

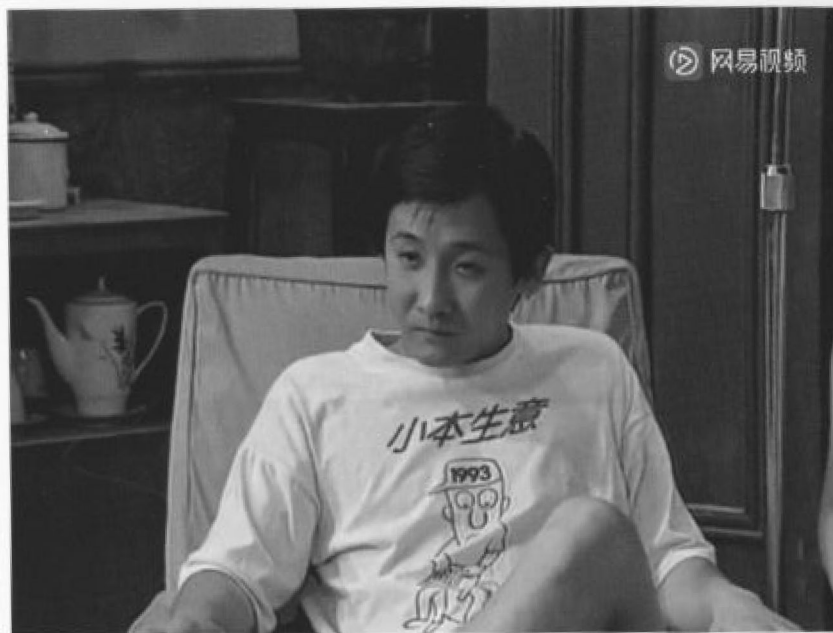
POPPY WU

FROM SCREEN TO SCREEN:  
CHINESE FASHION IN THE  
DIGITAL REALM

In 1978, the Chinese clothing industry received a kick-start from the sweeping Chinese Economic Reform, opening up a prosperous future in which factories would be abundant with new employees and entrepreneurs impeccably groomed for business dinners and orders. The effect of this neoliberal reform was to start stirring up lust for “fashion,” a word that had been unspoken in the country for more than three decades. In a rapid transition, various attempts of large-scale fashion production came into formation, from the burgeoning outsourcing business of Western garment manufacturing in the Pearl River Delta region to self-employed individuals who built their businesses from knowledge gathered by community-based info-sharing systems in Zhejiang Village on the outskirts of Beijing. During this aggressive market-oriented period, productivity was the ultimate touchstone for successful fashion business models, tossing aside appreciation for authenticity and craftsmanship, effectively obliterating a sense of origin, and resulting in the anonymity of mass-market garment makers. Regardless, this course of fashion history, the cavity of creativity, made China a veritable petri dish for globally emergent modes of fashion practice.

Two decades before the internet was born, Marshall McLuhan

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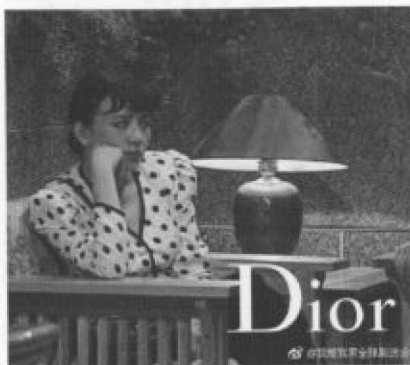
envisioned that the impending world of the electric circuit would heal the sensory alienation of an earlier media period, dominated by print forms and restricted by geographical boundaries.<sup>1</sup> New media, as McLuhan would have it, propagates a near-reality cyber world. It may go far beyond his utopian prophecy that this media verisimilitude in the construction of biased parallel worlds strengthens such alienation. In the most literal sense, screens have

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London and New York: Sphere, 1964).

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become the primary medium in forming the global perception of Asian-ness—including its social fabric, culture, and fashions. On the other end of the optical fibers connected to our screens, who or what generates new styles is an ever-changing mystery, particularly in the vast heterogeneous network we know as “China.”

At first, television was devised as a highly centralized tool for one-way information dissemination; its content is designed under strict criteria, and programming matches mainstream values. Social media, by comparison, has a decentralized approach, characterized by the



encouragement of user-generated content, disturbing the old power structure of centralized media. The most recent screen takeover hype by video-sharing platforms such as Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou has set an entirely new agenda for the production and consumption of fashion images. These online spaces are playgrounds for fashion, rapidly opening their gates to the non-professional masses. Traditional style imagery is overthrown by moving image clips defined by rapid obsolescence, breathing life and temporality back into the experience of fashion mediation. The latest Retina Display in our pocket is now the digital

prosthetic of our newly evolved fashioned body, from which we access the world in our search for style.

#### SITCOM

*I Love My Family* (我爱我家, 1993) was the first sitcom produced in Mandarin, and is still one of the most influential of its kind. Through the portrayal of an ordinary family in Beijing and their day-to-day social relations, the show restores a vision of the golden age when the Chinese market economy was brought into effect, and popular culture emerged as a shared national point of reference. In the last decade the sitcom

has set off a retrospective trend, with youth re-interpreting everyday outfits in the show, part of the revival of 1990s fashion in China. The costume design had a somewhat radical agenda in the context of the early 1990s. For example, a particular T-shirt worn by one of the show's main characters, Jia Zhixin, which appeared in many episodes, had the slogan 小本生意 ("small business") in a 1980s-style Chinese font, with a cartoonish figure using a calculator and wearing a cap emblazoned with "1993," signifying the year the show was made. This T-shirt has two layers of significance. On the one hand, there is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the then popularized slogan tee by British designers Katharine Hamnett and Vivienne Westwood, but more notably here, the political content is replaced by the self-deprecating humor of a young unemployed man who ventures on speculation. On the other hand, regarding the T-shirt as an imported, Western object detracts from the authentic picture that the show tried to create: it is almost impossible to neglect the trace—in respect of layout and typeface—of the summer workwear of government-owned enterprises founded during the Great Leap Forward.

The representation of Jia Zhixin, as well as his T-shirt, epitomized the young generation in the

1990s, who were brought up by an "in-system" family (whose members mainly work for the government and public institutions), but were attempting to "escape the system" and catch the wave of reform and opening up. This group oscillated between traditional values and brave new adventures, and kept searching for a place for their rebellious hearts to rest. The hybrid T-shirt has even found its place in today's e-commerce market. Zooming out of the context in terms of time and space, one might conclude that a collective sense of anxiety finds expression through the garment. Fashion becomes a vehicle that connects one's physical body with the social body, with the former offering an interface for analyzing the latter.

#### FROM ELITE TO ALGORITHM

In 1957, Georg Simmel discussed the antagonistic interplay between unity and segregation in fashion as it relates to social class—namely, that it both challenges and reinforces it. As he wrote, "[f]ashion is a form of imitation and so of social equalization, but, paradoxically, in changing incessantly, it differentiates one time from another and one social stratum from another. It unites those of a social class and segregates from others. The elite initiates a fashion and, when the mass

imitates it in an effort to obliterate the external distinctions of class, abandons it for a new mode—a process that quickens with the increase of wealth.<sup>2</sup> If considering sitcoms for their centralized approach to style initiated by an educated, media-specialist elite at the beginning of the new media age, the mass audience of these TV shows, in less critical ways, benefitted from a pleasant dictatorship that implemented the style guide in everyday life. By contrast, in today's internet age, relatively decentralized social media platforms distribute the previously concentrated monopoly to individual content makers. The perceived autonomy of viewers is confronted by the severe, prescriptive nature of the algorithm. In our private cyberspace, the personalized feed is attuned to our habits of usage; what you get is tailored to what it thinks you want to see.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

It was only recently that the content of short video-sharing platforms started causing a frenzy and spilled over into other social media channels, effectively consuming larger and larger amounts of our

2. Georg Simmel, "Fashion," *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 6 (1957): 541–558.

screen time. Fragmenting timelines with pieces of information, Douyin took over almost half of phone screens on public transport in Beijing. The app features a wide but particular range of fashionable video content, which has increasingly made its way to a broader global sphere, most notably the West—the old power center of fashion: moving image street style from hotspots Sanlitun in Beijing, Xintiandi in Shanghai, and Taikoo Li in Chengdu. Among these locations, Taikoo Li in Chengdu has gained the highest exposure, becoming the hottest rendezvous for street fashion videographers to seek out their subjects.

Large curtain walls embedded in the skeletons of ancient Chinese buildings conjure a surreal, anachronistic urban backdrop in these videos. Swipe up and down and you are, for a second, surrounded by a remix of "Boom Shaka Laka," followed by newly released Chinese hip-hop. Along with these addictive rhythmic beats, videos are organized in a surreal way: fashion peacocks are caught walking from a distance in seemingly ordinary moments, but by the time they approach and turn to the camera, a sudden shift to slo-mo highlights their feigned nonchalance. The veracity of their naturalness renders their identities (model or

passers-by) obscure. Perhaps the enchanting power of these contemporary short videos lies precisely within the ambiguity of identification and authorship. The camera becomes talent scouts overseeing model castings. And these footages form a radical HD avant-garde compared to the flat images from the Web 2.0 street style blogs. Fashion account operators on Douyin, as well as the stylish, half-performed subjects, are curated to the rules of the street runway and its emergent cinematic lens; you would be a misfit if you were too embarrassed to pose. There is, apparently, neither director nor script within this new ecosystem of the fashion image, where labor relations and employment do not exist, or at least, are never spelled out.

In fact, cases of professionally orchestrated performances (complete with a director) are common finds within these video streams, which only adds to their sartorial surrealism: a plump woman, in a dark green cheongsam and Chanel camellia slides with a Gucci monogram handbag and a miniature pig figurine in hand, runs up from behind a couple and splits them up, giving off a veneer of satisfaction with her victory.<sup>3</sup> The modes of

3. 不懂街拍, 果然空姐眼里容不得沙子,

cooperation between self-directed performers (models), videographers, and account operators, are tricky to decode. What we know is that the currency for the evaluation of the outcome is based on hits and reposts. If Douyin moves such performativity from theater to street, and from performer to general public, then it is possible to say that these actions, the posing on the spot and the orchestrated affair, are performance for occasions.

These occasions, whether for videographers who capture the clips, or passersby who dress for the event, cohesively contribute to emergent templates of fashion theater that are viewed millions of times online. They have, therefore, replaced the role of fashion's initiator—"the elite," in Simmel's elaboration—in the power structure of the fashion image system. These individuals are not bound by capital and social stratum, and thus sabotage the fixation of class identification in fashion. They serve up slapstick parodies of elite fashion, which are alternative in the sense that they do not properly belong to the industry but to the vast web of things floating on the internet, and the motley crew who work or play

2021, accessed October 27, 2021, v.douyin.com/RRYp91C.

to produce these things for a variety of incentives.

In the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin mapped out the genesis of European modernity as it unfolded as fashion consumption in nineteenth-century Paris. Through the post-industrial arcades, bourgeois social life was caught and formed in the flow of capital. He wrote that these arcades “undergo this ‘illumination’ not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias. Thus appear the arcades—first entry in the field of iron construction; thus appear the world exhibitions, whose link to the entertainment industry is significant.”<sup>4</sup> In the twenty-first century, the new economic and technological model of the shopping mall forms the perfect shell for such social life in fashion. The physical location of Taikoo Li is less important than its location tag on social media feeds. In this urban space a variety of everyday fashion is viewed, entertained, consumed, and digested, whilst the actual space where fashion happens is rendered increasingly

4. Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 14.

opaque. This popular shoot location thus becomes the phantasmagoria of fashion channels on Douyin; the arcades dematerialized. Building complexes are turning into a decontextualized runway that goes against the architectural intentions of their makers. They are transforming into a virtual site where real-life events do not happen, but rather concrete tiles, glass façades, landscaping, and clothes are used as props for digital image consumption. In this way, it is more surreal than a sitcom stage set.

Rem Koolhaas defines the postmodern megastructures of shopping malls as “Junkspace.” The fallout that coagulates during modernization, where approximate identities of buildings are experienced. “Junkspace is a Bermuda Triangle of concepts, an abandoned petri dish: it cancels distinctions, undermines resolve, confuses intention with realization. It replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more.”<sup>5</sup> Now large shopping malls in China encompass most fashion activities in their concrete grip, becoming the home of design ateliers, showrooms, runways, and video shoots. The homogeneity of Junkspace contributes nothing

5. Rem Koolhaas, “Junkspace,” *October* 100 (2002): 176.

more than identical idiosyncrasies to the continuous process of digitizing the physical world. Radical accumulation of user-generated fashion content fueled by the internet and its flatness (will soon) accomplish the online Junkspace.

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In recent times, fashion critics have begun to acknowledge the point at which digital media is overtaking the functionality of clothing, and fashion is predominantly experienced through screens.<sup>6</sup> Media technologies continue to morph and advance this shift from *wearing* to *viewing* a piece of clothing. Styling, shooting, retouching, and post-production all serve the purpose of viewing, watching, and being watched; they often take up more decisive roles than the original subject—clothing. Photo studios are transformed from physical entities into algorithms, and made to fit the digital space,

6. Femke de Vries observes: “To a large extent, fashion today takes place online. This is a two-dimensional context, mainly focusing on still images rather than on moving images, and is aimed at viewing a piece of clothing, not wearing it.” Femke de Vries, *Fashion Value - Undressing Ornament* (Eindhoven: Onomatopoeie, 2015), 60.

which is installable on every smart device. This compressed space encapsulates material desires and body fantasies into a simple click or swipe. With the KOL (“Key Opinion Leader,” the Asian term for influencer) economy having passed its adolescence in China, the once fluid term “influencer” has become not only an occupation but a central force of marketing. The alliance between social media influencers and e-commerce changes people’s connection to fashion objects into an abstract event—an event based on speculations, moods, emotions, beliefs, and which in turn converts image consumption into consumerism. The invisible laborers behind image/video post-production are being plunged into the tide of the fashion system by style makers and their audiences, becoming the constituents of the contemporary digital factory for fashion production. In this online Junkspace, there is no inherent difference between the photo retouchers and video editors, whose repetitive work requires specific skill sets, and those working on the assembly line—the oldest laborers in globalized fashion.

Waking up by the alarm and the screen, we are perpetual jetlagged.