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CULTURES, FASHION AND SOCIETY'S *notebooks* **2016**

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The “Cultures, Fashion and Society’s Notebooks” are one of the activities which originate from the “Culture Fashion Communication – International Research Group”, to strengthen and give new development perspectives to a network of scholars and experts, who have been studying for several years the phenomena linked to the fashion system, consumer goods and lifestyles with an innovative interdisciplinary method. The Research Group studies the fashion system and lifestyle dynamics as privileged analysis tools of contemporary trends and transformations by looking not only at the virtuous interconnections between social-liberal art disciplines, but also by directing great and ever increasing interest in the contact zones with the cultures of planning and design, computer science, technological applications.

Besides its interdisciplinary feature, the Group has a strong international vocation as it is already supported by a sound network of relationships and collaborations with foreign scholars, who have been active and involved in different ways in the field of cultural and fashion studies for many years.

In like manner to the “Culture Fashion Communication – International Research Group”, this new series (published on yearly basis since 2015) has a multidisciplinary and transversal approach to methodologies and traditional academic knowledge encouraging readings and languages suited for the study of the complex landscape of the contemporary.

Within each Notebook, every year a different editor will be responsible for the publications of the various subjects (monographic essays, miscellaneous collections, conferences and one-day workshops).

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Korea vs Paris

There Is No Fashion, Only Image or How to Make Fashion Identity

Wessie Ling

Making Fashion Identity

It is true, to a certain extent, that «the identity of a fashion centre is constituted not by a particular national style or regional costume, but by the localised capabilities that produce new styles or redefine old ones. Such capabilities include the presence of key industry activities – production, design marketing and distribution... [and] the interaction and coordination between industry actors” (Rantisi 2015: 261). For a viable fashion centre, several key factors are believed to be fundamental (*ibid*). They can be categorised as (a) place-specific elements, namely training and research institutes, cluster of skill and specialised subcontractors, promotional infrastructure and links between fashion and other cultural industries (Scott 2002); (b) fashion centre as a site for consumption (Gilbert 2006) and (c) the interaction and coordination within the fashion industry. In recent years, emerging fashion centres from Seoul to Stockholm to Shanghai to Hong Kong have taken production, design marketing, distribution, consumption and links within and across the fashion industry as key infrastructure for the construction of their own fashion system. Yet, can an identity for a fashion centre be constituted without a distinctive look and/or an outstanding style? How did a recognisable style or look be constituted in the first place? Is there a mechanism for its construction?

This article discusses the construction of fashion identity through two cases: Paris and Korea. While Paris provides a definitive checklist constituting to a viable fashion identity, the rise of Korean fashion provides an alternative insight into its making in the 21st century.

The place-specific elements in Paris

Despite the understanding of commercial benefits with a distinguish identity for a fashion centre, there has been a lack of comprehension of its formation let alone cultivation when it comes to investment and policymaking. It is worth noting that a fashion identity has not “emerged” out of accident, in historic and contemporary times. Reference can be made to the construction of a viable fashion identity through the case of the capital de la mode, Paris. A century of economic stability and political power of Versailles under the reign of Louis XIV remains the key sustainable factor for Paris in the world of fashion. The visionary project of Minister of Finance Jean Baptiste Colbert and Louis XIV to centralise and legitimatise the production and consumption of French luxury goods (Dejean 2005, Kawamura 2004) would be impossible to replicate in contemporary times. It allowed French clothing manufacturing to flourish, tastemakers such as Queen Marie Antoinette to disseminate influence, domestic consumption of luxury goods and French fashion in full bloom. Paris became a significant cultural centre in the eighteenth century, then a capital of modernity in science, politics, culture as well as fashion in the next century (*ibid.*). Followed suit was the establishment of haute couture as the centre of excellent giving rise to the first generation of haute couturiers. Through Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture Parisienne (est. 1868), haute couture shows were henceforth systematically scheduled, industrial quality standard was set and the status of haute couture was legitimatised. Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale

de la Couture (est. 1927) was subsequently established to train a highly skilled workforce for the sector. Albeit the decline of haute couture customers around the world, Paris managed to transit to ready-to-wear in the 1960s gratitude to the wave of distinctive créateurs, many of whom were actively engaged in foreign markets and licensing. Followed suit was the Federation Française de la Couture du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode (est. 1973) to represent both haute couturiers and the créateurs. A coalition of local and national stakeholders – cooperation between the industry, haute couture and political power – helped French fashion to sustain its premiere position in the fashion map in the 1980s (Godart 2014; Steele 1988; Lipovetsky 1987).

Paris as a site for fashion consumption

Thereafter, two fashion groups (LVMH and PPR) have dominated the operation of Paris fashion. Through the acquisitions of foreign brands and the employment of talents from other fashion cities to Paris, the capital has since legitimised designers and endorsed trends. As a desirable fashion destination, shopping in Paris has been a grandiose affair since the 19th century when the famous department stores opened on the grand boulevards. Popular cultures, the creative industries, and the mega global fashion industry and its consumers joined force, altogether extenuates the aura of Paris as an urban centre and a fashion capital (Agin 1999).

The excellent networks within the fashion industry

Besides, the capital dominates the symbolic presence of fashion and maintains excellent global networks and exchanges through major

international trade fairs such as *Premiere Vision* and the highly regarded *Paris Fashion Week* (Godart 2014). Outstanding infrastructure, global networks, top-notch consumption site and interaction within and across the fashion industry lay a strong foundation for Paris as the dominant world fashion player. Nurture within is a viable fashion identity that has lasted for more than a century.

Parisian chic and elegance

The image of French fashion is totally subsumed under Parisian symbolic power so much as the capital's cultural, economic and political power have overtaken the French national space. It is noteworthy that the Parisian fashion identity has taken shape not solely because of the distinctive style of the haute couturiers or créateurs but by the symbolic force that the capital has been cultivated through socio-cultural and political investment. Throughout the centuries, French literature, art and cinema have taken on and reinforced the Parisian style which can be summed up in two recurring terms, "chic" and "elegance" (Rocamora 2009: 75). Ever since the birth of French fashion press, these images have been intrinsic to the façade of Paris and its fashion. Their long-standing and imaginary presence spread across the literal field which altogether mythologised Paris fashion. Unsure is who and where first started to encapsulate elegance and chic for Paris fashion. Apparent within these images is a strong symbolic power observed and preserved by the cooperative workforce, creative labour, international media and the discerning consumers (Ling 2008). The capital's specificity of luxury and fashion industries has thus proliferated other industry to flourish (Godart 2014). Reckoned with which is the soft power that has made inroad into sales and marketing, commercial branding and nation building.

The Cool Factor of Korean Fashion

French fashion image is a parcel of the Parisian identity so much as fashion is part of the creative industry which cannot be separated from socio-cultural, political and economic movement. The recent rise of Korean fashion sheds further light into the mechanism of symbolic production. Over the past decade, Korea has been positioned at the most lucrative of crossroads where fashion, music, entertainment and celebrity collide to form a nebulous cool factor. Although the establishing infrastructure of Korean fashion industry can trace back to 1960s following the increased made in Korea exported clothing (Geum et al 2015), the rising international attention of its fashion in recent years has close link with South Korean policy on the creative industry. With the aim to match the world's leading exporters of culture like Japan and Britain, the South Korea government has, since 2000, invested in its creative industry as a form of soft power. The export of local cultural goods to East Asia was first driven by the spread of K-drama, K-pop across East, South and Southeast Asia. From regional development into a global phenomenon, the Korean Wave has turned Korea into a major exporter of popular culture and tourism forming a significant part of its burgeoning economy (Jin 2012, Nye 2009, Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). The global sensation of Hallyu style, K-pop culture and the Korean TV and cinema have boosted the appeal of Korea's fashion market among Asian and Western consumers alike. Actors, actresses and singers emerged from Korean pop and media culture received widespread popularity in the Chinese and Asia-Pacific market so as the fashion and style they adopted. Irrespective of a unified style from these popular idols, the cool factor is the image marker for the followers.

Korean Fashion the Kingmaker

From regional to global, the coolness of Korean fashion, the styles and fashion adopted in its entertainment circuits are wildly circulated. Leading to which is the recognition of Korea as the “Kingmaker” within the global fashion industry. While it may not be regarded the king of fashion, the cool factor of its national brand, combined with its influential stylish products and popular culture, makes it a regional kingmaker (Young 2015). Global brands are developing exclusive items targeted for the refined Korean consumers, as a way to enter the wider Asian fashion market. South Korea is taken as a pivotal point for its sensitive response to new trends given its capability to translate desirable taste to the regional market especially China (Onishi 2006) (**Fig. 1**). As seen were the staging of Chanel 2015 cruise collection in Seoul; (Longo 2015) the opening of Asia biggest Christian Dior flagship store in Gangnam (June, 2015); Lancôme’s and Dior’s partnership with Korean beauty brands for product development; media giant Condé Nast international conference in Seoul (March, 2015), and LVMH’s US\$80 million worth of shares in YG Entertainment, a major K-pop agency representing key Korean players and celebrities, for the benefit of product placement in K-pop shows (Twiggy 2016). The trend-savvy consumers in the domestic market take beauty to the extreme given the widespread practice of cosmetic surgery across the generations (**Fig. 2**). Fashion, plastic surgery and cultural tourism have formed a significant part of Seoul’s economy (Han and Lee 2008).

Korean Fashion Serves Its Own Wave

The emergence of fashion industry also gave rise to a world-class creative fashion labour whose influential force has been growing at

home and abroad. Although few fashion consumers can name an individual Korean fashion designer, “Korean fashion” has become a household name, a force to be reckoned with throughout the Asia-Pacific region (Leong 2014). Recent years saw “Korean fashion” as a brand penetrating into other emerging regional markets such as Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore. The preference for “Made In” and “Created In Korea” fashion products is prevalent among Asian consumers who are willing to pay more than those from China. The size of the country’s overall apparel and footwear market has grown from \$23.5 billion to \$27.8 billion between 2010-2015 according to Euromonitor International; during the same period, the size of the designer category has soared from \$2.7 billion to \$4.6 billion (Young 2015).

Conclusion

In sum, the case of Paris has unveiled its mechanism for a viable fashion identity. Gratitude to its century’s economic and political stability, the luxury industry was firmly in place prior to the arrival of fashion créateurs, who, were then promoted as creative genius. The chic and elegance that define the Parisian style retain an aura of Paris and have since been preserved by a cooperative workforce of creative labour across the industry. Alternatively, the cool factor generated by K-drama and K-pop gives rise to the image of Korea fashion. Unlike France where a solid foundation of apparel and textile industry were in place prior to the arrival of fashion designers, the image of cool affiliated with Korean fashion facilitates it to negotiate a place in the global fashion market. While government and industrial investment were substantial in promoting Paris fashion, the South Korean government initiative to export its creative industry in the millennium year had not included fashion. Korean fashion is seen surfing its own

wave generated by the Hallyu. What the Korean wave has propagated for the Korean fashion industry are Dongdaemun as a site for fast-fashion production and consumption (**Fig. 3**), the rise of Korean fashion designers and the creative fashion labour and regional consumption of Korean beauty products. The answer as to what exactly is Korean fashion or K-fashion or how it can be defined cannot be satisfactory. The fact that the style promulgated by the Korean pop culture, as seen by many, is the quintessential arbiter of cool, to which Korea fashion is assigned. The case in point here, for the trend-savvy consumers, is Korea as a place for 'cool' fashion and beauty products. Albeit various trajectories in the construction of their fashion centre, apparent in both cases – Paris and Korea – is their relation with the economic movement and cultural policy. While a formula to constitute a fashion identity cannot be concluded, both cases reviewed the essence of a national style or "look" for various degrees of the recognition for their fashion centre. As such, fashion identity has not been constituted unilaterally. The emerging style or "look" has close link with the software of the adjacent culture and creative industry as much as fashion being part of it.

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Fig. 1: Posters promoting shopping activity outside of a building in Dongdaemun district. Left poster is written in simplified Chinese characters with the image of pandas targeting Mainland Chinese tourists. The text reads: Welcome to the shopping centre.
Photo by Wessie Ling.



Fig. 2: A modern building dedicated to plastic surgery in the upmarket Gangnam district in Seoul.
Photo by Wessie Ling.



Fig. 3: Typical view of fast-fashion and mass-produced merchandises sold in a shopping mall in Dongdaemun.
Photo by Wessie Ling.