iconography
	S/S 2018, "Way Out"	Fashion Scout	Hexagon Collective (London)	Visual Ethnography
	A/W 2020, "Prelude序"	XCommons	ICY Platform (Shanghai)	Visual Ethnography
	A/W 2019, "Vanished Muse"	British Fashion Council	Hexagon Collective (London)	Visual Ethnography
	A/W 2017, "The Visitors"	LabelHood	LabelHood and in-house team	Visual Ethnography
Fengyi Tan	S/S 2017	LabelHood	Hexagon Collective (Shanghai)	Visual Ethnography
	S/S 2018, "City Life"	XCommons	Hexagon Collective (Shanghai)	Visual Ethnography
	S/S 2019, "Body in/ e motion"	British Fashion Council	Hexagon Collective (London)	Visual Ethnography
Wanbing Huang	A/W 2017, "Dance Performance"	LabelHood	LabelHood and in-house team	Visual Ethnography
Roderic Wong	A/W 2020, "Die-Flusse"	XCommons	Hexagon Collective and ICY Platform	Visual Ethnography

96) that legitimize the behaviors, beliefs, activities, and practices of their followers, which is suitable for this study in explaining the rationale of followers when choosing the same or similar techniques when experimenting with the same pursuits in a distinguished period and context. As mentioned above, the designers featured in the designerscape era, in addition to being identified as revolutionaries in bringing new aesthetics to fashion, are also recognized as “substance designers,” who create shows based on abstract concepts and that convey concepts through a system of symbols and “esoteric means” (Duggan 2001, 269). When emerging designers, like the collective of Chinese designers discussed in this paper, try to explore new aesthetics in showing fashion, this tends to be viewed as a departure from aesthetic traditions. The aesthetic revolutions investigated in this paper are created based on revolutions handed down from the designerscape era, which are inherited by the following generation of designers, represented by the emerging IBC designers researched in this study.

During the period from the late 1990s to 2010, Wang Xinyuan and MaKe need to be highlighted among the Chinese designers who attempted to explore theatricality and performativity in showcasing fashion, yet, due to the limited number of advocators, this phenomenon did not have a profound international influence. Domestically, Wang Xinyuan, as a paradigm of the first generation of Chinese designers,⁴ is recognized as the main contributor to experimentations with how traditional Chinese cultural symbols could be applied to modern fashion shows. Wang’s pursuit of the modernization of China’s traditional cultural identity in order to connect with global aesthetics paved the way and set up a role model for the following Chinese designers in terms of innovations in showcasing fashion, although he did not gain recognition from legitimate Western fashion systems and his theatrical fashion shows were only exhibited within Chinese fashion communities and have yet to expand to global fashion stages such as international fashion weeks (Liu 2018; Fashion Beijing 2018). One of his iconic shows, *The Tianyi Pavilion*, staged in 1999 in Ningbo, is an example of how a venue with significant heritage can be redesigned to facilitate the creation of an immersive experience for the audience. This was the first time that a Chinese designer had experimented with ways of using dramatic performances as well as embedding cultural heritage into a show through the choice of venue, the Tianyi Pavilion (Chinese: 天一阁 Tianyi Ge; literally “One Sky Pavilion”). Later, he staged a series of fashion shows at the Great Wall in 2000, as well as at different cities in China, such as “Xing Yun Liu Shui” (2002) on the viaduct on Chongqing Road in Shanghai during SHFW and a show at the Potala Palace in 2002 for the Elite Model Look World Final competition (Liu 2018; Fashion Beijing 2018).

Ma Ke, categorized as a paradigmatic second-generation Chinese designer (Tsui 2009), was among the first Chinese fashion designers



Figure 1

Jin's fashion performance, "Recreation," for the Autumn/Winter 2017 season at PFW; images taken for the press release, 2017.

who experimented with incorporating the Chinese cultural identity in a fashion show. Nurtured by Chinese culture and philosophy, Chinese artistic designers are digesting Western art forms, integrating them with Chinese culture, and creating cultural innovations for Chinese fashion shows. Although recognition from Western fashion systems has been limited, Ma Ke's application of Chinese philosophy to Western fashion shows via conceptual art and abstract expressions was seen as revolutionary under the prevalence of fashion globalization. She was the first Chinese designer to test the possibilities of linking Western and Chinese cultures and expressing Chinese philosophy through Western art forms, exhibiting her works at an international fashion week (Tsui 2009). The Taoist philosophy of "Uselessness," for example, was applied as the conceptual basis of her fashion shows staged at PFW in 2007 and 2008. However, these two designers, although viewed as pioneering Chinese designers in experimenting with theatrical and performative fashion, disappeared from the international stage. It was not until the rise of the third generation of IBC designers that the design discourse power within the international fashion system could be successfully proliferated and emphasized.

IBC designers created their new aesthetic by incorporating new forms of theater and performance to existing ways of showing fashion, which are drawn from two types of avant-garde theater: physical theater as a form of postmodern and post-dramatic theater initiated in the 1980s (Barton 2005; Lehmann 2006; Brater and Taylor-Batty 2019) and immersive theater as one of the most historical types of modern theater initiated in the nineteenth century (Machon 2013; Fischer-Lichte 2014; Alston 2016). Theatricality and performativity



Figure 2
Interaction between a dancer and a spectator. Photo by the author, 2017.

were first established by McQueen and Galliano as aesthetic revolutions in showing fashion (Gill 1998; Duggan 2001; Quinn 2002a, 2002b, 2005; McRobbie 2003; Loschek 2009; Knox 2010), have become the main types of art form that these designers view as a departure from traditional aesthetics, and they explore new aesthetics based on this. Jin's shows, starting with "Recreation" and "Way Out," have added performance of an immersive nature and applied avant-garde post-dramatic theater, which is physical theater in terms of productive participation (Lehmann 2006; Fischer-Lichte 2014; Alston 2016; Brater and Taylor-Batty 2019), for which the politics or governance of aesthetic production tend not to appear in today's exploration of showing fashion.

Theoretical discussions of immersive theater often incorporate the topics of new individualism, productive participation, art neoliberalism, and the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Santone 2014). It is an "aesthetic experience" (Alston 2016, 7) in which theater performances present audiences with aesthetic objects via theatrical and creative interpreters. The audience's relationship with a set of theatrical components in artwork tends to be framed as the primary aesthetically meaningful element in immersive theater, alongside a series of other meanings attached to constructions and bodies in an immersive space. Theater study scholars have vividly described audience participation, which is to enter "experience machines" that are "enclosed spaces" in which different types of performance are incorporated, such as scenography, choreography, and dramaturgy (Alston 2016, 2, 3; see also Machon 2013; White 2013;). These



Figure 3

The performance pictures of the show “Way Out” at LFW. In order to enable the audience to see more clearly and decrease the distance from them, the dancers sometimes stood on the front table of the cloakroom to dance. Photograph courtesy to Youjia Jin, 2017.

performances are aimed at “placing audience members in a thematically cohesive environment that resources their sensuous, imaginative and explorative capabilities as productive and involving aspects of a theatre aesthetic” (Alston 2016, 2).

The live interaction between the audience and the performers took place during the show, which ran for two hours in total and one round consisted of twenty minutes in which a new group of audience was brought into the space after every round. Due to the free roaming of the audience and the performers, each round of the show featured different content. The audience’s “productive participation” (Alston 2016, 4) is essential in identifying immersive theater, in which audiences co-produce the artwork rather than merely watch the performance. Audiences can roam freely around the venue and interact with performers and other audience members, who are expected to use their “psychological and physiological” (Alston 2016, 4) faculties to fully involve themselves in the performance (Machon 2013; White 2013). In Jin’s “Recreation” show for the Autumn/Winter 2017 season at PFW, the changing relationships between the performers, the models, and the audience, especially regarding the audience’s productive contribution, enabled this fashion performance to incorporate immersive theater. The performance pictures without the audience present are shown in Figure 1; I shot these photographs before the show started and the audience entered. As an immersive

performance where the audience was not restricted to watching the show in a confined region, it was difficult to take pictures without the audience interaction. To provide pictures for the press release and to be featured in mainstream publications, it was still necessary to take photographs without the audience before the show started.

The live performance was completely different from the pictures taken for the press. Being an immersive performance where the audience could interact with the performers, the images of the live show are filled with the audience taking photographs and discussing the performance. The audience could be invited to co-create the show at any time by the performing dancers and models, such as making and throwing paper airplanes with the performers, dancing with the models and dancers, and playing with the installations, such as the fake mannequins, with the performers to co-create and co-produce the performance through “autopoiesis” (Alston 2016, 7; see Figure 2). In this contemporary space under the theme of a “schoolboy’s dream,” the surreal installations provided the audience with the chance to create their own “aesthetic experience” (Alston 2016, 7), which was “a special and magic experience that had never been existed or appeared in the previous experiences of attending a fashion show” (He 2017) (this or words to this effect were mentioned by fifteen audience members out of twenty whom I randomly selected and interviewed before they left the show within the ethnographic research). In immersive art, when audiences experience “autopoiesis” during a fashion performance, they do not only view, touch, and discuss the garments but are also able to participate in adding significance to the original meaning of the performance based on the timely and dynamically changing situations within the performance.

In another performance staged for “Way Out,” Jin and Zhao had to discard their original plan of making this show an immersive performance due to the venue and institutional constraints. The audience was confined in a prepared area in the hall in front of the cloakroom. However, they maintained the identity of using physical theater combined with contemporary dance and managed to perform as close as they could to the audiences, such as the dancers jumping onto the table in front of the cloakroom (Figure 3). Jin and Zhao made full use of the venue not only in terms of the design but also with the concept of “cloakroom” as an enclosed space, making it rhetorically fit the concepts of “id” and “ego,” the physiological limitations that performers wanted to escape, and the region in which the audience stood, which was the rhetorical destination in this performance. Although the audience was not able to co-produce or productively participate in this theatrical show, they could still unconsciously become co-creators of the performance and they could obtain a strong sense of the avant-garde aesthetics and emotions it provided and conveyed when seeing all of the performers managing to “escape” or “climb out” (Jin 2017) of the cloakroom.



Figure 4

A multidisciplinary artistic implementation on different IBC designers showing fashion at SHFW brought forward by Labelhood in 2017. Photos courtesy to Labelhood, 2017.

This, in turn, made this performance an example of immersive theater due to the unconscious productive participation of the audience.

Although Jin and Zhao have gained recognition from Paris authorities, the expansion of cultural influences of these newly established aesthetics and new forms of theater-performance-fashion incorporation is constrained. This is because they lack a substantial budget for mass communication. Fashion editors no longer recommend emerging by dint of outstanding talent; emerging designers need their own public relations operation if they would like to gain wider exposures (Wang 2019). It is difficult to balance the pursuit for “art for art’s sake” with the mass market. The “third generation” (Tsui 2009, 121) of IBC designers, especially those showing their work at international fashion weeks, are now facing a more complex and fast-changing global fashion ecosystem compared with the era their role models or predecessor designers experienced. Their careers started when the fashion became even more deeply influenced or even controlled by capital after the year 2000; capitalists, rather than artists and designers, took greater command of the fashion world. For designers who pursue art for art’s sake, bringing about a new aesthetic is thus about more than challenging aesthetic convention; it has become a development strategy that seeks to form a decentralized aesthetic collective. If these revolutionaries aim to build up a global influence within the fashion cultural system, they must cultivate a market for consumers.



Figure 5

The flow and the narratives of Tan's "Time" performance at SHFW (left). Tan's performance "Body in/E emotion" at the Spring/Summer 2019 season at LFW. Photos courtesy of Tong Zhao, 2018.



Figure 6

Wanbing Huang in Collaboration with Zhao of Producing her Show at SHFW (left); Wanbing Huang used a live exhibition to showcase her collection at the Autumn/Winter 2017 season at SHFW in collaboration with Labelhood (right). Photos courtesy Labelhood, 2017.

4.2. Systematic revolutions: IBC designers and institutions in Shanghai and London

Because France is still the hegemon in the fashion industry, it remains difficult for today's designers to gain wider recognition of new aesthetics due to the commercially focused cultural atmosphere. No matter how many works they make or followers and advocates they have, IBC designers need more to build up a new aesthetic community. Establishing new symbolic practices in fashion



Figure 7

Xuzhi Chen in Collaboration with Zhao in Producing his Immersive Physical Theater Performance, “The Vanishing Muse,” at LFW. Photos courtesy of Tong Zhao, 2019.

shows at different legitimate fashion weeks is unfeasible without organizational support, which in this research context refers to support from institutions and organizers of international fashion weeks. By being recognized as the first fashion performance at FCF showing on the official calendar, for instance, IBC designers’ new type of fashion performance was noticed by organizers from SHFW, and applied by one of its official organizers, Labelhood⁵, who was set up to incubate and showcase emerging Chinese designers’ artistic creativity at SHFW since 2017 (see Figure 4).

Creative innovation and its adoption is often embedded with the organizational and systematic changes, as seen with the emergence of new products from the niche market (Geels 2002, 135). Under these circumstances, the generation of IBC designers led by Jin and Zhao is followed by an emerging generation: Fengyi Tan (Figure 5), Wanbing Huang (Figure 6), Xuzhi Chen (Figure 7), and Roderic Wong (Figure 8), all of whom collaborated with Zhao in producing immersive physical theater shows at LFW and SHFW between 2017 and 2020. Their works have bubbled up as a niche aesthetic product emerging in the global fashion ecosystem, forming a new designer community who advocate a similar aesthetic genre.

All the above-emphasized fashion performances were presented physically as a form of cultural production within the field of a fashion week, where cultural influence is restricted to the circle of industry professionals. To broaden the cultural influence of this new aesthetic, HC collaborated for the Autumn/Winter 2020 SHFW with the designer brand Fengyi Tan and Roderic Wong and with SHFW’s organizers Labelhood and Xcommons. Tan and Wong’s usage of physical theater to virtually showcase their new collections through avant-garde dance for the recently completed online SHFW (the



Figure 8

Fengyi Tan's "See Now Buy Now" digital physical theater performance video, staged by Labelhood and broadcast on the Taobao live broadcast platform (above). Roderic Wong's fashion film co-staged by Xcommons and ICY Designer Platform, which was directed and produced by HC studio. It shows the consistent identity of the accumulated new aesthetic collective initiated by Zhao and Jin. Photos by the author, 2020.

season of Autumn/Winter 2020) that was opened to the public has significantly encouraged the public discussion of physical theater as performance art and gained a wider cultural recognition from the mass audiences (see [Figure 8](#)).

The digitized series of fashion shows launched by Xcommons in collaboration with ICY's digital production displayed at this virtual SHFW further investigated the diversification of presenting fashion. This new aesthetic of showcasing fashion, whether the physical immersive theatrical performance or the virtualization through Computer Generated (CG) digital production is obtaining its collective cultural influence and discourse from bubbled-up individuals' advocates (the third generation of IBC designers) to organizational and

institutional support from industry professionals, and then to the approach of broadening the cultural influence through aesthetic revolutions of bringing new aesthetics as well as revolutionizing the showing forms within the global fashion system. When building up its cultural community adapting and advocating for the same aesthetic when showing fashion, the international fashion weeks and their organizations and institutions have played a vital role in constructing this aesthetic-sharing community and globalizing their cultural influences as IBC designer collectives seeking new implementations of showing fashion.

When a group of individuals or organizations are setting up new standards of cultural legitimation within an existing cultural system, they work to achieve the implementation of “substantive management” and “symbolic management” (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990, 176). The “core value” and “cultural norm” (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990, 179) shared by both Labelhood and Xcommons is to establish IBC designers’ capability and avant-gardeness in relation to the Western fashion world. That IBC designers have achieved this goal is one of the main reasons that SHFW is now covered by the Western fashion press and is due to their active incubation on niche markets for creativity cultivated by Chinese independent fashion designers.

Distinguished from the commercialized requirements from SFDA for brands showcasing at XintianDi, the “field” cultural production (Bourdieu 1993, 113) that Labelhood and Xcommons have created is in essence to decentralize and articulate the emerging creativity and niche culture rupturing the existing cultural legitimation that the authorities of SHFW were trying to construct, which is “Haipai” genre, homogeneous to Shanghai as an emerging fashion city, featuring a mixture of modern Western and Eastern cultural identities (Wang and Lau 2009). Collaborating designer brands have a high degree of art autonomization in showing their creativity and are encouraged to experiment on multi-diversified forms of art when presenting their work. Under these circumstances, the new aesthetic created by Jin and Zhao is becoming a core and new aesthetic genre which is advocated by Xcommons. It could be said that since its establishment in 2018, Xcommons has been advocative in promoting and disseminating the new form of incorporating immersive performance and physical theater when showing fashion to the industry professionals as well as to the mass audiences. It invited HC studio as the core production company at SHFW to undertake all the fashion performance’s design and production for the new IBC designers they incubate. In fact, the initiation and construction of the Xcommons, which could be considered as an outsourced commercially running company partially owned by SFDA, is founded due to noticing the rising capacity of IBC designers and needs of art autonomization among emerging IBC designers touring back from legitimate fashion weeks. This demonstrates a bilateral influence in-between bubbled-up individuals from the niche and legitimate organizations and

institutions, which is brought by a systematic change when a new aesthetic is being introduced to the field of fashion.

5. Conclusions

Although IBC designers have advanced the aesthetics of fashion shows and made a mark on the global fashion ecosystem, their reconstruction of global fashion culture cannot be discussed from an aesthetic perspective alone. The new aesthetic that has emerged in the contemporary fashion shows produced by IBC designers and displayed at international fashion weeks corresponds with rising institutions and organizations that advocate and integrate these works as a collective cultural phenomenon. Their system is comprehensively interconnected with the whole fashion system and has opened a new market for China's fashion culture.

While the systematic symbolic production practices brought forth by the third generation of IBC designers has upgraded Chinese designers' hierarchical status in the global fashion system, a new cultural collective of emerging IBC designers is progressively emerging while the old aesthetic and cultural hierarchy created by designers from the designerscape era is being reconstructed. Now, as Chinese designers assert their power in the global fashion system, they may gain recognition as a second group of Asian designers after the Japanese designer collectives (Kawamura 2004; English 2011). This could add more cultural diversification and aesthetic innovations in today's global fashion cultural system without rupturing any existing cultural systems and creative disciplines of showcasing fashion.

Notes

1. Namely, Paris Fashion Week (referred to as PFW hereinafter), New York Fashion Week (referred to as NYFW hereinafter), Milan Fashion Week (referred to as MLFW hereinafter) and London Fashion Week (referred to as LFW hereinafter).
2. The majority of international students in the world-renowned design colleges like Parsons School of Design in New York and Central Saint Martins in London are Chinese (Miller 2018), with approximately forty-eight percent of Chinese designers having international education backgrounds, with seventeen percent graduating from Central Saint Martins, which is the highest proportion of the design colleges (Liu 2017).
3. This theory clarifies the interconnections between the autonomy of the arts and the whole system of cultural production, which contributes to the core analysis of this section as this theoretical identification inherently elaborates on the rationale in the cultural production of innovation within a cultural system. As Bourdieu (1993, 112) has noted: "The autonomisation of intellectual and artistic production is correlative with the constitution of a socially distinguishable category of professional artists or intellectuals who are less inclined to recognize rules other than the specifically intellectual or artistic traditions handed down by their predecessors, which serve as a point of departure or rupture."
4. Tsui raised that the first-generation that emerged in the 1980s tended to be artistically driven, more concerned about their Chinese identity yet less

- successful commercially; the second generation of the 1990s was more “pragmatic and professional” and emphasized business success; the third (the twenty-first century) generation is more “contemporary, diversified, and creative” yet still “copies” Western design techniques (Tsui 2009, 121).
5. Labelhood, as mentioned above, as one of the main organizers of SHFW apart from the Shanghai Fashion Designers Association (SFDA), is devoted to importing emerging independent designer brands, especially those who have graduated overseas, to the domestic market via SHFW. As a platform for SHFW, it aims to deliver pioneering fashion art and to explore and promote young Chinese designers, fostering pioneering talent for international fashion culture. It was founded in 2016 and it provides a platform for emerging Chinese designers, especially IBC designers.

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