

FASHION - AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURE:**THE CASE OF HONG KONG**

by

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Fashion represents the aspirations of both the individual and the collective consciousness, providing extrinsic cues which assimilate concepts of style, translated in terms of aesthetic sensibilities. In the form of wearable art, as a symbol of conspicuous consumption, alluding to a revolutionary spirit, or otherwise providing a cloak of mystery, the fashionable form of dress is taken as a symbol of culture - demonstrating country of origin and personal taste in one single or all-encompassing statement.

Inextricably entwined with the history of a nation or indeed mankind the fashion business has evolved to encompass marketing, management, technology, communication of intangibles and the all-too evident constraints of politics, economics and material supply. The 'fashionable woman' or man may be associated with time, place and a prevailing sense of beauty. A refined, sculpted, hi-tech or otherwise pleasing silhouette is supported by a myriad of developments which facilitate the merger of disparate disciplines - spanning engineering and science, art and alchemy - providing infinite variations on the theme of social correctness.

In the process of economic development a government or population may pose the question 'What constitutes economic success?' A sophisticated car manufacturing industry, a quantifiable treasure trove of artefacts, magnificent architecture, a thriving computer industry and/or demonstrable quality of life for the majority of citizens? The fashion industry may not come in first place in the wish list of developing or newly developed nations; nevertheless the general health, wealth and appearance of the populace relates to the (hitherto unmeasured) fashion index.

Most nations progress from the agrarian to the industrial society via the route of low-intermediate- high-technology; clothing production and the trading of the same is, in historic terms, the 'classic' development route, implying minimal investment of resources and maximal involvement of the existent labour pool. In the process of moving 'up market' a skilled workforce - employed by entrepreneurs with an evident flair for identifying export opportunities - is apparently worthless without a constant supply of talented designers capable of interpreting the needs, wants and desires of the target market. In short, economic development and the expression of taste must go hand in hand.

2. Historical Roots

Homespun Western philosophy suggests that 'the Devil makes work for idle fingers' hence, for centuries past, privileged women of position (and the not so privileged, obliged to fill every waking moment) from the recorded history of Ancient Greece wove tapestries and indulged in handicrafts to fill their spare time. A combination of manual dexterity and what may be loosely termed 'folklore' provided the techniques, patterns and derivations on tried-and-trusted themes to weave, stitch together, embroider or otherwise embellish cloth for rainments which denoted rank and familial associations. In China, the rich patterns of the minority 'tribes' constitute an inexhaustible formula for permutations from the basis of a language which is unique in colour, texture and form. All nations provide a similarly immeasurable vocabulary of images which generate pattern after pattern - evoking the dreams, natural habitat and general living conditions of the social group.

In extrapolating the theory of ethnic, geographically determined and historically defined 'parameters' which constitute a style of dress, it is conceivable that social class, rank, and general status of life would determine the appearance of the modern man or woman. Not so: in opening the 'Pandora's box' of international references, the fashion business has taken on board surfing, aerobics, the club scene, adventure and romance - borrowing concepts across the board to signify 'life' in all its complexity. Woman at leisure, man at work, the intellectual campus persona and the enigmatic 'I exist, therefore I am' existentialist all contribute to ... life's rich pattern in the fashionable context. And more.

3. Hong Kong at its Crossroads

The recent changes in Hong Kong's political history have been well documented and will not be touched upon in this paper. Approaching 1997, Hong Kong designers - whether in the fashion business or otherwise - addressed the issue of 'identity' with predictable results. Those who aligned with the West, for reasons of education, visual aptitude or personal preference, maintained that the directions of Europe (or those customised by North America) were exemplary. A second camp, arguably the most vociferous, maintained that a 'fusion' of East and West, as prescribed by advocates of Hong Kong's entrepot status, represented a leading competitive edge in business terms. A third, as yet in the minority, suggested that the motherland China (and hence the majority of the territory's population) afforded inspiration based on 5,000 years of history and the aspirations of 1.2 Billion persons - a formidable force in anyone's portfolio.

In the countdown to the handover, even as long ago as 1987, images and influences from 'the hinterland' provided food for thought, inspiration for collections and a controversial headline or two for local designers. The dilemma was this: how to express 'local' identity and render resultant merchandise in a 'global' or otherwise commercial formula. Some opted for a controversial approach: William Tang with his outrageous interpretation of the cheongsam; Peter Lau with his 'China Dolls', Pacino Wan with the Union Jack ablaze and Flora Cheong Leen with a pared down, ethereal version of the Empress adorned 20th Century style. In the course of 10 years the permutations provoked a 'rage' in China for all things Hongkongese: music, drama, films and fashion, each representing the Western facet of a populace too constrained by politics and fiscal reserves to strike out, fashion wise.

Today, the presence of Shanghai - a former Eastern fashion capital and China in all its enormity - overshadows the 'pinhead on the map' which signifies Hong Kong. Phasing out of quotas, harmonisation both cultural and economic, the rationalisation of the education system and a general shift of emphasis will likely relegate the territory to a position of relative anonymity. In this, brief period Hong Kong continues to assert itself as the leading clothing exporter of the region, arbiter of all things relevant to the international market and above all, originator of a distinct Eastern look.

In combining the strengths of market cognisance, economic prowess, technological leadership and 'guangxi' (connections) the average wheeler-dealer business man has demonstrable advantages on the world-wide stage.

4. Hong Kong's Future Scenario

After the crossroads comes the path, and millions of Hong Kong dollars have been invested in the process of predicting the same. According to one team of forecasters the formula is broken down into the elements of flexibility in production, understanding customers in different markets, coordinating production, provision and allocation of managerial resources for plants outside of Hong Kong, 'one-stop shopping', reorganisation of public institutions in support of industry's efforts, harnessing of low-wage manufacturing sites, increase of supply of Hong Kong managers and general attention to training. The role of the blue jeans denim product, a mainstay of Hong Kong's clothing industry in the early years of its development, is a key focus of the analysis of the territory's competitive abilities and a projected future strength to contribute to general economic stability. The importance of the jeanswear sector is not underestimated, yet sophisticated pattern and sample making represent much more to the local clothing executive and the fashion designers accustomed to promoting their own, individual handwriting.

Hong Kong's 40-somethings have broken the barrier, creativity wise, prohibiting the export and promotion of locally-derived labels; Hong Kong's 20-somethings are, in their turn, presenting new collections which spell out cultural identity with the energy of change to support their initiatives. Having provoked, cajoled, feted and otherwise endured the attentions of overseas press in an endeavour to spread the word that Hong Kong - if not China and South East Asia - have something more to offer than a dextrous workforce - further attention to cultural cues and perceptions of beauty is deserved. If fashion represents the prevailing taste of our times, then the eclectic if not arbitrary assimilation of style and extrinsic cues representing the same commands attention. It is time, in effect, for a re-evaluation of culture in the fashion context. Alternatively for the 'winds of change' to breath some freshness into the wardrobes and lives of men and women who have the resources and discernment to choose how to present their persona to the outside world.