

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

## Is promoting diversity in fashion ads a mistake in China?

July 22, 2020



*While China's mainstream sees diversity in fashion ads as the West's excessive political correctness, the fashion-forward crowd sees a much-needed change. Image credit: Hailun Ma Photography*

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Fashion's culture wars are dividing Chinese millennials. In June, a series of fashion and beauty moves, including a [Calvin Klein](#) pride campaign featuring the black trans model Jari Jones and the decision by some top beauty groups to take their skin-whitening products off the market in China, polarized opinions across the country's social media landscape.

While the mainstream overwhelmingly saw these radical changes as a byproduct of the West's excessive political correctness, the fashion-forward crowd recognized these debates as the start of a much-needed change in their country.

On June 28, #CKnewAd became the top trending hashtag on China's Twitter-like Weibo, while drawing an avalanche of critical comments. The Calvin Klein ad, which put a plus-size, transgender, black model in the spotlight, was a profound contrast to Chinese society's extremely rigid beauty standards.

Unfamiliar with the complex cultural history of [LGBTQ+](#) and black injustice in Western societies, a large number of [Weibo](#) users commented that the ad was "socially harmful and misleading to children," believing the ad was actively promoting obesity.

Meanwhile, during this moment of heightened [U.S.-China tensions](#), a growing cohort of digital nationalists also flocked to online forums to criticize the advertisement as proof of Western decadence. To them, the image represented everything wrong about the West's notions of progress it was too absorbed with being politically correct, too obsessed with hashtags, and too far from traditional beauty.

But on the other end of the spectrum, Weibo's fashion communities have been overflowing with voices of support for the CK ad. Those holding this opinion see these debates as a wake-up call for China's patriarchal society and have explained that women's underwear ads are meant to inspire women rather than please men.

However, both of these ideologies are missing the central message of the ongoing culture wars, which is to

celebrate diversity.

Calvin Klein's ad featuring a black, overweight, lesbian trans model stimulated some positive comments on Weibo from Chinese women, but only because they saw the advertisement as breaking from traditional beauty conventions. "Their understanding of this ad was feminist, not racial or pro-LGBT," said Laurence Lim Dally, founder of Cherry Blossoms Intercultural Branding.

Despite their "**wokeness**" on other social fronts, China's young fashion audience has remained insulated from issues of racial diversity all while China's fashion community faces its own diversity problems.

On June 1, the domestic jewelry brand **Chow Tai Fook** posted a campaign showing a fair-skinned model alongside a black model. The post was soon flooded with tens of thousands of comments saying the ad was disgusting, with some even going as far as accusing the brand of "wanting to turn China into a country of immigrants."

Along with its deep-rooted racism, China's media space is also dominated by a sense of ethnocentrism. Although China is a diverse country with 56 official ethnic groups, non-Han Chinese are extremely rare in domestic advertising or media representations.



*Chow Tai Fook's June 1 campaign showing black skin created a controversy online. Image credit: Chow Tai Fook's official Weibo account*

Despite being in an environment that increasingly embraces conservatism, some of the bravest **KOLs** and designers have voiced support for more diversity, calling on mainstream China to rethink its conservative stances on race and beauty.

@PiPiJuice, an influential fashion blogger with nearly 1.6 million fans on Weibo, recently published a post concerning the absence of ethnic minorities in Chinese fashion media that stated, "Despite how our propaganda

songs sing words like '56 ethnic minorities are one family,' where are they in the media?"

Chinese designer Susan Fang has ventured into Xinjiang, a northwestern region with a mostly Turkic Uyghur population, to shoot photos for the brand's SS20 campaigns.

Although these gestures might seem trivial by global fashion standards, they are the disruptive first steps needed in breaking the Han pre-eminence in Chinese fashion circles.



Chinese designer Susan Fang's SS20 campaign is photographed in Xinjiang. Image credit: @Susan Fang's Weibo account

In an email interview with *Jing Daily*, @PiPiJuice said a lack of a multicultural history was the leading cause of China's current struggle with diversity representation. "Diversity is more of an imported concept than it is a native Chinese term," she said. "China's long history of unification, massive population and an ingrained sense of collectivism are all reasons why most niche cultures end up assimilating into the mainstream."

Cultural preferences for standardization and hegemony also cause Chinese viewers to get easily agitated when seeing images that stray from their aesthetic norms. That explains why, when the beauty group **L'Oral** decided to eliminate the word "**whitening**" from product catalogs as a reaction to the #BLM movement, the decision created widespread negative sentiment across China.

Cherry Blossom's Lim Dally said that "fair skin equals beauty in China. Chinese women wish to be allowed to consider white skin as a beauty criterion, which has been the case for centuries, in the same way as Western women aspire to tanned skin without being considered as racist."

Since each has very different histories, China and the West were bound to have divergent ideas about diversity.

First, diversity in China's fashion scene means seeing more representations of Asians in the media. "Racial diversity in China is about the dichotomy between Asians and Caucasians," Lim Dally added.

"What matters the most to a Chinese audience is to see more Asian women represented in Western brands' communications." While fashion's usual diversity playbook showing people of color or members of the LGBTQ

community does succeed in drawing attention, a lack of media exposure means these topics won't resonate as much in China.



Designer Guo Pei's SS 2020 Haute Couture collection inspired by Tibetan culture has been accused of cultural appropriation. Image credit: Weibo

Second, diversity means demanding a more nuanced understanding of Chinese or pan-Asian culture.

As @PipiJuice told *Jing Daily*, "Chinese youth have sharpened their radar for cultural appropriation, especially when brands do it to Asian cultures. If John Galliano's Asia Major' Dior collection was published today, he wouldn't pass public acceptance."

The same level of sensitivity applies to Chinese designers, too. When designer Guo Pei launched her SS 2020 Haute Couture collection inspired by Tibetan culture, the collection's overt display of Buddhist motifs were criticized as being "disrespectful."

Despite the diversity disconnect between Chinese youth and their Western counterparts, current debates on China's Internet proves that the country has at least started moving toward more meaningful conversations.

As the global culture wars continue to rage, more debates will follow. That will push more netizens to learn about the world beyond themselves, at which point fashion's call for diversity could start taking off in China.

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