

# Shaping Traditional Chinese Culture in Contemporary Fashion: ‘Guochao’ as a Rising Aesthetic and the Case Study of the Designer Brand Angel Chen

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**Abstract**—With the unprecedented spread of cultural Chinese fashion design in the global fashion system, the under-identified ‘Guochao’ aesthetic that has emerged in the global market needs to be academically emphasized with a methodological approach looking at the Western-Eastern cultural hybridization present in fashion visualization. Through an in-depth and comprehensive investigation of a representative international-based Chinese designer, Angel Chen’s fashion show ‘Madam Qing’, this paper provides a methodological approach on how a form of traditional culture can be effectively extracted and applied to modern design using the most effective techniques. The central approach examined in this study involves creating aesthetic revolutions by addressing Chinese cultural identity through re-creating and modernizing traditional Chinese culture in design.

**Keywords**—Style modernization, design identity, fashion show, Guochao, Chinese culture, Angel Chen.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE academic field has demonstrated the significance of culture in the field of design [1], which is pivotal when design is becoming more localized under an increasingly globalized industry [1]-[3]. Emphasizing local cultural characteristics seems to be the most prevalent theme when a brand is constructing and shaping its own identity and aesthetic uniqueness [4], [5]. 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 [1], [6]-[8]. Scholars [2], [3], [9], [10] 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’ [1].

The wide academic discussion of the hybridization of Eastern and Western cultures in a number of creative cultural fields, such as film and fashion, has addressed the rising importance of undertaking aesthetic and visual research on cultural hybridization under increasingly intensive globalized cultural trends [11]-[14]. Recent studies have pointed out that the cultural hybridization in the field of creative and cultural

industry production is an ‘organic process’ instead of a ‘mechanic combine’ [15]. According to [14], cultural hybridization in the context of cultural globalization does not merely refer to fusing two or more different cultures into a single culture and is not just ‘a mixing, blending and synthesizing of different elements that ultimately forms a culturally faceless whole’ [14]. It is a complex organic and dynamic process of cultural integration rather than a mechanic combination.



Fig. 1 Angel Chen’s Spring/Summer 2019 show at Shanghai Fashion Week. The collection and show, named ‘Madam Qing’, incorporate traditional southeastern Chinese culture, Chaoshan culture, and extract design elements from Chaoshan electronic trucks and traditional Chaozhou lanterns to construct the whole collection and show design [35]

As one of the core parts of the global cultural industry, the fashion industry has revealed a rising trend of new Western-Eastern hybridized aesthetics that have appeared within the global fashion industry since 2018 and typically refers to the modernized and globalized transformation of the ethnic and

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traditional Chinese cultural design aesthetic known as 'Guochao' [16]-[18] or literally 'Chinese fashion trend' [18]. This term was initially created to describe a new aesthetic which modernized traditional Chinese designs in streetwear brands and this term's global establishment was marked by the presentation of the Chinese sportswear label Li-Ning at New York Fashion Week in 2018 [16]. This term, introduced by Chinese streetwear brands, then gathered new global recognition and was used to represent Chinese-style fashion products [16], becoming prominent and seen in international-based Chinese designer labels targeted at the high-end market in the global fashion industry. The term has become established at international fashion weeks and used by international-based independent Chinese designers to construct a clear national identity and endorse China's cultural persistence of raising the cultural self-confidence among the younger generations, whose brands includes Xiong Ying's label HEAVEN GAIA and Angel Chen's autonomous brand, also named Angel Chen (see Fig. 1). The rising emphasis on localized cultural development in China that designers are endeavoring to promote to the Western fashion world demonstrates the ambition of Chinese design practitioners, from industry authorities to designers, to promote and shape a new modernized Chinese aesthetic that

incorporates traditional culture within the global fashion discourse and market competition [19], [20]. Under these circumstances, although 'Guochao' has become a ubiquitous term within the global fashion market to identify a new aesthetic that appeals to the modernization of traditional culture [17] and is being advocated by many Chinese designers and commercial brands, the concept is still problematic and controversial. This is because it seems that 'Guochao' as a new term to show an emerging aesthetic is used indiscriminately in China and every designer could self-identify as 'Guochao' if they mechanically add traditional Chinese cultural symbols without re-designing or modernizing them. Furthermore, [17] explains that it is controversial for Chinese designers to build up self-identified cultural confidence through gaining recognition in the Western market and fashion system. 'Guochao' as a newly recognized term seems to be overly discussed in the field of marketing research in the study of consumer behaviors [16], [21] rather than the cultural field although it is inherently a portrait of new aesthetic and cultural trends appearing under the discourse of increasingly heated discussions on Western-Eastern cultural hybridization in the field of fashion [22], [23].

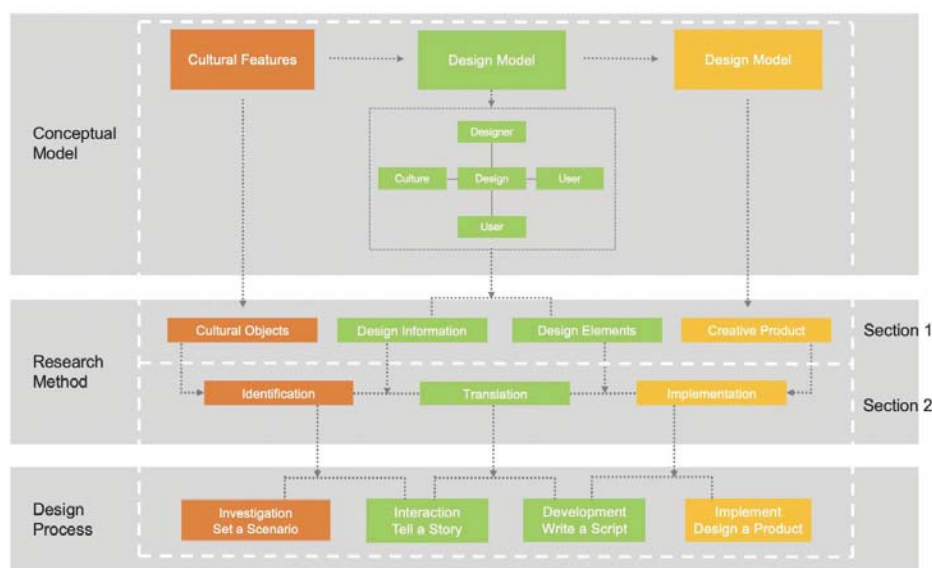


Fig. 2 Cultural product design model (content extracted from [1])

Scholars [3], [24], [25] 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. This paper could solve the issues raised in recent discussions on the rising 'Guochao' aesthetic [16]-[18] providing a rigorous and academic identification of this new aesthetic and hybridized cultural trend within the current global fashion cultural system. This can be done through an in-depth investigation of the rationale and methodology of how traditional Chinese culture in the field of modern or contemporary fashion design could be effectively extracted from ethnic cultural elements and re-designed or re-produced in modern fashion products to showcase and promote the traditional Chinese culture to the global fashion system.



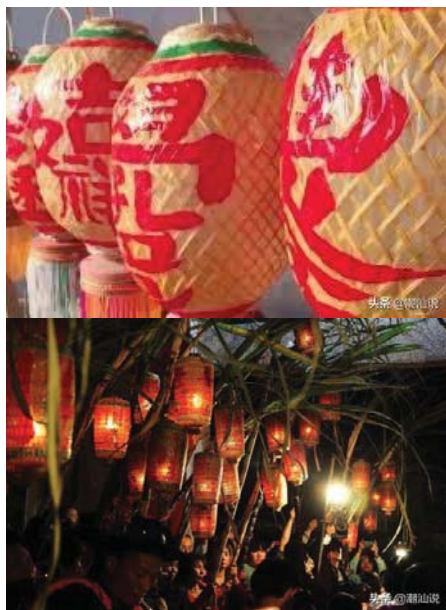


Fig. 3 Traditional Chaozhou lanterns prevalently used in the Chaoshan area (or Chaozhou city). This is because, in the traditional language of the area, 'light' and 'ding' are homonyms. 'Ding' refers to 'man' according to their cultural norms and has the meaning of wishing prosperity in people's lives, so some ancestral temples hang this type of lantern throughout the year [38], [41]



Fig. 4 The modernized oil paper lantern designs produced and staged within Angel Chen's fashion show. Experienced craftsmen in Chaozhou were invited by Angel Chen to produce these lanterns and they were presented as an installation and tool for the performance of the show [35]

## II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

For its methodological approach, this study selects one of the most representative and notable international-based Chinese

(referred to as 'IBC' hereafter) designers, Angel Chen, to investigate her work as a case study. Her brand identity has displayed a strong affinity with traditional Chinese culture and the brand has endeavored to transform cultural heritage into modern fashion designs since it was established in 2015. Her work, from the garments to the fashion shows and events she has designed and presented, is a paradigm in successfully and organically transforming traditional Chinese culture into modern fashion design and has been extensively recognized in both the Western and Eastern fashion worlds [26], [27]. A case study on her work could provide a more explicit and in-depth discussion of how traditional Chinese culture as an ethnic characteristic could be transformed into today's fashion products in a modern way with the academic identification of 'Guochao' and can provide practical recognitions of how traditional Chinese culture could be progressively extracted and re-inserted into her work, from her garments to fashion shows. Angel Chen's work as a case study will be mainly traced based on her design of branding events, such as fashion shows presented at international fashion weeks, using 'Madam Qing' at Shanghai Fashion Week (SHFW) for the Spring/Summer 2019 season as an example, as well as commercial collaborative projects with the beauty brand MAC and the sportswear brand Adidas for marketing campaign events designed and catering for the Chinese market. Visual analysis methods [28], such as semiotics [29] and content analysis [30], are simultaneously applied to this study to investigate the explicit design procedures of the works of Angel Chen selected for this paper.



Fig. 5 Coolie hats for sale in Chaoshan people's real lives [42]

For its theoretical perspective, this study selects and applies the design model introduced by [1] as a core analytical tool (see Fig. 2). This model has been chosen due to the similarities in the nature and motivation between this research and [1] on transforming traditional Taiwanese culture into modern product design. The cultural product design model consists of three main parts: the conceptual model, research method and design process. As addressed by scholars [12]-[14], [26], using the cultural features of certain areas to add cultural value to designed products, such as garments and events produced in the field of fashion, to fit into the modern cultural and aesthetic industry, thereby catering to changing consumer needs, could not only benefit the economic growth of the industry but could also promote local cultures to the global market. This model provides an applicable analytical rubric for this study as it shows the clarified design processes of 'identification, translation and implementation' [1] when extracting traditional ethnic culture to produce modern designed products.



Fig. 6 The hat inspired by the traditional Chinese coolie hat displayed in the show [35]



Fig. 7 Traditional Taiwanese electronic trucks designed by Shen Chao-liang in 2015 [39]



Fig. 8 Traditional Quanzhou electronic trucks which the culture of Taiwan's electronic trucks originated from [37]

## The Evolution of Image of Chinese Dragons

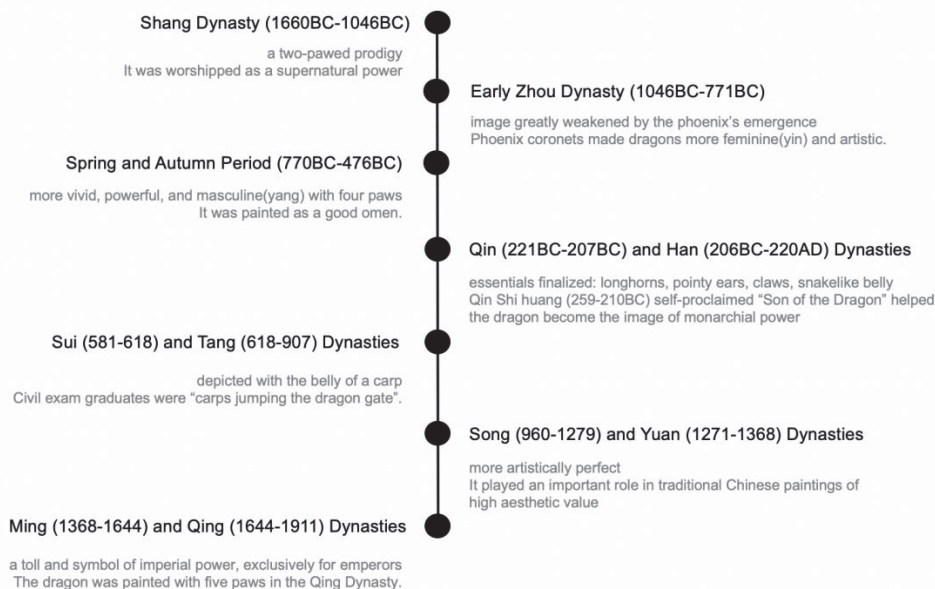


Fig. 9 Cultural, symbolic and image evolution of Chinese dragons in feudal China (content from Zhang [26] and re-illustrated by author)



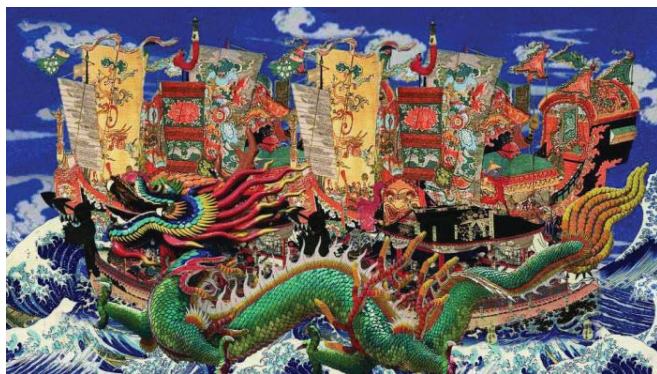


Fig. 10 An extracted traditional Chinese cultural symbol of the dragon and its design application incorporating a dragon boat, which is included in the Chaozhou cultural system [35]

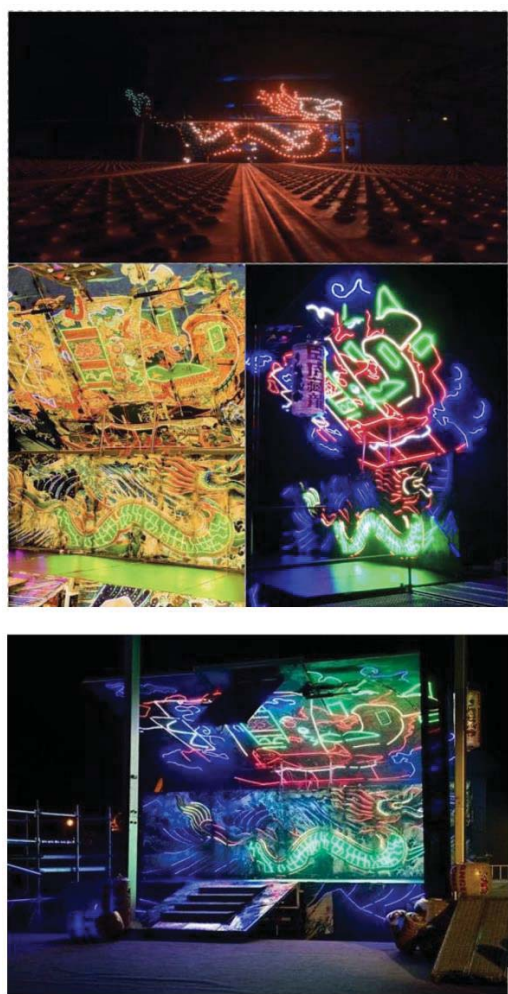


Fig. 11 Lit Chinese festooned vehicle with lanterns and dragons [35]

Through providing new methodological and theoretical interpretations of traditional or ethnic Chinese culture in the field of fashion design, this study provides the design field, as well as research on traditional or ethnic culture, a methodological approach on how a form of traditional culture, Chinese culture in this case, could be effectively extracted and applied to modern design using the proper techniques. This

does not mean merely mechanically adding ethnic design elements to certain products without any re-productions or recreations in terms of aesthetics and design. Furthermore, this study could contribute to the construction of a new aesthetic introduced by the forming collective of cultural and aesthetic innovations in IBC designers' visualizations and showing of fashion from the global design and cultural perspectives [31], [32]. This could provide new theoretical interpretations of long-existing research on Chineseness [33] under a new era of a globalized fashion cultural system in which Chinese designers as a rising collective have progressively gained hierarchical cultural status and positions in the field of fashion as a whole [34].

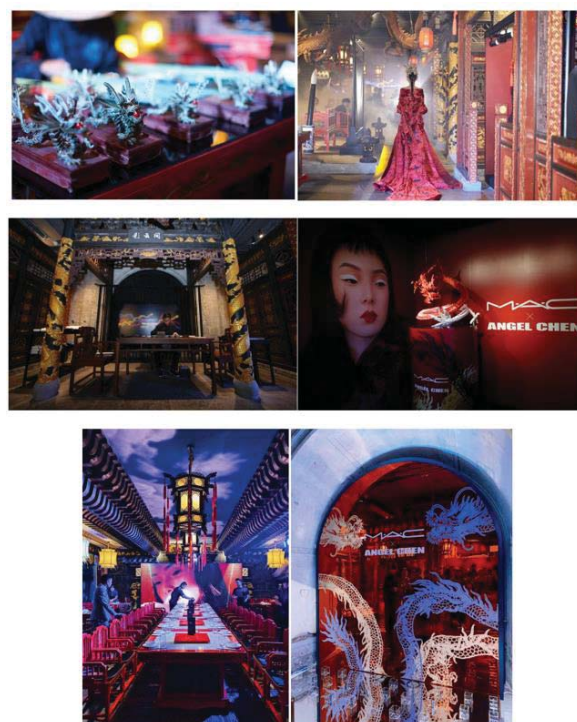


Fig. 12 One of MAC's marketing campaigns for the collection in collaboration with Angel Chen and a promotional event featuring dragons as one of the most representative traditional Chinese cultural symbols, applying and modernizing this design element in the design of this event [40]

### III. ANALYSIS: EXTRACTING AND MODERNIZING TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE IN FASHION PRODUCTS

The IBC 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 [27]. Her work tends to incorporate Chinese ethnic and cultural 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 that has been selected for this paper is one of Angel Chen's paradigmatic works that incorporated traditional Chinese culture and handcrafted techniques,

including traditional ethnic design in modern globalized garments and accessories, rather than merely mechanically adding traditional Chinese symbols to the show and garment designs. The fashion show, which demonstrated the collection and the brand image simultaneously, is more comprehensive

and efficient in investigating Angel Chen's ontological and methodological approaches when extracting traditional cultural elements and applying them to modern fashion design compared to solely analyzing her garments.

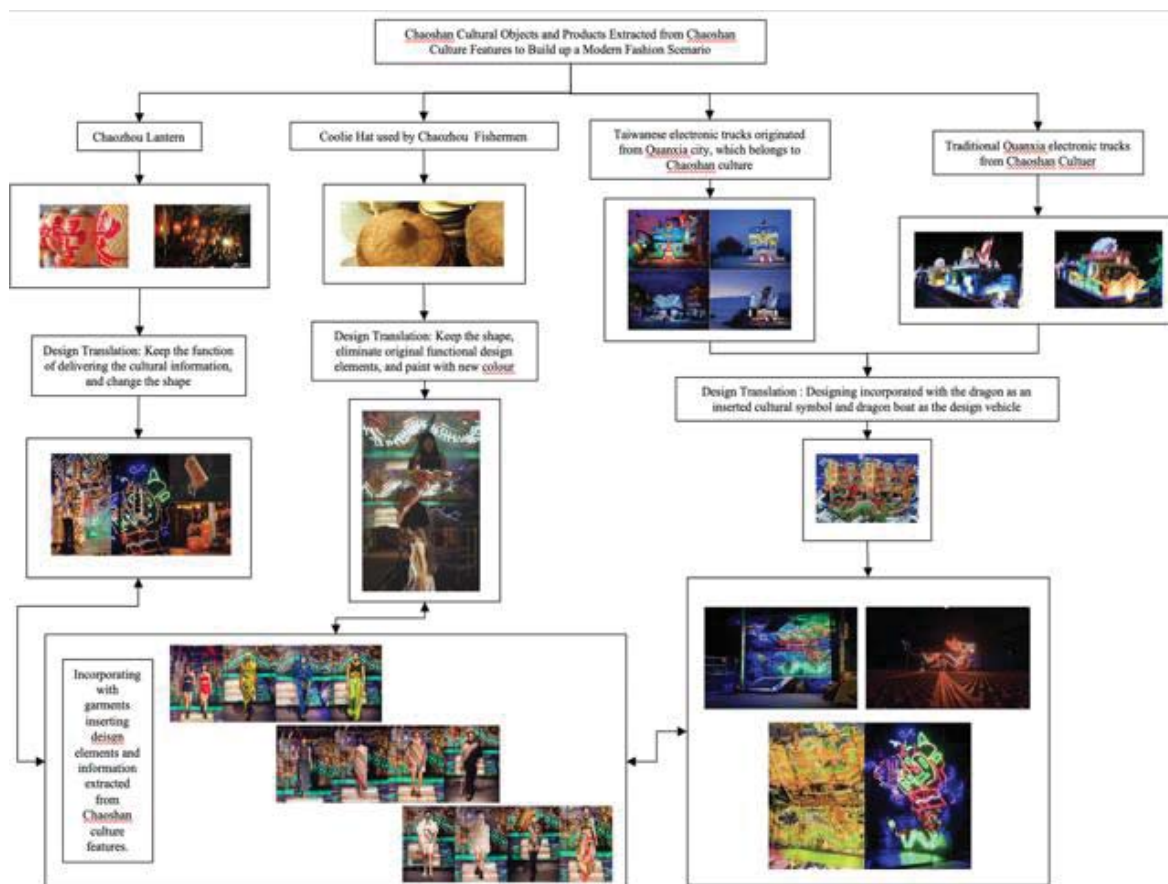


Fig. 13 The 'organic' design processes of designers creating a modern fashion scenario in the show 'Madam Qing'

Teochew or Chaozhou culture<sup>1</sup> [34] is an example of traditional Chinese culture that was extracted and transformed into the collection and show for 'Madam Qing'. Three traditional design elements from Chaoshan (or Teochew) culture, which can be seen as 'cultural objects' according to the design model introduced by [1], are oil paper lanterns, the coolie hat used by fishermen in Chaozhou and the electronic trucks seen in Taiwan. These three cultural objects extracted from the cultural features of the Chaozhou culture were applied to Angel Chen's Spring/Summer 2019 collection and show. The following analysis explicitly investigates how these three cultural objects extracted from Chaozhou culture were incorporated within one collection and modern fashion show according to the design model introduced by [1].

All of the oil paper lanterns used in the show were made by experienced craftsmen from Chaozhou. The 'design

information' and 'design elements' [1] of the Chaozhou oil paper lanterns (see Fig. 3) used for this show were the symbolic meaning and function that these lanterns were conveying, which were a wish for the prosperity of popularization, as well as a hope for peace and happiness in people's lives in the Chaozhou (or Teochew) culture. These meanings and functions were translated and used in the re-design of these lanterns to set a scenario and represent a cultural phenomenon for this show and were produced as installations and decorations held by the models on the runway (see Fig. 4). There was also a story that shaped the cultural interaction between the designer and the products, shown through Angel Chen's decision regarding the words written on the lanterns produced for the show. As stated by Angel Chen [35]:

'The idea for the lanterns came from photos of the Mazu Temple, where families go to worship after returning to Chaozhou. When I first saw the oil-paper lanterns in the photos, they read "divine light shines

<sup>1</sup> 'Teochew or Chaozhou culture, a regional branch of Han Chinese culture unique to the Chaoshan region in eastern Guangdong province, is the product of centuries of evolution and interaction with external influences especially from the southern Fujian province' [34].



everywhere, the sea is calm and peaceful”<sup>2</sup>, and I was deeply attracted by these eight characters’.

It could be seen in the characters drawn on these lanterns (see Fig. 4), which were ‘四海一家’ (‘si hai yi jia’, which could be translated in English as ‘we are the world’), ‘卧虎藏龙’ (‘wo hu cang long’, which could be translated in English as ‘crouching tiger, hidden dragon’), and ‘神光’ (‘shen guang’, which could be translated in English as ‘divine light’).

Another cultural object that was extracted from Chaozhou culture and transformed into modern fashion design was the coolie hat displayed in the show (see Fig. 6), inspired by the traditional Chinese coolie hat used to protect the body from rain (see Fig. 5). This object originated among and is still commonly used by fishermen in Chaozhou and is seen as one of the design elements featured in Chaozhou culture that reveals the fact that many people are fishermen in this area, which is a piece of design information and cultural implication that Angel Chen managed to deliver to the audience in this case. It can be seen in the following images that Angel Chen extracted the shape and design features of traditional coolie hats and modernized them with the globally recognized design of hollow grids, expanding the size of the brim and changing the colors used (see Fig. 9). In this way, the coolie hat that was modernized by Angel Chen lost its original functional characteristics yet retained the cultural elements and information, thereby strengthening and broadening the aesthetic information and making this object a modernized fashion accessory for her collection and show.

In addition to the two accessories mentioned above that were designed after being extracted from the Chaozhou cultural system and were presented in the show, the final cultural object used in the show was the traditional electronic trucks Angel Chen saw in Taiwan (see Fig. 7). This object originated from Quanzhou city within the Chaozhou region as a Chaozhou cultural symbol and object [34] (see Fig. 8), becoming a representative folk cultural object in Taiwan used for weddings and funerals [36]. The electronic truck functioned as the main stage (see Fig. 11) for this runway and the design information and element that Angel Chen managed to convey to the audience, which was the ‘user’ when applying Lin et al.’s [1] theoretical design model to this case, was one of the most widely recognized Chinese cultural representative symbols or objects. The dragon was used, which has the cultural implications of being ‘lucky, propitious, powerful, and noble’ in the modern and contemporary period of China [26].

As the design of the truck functioned as the main stage and the core theme that conveyed the cultural implications of this show, which were global cultural cosmopolitanism and the wish for Taiwan’s unification with China, the main purpose of the re-designing of the Taiwanese electronic truck for the show’s stage was to set a scenario and deliver the theme of unification through the use of one of the most representative cultural images of China, the dragon (see Figs. 9 and 10). The

wish for cultural unification was also implied by the use of a Taiwanese electronic truck instead of one from Quanzhou, conveying the cultural implication and information to the audience that Taiwan’s culture is based in the Chinese cultural system and they cannot be divided into two cultural communities [35]. Furthermore, thematically aligning with the aforementioned characters used on the lanterns of ‘卧虎藏龙’ (‘wo hu cang long’, or ‘crouching tiger, hidden dragon’), the dragon was 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’ [26] after the dragon transformed from ‘an imaginary prodigy to a mascot from ancient times to the present’ [26] (see Fig. 9). The electronic truck was transformed into a contemporary T-stage, not merely using the dragon image but also synthesizing the dragon boat as another cultural object to enrich the design elements extracted from the cultural image and to convey the design information of the modern Chinese culture of having the ‘unrelenting and pioneering spirit of keeping pace with the times’ [26].

Not merely seen in the ‘Madame Qing’ show, the dragon as a cultural object or design element that features and represents traditional Chinese culture is often used by Angel Chen and has been frequently modernized and applied to her designed products and events. Another example of this is MAC’s collection launch (see Fig. 12). A collection of MAC’s beauty products, such as lipsticks and pressed powder, were designed in collaboration with Angel Chen specially catering to the Chinese market, which also contributed to the aesthetic experimentation with modernizing and disseminating Chinese cultural heritage symbols and designs in the globalized fashion market. Dragon images were applied to the packaging of the products, as well as presented as the main installation art in the show produced for the marketing campaign.

Through the analysis of the culturally hybridized designs created by Angel Chen, it can be detected that instead of a mechanical combination and synthesis, the cultural objects extracted from the traditional cultural images or symbols were modernized by Angel Chen through the processes of recognizing the original function of these objects but changing the shape and color to exaggerate and address the aesthetic function while retaining the original cultural information and implications.

To create a comprehensive transformed image of certain products and collections and to prevent the product from appearing like a mechanical adoption of traditional cultural symbols, the selection and extraction of the cultural features of multiple cultural objects can be inserted into one product or one collection. This could be generated as extraction multiplicity, as well as the process of changing the shape and color of objects based on modern or contemporary design techniques and the deprivation and abandonment of the original and conventional functions, which could be summarized as exterior aestheticizing within the processes (see Fig. 13). These procedures and methodological explorations of the ‘organic’ [33] transformation and modernization of Chinese cultural heritage and cultural objects in Angel Chen’s work are useful

<sup>2</sup> In Chinese, this is written “神光普照，海不扬波” [pinyin: shenguangpuzhao, haibuyangbo], which is an old saying that delivers a wish and a prayer for fishermen to be safe when going fishing on the sea.

for other fashion brands in designing products and constructing brand image.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The Western-Eastern cultural hybridization in the establishment of fashion design has long been explored by different generations of Chinese designers but it was not until the 'Guochao' trend became globally recognized that these endeavors and explorations into design and aesthetic hybridization began to become widely noticeable in the Western fashion world. The currently ongoing global popularization of 'Guochao' is based on the 'Western gaze' [17], which is inevitable as, within the global fashion cultural system, Western fashion still has cultural and aesthetic legitimacy and centralization due to its contribution to the shaping and constructing of the modern and contemporary fashion system. Although this centralization has been partially reconstructed by Japanese designers as the first Asian national collective that proliferated throughout the legitimate Western fashion systems, all designer collectives from the beginning of the 'designerscape era' [11] in 1970 through the Belgian collective, British collective and Japanese collective, if allocated by nation, could not become globally recognized if they could not introduce aesthetic revolutions based on the modernized transformation of their ethnic or traditional national cultures [10], [11]. Facilitating aesthetic revolution is the key to upgrading global fashion cultural images for national or collectively recognized designers. Upgrading China's soft infrastructure through the improvement of China's global creative cultural image and the building up of cultural confidence is not merely undertaken based on the emphasized slogan of 'rejuvenate traditional Chinese culture' and the blind purchasing of products offered by Chinese designers regardless of the design and aesthetic standards and quality. It is also not about blindly setting up a self-legitimized aesthetic system regardless of the existing globally aesthetic and cultural recognition, which is controversial due to the cultural hybridization in modern fashion design. Making full use of the existing cultural system, bringing aesthetic revolutions by addressing Chinese cultural identity through modernizing traditional Chinese culture in design, and accumulating a creative practitioner collective ranging from designers to fashion authorities who show revolutionary and pioneering designs on the global stage will automatically lead China to the true construction of cultural confidence within the global cultural system.

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