

Exploring the Cultural Influences on Modern Chinese Jewellery

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Abstract

Since the turn of the twenty-first century jewellery industry of China has been showing clear signs of rapid expansion. A major contributing factor to this development has been the artistic skills of the Chinese designers who have created a separate brand for themselves globally. This paper seeks to understand the rising popularity of the designers in the light of the debate that exists in jewellery designing research field- skill vs aesthetics. The youthful Chinese brand has created a syncretistic design that showcases the traditional Chinese aesthetic (or philosophy) and tempers it with the technical skills of the West. This has led to a new phenomenon of Zhong-reviving the traditional Chinese in the light of the global West. In light of this development, young consumers who have dispensable income in their hand are now bent on purchasing customised bespoke jewellery. Various Chinese designer-artists and their aesthetic branding has been compiled together through various secondary literature review to critically analyse this new Chinese phenomenon visible in the global jewellery market.

Keywords: Jewellery, Aesthetics, Chinese-Jadeite, Zhong-Bespoke-Design, Honeycomb

Introduction

Since ancient times jewellery has been a medium of meeting the needs and desires of people (Adnan, 2018). Predating modernity it has been a part of the evolutionary growth of human civilization being used by Homo Neanderthalensis, Homo Sapiens and Denisova Hominin (Adnan, 2018). The utility aspect of jewellery acquired a more specific stature of adorning one's identity and social status with the emergence of human civilization. As nation states became a part of a global commercial network in the twentieth century jewellery as status symbol absorbed a more globalized aesthetic value witnessed in almost every part of the world.

Chinese jewellery industry though a late comer into the fray due to the politico-cultural upheavals nonetheless has begun to make its presence felt in the market.

The Chinese jewellery industry gained momentum in the 20th century. It shed all the seriality of the revolutionary fashion sense and has not completely reverted to the traditional jewellery designing style serving as the loci of social status. Instead, a harmonious styling has been innovated a harmonious combination of western utilitarian sense and traditional Chinese sensibility. Contemporary Chinese jewellery designs owe its emergence to revitalization that has not only adopted western suitability but adapted it to traditional Chinese sensibility. This has attempted to reflect the modern Chinese society where individuality and its uniqueness has once again found a sustainable voice.

Jewellery design in contemporary China derives its aesthetic from traditional artforms. Ranging from jewellery like headgears, neck pieces, earrings and bangles to materials used to make it like silver, jade, or even gold, traditional Chinese jewellery consistently makes its presence felt in the modern jewellery designs. Rising demand of the consumerist market that entered the Chinese economy since the end of the twentieth century when China entered the World Trade Organization has redefined the local jewellery market and the designs it has branded. Cartier, the global jewellery brand, entered the Chinese market in 1990 and brought in the western utility-based designs into the industry. But the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a redux of Chinese socio-cultural aesthetics. Since 2000s there has been a rising wave of traditional Chinese ware where the youth of China has attempted to revive the erstwhile Han tradition

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(Wright, 2019) (Yuan, 2020). As a result the traditional accessories or jewellerys have found their place once again into the Chinese market. The symbolic power of fertility, peace, and harmony derived from the erstwhile traditions of Buddhism and Daoism has begun to find a place in contemporary jewellery again. Han motifs and designs bearing prosperity for the Chinese are being revived in the jewellery as are the fé cǔi or jade, gold, silver and other precious stones used in traditional Chinese jewellery. In fact, traditional jewellery making methods are being reinvented into the industry to cater to the growing demand for traditional art forms. The revival of the socio-cultural aesthetic of Chinese jewellery has bolstered the jewellery industry of the country in the last few decades.

At the cusp of revival of traditional aesthetics China has opened its market to the global market. Entry of western fashion brands, including jewellery makers, has introduced the Chinese consumers to luxury brands and products that has created quite a rave in the urban localities of China. Consumerism has found a sure den in the Chinese market as more and more buyers are turning to both luxury and accessible fashion jewellery. Jewellery industry has not been lagging in this arena and have geared up to remarkably well to reinvent their designing methods to cater to a pool of buyers who seek utility of western designing pattern steeped in the traditional aesthetics of China. As a result, a huge market for bespoke or customized and fashion jewellery has opened in China. Native designers trained in the western utility are trying to cater to the rising demand for novelty and uniqueness steeped in traditionalism have combined both to suit the taste of each buyer.

Methodology

The present research paper seeks to understand the changing currents of design making of Chinese jewellery industry and how it has emerged into a global brand despite remaining true to its aesthetic roots. It will delve into a qualitative analysis of the of the designs and methods employed by the modern Chinese luxury and fashion/costume jewellery brands to understand how the emergent idea of global local has played a key role in combining the global influence with traditional art form. The data sources used to write the paper has been derived from journal articles, books, newspaper articles, interviews and web material. These data sources have been analyzed to understand in a critical method few case studies of Chinese jewellery brands. In this way the paper has attempted to understand the changing face of jewellery industry in China.

Genesis of jewellery making in China: A Literature Review

Adornment of jewellery as a symbol of status and power made its appearance in almost every part of the world with the emergence of human civilization. China witnessed its emergence and wide usage with the rise of the imperialistic civilizational state structure. Each imperialist period ushered in an innovation in jewellery making either in terms of material or motifs through commercial networks like the Silk Route or through openness to foreign influence like Mongolian influence during the time of Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 C.E.) (Metropolitan Museum of Art , 1944) The collection provides a vivid pictorial anthography of the traditional jewellery art minutely detailing the designs, patterns, material and methodology employed to create the art pieces. But it does not move beyond the pale of detailed anthography and does not provide an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural import of the jewellery art form. A classic ureprint of another anthology provides a detailed classification of the jewellerys of ancient China (Forgotten Books & Co., 2017).

Edmond Chin breaks away from the anthology style of the previous research intervention and tries to wean out the significance of the art form among the acculturated Chinese of Singapore and Malaysia (Chin, 1991). He indicates a close connection existing between the Straits Chinese, mostly wealthy merchants who had settled in Singapore and Malaysia, and how they had incorporated Chinese designs and motifs into the local gilding pattern . A recent publication on Chinese jewellery by Metropolitan Museum of Arts takes a more concentrated interest on the history of jewellery production and its various aspects in the mainland China (Metropolitan Museum of Arts , 2012).

René van der Star and John Beringen brings into the fold of academic discussion the specific silver jewellery art form practiced and adorned by the minorities of China and the extended territorial stretch of China like Mongolia and Tibet laying attention on the acculturative practices inherent in the history of jewellery making of the land (René van der Star, 2006).

Elizabeth Herridge in her comprehensive work on Chinese jewellery and ornaments during the Late Qing period through to the 1930s highlights the importance of material and mythical motifs in the socio-cultural fabric of the land (Herridge, 2016). The history of the period of production witnessed during the period, she observed, has been underexplored and needs to be brought into the mainframe of serious research engagement.

Most of the academic works on Chinese jewellery genesis explores the development of the skilled artistry in the mainland paying little attention to the development of the art form in global context. In the next section attempt will be made to explore diminution of the art form in the context of the global market for jewellery, particularly the Western jewellery market, that began to make its presence felt throughout the world not only in terms of artistry but also in terms of transformation of Chinese jewellery industry.

Shifting Market Paradigm: A Historical Enquiry

Jewellery industry has undergone a change since 2008 after the world economy was hit by a financial crisis in 2008 (Watkin, 2014). In terms of jewellery consumption India and China are out to take over the U.S.A. The rise in number of middle-class consumer both the countries have developed a consumerism driven market where the demand for both luxury and fashion jewellery is on the rise. Based on the strategy suggested by the report it is clear that the Chinese market is all set for consuming jewellery both as a luxury brand and as an everyday wear.

The changing consumption pattern is representative of the new trend of going back to one's cultural roots. People are all set to reinvent and explore their roots that is increasingly set to become the new global consumerist trend. The change has not been sudden and has gradually progressed to this point.

Western jewellery market and its adoption of modern technological schema did not happen overnight with the onslaught of Industrial Revolution in the West. Designs remained heavily oriented towards precious stones and metals being the mainstay of upper echelons and class of the society. It remained representative of class status passed on and consumed as heirlooms. Perhaps the historically tumultuous era of politics prevented the market for jewellery to open up for all. However, the expanding network of commerce through imperialistic overseas occupation cultural exchange acquired a fluidity that became visible in continuous and easy flow of goods from one end of the globe to the other. Silver, gold and precious stones flooding into the Western market opened new avenues for the jewellery market.

The fluidity that the new global commercial network created allowed flow of new cultural artefacts, in the form of new sensibility, that left a deep impact on Western artistry. Love for the exotica found a new home in the West. The Oriental motifs and designs became a widely demanded and consumed in the West. The exotica in the form of broaches, chokers and particularly headgears began to make inroads into Western jewellery industry. Gold and silver jewellery inlaid with precious stones also made its appearance in the Western jewellery designs owing to the influence of the exotica. Designing sensibility adopted from the royalties of the remained maximalist in nature.

The styling pattern entered a new genre in the 1980s when maximalist styles were replaced by frugality and simplicity. Entering a time that had the semblance of political peace 1980s gave birth to designs that were simple, elegant and wearable on an everyday basis. Perhaps coming after an era of tumultuous political era a caution had set in the consumption pattern of the buyers and responding to the new trend luxury brands like Dior, Chanel, Gucci, Prada, Tiffany's began to venture into jewellery designs that were sleek, colourful and mostly made of silver.

As the market expanded and new cultural imperialism set in the post-colonial era such designs travelled to the Eastern markets through global market connections. Using a similar pattern of media propaganda prevalent in the ancient era the new frugal western designs were turned into the status symbol of the rich and the refined. It began to be consumed as it is in the Eastern markets when it first opened its gate to foreign products, as happened in China and India, in the 1990s. coming out of the politico-cultural stasis of the previous years it allowed, especially the Chinese population, a taste of uniqueness. The market was on the rise, hence consumption remained restricted to a moneyed few.

2000s has witnessed another major shift in the jewellery designing sensibilities. The traffic in terms of artistry and skilled craftsmanship that had been largely western has begun to take a backseat making way for a more fluid market for exchange. Once underdeveloped markets of the East have now become developing claiming a major share of the global market in terms of production and consumption of interbraided cultural products that bear the aesthetics of the East and sensibility of western designing. Growth of jewellery industry has followed the same trajectory.

Socio-cultural aesthetics of the erstwhile era is gradually making a comeback into the industry. Revivalism has opened a space for acculturation that is all set to bring back the so-called Oriental exotic but in the garb of minimalist designing pattern. If one looks at the burgeoning jewellery market of the east, particularly in China and India, one will observe a revival of gold and diamond jewellery market and the increasing consumption of such jewellery products. But surprisingly none of the jewellers produced in the material and motifs of the ancient world lacks wearability. They employ the plaque and clasp style of the western designing world that is easy to use and has a chic look to it.

The present debate that has the jewellery industry in its clasp is the viability of precious jewellery over fine jewellery. The debate has raged over the distinctive relation between art and craftsmanship. According to Unger:

Artistic movements like Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and the Bauhaus revolutionised the concept of jewellery, questioning the hierarchy of materials and exploring the interaction between the body and the jewel. But later, in the 1970s, this new way of thinking about jewellery also gave rise to a new sale venue: the jewellery gallery. The gallery owners increasingly gained a key position in the new network of creators, customers and cultural institutions that began to exhibit and collect what was called Modern Jewellery [...] This approach to modern jewellery- (jewellery as a medium of personal expression that reaches a small clientele through a select circle of specialised galleries) became a connecting factor for individual jewellery designers in various parts of the world, with centres such as Munich, Barcelona, Philadelphia, London, Tallinn and Amsterdam. (Unger, 2019)

The interest shown by jewellery designers in transgressing body and societal limits, creating jewellery as an installation or sculpture according to the kind of critical or emotional impact it sought to make by stimulating a dialogue between the creator, the wearer and the spectator is now being reinvented (Klimt02, 2024). Galleries and collectors promoting contemporary jewellery are reentering the scene. New artists are trying to reinvent the dialogue but that functions in the cusp of traditionalism and consumerism.

Produced for the sake of art and of creating an impending dialogue, jewellery designing is now bent on making the consumer believe what they want; in short, creating a cult, a luxury and a Ready-to-Wear (RTW) brand. It is no longer representative of human emotion, but a quotidian construct of what they must feel. Lying in the warp of this debate jewellery industry, artistry and designing is everyday redefining itself but in a shallow wall of re-invention. No doubt, there has been an immense surge in the industry that is forecasted to occupy a major share of the growing global market, it is receding into the shadows of creating a cult more for the sake of saleability than for the sake of art.

Sparkling in the light of the Orient: Case Study of Modern Chinese Jewellery Artists

At the turn of the century Chinese jewellery designers and artists began to carve out a space for themselves. This has been no mean task since they were pitted against global luxury brands like Cartier, Tiffany, Chanel

and the likes of it. Functional as a symbol of sleekness, style, and most importantly, status symbol, western global luxury brands left no space for competition. Young Chinese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong based jewellery artists fighting against the tide have made a name for themselves using sparklers as their medium. In the race to cut an edge above the western luxury jewellery brands Chinese designers have used diamonds, sapphires, carnet and most importantly jade (or its sister jadeite) (Jing Daily, 2010) to spark their skills right into the heart of the global jewellery market.

Case Study 1: Michelle Ong and Carnet

Michelle Ong, the creative director and cofounder of the Hong Kong based jewellery brand Carnet, is nothing short of a celebrity jewellery artist (Olandey, 2023). With her creations having found a place in popular productions like *Da Vinci Code* and the recent romcom *Crazy Rich Asians* (Baker, 2019) she has marked a place for herself in the global market through her unique designs (Only Natural Diamonds, 2022). Bedazzled by her aesthetic and traditional stylises, Ong has brought the Eastern spiritualism back into the picture. Born in Hong Kong she completed her education in Toronto only to return to China and set foot in the field of jewellery design (Only Natural Diamonds, 2022). In 1998 she founded Carnet as a high-end jewellery brand along with Israeli diamond dealer Avi Nagar. Thus, began her journey of dazzling the Chinese market with her unique aesthetics and fine artistry.

One of the most acclaimed pieces designed by Ong comprises of motifs where the East meets the West. One such artistic presentation is the floating cloud sported by a 2003 necklace by Carnet (Baker, 2019). Warren describes the aesthetics of Ong as dynamic and dramatic that has strong Chinese influence (Baker, 2019). Interestingly, the floating cloud motif is a strong representation of the Orientalist culture that evokes celestial mood (Baker, 2019). Elementals like earth, sea and sky has often been a part of traditional jewellery believed to evoke divine blessings and spiritual endearment that set a class of individuals separate from the others, serving as a status symbol. The clouds are depicted with white diamonds, pink and blue sapphires and amethyst in platinum and titanium with sparkling and rich coloured tourmaline in midst of the bejewelled clouds (Baker, 2019). The presence of the richly coloured centre piece creates an illusion of a stand-alone regal gem amidst floating clouds. The serenity the illusion invokes in itself is evocative of the spiritual zen representative of the Chinese culture and aesthetics. But alongside the soft illusionary presence of the necklace, it has a very Art Deco style designing that was influential in the Europe of 1920s that even influenced Cartier to introduce Chinese panelling style in their jewellery boxes (Baker, 2019). Chinese panelling inspired European artists that gradually was absorbed in their work.

Ong is conscious of her roots and the western stylistic designing that has been born of such inspirational motivations. Using flower and fruit motifs in her designs, Ong concedes, is not only a revitalization of her Chinese roots and aesthetic values, but also inspired by the naturalism of the Dutch and Flemish still paintings. The 1998 brooch, a typically Chinese style of ornamentation, is found realistically depicted using white and brown diamonds (Baker, 2019). One should also mention the precious pomegranate brooch of 2018 that is also rendered realistically with inlays of rubies, brown, white and gold diamonds in white and yellow gold (Baker, 2019). Realism depicted in her work and the sparklers used to invoke it has created a unique style of the Hong Kong based jewellery artist that brings to life the serene and pristine world of the ancient era.

Case Study 2: Dennis Chang and Qeelin

The aesthetics of Chinese culture has been increasingly visible in the works of Dennis Chan as well. Founder of Qeelin the various collections of the jewellery brand have set a trend that is resplendent of traditional values yet sparkling with the Gen-Z aura of chicness. After graduating from Hong Kong Chan relocated to London and began the early days of his career there. Later he returned to Hong Kong and began working at a design consultancy (SCMP Reporter, 2007). The inspiration for Qeelin was derived by the designer from the frescoes in the Dunhuang Caves in the Gobi Desert. Initially marketing through Colette, Le Bon Marche, Mathilde, Restir and Lane Crawford Qeelin began the process of opening up outlets in the city gradually (SCMP Reporter, 2007).

The first collection of Qeelin was inspired by wulu Chinese fruit. The collection was named after it Wulu Wulu. Said to be the harbinger of good luck the fruity collection has infused the design- shaped on the legendary gourd- which is a Chinese symbol of positivity and good luck, with modernity and playfulness. Mostly crafted in 18k gold it is inlaid with diamonds and rubies. Usually of different size the Wulu collection is “intricately linked and exquisitely articulated” (Harbour City.com, 2023). Though having a rather modern look the soul of each of these pieces is rooted in spiritual timelessness.

Harbour City report notes, “This epitomizes Qeelin’s extraordinary craftsmanship which best represents the natural beauty of precious gemstones, while simultaneously unveiling the Wulu as a luxurious work of art that can be worn on the most special occasions.” (Harbour City.com, 2023) The line of precious stones used to decorate the exquisite designs not only brings in sparklers like diamonds, red agate but also jadeite (Harbour City.com, 2023). Jade and jadeite are gradually “creeping into the Chinese luxury mainstream.” (Jing Daily.com, 2010) According to Jing Daily “While most Chinese brands that are looking to establish themselves globally struggle with the issue of pedigree...jade has built-in heritage of thousands of years, tied closely together with centuries of Chinese history.” (Jing Daily, 2010)

The Tien Di collection uses the abstract concept of “heaven and earth” to uphold the beauty of balance and harmony (Harbour City.com, 2023). Tien or sky is depicted as a circle which symbolises movement, change and challenge (Harbour City.com, 2023). Di as a square that represents earth in the form of tranquillity, peace and stability (Harbour City.com, 2023). the collection celebrates the unity and harmony for the newlyweds. It mostly features 18k rose gold or platinum rings where the jewellery is crafted with square and circular designs (Harbour City.com, 2023). Deriving its spiritual aesthetic value from the ancient Chinese socio-cultural philosophy of harmony. The rings of this collection projects dynamism and devoted relationship for newlyweds. However, the collection also features neckpieces and other kinds of jewellery forms. The spirituality of the collection is largely encapsulated in the use of black jade that forms the mainstay of its aesthetic.

Case Study 3: Shirley Zhang and Polychromatic Adornment

Another Chinese jewellery designer Shirley Zhang who began her career as an accounting officer in the subsidiary jewellery company of People’s Bank of China (Lucas, 2013). In the early 1990s Shirley gradually enhanced her own career as a jewellery designer. She has created her own special category of z style jewellery. Abounding in vivacious colour many hued stones has been an integral part of her jewellery designs. Colour has played a significant role in the lives of the Chinese which has become the selling point of Zhang’s collection (Lucas, 2013).

She has designed a series called the “Spirit of Peacock” and “The Love of Flowers” both drawing inspiration from daily and particularly from the traditional socio-cultural aesthetic of China (Lucas, 2013). However, it is her masterpiece “Dancing on the Flowers” that won a special award at the 2021 National Gems and Jewellery Technology Administrative Centre jewellery design and manufacturing skill competition that brings out the intricacy of Chinese socio-cultural aesthetics the best (Andrew Lucas, 2015). The intricately designed shoulder piece is accented with bee and floral designs, and sports a bracelet and earrings designed in similar format. Zhang admitted that the use of floral designs was inspired by the serenity associated with flowers in Chinese culture (Andrew Lucas, 2015). But the astounding part of the design is the honeycomb pattern that reflects, as she later clarified, the diligence of human soul as believed in ancient Chinese culture.

Case Study 4: Jin Ren and Carving a Story on Stone

Jin Ren, another luxury brand jewellery designer of China, “considers jewellery design a matter of controlling shape, color, and dynamics, combined with a strong emphasis on culture.” (Ren, 2011) His designs reflects the ancient Chinese stories and combines them with the contemporary world. It creates a dialogue between the maker, wearer and the onlooker weaving a story on its own right.

One of his jewellery design collection named “Journey to the West” derives its inspiration from an ancient Chinese fairytale that is considered “one of the four great masterpieces of Chinese literature” (Andrew

Lucas, 2015). He uses baroque pearls to represent the four characters of the story who embark on an expedition to the West.

The endearing character of the Monkey king features in his designed couture which is endearing to every Chinese born who are fed on these stories as a child (Andrew Lucas, 2015). Each character depicted in his designs evoke the ancient Chinese wisdom where Master Tang Sanzang represents ‘mercy’, The Monkey King represents ‘boldness’, Sha Wujing represents ‘honesty’, and Zhu Bajie evokes ‘greed’ (Andrew Lucas, 2015). Designing skills of Ren brings alive the ancient wisdom of friendship, bravery and adventure and invokes the spiritual Chinese soul.

Case Study 5: Kaka Zhang and Jadeite Legacy

Wisdom of the old makes a niche for itself in the designs of Kaka Zhang. Using the gold-jade saga of the ancient lore the young designer caters to the high-end, mid-range and commercial markets. Celebrated as the stone of the Imperialists jadeite carries the legacy the Chinese ancient world and its hierarchies. But beyond that it invokes a sensibility and spirituality that is representative of the world that was.

Zhang uses transparent jadeite widely used by the Chinese imperialists to make hairpins that was popular among the Chinese women as a representation of femininity. A hairpin designed by Zhang in transparent jadeite is shaped in the form of a butterfly which is a traditional symbol of loyalty of love (Andrew Lucas, 2015).

Zhang often allows the shape of a jadeite to inspire a story or old saying from her memory that she then gives the form of a jewellery. In a broach named as “Fishing Fun” Zhang used the fish like shape of the jadeite to create in finery an old Chinese anecdote that describes a famous intellectual of the ancient generation fishing with no bait and the hook held above the water (Andrew Lucas, 2015). It carries within it the wisdom of the elders that warns against forcing things to happen. As the Chinese believe: the true intellectual “goes with the flow” (Andrew Lucas, 2015).

Similarly, Zhang designed a ring “Beautiful Opera Singer” that displays intricate metalwork resembling a ring worn by female Peking opera singers. Representative of the story of these singers the jadeite used in the piece brings out the opera singers’ beauty and purity of heart (Andrew Lucas, 2015).

Case Study 6: Yvmin and Bloody Pearls

As Chinese luxury jewellery brands have cut a niche for themselves in the global market, Chinese costume jewellery has also created a brand name for them both in the domestic and global market. Reaching out to Chinese customers not just in the first tier cities but also second and low tiered cities of Mainland China, costume jewellery line of products of Chow Tai Fook can definitely form a part of the case study of Chinese jewellery brands. Though beginning in 1929 as a gold jewellery brand it has revamped itself to cater to the Millennial generation in China that no longer wishes to spend on jewellery as a form of investment but as a self-defining piece. Lv Xialei, Vice Secretary of Shanghai Fashion Week, believes the change in the buying behaviour of the Chinese millennial consumers has shifted the interest of the Chinese jewellery designers to affordable fashion statement jewellery (Yang Q. , 2019). Jewellery designer Yvmin has collaborated with the long standing Chinese brand Shushu/Tong to create a range of bloody pearls that make a statement for itself, yet is affordable and unique.

Case Study 7: Yirantian Guo and Redefinition of RTW (Ready-To-Wear)

Building her brand Yirantian as a ready-to-wear clothing line in 2016 she ventured into jewellery to accessorize the art of RTW. A graduate from London College of Fashion Guo developed her jewellery line as a complement to her initial venture into fashion clothing. This probably made her conscious of the buying attitude of the Millennial generation that values lightly designed unique affordability over heavily designed pricey jewellery piece as an investment.

Case Study 8: Ejing Jhang and Traditional Calligraphy

Redefining fashion jewellery Ejing Jhang has introduced the use of spalted beech wood wrapped with colour thread and cast in resin in the making of fashion jewellery. It creates a unique line of jewellery that is affordable yet affordable. Catering to the Millennial's love for self defining fashion it has made name for itself in the global market being stocked in global stores like Net-A-Porter and Selfridges (Yang Q. , 2019).

Case Study 9: Gengi Yu and Midnight Opera House

The brand was developed by the designer Gengi Yu while working as a costume designer for the Chinese TV series *Empresses in the Palace* (Yang Q. , 2019). He later developed his own brand *Midnight Opera House* to cater to the rising demand for costume jewellery among the Chinese Millennials. Joe Cheung, the buying manager of accessories for SKP, one of the leading and prestigious department stores in China believes, "MOH's aesthetics are unique, blending traditional Chinese craftsmanship and modernity. It is difficult to find similar brands in the market," (Yang Q. , 2019)

Case Study Summary

Modern Chinese jewellery has emerged as an eclectic brand that does not only represent Chinese culture in the global market; it reveals the inner soul of China to the world. Every piece designed by these groups of eccentric and talented designers brings out the philosophy of existence followed so far by the Chinese. To some it would seem not an art because it is commercializing and selling the soul of China. But I disagree on this score. Chinese designers working on designs and material of the older days but brings out the essence of Chinese life, daily existence of people and their inter-personal interaction. It would not be wrong to say that the Chinese jewellery designer invokes and recreates a 'collective memory' (G. Hofstede, 1988) that is strong enough to make the people turn back to indigenous jewellery and celebrate its designs.

Making of the 'Zhong' (Yan, 2023): Designs in Modern Chinese Jewellery

"The "new" is rooted in the "China" foundation, while the "China" collection serves as a lens through which the "new" is viewed and integrated with the traditional art and modeling's innovative and reformist design approach." (Yan, 2023) The new tradition of Zhong in jewellery designing requires a fair understanding of the present time and combining the traditional appreciation with the techniques of the time.

Modern Chinese jewellery industry has combined both to create a brand for itself that is rooted in its traditional spirit and caters to global aesthetic. In this way art has not been compromised at the stake of consumerist market, and a practical dialogue has been opened between the maker, the wearer and the spectator.

Serving a clientele that is not restricted to mainland China alone and spreads to overseas market as well Chinese jewellery designers have adapted to the market demands without compromising on aesthetics. Art remains the mainstay of the designs that they create and serves as platform to combine the best of different world cultures as will be demonstrated through various case studies.

Case Study 1: Shirley Zhang and Dumbbell Buckle Link and Honeycomb Designs

One can mention the designing craftsmanship of Shirley Zhang to attest the point. She is one of the contemporary jewellery designers of China who has patented two designs- the dumbbell buckle link and honeycomb designs (Andrew Lucas, 2015).

The craftsmanship drawing its inspiration from the 'fine gold art' technique of China also puts to the western technology to perfect use to bring alive an intricate design. That is how her creation 'Dancing on the Flowers' won a special award in 2012. Of these the honeycomb technique that she patented and used in

this piece is a signature designing technique she applies to all her creations making them consumer market-wise viable, yet artistic and unique.

Along with the ancient Chinese technique she has adapted to her designing skills for the modern consumerist market she has mixed the technique with the 14th century European technique of plique-à-jour, developed in France and Italy.

The Beijing enamel (Katerina Perez, 2020) technique in consonance with the European technique has been adopted to the creation of precious metal frames without any back frame wot allow the light to pass through it directly. This creates an illusion of miniature-stained glass that adds to the artistic expression of the piece. Western jewellery brands like Van Cleef & Arpels, Cartier and Tiffany use the plique-à-jour technique (Andrew Lucas, 2015). But Zhang has added a cutting edge to the technique by combining it with the ancient technique of Beijing Enamel.

Case Study 2: Master Jingyi Bai and Filigree Inlay Art

The creation of Master Jingyi Bai who has been designated the official representative Inheritor of filigree inlay art, however, does not consider the western technique into her stylistic department. Learning the art from the older generation master goldsmiths for almost forty years Master Bai learnt the ancient technique of using gold and silver threads of different weight and filling stones, carvings or other precious stones around the filigree (Andrew Lucas, 2015).

Later she began designing for the popular Chinese jewellery brand Zhaoyi. She has divested her artwork with the philosophy that every art piece produced in the form of an adornment “must succeed on its own in the market.” (Andrew Lucas, 2015). A difficult proposition to fathom Master Bai remains the classical craftsman who believes in the appreciation of a piece of adornment for the sake of its beauty and not its wearability.

Case Study 3: Yue-Yo and Knotting Art

Knotting art, another traditional Chinese technique of fabric art, has made a comeback with its adoption in the jewellery industry. Taiwanese designer Yue-Yo Wang first applied the technique in the form of long tassels and thread patterns to incorporate the traditional symbols so loved by the Chinese, especially the newer generation that is undergoing a revivalist culture.

Interestingly the art of knotting has been mixed by the designer with the ancient technique of using gold filigree. She uses the form to balance traditional Chinese symbols with filigree knots maintaining a symmetry that remains the parameter of culture in China as set by Confucius since ancient times.

It has marked out a space for itself in the high-fashion circle of the society bringing a symmetry to the contemporary standards of culture in the light of ancient tradition.

Case Study 4: Ziwei Longhong and Nuosu Heritage

Costume jewellery has been redefined by the label Soft Mountains by the designer Ziwei Longhong. She has channelled her Nuosu heritage into the stylistic making of these artificial jewellery pieces that uses the skill set of artisans from south west China, a mountaneous region. A sustainable approach has been worked into the label where Longhong upcycles dead stocks in favour of new materials that are incorporated into making sutainable yet affordable jewelleries (Yang Q. , 2019).

Case Study 5: Min Wu And Her Laid-Back Jewellery Designs

A graduate from London College of Fashion Min Wu uses ancient Chinese coins as her inspiration for combining Chinese aesthetics with modern RTW label of jewellery. Her brand 5min began as a clothing

label but gradually entered the fashion jewellery market to cater to the Millennial fashionistas (Yang Q. , 2019).

Case Study Summary: Emergence of Millennial Jewellery

These are invaluable pieces because they cannot be valued merely based on the worth or clarity of the gemstones or gold or silver inlays used in the pieces. These pieces of adornment are artistic pieces that not meant for consumption, but appreciation.

Wallis Hong, Guangzhou born designer, lamented, “Traditional Chinese jewelry companies share the same problem, that is, no design. They don’t understand the younger market, nor the European aesthetic, and they are looking to me to open a new styling proposition for them.” (Fearon, 2023)

Since 2000s the new designers, including Hong, have begun incorporating the Chinese soul into the designs, reviving the traditional gem storytelling, to create a line of bespoke and RTW jewellery. The younger generation in China, and across the globe, are besotted not by the clarity and value of the gems used in the jewellery, but by the artistic presentation of the piece. This has not only revived the ancient Chinese tradition of jewellery adornment as a symbol of refinement, but also the 19th century French idea of uniqueness. It brings back to mind what Master Bai propagates, a piece of jewellery that sells for its art, and not for its worth/value.

The line of bespoke and RTW jewellery that is on the rise in the Chinese domestic market and across the globe is using the ancient tradition as its lens. Revivalism is on the rise. But one must not assume that this has been done in complete ignorance of the modern equipment and technology. “Laser sawing for diamonds, computer-aided diamond cut planning, highly precise robotic cutting for coloured stones, and vacuum-casting in platinum” (Tao Hsu, 2014) all are assiduously employed to reach the high art production level.

But the technology does not facilitate increased production. It merely enhances the clarity of the artistic production of a piece of adornment. Western influence in this case has played a role only to the extent of technological innovation and allowing the jewellery market to produce pieces that are not objects, but subject of appreciation.

The Zhong is cutting for itself a new edge in the global market by virtue of its artistic revivalism and uniqueness. Each piece is a story that the connoisseurs of artform want to appreciate and preserve. Western aesthetic has moulded the revivalist spirit of Chinese traditional artform turning the modern Chinese jewellery into a collection of uniqueness.

Mixed Jewellery Making Stratagem: Chinese Jewellery Making

“High jewellery, like haute couture, commands the question as to where luxury product ends and art begins.” (Maillerdet, 2021) The globalized market is caught up in the stratagem, design technique, and fashion trend storm raised by the Western fashion brands; that one desirable effect- exclusivity. As footfall and competition from independent brands are becoming a staggering impediment to the success story of the major jewellery brands, they are gradually deviating from the “classic creative and commercial approaches.” (Maillerdet, 2021)

The individualistic nature of the young buyers is making them turn towards designs that has a distinct taste of exclusivity. Such exclusivism demand observable in the global market demands jewellery designs that are innovative and defines the customer. As commercial enterprise turns from real to the virtual platform ecommerce is taking over, and in a war is redefining, the buying experience of the customers. They no longer want to be a part of a queue. They want to be treated separately, catered individually and delivered exclusively. This has seeped into the global market reaching out to other markets, including that of China.

The Chinese gem and jewellery industry despite the global recession shows immense potential for growth (Tao Hsu, 2014). The success story of Chinese adornment industry owes much of its success to both revivalism of tradition and to its adaptation of global fashion trend and production strategy. As discussed in the previous section, the Zhong phenomena visible in China, particularly in fashion trend that includes jewellery industry, has adapted the spirit of the young China to encapsulate the Chinese soul. Now they are all set to adopt the High Jewellery art and production technique to showcase (not sell) the Chinese soul to the global market.

A soul, as these Chinese designers understand, cannot be sold. These are works of art that needs to be appreciated and accordingly valued. The strategy that has influenced the East has been professionally streamlined to open galleries and training courses that would enable the new age designers to capture the best of both worlds.

A specialized sector is on the rise in Chinese jewellery designing market where designers with global fame are trying to integrate their world fame with the demands of the youthful and growing global market. Initially functioning through shopping centres young designers are now reluctant to make their pieces into mundane pieces of adornment sold through shops. They are reinventing their line of jewelleries into specialised artistic pieces that are not sold, but artistically appreciated and valued. But alongside luxury brands names costume jewellery labels have earned for themselves fame both at home and abroad functioning through burgeoning e-commerce as well as department stores.

Gallery

A brand value is being created to set them apart as a piece of appreciation. Following the haute couture stratagem adopted in the West Chinese designers are now opening Galleries to showcase the works of these artists that allows people to look at them and appreciate them thereby escalating their cultural value. Shirley Zhang and her likes are opening brand galleries (not stores) to allow interaction between artist and the potential collector. To put it more simply, they are no longer pieces that one wears but adorns to mark their cultural presence.

Auction & Exhibition

Frequent exhibitions in galleries and auctions have also been an assured means for achieving a global audience for the artistic pieces of Chinese designers. Hong Kong's Wallace Chan and Michelle Ong of Carnet acquired fame by exhibiting their art pieces in various art galleries and auctions (Fearon, 2023).

Even Feng J. who harks from Shanghai catapulted to fame after her work was invited for exhibition at the Paris Biennale in 2022 (Fearon, 2023). This exhibition is a reputed platform for accomplished designers and is reputed across globe as a fine art fair.

Due to the exposure her work received in the fair her art pieces are now finding a place in private collections. She has not been a path breaker in this ground as many Chinese jewellery designers like Wallace Chan, Cindy Chao and Anna Hu have gained international fame and an entry into the haute couture sphere through this very means (Fearon, 2023).

After being recognized as a creator and not merely as a jewellery maker Feng J. was conscious of the encouragement it showered on her along with accolade. Most importantly it made her realise that she is being recognized in the jewellery arena as an artist (Fearon, 2023).

Reevaluation of the Revived Chinese Traditional Jewellery Designs

Galleries, exhibitions and auctions has opened a space for these creatives to spread their wings that had so far been chipped by the store manufacturing jewellery market. Media coverage has also made the jewellery designers of their status as creative artist in the new era.

They are now featured not as makers, but storytellers who narrate a new story with each creation. Though the Chinese domestic market is still young and growing, there is no denying that it has immense potential to adapt to this western culture of haute couture.

It is still in a developing phase but artists like Kaka Zhang believes this can easily be broached by opening spaces where the creator and the connoisseur can interact. In fact, up her sleeves she has the future plan to open specialized jewellery clubs where such interaction between the two can be facilitated.

But overall, as Aso Leon believes, “It is about new generation designers now, and it is global,”. “Because of the internet, we all have access to the same information, and like the global fashion and entertainment industries, we like to mix it up. So, I don’t want people to concentrate on an Asian face doing something like this — for me it’s grouped around young people, internationally.” (Fearon, 2023)

However, exclusivity is not defined through monetary terms alone. The preciousness and uniqueness of Chinese jewellery designs are also maintained in costume or RTW jewellery that are reaching out not to the high tiered city dwellers of China alone, but catching onto the third and low tiered cities of China as well. Reinventing Chinese aesthetics and soul in modern jewellery making costume jewellery designers of China are also offering affordable unique jewellery pieces.

Several department stores across China and also globally have started showcasing costume jewellery made by Chinese jewellery designers that have become quite the rage. Mostly gold plated on brass or made of 18k gold, these light and comparatively affordable jewellery pieces have lured in not only the Chinese Millennials but the Z Generation of the West as well. It is interesting to note that majority of the costume jewellery designers rely on e-commerce platforms to reach out to their global clientele. For instance, fashion jewellery designing brand OOAK one-of-a-kind established in 2012 by designer Alice Xu has made her designs presence felt in the global market through international e-commerce platform like YOOX (Wu, 2020). Old school marketing through retailers also remains a practice as shown by the marketing stratagem adopted by label Yirantian. This fashion jewellery label uses the outstanding stocking network through retailers like LABELHOOD, Galeries Lafayette, the Beast Shop and Lane Crawford (Wu, 2020).

Designing Courses to Promote Chinese Soul in Western Concept

The new Zhong is not dependent on exhibitionary and e-commerce platforms and retailers alone. Attempts are being made by the new age creative designers to open courses and centres where interactive discussion and hands on training can be provided to aspiring new generation Chinese jewellery designers. As most of the now renowned creative designers received their training either abroad, or shifted to sphere from other professional spheres, as the artists later lamented, an indigenous training program is quintessential for expanding the field of creative designing in China.

Initially knowledge was transferred from the master to the apprentice. But the recent trend of growth in the market has developed a necessity to provide one-on-one training. The certificate training programs to facilitate the demand was first established in the West and China initially began to import these foreign programs.

The first teaching centre on Gemmology was established by the China University of Geoscience in Wuhan in 1989 in collaboration with the Gemmological Association of Great Britain (Tao Hsu, 2014). Several other foreign gemmology and diamond certificate training programs followed the suit and were established in mainland China. The American Gemmological Institute taught its first Chinese graduate gemmology course in 1998 (Tao Hsu, 2014).

Since 2012 after several attempts an indigenous certificate training program has been opened up in China by the China University of Geosciences (Yang M. X., 2013). Students enrolled in the program are taught courses on gemmology, manufacturing, design, sales and management. Local labs and banks are now collaborating to provide specialised management course to individuals. There are jewellery advisors who are now offering one-to-one classes for high end investors and collectors (Yang M. X., 2013).

The efforts made by the state of China in collaboration with the West and the developing field for artistry in jewellery industry has not been a single player game. A many actors play it has put to use the global fashion fad for brands to the new era customized jewellery demand of the domestic market.

Creative designers are carving out a space for themselves in this niche market by virtue of their skill and creativity. Uniqueness in the catch word of this new sphere where, as Leon has pointed out youth and innovation go hand in hand. Perhaps, that has opened a space for more direct interaction of the Western aesthetics and Eastern intellectual revivalism in creative artform.

Conclusion

Rise of discretionary income in the hands of Chinese and socio-economic demography affecting the jewellery industry

Over the last thirty years and more Chinese economy has demonstrated a phenomenal growth and resilience even after the economic set-back experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jennings, 2022) (Daye, 2024). All of this is the result of the exponential growth in discretionary income in the hands of the Chinese, especially the growing strength of the upper middle class in the cities. The sustainable growth policies that have been undertaken by the Chinese government intends to develop domestic consumption of the future.

The phenomenal of growth of discretionary income in the hands of people migrating and settling in third and fourth tier cities of China holds the promise of an increase in domestic consumption of goods. In the light of these unfolding changes jewellery industry and demand for bespoke and fashion jewellery as art pieces will continue to flourish, as can be forecasted.

The vision for this development in near future rests on the socio-cultural demography of China that now comprises of a generation that was born after the mid-1980s and are largely “global minded and open to Western...product consumption.” (Tao Hsu, 2014) it is the confident outlook that the generation exudes that serves as a positive signal for discretionary spending and holds hopes for further development of the Chinese jewellery industry, especially that of luxury brands and fashion RTW jewelleryes [often referred to as body accessory laboratory as done by Yvmin (Wu, 2020)].

Cultural Revivalism of Chinese Traditionalism in Jewellery Designs

One must also bear in mind that Chinese jewellery designers have carved out a space for themselves both at home and internationally in tandem with these generational phenomena. The Chinese designers have realised that their common cultural background “drawing from the heritage of time-honored craftsmanship and respect for the Chinese philosophical system” (Andrew Lucas, 2015) are in tandem with the financial and cultural tidings of the generation that holds buying power in contemporary China.

It is a generation that desires unique jewellery designs that has aesthetic value (Yang F. , 2014). It is no longer a market for traditional heavy gold jewelleryes that has saleable value. Acquisition of collectibles is the new parameter of cultural refinement. Designers with new ideas and revivalist acculturative capacity have the potential to cut an edge in the new market.

Future Trend

They are also making it big in the global market expanding their artistic craftsmanship to take over of big names in jewellery market. For instance, Chow Tai Fook Jewellery Group took over the American diamond company Hearts on Fire. Whereas the popular Chinese jewellery house Qeelin was taken over by French luxury retailer Kering. Such expansionism has not been neo-imperialistic take-over of the culture because Chinese designers continue to design and showcase in the global market their artistic creations that are widely admired and appreciated.

Limitation of the research field is the restrictive nature of the jewellery designing market of China that deals with many high end designers and few fashion jewellery designers. Though fashion jewellery has made its presence felt at home through retail shops and department store, customized jewellery remains restricted to domestic and global luxury city based market. The gap between the marketing strategy of both kind of Chinese jewellery needs in-depth research to understand the changing pattern of the market for Chinese jewellery designing.

Future research on the Chinese jewellery industry can perhaps take into account the ever-growing capacity of the ever growing market that is young but has lot of potential to revive the age-old Chinese tradition in its own right, moving beyond the fashion trend and production technique of the West and setting a trends of its own, bringing about a full scale exotica redux.

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