WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

A research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduating from the Fashion & Design department at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute.

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INTRODUCTION

Having moved countries from the Netherlands to Germany at a young age, a simple question that was often asked was more difficult to answer for me than it seemed for others: Where are you from? could never be answered by me with one word but always required an anecdote. Having grown up in different countries in the Western world with parents of Chinese descent, I have always been influenced by a variety of cultures, struggling with the clear definition of my own cultural identity which is neither entirely Western nor Chinese but a mixture of both. As a foundation to my graduation project at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute the following question will therefore be elaborated on in this research paper: Has the definition of cultural identity been blurred by globalization?

As a member of Generation Y, I have observed the world rapidly changing since the introduction of the internet as a digital platform and the increased usage of social media offering each one of us immediate access nowadays to what is happening at the other side of the globe. At the same time, political borders are more and more opening up and the aspect of travelling to different countries, or even emigrating entirely, is not exclusive for only the wealthy anymore but has progressively become accessible to the middle class as well in the past few years. Consequently, making the development of biculturals or even multi-culturals worldwide a regular phenomenon now.

During my research, I will place a focus on China’s societal and political developments exemplifying to what extent the richness of traditional heritage is still present in China today and whether the country’s own development of a modern culture is being limited due to their focus on Westernization. For primary references, information from the documentary Langs de Oevers van de Yangtze (Terlou 2016) will be used in addition to the analysis of a performed demographic survey. To furthermore support the elaboration of the research question, information from other online platforms will be extracted.

By actively confronting myself with the cultural identity I was born into and did not have a choice of, the graduation project in general is aimed at the pursuit of finding the definition to my own cultural identity and how to display the internal characteristics of biculturalism externally in clothing.

BICULTURALISM VS. BILINGUALISM

To be able to understand the concept of biculturalism, one has to define its meaning and distinction to bilingualism. According to professor emeritus François Grosjean, there are at least three characteristics that the individual fulfills, or rather needs to fulfill, to be considered bicultural: “First, they take part, to varying degrees, in the life of two or more cultures. Second, they adapt [...] their attitudes, behaviors, values etc. to these cultures. And third, they combine and blend aspects of the cultures involved.” (Grosjean

1 The specific generation born between the 1980’s to early 1990’s into the introduction of the internet and an emerging world of technology
2 [Translation] Along the Shores of the Yangtze River
Rarely, the two cultures play an equal role within the individual’s life leading to a dominance of one culture which is prone to change and not linked to a concrete period of time.

Unlike bilingualism, it is not possible to deactivate biculturalism even when living in a monocultural environment. This aspect being the main distinctive feature of the two terms, it is also of importance to discern that they are not conditionally linked either: Speaking two different languages for the purpose of communicating with business partners, for example, does not allude to the respective person being bicultural. Vice versa, an English-speaking person can identify himself as both, British and American. However, they have one common parameter: bilingualism as well as biculturalism does not have to be innate and hereditary but can be acquired at any stage in life when confronted with a different culture, during the process of emigrating for instance.

The necessity of defining whether one is a bicultural is closely related to determining the definition of one’s identity. Being aware of your cultural affiliation supports the ascertainment of your role within the context of society. While the adaptation of cultures is essentially dependent on the individual’s choice, the distinction as a bicultural is also related to a coherent perception and the acceptance of others in a social environment and therefore an ambiguous process of interpretation.

MODERNIZATION OF CHINA
As mentioned before, this research paper is a reflection of my quest to determine my own cultural identity. Within the next paragraphs, this paper will elaborate on the question whether the influence of globalization has contributed to blurring cultural distinctions and whether it is more and more creating a homogenous society. This will be exemplified by taking a look at China’s current political and societal developments with a focus on the aspect of Westernization and China’s youth generation, or rather, the future of China.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Mao Zedong’s beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), an ideological campaign that was meant to reassert and purify the Chairman’s communistic politics from “old customs, old habits, old culture and old thinking” (Spence 2001) which caused the death and imprisonment of millions of people (History.com 2009). While Mao’s portrait still continues to hang at the Tiananmen Square, the GPCR might still not be finished today according to Chinese pop culture icon Cui Jian who is also one of the most popular critical voices in the country. Not only the previous Chairman Mao but also China’s current president Xi Jinping sees culture as a means to establish a political “one-voice chamber” (Lam 2016).

Xi Jinping became military chief and general secretary of the Communist Party in November 2012 after which he arose to presidency in March 2013 uniting a faceless party to the authority of one single

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3 The social process of becoming familiar with or converting to the customs and practices of Western civilization
man. Since then, Xi has begun his campaign of reviving Chinese culture which he has put forth under the term of The Chinese Dream referencing his overall vision on China’s political agenda (Economist 2014). By “carrying forward the exceptional culture of the Chinese nationality and defending against the infiltration of harmful culture” (Ash 2015), he considers The Chinese Dream as the Great Renaissance of the Chinese people to reclaim national pride, personal wellbeing, and in general the prosperity of Chinese culture.

![Image 1: Poster by artist Zhang Yuqing showing a gathering in the center of “The Great World” Entertainment Center in Shanghai in the sixties. In the center a propaganda play is performed with an American capitalist and soldier under attack visualizing the country’s mentality during The Great Leap Forward, another campaign by Mao Zedong to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy to an industrialized socialist society. (Zhang Yuqing, Anti-American wave of rage next to the Huangpu River, 1961)](Image 1)

A close similarity between Xi’s current administration and Mao Zedong’s campaign leading to the formation of the Red Guards can clearly be seen in last year’s announcement of the General Office of the Central Leading Group on Cyberspace Affairs (CLGCA) which included plans to recruit 10.5 million “Youth Volunteers for Internet Civilization” and the assignment of quotas at each major university to bring forth “several thousand such volunteers whose job is to ensure that politically incorrect and ‘westernized’ materials are banished from the internet and the social media” (South China Morning Post 2015 as cited by Lam 2016).

Another aspect the former Chairman and Xi Jinping have in common is the thoroughly constructed image: by appearing in public holding his own umbrella, riding a bycicle with his young daughter on the
back and having his supportive wife Peng Liyuan next to his side, Xi deliberately promotes himself as a single public figure and authority to carry out his reforms. He has successfully developed a cult around his personality and earned names such as Secretary of the People, Core of the CCP Leadership or Uncle Xi increasingly winning the nation’s trust (Economist 2014, Lam 2016).

Considering these political developments, it becomes apparent that China is resolutely trying to reimplement traditional values to its society and focuses on spreading nationalism. However, Xi Jinping’s vehement administration at the same time indicates that there is a great influence of Western, or more specifically, American culture which becomes apparent when taking a look at China’s societal developments.

By opening up foreign trade 30 years ago in the wake of globalization, Americanization has made its way into the country visible in various aspects of China’s society nowadays. According to award-winning author and expert on China’s middle class Helen H. Wang many of the people she interviewed while traveling her home country actually admired the US and its system rather than considered them the enemy. From adopting English names to pirating American TV shows, such as America’s got Talent or The Bachelor, the Chinese consumer shows a clear desire for affiliation with the American culture.
and Kentucky Fried Chicken\textsuperscript{4} have become popular places to meet up amongst the young adolescents to such an extent that they are even considered suitable for wedding proposals as seen in Ruben Terlou’s travel documentary Langs de Oevers van de Yangtze (2016).

![Image 3: Wedding proposal scene at KFC showing the groom preparing the setting and receiving instructions from the restaurant’s employee. (Terlou 2016, Langs de Oevers van de Yangtze, Episode Double Happiness)](image)

In addition to Wang’s observations, the Dutch photographer Terlou has captured visual evidence of dissatisfaction with the country’s leader within his documentary. In this travel-series released this year, the governmental restrictions on freedom of speech imposed on the Chinese people is one of the main aspects that becomes apparent. While Xi’s politics aim at uniting the nation once again to create a modern China fiercely pushing the preservation of the Chinese cultural identity but actually inevitably limiting China’s growth potential, he simultaneously fails to see the increasing frustration building up under the surface of his system. While he may have succeeded at intimidating the majority of the people to remain silent, the younger generation is slowly but surely growing their confidence to stand up and voice their opinions through the use of social media possibly leading to an outrage and political instability in the future.

All in all, it can be concluded that the Chinese population is influenced by the Western world but not to such a degree that the country’s own traditions are being lost to foreign influences, as the current president is wary of. Instead of Americanization taking over the people, the American culture is being

\textsuperscript{4} First restaurant opened in 1987 at Tiananmen Square during Deng Xiaoping’s reign in the era of “Reform and opening”. Since then KFC in China has adapted its menu featuring rice pudding and egg tarts to reflect a Chinese adaptation of the Western concept.
admired and adopted by the younger generation with the aim of creating their own translation to build a modern China for the future. This is also observed by David Wang, an anthropologist who has been studying youth-related trends and culture in China. According to him, “if there’s one thing that Chinese youth don’t lack, it’s energy” (Wang as cited by Ghedin 2013) to try everything, learn about it, and work hard to find the guidance they need. By establishing his company China Youthology in 2008, Wang got to work with Reason D, a member of Xi’an’s first graffiti gang, and remarked all their tags were in English upon which the gang responded, “we need to master the graffiti techniques first. We’re still in the beginning of being graffiti artists. Give us another 5 years and then you’ll start seeing some Chinese style graffiti” (Reason D as cited by Ghedin 2013).

Thus, globalization has not necessarily contributed to blurring cultural distinctions but rather given way for biculturalism and the possibility of affiliating with more than one culture without having to replace one with the other.

CHINESE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE WESTERN WORLD

While the previous section covered the cultural development of China itself, the following one is aimed at analysing the perseverance and dominance of cultural identity and affiliation based on ethnicity, the Chinese one in this case, of individuals living in or visiting a Western country for a longer period of time. The demographic survey, digitally performed on Typeform.com, led to following results: the participants’ age range varied from younger than 17 to 44 years old out of which a third were actually born in China. At this point, all of them indicated living in a Western country while 52% additionally stated never having lived in China before. More than two thirds of the participants were born to Chinese parents from which can be assumed that the main influential source of Chinese culture has been their families and not necessarily their environmental surroundings. When asked whether they have ever thought about their cultural identity before, more than 90% affirmed resulting in a total average of affiliating with the Western and Chinese culture to exactly 50% each, regardless of the individuals ever having lived in China or not.

In addition to these statistics the respondents were inquired to provide written descriptions for their cultural identities and whether they believe there is a possibility of change in the future. While the answers provided varied quite a bit, the majority stated that their Chinese cultural heritage will always have a certain degree of influence to different aspects of their lives, whether they felt mostly Western or not. One participant specifically pointed out that regardless of how they felt internally about their cultural identity, they will always be perceived as Chinese by others. Considering François Grosjean’s definition of biculturalism and the fact that the perception of a bicultural is also related to the acceptance of others within society, it becomes clear that there is no possibility of denying one’s cultural background when it is

5 Second-tier city
visible in one’s looks and ethnicity.

When asked whether cultural distinctions can still be made nowadays, another participant stated following: “I think cultural identity is fluid. Culture changes over time [...]. People who go back to visit their motherland realize that the people there have changed. I also think that everyone adapts to the influences they are exposed to and therefore a global culture is slowly bringing everyone together in a way that has never happened before and will continue to make an even deeper impact to future generations so long as instant global communication and transfer of information continues to happen.” By pointing out the important aspect of time and instant global communication made possible since the technological developments of the internet, he also touches on the inevitability of cultures being prone to change themselves. At the same time, he indicates that older generations who emigrated to Western countries are inclined to hold on to a romanticized view of the culture from the past that does not exist anymore but has developed.

In summary, it can be noted that, regardless of the time the individuals lived in a Western country, all of them innately affiliated themselves with the Chinese culture, or in other words, their heritage. The survey also suggests that the individuals do not believe that globalization has blurred clear distinctions but has rather given way for the possibility of different cultures to change and modernize and need to be defined anew.

“It is easy for us to treat the Chinese people as a mass where you can’t specify components or particular individualities. Robots with identical faces, pursuing wealth, without a free will, blindly executing the orders of the government, disrooted from tradition and spirituality. We are comfortable with pigeonholing them in stereotypes, thus reassuring ourselves of our superiority. Starting from this position we are going East, colonising everything with western pop culture, being never really able to deeply understand even a single individual.”

- WIKTORIA WOJCIEJOWSKA
Image 4-6: Pictures from photo series *Swallow* by photographer Wiktoria Wojciejowska exploring China and the way Western society processes, dismisses and smudges the cultural history, values and aspirations of its people.
SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Having elaborated on the definition and the function of culture so far, the following fragment will discuss the necessity and benefits of actively safeguarding a culture outside of its environment. Cultural heritage is “a living form of heritage which is continuously recreated and which evolves as we adapt our practices and traditions in response to our environment” (Unesco). By learning about different cultural backgrounds, mutual respect for others as well as intercultural dialogue is promoted. While there is a possibility for intangible cultural heritage to disappear without help, a clear distinction must be made between the act of conserving and the act of safeguarding a culture: while conserving a culture may cause the cultural heritage to stagnate and become frozen, safeguarding allows the culture to be continuously recreated and transmitted from generation to generation; in its essence, safeguarding allows for change and, in general, implies the passing on of information, knowledge, skills and meaning which cannot only be done by the respective communities practicing the culture themselves but also by outsiders through various educative channels.

Image 7: Annually organized Chinese New Year celebration in Amsterdam bringing together the community and sharing a cultural event as an example of safeguarding Chinese cultural heritage in a Western environment. (Remko de Waal 2016)

“Intangible cultural heritage is important as it gives us a sense of identity and belonging, linking our past, through the present, with our future” (Unesco). In addition, it supports social cohesion which is essential to give way for development and provides individuals with the opportunity to feel part of a community, or on a larger scale, to feel part of society as a whole.
CONCLUSION

Extracted from my research, it can overall be said that China is currently in transition of changing and developing its traditional culture in response to the influences of globalization. While it politically may seem that the country is going backwards to focus on nationalism and defies the influence of Western trends, the minds of the younger generation are set on embracing those modern advances of the Western countries and on learning from them in order to eventually translate them into their own culture. Although it cannot be denied that China’s society is still predominantly defined by strictness and obedience at this point, the crowd is gradually gaining confidence to shape the modern China of the future.

As a graduating student from the design department at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute, I am developing a collection inspired by my Chinese heritage and making use of clothing as a channel to safeguard the culture of China today in a Western society. By using a combination of the traditional Chinese dress with the Western concept of streetwear, I intend to visually represent my bicultural identity while raising awareness for the changes that are taking place in China’s society nowadays. By making use of perler beads and the design principle of out-of-proportion, I will induce the aspect of childhood nostalgia as one of my main design signatures and add a playful twist to grasp the viewer’s attention to critique the superficiality of how Chinese culture is portrayed and blown up in the Western world. The silhouette for the designs will be defined by fit and flare to show the juxtaposition of strictness and the corrupted image of freedom portrayed to the Chinese people. Furthermore, the use of plastic and iridescent materials will represent the artificial reproduction of China currently imitating the West while the predominant use of the traditional colors red and gold is aimed at denoting the governmental persistence of holding onto the culture of the past.

Image 8: Graduation Concept Double Happiness (Lee 2015, own image 2016, Suh 2004, Eyecandy n.d.)

Overall, the graduation collection will represent the epitome of my work as a womenswear designer which can visually be described as modern Chinese, witty, narrative and fresh creating a total outcome of garments embracing a combination of streetwear and pop-culture.
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