

## China: Hyper-Consumerism, Abstract Identity

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**Abstract:** Is the 21st century the Chinese century? Westernization has changed nearly all facets of life in China, except for politics (Wu, 2009). This has created mass-confusion, enthusiasm, rebellion, romanticism, and idealism. The 1990s manufacturing industries continued to dominate the acceleration of consumerism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and created, more than ever, a bizarrely giant, abstract world of identity that is self-created and sustained.

This paper examines the politics of abstract desire, hyper-consumerism, and the notion of fantasy in the Chinese fashion industry. Today, hundreds of giant “hyper-malls” found all over China are connected to the distribution of fake “stuff.” These commercial emblems have become an integral part of China’s visual and social landscape. The marketplace of fake goods using Western brand images (e.g. logos) has grown for centuries to become an abstract superstructure of falsely branded lifestyles and design integrity. The global rise of hyper-consumerism gave China the ultimate opportunity to create a new identity for itself while importing the dream of luxury: *The Buying Power*.

This paper focuses on abstracting the notion of hyper-consumerism and interrogating the relationship between visual advertisement, its materiality, and its representation in the global marketplace. How does advertising contribute to the production of consumer goods? Can we create a cyclical vision for new materials? How is the value of luxury created, displaced, transformed, and consumed through space and time?

**Keywords:** Luxury - Identity - Exclusivity - Authenticity - Fake - Spirituality - Consumption - Hyper consumption - Malls.

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between national, rural and urban identities, examining the politics of abstract desire, hyper-realistic landscape, and the notion of fantasy.

## Introduction

Is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the Chinese century? Westernization has changed nearly all facets of life in China, except for politics (Wu, 2009). This has created widespread confusion, enthusiasm, rebellion, romanticism, and idealism. The 1990s' manufacturing industries continued to dominate the acceleration of consumerism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The rise of hyper-consumerism gave China the ultimate opportunity to create a new identity for itself while importing the "dream" of luxury. By transferring Westernized ideas of consumption into visual symbols, production systems, and communication tools, China channeled an idealized fantasy world.

This paper focuses on the notion of hyper-consumerism. By examining the rise of consumerism, quest for individuality, social impact of giant retail spaces, luxury, authenticity, and spirituality, this dissertation challenges the recent changes in the study of fashion and globalization. It underlines recent questions related to economic, social, and cultural logics related to consumption and communication of the constructed significances of fashion.

## Context

Since China opened its doors to the world in 1979, businesses grew rapidly and took a high position into fierce global competitive spaces. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, vast quantities of the Chinese workforce went from being farmers to steel workers to business professionals. The economic growth in China is very significant to all industries. According to its culture and history, China has always encouraged an idea or an object to be spread among people of all classes. Based on this belief, one can argue that popularization of fashion to the masses is a positive cultural advancement for the East.

In the 1980s, the rise of television, print, and other media sources as a means of communication greatly contributed to the commercialization of fashion. The growth of television played a particularly important role in forging a path to the rise of the fashion "copies" or "inspiration." Television programs shown in Japan and Hong Kong provided fashion inspirations for the Chinese to copy. Hong Kong served as both a conduit and a filter of Western fashions and values to China, thus promoting Western television and movie stars to be slowly copied on the mainland. The popularity of fashion inspired by television programs also had an impact on early fashion marketing in China. Private merchants marketed products reflecting the popular television characters even if their merchandise had little connection to the original styles. Wu (2009) notes that the "so-called socialist merchants of the time learned not only how to make money with fashion but also the value of celebrity marketing" (p. 24).

Chinese fashion agents understood very early that importing fashion media icons into the image production of a "dream" was very valuable. As such, members of the music,

television, and movie scenes have acted as role models and authorities for young consumers. For example, among the most famous musicians were Taiwanese pop singers Deng Lijun and Teresa Teng; the 1980s boy band “Little Tigers”; the 1990s group of male singers known as “Four Heavenly Kings” from Hong Kong; Canto-pop singer Faye Wong; and the South Korean boy band known as “H.O.T.” Moving forward, in 2017, Angelica Cheung (2014), Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue China* and former investment banker, discussed methods of reaching the youth through celebrities on social platforms. Most of the Chinese millennials, due to the one child policy, grew up in wealthier families. As adults, they now “consume for the sake of consuming, without any purpose” (Cheung, 2014). Brands using celebrities as a vehicle to popularize products are reaching fans around the globe and promote these high levels of “blind” hyper-consumption.

Fashion Print media blossomed in the 1980s. Magazines such as *Qingnian yidai* (the young generation), *Zhongguo funv* (women of china), *Shizhuang* (fashion), *Xiandai Fuzhuang* (modern dress and dress making), and *Zhongguo fuzhuang* (China garment) led the way to this new industry and high levels of consumption. Many of these magazines included practical patterns and sewing instructions. Some of the television stations in the 1980s also offered long-distance dressmaking lessons to their fashion-hungry audiences. Wu (2009) notes that “starting in the winter of 1981, a Shanghai television station began airing a popular tailoring program that featured famous master tailors giving lessons on pattern making, the calculation of material usage, and other tailoring techniques” (p. 26). The Chinese understood decades ago that technology, and the creation of on-air and online education service system, was the future of education. Online education was originally created to accommodate and extend education to people in rural areas but has now evolved into a billion dollars industry attracting millions of online viewers across China. The relationship between fashion design and its manufacturing was symbiotic from its early development. Factories were designing garments and selling them directly to customers and buyers. Several large factories funded fashion exhibitions for their designers and sent their work overseas to international trade shows and competitions (Wu, 2009). The creative system, being closely linked to the production system, also gave new opportunities for female factory workers to become “supermodels.” Wu (2009) found that “these models modeled only part-time and returned to their factory posts after shows. Their training encompassed not only fitness, body movement, and make up techniques, but also sewing. They were called *shizhuang yanyuan* (fashion actors)” (Wu, 2009, p. 158). This influenced the implantation of new degree programs across China. Suzhou Institute of Silk Technology established China’s first modeling degree program in 1989 and the Chongqing Institute of Engineering, in southwest China, announced in September 2017, an “internet celebrity” program for students who want to be live-streaming stars (Zhen, 2017).

Although the Chinese print media was becoming influential, Western ideas and imagery were still used to promote fashion ideals. For example, in the 1980s, the creative teams of Chinese magazines often used Caucasian models with blond hair and blue eyes. Today, this image is still used in China to promote a certain aesthetic; recently, at The New Century Global Center in Chengdu, a giant monitor above an artificial pool of water screened a Victoria Secret runway show featuring a performance by Taylor Swift. This display both supported and represented the escapism via vacation and a Western concert experience.



Figure 1. New Global Center, Taylor Swift, August 2016. Photo credits: Joseph Jagos.

In the early 1990s, the traditionally discreet Chinese population suddenly became outspoken through “cultural” t-shirts (Wu, 2009). Printed Chinese characters featured messages such as: “Only my mom is best in this world”, “My future is not a dream”, and “A peaceful life for all good people”. Other t-shirts were more rebellious and conveyed messages such as, “I only follow my feelings” and “Getting rich is all there is.” As this fashion trend began to turn into a broader national trend, the government issued “emergency regulations” and formally banned the manufacture and sale of “unhealthy” cultural shirts in Beijing. The news promoted mottos such as “Study hard and make daily progress” and “I must train myself for the construction of the motherland” (Wu, 2009). In January 2018, China announced the ban of hip-hop culture and tattoos from all media sources (Pasha-Robinson, 2018). Gao Changli, the publicity department director at the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People’s Republic of China promoted regulations such as “Absolutely do not use actors who are tasteless, vulgar and obscene. Absolutely do not use actors whose ideological level is low and have no class. Absolutely do not use actors with stains, scandals and problematic moral integrity” (as cited in Pasha-Robinson, 2018).

China aims to promote a positive and healthy image on all media platforms. Since the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese have been developing strong new values and embracing individuality of contemporary culture in an attempt to have a rapport with the outside world. While contemporary advancements are made towards culture, the Chinese government at large still attempts to administer and regulate what's distributed.

## Luxury: Object / Experience

Hyper-consumption is often defined as the extreme maximalist consumption of goods/commodities for non-functional purposes. Also attached to hyper-consumption is the significant pressure to consume those goods in order to shape one's identity. Can one shape identity without consumption? Luxury, capitalism, advertisement, exclusivity, and authenticity are important social agents to the consumptions of objects and experiences. Advertised goods, travels, and market landscapes form universal codes of luxury that contribute to the representation of "high" status in society.

Every culture has its own definitions of luxury. In China, luxury in the *Han Dictionary* is defined as something that is the opposite of daily necessity; luxury often refers to consumption that is related to entertainment and decoration. The Chinese *MBA Database* defines luxury from the economic perspective: as a product that has the highest value or quality based on seven traits. These traits include the material is special and the product is scarce; a symbol of wealth; looks like the nicest; shows the owner's personality; exclusiveness; a sense of distance; and very high emotional value. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary's* (2016) definition of the word luxury is "a condition of abundance or great ease and comfort or a sumptuous environment; something adding to pleasure or comfort but not absolutely necessary." The French dictionary *Larousse* (2018) describes luxury as something slightly different:

Something that is expensive, refined, sumptuous; an environment consisting of expensive objects; expensive and refined way of life or pleasure relatively expensive that is offered without any real need, a great abundance of something (n.p.).

In Latin, there are two similar words with overlapping meanings: *luxus*, meaning "luxury" or "excess," and *luxuria*, which meant "rankness" or "offensiveness." By the Elizabethan period, it was associated with adultery, as in Shakespeare's line "she knows the heat of a luxurious bed." Eventually, the word came to refer to a sumptuous environment. *Luxure* referred to unrestrained sexual pursuits and became a synonym of lasciviousness or wantonness and is associated with words like debauchery and perversity. The etymology course of luxury started with the physical, but then drifted to the material. However, pleasures of the senses were nevertheless always at the root of how we understand the word. Recent research performed by Agility Research & Strategy, one of the top luxury research firms in Asia, found that Chinese consumers opt for luxury goods over travel. Amrita Banta (2017), Managing Director, notes:

Different reports and articles have stated that consumers, especially millennials, are spending more on leisure travel, preferring intangible experiences over material goods like handbags, jewelry, or watches as they believe that traveling gives them a more lasting memory and greater happiness. While this may be true in some markets, it is not entirely true in others (n.p.).

The results from the company's 2017/18 "Affluent Insights Luxury Study," which interviewed 3,000 affluent individuals across Asia, found the Chinese story is a little different from other nations in the area. Affluent Chinese consumers are, in fact, spending vast sums of money on personal luxury goods. Their total spending on personal luxury goods (fashion, jewelry, and watches) is 34%, a significantly high margin. In descending order, they found that Chinese spend most of their money on the luxuries of jewelry (12%), travel (11%), clothing (9%), watches (8%), and entertainment (6%), with a very low percentage representing alcohol, gym memberships, and spa visits (Banta, 2017).

In Asia, the concept of "luxury" is still mostly embedded in objects or goods. Banta's (2017) research found that "throughout early historic periods, the Chinese have shown their conspicuous display of wealth and power through material objects. Most notably through the use of gold, ornate jade, and gilded objects" (n.p.). Today, luxury goods are conspicuously displayed at social gatherings, business meetings, and even a date. To the Chinese, luxury still revolves around identity and status symbols.



**Figure 2.** *New Century Global Center, Luxury Mall Interior.* Chengdu 2016. Photo credits: Joseph Jagos.

Luxury is often associated with the quest for exclusivity and authenticity. When it is exclusive, luxury becomes a symbol for success. Scheppe (2015) explains that “luxury consumption is the consumption of the feeling of having excluded others [...] and of being able to warm oneself in the agreeable sensation of their admiring envy. It is nothing other than the enjoyment of total separation” (p. 75). Can luxury goods, when serially- and mass-produced, provide a sense of uniqueness to the consumer? Simmel (1957) proposed that “a product has the less soul, the more people participate in its manufacture.” Designers are too often considered modern-day gods & celebrities. The myth of creation by a single person is rooted in the history of religion. Art or craft can be created and produced by a one single person with low technological processes. However, most objects of mass-consumption are made through a production flow system that engages dozens, hundreds, or thousands of individuals. Is design less valued when it is mass-produced?

Wang (2013) described authenticity as a salient imperative of identity making that involves strategic, complex processes of semiotic maneuvering that orients towards multi-scalar, polycentric systems of norm. In the creators’ quests to offer authentic design and identity, they can be viewed as lacking credibility the more aware they become of their outward intentions towards a larger audience. Using brand status to display authenticity often negates credibility. Baudrillard (1968) understood that “the [f]antasy of authenticity is sublime, and it is always located somewhere short of reality (sub limina)” (p. 84). Nothing is ever authentic; the idea of authenticity is an elevated emotion of the purity.

When advertising authenticity, a brand cloaks itself with an “authentic” sense of values marketed to a public’s collective identity –and fuels the need for individuality. Guy De-bord (1967) describes advertisement as a *mise-en-scene* in which all are participants are in a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement. Despite the “search for individual,” one is constantly in flux and looking for approbation, for collective enviousness in the fashion context. Consumers need validation, a sense of collective emotions and personal feeling of higher spirituality or “exclusivity.”

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard (1968) also compared advertisement to “a show, a game [...] where an idea (object or experience) is being sold to the world” (p. 187). Advertisement constitutes a useless and unnecessary universe. As stated by Baudrillard (1968), “It contributes nothing to production or to the direct practical application of things, yet it plays an integral part in the system of objects” (p. 178). Advertisement is necessary to create fashion meanings because clothing as material has no meaning. Similarly, Sheppe (2015) believed that “the material constitution of the products is irrelevant” (p. 92) and “the production of a product has become the production of the communication of the product” (p. 90). Thus, in the current global marketplace, the fashion image (or, more broadly, the communication of goods) has become more important than the physical applications of design on the object itself.

## Malls: Dream of Consumption

Hyper-consumption structures, such as malls, demonstrate the power of the manufacturing industries in China. Despite the large amount of abandoned commercial retail spaces,

China continues to invest in bigger, grander environments for consumption. Some of the largest buildings in the world are located in China. Chinese investors spend tremendous sums of money on erecting giant retail complexes for shopping and entertainment. For example, The New Century Global Center, developed by billionaire Deng Hong's Entertainment and Travel Group based in Chengdu, was created to be less about material consumption and more about experiences. The Center is a place to meet friends, go to video arcades, see a movie, eat, swim, skate, and sing karaoke. The giant space also offers offices, conference rooms, a university complex, two commercial centers, hotels, an IMAX cinema, a Mediterranean-styled "Village", a pirate ship, a church, and a skating rink. The Center's premier feature is a water park named "Paradise Island Water Park" that contains a 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> (54,000 square feet) artificial beach where a giant 150 by 40 m (490 by 130 ft) screen forms an artificial horizon to replicate sunrises and sunsets. At night, a stage extends out over the pool for concerts. The New Century Global Center is ranked as the number-one building with the largest floor area in the world, containing 1,760, 000 m<sup>2</sup> (18,900,000 square feet) of floor space, followed by Dubai International Airport's Terminal Three.



**Figure 3.** *New Century Global Center, Exterior Landscape, Chengdu, August 2016.* Photo credits: Joseph Jagos

The slogan of The New Century Global Center is "The One of Everything" (Beam, 2013), thus underscoring its maximalist approach to a maximalist structure. Christopher Beam (2013) wrote for *New Republic* magazine that "the slogan also nods to the pop-Buddhist



concept that everything in the universe is one, but with a commercial twist” (n.p.). It seems shoppers can find virtually any object from different market categories and price levels. While China has developed highly unique physical shopping experiences, the nation’s business owners have simultaneously created several forms of condensed digital and mobile commerce that are available no matter the shopper’s location. For example, consumers can access mobile commerce via *WeChat* (a social media, communication, and payment platform) even at the smallest farmer booth in the countryside. In contrast to the East, payment options are being created in the West, but consumers are still apprehensive to participate.

## Fake

Today, hundreds of giant hyper-malls all over China are connected to the distribution of fake “stuff.” These commercial emblems have become an integral part of China’s visual and social landscape. The quantities of fake goods using Western brand images (e.g. logos, symbols, and language) has grown for centuries to become an abstract superstructure of falsely branded lifestyles and design integrity. For example, in a Beijing mall where all garments are sold for less than \$50 USD each, the decor consists of crystal chandeliers, shiny marble, and mirrors; these overt indications of luxury are important to social status –and shoppers. The aesthetic of the store’s environment is of high interest in the context of this research because it lends a form of prestige and exclusivity to the fake goods.



**Figure 4.** *Boredom.* Guangzhou, China July 2017. Photo Credits: Marie Genevieve Cyr.

China's history of replicas has naturally been labeled "imitation" and "knock-offs." The frequently busy and chaotic distribution in China creates a perfect commercial environment for fake goods. With Western designers outsourcing the production of their luxury goods in China, they are losing control over their own supply chains. Legal enforcement of intellectual property rights is growing in the country, but it is still very unrefined and unregulated. Moreover, copying becomes easier due to the designs themselves. For example, ready-to-wear for mass-production and consumption focuses on basic silhouettes that use various textiles and colors. The simplification of garments' shapes, details, and fabrications make it easy for the development of knock-offs by merely applying a logo. The brand names or logos are subtly disfigured or roughly abstracted at the forefront of production in an attempt to prevent any infringement of copyright. By keeping the process basic and repetitive for factory workers, China has been able to rapidly reproduce the Western mass-production aesthetic.

With the sophistication of the production system, one can recreate an almost exact visual replica of a luxury product. Crewe (2017) tells us,

The emergence of high quality 'super fakes' whose inauthentic assembly is discernible only to the well-trained eye, is damaging the values that are fundamental to the perception of luxury designer brands. The copy, they argue, represents an inferior craft, a failure of creativity.

Fake brands are, after all, "inauthentic only in the eyes of certain people and only in certain moments or contexts" (Craciun, 2014, p. 70). Only through knowledge of the craft can one identify inauthentic products from luxury goods. However, if the products in question are not related to luxury, the low-quality goods still exist as a product of use but not of quality.

Many questions arise due to these factors. Is luxury truly relevant given this ease of abstracting comparable manufacturing methods and materials? Most consumers who buy fake luxury goods don't even know the brand's name, its history, and/or its provenance. How is the value of luxury created, displaced, transformed, and consumed through space and time? How can one convince a consumer audience that real luxury investment can prolong the lifespan of an object through quality and culturally stand the visual test of an aesthetic timeline?

## **Branding Cultural Experiences**

In China, businesses are not only producing and selling fake goods but also "fake experience." Many abstracted commercial endeavors have surfaced in the past twenty years, from Shenzhen's "Splendid China Park" that offers tourists the experience of a traditional Chinese folk village, to Shenzhen's "Window to the World," where visitors can have their photo taken with all the top iconic monuments in the world including the Eiffel Tower and The Louvre Museum. The New South China Mall in Guangdong, formerly the largest in China, is divided into replicas of popular European cities such as Venice and Amster-

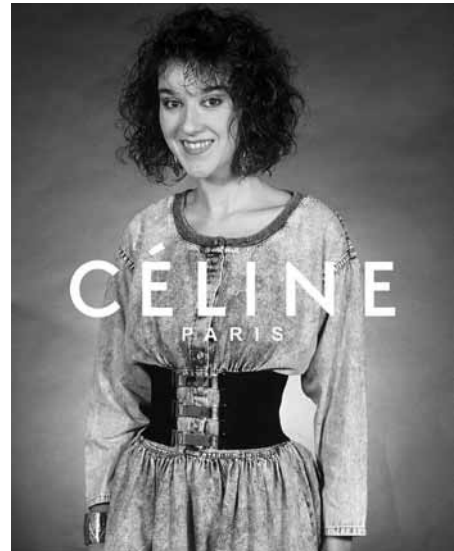
dam. More or less interested in history, concept, material, and social context of the monuments, the consumers “consume” the image and experience.

When related to experience, where is the line that defines counterfeit or illegal copy? China has developed malls, parks, and architecture that duplicates foreign cultures, environments, and monuments. Is this copying and/or counterfeit? These questions are also relevant in the fashion design context. For instance, the acclaimed fashion house Vetements sews together deconstructed garments made by other fashion brands into a single garment. These garments are then presented as Vetements’ own designs. For many, this creative process blurs the line between humor and counterfeit. It also raises significant questions around authenticity, originality, and legality. Is a deconstructed Gucci skirt that is re sewn to an Adidas skirt considered a fake? Why is Vetements’ appropriation of other fashion brands seen as “cool” and not counterfeit? Is reconstruction –or recontextualization– considered original design? Is it only about logo? Where is the line?

The same can be said about luxury advertisement imagery. On Instagram, many accounts are creating and posting their own advert images from European fashion houses without consent from the designer and/or brand. This is taken further by the owner of the Instagram account “@hey\_reilly” who combines current or vintage images that represent the banality of life with the luxury brand logos of Balenciaga, Acne, Celine, Fendi, and more. The account owner’s work, in effect, creates a form of advertisement for the brands. Given the popularity of this particular Instagram account, important questions arise: Is it worthwhile for the fashion houses to fight the use of their logos? Or, should the brands use it to their advantage by embracing it as a form of promotion and advertising?



**Figure 5.** Balenciaga by @hey\_reilly



**Figure 6.** Celine by @hey\_reilly

## Spirituality

The ritual of consumption and its social agenda are in constant flux. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) believed that a ritual process' main function consists of gaining meaning from an ongoing change of events. The constant social movements act as a vehicle for capitalism –extracting popular concepts into brand messaging. In one of his most important writings, Guy Debord (1967) found:

Capitalist production has unified space, which is no longer bounded by external societies. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization. The accumulation of commodities produced in mass for the abstract space of the market, which had to break down all regional and legal barriers and all the corporative restrictions of the Middle Ages that preserved the quality of craft production, also had to destroy the autonomy and quality of places. This power of homogenization is the heavy artillery which brought down all Chinese walls (p. 165).

In his book *Supermarket of the Dead: Burnt Offerings in China and the Cult of Globalized Consumption* (2016), Friederike Assandri looks at the history of traditional burnt paper offerings in relation to brand status and spirituality; by all appearance, symbolic consumption overlays physical conception. The first records of burnt offerings were made in the form of fake paper money. In modern times, money is still seen as a means to achieving happiness. Scheppe (2016) outlined that “the world of the dead in Chinese popular belief not only continues the earthly materialism of money-regulated economy identified with the concept of happiness: it invests in it with the heavenly sanctification of eternity” (p. 13). The current conception and materialization of wealth is transferred through generations by burning “chic” and fashionable goods replicated in paper to honor one’s ancestors. In this spiritual context, authenticity of the artefact is not important. Rather, the representation of things is more valuable. Scheppe (2016) asserts:

Since freed from the obstacle of the unaffordable prices of real equivalent, this symbolic contrivance of objects which people desire and wish to possess expresses, in a spiritual game, the most intimate nature of yearning for commodities, the presence of this demand in material form is a highly informative diagnostic index. A cataloguing of the range of goods destined for the world of the spirits is tantamount to a cartography of the subjectivity portraying itself in its consumer wants. It is a cultural manifestation of something that would otherwise remain concealed (p. 67).

Luxury artefacts are symbols of status beyond physical life. As noted by Scheppe (2016):

The act of burning the paper replicas of money and goods transfers the objects, in the very moment in which they crumble to ashes and go up in smoke, into a world beyond the terrestrial world, where they are placed at the disposal of the

chaotic pandemonium of ancestors, spirits, and gods that need to be appeased, serving to feed them and meet their needs so that they may be favorably disposed or their hardships assuaged (p. 57).

Scheppe (2016) reminded the reader that “Confucius recommended the sacrifice of representations of things rather than the things themselves as an acknowledgement of the essential difference in the needs of the incorporeal beings” (p. 57). The fact that they are “devoid of usefulness is why it is fitted to the religious practice and the transfer to another world” (Scheppe, 2016, p. 57). Thus, the logo became emblem of holiness.



**Figure 7.** Funeral car, chauffeurs. Photo credits: Sidney Gamble, 1924-27.

In China, one can find life-size 3D paper replicas of luxury goods such as Gucci bags, Prada shoes, Chanel eyewear, Apple computers, and credit cards to be used as burnt offerings. The type of luxury object being represented –and their scale– has had few limits throughout history. In the 1920s, the American photographer Sidney Gamble documented Chinese funerals featuring life-sized models of American cars with two chauffeurs. The paper

replicas represented the highest monetary investment beside a home, thus symbolizing the power and wealth of its religious devotees making the offering.

Is selling paper copies of luxury goods considered infringement? Luxury brands have hired teams of experts and government officials to fight the production and selling of counterfeit goods around the world. But what about paper non-functional copies? In April 2016, Hong Kong shop owners were surprised to be accused of selling counterfeit Gucci goods. In the article, “Dead Serious: Gucci Warns Afterlife Paper Offering Shops Over Copyright” published by the Hong Kong Free Press, a store owner stated, “I am neither the manufacturer nor the supplier, why are they picking on me?” (Lin, 2016, n.p.). The store owner added that she did not recognize that her paper products resembled Gucci’s as she has never owned anything from the luxury brand. Other store owners stated, “We are burning it, not selling it. These products are offerings for the dead, not the living, how are we violating copyright?” (n.p.). These practices raise many questions regarding the symbol of Western luxury and its impact on Eastern spiritual rituals.

## Conclusion

Luxury has become mainstreamed and normalized –or so it appears. It is no longer considered impressive and exclusive to own a Prada bag or Gucci sunglasses. Marketing and branding have built social and human connections to material objects –in this case, clothing. Personal identity has become more complex with various means of communications. In our contemporary society, many people possess multiple identities that they construct, collage, and display in various forms. Clothing is arguably the most valued identity shaper as it is strongly connected to human emotions. The rise of hyper-consumerism gave China the ultimate opportunity to create a new identity for itself through consumption. Following the accumulation of Western social symbols, China is redefining its design aesthetic through heritage and innovation. This clash of visual references has created new markets, discovered new talents, created an obsession with “coolness,” and developed large-scale fan databases via social media.

In the constantly evolving fashion industry, one can only question and re-assess the meaning of fashion and its role in society. Given the hyper-accelerated growth of the global market, how can fashion be created for eternity? Or even for a 10-year period? According to famed architect Rem Koolhaas (2013), “There is no future anymore. Everything happens now and if it doesn't you're too late.” Nothing is made to last for eternity anymore. Many consumers that live in first-world societies are accustomed to the idea that clothes last a short time before they are to be discarded, thus prompting a culture of “pret-a-jeter” (made to throw away). If we only value visual representation as a society –as opposed to materiality– can designers create garment-image only? The notion of a fashion “collection” loses value as it is of less importance.

This research has shown that people are attracted to the brand experience perhaps more than the object itself. Thus, designers must strive to create new *experiences* for their consumers since the aura of an experience cannot be counterfeited. Consumers can pay to have a Gucci experience without consuming Gucci garments. The runway show can be

replicated but the brand experiences that include a discussion, concert, exhibition, or performance cannot be authentically replicated. Will a virtual reality Gucci experience travel to the afterlife? A consumer's environment will become his/her sought after identity.

**Author's Note:** Hyper-consumerism is being investigated through a series of photographs and creative prototypes –in collaboration with *Lamar Billboard Company's Recycling Program*– contributing to the creation of new aesthetics and new materials for fashion. Through discussion, writing, and travel with artist and photographer Joseph Jagos, this current research project also investigates hyper-consumerism via the fabrication of industrial items/objects and a series of photo essays. The production of these artefacts involves the materials from industrial advertising processes –such as billboards and banners that feature digitally manipulated imagery. The relationship between advertisement, landscape, and material consumption is depicted in a series of photographs where consumption agents engaging in an over-charged retail or ritualistic space with garments, stuffed, piled, wrapped, and discarded.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.

**Figure 8.** *Counterfeit Mall*. Guangzhou, China, July 2017. Photo credits: Marie Genevieve Cyr. **Figure 9.** *Prototype in collaboration with Lamar* by Marie Genevieve Cyr, photo by Joseph Jagos.

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**Resumen:** Es el siglo 21 el siglo chino? La occidentalización ha cambiado casi todas las facetas de la vida en China, a excepción de la política (Wu, 2009). Esto ha creado confusión masiva, entusiasmo, rebelión, romanticismo e idealismo. Las industrias manufactureras de la década de 1990 continuaron dominando la aceleración del consumismo en el siglo XXI y crearon, más que nunca, un mundo de identidad extrañamente gigante y abstracto que se auto creó y se mantuvo. Este artículo examina la política del deseo abstracto, el hiper consumismo y la noción de fantasía en la industria de la moda china. Hoy, cientos de “hipermercados” gigantes que se encuentran en toda China están dedicados a la distribución de “cosas” falsas. Estos emblemas comerciales se han convertido en una parte integral del paisaje visual y social de China. El mercado de productos falsificados que utilizan imágenes de marcas occidentales (ej., logotipos) ha crecido durante siglos hasta convertirse en una gran estructura abstracta de estilos de vida con marcas falsas y diseño integral. El aumento global del hiperconsumo le dio a China la última oportunidad de crear una nueva identidad para sí misma mientras se importa el sueño del lujo: *The Buying Power*. Este documento se centra en abstraer la noción de hiperconsumismo e interrogar la relación entre la publicidad visual, su materialidad y su representación en el mercado global. ¿Cómo contribuye la publicidad a la producción de bienes de consumo? ¿Podemos crear una visión cíclica de nuevos materiales? ¿Cómo se crea, se desplaza, se transforma y se consume el valor del lujo a través del espacio y el tiempo?

**Palabras clave:** Lujo - Identidad - Exclusividad - Autenticidad - Falsificación - Espiritualidad - Consumo - Hiperactividad - Centros comerciales.

**Resumo:** O século 21 é o século chinês? A ocidentalização mudou quase todas as facetas da vida na China, com exceção da política (Wu, 2009). Isso criou uma enorme confusão, entusiasmo, rebelião, romantismo e idealismo. As indústrias manufatureiras da década de 1990 continuaram a dominar a aceleração do consumismo no século 21 e criaram, mais do que nunca, um mundo de identidade estranhamente gigante e abstrata que foi criado e mantido por si mesmo. Este artigo examina a política do desejo abstrato, o hiper consumismo e a noção de fantasia na indústria da moda chinesa. Hoje, centenas de “hipermercados” gigantes localizados em toda a China se dedicam à distribuição de “coisas” falsas. Estes emblemas comerciais tornaram-se parte integrante da paisagem visual e social da China. O mercado de produtos falsificados que usam imagens de marcas ocidentais (por exemplo, logotipos) cresceu ao longo dos séculos para se tornar uma grande estrutura abstrata de estilos de vida com marcas falsas e design integral. O aumento global do hiperconsumo deu à China a última chance de criar uma nova identidade para si, enquanto importava o sonho do luxo: *The Buying Power*. Este documento concentra-se em abstrair a noção de hiperconsumismo e questionar a relação entre publicidade visual, sua materialidade e sua representação no mercado global. Como a publicidade contribui para a produção de bens de consumo? Podemos criar uma visão cíclica de novos materiais? Como o valor do luxo é criado, movido, transformado e consumido através do espaço e do tempo?

**Palavras chave:** Luxo - Identidade - Exclusividade - Autenticidade - Falsificação - Espiritualidade - Consumo - Hiperatividade - Shopping centers.

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