

A Narrative Inquiry of Identity Formation of Chinese Fashion Designers

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Abstract : The contemporary fashion industry has witnessed the global rise of Chinese fashion designers. China plays more and more important role in this sector globally. One of the key debates in contemporary time is the conception of Chinese fashion. A close look at previous discussions on Chinese fashion reveals that most of them are explored through the lens of cultural knowledge and assumptions, using the dichotomous models of East and West. The results of these studies generate an essentialist and orientalist notion of Chinoiserie and Chinese fashion, which sees individual designers from China as undifferentiated collective members marked by a unique and fixed set of cultural scripts. This study challenges this essentialist conceptualization and brings fresh insights to the discussion of Chinese fashion identity against the backdrop of globalisation. Different from a culturalist approach to researching Chinese fashion, this paper presents an alternative position to address the research agenda through the mobilisation of Giddens' (1991) theory of reflexive identity formation, privileging individuals' agency and reflexivity. This approach to the discussion of identity formation not only challenges the traditional view seeing identity as the distinctive and essential characteristics belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular social category or group but highlights fashion designers' strategic agency and their role as fashion activist. This study draws evidence from a textual analysis of published stories of a group of established Chinese designers such as Guo Pei, Huishan Zhang, Masha Ma, Uma Wang, and Ma Ke. In line with Giddens' concept of 'reflexive project of the self', this study uses a narrative methodology. Narratives are verbal accounts or stories relating to experiences of Chinese fashion designers. This approach offers the fashion designers a chance to 'speak' for themselves and show the depths and complexities of their experiences. It also emphasises the nuances of identity formation in fashion designers, whose experiences cannot be captured in neat typologies. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) is adopted to identify and investigate common themes across the whole dataset. At the centre of the analysis is individuals' self-articulation of their perceptions, experiences and themselves in relation to culture, fashion and identity. The finding indicates that identity is constructed around anchors such as agency, cultural hybridity, reflexivity and sustainability rather than traditional collective categories such as culture and ethnicity. Thus, the old East-West dichotomy is broken down, and essentialised social categories are challenged by the multiplicity and fragmentation of self and cultural hybridity created within designers' 'small narratives'.

Keywords : Chinoiserie, fashion identity, fashion activism, narrative inquiry

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