

Visions of Fashion Industry and Fashion Education in Asian Countries

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Abstract

This paper discusses developments in fashion practice, and fashion education, reviewing developments throughout Asia. Reference is made to the historic origins of the clothing trade and efforts made on behalf of industry to educate its personnel. Current challenges are addressed, and a case study based on experience in Asia is provided.

Introduction

The word 'fashion' has many definitions (1), and associated connotations, ranging from trends which are accepted by the general population to elitist, luxury goods. In Europe and America, efforts from both private sector entrepreneurs and governments have given rise to reputable institutions with alumni in key positions designing and directing policy. The same is true of Asia and, in many cases the fashion establishments and fashion institutions have an equally long history.

The fashion industry is 'global' by nature, but 'local' in respect of skills and materials. The issues raised in supply chain management and trade regulation discussions underline the need to respect regional differences whilst seizing opportunities for international trade (2). Buyers from the 'developed' countries have a direct, financial interest in offshore sourcing to maintain margins; manufacturers in 'developing' countries find themselves at a disadvantage when sourcing decisions are made on the basis of wage-based calculations. The imminent changes, effective as of 2004/05 have caused most developing and newly-industrialised nations to review their economic strengths, and consequently shift from original-equipment (OEM) to original-design manufacturing (ODM). Educational planning has correspondingly shifted to keep pace with this trend.

National Plans

Most governments in the region have central planning for industry sectors inclusive of fashion and textiles, and the purpose of these plans is to facilitate economic growth with a view to maintaining social stability. In China, for example, the phased plan for the industry sector incorporated modernization, rationalization and differentiation, bearing in mind both international and domestic needs. A similar directive in India took account of industrial, semi-industrial and handcraft enterprises, focusing on competitiveness and preparedness for the so-called level playing field (3).

Aside from Asia's giant states the smaller 'tigers' (4) are likewise preparing for the new, world trade order with revitalization plans aiming to reduce dependency on traditional, importing countries, expand domestic markets, and take up further responsibility for original design manufacturing (ODM). Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia etc. are simultaneously preparing for competition in domestic markets, and bolstering export opportunities to remain in the league of fashion and textile suppliers (5).

Initiatives in Education

In China, structural reforms have had a strong influence on educational programmes, with the net result that academic identities have been redefined (6). Under the management of the Ministry of Textile Industry, specialist institutions served the manpower needs of both enterprises and educational institutions, according to planned production needs. In the highly structured vertical system, employment was guaranteed and macro management prevailed. Towards the end of the last century, the system in place for approximately 50 years was dissolved, and market forces now prevail. Institutions of higher education have more autonomy, and graduates of these educational institutions are obliged to compete in the light of market forces. Regional cooperation is proposed as one of the strategies for strengthening Asia's position in the global marketplace (7).

India has enlisted the help of international agencies, national governments and private enterprises to prepare for what Gupta refers to as the 'changed business scenario' but has evolved its own system based on a mixture of tradition and modernization. This modern/traditional mix has its origins in the national movement, the teachings of Gandhi and the tendency to self-reliance. The educational system has, apparently fared very well: a quick glimpse at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) website demonstrates that programmes range from highly theoretical to supremely practical, with a blend of local/international ingredients to prepare graduates for a wide range of job opportunities (8). The emphasis is on creative thinking, problem solving, and world-class technology; however, indigenous and cultural characteristics are well catered for (9).

China, India, Singapore, Malaysia and surrounding territories each have unique, nation-centred approaches to education and there is no, known common strategic approach for curriculum development or standardization in the region. Educational development may loosely be described as having followed European models, modified or refined in the light of American and Japanese experience, dependent upon historic development and geographic or political affiliations. These affiliations have likewise determined the patterns of education for industry leaders and senior educationalists who, in turn, transfer knowhow. Various scholars have identified the changing role of the state from that of 'provider of benefits' to 'builder of markets', and the related pressure on tertiary education institutes to reform has been considerable (10). Correspondingly information technology has played a major role in bringing about the restructuring of education. Business and

education mentors have, in practice, the tendency to pass on information and expertise which is congruent with their own educational experience, and much of this has a market orientation.

“E” Developments

In 2001 it became possible to study a programme of Master-equivalent standard via US sites, free of charge, and to know what every MBA graduate knows—courtesy of the finest educational institutional establishments in the world (11). On-line approaches to teaching and learning have been fully explored in Australia and elsewhere, with consequences for both networking and independent study (12, 13,14). Since educational institutions such as the Open Learning Institute, Hong Kong, MIT, USA and Monash, Australia each reinforced the demand for on-line education, global approaches which have a local flavour may fulfill some of the immediate, pressing needs for up-to-date fashion programmes. Such an approach, if well coordinated in the regional context could conceivably strengthen ASEAN countries in advance of the final phasing out of quotas at the end of 2004.

Revitalisation Campaigns

Thailand, amongst other countries in the Asian region, is intent on ‘revitalising’ its fashion industry in the light of recession (1997), reduced American orders (2001), the Iraq war, SARS and so forth. The Thai government reacted quickly to perceived threats, with a view to strengthening both the industry and education, achieving stability or growth in the midst of volatile international forces, and in particular ‘championing’ design. Hong Kong has followed a similar course, taking heed of the warnings from major buying organizations on the subject of increased service (design, product development, quality assurance, customer relationship management) in order to shore up its domestic industry. As a consequence, Thailand, Hong Kong, The Philippines and other territories have explored options for establishing ‘fashion centre credibility’ in the region, acutely aware of the production (and increasingly creative) strength of China Mainland. Coupled with fashion centre proposals are fashion institute recommendations, starting from ‘ground zero’, or enhancing existing structures (15).

Korea, as may be seen from the success of the Milano project, has forged ahead with plans that other territories have only watched with awe: the sheer scope and budget for the realization of a ‘fashion capital’ based on historic and contemporary justification for bolstering fashion and textile enterprises is overwhelming. By establishing Daegu as a centre for design, promotional events, dyeing and finishing etc. the combination of government, industry and education forces has established a model which can scarcely be emulated, even in the vicinity of Milan (16).

Japan has been ultimately successful in pursuing a course of diffusion in the sense that technological initiatives focus on ‘niche’ areas (high technology textiles, specialty goods) and

low-cost, lesser value-added activities are generally undertaken offshore. The developments in fashion have been exciting to say the least, with Japanese fashion emulated throughout the world in respect of its intellectual associations and mainstream influence. Most fashion students can readily identify, if not relate to the styled lines of collections from trend-setting icons such as Miyake, Kawakubo and Watanabe; when considering the world's fashion capitals, few would deny that Tokyo ranks with Paris, Milan, London, and New York as a haven for innovative ideas.

Various economic theories suggest that textile and garment industries, rather than developing to a high level of sophistication as a country proceeds along a course of increasing prosperity should necessarily 'diminish' to make way for such advanced sectors as electronics which, in their turn will generate more wealth. This economic advancement scenario neglects the input of technological and related productivity improvement which can-when combined with business acumen-represent highly profitable manufacturing options. Coupled with original design, or that certain 'mysterious something' which attracts the consumer to the brand, store and product, this apparently 'sunset' pair of industries can effectively be reinvented as fundamental to the prosperity of a nation.

Fashion Vision in China

A quick look at the fashion map of the entire territory which makes up China demonstrates that most major centres having a tradition of tailoring and/or fabric manufacture have the ambition to be fashion cities. Hong Kong regularly draws comparisons with Shanghai, yet Ningbo has its own festival, historic credibility, skill base and fashion institute, although it is in close proximity. At the planning stage the 'key' appears to be differentiation (men's wear, knitwear, lingerie and so forth) yet there is a distinct sense of competition between many of the regional areas for prominence in fashion and design.

Fashion Initiatives in India

The cited example of NIFT above refers specifically to New Delhi yet there are many cities which claim prominence in manufacture, export and more recently design of fashion goods. The expansion of the domestic market, decreased emphasis on bespoke tailoring for menswear, steady supply of well-educated and locally qualified fashion and textile designers has boosted both diversity of product choice and interest in indigenous styling, with the net result that local enterprises are well positioned for local-global distribution. The comparisons between India and China are numerous and not entirely favourable-infrastructure, import duties, speed of distribution and general work ethic are cited as disadvantages, yet the fashion collections often reveal the rich cultural heritage and vast textile resources of the nation.

Education and the Artistic Dimension

Design educators intent on preparing their students for commercial enterprises generally encourage and reward creative 'flair', providing the necessary practical skills, problem solving techniques and insights into management practice to put their concepts into practice. In a discussion of Chinese design education, Fung and Lo (17) noted that the somewhat narrow focus of design instruction and lack of experienced tutors left a 'gap' between corporate requirements and graduate supply. They recommended changes at primary and secondary education levels, further distinction between design and fine arts, reorganization of design schools and greater interaction with designers from Western cultures. Greater emphasis on innovative models and methodologies was proposed, with needs assessment to establish what was required by the relevant community which the design school would service, in addition to what was expected by the students to be educated.

Few educators today would assume that design and fine art required greater separation; indeed, many believe that technological and business components detract from the main purpose of the educational experience, that being experimentation, or exploration. The subject is discussed by Findeli (18), who cites references to the disturbing effect of product engineering and marketing on design and the visual arts, and queries, 'how will this intelligence of the invisible be taught?' In effect, systems with arrows stating input and output, the debate of aesthetics within or outside of the system, and the historic concept of 'design handed down by the nineteenth century' are seen as reasons for laying foundations for a renewal of design education and research. The issue is not therefore of consequence to China, or even Asia, but the whole world. Findeli advocates Moholy-Nagy's work at the New Bauhaus in Chicago as a starting point, and suggests that design should propose new scenarios for the future, rather than becoming (or remaining) a branch of product development, marketing communication and technological fetishism.

An interesting additional debate of relevance was raised in Seoul, 2000 when designers from Brazil, China, Germany, India, South Korea, The Netherlands, South Africa and the United States assembled to draft the ICOGRADA Design Education Manifesto (19).

Reference was made to developments in technology, new challenges, and the expansion of the variety and complexity of design issues. Fully acknowledged by the team which drew up the manifesto as witty, the document suggests, for example that the designer to be educated in the modern context would be one 'Whose approach is grounded in a symbiotic conduct that respects the diversity of environmental and cultural contexts without overemphasizing difference, but by recognizing common ground'. Since the focus was graphic design, this particular reference to a shift in the academic programme may not be entirely relevant, yet educators caught between studio practice and in-depth counseling on minutiae of the collection may take heed of one recommendation, 'the role of a design educator shifts from that of only knowledge provider to that of a person who inspires and facilitates orientation for a more substantial practice'.

Education and Quick Response

In keeping with the accelerated pace of life education has taken on a sense of urgency, hence the 'fast track' programmes referred earlier in this paper and progressively more intensive schemes of study which supply theories and concepts of relevance to the 21st century. Mandates for the modern universities require increasing levels of accountability to society, increasing orientation towards commercial goals and congruency with the perceived needs of identified sectors which will enrich national and global economies. In Hong Kong, as elsewhere students are 'bombarded' with advertisements for a wide range of product offerings, amongst them being educational programmes which are directly linked with achievable earnings in the chosen field of study. Fast track curricula which take graduates forward in their careers have universal appeal, whilst promoting debates on the subject of in-depth understanding of specialist subject matter, and the nature of knowledge itself.

There is an expectation that 'new world' economies assume a leadership role in creating pragmatic solutions to workforce problems by designing and implementing programmes which overcome some of the obstacles evident in the 'old world' resulting from centuries of tradition and political contexts. Nevertheless, institutions such as Domus Academy in Milan have attracted an international student body by accurately forecasting demand for intensive programmes (specifically the MA Fashion Design) and challenged many preconceived ideas about 'mastery' of subject matter in the process. The London College of Fashion, with its trade-school origins has similarly predicted changing needs of both the student body and industry, adjusting its course offerings accordingly. In my own '*alma mater*' the shift-in terms of both student expectations and industry needs-has been tremendous, encompassing alliances with outside institutions and commercialization of course materials which would have been unimaginable 30 years ago.

Compounding the need for rapid readjustment of educational institutions in the light of progressively more complex demands from the knowledge based society is, in our industry, the pressing need to reorganize the workforce in advance of 2005. Countries as distant as China and Mexico are aware of the tensions which will arise when a free-trade situation prevails and somewhat artificial price constructs are, to all intents and purposes eliminated. The fundamental prerequisites of quick response-rapid turnaround, efficient information flow, advanced technology and related systems-will place more emphasis on design in the fashion business. In order to meet the challenges of industry, an equally radical metamorphosis is required in the educational sector.

Thailand Case Example

Reference is made to a preliminary proposal to found a Fashion Institute in Bangkok, Thailand. The institution is one part of a comprehensive plan to upgrade the industry in preparation for 2005.

My association with the Thai garment industry began in 1998 when I visited the office of the

Thai Garment Manufacturers Association, later affiliated with the Thai Garment Development Foundation, in Bangkok. Entrepreneurs from the small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) sector of the industry expressed concern about post-WTO prospects, particularly since relocation to China of the offshore production for original equipment manufacturing (OEM) seemed imminent. The association, for those who have followed the development of the Federation of Asian Professional Textile Associations (FAPTA, arose from an invitation to professors of the Rajamangala Institute of Technology (RIT) to attend the third conference in Hong Kong. I introduced the concepts of design management to the industry and hence became involved in the 'revitalisation' campaign spearheaded by the Thai Government Department of Industrial Promotion.

Design management was seen as a method of introducing change to the industry in Thailand, in anticipation of WTO. The companies involved in the project were recommended to innovate, for example, using a ten-step programme which involved strategic planning, introduction of innovation and brand promotion to achieve differentiation in the market place. During this project, I was asked to propose a form of blueprint for a fashion institute, organize fact-finding tours, make recommendations on matters ranging from curriculum development to staff recruitment, and generally participate in the planning process.

The fact-finding stage of the project involved trips to centres of fashion in Asia, Europe and North America. A similar course of action was followed by the Japanese in the 1990s, resulting in the founding of the International Fashion Institute in Tokyo, and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HK PolyU) gave input to Japanese industrialists and educators on that occasion. In the case of Thailand, visits were made to Seoul and Daegu, Taipei, Hong Kong, Tokyo, London, Paris, Milan, Florence and so on until sufficient input was available for benchmarking and the definition of good practice in fashion design education. The changes in the institutions in Bangkok, the SARS phenomenon, budget constraints and other factors have impeded progress yet the Thai Government has now made a firm commitment to fashion design education, and is making progress with the institute project. This, needless to say, complements efforts to upgrade the garment manufacturing sector and ensure the supply of creative industry entrants. In every nation, Thailand included, there is a requirement for talented personnel to lead the fashion industry (and with it the economy) forward.

Hong Kong Case Example

Hong Kong, relative to Thailand is in a 'mature state' and has nurtured fashion design talent since the founding of the garment industry. The education system is based on that of the UK and has retained many of its early origins, whilst gravitating towards what might be loosely termed an American model. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HK PolyU), which is the only institute providing sub-degree, degree and post-graduate qualifications for fashion design, is cited for reference in this paper.

In common with many other major cities Hong Kong has embarked on a course of differentiation via innovation, and has plans to represent the Asia-Pacific region as a fashion centre. The course has not been an easy one, and the city is charged with negative associations of copying and piracy which, to its credit have been countered by resolute initiatives to combat accusations of unfair trading. When this paper was written, plans for a 'fashion centre' were still being considered by the financial secretary of the government—and much progress has been made since the chief executive first announced in his policy address that Hong Kong should be a centre for design and fashion in the region.

Curricula of the HK PolyU have been revised on a regular basis to reflect the changing needs of industry and the economy. As offshore processing (OPA) became the norm, so more emphasis was placed on sourcing and, as differentiation via original design and branding were consistently stressed the HK PolyU shifted emphasis accordingly. An additional set of programmes in retailing, merchandising, marketing and quality assurance set the scene for 'pure' design – hence a major in fashion design and associated technology at sub-degree, degree, and post-graduate levels was formulated in the 1990s and is now being revised in the current, validation exercises.

The strategic plan of HK PolyU stresses knowledge society development, enhancement of information technology skills, communication to keep pace with the international developments (a multi-lingual workforce) and reduced government funding, amongst other issues. The institution has therefore operated a self-financed Master course in Fashion and Textile Design for almost 3 years, it has a 'major' in fashion design incorporated in the MBA programme, and is planning to introduce a global fashion master degree in the next academic year (in cooperation with IFM, France, and FIT, USA). The Institute of Textiles and Clothing is also able to offer Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) programmes by research, recent theses having included comparative studies of Eastern and Western fashion design, and the 'deconstruction' of the Hong Kong fashion industry.

Conclusion

Plans are afoot in China, India, Sri Lanka and other territories in the region to reinforce educational sector activities in order to prepare for the 'level playing field' which will both increase trade opportunities and challenge domestic markets after 2004. Some of the key issues associated with educational development remain to be answered, some as fundamental as the mapping of design territory and the scope of influence of fashion designers.

Feedback from representatives of industry suggests that the same, burning questions remain to be answered – amongst them, how can originality be 'taught' within the educational environment, and how far must a creative individual enter the realm of technology and commerce in order to perform effectively in the individual company? Many advocates of change management recommend a playful approach to innovation, implying the innocence of a child and a curious attitude will

redress the balance between financial bottom line and the antidote to 'McFashion' clothing. In the shopping centres, retailers and the suppliers run the risk of appearing mediocre and hence competing on the basis of price alone. The question, therefore of what constitutes originality, and how that may be translated into workable formulae for fashion collections is still foremost in the minds of educators and, after decades of debate, I personally recommend a review of WTO objectives in advance of preparation of teaching plans.

Intellectual property, cultural symbolism, the inevitable semiotics debate and conversion of 'signifiers' into corporate identity are, in my analysis, fringe issues for the average 20-something fashion designer. What matters is the journey from discovery of data (graphic images, text, recollections) to ingestion, experimentation and realization of subsequent forms which reflect, in one sense or another, the aspirations of imagined or real consumers. The role of educators, in a shadowy context is to provide the necessary frameworks and techniques for the realization of these ideas within the given, commercial boundaries. At a professional level most corporate entities expect, based on experience and perception of reputation a level of competence and imagination which translates into profit for the apparel enterprise. The prerequisites - specifically, learnt experience in advance of tertiary education - imply corresponding attention to creative development at primary and secondary levels. Added to this the environment and social conditioning of the individual fashion student/young designer will dictate, to a degree, responses to intellectual challenges. Each nation, in short must fall back upon its accumulated resources in the general sense of history and culture, defined in terms of educational policy and the incubator environment, when planning for creative stimulus to inject new energy into the fashion industry.

This paper has summarized some of the developments in industry and education with reference to industrial competitiveness based on design identity. The acceleration of the developments arises directly from the imminent phasing out of quota and elimination of tariffs which will radically alter existing trade patterns. Every nation has its 'contingency plan' and many cities are preparing fashion centres, fashion institutes or a combination to pursue a differentiation policy and retain market share. Cited examples include Bangkok and Hong Kong - there are many more, and Korea has shown leadership with the Milano Project initiative. Fashion educators bear the responsibility for nurturing design talent and it remains to be seen whether the graduates of fashion institutes can, in future, provide the necessary stimulus to propel the industry forward. In Hong Kong, we are constantly reminded of the need for partnerships between the industry and education sectors and have proposed many schemes to draw the two closer together - from teaching company schemes to exchange programmes. We continue to work on 'outreach' initiatives, and prepare for projected 'manpower' requirements in the Pearl River Delta and beyond.

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