Orientation of Chinese Fashion Designer Brands: Market vs. Design

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Abstract. China’s growing economic prosperity increased the visibility of Chinese design and designers internationally. With frequent appearances at fashion’s world, cities’ fashion weeks, museum exhibitions and retail, Chinese designers have started to gain international recognition. Although all the fashion designers stressed that the key to their brands success in China is design and quality, there is a significant difference between the brands’ orientations: market or design, which is embodied by the brands’ positioning strategies, approach to design, retail operation and international outlook. This research on Chinese fashion designer brands would extend our current understanding of fashion branding in China. At the same time, these designer brands provide exemplary branding strategies that suit the Chinese fashion market.

Introduction

“In this globalized world, as interactions between West and East accelerate, the China that is embodied in its skyscrapers, bullet trains, and mega malls has become familiar to Westerners, but the China that is encapsulated in fashion, design, and creativity remains foreign, not only to outsiders but often to the Chinese themselves.”[1] However, in the fashion circle, Chinese designers have started to gain international recognition. For example, Ma Ke, was invited to hold a Haute Couture show during the 2008/2009 Fall/Winter Haute Couture week. However, surprisingly, first-hand research on this new group of influential young Chinese designers, who are commercially successful domestically while making their names in the international fashion arena, is limited. As Japanese designers in the 1970s and 80s, the rise of Chinese designers might create a long-lasting effect on international fashion. The Chinese fashion designer brands’ positioning strategies, approach to design, retail operation and international outlook are invaluable knowledge to both the academic and business worlds.

Methodology

This research encompasses fieldwork on contemporary Chinese designer brands in their cultural contexts in Shanghai, China and five in-depth interviews with the founding designers and their colleagues. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and content analyzed. We highlighted the important words, phrases, and sentences and later grouped them under different themes. To enhance the reliability of transcribing the transcribers listened to the audio multiple times and talked with each other to clarify any ambiguity. Fieldwork notes and photos aided the analysis and understanding of these designer brands.

Procedure

Four famous Chinese fashion designers were selected, who are under 45 years old, established at least one fashion brand with retail presence, participated in national or international fashion shows or exhibitions, and were exposed by national or international media ever.
The first one is Wang Yiyang, who owns and runs two labels: ZUCZUG and CHA GANG. Designing works exhibited at “China Design Now” in the Victoria & Albert Museum, at the “AND” exhibit in the Aedes Art Gallery in Berlin in 2007, at the Contemporary Art Exhibit in the Netherlands, at the “Huayang Show” in Beijing’s 798 Art District, at an exhibit in Manchester’s Urbis, and at a show at London Fusion in 2006, he was featured in the inaugural issue of Vogue China as one of the new powerhouses of Chinese design.

The second designer, Zhang Da, created and owns women’s wear label Boundless since 2005, and was the chief designer for Shang Xia (Up Down), the Shanghai-based luxury brand of Hermes. His design works were exhibited at the Victoria & Albert Museum and was featured in the inaugural issue of Vogue China. His designs have been shown in many countries, including Belgium, Sweden, Canada, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Japan, and Singapore.

The third, Liu Canming is the Chief Art Director of ZIGE and CM · Loose, and an associate professor in the Fashion Art Design Institute at Donghua University and teaches fashion design. He was selected as one of China’s “Top Ten Fashion Designers” of 2007, and in 2008, awarded the “Golden Ring” by the Shanghai International Fashion Culture Festival. His designs showed at Chicago Fashion Week in 2008 and 2009, at the International Fashion Week in Korea in 2007, and at the Shanghai International Fashion Culture Festival every year since 2003.

The forth designer is Lu Xuejun. With creating women’s wear label LEVU’SU in 2000, he was awarded a “Golden Prize” by the Shanghai International Fashion and Culture Festival in 2001. His design works were showed at the Shanghai Fashion Week in 2007.

In order to get the first-hand data about the establishment, operation and development of these four designers’ brands, we interviewed the designers and their colleagues. The survey was made to get more comprehensive and in-depth information. [Table 1]

Table 1. Survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do you describe your design?</td>
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<td>2. Where do you get your inspirations?</td>
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<td>3. What is your most important consideration in design?</td>
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<td>4. What characteristics should a compelling design possess?</td>
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<td>5. What characteristics should a successful designer possess?</td>
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<td>6. Where do you produce your designs?</td>
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<td>7. What marketing strategies do you employ to promote sales?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. How do you distribute your designs? What channels?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Who designs your store and image?</td>
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<td>10. What are the most critical elements in your store image?</td>
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<td>11. What visual merchandising strategies you think worked best to sell?</td>
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<td>12. How do you differentiate your store from others?</td>
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<td>13. Describe your typical consumer.</td>
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<td>14. What change do you see in consumer demand in the future?</td>
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<td>15. What is the relationship between your design and international trends?</td>
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<td>16. How do you acquire information about international trends?</td>
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<td>17. What are the difference between Chinese consumers and others?</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. What is different between Chinese fashion and fashion overseas?</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Do you see a difference in design approach in China and overseas?</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. How would you describe Chinese designers performance internationally?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. How do you see Chinese elements in design?</td>
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After the interview records were transcribed and analyzed, the basic information of these selected designer brands could be seen, including the number of designers, employees, retail stores, and the type of retail operation. [Table 2]
Table 2. Basic Information of Selected Brands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brands</th>
<th>ZUCZUG</th>
<th>CHAGANG</th>
<th>Boundless</th>
<th>ZIGE</th>
<th>CM • Loose</th>
<th>LEVU’SU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Founding Designer</td>
<td>Wang Yiyang</td>
<td>Zhang Da</td>
<td>Liu Canming</td>
<td>Lu Xuejun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Designers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Employees at the corporate</td>
<td>over 50</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>60-70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Retail Stores</td>
<td>~50</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>~100-200</td>
<td>~300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Retail Operation</td>
<td>Franchised and direct managed</td>
<td>Partner with boutiques</td>
<td>Franchised and direct managed</td>
<td>Franchised and direct managed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

The data revealed that the designer brands take two different orientations: either a design or a market orientation, which based on their general directions of design, market positioning, and management. The four interviewed designers have founded six fashion brands. Four of the brands were design oriented and two market oriented. Their position in the trend curve, definition of target market, price range, style, store/retail image, and perception of competition characterize the orientations of the brands. [Table 3]

Table 3. The difference between brands orientation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Design Oriented</th>
<th>Market Oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ZUCZUG, CHAGANG, Boundless, CM • Loose</td>
<td>ZIGE, LEVU’SU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in the trend curve</td>
<td>Aim to lead trends</td>
<td>Aim to ride with trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of target market</td>
<td>Anyone who identifies with brand aesthetic</td>
<td>White-collar female professionals, aged late 20-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price Range</td>
<td>Mid-high end ($100-500)</td>
<td>Mid-end ($30-150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Designer’s personal style strongly reflected</td>
<td>Designer’s personal style vaguely reflected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail image</td>
<td>Consistent, recognizable, and relatively stable</td>
<td>Inconsistent, minimal style, relatively flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of competition</td>
<td>No direct competitors identified Uniquely positioned</td>
<td>Direct competitors identified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The design oriented brands aim to lead trends and they do not strictly define their target market based on common demographics such as age, education, or income. Rather they consider their customers to be anyone identify with their brand aesthetic. The typical price range for the design-oriented brands is considered mid- to high-end at around $100 to $500. The style of the brands strongly reflects the designer’s personal style, which is one of the main attractions for loyal consumers. The interviewed founding designers did not perceive any direct competition because of their distinct, differentiated style and unique positioning in the marketplace. They intentionally keep their retail/store image consistent from store to store and relatively stable from year to year. Thus, their image is more recognizable than the market-oriented brands.

“We do not intentionally follow international trends...It is more about paying attention to what is changing in our lives and combining with our understanding of fashion.” –Wang, 2010
“Frankly, I don’t pay much attention to trends…What is important is your observation of everyday life and independent thinking.” – Wu, 2010

On the other hand, the market-oriented designer brands aim to ride with the trends. Their designs tend to cater to a defined market of white-collar, female professionals aged late 20 to 40, who desire clothing that makes them look “young, elegant, fashionable, feminine, and with status (interview with Lu Xuejun).” The price range of the market-oriented brands typically ranges from $30-150. Designers’ personal style is only vaguely reflected in the brand. Their store/retail image depends on the varied style of department or franchising stores. For example, LEVU’SU is sold in nearly 300 stores with around 90% of them franchised all over China, which poses a challenge for the brand to maintain a consistent image. But in general their store design is minimal in style and flexible to adjust to local needs. These brands also face fierce competition from broad (e.g. Zara, H&M) and within.

“We do not have very individualistic designs because we focus on the market. Our designs are reserved but the structure or craftsmanship has unique details…The image of our store changes quite often depending on trends.” –Liu, 2010

“In my view the foremost function of design is its wearability. And then add trendy fashion. I do not like to design in an exaggerated manner.” –Lu, 2010

There are themes emerged from the interviews which are shared by all designer brands regardless of their orientation. For example, all designers stress the key to success in China is design and quality-contrary to the common believes of low quality associated with “made in China”. Meanwhile they do not see advertising as being effective but instead stressing the importance of the selling floor. Further, none of their designs have observable connections to Chinese cultural aesthetic in design.

“Unorganized, a mixture of new and old, disorderly. It looks lively and energetic when juxtaposing and patching together many different things. This might be distanced from a traditional aesthetic. But I think it is the cradle of newness.” – Zhang described his new line, 2010

And in terms of running the business they all expressed an urgent need of professional managers who understand design. The chaotic state of the Chinese retail market is their common concern. But none of them have plans for international expansion.

Conclusions
The designer oriented brands love unique and vivid style followed by loyal consumers, while the market oriented brands stress trends style to meet the needs of consumers. The designers of the former pay attention to designing only, while the designers of the latter do more management and marketing job. The retail/store image of the former is relatively stable and consistent, while that of the latter is flexible.

Regardless of orientation, all these fashion designers stress that the key to success in China is design and quality. They do not see advertising as being effective in attracting consumers but instead stressing the importance of the brands selling floor and quality products. In spite of their attitude to trends, none of their designs have noticeable connections to Chinese cultural aesthetics. The need for professional managers who understand design is identified urgently. Limited retail channels along with the chaotic state of the Chinese retail market are common concern. Some designers are using/considering online retailing. None of them have plans for international expansion.

Theoretical and Practical Implications
This research extends our current understanding of branding in China. These Chinese designer brands provide exemplary branding strategies that suit the Chinese market. A focused issue of Fashion Practice: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion was on contemporary Chinese fashion, which delves into the topic of Chinese fashion design and brands. Segre Reinach [2] and Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren [3] held nearly opposite viewpoints on what brands Chinese design: the former argues that Chinese design is characterized by a fusion of plural aesthetic elements from around the world and the latter consider it vital for Chinese designer brands to have a distinct “national aesthetic identity that breaks with tradition, yet still incorporates its cultural heritage”. This
research supports Segre Reinach’s viewpoints for Chinese designer brands retailed within China. However, the success in branding internationally is yet to come.

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References

