

Author: Anthony Bednall
Associate Head of Department of Apparel.
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Email: a.bednall@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract: Fashion Revolution China: Embedded Narratives and Social Identities in Clothing.

It would be an understatement to say that China has undergone a turbulent recent history and remains a complicated, diverse and complex country.

The 'New China' as proclaimed by Mao Zhedong in the 1950's has now been described as the 'New New China' (i) (John Gittings *The Changing Face of China*), where a powerful sense of contradiction and individual perceptions based on fiscal acquisition define it's society.

On the one hand China is perceived as being a developed nation, on the other hand, still developing. There are luxury hotels and International Fashion Brands in the most desirable and exclusive real estate locations in multi populated megacities and yet at the same time in 2011, with a population of 1.3 Billion, China's gross national income per capita of \$4,940 ranked it 114th in the world. In the same year China became the single largest market for Rolls- Royce cars and yet still had over 170 million people still living below the \$1.25-a-day international poverty line.

(ii) www.worldbank.org china overview

Against the context of a century of economic, social and political developments, fashion or clothing, depending on how this is defined, has acted as a representational and symbolic illustration of a culture trying to clarify its own identity as its population negotiated unparalleled turmoil and seismic change

The idea that ones dress might express one's own unique identity seems naïve these days (iii) *Fashion and Modernity*, Elizabeth Wilson Page 13 (Breward and Evans, Berg 2006)

however, in the context of China it has represented the birth and rebirth of culture by being both dismissive and formative and for much of the 20th century contributed to and reflected on individual expression, modernity and political turmoil.

From a fashion design background, the key principles which have driven my academic viewpoint is how dress explores individual identity, as a non-verbal language, in response to a range of social, economic, political and cultural contexts. By archiving garments from China from the 1930's through to contemporary Chinese fashion designers and recently exhibiting them in the UK under the heading 'Fashion Revolution China', many of these themes were both reinforced and illustrated by using dress/clothing as cultural artefact.

The exhibition itself follows an almost cyclic journey, beginning with the pre revolutionary pieces which fine Chinese and imported fabrics and incorporate hand embroidery and skilful manufacturing techniques. Through the period post 1949 which although stylistically tempered by a political overview, were crafted with care and precision and on to China's contemporary designers who are reviving traditional skills and developing modern styles that are embedded with cultural resonance.

Ultimately the unique narratives of the artefacts illustrated through their owners or designers, evidence the notion that clothing and style cannot exist in a cultural vacuum yet responded individually to the cultural context.

The paper investigates the content and context of the exhibition and explores the narrative of clothing against the social and political conditions that supports evolutionary cultural identity. It also explores the three specific sections Extravagance/pre 1949, Uniformity/post 1949 and Contemporary designers and discusses how contemporary China is responding and developing a relationship to its fashion past, present and future.

Key Words: China, fashion, identity, clothing, narrative, politics, exhibition.