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«À la mode à la mode» From Paris Fashion Week to Beijing «Chic»

The Paris Fashion Week is a highlight in the fashion calendar. Thousands of brands, creative designers, sellers and buyers and trade associations from throughout the world occupy various parts of the French capital to talk business, new trends and future stars. The fashion industry is a huge global enterprise and one of the European flagship industries whether in haute couture or prêt-à-porter (ready-to-wear). This success is built on a respect for tradition, craftsmanship and creativity. Creators are the driving force behind an industry that calls on consumers' hedonism, desire to emulate others or to celebrate their own individual identities.

Chinese cities, garment industries and fashion associations are keen to associate with European fashion designers and brands. I went to Paris keen to ascertain how China was represented at the Paris Fashion Week.

After all, China is the second largest economy in the world. It is also rated the 3rd largest fashion market after the USA and Japan. China's highest authorities have made the development of the creative industries an economic and policy priority. China has made the decision to develop its service industries and to transform the focus of its economy from "Made in China" to "Create in China". The country organizes important fashion shows and fairs notably in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. The Beijing "Chic" fair taking place every March is pushing for international credibility as China and Hong Kong are now the first export market for French and Italian prêt-à-porter. In the south of the country Shenzhen and Guangzhou, the main garment manufacturing centre, are organizing important fashion events to support match-making between European creators and local manufacturers or distributors.

To my astonishment the Chinese presence at the Paris Fashion Week was rather discreet. This contrasted with my experience of the large delegations attending music, book, design or film markets in Cannes, Frankfurt, Milan or Berlin.

Making in ways into fashion is key for China to develop its creative credentials. Fashion is the driving force of the textile and garment industries, a multibillion Euro global industry. Fashion also leads to the growth of retailing, ecommerce, new technology applications but also tourism. The textile industry not only creates employment and wealth, it is also the expression of tradition, customs, local cultures and craftsmanship, social values and heritage, the reinterpretation of the past, its enrichment. Like other cultural

industries fashion mines the cultural resources of territories and people to elevate a country's memory and traditions to contemporary relevance. Fashion is the expression of a country's taste and quality of life. It is also the vehicle for the development of creativity and innovation in society. Therefore the development of fashion in China is simultaneously the necessity to:

- Stimulate indigenous creation and talents.
- Re-discover tradition and craftsmanship.
- Reappropriate a rich history, culture and industry in a contemporary context.

Investment in fashion is a way for the country to understand its own sociological trends and behaviour as fashion is intrinsically linked with modernity and societal evolution. Chinese creators are bound to have a say in the development of local and global tastes, more so in a county so densely urbanized with a wealth of cultural resources.

Today high fashion is strongly associated with luxury. Consumption is somewhat conservative at the high end of the market as it is strongly linked the marketing activities of global brands. Wearing Louis Vuitton, a Burberry or a Gucci accessory is a sign of social differentiation, an indication of monetary success. It is also supporting the concept that pleasure, indulgency and the ephemeral are valuable experiences. The multimillion dollar strategy of luxury brands is to capture and monetize the desire of fashion conscious Chinese women and men who now have increased purchasing power. For the PPR Group (now Kering) (with brands such as Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent) Asia represents 35% of its total sales which represented 6.5 billion Euros in 2012 (+14% compared to 2011) for its luxury brands.

The need to imitate the wealthy will remain: imitation means not making an individual choice, being part of a group. Chinese and international consumers will soon switch to Chinese quality clothing brands to meet their new desire to be different and to celebrate local creation. The market potential is enormous: the middle class in China amount to some 300 million people. Like Japan before, China will switch from simple imitation at production and consumption levels to creation encouraged by its young designers who will want to bring Chinese ancestral crafts (in embroidery for instance) into the 21st century.



If China is also to become the country of the new, spectacular, beautiful and charming (all associated with fashion) it has to entrust the development of fashion to its creative forces and talents. Foremost, its policy should be geared towards supporting the training of designers, the development of incubators and clusters at city levels, promoting interactions and spillover impacts between creative professional and industries. Chinese distributors and investors should be encouraged to support local creation. Cities and fashion associations should take the best fashion designers abroad to participate in fashion fairs and to enable designers to confront their skills and creativity with those of European designers. Chinese financiers will have to take the risk of supporting creation with a view to establish Chinese fashion brands. China has yet to create the ecosystem that nurtures the emergence of creative companies, very

often micro-enterprises led by creative minds. This is bound to open opportunities for European fashion schools, incubation centres, design studios (fashion and graphics).

Fashion has branded cities like Paris, Milano, New York, Tokyo and London, contributing to their wealth and attractiveness. It will do the same for cities like Shenzhen or Tianjin that aspire to international status and a creative image. The belief that fashion can only come from Milano, Paris, London, New York or Berlin is now questioned in the same way as Hong Kong challenged Basel and New York as the natural place for the contemporary art market to the great benefit of Chinese artists.

Philippe Kern
Beijing, April 2013

Since 1999 KEA is a Brussels-based strategic consultancy and research centre providing advice, support and research in relation to creative industries, cultural, entertainment, media and sport sectors. KEA acts as a European hub to foster culture and creative industries and culture-based innovation. It believes in European integration as a visionary project.

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