

MARKETING

How a brand can build a cliché-proof Chinese style

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Due to China's rising economic power, contemporary Chinese identity is becoming a popular theme in fashion media. What can brands learn from these stories? Image credit: Harper's Bazaar China

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In China, one of the most consistent themes in fashion has been international brands attempting and failing at Chinese aesthetics. Be it an "Ode to China" collection, a Chinese New Year capsule, or simply a campaign dedicated to the region, big names such as [Dolce & Gabbana](#) and [Burberry](#) have committed frequent gaffes that became waves of social backlash and, sometimes, consumer boycotts.

While plenty of critiques and social media posts have been dedicated to flagging fashion's cultural appropriation problem, few brands have actually turned to the emerging Chinese creative community for their perspectives.

Due to China's rising economic power and nationalist sentiments in a post-[COVID-19](#) world, contemporary Chinese identity has increasingly become a popular theme for fashion media to explore.

In the past few months, [Harper's Bazaar China](#), [Marie Claire China](#) and [T Magazine China](#) have all come up with cover stories that present different visions of a modern Chinese look. But instead of showing the typical color palettes of rich red, opulent gold, and jade green like Western media often do, they have presented more subtle explorations.

In a field where the line between admiration and appropriation has grown thinner and thinner, these looks provide a fresh solution for brands that want to build a relevant, cliché-proof cultural aesthetic.

Forget about Chinatowns

There is a common misconception in the sphere of luxury and fashion that China is synonymous with Chinatowns in Western metropolises.

When approaching a pan-Asian topic, brands tend to rely on the Chinatown district in their respective cities for patterns, sounds and inspirations. This assumption that the "China already inside the West" will be relatable to the real China thousands of miles away has long been problematic.

Wei Liu, the founder of a United Kingdom-based biannual publication on Asian women's fashion called *WOW*

magazine, told *Jing Daily* that this approach must end.

"Western production teams who have a limited understanding of China tend to rely on Chinatown as a cultural backdrop," Mr. Wei explained. "They tend to go for familiar and easily identifiable elements like chopsticks and lanterns to represent the culture. That is why a lot of those images appear outdated to young people in China, while some go as far as saying such an outdated vision of their country is offensive."

That is not to say that all the Chinatown symbols or any of the Chinoiserie genres are merely fiction. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The classic Chinatown aesthetic originally drew upon obvious cultural emblems such as dragons and the color red. The problem with drawing inspiration from Chinatown was not that it was a false culture but that it has become part of a Western culture that makes no distinction between the China inside the West and the always-changing country on the other side of the globe.

To stop perpetuating this cycle of "outdated, offensive" images of China, brands must put their feet on the ground in China, both physically and theoretically.

Break down the Big Idea

Generalization is always a bad strategy when it comes to cultural subjects.

So when brands launch collections with grandiose sounding names, like "A Tribute to China" or "Love Letter to China," they already sound like an oversimplification of a Chinese aesthetic.

Such was the case for Delvaux's "China Dream" handbags, where the sweeping name and the bags' stereotypical prints of mahjong and qipao in bright red were inevitably seen as banal.

Gugu Wang, deputy style director of *Harper's Bazaar China*, said to *Jing Daily* that breaking down a big idea into specific themes is crucial.

"*Bazaar China* has been showing and expressing the so-called Chinese Aesthetic for a long time," Ms. Wang said. "Last year, we made the September issue about the nation's rivers, lakes and seas (). This year in the October issue, we turned to cotton, China grass, silk and cashmere (). Using concrete forms and finding regional themes has always been our premise."

In the first example, the imagery of rivers and lakes has symbolic weights in the Chinese definition of "terroir."

In the second, a reference to China's traditional fabrics looks at the country's cultural identity from a sartorial perspective.

"To capture this country's beauty, you have to go deep into its different regions and landscapes, and think from a grander cultural perspective," Ms. Wang said.

Including a personal and emotional take on China can be equally compelling.

"For one of our issues that focused on heritage, we asked photographers from different backgrounds to tackle this theme," said *WOW Magazine's* founder Mr. Wei. "Two Chinese photographers came back with a documentary on a traditional wedding in Xinjiang and a personal family story in rural Fujian. Although these are not the finest images of China, they were powerful and touching."

Instead of focusing on a grand idea of China, brands would be better off thinking small, hyperlocal and even personal.

After all, China is a vast country whose luxury audiences are getting increasingly fragmented, diverse, and demanding. A simplistic cultural narrative no longer works.

Look beyond heritage

Today, luxury brands have overwhelmingly viewed a China-themed project as a way to tap into their "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" or "Last Emperor" fantasies.

When the word "culture" pops up, brands routinely seek inspiration from the culture's distant past. But despite China's rich history, the country's optimistic, affluent young consumers are more interested in the present and future, as they are surrounded by patriotic hymns about eternal progress and growth.

That is where the trending term "digitized Chinese heritage chic ()," coined by netizens to describe a style that fuses

technology, futurist fashions and traditional Chinese patterns, comes into play.

Combining cultural pride in the country's past and a faith in its future, the style has continued to gain ground in China's **Gen-Z** circles. Photos mixing a **Cyberpunk** look and traditional Chinese architecture have been trending on social media.

This same idea of retro-futurism can also be seen in **Dior's** 2019 popup store in **Chengdu**.

For the worldwide launch of the house's Pre-Fall 2019 men's collection by **Kim Jones**, the brand set up a giant robot installation within a backdrop of sleek skyscrapers and ancient temples.

Mixing modernity, antiquity and technology, Dior's surreal-looking popup was the perfect response to China's identity zeitgeist.

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