

JEPPE UGELVIG & CHEUK NG INTRODUCTION

Asia is at once a blindspot and salient signifier in dominant fashion discourse. Often invoked as an exotic object or theme—socio-aesthetic fantasy, contested manufacturing site, or consumerist future—the abstract notion of “Asian fashion” is both invisible, pervasive, and entirely illusionary, a paradox defined in the negative to its Western counterpart.

While the foundations of fashion epistemology, a modern capitalist engine of “the new,” has predominantly been approached as a Western concept, the production, distribution, and consumption of style have never remained in defined and static geographies. Rather, style moves between locations and in multiple directions, symbiotically shaped by its local contexts, agitating and contributing to globalization large and small in the spaces that it engenders and inhabits. The production and consumption of clothing have long produced complex transnational networks in constant flux, and often constitutes the fabric of migration and histories of cultural exchange to/from/within Asia.

With the exception of Japan, the Western fashion discourse has largely relegated the realm of Asian fashion to orientalist and reductionist treatments, swaying

2

between a fixation on industrial labor and anthropological studies on consumerist habits of Asians due to the recent boom of luxury consumption in the region. In fact, Asia’s multiple rag trades hold a central place in the modern history of the world, and have often been located in the fray of social, political, and economic revolutions. With the beginning of outsourcing and subcontracting practices in the global fashion industry from the 1970s onwards, coinciding with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the new Open Door policy in China, a vast majority of the world’s textile production moved to Asia, just as emergent free-market consumerism in the region led to a new accelerated proliferation of fashion and style as aesthetic-economic systems (and with it, a boom in fashion publishing, fashion education, fashion weeks, and mall culture). However, pervasive subcontracting and exportation meant that few traditional design practices thrived in the region, thus positioning Asian fashion production at the lower tiers of fashion’s global value chain—or at least, so the story goes. Up until recently, “Made in China/Vietnam/Thailand/Cambodia/etc.” connoted a stereotypical image of stagnant, low-tier garment production devoid of any

3

sense of creativity and authorship—if anything, its occasional semantic anachronisms being ripe for ironic celebration.

In a weird parallel, artisanal fashion labor in Asia holds a different romantic value in the global market, thus often exoticized as a signifier of authenticity and tradition to slap onto luxury commodities in the West. In both instances, fashion authorship as we know it is denied its local producers, rendering Asia a kind of faceless back-end of the fashion world. Here, the rhetorics of creative authorship and style often become a proxy for race and nation by a Western epistemological framework — this is what Asian fashion histories are working up against.

These images could not be further from the rapid proliferation of fashion styles and forms of fashion entrepreneurship evident in the Asian region then and now. In the past decades, Asia’s growing domestic culture industries and the advancement of digital technologies have rapidly transformed fashion business and allowed for new modes of fashion practice native to the social media sphere. DIY producers on Weibo, Wechat, and Taobao are radically re-defining the meaning, practice, and perception of

Asian fashion manufacturing, while fantasy-laden street style and local subcultures broadcast on TikTok and YouTube renews fashion's historic phantasmagoria in the millions. The growth of local fashion weeks is rapidly transforming national luxury consumer markets, while burgeoning mall and e-commerce empires are changing the very definition of fashion consumption. At the same time, garment workers across Asia are faced with new levels of precarity and exploitation, and must adapt to shifting political regimes and economic practices.

In addition, the proliferation of Asian diaspora fashion practices around the world is a reminder of the endurance of the "Asian" aesthetic context, however contradictory such a term may suggest. These practices emerge from numerous sites—international fashion design programs, diaspora communities, migrant business networks—and draw on a wealth of "Asian imaginaries" old and new in their self-fashioning within Western contexts. While inextricably heterogenous, they contribute to the construction of a biopolitical sense of "fashionable Asianness" or "Asian fashion production" that is forever displaced, absent, fragmented

from any geopolitical concept of Asia—but never the less, always ripe with meaning (as critic David Xu Borgonjon once observed, "You can only be Asian outside of Asia"). It is no coincidence that fashion and style are salient spaces to explore and critique lofty and complex concepts such as belonging, identification, community, and tradition, seeing as these are often played out most vividly in the space of appearances. In embracing style—"Asian", "yellow", "immigrant" style—as a critical motif, such practices work against the flattening and caricature of Asia that long has, and continues to circulate in the global fashion system. Even if often dismissed as mere commodity consumption, they also contribute significantly to our theoretical understandings of diaspora and subaltern cultural imaginaries; namely, they challenge and problematize their aesthetics and relation to work, body, community, and self. Of course, they also produce new stylized images of Asia and Asianness, which, like all things stylish, reverberates in numerous feedback loops between geographies, audiences, and consumer markets, where they become prone to reduction and appropriation once more.

These numerous "Asias" speak to the countless possibilities and

dilemmas in/of globalization and its multitudes. For this special issue of *Viscose*, we set out to register and reflect on some of them. The issue seeks to complicate the very notion of "Asia" as a cultural, geographical, and economic framework (particularly, as a theme for a journal) while deepening and offering representation to the stories, questions, and sensibilities behind it. The project brings together a broad group of contemporary cultural producers from Greater China, South East Asia, and their global diasporas to study and contest the ways that "Asian" fashion production is represented as a system and cultural narrative—in criticism, in academia, in art as well as in fashion. With a particular focus on the regions and nations bordering the South China Sea, the project explores the fashioning of selves and communities in a variety of sites within fashion's global supply chain, from street, factory, and workshop to print publishing, education, and retail, and seeks to address fashion as both an aesthetic system and a system of labor. Ultimately, we wish to present Asia as a framework for new critical thinking around some of fashion's oldest themes—authorship, value, labor, and consumption—so as to challenge and expand them.

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