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Implementation of Chinese-styled branding in global fashion: 'Guochao' as a rising cultural identity

ABSTRACT

Culture-specific Chinese-styled branding as a rising trend in cultural and branding studies has provided new discourse for the discussion on the national identity of Chineseness or chinoiserie that has long existed, with further reflections on the Chinese fashion brand design known as 'Guochao', which has become an increasingly ubiquitous new conceptual identity in the past five years. Chinese fashion brands are changing their peripheral cultural status and impacting global fashion, transforming the global recognition of Chinese national identity and style in the field of fashion. This article investigates this emerging phenomenon in the global fashion system and theorizes 'Guochao' as a rising cultural identity that reconfigures and readdresses the national identity in Chinese fashion branding practices in terms of its connotations and industry applications. It shows that the 'Guochao' identity can be separated into two sub-connotations: one that addresses the connotations of 'Guo' that symbolize, rejuvenate and rematerialize Chinese historical and material culture, and one that emphasizes the 'Chao' discourse, featuring subtle Chinese symbolism that incorporates strong western street style and further blurs the boundaries in the West–East aesthetic binary system. Through case studies on

KEYWORDS

Chinese-styled
branding
culture-specific
branding
brand identity
Guochao
Chinese cultural
identity
fashion brands

the brand designs and campaigns of two Chinese designer brands that are paradigmatic of the 'Guo' identity, Angel Chen and MUKZIN, and two classic Chinese sportswear brands that are representatives of the 'Chao' identity, Li-Ning and Warrior Shanghai, the theoretical connotations of 'Guochao' as a rising cultural identity in Chinese-styled branding are discussed. This article theorizes 'Guochao' as a recreated representative cultural identity in global fashion that challenges the world's understanding of chinoiserie in the field of fashion and further showcases the popularization of Chinese-styled branding in Chinese fashion.

1. INTRODUCTION: QUESTION AND CONTEXTS

With rising global establishment and recognition, the current Chinese fashion industry is increasingly shifting the Eurocentric images of Chinese fashion production from the long-existing 'Made in China' to a now-influential 'Created in China' status (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012; Wu et al. 2013; Christie 2015). However, while the current global fashion industry is becoming interested in the rising Chinese design power, it is still under a Eurocentric design discourse system. Chinese fashion practitioners, from designers to branding actors, with emerging achievements in demonstrating their creative capabilities, are now facing challenges in demarcating an unambiguous national design identity within the global fashion industry seen through the lens of a Eurocentric design discourse system (Kawamura 2004; English 2011, 2013; Christie 2015). Chinese cultural heritage has provided design inspiration for international fashion practitioners and has triggered a culture-led product design and branding approach, which is identified as 'Chinese-styled branding' (Wu et al. 2013), as proposed and discussed by scholars (Tsui 2013; Wu et al. 2013; Wang 2017, 2018; Gaddi 2018; Zhang 2019). It refers to 'a specific aesthetic regime of cultural forms or arts in order to examine the creative aspects of authenticity, retrospection and re-invention deployed in brand building' (Wu et al. 2013: 162). Its aesthetics are expressed 'in habits of Chinese life practices, such as conventions of salutation and social interactions, food preparation, and principles of organising space and religious rituals' (Wu et al. 2013: 165).

Chinese-styled branding, as a rising topic, has established its value among managerial and cultural studies since 2013 when the academic indispensability of addressing the 'culture-specific global brand development in emerging markets' like China (Wu et al. 2013: 151) became apparent. Chinese brands "panorama is expanding" (Wu et al. 2013: 151) and the co-creation and reconfiguration of Chinese historical culture and brands have brought new discourse and forms of brand productions and promotions within the global market (Tsui 2013; Wu 2018; Geczy 2019; Zhang 2019; Shen 2020; Daxue Consulting 2021). Practitioners in the Chinese creative industry are constantly seeking the most representative style in global industry practices, especially in brand design and promotion practices (Leong 2003; Lee 2004; Lin 2006). Evolving from the 'chinoiserie' recognized in the West (Geczy 2019) to the changing modern idea of 'Chineseness' (Tsui 2013), the long-existing West-East aesthetic binary system in visual cultural transformations (Chan 2013) has recently triggered new conceptual styles among international fashion brands, seen through unprecedented popularized trends that rejuvenate and rematerialize traditional Chinese culture, one of which is the 'Guochao' movement (Luo 2019, 2020; Slemmer 2020; Daxue Consulting 2021).

In the past decade, Chinese-styled branding has expanded in diverse creative industries such as music, film and recreation, and has been echoed and highlighted in the field of fashion together with the long discussion on cultural-led fashion design approach (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012; Wu et al. 2013; Christie 2015). One noticeable trend that has triggered widespread industry discussion has been the prevalence of 'Guochao' as a rising concept or term (Luo 2019; ZH 2019; Hallanan 2020), literally meaning 'Chinese fashion trend' (ZH 2019), which was initially created to emphasize a new aesthetic representing the Chinese cultural identity that readdressed and reconfigured traditional and modern Chinese culture in fashion brand designs and international promotions. It has become a new concept in Chinese-styled branding when brands are seeking a representative national identity to build up the corresponding images (Bian and Li 2021; Hallanan 2020; Williams 2015; Wu et al. 2013; Tsui 2009).

The global establishment of 'Guochao' movement was marked by the presentation of the Chinese sportswear label Li-Ning at New York Fashion Week in 2018 (Hallanan 2020). In the same year, VIP.com, one of the largest online fashion platforms in China and seen as a strategic partner of London Fashion Week since September 2018, brought four Chinese fashion brands, MUKZIN, LOUISY AO, A Life On The Left and KISSCAT, to London Fashion Week and established a campaign named '国潮出征' (translated as 'Guochao Campaign') with the aim to deliver a new discourse in Chinese fashion in terms of design and culture. This event had a profound cultural and commercial influence in both the United Kingdom and China. The authority of British fashion mechanisms, the British Fashion Council (hereafter referred to as 'BFC'), has recognized Chinese fashion brands as a rising 'new wave' (Liu 2017; Xie 2018; Wang 2020) within the global fashion industry, both in terms of business and culture. Moreover, over 10 million people watched the live-streaming and the film of the 2018 London Fashion Week on Tencent's video platform. It was a wake-up call for Chinese fashion brands exporting Chinese-styled branding beyond the nation. Since then, a vast number of emerging Chinese fashion brands, whether within China or internationally, have begun to apply the concept of 'Guochao' to their brand designs and promotions, especially when exporting them to the international market (Luo 2019, 2020, 2021; Slemmer 2020; Daxue Consulting 2021).

Before the 'Guochao' movement was introduced to the fashion field, scholars (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012; Christie 2015) discussed the culture-led design approach and the usage of cultural heritage as inspiration in international branding establishment and activities. They proposed the difficulties of Chinese fashion designers in demarcating their national representative style and identity parallel to the representatives of the craftsmanship of Italian fashion, the radicalness and avant-gardism of British fashion, the perfectionism and romanticism of French fashion, and the post-modernism of American fashion (Kawamura 2004; English 2011, 2013, Tsui 2013). The recent international rising of the 'Guochao' movement seems to provide a new discourse for both industry practitioners and scholars to investigate and identify a suitable style discourse to represent the contemporary Chinese fashion identity as a whole that is parallel to the existing images of the traditional 'Big Four' fashion capitals.

It is clear that 'Guochao' has become a cultural phenomenon disseminated in the global fashion system that is being used to represent a new aesthetic that appeals to the modernization of Chinese culture (Bian and Lin 2021;

Luo 2019) and is being advocated by a large number of Chinese fashion brands both domestically and internationally (Luo 2020; Slemmer 2020). Even if the term and movement started with the emphasis on Chinese historical and cultural rejuvenation and reinvention with western design approaches via fashion brand design and promotion approaches, 'Guochao' seems to have developed a complex meaning embedded with interdisciplinary, culture-specific fashion branding under global fashion mechanisms. Furthermore, this term is being discussed in the field of marketing research in the study of consumer behaviours (Hallanan 2020; Chan 2019), rather than in the cultural field, although it is inherently a portrait of new aesthetic and cultural trends appearing under the discourse of increasingly heated discussions on West–East binary in fashion as well as the visual culture area (Barnard 2020; Chan 2012). As a rising concept that incorporates studies on design, culture and aesthetics, as well as fashion brand design and international promotion, triggering significant industry discussions and applications, it is unfortunate that few studies have tried to interpret 'Guochao' as a new theoretical concept and further investigate it.

This article emphasizes how 'Guochao' has brought new concepts and aesthetics to Chinese-styled branding practices as a rising identity that can represent Chinese national culture and has further developed and given new style to contemporary chinoiserie in the field of fashion. It has become a new vehicle that emerging and younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Z, can utilize to recognize Chinese culture in the global fashion system instead of chinoiserie.

Following the question raised above, this article breaks down the concept of 'Guochao' into two sub-connotations in the context of Chinese-styled branding within the global fashion system through case studies on two international-based designer brands, Angel Chen and MUKZIN, as paradigms of the 'Guo' identity, and two classic Chinese sportswear brands, Li-Ning and Warrior Shanghai, as representatives of the 'Chao' identity in terms of their productions and Chinese-styled branding in and beyond China. This article also reconfigures the theoretical framework of Chinese-styled branding in fashion cases in terms of culture-specific brand designs and promotions based on existing studies (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012; Wu et al. 2013; Christie 2015). It explores the inheritance and further aesthetic evolution of 'Guochao' from chinoiserie, featuring a deeper design engagement with western pop culture and street culture conveyed via Chinese brand collectives rather than western brands in the global fashion system. On the theoretical level, this article could provide a new discourse for both the industry and academics to recognize a new Chinese aesthetic, further updating the cliché concept of 'chinoiserie'. Furthermore, this study also contributes to the field of visual culture as it demonstrates that the West–East binary system in terms of visual culture is reconciled by the emergence of 'Guochao' in the field of fashion as a rising Chinese cultural identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above, the conceptualization of 'Guochao' requires the circulation of both scholarly discourse and evidence and implementations in industry practices in interdisciplinary areas encompassing Chinese-styled branding, contemporary chinoiserie or heritage branding, and the design and branding practice in aesthetic and cross-cultural studies. To better depict the current

research context regarding 'Guochao', it is necessary to review the corresponding literature produced in the above-mentioned fields.

According to Okonkwo, branding is a complex process that requires 'a consistent integrated strategy, innovative techniques, rigorous management control and constant auditing' (2007: 5). Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren point out that successful branding 'results from striking the balance between currency, innovation, and heritage' (2012: 73), elaborating on the interdisciplinarity of branding and the bedrock status of history and heritage within branding. When investigating the topic of culture-specific branding, Chinese-styled branding and heritage branding share similar core concepts when emphasizing the aesthetic regime of the creative aspects of 'authenticity, retrospection, and re-invention deployed in brand building' of traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, it is necessary to review and introduce the concept of Chinese-styled branding and to emphasize scholars' demonstrations of its application of heritage culture before moving on to a further analysis in this research, adding new discourse regarding 'Guochao' with two different connotations to the current theoretical system.

As identified by Wu et al., Chinese-styled global branding is identified as 'a specific aesthetic regime of cultural forms or arts in order to examine the creative aspects of authenticity, retrospection, and re-invention deployed in brand building' (2013: 161). Inherently, the research topic of 'Guochao' is associated with the accommodation of a new aesthetic and identity incorporated into an existing mode of Chinese-styled branding. The mechanism of 'Guochao' fits into the concept of Chinese-styled branding in terms of international fashion practitioners' attempts to co-create, reinvent and reconfigure Chinese cultural identity in fashion promotion and adapt the aesthetics and lifestyles of new global branding that represent the new regime of Chinese brand culture (Luo 2019, 2020; Slemmer 2020; Daxue Consulting 2021). Driven by accumulated and increasingly ubiquitous industry phenomena accompanied by the emerging efforts in the academic field to identify and reframe 'Guochao' theoretically, it is essential to link this emerging topic to the existing literature in the interdisciplinary fields of brand management and cultural studies.

The extent to which chinoiserie represents Chinese cultural identity and how it has evolved from ancient China to contemporary and modern China have been debated by scholars in the fields of the arts and aesthetics (Davidson 2019), creative culture (Wu et al. 2013; Christie 2015; Geczy 2019), and historiography (Porter 1999; Johns 2016). Heritage and history alone may indeed inhibit renewal and innovation as history is often misconceived as interchangeable with heritage (Morley and McMahon 2011). The vision of heritage must combine both historical and contemporary ideas to create a positive sense of identity for the brand user.

Locating a national identity of the current Chinese brand collective to represent the Chinese culture has become an issue raised and discussed by fashion cultural critics in the past decade (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012; Tsui 2013; Radclyffe-Thomas and Radclyffe-Thomas 2015; Christie 2015; Barron 2020). The limitations and stereotyping of the continuous utilization of the cliché chinoiserie to represent Chinese style in the global context due to the developing nature of Chinese culture and its rising hybridity have also been discussed (Geczy 2019: 113; Christie 2015: 14–16). Fashion has become the most paradigmatic field that collectively reflects on these issues. As Harold argues when discussing strong reflections of chinoiserie in the field of fashion,

Paradoxically, chinoiserie's prescribed and relatively limited aesthetic vocabulary, whether exploited by the Chinese or the non-Chinese, is directly related to its communicative power. It is because of these omissions and elisions in its system of reductive signs that fashion so compellingly conveys China's unwieldy and complex reality.

(Harold cited in Geczy 2019: 113)

In this way, to investigate the Chinese-styled branding regarding 'Guochao' in the field of fashion is appropriate not only due to its strong industry reflections but also because of its interconnections with chinoiserie in terms of communication power. The changing image of Chinese design power in the last five years has given it necessity and value so that the global recognition of Chinese design identity can be reconstructed.

With the rising attention paid to locating a representative term to depict the identity of Chinese design style in the field of fashion, industry practitioners and academics seem to resonate with the experiments and implementations of heritage branding, managing to reconstruct the national design identity by rejuvenating the historical nature of Chinese culture (Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren 2012; Tsui 2013; Christie 2015; Geczy 2019; Barron 2020).

The focus on the rising issue of the limited aesthetic vocabulary used to showcase the Chinese design power and identity seems to be further explored and expanded to a broader discussion on the East-West binary relationship and the fusion of the two aesthetics. Further explorations of the fusion of Chinese and western culture in the field of fashion studies cross multidisciplinary fields covering diverse topics such as aesthetics and styling (Jansen and Craik 2016), China and contemporary chinoiserie in fashion historical studies (Christie 2015; Geczy 2019), and 'Haipai' culture in geographic fashion cultural studies (Beward and MacDonald 2020). Scholars seem to share a common recognition of the complexity and infeasibility of finding an authentic representative or iconic design symbol or certain aesthetic style that symbolizes or materializes the modern Chinese cultural identity as a whole, especially in global branding practices (Tsui 2013; Wu et al. 2013).

In fact, ethnologists (Yeh 1998; Meyer and Rhoades 2006; Kim 2010) have pointed out that symbolizing Chinese culture in one or two certain identities within Chinese-styled branding is nearly impossible due to the multiethnicity of China as a multicultural nation, containing 56 ethnic groups with the Han ethnicity accounting for the majority of people. Although some ethnics are Sinicised, each ethnicity still reserves its own representative texts and graphic symbols to represent its culture (Meyer and Rhoades 2006; Kim 2010). It would be possible to identify a representative symbolic identity of the Han nationality but not for China as a whole. In this way, whether the 'Guochao' trend as a rising identity and aesthetic can provide new discourses to address this issue is worth discussing.

In design and branding practices, Bian and Li (2021) propose that the modern Chinese design and cultural expression in fashion is built upon a means of 'expression that can arouse the emotional resonance of Chinese people', which can strengthen Chinese consumers' ethnic connections between themselves and the brand. The new Chinese style in fashion branding refers to brands introducing products 'originally made in China, based on modern fashion, featuring traditional Chinese culture or design elements in modern and contemporary Chinese social life and culture, and in line with the current fashion aesthetic and lifestyle' (Bian and Li 2021: 1). Although

this conceptualization is vague, the efforts of scholars can be witnessed who aim to manage the framework of Chinese-styled fashion branding in the most up-to-date context, correlating with 'Guochao' and 'Hanfu' ('汉服' or 'hàn fú') as two dominant emerging cultural phenomena. These two dominant rising cultural movements are embodied in the field of fashion. 'Guochao' as a rising national identity and the 'Hanfu' culture that is representative of subculture both reveal the eagerness of the younger generations of Millennials and Generation Z to rejuvenate traditional Chinese culture in fashion practices (Shen 2020; Bian and Li 2021). However, 'Hanfu', as another rising cultural phenomenon in China, although seen in the field of fashion practices, should still be discussed separately from 'Guochao' as it is a rising subculture featuring the exclusive rejuvenation of Chinese historical garments without incorporating any western design or culture (Shen 2020). It is a domestic sub-cultural phenomenon rather than a global cultural export and it has little relevance to Chinese-styled branding, which is the main discussion area of this article.

From a broader perspective on cultural-specific design, the academic domain has demonstrated the significance of culture in the field of design (Lin et al. 2007), which is pivotal when design is becoming more localized in an increasingly globalized industry (Lin et al. 2007; Crane et al. 2016; Wu 2018; Titisari et al. 2019). Emphasizing local cultural characteristics seems to be the most prevalent theme when a brand is constructing and shaping its own identity and aesthetic uniqueness (Mariutti and Medeiros 2018; Peng and Bazaki 2016). Transforming a traditional culture or researching how to extract the cultural value and traditional design aesthetics or models from certain ethnic cultural heritage designs to create a new hybrid aesthetic between the traditional and modern in the field of design have become more widespread in both academic and industry fields in the most recent decade (Lin et al. 2007; Lin 2006; Lee 2004; Leong and Clark 2003). Scholars (Titisari et al. 2019; Wu 2018; English 2011, 2013) have strongly demonstrated the affinity between cultural identity and design within the global market and the increasing contribution of design in stimulating and accelerating the cultural development of certain countries within the global market under a 'local design era' (Lin et al. 2007: 147). In Moalosi et al.'s view (2010) of the integration of culture within product design, a central aspect of the process is that designers should strive to embody culture in the products that they design. The reason for this, which is given in their analysis, is that the distinctive aspects of craft production can influence contemporary design techniques and products in a global context. These fashion-based approaches act as a means of preserving and communicating distinctive cultural expressions, serving a function of 'holding, preserving and presenting cultural values to the respective product users' (Moalosi et al. 2010: 177).

Furthermore, scholars (Kang et al. 2019; Wu 2018; Harper 2017; Crane et al. 2016) have emphasized the contribution of the methodological or conceptual discussions on new aesthetics in the field of global design study, which is to revolutionize the existing cultural identification or recognition of certain local cultures, providing new ontological and methodological recognition within the fields of both cultural and design studies. In this way, discussing a new aesthetic integration of western and eastern cultures in the field of fashion and providing a rigorous definition of 'Guochao' or the western-eastern cultural hybridization aesthetic are necessary in paving the way for future academic research on the modernizing of traditional Chinese culture

in fashion globalization, as well as providing new discourse in the study on cultural hybridization in the field of design culture research.

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES: METHODS AND ANALYSIS TOOL

Semiotics and videography (Cubitt 1993; Chandler 2007; Kozinets 2015; Rose 2016) are the two main methods applied to this research. Most of the data used for the analysis is visual data published online, including images, films and brands' websites. The extraction and reinvention of cultural-specific design elements with semiotic meanings of Chinese historical culture are emphasized by investigating two paradigmatic brands, Angel Chen and MUKZIN, who are both recognized as successful in reinventing and redesigning traditional or historical Chinese culture in their globalized Chinese-styled branding. The campaigns and corresponding data that are used for this research are specified in the following table (see Table 1).

'Guochao', as an identity in Chinese-styled branding that is currently used in the industry, encompasses two levels of discourse. One highlights the characteristic of 'Guo' (which means 'the nation' in Chinese), referring to those reinventing Chinese historical and cultural symbolism and advocating brand design, including products and branding campaigns. The other level of discourse focuses on 'Chao' (which means 'trendy' in Chinese), simply referring to the street fashion brands whose founders are Chinese, which provides a cultural nature to the brands' DNA. However, these two discourses have different presentations in terms of brand design associated with 'Guochao' identity. The first level of discourse features the brands that reveal their 'Guochao' identity by highlighting 'Guo' as a mixture of cultural and aesthetic identity via reinventing Chinese historical and cultural symbols in their brand designs, such as MUKZIN and Angel Chen. These brands tend to hybridize Chinese historical and cultural symbols and western design formats in their Chinese-styled branding and product design. The second level of discourse is associated with street fashion brands that have been founded by Chinese designers or companies that feature the meaning of 'Guochao' as 'Chao' (which is equivalent to street style in global fashion) in their brand identities. One example of this is Li-Ning, the former sportswear brand and current street fashion brand, after rebranding and self-identifying as a brand that is representative of 'Guochao' and emerged in China but targets a global market (Luo 2019, 2020).

The brands being researched to demonstrate the implementation of 'Guo' in the 'Guochao' style or identity are Angel Chen and MUKZIN. The reasons for choosing these two brands are as follows. The IBC (International-based Chinese) designer label Angel Chen, emerged and established with Angel Chen's first collection at London Fashion Week in 2014, aims to build up a brand image that modernizes and fuses the aesthetics of western and eastern culture (BOF 2018). Her work tends to incorporate ethnic and cultural Chinese elements and traditional handicrafts and designs into modern globalized products that can be popularized among both Chinese and western audiences simultaneously. The show and collection 'Madam Qing', staged at SHFW for the Spring/Summer 2019 season, as well as the subsequent collaboration campaigns with western fashion or beauty brands (MAC, H&M and Adidas) (see Table 1) are selected for this article as Angel Chen's paradigmatic works. These works incorporate traditional Chinese culture and handcrafted

Table 1: Visual data collected for this study and the corresponding methods applied.

Angel Chen	'Madam Qing' staged at Shanghai Fashion Week for the Spring/Summer 2019 season: Runway Collections and Fashion Show	Runway images, including looks from the collections, stages and installations	Semiotics
	Angel Chen and Adidas Brand Collaboration Campaign, 2020	Campaign films and images from the lookbook	Videography, Semiotics
	Angel Chen and H&M Brand Collaboration Campaign, 2019	Campaign films and images from the lookbook	Videography, Semiotics
	Angel Chen and MAC Capsule Collaboration and Campaign, 2018	Campaign films and images from the lookbook	Videography, Semiotics
MUKZIN	MUKZIN's 'Dragon Scale Pavilion' of the Spring/Summer collection	Campaign poster and images from the lookbook	Semiotics
	MUKZIN's Fall/Winter 2020 collection	Images on the Fashion Show and the collection images	Semiotics
	Kipling x MUKZIN collection	Campaign images and images from the press report	Semiotics
	MUKZIN 'Woman Xia' collection established in 2019	The branding campaign images	Semiotics
Li-Ning	Li-Ning's Fall/Winter 2018 collection presented at New York Fashion Week	The branding campaign images: Images on the Fashion Show	Semiotics
Warrior Shanghai	Branding campaigns of Warrior Shanghai self-identifying as 'Shanghai Guochao' after 2017	The branding campaign images	Semiotics

techniques, including traditional ethnic design in modern globalized garments and accessories, rather than merely mechanically adding traditional Chinese symbols to the show and the garment designs. The fashion show and the branding campaigns, which demonstrate the collections and the brand images simultaneously, are more comprehensive in investigating Angel Chen's ontological and methodological approaches when extracting traditional cultural elements and applying them to modern fashion design compared to solely analysing her garments.

MUKZIN, established in 2014 in Hangzhou, founded by designers Kate Han and George Feng, is a Chinese brand 'standing from a pan-Asia perspective and following the consumption trend' (Mukzin Designer Brand 2019, 2020), making it another paradigmatic brand that is aiming at the international fashion market. Each collection revisits, reinvents and redesigns traditional Chinese culture through prints, embroideries and patterns, as well as elements extracted from traditional Chinese costume design, endeavouring to introduce a 'neo-orientalist aesthetic' (Mukzin Designer Brand 2019, 2020) through Chinese-styled branding. It has a very clear image of representing traditional Chinese culture in the global field of fashion.

Two brands are researched to underline the 'Chao' identity within 'Guochao'-style branding, which are Li-Ning and Warrior Shanghai, both of which are identified as iconic or classic sportswear brands in China (Luo 2021). The reason that Li-Ning is chosen as a representative brand of 'Chao' in the 'Guochao' identity is due to its efforts put into transforming the global image of Chinese fashion from 'made in China' to 'designed in China' in the international fashion system. It is rebranding itself and targeting the younger generations, endeavouring to present its collections of leisure wear and sportswear that engage with western street culture and seeing Chinese culture as a spiritual and subtle brand design concept. This is analysed by emphasizing its branding campaigns (see Table 1) in the international fashion market in the following core analysis section. Being the first Chinese brand to promote and identify itself as a 'Guochao' brand, the brand identity being communicated through Li-Ning's branding campaigns is worth discussing due to its targeting of Gen Z and the commercial-oriented implementations of 'Chao' (which is equivalent to street style in global fashion) within the 'Guochao' identity. How the brand addresses Chinese culture in a subtle and spiritual way alongside the aesthetic engagement with western street culture is also elaborated on through the analysis of its products and campaigns. This is similarly seen in the brand of Warrior Shanghai as another sportswear brand that has been recognized as one of the most iconic and historic Chinese sports shoe brands endeavouring to rejuvenate by actively reacting to the 'Guochao' movement. Although it has not showcased its campaign internationally, Warrior Shanghai can be seen as a domestic subject in China and a long-existing iconic sportswear brand that represents the companies actively participating in the 'Guochao' movement. Together with Li-Ning which has been chosen as one of the paradigmatic brands that has promoted the 'Guochao' identity to the global fashion stage, Warrior Shanghai is a representative subject brand aimed at the domestic market in China.

Shown in the above table, videography is associated with semiotics to investigate how Chinese-styled branding campaigns can reinvent and redesign traditional Chinese culture and promote 'Guochao' as a new identity, as well as a rising style, within the global fashion market. For the brand addressing the 'Guo' discourse, namely Angel Chen and MUKZIN, videography is mainly applied to analyse the advertising films made for the brands that Angel Chen has collaborated with, such as Adidas and MAC. Netnography is used to investigate MUKZIN, showing how, alongside garment design, a series of Chinese-styled branding campaigns are interconnected and contribute to shaping the brand's global recognized 'Guochao' identity. For the brands that have been selected to investigate the 'Chao' discourse, featuring subtle Chinese symbolism that incorporates strong western street style, semiotics is one of the core methods applied to explore Li-Ning and Warrior Shanghai's branding concepts and identities as a whole rather than assessing certain campaigns. It is interesting to see that brands embodying the 'Chao' identity tend to be sportswear brands rather than conventional fashion brands, so Li-Ning and Warrior Shanghai have been chosen as subjects as two paradigmatic brands whose campaigns and development histories are revisited in the following section to introduce the extent to which the aesthetic or design boundaries in the West–East aesthetic binary system are further blurred by the 'Chao' identity. Furthermore, the trend of athleisure among Chinese Gen Z brought about by the sportswear brands trying to address their 'Chao' identity is analysed in the following section.

Decoding the 'Guochao' identity in two sub-connotation constructions by reviewing and analysing design and branding cases that are paradigms in the industry could contribute to theorizing 'Guochao' as a rising Chinese national identity being presented in the global fashion industry. This article follows and further updates the existing theorization on 'Chinese-styled' branding concepts and builds up a cutting-edge national design identity for Chinese fashion in the global fashion cultural system.

4. CORE ANALYSIS

As 'branding beyond nation building addresses a variety of concerns stemming from questions of identity, belonging, and social status' (Wu et al. 2013: 164), Chinese-styled branding in the field of fashion has seen an exploration of the rejuvenation of Chinese historical culture. The recent rising emphasis on culture-specific fashion branding in the global market has become a dominant tool for Chinese fashion labels to 'co-create, circulate and re-configure existing meanings of brands and their cultures' (Wu et al. 2013: 164) among the global fashion audience, in turn, shaping new images and cultural characteristics for Chinese fashion brands. Handed down from the existing studies on Chinese-styled branding, the following analysis identifies the connotations of 'Guochao' on two theoretical levels and discusses them separately with the corresponding brands that have emerged in the global market in the most recent decade. As mentioned above in the methodological section, the first connotation refers to branding implementations that underline the identity of 'Guo', which rejuvenates the Chinese historical culture merged with modern design culture that is employed by designer brands, while the second connotation refers to the approaches that implement 'Chao' as an identity, aiming to elaborate on and embed street fashion design originated from western fashion alongside Chinese cultural symbols.

- *Reinvention of Chinese Historical Culture: MUKZIN and Angel Chen*

With the expanding panorama of Chinese fashion brands and the related industry, as well as the rising need to seek the global recognition of national cultural identity and cultural discourse power rather than strengthen economic power in global fashion system, brand creators are endeavouring to reinvent, redesign and modernize historical and cultural symbols in their brand design approaches. This includes but is not limited to product design and image building through various promotional vehicles, such as showing at international fashion weeks, promoting fashion films and global advertising campaigns in their own brand promotion activities, and collaboration projects with western fashion brands.

The most up-to-date global branding literature reveals the trend in the hybridization of branding as a commercial substance and a symbol of culture and lifestyle at the same time (Peng and Bazaki 2016; Gaddi 2018; Bian and Li 2021). As Chinese-styled branding has been identified as 'a specific aesthetic regime of cultural forms or arts in order to examine the creative aspects of authenticity, retrospection and re-invention deployed in brand building' (Wu et al. 2013: 161), as mentioned at the beginning of this article, it is currently experiencing a 'new wave' in fashion, with Chinese fashion brand creators encouraged to explore further the potential of Chinese brand culture and its corresponding identity. Although the notion of finding one specific aesthetic

identity to represent Chinese fashion brands as a whole seems impossible, a number of brands are delivering notable performances in global fashion branding and are being recognized as representative of Chinese 'Guochao' fashion brands reinventing Chinese historical culture and promoting themselves in a series of campaigns to the international fashion market. The designer brands MUKZIN and Angel Chen are two of the most recognizable brands in this field.

This semi-section investigates MUKZIN and Angel Chen as two subjective brands in terms of how they exemplify the symbolization and modernization of Chinese cultural heritage, as well as the materialization of Chinese folklore, mythology and literature, in their branding activities. It analyses how Chinese historical or ethnic culture can be symbolized, reinvented and co-created in fashion branding campaigns, namely using fashion shows and films, brand collaboration campaigns, product design and online advertising by revisiting the brand design and visual constructions of Angel Chen and MUKZIN. For these brands, the cultural-specific symbolic elements that are incorporated into the brand design showcase the designers' perceptions of their own culture.

Globally recognized Chinese cultural symbols, such as the dragon, calligraphy, kung fu, poems, as well as design elements extracted from Chinese opera (such as the costumes, characters, stories and literature) are the ones most frequently reinvented and redesigned by fashion brands featuring the 'Guochao' identity by highlighting 'Guo' as a mixture of cultural and aesthetic identity, such as Angel Chen and MUKZIN. Seeking cultural-specific recognition within the international fashion market, Chinese-styled branding that reinvents traditional culture is endowed with modern design forms and implementations.

For instance, the Chinese dragon, as the most recognizable Chinese cultural symbol for being 'lucky, propitious, powerful, and noble' has evolved for thousands of years since the Shang dynasty (see Figure 1) (Zhang 2019) and has been frequently used in Chinese-styled global branding in film, music and architecture, as well as costume, since China's reform and opening-up in the 1980s (Wu et al. 2013). The rise of cultural discourse in the global fashion industry has followed these 'handed down' (Wang 2018, 2020) rules from predecessors in parallel industries within the creative cultural system.

Angel Chen's stage design for the spring/Summer 2019 fashion show (see Figure 2), her capsule collection in collaboration with MAC and the corresponding branding campaign in 2018 (see Figure 3), her capsule collection and corresponding branding campaign in collaboration with H&M (see Figure 4), as well as MUKZIN's 'Dragon Scale Pavilion' for the Spring/Summer 2020 collection (see Figure 5) and the corresponding promotional poster design (see Figure 6) all display the intertwining of the culturally symbolic dragon, modern fashion products and the new endowment of the 'Guo' in 'Guochao' as a new aesthetic in today's Chinese-styled branding. The dragon as a Chinese cultural symbol is redesigned and appears in the forms of paper cutting and sculpturing on products, or is used as the main element after being reinvented in the set design of a fashion show incorporating traditional electronic trucks (see Figure 7).

Expanding on the design rationale behind Angel Chen's Spring/Summer 2019 fashion show, the design of a truck functioned as the main stage and the core theme that conveyed cultural implications, with the global cultural cosmopolitanism and the usage of the dragon as a cultural symbol

The Evolution of Image of Chinese Dragons

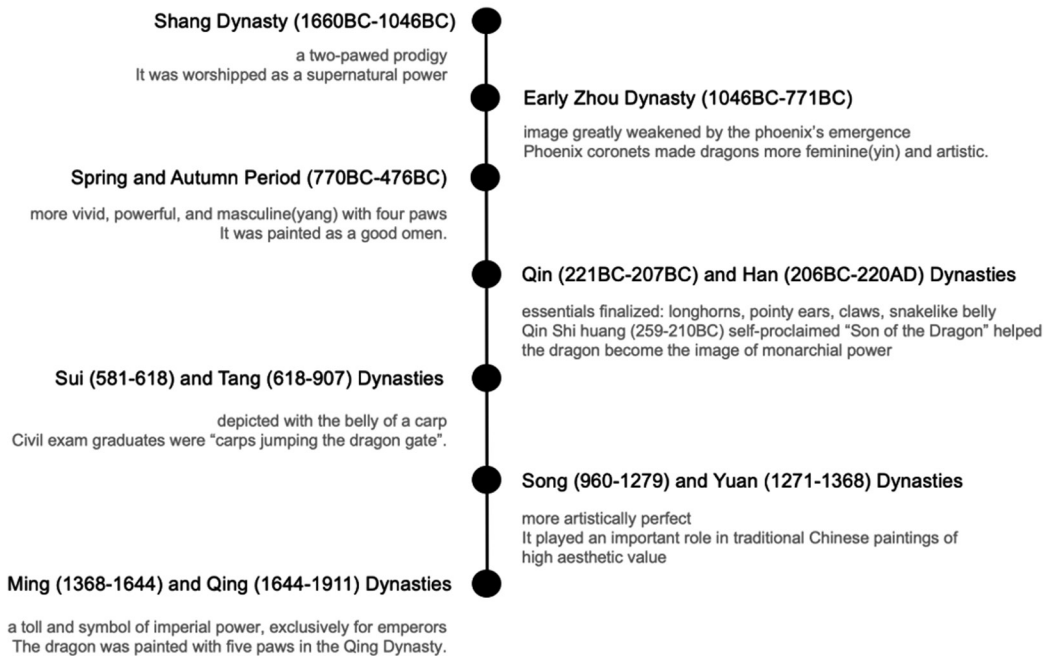


Figure 1: Evolution of Chinese dragons in feudal China in terms of culture, symbols and images (content from Zhang [2019] and edited by Wang [2020]).

highlighting the characteristics of Chinese culture in this branding activity. Thematically aligning with the characters used on the lanterns of 卧虎藏龙 ('wo hu cang long' or 'crouching tiger, hidden dragon'), the dragon is used as a design element in this show to convey the traditional Chinese cultural spirit of people having the 'unrelenting and pioneering spirit of keeping pace with the times' (Zhang 2019) after the dragon is transformed from 'an imaginary prodigy to a mascot from ancient times to the present' (Zhang 2019). The electronic truck is transformed into a contemporary T-stage (see Figure 7), not merely using the dragon image but also incorporating the dragon boat as another cultural object to enrich the design elements extracted from the cultural images and to convey the design information of the modern Chinese culture of having the 'unrelenting and pioneering spirit of keeping pace with the times' (Zhang 2019).

In addition to the dragon as a representative Chinese cultural symbol, a number of examples of Chinese material culture that are seen in intangible cultural heritage, such as calligraphy, kung fu, Chinese opera (such as Beijing opera), and traditional Chinese embroidery (such as Miao embroidery and Su embroidery), as well as Chinese mythology have been applied by both western and Chinese designers to their works. In Chinese-styled branding, these recognizable elements of intangible Chinese cultural heritage represented by Chinese material culture are recreated and modernized by the international promotions of Chinese designer brands that underline the discourse of 'Guo' in 'Guochao' as a rising identity. Angel Chen's collaboration campaign with



Figure 2: Angel Chen's stage design for the Spring/Summer 2019 fashion show: Lit Chinese festooned vehicle with lanterns and dragons. © ANGELCHEN 2018.

Adidas in 2020 applied calligraphy as a design element in its collection design and kung fu as a cultural context for the advertising campaign in its global branding (see Figure 8). Moreover, MUKZIN's Fall/Winter 2020 collection was partially inspired by *Dream of the Red Chamber* and its story was depicted on the garments and applied to the corresponding fashion show (see Figure 9). The collaboration in 2020 between Kipling and MUKZIN in a bag collection applied traditional Chinese embroidery to a sporty striped pattern with a 'lock' keychain that referenced traditional Chinese locks inspired by ancient Chinese poems, with birds being a key motif due to their spiritual meaning in Chinese culture (see Figure 10) (Tan 2020).

Materializing intangible Chinese cultural heritage, as well as Chinese mythology, are the main implementations showcasing 'Guochao' as the identity of Chinese-styled fashion branding. An example of this is MUKZIN's Fall/Winter 2018 collection on the theme of 'Woman Xia' (MUKZIN Designer Brand 2019). Shown in Paris, the designer staged a fashion show for a collection that showcased a

Wulin (a term used in fictions and media to describe the community of martial artists) event on the theme of 'Woman Xia (a title of the legendary female with both chivalrous spirits and Kung Fu, who are not frail beauties lamenting in boudoirs in most Chinese beauty-and-hero romances)'.

(MUKZIN Designer Brand 2019; Figure 11)



Figure 3: Series of images showcasing one of MAC's marketing campaigns for the collection in collaboration with Angel Chen and a promotional event featuring dragons as one of the most representative traditional Chinese cultural symbols, applying and modernizing this symbol in the design of this event.
 © ANGELCHEN 2019.



Figure 4: Angel Chen's 2019 capsule collection and the corresponding in-store setting in collaboration with H&M. © ANGELCHEN 2019.



Figure 5: MUKZIN's 'Dragon Scale Pavilion' of the Spring/Summer 2020 collection. © MUKZIN 2020.

Kate Han has deconstructed the symbols of Women Xia and their spirits throughout history and mixed those elements in a new way to create an image of the modern woman, as reflected in the hall of the World of Mirror. Women Xia characters, including Nie Yinniang and Hong Xian in the legends of the Tang dynasty, are presented in the styles of popular Hong Kong comics in the 1980s and are depicted on composite technological fabrics made from paper and memory metal, together with structural tailoring as well as hand-shaping techniques.

Culture represents the intellectual achievements of a certain group and can be seen through artefacts and symbolic content in art and design products (Julier 2013). Clothes, as a microcosm of a culture, embody the evolution of a society (Levinson 2006). Wu et al. (2013: 167) raise the point that Chinese brand builders do not merely promote 'individual brands, but also certain cultures of lifestyle' (Wu et al. 2013: 165), during which the complexities and potential of Chinese brand culture construction should be focused on. This point has been realized in today's field of fashion. The 'Guochao' brands featuring the 'Guo' style, such as Angel Chen and MUKZIN, have co-created a new type of Chinese-styled branding among global branding and they reflect a materialization and popularization of traditional culture in the current lifestyles of Chinese consumers and audiences in terms of cultural production.

Due to the complexity of Chinese folk culture and the diversification of ethnicity, it is difficult to depict the Chinese national design identity and style through one or two conceptual terms under the 'Guo' discourse. It seems that most current Chinese brand practitioners, from designers to promoters, extract the most recognizable cultural symbols not only from historical heritage but also from a broader modern lifestyle and popular culture. National identity in Chinese fashion branding practices is not merely about re-addressing chinoiserie but also about embodying modern Chinese culture, as well as having the



Figure 6: Promotional poster design for MUKZIN's 'Dragon Scale Pavilion' of the Spring/Summer 2020 collection, which depicts a futuristic vision of a Chinese dragon temple, with a surreal twist. Within the piece, iconography pertaining to the collection is scattered throughout, including lotus flowers, a Chinese dragon, and coral. The architecture is influenced by Chinese temples, the Art Deco movement and overflowing natural elements to give an ethereal sense, allowing for a fusion of human-made and the natural world. © MUKZIN 2020.



Figure 7: An extracted traditional Chinese cultural symbol of the dragon and its design application incorporating a dragon boat, which is included in the Chaozhou cultural system and redesigned as the main set (as an illuminated Chinese festooned vehicle) in the Spring/Summer 2019 Angel Chen show at SHFW. © ANGELCHEN 2018.



Figure 8: Angel Chen designed new iterations of the Sleek Super, Kiellor, Ozweego and Magmur silhouettes, featuring two bold colourways for each. Inspired by Chinese calligraphy, as well as references to traditional Chinese martial arts and ping-pong, the collection fused the designer's experiences of eastern and western culture. © ANGELCHEN.



Figure 9: MUKZIN's Fall/Winter 2020 collection was partially inspired by Dream of the Red Chamber (see the top image) and its story was depicted on the garments and applied to the corresponding fashion show (see the two bottom images) (Jia 2020).

strong motivation of rejuvenating traditional Chinese culture within the global fashion system.

Infusing the brands with historical and material culture endows them with a recognizable image, thereby informing the global reception of their products, services and experiences (Wu et al. 2013: 166). As aesthetics are 'a specific



Figure 10: A close-up look at the bags in the Kipling x MUKZIN collection, showing the bird and floral print on luxe PU sheen fabric. 'On top of that, other details you can observe are the embroidery woven patches that highlight significant parts of the print for a 3-D feel, contrasting straps in a sporty striped pattern, leather touches, as well as a special "lock" keychain that references traditional Chinese locks. An additional white-based print is available too, one that pays homage to traditional Chinese porcelain' (Tan 2020: n.pag.).

regime for identifying and thinking about the arts or the aesthetic regime of art' (Rancière and Rockhill 2006: 82), new regimes of aesthetics that organically integrate western design and Chinese culture can be created via the aforementioned Chinese-styled branding approaches of these brand builders and designers. Extracting material culture and historical culture, the emerging Chinese aesthetic identity that utilizes symbols is being constructed by the new generation of Chinese designers. Although the globally recognized Chinese cultural identity is difficult to understand due to the complexity and diversity of China's ethnicity, this identity still positively contributes to Chinese brands transforming the image of the low repute of Chinese design



Figure 11: The branding campaign for the 'Woman Xia' collection symbolizing and materializing traditional Chinese Wulin culture and applied to kung fu movements. MUKZIN Designer Brand 2019.

power and building up cultural discourse in the global fashion and creative cultural industry.

- *From Sportswear Brand to Global Street 'Guochao' Fashion: Li-Ning, and Warrior Shanghai*

With the robust growth of the sportswear industry as a global phenomenon in recent years, sportswear has become one of the strongest 'Guochao' sub-industries in China (Ahn 2020). This sub-industry particularly refers to the brands featuring the 'Chao' aspect of 'Guochao', aiming to reidentify and popularize the casual style designed by Chinese brands and designers in terms of products such as garments and accessories (like hats and shoes) as another characteristic of Chinese-styled branding, rather than highlighting traditional Chinese cultural symbols. These sportswear 'Guochao' brands, such as Li-Ning and the Warrior Shanghai, tend to demonstrate the geographic and ethnic origins of the brands through a trendy western casual wear style that is favoured by Millennials and Gen Z (EMIS 2019; BOF and McKinsey 2020). They tend to apply modern Chinese cultural symbols rather than traditional ones to their branding campaigns, such as the iconic Chinese red extracted from the national flag, Chinese characters (or text), representative animals like pandas, and the modern lifestyle of Chinese people, thereby constructing

brand images of the Chinese 'Guochao', featuring the trendy style of 'Chao' rather than the national symbols and traditions of 'Guo'.

The characteristics of the sportswear brands Li-Ning and The Warrior Shanghai that underline 'Guochao' are emphasized in the Chinese-proud narrative when promoting themselves to the international market, such as when these brands have been showcased at the 'Big Four' fashion weeks. Extracting elements from Taoism as the foundation of the design concept alongside the spirit of 'Essence (悟道)', the promotion campaign of Li-Ning in its first showing at New York Fashion Week in 2018 but few traditional Chinese cultural symbols were applied to the products and the show design. The most iconic Chinese cultural symbol in this branding campaign was the reproduction and reapplication of the classic colours of red and yellow (the colours used on the national flag of China), which are often used to represent China in the Olympic Games. This was influenced by the first time that Li-Ning designed the Olympic award-winning uniform VICTOR001 for the Chinese team in 1992 (see Figure 12). In Li-Ning's collection presented at New York Fashion Week in 2018, the brand stamped the Chinese characters 中国李宁 ('China Li-Ning') onto the backs and fronts of the jackets and sweatshirts, accompanied by the iconic Chinese colours of red and yellow, aiming to reflect on and reconstruct a time when Li-Ning led Chinese sports fashion (Daxue Consulting 2021).

After Li-Ning took the first step towards changing its brand image by reidentifying the brand DNA and emphasizing its aim of constructing a modern Chinese 'Guochao' sports fashion brand, it repositioned its target group and focused on the younger generations, demonstrating its authenticity and representative status in leading and capitalizing on the rising trend of street fashion in the Chinese market (Ahn 2020). Adhering to the spiritual connotations of 'introspection, self-enlightenment, and self-initiation' (Little et al. 2000), extracting aspects of Taoism, Li-Ning reconfigured the street style in China via its series of new Chinese-styled branding campaigns circulating under the new trends of athleisure and changing lifestyles, reflected in the modern lives of the younger generations in China.

Since Li-Ning led the rebranding trend regarding 'Guochao', domestic Chinese sportswear brands have started to promote a new Chinese-styled athleisure trend with Chinese cultural characteristics, incorporating modern Chinese cultural symbols. Casual wear has become a fashion trend that has driven the sportswear industry to take market share from the apparel industry. Industry reports and professionals (EMIS 2019; Ahn 2020; BOF and McKinsey 2020) point out that young Chinese consumers, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, the new target audiences for these sportswear brands, have been dressing more casually and wearing more leisure styles than the older generations, especially those working for tech companies that are more relaxed compared to traditional industries (BOF and McKinsey 2020). The changing lifestyles of Chinese consumers and their inner needs for cultural identity recognition from their outfits have triggered the commercial success of and provided prerequisites for the popularization of 'Guochao' among sportswear brands.

This rising Chinese-styled athleisure trend, as an element of the new Chinese-styled branding, can be summarized as a growing trend among the younger generations, especially Millennials and Gen Z, who are seeking more leisure and casual styles embedded with strong Chinese cultural and ethnic identity in their daily lives. Two types of collectives among street fashion brands that self-identify as 'Guochao' are emerging designer street fashion

New York Fashion Week Vintage Coat

— 定格荣耀 —

Olympic athletes wore sportswear of Chinese brand for the first time on 1992 Barcelona Games. And it is also re-edition of the first awards clothes VICTOR001. of Chinese brand. The design is younger and more modern and show splendor of Li-Ning in 80-90 years.



Barcelona'92 printing reproduces the brilliant moment of Chinese delegation when they win the prize. It has special historic meaning.



LI-NING

Li-Ning Show fashion attitude and spirit of original brand in 2018 New York Fashion Week.



— FASHION SHOW —

LI-NING 2018



Figure 12: Li-Ning's Fall/Winter 2018 collection presented at New York Fashion Week, with the brand stamping the Chinese characters 中国李宁 ('China Li-Ning') onto the backs and fronts of the jackets and sweatshirts, accompanied by the iconic Chinese colours of red and yellow, aiming to reflect on and reconstruct a time when Li-Ning led Chinese sports fashion and when Li-Ning designed the Olympic award-winning uniform VICTOR001 for the Chinese team in 1992. © Li-Ning.

brands founded after 2010, such as Roaringwild, Hi Panda, and Wookong, and the older sportswear brands with a longer history, such as Li-Ning (founded in 1989), Warrior Shanghai (founded in 1927), and Anta (founded in 1994).

Warrior Shanghai is recognized as one of the most iconic and historic Chinese sports shoe brands. Its golden age in China peaked in the year 1956 when Warrior Shanghai customized a classic shoe called 565 for the Chinese basketball team to participate in the Olympic Games. As soon as it was launched, it became a fashion symbol at that time and was popular among the public (Warrior Shanghai n.d.) (see the press report of the brand in Figure 13). In 1984, the Chinese women's volleyball team won gold at the Los Angeles Olympic Games, with the shoes they were all wearing made by Warrior Shanghai (see Figure 14). For a long period before 1990 when it fell out of favour among Chinese consumers, Warrior Shanghai was viewed as the most iconic, trendy sports shoe brand embedded with proud Chinese culture and confidence in the field of sports and among athletes.

Capturing the rising 'Guochao' trend, Warrior Shanghai has reconfigured, recreated and rebuilt its brand image by incorporating the cultural narrative and being proud of its Olympic spirit. Through a series of rebranding campaigns in the domestic Chinese market, it self-identifies as a representative of 'Shanghai Guochao' (see Figure 16), although being criticized for excessively underlining national pride but not making progress in the aesthetic modernization of its product designs (Luo 2020). Targeting Millennials and GenZ, Warrior Shanghai has reconstructed its brand image by promoting an athleisure lifestyle whilst highlighting its iconic product, the 565 shoes. In most of its rebranding campaigns seen in the following images (see Figure 15),

1935年4月4日，上海正泰公司正式註冊了中文“回力”和英文“Warrior”品牌。回力商標的創意源於英文“WARRIOR”意為戰士，勇士，鬥士。由此將“WARRIOR”譯為“回力”含寓“回天之力”喻指“能戰勝困難的巨大力量”。

近年復古風潮熱吹，國貨回力球鞋為街頭復古經典。來自東方原汁原味的街頭至潮，國貨名牌歷史悠久，設計簡約。經久耐用，紛紛受到國外潮流人士挖掘追捧。

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出品廠膠機記備泰正
特選華大上海 製造 供至陸海軍在中華上 無行社

Figure 13: Press report of Warrior Shanghai in 1935. © Warrior Shanghai.



Figure 14: In 1984, the Chinese women's volleyball team won gold at the Los Angeles Olympic Games, with the shoes they were all wearing were the classic 565 made by Warrior Shanghai. © Warrior Shanghai.

the iconic 565 shoes are spotlighted in the visual communications. Athleisure elements such as casual wear and sportswear, as well as iconic street cultural elements such as skateboards, are utilized as symbols to deliver the brand value and identity that underline 'Chao' within a 'Guochao' brand.

The athleisure trend in China, influenced by the rise of the 'Guochao' trend in branding, has triggered the mass popularization of street culture and street fashion in China (Kwon 2016). Street style has evolved from a common kind of social practice adopted by particular sociocultural groups to an important segment of the mass fashion industry. Different paradigmatic styles, such as hippy, punk, goth and biker, have been prevalent in western fashion and also influenced China's cultural development in the 1990s. Guided by the rise of pop culture in the 1990s, street fashion was popularized among the public but fell out of favour in the post-2000 era due to the capitalization of cultural production. Nevertheless, it is currently being rejuvenated in the field of fashion with the rise of the pursuit of 'Guochao' identity in branding practices. The new application of Chinese-styled branding underlines the 'Chao' discourse by reconfiguring and reidentifying street fashion in China, developing an athleisure style that merges western culture and design with iconic Chinese cultural narratives and stories. The Chinese identity in this category of branding is underlined in the brand narratives and branding contexts rather than the product design or the materialization of cultural symbols and patterns. The 'Chao' discourse is being incorporated as a cultural context in the branding practices of Li-Ning and Warrior Shanghai.



Figure 15: Branding campaigns of Warrior Shanghai self-identifying as 'Shanghai Guochao' after 2017. © Warrior Shanghai.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Inherited and extracted from the contemporary idea of 'chinoiserie' (Christie 2015; Geczy 2019), which has been a regime of images used in western countries to interpret China in terms of design, culture and aesthetics, the 'Guochao' style, as a rising aesthetic, is proliferating a new wave of Chinese design power. It introduces a new iconic identity representing a Chinese modern design aesthetic that modernizes historical design and the emerging athleisure trend in the field of fashion, as well as in the broader global design and cultural system. This 'Guochao' identity appeals to Gen Z's aesthetic preferences and further incorporates Chinese cultural characteristics with a modern international design aesthetic, providing a more approachable and recognizable identity for Chinese design images internationally.

'Chinese-styled branding' (Wu et al. 2013), as an emerging academic term introduced in 2013, is a step in reconstructing and updating Chinese branding implementations within the global market, embedding the branding activities of Chinese brands with cultural explanations and underlining the cultural and aesthetic characteristics or regimes among Chinese brands from a general perspective. This has further blurred the boundaries between marketing studies and cultural studies in investigations into global branding. Through a thorough review of some paradigmatic brands that emerged after 2013 alongside the rise of 'Guochao' as a specific emerging identity in the field of fashion, which places Chinese-styled branding in a more concrete field of practices within global branding, this article theorizes 'Guochao' as a rising polyvalent connotations of fashion branding, aiming to organically reconfigure and modernize Chinese material culture, materializing and symbolizing Chinese culture with a western aesthetic and style of fashion design.

Decoding the design of the branding campaigns and the product designs of Angel Chen, MUKZIN, Li-Ning and Warrior Shanghai using the methodological approach of semiotics, as well as the cultural product design model raised by Lin et al. (2007), the meaning of 'Guochao' is theorized in two explicit directions that reveal the distinct divisions between two sub-industry practices. One is mostly seen in the designer brands underlining the 'Guo' identity, aiming to materialize iconic and traditional Chinese material culture, including calligraphy, literature, mythology, ceramics and court theatre, decoding these paradigmatic Chinese cultural symbols in both branding and product design and targeting a relatively high-end market. Another direction is mostly applied by the sports streetwear brands that underlined the connotation of 'Chao', among which Chinese material culture is still applied but more in the branding context, rather than the patterns applied to the product lines, in addition to their underlining of brand history within the social and cultural context of China.

This clarification and specification of Chinese-styled branding in terms of 'Guochao' as a rising identity has concretized the study of Chinese-styled branding within the field of fashion in that 'China provides a wake-up call to Chinese brand builders, producers, managers, and marketers, recommending that they pay attention to the complexities and potential of Chinese brand culture' (Wu et al. 2013: 164), proving that the problem of the low repute of Chinese exported brands compared to prominent global brands is being fixed. Robust paradigms show that via cultural exportation in fashion, seen through the collective of 'Guochao' brands, the discourse of Chinese brands is being increasingly upgraded. A clear division between the two connotations of 'Guo' and 'Chao' has formed and can be seen among all 'Guochao' brands, with the infusing of 'Guochao' into brand DNA in both global and domestic branding progressively becoming a new regime that is being followed by most Chinese brand builders within their global fashion branding practices. However, brand builders should be cautious about 'Guochao' fatigue in terms of excessive declarations of 'Guochao' used merely as a strategic approach with few cultural-specific reflections in the product and campaign design. Chinese-styled branding in the field of fashion is still under development and could have a larger variety of identities rather than one 'Guochao' DNA due to China's multi-ethnic nature and diverse cultural symbols, which could be explored in the field of fashion as well as from a broader design perspective.

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