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Hartley, John and Montgomery, Lucy (2007) Fashion as consumer entrepreneurship: Emergent risk culture, social network markets, and the launch of Vogue in China. In *Proceedings Harmonious Society, Civil Society and the Media*, Communication University of China, Beijing.

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**Fashion as consumer entrepreneurship:
Emergent risk culture, social network markets, and the
launch of *Vogue* in China**

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October 2007

Paper presented at *Harmonious society, civil society & the media*

International joint conference: International Communication Association /

Communication University of China, Beijing

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Fashion as consumer entrepreneurship: Emergent risk culture, social network markets, and the launch of *Vogue* in China

An invidious distinction: utilitarian vs. honorific values

China has earned a reputation as an economy based on utility: the large-scale manufacture of low-priced goods. But there is no such thing as a utilitarian economy. Useful functionality, fitness for purpose and efficiency (whether of production or use) are only part of the story, perhaps not even the primary part. Much more important are what Thorstein Veblen called 'honorific' values, arguably the driving force of development, change and value in any economy. These are established within social networks in which agents and enterprises (or consumers and producers, in the old industrial nomenclature) both make choices that are determined by the choices of others in the network. To understand the Chinese economy therefore, it is not sufficient to point to its utilitarian aspect; honorific status-competition is a more fundamental driver than utilitarian cost-competition (see also Lanham 2006). As the expression of these honorific values, relationships and connections that structure and coordinate individual choices, *social network markets* need to be added to industry and efficiency in the economic model (Potts et al 2007). In short, what drives consumption determines production.

In this respect, the Chinese economy is like apparel. As social theorists have pointed out since the nineteenth century, the useful functionality of clothing is not its primary value. Clothing has co-evolved with an equal if not more important 'honorific' value, variously described as decoration (Carlyle), display (Spencer), adornment (Veblen), elegance (Simmel), and representation (Barthes) (Carter 2003: pp. 27, 32, 56, 63, 147). Indeed, Veblen himself went so far as to call the use of clothing for comfort or protection 'some sort of afterthought' when compared with its value as 'dress' or adornment (1964: 66). He saw dress (i.e. fashion not just clothing) as the systematic expression of wealth, status, competition, and meaning, and that these were its real functionality.

An economy based on supplying material needs alone is as unimaginable as a clothing system based only on the need for bodily warmth or protection: it's a romantic fantasy. Just as 'dress' expresses social relationships, hierarchies, choices and changes, so the economy is driven not by utility but also – and primarily – by what Veblen famously identified as 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen 1899).

Michael Carter explains:

The activities and values of the social order are distinguished from one another by what Veblen calls the 'invidious distinction.' ... On one side lies the world of the 'honorific' in which the gaining and retention of status is all that matters. On the other side sits the 'unworthy' world of drudgery, industry and utility. This is the kind of world in which clothing (now transformed, in Veblen's terms, into dress) emerges as a key component of the pecuniary way of life. (Carter 2003: 52).

Inevitably, therefore, a Chinese economy conceived in terms of useful industry is caught up in this ‘invidious distinction.’ To see it merely as the world’s factory is to dismiss it as an ‘unworthy’ global drudge. At best it’s a partial view; at worst a delusional hope that China might remain willing to compete only at the ‘volume’ end of the economy, leaving high value-adding to be done by others. This is in fact recent British government policy (Jowell 2005; DCMS website).¹

Like any other, the Chinese economy must express human values, social networks, and competitive choices (‘invidious distinction’). But in traditional accounts such a world is barely understood *as* economic. Large-scale factories look economic; individual status does not. However, it is our argument that socially networked competitive status choices – including the fashion system – are prime determinants of economic activity within a complex open system of agents, networks and enterprises (Potts et al 2007). The coordination of choice is a major component of the services sector, which is now more than 50 percent of GDP (even in China, where it is less developed than in advanced economies, where services are typically over two thirds of GDP).

One way to track how such values, networks and choices are travelling in China is to look at one of the classic sites of ‘conspicuous consumption,’ namely fashion. Unsurprisingly, the standard account allocates to China only a utilitarian role in

¹ See: www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/Creative_industries/creative_economy_programme.htm

the global fashion industry – that of the universal sweatshop (e.g. Ross A. ed. 1997; Ross R. 2004). However, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, China has rapidly developed as a fashion market. Fashion values have emerged in the field of production as well as that of consumption, as the creative industries, especially design, have developed and attracted increasing economic, policy and journalistic attention. But more fundamentally, perhaps, the fashion scene in China is an example of how economic values are driven not by efficiency, utility and function but by what traditional economic theory might regard as ‘surplus’ values, and what Veblen called ‘conspicuous waste,’ i.e. consumption and disutility as an index of wealth.

Waste – or wealth?

Thorstein Veblen was among the first modern writers to propose an evolutionary theory of economics (Carter 2003: 51). He analysed ‘honorific’ *dress* (i.e. fashion) as opposed to ‘useful’ clothing as an illustration of his economic principles. Unlike Marx, he sought the explanation of the economy in consumption, not production, in the systematic patterns of choice, relationship, competition and hierarchy among both the affluent ‘leisure class’ and all other classes caught up in modern ‘associated life.’ Dress (as opposed to clothing) evolved historically as the expression of wealth:

The line of progress during the initial stage of the evolution of apparel was from the simple concept of the adornment of the person by supplementary accessions from without, to the complex concept of an adornment that should render the person pleasing, or of an enviable

presence ... In this latter direction lies what was to evolve into dress ... What constitutes dress as an economic fact, properly falling within the scope of economic theory, is its function as an index of the wealth of its wearer. (Veblen 1964: 65)

If dress is an index of wealth, it requires a system of what Veblen calls ‘invidious distinction’ or comparison, and a society-wide means of representation; both apparel itself as a public medium and media as such: dress is the ‘paper currency’ of pecuniary values. Fashion itself and fashion media (magazines etc.) are the means by which status, hierarchy and comparative individual advantage can be socially networked and communicated. Each individual fashion choice, clothing ensemble, and personal ‘look’ is rich in information that is both an expression of the choices of others in the system (fashion as imitation) and of one’s own choices (fashion as invidious comparison). Such a system is extremely supple and sophisticated both in range and over time – as Barthes was the first to point out, the meanings communicated through dress are structured like language and fashion can generate elaborate ‘texts’ and superfine distinctions. Furthermore, since the entire system is based on individual choices within a system where choices are determined by the choices of others – the very definition of a social network market – it is necessarily a dynamic, changing system, based on novelty. None of these meanings would by themselves be strictly economic, but the system itself drives the economy – it is what Richard Lanham has recently called the ‘economy of attention’ (Lanham 2006).

In *The Origin of Wealth*, Eric Beinhocker argues that fashion design is an evolutionary process, involving iterative ‘differentiation ..., selection ..., and amplification or scaling up of the successful designs to the next stage of the process,’ within a social network of designers, clothing companies, retailers, and consumers. ‘Your shirt was not designed; it was evolved’ (2006: 14-15). The reason why the fashion industry goes through such a seemingly wasteful process is that its fitness for purpose cannot be predicted:

The reason that your shirt was evolved rather than designed is that no-one could predict exactly what kind of shirt you would want out of the almost infinite space of possible shirt designs... Our intentionality, rationality and creativity do matter as a driving force in the economy, but they matter *as part of a larger evolutionary process* (p. 15; original emphasis).

The evolution of a garment – a *design* process that nevertheless works by *trial and error* – is only successful if it finds sufficient buyers (or admirers) to justify its manufacture (or mediation). This is coordinated by the market. Here the culmination of the efforts of designer, manufacturer and retailer finally confront the risky moment of choice: the decisive moment.

Institutions of learning: the fashion media

Neither buyer nor seller goes into the bargaining process ‘naked,’ so to speak. Both parties seek to reduce uncertainty and risk by means of information. The supply side will have used marketing techniques to find out what you are likely to choose, while the consumer has sought information to mitigate personal fashion errors, or

to gain a competitive advantage in knowing what's hot. This is not, in other words, a totally asymmetric relationship with all the power in the hands of the seller.

Astute consumers may have extensive 'cultural capital' in fashion culture to bring to the experience of shopping, and in intensive, urban environments such capital may be distributed widely among the population, forming a general and often highly developed 'creative literacy' in the meaning of particular choices, combinations and uses.

The forum where such information is shared, where essential learning and feedback are rendered visible, is that of the fashion media, of which the classic form remains the 'glossy' magazine, even though significant innovations have been made in other platforms, for instance fashion advice shows on TV (e.g. Trinny & Susannah's *What Not to Wear*) and fashion websites on the internet. Fashion 'bibles' like *Vogue* have for many decades acted as arbiters of taste: they *represent*, literally and visually, the choices of the fashion-conscious social network.

It is not a foregone conclusion that enough people (choices) will converge on a garment, a designer or a 'look' to justify scaled-up manufacture; and it is by no means certain that a given garment or collection will afford the consumer sufficient novelty and exclusiveness to justify purchase. *Vogue* and its competitors are there to assist in the tricky business of bringing innovation (the fashion value

of novelty) into convergence with imitation (the market value of replication); which, despite their opposing logic, are equally essential in any social network market. You want your choices to reflect the highest-status values in the system; this requires emulation of trend-setters, whether they are style entrepreneurs or celebrities. But you want your choice to be unique; this requires constant novelty and innovation to be expressed in the very materiality of your fashion purchases. Fashion media exist at the point of tension between innovation and emulation. They are the mechanisms for learning and feedback by both consumers and producers, and as such are an integral part of the productive process of emergent values (both economic and symbolic). They map the social network that links agents and enterprises in the fashion system, and show agents how to navigate that network in pursuit of individual 'honorific' status choices.

In spite of the close links between fashion and political culture that are evident historically in China, few researchers have made use of the vast wealth of cultural artefacts, including fashion magazines. As Beverley Hooper laments:

In few societies has clothing been a more significant symbol of a nation's political culture. Yet apart from the occasional reference by western journalists to China's 'blue ants' in the Mao era and to miniskirts and makeup in more recent years, little use has been made of these artefacts (Hooper, 1994a p.164).

In this article we hope to help correct this imbalance. We argue that the launch of *Vogue* marks a tipping point in the development of Chinese fashion and fashion media, linking China more closely to the international fashion system, and setting

new standards in photography, style and design in Chinese fashion publishing.

The launch of *Vogue* China also reflects the growth of fashion and luxury brand consumption in China. It is an important catalyst for the further development of fashion values and consumer culture. As Caroline Weber puts it:

Vogue is to our era what the idea of God was, in Voltaire's famous parlance, to his: if it didn't exist, we would have to invent it. Revered for its editorial excellence and its visual panache, the magazine has long functioned as a bible for anyone worshipping at the altar of luxury, celebrity and style. And while we perhaps take for granted the extent to which this trinity dominates consumer culture today, *Vogue's* role in catalyzing its rise to pre-eminence cannot be underestimated.²

The growth of fashion-magazine publishing in China reflects deeper changes that have taken place in Chinese society since Mao's death. Modernisation, economic reform and 'opening up' to the outside world have been accompanied by the growth of fashion consciousness and fashion values among Chinese consumers. The launch of *Vogue* China might be understood as the 'decisive moment' (in photographer Cartier-Bresson's famous phrase);³ the moment that readers' desire for fashionable images and information about international style trends converged with advertisers' and fashion-professionals' demands for a reliable, high quality publication capable of creating a connection with consumers to draw China firmly into the international network of fashion production and consumption.

Fashion and modernity

² Weber, Caroline "Fashion-Books: Review of "IN VOGUE: The Illustrated History of the World's Most Famous Fashion Magazine (Rizzoli)", New York Times, December 3, 2006.

³ See www.e-photobooks.com/cartier-bresson/decisive-moment.html

Michael Dutton (1998) argues that the emergence of Western-style fashion in China is often misinterpreted by outside-observers as a sign of a growing sense of individualism and freedom among Chinese consumers. Dutton suggests that, rather than signalling the rise of '*a modern individualised political subject*' (Dutton, 1998, p.275), contemporary consumer fashion culture in China is little more than the recasting of collectivist values in the context of mass production and liberal economic reform. According to Dutton:

In China, especially among the middle-aged, fashion is quite often recoded to promote a collectivist, not individualist, ethos. As though in recognition of the fact that we live in mass-producing and mass-consuming times, many consumers in China do not operate with the notion of individuality that underpins even the most mass-produced of fashion products in the West. For these Chinese, fashion is not constructed to mark out one's individuality, but to mark out one's success. (Dutton, 1998, p.275)

In describing the tendency of middle-aged fashion consumers, in particular, to make fashion choices based on what the majority choose to wear and to associate 'wise' choices with 'popular' choices of clothing, Dutton implies that a particularly Chinese desire to conform persists:

'Success is made verifiable through the notion of correct choice. Success means choosing a coat that everyone else is wearing for, to see others in the same coat, dress, trousers or shirt is not a sign of social disgrace, but a mark of wisdom and affluence. One has chosen wisely, for one has made the 'popular choice'. In this respect at least, fashion stands in for a wider, deeper and more unconscious sense of collective self.' (Dutton, 1998, p.275)

Dutton has chosen to discuss the 'fashion statement' in order to illustrate his point that the most apparently convincing 'sign' of 'Western consumer-individualism'

cannot be taken at face value. Existing Chinese values and habits continue to dominate and economic reform is not necessarily the 'harbinger of a modern individualised political subject' (Dutton, 1998 p.274). However, there is no need for an ethnocentric reading of this phenomenon, for what Dutton has described very accurately is not the secret of the Chinese collective psyche but the workings of the social network market – a process that can be observed just as readily among consumers and producers in the West as in China.

A closer reading of the history of fashion in the West suggests that the emergence of fashion values is more complex than Dutton's comments imply. While it may be difficult to argue that fashion *caused* the social or philosophical shifts responsible for modernity and democracy in Europe, the relationship between what people chose to wear and how they think about themselves and society is well documented.⁴ Indeed, no country has modernised its economy or polity without concomitant changes in costume, or without media to diffuse information and feedback about those changes and their significance. Modernity everywhere was just as much a corporeal experience as an intellectual one. As Lipovetsky (1991) demonstrates, the rise of a fashion culture is closely linked to deeper changes in society: the predominance of the tastes and opinions of *contemporaries* (rather

⁴ See: Lipovetsky, G. (1991) *The Empire of Fashion, Dressing Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, translated by C. Porter; Carter, M (2003) *Fashion Classics*. Oxford: Berg; Wrigley, R. (2002) *The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in Revolutionary France*, Berg, Oxford; Breward, C. (2000) 'Cultures, Identities, Histories: Fashioning a Cultural Approach to Dress' in *The Fashion Business: Theory, Practice, Image* Ed. Nicola White and Ian Griffiths, Berg Oxford and New York. pp.23-36.

than traditional authority) in decisions about comportment; and a perception of *change* as a positive force:

Love of change and the determining influence of contemporaries are the two major principles governing eras of fashion; both entail a devaluing of the ancestral heritage and a tendency to dignify the norms of the social present. Fashion plays such a radical role in history because it institutes an essentially modern social system, freed from the grip of the past (Lipovetsky, 1991, p.23).

Lipovetsky ascribes causal force not to a 'collectivist ethos' but to its very opposite; 'love of change' and freedom *from* 'the grip of the past.' He allows for the 'determining influence of contemporaries,' but does not reduce that determination to any single 'ethos'; and as a result Lipovetsky's conceptualisation of the modernising force of fashion is an exact description of the emergence of a social network market.

Li Xiaoping (1998) observes the connection between the modernisation of Chinese society and the emergence new fashion systems in China. Li argues that the emergence of fashion-consciousness after Mao's death reflected important changes in China's aspirations and a growing sense of connection with the international community:

Modernization became the major driving force behind the development of new fashion systems in China. In fact, the Chinese term *shizhuang* (fashion) has always signified the modern, as it is clearly contrasted to *fushi* (costume), which refers to clothing styles in Imperial China and of ethnic minorities. It is *shizhuan* (fashion) not *fushi* (costume) that links China to the outside world. If *fushi* always points to tradition and past *shizhuang* is closely associated with internationalization and modernization. (Li, 1998, p.75)

According to Li, 'from the very beginning, modernization in China has involved the construction of the 'new' or 'modern woman' (Li, 1998 p.71). Li argues that fashion and popular culture form a major arena of femininity, offering new forms of bodily adornment as well as new role models for Chinese women:

The re-fashioned 'modern woman' reveals how aesthetic values and body techniques have been reshaped by global consumer capitalism. It also conjures up and adds a new dimension to a historical truth: the female body is now a site on which party politics, consumer capitalism and patriarchy are played out (Li, 1998 p.71).

In an age of modern media and the global circulation of images, the fashion world that China joined was no longer informed only by what one's immediate neighbours or contemporaries were wearing. By 1976 access to 'models' of fashion and lifestyle had become an important part of a global fashion system. With little access to images produced by the fashion industries and popular media elsewhere in the world, China's new fashion producers and consumers had little to work with:

...it is clear that in the early 1980s the lexicon of the new Chinese fashion shared little with fashions in the West. Fashion meant brighter colours, moderately altered uniforms that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and skirts and dresses modelled on the patterns of the 1950s. After decades of state surveillance over bodily practices, neither state-run garment industries nor private tailors had the experiences and imagination to produce something fresh. Individual experimentation with techniques of selection and combination suggests greater ingenuity in the general climate of post-Mao freedom, yet this was substantially curtailed by the lack of aesthetic and material resources. (Li, 1998, p.75)

‘Aesthetic resources’ – shared between producers and consumers – are a vital component of a modern fashion industry. They provide consumers with models of fashion and an unfolding image-bank of the current repertoire of choices. They provide producers (designers, manufacturers, retailers) with opportunities to showcase their latest offerings; and they offer aesthetic professionals (photographers, stylists, models) the chance to develop their portfolio and to connect with audiences. Fashion labels use magazines as a theatre in which to convey carefully constructed and fiercely defended images of their brand. Designers, fashion buyers and fashion stylists depend on the fashion media as a source of inspiration and information about what others are making and the images they are creating. As fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson observes, for consumers, fashion magazines offer entry into ‘a magical system’:

Since the late nineteenth century, word and image have increasingly propagated style. Images of desire are constantly in circulation; increasingly it has been the image as well as the artefact that the individual has purchased. Fashion is a magical system, and what we see as we leaf through glossy magazines is ‘the look’. Like advertising, women’s magazines have moved from the didactic to the hallucinatory. Originally their purpose was informational, but what we see today in both popular journalism and advertising is the mirage of a way of being, and what we engage in is no longer only the relatively simple process of direct imitation, but the less conscious one of identification. (Wilson, E., quoted by Breward, 2000, p.29)

Wilson’s distinction between the ‘didactic’ and the ‘hallucinatory,’ ‘imitation’ and ‘identification,’ or ‘artefact’ and ‘image,’ is another way of expressing the ‘honorific’ as opposed to ‘utilitarian’ value of dress. She sees it as a movement from one side of the equation to the other over time, but it may be more accurate to

think of it as a general ‘toggle’ mechanism between ‘substance’ and ‘style’ that characterises the economics of attention (Lanham 2006). The ‘magical system’ of fashion is made as much of words, images, desires and choices as it is of fabric. It is an elaborate meaning-system within which individual agents and enterprises can associate their individual ‘look’ with that of others, and differentiate it at the same time.

The development of a market economy in China has provided a new context for the marketing and consumption of clothing and beauty products (Hooper, 1994b), and provided women, in particular, with both freedom to express themselves through their hair and clothing in new ways, and the means to afford the startling array of new items now available to them. In a sophisticated, commercially-driven fashion landscape, fashion reflects the aspirations, desires and sensibilities of modern consumers. The choice between different designers or labels allows individuals to identify with the values claimed by brands, capitalising on images created by designers and labels in the construction of their own identity:

‘The Modernists, for example, (represented by, say, Jil Sander) are an entirely different breed than the Sex Machines (Tom Ford for Gucci). The Rebels (Alexander McQueen) can easily be distinguished from the Romantics (John Galliano). This is not a question of socio-economic status or age. Members of the Status-symbol tribe (Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton) have neither more nor less money than members of the Artistic Avant-Garde (Rei Kawakubo for Commes des Garçons), but they do have very different values and lifestyles.’ (Steele, 2000, p.7).

The modern fashion industry relies on a common visual and imaginative language. By providing makers and consumers with continuously updated and competitively selected images and concepts that are part of this language, the commercial fashion media play a vital educational role in the formation of a modern fashion industry. The emergence of a domestic fashion media in China is, therefore, an important step in the development of the literacy, skills and sensibilities necessary for China to begin producing and exporting, rather than simply importing and consuming, fashion.

Maturity of the fashion industry in China:

The emergence of a domestic magazine industry since the late 1980s (when *Elle* appeared) has created important opportunities for local editors, stylists, photographers and models. The sector is now crowded and many local titles are not turning a profit, but fashion publishing is an important creative industry in its own right and its growth is providing new opportunities for China's emerging 'creative class.'

Hung Huang, CEO of the China Interactive Media Group, is a creative entrepreneur at the forefront of the development of a domestic fashion consciousness and skill-base. Her China Interactive Media group publishes five fashion magazines in China, including *i-look*, *Youth International (Seventeen)* and *Time Out*. It also produces three television programs under the same media brands.

Identified as one of 'Asia's new cultural entrepreneurs' and 'interpreter of style' by *Time* magazine, Huang was educated in the US and has a B.A from Vassar College (her father was a prominent figure in Mao-era diplomacy). She is a regular newspaper and magazine columnist and best selling author. Her book *My Abnormal Life* sold 200,000 copies in China.

We interviewed Huang in Beijing. She is clear about the relationship between China's liberalisation and the growth of a fashion consciousness in China:

... you look at the way Chinese dressed 20 years ago and the way they dress today and you look at the way they thought 20 years ago and the way they think today – there's a massive liberalisation that has happened here. You've got to be blind to miss it. Self-expression and individualism have become more prominent. These things haven't translated into democracy. They haven't translated into completely liberal values in people's personal lives. I don't think that being able to choose whether to carry Vuitton or Dior or a Chinese straw bag leads people to think they should have the right to vote. It hasn't happened yet. It will eventually do that.

However, Huang concedes that the creative workforce needed to support a world-class fashion industry is still being educated. She highlights China's fashion photographers as a group that is still in the process of learning to interpret the visual codes of the fashion world. In this context, technical skill is not enough:

I think we are still very much in an avant-garde phase of clothing, perfect beauty. There's nothing edgy about Chinese photography. The minute they go edgy they go trashy. The current pool of artists is really bad at controlling that particular line. We're trying desperately to look for someone who can be edgy and beautiful and artistic and without immediately going into trash.'

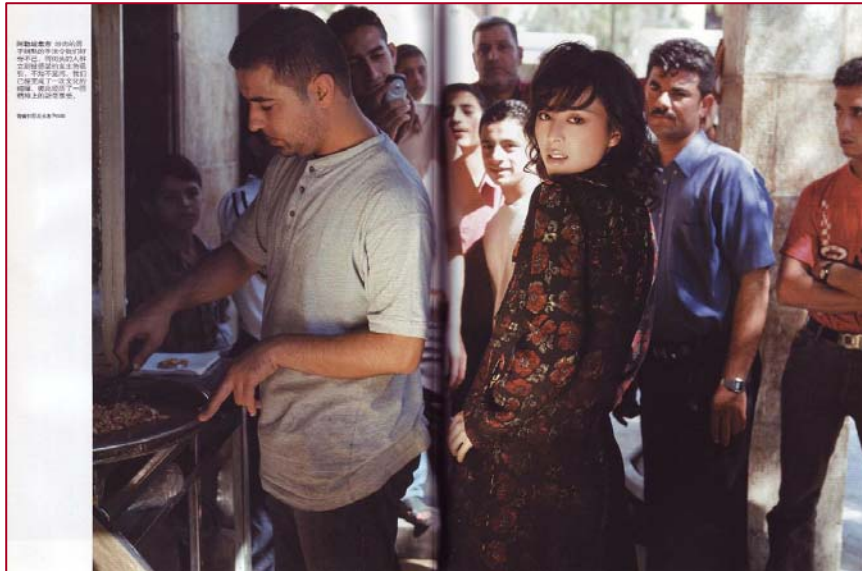
The domestic fashion media is also struggling to find stylists with the fluency and skill to produce edgy, original fashion images:

The problem is that China doesn't have any stylists. The stylists can't figure out the difference between sexy and obscene. They struggle to negotiate the lines between sexy and obscene, between beautiful and plastic because they don't have details. They can't distinguish between edgy and completely trashy. (Huang, 2005)



Illustrations of this problem are not hard to find. One that was current in the lead-up to the launch of *Vogue* China appeared in Chinese *Marie Claire* (June 2005). The lead fashion set was a syndicated import (just as the cover featured Cameron Diaz), but the next set, 'Virgin Pretty,' was locally produced (180-7). The intent was clear: a girlish model, simple flowery dresses, countryside location and the budding blossoms of spring. Evidently the photographer tried to catch the allure ('pretty') as well as the innocence ('virgin') of this standard scene. In one shot the model leans back with open legs and closed eyes while she holds a freshly-bitten fruit: except that the fruit is an orange (it should at least have been a peach), the girl is stuck up a tree and the ecstatic moment comes across as awkward and even prurient. In another shot the model has evidently just popped some bright green bubble-gum. While this certainly draws attention to her lips it does nothing for the Chanel dress. And no matter how enthusiastically she flashes her legs, the

photographer fails to render this ‘pretty virgin’ into a desirable ‘portrait of a woman.’ The overall effect compares poorly with international standards, even though it is published in the international title *Marie Claire*.



Hung Huang’s own title, *i-Look*, however, promotes a sophisticated visual style, paying particular attention to portraits and profiles of Chinese celebrities and artists. *i-Look* can also add an innovative twist to the standard fashion shoot. The December 2005 issue, for instance, ran an excellent fashion-cum-travelogue feature set in Syria (114-133), upstaging Western rivals with this spectacular but ‘politically incorrect’ location. The Asian model was dressed in Western labels, and photographed among the people, archaeological treasures and contemporary streetscape of Syria. The shoot integrated fashion and documentary values. The effect was both to glamorise and to humanise a part of the world in which China may have different interests and expectations from those of Western countries. The Chinese reader may therefore identify with the fashion in a way which

concedes nothing in style to Western counterparts, but she gains an honorific ‘competitive advantage’ by being placed in a setting where they rarely venture; and – literally – shining in that setting.

Fashion publishing in China

Like other areas of China’s media and economy, the magazine publishing sector has been caught up in the commercial transformation that has taken place since Mao’s death and the official end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 (de Burgh, 2003: 29). Beverly Hooper reports that by 1990 there were more than 6,000 magazines being published in China, compared to under 3,000 in the decade before and a low of just 20 in 1969, when the Cultural Revolution was at its height (Hooper, 1994b). However, it was one of those very magazines, *China Pictorial* (人民画报), whose masthead calligraphy was provided in Mao Zedong’s own hand, which was eventually to partner with Condé Nast to produce *Vogue China* (Danwei.org 2005).



Fashion in 1950 — China Pictorial's 6th issue (Danwei.org)

As with other cultural industries in China, magazine publishing has a history of heavy subsidisation by the state and continues to be the subject of stringent regulation. The Chinese government has gradually instituted policies intended to encourage magazines to generate their own funding in a market-driven context. In the past, many magazines relied on a system of 'command subscriptions', whereby work units were required to subscribe to particular titles, as a major source of income. In 2003 the government announced that it would begin to reduce the number of both command subscriptions and subsidies to unprofitable magazines. Nonetheless, the state remains heavily involved in the industry and the vast bulk of titles are not considered profitable (McCullagh, 2006).

Foreign parties cannot themselves publish in the Chinese market, but may seek approval to enter into co-publication agreements with licensed Chinese magazines. In 1988 *Elle* became the first foreign title to appear in China under a co-publication arrangement with the state-owned Shanghai Translation Publication House (Goldkorn, 2006).

In 2007 the International Federation of the Periodical Press (FIPP) reported that 9,500 magazines are published in China (FIPP, 2007). Magazines aimed at the mass market with a low cover price make up the vast bulk of the sector and circulation revenues, rather than advertising, continue to act as a major source of income for

the industry. Magazine adspend is estimated to be Rmb2.49 million or US\$321,921 (FIPP, 2007).

Some observers say fewer than 10% or 1,000 of the total magazines are profitable. Others suggest half that number. This is an impossible calculation given the ubiquity of sponsorship and government support. The top 100 magazines take 95% of the advertising revenue with the lion's share going to the international brands. While international companies such as Hearst, Hachette, Condé Nast and others have helped transform the top end of the market, these salutary business effects have not filtered down to the rest of the industry (McCullagh, 2006).

Approximately 106 foreign titles appear in China, dominating the fashion and IT portions of the industry (*China Publishing: 2005*, 2005). Zhang Wenhe, editor of *Art and Design* in China calculates that just 15 percent of the domestic fashion media is occupied by indigenous fashion magazines (Zhang, 2006). The Japanese-dominated *Ruili* Group, the American-influenced *Fashion* group and the European-backed *Elle* group have all established strong publishing bases, employing vertically integrated business models that have not yet been widely adopted by domestic publishers (Zhang, 2006).

International competition is raising the bar for the domestic industry, and local magazines are struggling to hold onto market share in the face of foreign competition:

In the face of global publications which possess strong financial support, international editing operations and state of the art technology, local magazines are undercapitalised and weak in resources and talent. Also, many magazines based in Hong Kong and Taiwan are interested in the Chinese youth market (Zhang, 2006).

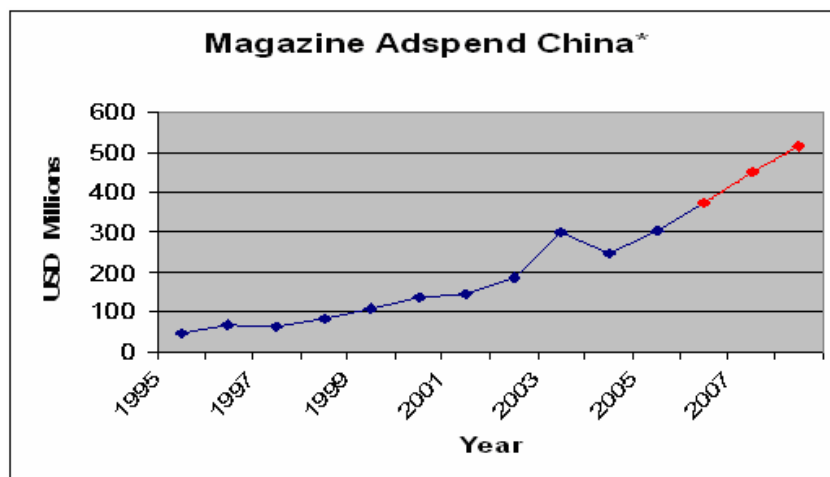
As with other industries, knowledge transfer is involved in Chinese-foreign partnerships in fashion publishing. Foreign titles are licensed to local publishers who gain valuable insight into what is involved in creating a fashion publication that is appealing to Chinese women and attractive to advertisers. Co-publications provide local publishing houses with access to international content. This not only provides Chinese readers with access to the images, stories and trends of international fashion, it also provides local editors with important experience and insight into standards of production that might be expected from local content-producers.

2002 high-end magazines advertising revenue

Places	Magazine titles	Advertising Revenue (millions)	Magazine Types
1	<i>Elle</i>	73.1271	Fashion-trend
2	<i>Trends</i>	69.5389	
3	<i>Fortune (Chinese edition)</i>	32.1725	Economics
4	<i>Trends Esquire</i>	29.9424	
5	瑞美服饰美容	27.0023	
6	<i>Chinese Computers users</i>	23.8061	
7	<i>Chinese fashion</i>	23.7586	Life and domestic services
8	<i>Beijing Youth</i>		Culture
9	<i>Shanghai Clothes and accessories</i>	22.1209	Fashion
10	<i>International Electronical Business Information</i>	21.8058	Business(industry)

11	<i>Readers</i>		Cultural
12	<i>The World of IT Managers</i>	20.0826	Industry
13	<i>Caijing</i>	19.3619	Economics
14	<i>Beijing TV</i>		Film and TV
15	<i>Internet Weekly</i>		Industry
16	<i>Urban Life</i>		Domestic services
17	<i>Eastern Airlines</i>		Industry
18	<i>Shijie jingli ren wenzhai</i>		Economic
19	<i>Fengcai</i>		Fashion
20	<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	16.0057	Fashion

(source: 《中国传媒市场大变局》 , CITIC Publishing House, Beijing, 2003)



Source: *FIPP World Magazine Trends 2006 – 2007* ** Red denotes projected value

In 2005, the London-based International Federation of the Periodical Press was quoted as projecting that growth in expenditure on magazine advertising in China would be between 30 and 50 percent per annum (Zhao 2005). The market was clearly ready for the heavy hitters.

***Vogue* China: representing risk culture**

In August 2005 *Vogue* launched its much anticipated Chinese edition. According to Zhang:

Its slogan is: ‘*Vogue*: ultimate fashion in China’, and many magazine professionals would go along with this. It generated a great deal of advertising revenue even before it began publishing. Top brands had been complaining that there was no appropriate advertising platform in the Chinese market so they queued happily to send money to *Vogue*. The debut of *Vogue* looks set to reconfigure the seating arrangements previously dominated by the Big Three magazine empires. (Zhang, 2006)

Jonathan Newhouse, Chairman of Condé Nast (international publisher of *Vogue*), said of the launch:

‘The Chinese market is different from anything that’s been seen in the world, maybe ever,’ says Jonathan Newhouse, chairman of Condé Nast International Ltd, the publisher of *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, *House & Garden*, *Glamour* and *The New Yorker*. Conventional wisdom suggests early arrivals have an advantage. But for *Vogue*, that was not so. ‘*Vogue* aims at the very top of the market,’ says Newhouse. ‘So typically *Vogue* is not the first magazine to enter any market. It waits until the market and its consumers have reached at a certain level of development.’ (Zhao 2005)

The same media report quotes Zhang Bohai, director of the Chinese Periodical Association: “The quality of most Chinese magazines is not satisfactory,” he says. “They are under great pressure when more and more international magazines come in the market. So in some way it stimulates domestic magazines to upgrade themselves.” (Zhao 2005).

This combination of forces – a lucrative advertising market, consumers at ‘a certain level of development,’ and weak indigenous competition – paved the way for a truly ‘decisive moment’ when *Vogue* finally hit the streets of China’s eastern seaboard cities with the aim of selling 300,000 copies.

For those not familiar with fashion media, the reason for *Vogue*’s brand leadership may not be immediately apparent. What does it mean to be the global style ‘bible’? What – and how – does this revered text teach its message? For one thing, in a highly differentiated market, *Vogue* deals exclusively in ‘fashion, beauty, art and the fashionable lifestyle’ (Cheung 2005: 114). Other titles, including for instance *Cosmopolitan*, also operate as ‘self-help’ or pop-therapy manuals for personal problems, sexuality, identity-formation, and career anxieties. *Vogue* on the other hand represents a contemporary equivalent of the discourse of ‘the good life,’ which spilled out of philosophy and into books about household management and epicurean taste in nineteenth-century Europe and America. *Vogue* offers an ‘image’ (in Elizabeth Wilson’s sense) of the complete woman: its fashion pages are

‘portraits of a woman,’ not a catalogue of clothing; its information, travel and style sections are all variations on the theme of ‘good living.’ In short *Vogue* speaks directly to ‘honorific’ rather than to ‘utilitarian’ values.

Its focus on luxury is of course wasteful in Veblen’s sense, but it is far from useless in terms of the overall system of symbolic distinction that drives competitive status within what may be termed a ‘risk culture.’ Furthermore, it does not require a utilitarian response from readers: it is not a direct spur to consumption (‘buy this frock!’), although the commercial consequences of having garments featured in *Vogue* should not be underestimated. However, the appeal of *Vogue* is not ‘material’ in this sense. Instead, its utility for readers is to make visible (literally – on the bodies of women in various contexts) the possibilities that govern the lives of those who live in conditions of individualist status competition, uncertainty, risk, and change. The beauties who blithely strut across *Vogue*’s ‘Point of View’ pages are the personification of risk culture. The reason why a ‘certain level of development’ is expected among readers is that they need to gain in semiotic as well as economic affluence. The ‘astute reader’ will understand the play of tension between imitation and innovation; they will see that what is being portrayed is not an instruction to buy but an imagined outcome of the workings of choice.

Fashion itself is *risk culture in action*. Designers and fashion houses (labels) produce novelty and originality season after relentless season. Showbiz types and

artists, wealthy families and old-money aristos, who are themselves high-end ‘investors’ in risk culture, are prominently involved in the industry, in creative and branding positions as well as being icon-consumers. Meanwhile, pressure also comes ‘from below’ – street fashion, pop-culture, younger models, new designers, photographers and stylists, ‘hot’ celebrities, the pressure of future choices on present realities if you like – as a form of ‘creative destruction’ that will renew the system for all players. And the fashion media disperse, to a much wider ‘reading public’ than those active in the scene itself, the appeal of the restlessness of creative innovation and of emergent knowledge about risk culture. Each fashion spread is ‘poetic’ (in the original sense of poïesis: to make anew); it both transforms and continues the world it represents.

Teaching social-network literacy with ‘Chinese characteristics’

You don’t get all this right without a bit of practice. Here is where *Vogue* is pre-eminent. Small wonder, then, that *Vogue* China’s launch issue devoted nearly 40 pages to ‘The Legacy of Vogue,’ showing how it had covered fashion in past decades and in other countries (*Vogue* China, Sept 2005: 104-37). Throughout, *Vogue* acted as the knowledgeable but friendly guide, teaching new readers about fashion history and culture while offering advice about how to draw from the ‘fashion well’ for ‘your style’ (196-7).



In the 'Beauty' section advice is offered on how to 'Get the look' featured in the main fashion spread (on later pages), detailing how the models' eyes, lips, skin and hair are treated (246-7). In short, *Vogue China* offered a *convergence* among fashion history, the new look, and Chinese readers.

In pursuit of that aim, the magazine was careful to visualize a version of the characteristic mode of 'foreign investment' in China: i.e. partnership with local players, rather than sole foreign control. Rather than simply displaying the fruits of world fashion as pure imports, almost every feature tactfully offered a Chinese dimension. Angelica Cheung's (张宁), editor's letter (38) set the tone: it juxtaposed a 1941 photograph taken by legendary photographer Cecil Beaton, showing a woman surveying a war-torn building with the caption 'fashion is indestructible,'⁵ with thumbnails of the work of four contemporary Chinese designers featured in the issue.

⁵ Cecil Beaton was dispatched to China in 1944 to take documentary photographs for the British propaganda war-effort (Beaton 1991).



The message is clear: China can emerge from a period of fashion destruction to build its own fashion future. Thus, each decade of the 'Legacy of Vogue' is accompanied by a vignette on 'our 1920s' etc. The 'Trend' section is preceded by a feature called 'Designed in China,' featuring the work of Chinese designers Wang Yiyang, Hu Rong, Zhang Da, and Wang Wei (140-7).



Perhaps the most tact was shown in the riskiest place – on the cover, together with the lead fashion set inside. Here *Vogue* solved the sensitive problem of whether to show a western model or a local one by producing a gatefold cover with no less than six models, of whom one was Australian Gemma Ward (the undisputed ‘face’ of 2005 worldwide), but the other five were Chinese, lead by Du Juan and Wang Wenqin. These models also featured in the main fashion feature, called ‘Shanghai Diary’ (282-309). It was styled by the editor of *Vogue* Paris, Carine Roitfeld, and photographed by leading international photographer Patrick Demarchelier. The opening shot shows Ward and Du in identical Prada outfits. Thereafter Ward dominates the scene, wearing exclusively western labels and accessories with artful ‘Chinese characteristics.’ Although some of the shots show the Bund in Shanghai and the Pudong skyline, the majority are interior locations, some seeming to quote a languid ‘opium’ look and the porcelain features that were once familiar signifiers of Chinese femininity (at least in the Western imaginary). Despite this lapse (or perhaps merely ‘French’ point of view), most of the set is strictly contemporary, carefully showing no difference between the styles worn by Gemma Ward, as the epitome of global fashion, and the local models. While velvet, the season’s hot fabric in the West, is featured, every picture in the set also conforms to a certain Chinese sensibility, by keeping the models’ throats and shoulders firmly covered (legs were another matter).



The clothes were structured, wearable, colourful and conservative – even though one was a Galliano confection in pink silk and feathers – with few concessions to impractical fantasy or to the darker side of fashion’s appeal. In short *Vogue* made sure that global fashion values were well represented, while offering new Chinese readers a reasonably straightforward ‘diary’ approach to visual realisation. In keeping with the tactful theme, the ensuing fashion set was called ‘China Girl’ and featured a local model photographed by New Yorker Thomas Schenk (310-21); followed by an ‘exclusive’ on ‘My China Inspirations’ by British avant-garde couturier John Galliano, again using Chinese models (322-7).

China in Vogue: peer-to-peer mediation



Once *Vogue* was successfully launched in China it was time for China to be launched in *Vogue*. Several national editions of the magazine carried articles about the launch itself, or featured the Shanghai fashion shoot. *Vogue* Australia, for instance, ran the set as its fashion lead in October 2005, under the heading of ‘Eastern Exposure’ (183-97): ‘Supermodel Gemma Ward takes a cross-cultural joy-ride through the streets of Shanghai as *Vogue* celebrates the season’s key looks – from rigorous restraint to opulent volume’ (184). Three of the pictures feature Du Juan, who is referred to as ‘Jennifer.’ Here then the parochial Australians downplay the significance of China in favour of Australian Gemma Ward’s ‘supermodel’ status.



Not surprisingly, given the role that editor-in-chief Carine Roitfeld played in the Shanghai shoot, *Vogue* Paris paid closer attention. Its October 2005 cover announced a ‘Shanghai Special: the new El Dorado and its Creative Heroes’ (No. 861, cover), with Gemma Ward and Du Juan posed together for the cover shot.

Inside there are several Shanghai related features, opening with one called 'L'Opium de l'optimisme' (151-2), followed by stories on art in the old industrial area of Shanghai (155-8), on model Du Juan (202), and in both the jewellery and beauty sections (214, 228). Following the fashion pages, there were major features on the rooms of Shanghai creatives, photographed by Hu Yang (262-5), and profiles of various Chinese designers and artists (266-71). Anchoring it all is the main fashion set, photographed by Demarchelier, designed by Roitfeld, featuring Ward and Du – as in the launch issue of *Vogue* China. But, interestingly, the set in *Vogue* Paris is quite different from that in *Vogue* China, with not a single photograph in common. Instead, Roitfeld has selected a predominantly white look (with bursts of red) in the garments, and most of the photographs are monochrome. A 'documentary' look permeates the set, even though the garments and ensembles are uncompromisingly 'fashion.' Ward is caught in mid-stride, walking purposefully past parked bicycles, wall posters and banners in an old *hutong* district. Another shot shows Du Juan seated in a dark doorway holding a cigarette. We see Ward seated in an interior with hotel-slippers on her feet; and again with someone cutting her hair extensions. We also see the two models bound to each other in silk organza as Du holds a coquettish finger-to-the-mouth pose, except that the finger belongs to Ward. Old China and new, documented and refashioned: at once continued and transformed.



Finally, the November 2005 issue of British *Vogue* published a diary by Angelica Cheung, editor of *Vogue China* (Cheung 2005: 113-8). We are shown a picture of 5-year old Cheung, ‘proudly holding a copy of Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book,’ while she muses that ‘in a matter of ten years, Chinese women have made the transition from Karl Marx to Karl Lagerfeld, from Mao suits to Mui Mui’ (114). Cheung, who had previously edited *Elle*, records that she ‘started on the bottom rung, at an English-language newspaper, and was lucky to be surrounded by (mostly British or Aussie) journalists who alternated between giving me kindly advice and mercilessly winding me up’ (114). As far as the content of the magazine went, Cheung had to engage in delicate cross-cultural diplomacy to ‘make sure that the all-Western creative team will create a cover that is to the taste of the Chinese market’:

Peter Philips [make-up artist] ... proposed make-up based on the movie *The Last Emperor*. This was exactly what I was worried about. ... So I explained to Peter: “Young Chinese women want to be modern and chic. Make-up like that in *The Last Emperor* would remind them of

ancient women. For example, you guys might think a Chinese woman looks great in a cheongsam, but to modern Chinese women, they remind them of their grandmothers! They want to look like Kate Moss.’ (118)

Cheung had to ask Carine Roitfeld not to dress the Chinese cover-models in black (‘bad luck in Chinese culture’), although she did not entirely succeed in weaning her off the ‘opium’ look.

However, she was clear that the mission of *Vogue* went beyond the immediacies of the current season’s look:

There has been some debate about whether China can produce its own top fashion brands and designers. There are a lot of negative voices. ... But I remain positive and this is where *Vogue* comes in. A major breakthrough will lie in the designers’ ability to subtly inject Chinese philosophy into very modern designs, as Japanese designers did 20 years ago (118).

Cheung quotes advice given to her by Anna Wintour, legendary editor of US *Vogue*: ‘The job of a *Vogue* editor goes beyond the magazine. You should support the fashion industry in your country’ (Cheung 2005: 118).

Conclusion

This analysis of fashion media as the representation of risk culture in China may be of value to researchers in a variety of contexts:

- *Media research*: fashion media need a different kind of attention from that currently familiar both in professional journalism research and critical media analysis;
- *Public policy*: policymakers need to recognize the economic value of the liberalization of choice and turn their attention to the development of entrepreneurs and markets, not focus only on industries;
- *'Critical' observers*: the 'sweatshop' explanation of fashion-labour describes only an unstable developmental phase, China in particular is undergoing a more thoroughgoing and more interesting evolution in fashion culture;
- *Cultural studies*: needs to investigate how semiotic and economic values co-evolve in social networks & complex open systems, and how the dynamic relationship between expert systems and 'amateur' users is driving the emergence of new values in a 'risk culture.'

Fashion itself and fashion media are an effective index of an evolving economy, one that is shifting from an emphasis on supply-side 'industry' to one on demand-side services 'market', and from a 'producer-provider' perspective to a 'consumer-navigator' one.

The growth of magazines and the rapid improvement in their content demonstrates the importance of mediating mechanisms in social network markets. These rely on continuous learning and feedback among agents and enterprises alike, if the choices of those in the system are to determine individual choices while at the same time adapting to changed circumstances and emergent values, both economic and cultural. In China their careful but explicit educational function, at least to start with, assists readers to develop an understanding of what's at stake in risk culture. In other words, fashion media like *Vogue* and its newer rivals improve the level of social and economic literacy among a population previously untutored in the semiotics of elaborate choice.

The 'tipping point' represented by the launch of *Vogue* is now past. Since then *Vogue* itself has settled into an evolving dialogue with its own readership, while remaining open to the international fashion system. It is still a relatively lonely voice, since other magazines retain a large proportion of lifestyle and relationship coverage as opposed to pure fashion. To this extent it may be premature to assert that China has developed a self-sustaining endogenous fashion system. It remains to be seen for example how quickly it will develop the dense array of more or less ephemeral avant-garde magazines that characterize global style cities like New York and London. These experiment with fashion itself and with photography, art, design and street culture (not to mention sex & drugs & rock'n'roll). Prominent examples have been *The Face* and *Another Magazine* in the UK, or *Joe's Magazine*

in the USA, which have exceeded but influenced mainstream fashion media and apprenticed significant new creative talent. In China only Chen Yifei's *Vision* seemed to follow this vein of innovation, often simply by copying international material. Only when such a competitive creative-productive network is indigenised will there be a material basis for internally-driven innovation and emergent 'honorific' values. Until then the system is run on international borrowings.

Angelica Cheung is right to heed Anna Wintour's advice to support the country's fashion industry. But support must run deeper than the promotion of local producers and designers. Those who would in another context be called 'fans,' 'ProAms' or 'apex consumers' (Hutton 2007: 96) need to be nurtured in their culturally driven, pre-economic creative initiatives, for this is where the 'next best thing' will usually emerge. And a wider readership – a 'reading public' – of fashion media consumers needs to be nurtured, to exert increasingly 'literate' demand-pressure on the system from those with a stake in a social network market for risk culture, creative imagination and consumer entrepreneurship.

Another lesson from fashion is that there are different kinds of innovation. Some industries are changing rapidly as a result of new technologies – the music industry after file-sharing is one. But fashion requires more than technology to drive innovation. It relies on the intense competition of status-differentiation in

social networks. New trends are only economically significant if they are copied; but if everyone wears them then they are no longer valuable. Hence there is an acute sensitivity to new trends, including those found throughout society and among consumers and amateurs as well as producers and professionals. Fashion is not based on the control of technology to the same extent as other industries; it relies on open complex social networks. It is interesting to observe in this respect is that other industries, including those with the major technological affordances characteristic of Web 2.0, are becoming more like fashion.

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