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# **The Creative Influence of History in Fashion Practice: The Legacy of the Silk Road and Chinese-Inspired Culture-Led Design**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on work that examines the role of culture as the stimulus for design, the article explores the ways in which the legacy of China's Silk Road, dating back 4,000 years ago, continues to provide inspiration for Chinese and Chinese-inspired fashion designers. In terms of substantive focus, the article applies the culture-led design research of Ritchie Moalosi and colleagues to the practice of fashion design. The article provides an overview of the history of the Silk Road and discusses the ways in which aspects of the history of the Silk Road was important for the development of the Chinese fashion industry and which finds specific expression in the work of designers and fashion houses. To explore this process, the article focuses on the design and fashion products and aesthetic of Laurence Xu, Jiang Qiong'er and Shang Xia, Shanghai Tang, and Vivienne Tam. The article discusses the ways in which these practitioners and companies have used aspects of the Silk Road in their work, such as imagery, textiles and materials, but the article also considers the ways in which aspects of cultural hybridity are evident in such artefacts. The article critically considers nostalgic conceptions of the Silk Road history and its status as an "imaginative community" with regard to culture-led fashion product design and contemporary cultural and social attitudes towards the Silk Road. The article concludes with the view that the Silk Road represents a significant example of the transformation of cultural features into distinctive design elements that express and preserve historical Chinese culture and illustrates how culture can provide materials for new design ideas and practice.

In the view of Yu-Han Wang, Sheng-feng Qin, and David Davidson (2013), culture can play a crucial role as an inspirational tool within product design. However, while of value to a range of industries, they see a clear value of this approach for the fashion industry as "aesthetic presence,

psychological satisfaction, social attitude and historical revival in the cultural context are the most important factors which inspire designers in creating new fashion” (2013, 2). Taking the idea of culture and cultural history as a specific design resource tool, but framing it in relation to what the product design commentators Moalosi, Setlhatlanvo and Oanthata term the practice of designing “from cultural memory” (2016, 17), this article will critically explore the efficacy of this distinctive culture-led design approach. However, while much of Moalosi et al’s research is focused on specific examples of national cultural traditions, the article will extend their product design approach to consider the ways in which a number of fashion designers have drawn from the broader culture and imagery associated with the ancient Silk Road, originating in China 4,000 years ago. The Silk Road was the trade route that enabled (principally) the trade of Chinese silk to reach many parts of the world, and so acting as an ancient channel for the “communication and exchange among different peoples and regions that brought about the splendid variety of the garments” (Mei 2008, 42). As Suzanne E. Cahill states of the Silk Road and its ancient founding city, Chang’an:

The sophisticated international culture of Chang’an was founded on its location at the eastern end of the Silk Route, a loosely connected set of roads leading from Chinese cities in the Yellow River plains, across the mountains and deserts of Central Asia, to western kingdoms such as Persia and India, and the Mediterranean. Active for over a thousand years, these roads had long been the main conduit of trade, travel, military conquest, and the exchange of ideas between China and points in the west. Chinese exports along these Central Asian routes before the Tang dynasty consisted of silk, high-value manufactured goods, and medicinal substances (1999, 104).

Given the primacy of the Silk Road in China's history, its influence and cultural traditions was discernible in the renewed sustained development of the Chinese fashion industry from the 1980s, and within the work of a number of internationally recognised designers and fashion houses, both within China and beyond. As such, the history of the Silk Road, and the traditions attached to it, will be argued to represent a distinctive fashion-oriented example of the culture-led product design approach. In defining this, Ritchie Moalosi, Vesna Popovic and Anne Hickling-Hudson state that culture-led product design is a process that consists of the "incorporation of cultural values in products [to provide] designers with a rich and varied set of materials that inspire new design ideas" (2010, 176). Crucially, this strategy yields new products that reflect a specific culture (Moalosi, Setlhatlhanyo and Sealesta 2016). Moreover, culture represents a valuable source of inspiration, because national cultural traditions can constitute a rich "resource for innovation" (Moalosi et al 2005, 3). Additionally, there is also a wider strategic importance for taking a culture-led design approach within the context of global markets, because, as Lin et al argue:

Designing local features into a product appears to be more and more important in the global market where products are losing their identity because of the similarity in their function and form. Cultural features then are considered to be a unique character to embed into a product both for the enhancement of product identity in the global market and for the fulfilment of the individual consumer's experiences (2007, 1).

In terms of this article, a key issue with the Silk Road is that, while it has a distinctive history that is primarily closely associated with China (from where it originated and developed outwards), the Silk Road also constituted a process of cultural hybridity in its weaving together of differing cultural practices, peoples and products. As Peter Frankopan argues, the Silk Road "helps us better understand the ways that religions and languages spread in the past, while showing how 'ideas about food, fashion

and art disseminated, competed and borrowed from each other” (2019, 2-3). So, while the Silk Road has served to be a fashion design influence, constituting (as will be argued) an example of fashion-based culture-led design practice, the source of cultural inspiration is more diffused than the forms typically described by Moalosi et al. Therefore, the article will stress the development of the Silk Road within China and identify how traditional culture was expressed within the renewed Chinese fashion industry from the 1980s, but it will specifically focus upon examples of how Silk Road-related culture has been drawn upon in the work of a number of Chinese-inspired designers.

With regard to critical examination, the approaches of fashion designers and creative directors such as Laurence Xu, Jiang Qiong'er (CEO and Creative Director of Shang Xia), Shanghai Tang, and the later work of Vivienne Tam will be examined with regard to the influence of the Silk Road as a mode of culture-led design. Moreover, the article will critically consider the ways in which some of these designers are also hybridised in terms of their European ownership and financial backing, factors that can problematize the specifically Chinese cultural basis of their design work in some instances. Yet, given the history and nature of the Silk Road, the issue of Chinese/European identities is an apt one as the Silk Road is frequently represented less in terms of historical and cultural specificity, but more in line with what Marie Thorsten dubs a “Silk Road nostalgia”. In this regard, some culture-led designs arguably evoke contemporary expressions of orientalism as they draw upon the Silk Road as a cultural abstraction, rather than in terms of culturally-rooted historical practices. Nevertheless, as will be argued, the primacy of the Silk Road in the examples discussed do serve to reflect the significance and efficacy of a culture-led design approach that serves to establish potent “cultural connections between products and their users” (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling Hudson 2007, 40), but within fashion-based design practice environments.

### **The Silk Road, China, and the design value of culture**

In her study of Chinese clothing, Hua Mei argues that the development of Chinese garments is an ancient practice, as verified by archaeological excavations. For example, in 1958, in a historical site in what is now Yuhang in the Zhejiang Province, “some silk textiles were excavated made 4,700 years ago, including silk threads, silk strings, and pieces of silk” (2008, 40). The production of this material would ultimately become a major factor in China’s economic trading activities with surrounding nations, delivered via the trading route that would ultimately be dubbed “The Silk Road” in the nineteenth century by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richtofen (Vainker 2004; Frankopan 2019). Established 4,000 years ago and stretching some 5,000 km long from Chang’an (what is now Xi’an) in Shaanxi Province, and reaching Antioch (what is now modern Turkey) on the Mediterranean (and from there to ancient Rome by sea), the Silk Road distributed China’s revolutionary product of silk to the West. As Mei states, silk is the invention of China, and for a long period of time, China was the only country producing and using the fibre. This was because, as John Feltwell states, the “creature at the centre of attraction along the Silk Road was...the silk moth *Bombyx*, which produced the precious commodity” (1990, 8). Consequently, China was the undisputed origin of all *Bombyx* silk products, as it was in China that the white mulberry, the only food plant of the *Bombyx* silk moth, and the silk moth naturally coexisted. Subsequently, the “Chinese had the unparalleled and exclusive claim to a tradition of at least five thousand years of silk production” (1990, 8).

Silk production (sericulture) would be a major economic and cultural force from the Shang Dynasty (1550-1050 B.C.E.), with the Silk Road being established within the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.). In this regard “the oasis cities dotted along the Silk Road became focal points of contact between the religions and philosophies of East and West, immortalized first in the decorative motifs on Chinese, Persian and, later on, Byzantine silks” (Anquetil 1995, 15) (Fig 1). Silk production and trade continued throughout the subsequent Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Such was its worth, silk would serve as both an internationally-valued and recognised form of currency in

addition to representing a coveted luxury product along the Silk Road route (Sheng 2013; Frankopan 2015). Silk production would continue throughout the subsequent Yuan (1279-1368 CE), Ming (1368-1644 C.E.) and Qing (1644-1911 C.E.) dynasties, with the Silk Road expanding and significantly evolving. As Mei argues:

The Silk Road across the continent of Eurasia, the Silk Road over the sea, and the Silk Road that connected Southwestern China with the surrounding countries brought the soft and lustrous silk of China to countries in Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and Europe, along with the technology of silkworm raising, reeling, silk reeling, and weaving of brocade. This was a historical event that gave Chinese garments its great impact on the rest of the world (2008, 45).

[Fig 1 Silk Road map near here]

Although the “Silk Road over the sea” would reach its economic and cultural apex within the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Chinese silk production and global trading relations would also play a major role within the post-Qing dynasty period from 1911, which resulted in the establishment of the Republic of China. At one level, silk production was affected by the introduction and increasing proliferation of synthetic textiles (Vainker 2004), but there were also powerful political pressures, too. This was influenced by the proliferation of Western fashion styles within China, coupled with a cultural rejection of China’s dynastic past and a distancing through clothing from the cultural and political traditions of the Qing dynasty (Tsui 2009). Yet, the increased consumption of Western fashions affected the sales of traditional Chinese fabrics, most notably silk, leading to the announcement of a ‘Formal Dress Code of the Republic of China’ in 1912. This would frequently take the form of a mix of traditional Chinese garments and Western fashions, such as the Zhang-Shan suit, apparel that reflected Western aesthetics in terms of cut, but fused this with distinctive Chinese symbols (such as pocket placement to visually represent balance and harmony). Nonetheless, in the period of the Cultural Revolution following the Chinese Liberation War (1945-1949), the socialist regime imposed

an anti-bourgeois state-planned economic structure. Accordingly, all private companies were procured by state-owned companies, and clothing became an explicit political statement, with design styles largely restricted to Mao and Lenin-suits or traditional trousers and tunics replicating the garb of the traditional Chinese peasantry (Tsui 2009; Steele and Major 1999).

Nevertheless, there were still continued technical expressions of the cultural recognition of China's textile and garment manufacture heritage. For example, the establishment of an embroidery institute in Suzhou in the 1950s both preserved traditional skills and techniques in silk-based garment manufacture, and ensured that the craft persisted (Vainker 2004). Furthermore, in the post-Mao period, there came to be a renewed investment and on the development of fashion design from the 1980s within China. This was initiated in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's "Open Policy". This was a process that saw China integrate a market-leaning economic system with its communist political structure, resulting in the rapid development of privately-owned business enterprises, but also a renewed government interest in fashion design (Justice 2012). Consequently, there was a significant expansion in fashion design education from the early 1980s, and a number of significant institutions specialising in apparel design were established, such as: the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in Beijing, The Academy of Arts and Design, China Textile University, and the Northwest Institute of Textile Engineering in Xi'an, (Tsui 2009; Tsui 2016). These would form the foundation of a nascent Chinese fashion industry, and a significant feature of garments produced within such institutions were designs that often balanced modern styles with a return to key Chinese heritage garment designs (such as the redesigned qipao, or "banner gown"). Hence, a distinctive sense of Chinese culture would play a significant and enduring function in the design ethos of its fashion industry. Moreover, traditions associated with the Silk Road would prove to be a notable impetus for culture-led fashion design work.

**China and Chinese-inspired creation: The Silk Road and cultural fashion design influence**



With reference to the global development of the Chinese fashion industry, Tiziana Ferrero-Regis and Tim Lindgren (2012) argue that the increase in fashion design institutions (and the work of its graduates) ensured that fashion and garment production has increasingly shifted the focus from the “Made in China” tag to a now influential “Created in China” status. A key element in this progression was the differing ways in which designers manifested ‘strong hallmarks of nationalism that actively essentialize “Chineseness”’ (Tsui 2016, 581). Accordingly, a number of designers consciously drew (and continue to draw) upon traditional styles, art, porcelain motifs, and cultural symbolism, factors evident in the work of Vivienne Tam, Yeohlee Teng, Anna Sui, Han Feng, Ma Ke, and Ji Cheng. As Gemma Williams (2015) argues, given that the Chinese fashion industry has only developed and matured in recent decades, Chinese designers have been faced with the challenge of establishing distinctive design aesthetics to clearly demarcate an unambiguous design identity within the international fashion world. In this sense, cultural heritage has persistently provided a source of design inspiration in this regard, and serves to illustrate key tenets of the culture-led product design approach. As Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling Hudson argue of this strategy, culture-led product design reflects the ways in which designers “embody culture in the products they design” (2007, 37). As such, key aspects of a nation’s culture “can be consciously integrated in product design”, and selected core components of a culture can be deliberately embedded in the designing of specific products” (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling Hudson 2010, 175-176).

As an example of this cultural embedding and integration of cultural motifs, historic traditions associated with the Silk Road are an important and enduring locus of design inspiration in this regard, for both Chinese-based and Chinese-inspired fashion designers. In this regard, the first example to reflect this culture-led process within the context of fashion is the Chinese designer, Laurence Xu. Training at the Central Academy of Craft Art and working initially as a costume designer for films such as Richard Bowen’s *Cinderella Moon* (2010), Xu’s couture fashion work has its inspirational

roots within historical Chinese culture, such as traditional embroidery and silk designs, and Chinese art, but adapted to reflect modern fashion and global aesthetics (Wynne 2015; Anonymous 2018). As Xu states of his work: “Traditional Chinese handicrafts are undoubtedly artistic treasures, and in my design I combine them with modern aesthetics” (in Williams 2015, 125). In terms of a sharply focused example of this design approach, Xu described his 2017 Paris Couture collection as representing “my Silk Road journey. In the past my collections were spiritual. This time they are literal, inspired by landscape. I want to take everyone to the countryside, people should not always stay in the city.” (Owen 2017, 1). In this context, Xu’s work has been argued to fundamentally display ‘the artistic charm of the ancient Silk Road’, a perception centered upon his use of traditional Chinese techniques, such as *yunjin*, a type of brocade first employed within the Tang dynasty. In this sense, Wu utilizes culturally-sourced materials that are adapted to reflect contemporary clothing designs, as exemplified during his *Donghuang* fashion show, held in Paris in 2015 (Anonymous 2015, 1). With reference to a distinctive culture-led design practice, Laurence Xu’s approach synthesises the ethos of the Silk Road with specific traditional craft techniques, an approach also evident within the design work of the artisan brand, Shang Xia. This is so because Shang Xia centrally and actively evokes traditional Chinese culture and craft-based design and production techniques through its fashion and luxury accessories, homeware products, and furniture.

Given its production of luxury designs, Shang Xia is built upon a design and production philosophy that is synonymous with the luxury sector, in that it emphasises craftsmanship, high quality, technical superiority, exclusivity, high price and an aspirational image (Seo and Buchanan-Oliver 2015). But in terms of the primacy of culture, the company is underpinned by a distinctive Chinese-centred ethos of ‘preservation through innovation’ (Mellery-Pratt 2015). Thus, in defining what creativity and design innovation mean for the identity of Shang Xia, the CEO and Creative Director, Jiang Qiong’er states that they:

[A]re like two good friends; they complement one another but are still independent of each other. In the broad sense of the term, creativity is born with everyone and is everywhere. It is a driving force of flowing water, bringing vigour to life. Meanwhile, innovation needs to integrate some basic skills and have a certain foundation. For example, 'Shang Xia' inherits the traditional handicrafts and aesthetics by using new materials and technological innovation (Zeitoun 2017, 7).

In terms of defining the nature of this creative design inspiration, and, crucially, accentuating the primacy of utilizing aspects of Chinese-inspired cultural heritage within the design of Shang Xia's products, Qiong'er further explains that:

Shang Xia is about excellent craftsmanship, contemporary design and very fine quality. It is the contemporary expression of a unique inheritance of 5,000 years of art and craft... Looking back to the history of China, we have had the most glorious periods of Chinese arts and crafts, such as the Silk Road (Williams 2015, 199).

Here, then, the legacy of the Silk Road points to the ways in which contemporary fashion designers can create products that do not simply signify direct historical simulations, or represent more time-limited nostalgia-driven designs, but instead keenly define the products as forward facing in terms of product design and use. Accordingly, the vision of Jiang Qiong'er has for the trajectory of Shang Xia is one in which the legacy of traditional garment design and textile use is a dynamic one. So, the core values of the company are "carrying the past to the future, pursuit of quality, cultural heritage and responsibilities", or, as Qiong'er further elucidates: "What Shang Xia does through contemporary design is create a link between the old and the new" (in Williams 2015, 197-199). However, the analysis of Shang Xia's design use of Chinese culture is especially noteworthy due to the fact that, in

terms of ownership and finance, Shang Xia is a European company, as it was founded in 2008 by Hermès. In terms of market presence, both brands are retailed together in the Shanghai flagship mansion, while the company markets Shang Xia in standalone boutiques in Beijing and Paris. In Martin Roll's assessment of Shang Xia, while Hermès has a 90% stake in the company, the dominant theme of the house has been to take Hermès' distinctive brand philosophy to "look back to the past to search for the future". Yet, while the company has been dubbed the "Chinese Hermès", its foundation is that of a distinctive Chinese-inspired attitude, and one that is predicated upon the mission "to resurrect and nurture the sense of craftsmanship" which was lost as China became a mass-production economy, and so "Shang Xia's brand offerings are built on centuries of Chinese heritage" (2017, 1).

In this regard, Jiang Qiong'er has overtly referred to the Shang Xia brand "as a hybrid of Chinese and French cultures" (2017, 3). In terms of Jan Nederveen Pieterse's analysis of cultural hybridity in the context of globalization, the process invariably involves the practices of cultural montage and collapse, "the mixture of phenomenon which are held to be different, separate" (1995, 55-56) and "transcultural cut-and-paste" (2009, 89). With reference to Shang Xia, the cultural 'mélange' at the heart of their designs is that of a conscious process of "blending of East and West." As such, Shang Xia's design spirit reflects and foregrounds Moalosi et al's concept of a design approach that creatively, and centrally, taps into a distinctive sense of 'cultural memory', iterating the ways in which a Chinese-inspired culture-led design approach can produce products that act as "mediators" between a cultural past and present (2016, 19). Consequently, as Hicks argues, Shang Xia extends "Hermès lifeblood of exquisite craftsmanship and timeless value into re-imagining ancient Chinese techniques and cultures [and] looks far into the future by taking a firm stand in the past" (2016, 1). Moreover, it draws upon elements of the traditions, aesthetics, and spirit of the Silk Road to form a part of this culture-led and historically-influenced attitude. Yet, a Silk Road-inspired

approach to culture-led fashion design is not always without limitations and cultural challenges, as arguably expressed in the case of the luxury fashion brand, Shanghai Tang.

Shanghai Tang was founded in 1994 by Sir David Tang, and while originating in Hong Kong, the company specialized in making Chinese-inspired clothing and accessories based upon the use of traditional Chinese fabrics and natural tissues, to the extent that some 80 per cent of clothing is represented by “traditional Chinese silhouettes, Tang jackets and qipaos” (Ooi 2019, 1) (Fig 2).

[Fig 2 near here Shanghai Tang]

Given this sense of cultural interweaving drawn from Chinese culture, it is unsurprising that the Silk Road has significantly featured within Shanghai Tang’s product design. In addition to drawing upon Silk Road imagery in the promotion of silk-based products, the company took a specific culture-led product design approach with regard to their 2015 Silk Road fragrance collection, created by the perfumier, Carlos Benaim. In terms of the design and marketing of the range, Shanghai Tang explicitly evoked the romantic ethos of the Silk Road as the source of product inspiration. As such, the brand communication underpinning the fragrance range declared that the collection was directly inspired by the ‘the exotic landscapes, rich colors and sense of adventure of the Silk Road’ with a number of products entitled: Gold Lily, Rose Silk, Oriental Pearl, Orchid Bloom, Spring Jasmine (for women) and Mandarin Tea, L’Orient and Jade Dragon (for men). In terms of design aesthetics and brand messaging, the intention was to evoke, in a sensory fashion, the atmosphere and experience of travelling along the ancient Silk Road, from East to West. In more practical terms, the bottle designs for the fragrances were carefully constructed to reflect an unambiguously Chinese-inspired culture-led quality, because the collection was created to be:

A celebration of attention to detail, exquisite handcrafting and luxurious materials, each fragrance is housed in precious bottle that prominently features SHÒU. This Chinese symbol

of longevity is cited as one of the Five Blessings: longevity, wealth, health, love and virtue. The women's bottle features the SHÒU symbol meticulously engraved in enamel and a gold leaf on the cap, serving as centerpiece of the design that forms the pattern of the lucky number 8. The tall and statuesque men's bottle features clean beautiful lines and glass cap handcrafted by skilled artisan, also featuring the SHÒU symbol in a solid metallic piece (Teo 2016, 1).

This design approach illustrates the differing ways in which the spirit of the Silk Road, and ingrained components of Chinese culture and symbolism, are interwoven into the Shanghai Tang range, and so represents a distinctive example of "how culture can be consciously integrated in product design" (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2010, 175). Conversely, unlike the earlier examples discussed, the fragrance range took a more holistic approach to the tradition of the Silk Road that flagged the differing cultures that marked the ancient trade route. And so, while China formed a core aspect of the inspiration for the branding, bottle design, and product names, the ethos of the range also evoked the Middle Eastern geographical spaces. Indeed, the references to the sense of the 'exotic landscape' and 'sense of adventure' of the Silk Road exhibit a more ahistorical use of the Silk Road, and one that serves to conjure a stylized, if not mythologized, conception of the trade road. In this sense, Shanghai Tang's cultural approach to the Silk Road arguably echoes classical orientalist tropes, whereby the spaces stretching from China to the Mediterranean were depicted historically by European travelers as a 'place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (Said 2003, 1). Hence, Shanghai Tang took an avowedly creative approach to the Silk Road traditions that emphasized it as an 'imaginative geography'.

Adapting Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community', Marie Thorsten argues that in a contemporaneously sense, the Silk Road has been frequently read as representing a romanticized proto-globalized network. This is based upon the perception that, in linking East and West, it represented a process in which 'a vast global flow of ideas and things permitted adventure,

romance and knowledge' (2005, 301) – the key tropes underpinning Shanghai Tang's Silk Road fragrance collection. In this regard, the use of culture in relation to the fragrance range serves to reflect elements of classic postmodern approaches to fashion based upon "transient phenomena" and "fleeting and ephemeral surfaces" (Church Gibson 2000, 355), and more cogently, frequently concerned with the "saleability of the cultural past" (Connor 1997, 206). In discussing the nature of postmodern fashion, Elizabeth Wilson argues that the classic key elements of postmodern culture foreground abstract evocations of "cultural memory" in terms of an eclectic approach to cultural and artefacts to ultimately create culturally hybrid styles. In this context, Wilson (referring to the approach of Frederic Jameson) contends that products which draw upon nostalgia typically approach "the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image" (1990, 225). At one level, the fragrance range does present an idealized and ahistorical evocation of the Silk Road in a manner that constitutes an orientalist spirit, of which a key aspect of this tradition has persistently been the fusion of memory and imagination with discourses pertaining to the East (Sardar 1999). Nevertheless, while it is a romanticized approach, the bottle design, with its clear stylistic presentations of SHÒU, does point to the ways in which Shanghai Tang's Chinese-inspired aesthetic draws upon specific cultural resources to attain a design outcome, and so illustrates the efficacy of the technique espoused by Moalosi et al.

On the one hand, then, Shanghai Tang's use of imagery and specific cultural factors in the context of the Silk Road demonstrates the ways in which the use of culture can inspire a distinctive culture-led design approach. But on the other hand, the company have also flagged some of the challenges that can arise from a company that draws upon a specific cultural tradition, especially in terms of establishing global brand presence. As with Shang Xia, Shanghai Tang has ostensibly become a European luxury fashion since its acquisition by the Italian Alessandro Bastagli in 2017 (and prior to this, the company had financial input from Richemont). In the view of Wang, Qin, and Harrison, while cultural specificity can play a vital role within the product design process, a "culture-

inspired product may have a very good market response in a certain cultural context, and a poor market performance in [another] cultural context” (2013, 2). For this reason, as Xuixin Deng states of Shanghai Tang’s design identity and international challenges:

Chinese aesthetic values are so different from Western ones that it’s impossible to design an outfit that caters to both Chinese customers and Western customers alike. For example, a dragon symbolizes auspiciousness in Chinese culture, but it implies the opposite in Western culture. Chinese love to dress in red for weddings, but Westerners prefer white. All of these cultural differences will make it hard for Shanghai Tang designers to craft and tailor an outfit that both fits the fashion standards of a Chinese customer and a Western customer (2018, 1).

This suggests that there can be limits to a culture-led fashion design approach that, drawing upon a specific cultural context, is unable to translate these designs, cultural features and values to a global market. As such, the effective hybrid design identity, philosophy, and market success of Shang Xia has not always been experienced by Shanghai Tang, whose business fortunes have notably fluctuated in recent years (a status signified by the closure of the financially unsustainable New York flagship store in New York). Yet, it is significant that the reinvention efforts undertaken by the company has explicitly retrenched its Chinese-inspired identity in relation to its product design. As the former Creative Director Joanne Ooi states of the centrality (and perceived efficacy) of Chinese culture in terms of marketing value for Shanghai Tang’s global consumer reach:

It may seem obvious today, but Westerners can appreciate Chinese culture and increasingly nationalist Chinese want to see their culture reflected at them. After I joined Shanghai Tang, my design team started creating seasonal collections based on some of the most significant themes in 5,000 years of Chinese history and culture. This included allusions to the Silk Road,



Peking opera, Mongolian nomads and the history of Chinese writing, all captured in advertising campaigns (Ooi 2019, 7).

Key aspects of Chinese culture, in this way, are central within the history within the past and future trajectory of the brand, not only with regard to the ways in which Shanghai Tang established its initial identity, but also in its process of image and product reinvigoration for both Eastern and Western markets. And again the Silk Road is part of this cultural repertoire. Thus, the issue of culture is a dynamic one as the centrality of Chinese heritage (and traditions such as the Silk Road) are a central factor within such design practice outcomes, even when balanced by issues of cultural hybridity, a perennial factor evident in the work of other designers, such as Vivienne Tam (Fig 3).

[Fig 3 near here Vivienne Tam. Christmas store window 2015]

[Fig 4 near here Vivienne Tam spring 2010 collection Butterfly Lovers]

Born in China, but moving to Hong Kong at the age of three, as Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren argue, throughout her fashion career, Tam has long “managed to extract the nature of her Chinese heritage and extrapolate it into an international brand with Chinese characteristics” (2012, 80-81). For example, her 1990s work displayed traditional Chinese cultural motifs, from dragon imagery and Buddhist scriptures, to collections inspired by Chinese cosmology and its division of the universe into five elements: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth (Steele and Major 1999). Hence, while Tam is a long-established designer in the West (launching her fashion company East Wind Code in New York in the early 1980s), she is nevertheless consistently “known for her use of Asian design elements” (Wu 2009, 179) (Fig 4). Consequently, the salient issue of “cultural memory” inherent within culture-led product design has been an endemic feature of her work. Furthermore, with regard to aspects of her more contemporary projects, the influence of Chinese cultural heritage and traditions of the Silk Road have played an influence in her culture-led design approaches. For example, Tam was one of 15 female

artists invited to submit work for the *One Belt, One Road* development (an initiative announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, which is seeing the route revived along the historic land and oceanic Silk Road routes). In the context of Tam's contribution to this project, she designed and produced a Silk Road-inspired tapestry for the *One Belt, One Road* Visual Arts exhibition held in 2016 (Chow 2016). Secondly, Tam produced a 2017 fashion collection entitled 'New Silk Road', an internationally-facing collection that was based upon the creative fusion of styles associated with the historic Silk Road with distinctively contemporary American style influences (Zhu 2017). In this regard, Tam exhibited designs that stressed a distinctive sense of cultural hybridity in terms of a collage of differing national identities, but unified in terms of weaving together varying countries that were located on the ancient Silk Road route. As such, Tam created her culture-led designs via the "borrowing from symbols belonging to indigenous cultures from Xinjiang in Western China, Central Asia, Turkey, and Russia" (Rapp 2016, 1). In this sense, Tam's work both evokes the ancient Chinese origins of the Silk Road with the current development that has now linked over eighty countries, while expressing the original geographically diverse and multi-cultural nature of the Silk Road adhering to the fact that the trade route consisted of "multiple networks" from East to West. Via the Silk Road, then, Tam has created culture-led designs that equally fuse her Chinese-inspired ethic with her Western fashion aesthetic.

### **The Silk Road and culture-led fashion design: weaving history with cultural memory**

The concept of culture-led design is a process in which 'designers are given opportunities to transform cultural features into design elements (Ser 2018, 186). And in this context, Vivienne Tam's *One Belt, One Road*-inspired work reflects the ways in which a Chinese-inspired culture-led fashion approach can draw upon distinctive aspects of national cultural memory in the service of fashion design practice. Furthermore, it also underscores the centrality of the Silk Road as a contemporary cultural, political and economic presence. As Thorsten states, the historical Silk Road has been seen in terms of a modern

“longing for global community” and as a “symbol of common humanity” (2005, 302). Indeed, this is what underscores President Xi Jinping’s modern replication of the Silk Road as a means by which “to forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region...to reinvigorate the Silk Roads” (Frankopan 2019, 88). Therefore, the ancient and modern Silk Road has found expression within contemporary geopolitics, and within fashion design visions and products, reflecting Shawhong Ser’s contention that, from a design perspective, culture constitutes a rich source of “creative resources” (2018, 163).

In Moalosi et al’s (2005) view of the integration of culture within product design, a central aspect of the process is that designers should strive to embody culture within the products they design. This is so because, in their analysis, distinctive aspects of craft production can influence contemporary design techniques and products in a global context and market-reach. In this regard, this article has extended this process of a distinguishing culture-led design to the work of Chinese and Chinese-inspired fashion designers and fashion houses that have instilled (to differing degrees) aspects of the Silk Road as a reference-point into their products. Ostensibly, the article has explored the ways in which, drawing upon the work of Moalosi et al, these fashion-based approaches act as a means of preserving and communicating distinctive cultural expressions in the ways that they serve a function of “holding, preserving and presenting cultural values to the respective product users” (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2010, 177). While Moalosi et al’s approach frequently looks at the ways in which specific national cultural products can bridge the gap between local and global product designs (agriculturally based handcrafting processes in Botswana, for example), their ethos of culture-led design is applicable to fashion design. From Moalosi et al’s perspective, designers can create from their cultural memories and from traditions endemic to a particular community. As such, the culture-led design approach enables designers to construct products that are “imbued with local value and meaning”, have a “distinctive international appeal”, but also serve to preserve the culture that is creatively drawn upon (2016, 19). With reference the Silk Road frequently representing a source of

‘cultural memory’ that inspires design work, this article has argued that such an approach is present within the work of a number of Chinese and Chinese-influenced fashion designers, and so constitutes an effective creative culture-led practice within the context of fashion practice.

In a wider fashion context, it is significant to also note that the cultural influence Silk Road has also served as an inspirational spirit within major fashion events and shows. For example, the 2017 International Fashion Week held in Chongqing, and the 2018 Beijing-held China *Instyle Expo* both took the Silk Road as their primary sources of inspiration in terms of conceptual theme and couture collections, involving Chinese (and international) designers creating bespoke garments in silk explicitly inspired by the Silk Road. Additionally, such Chinese-based fashion events have articulated the historic geographically cosmopolitan nature of the classic Silk Road. As such, the China *Instyle Expo* clearly demonstrated the scale of the ancient Silk Road in relation to the work of the Georgian fashion designer, Irakli Nasidze, whose collection was intrinsically inspired by the many cultures that were connected by the Silk Road. As he stated in terms of the inspiration within his work: “What attracts me to work with Fashion Beijing is that is not like a fashion week. And I felt a strong connection with the theme. I was born in Georgia, which also lies on the ancient Silk Road. So for this collection, I’ve used wool and silk, to create a simple poetic and elegant look” (Anonymous 2018, 1).

Although the focus within this article has been on Chinese and, more potently, Chinese-inspired designers, the Silk Road has also served to inspire a number of Western designers, such as John Galliano, Oscar De La Renta and Basso & Brooke, who have designed garments that have favoured ‘the “silk” connotations of The Silk Road. In this sense, the Silk Road has shown itself to be a pervasive source of culture-led design inspiration, and one that, as Emma Dick argues, has served as ‘attractive creative theme and marketing image for the fashion and textiles industry’ (2018, 4). Moreover, the Silk Road has also extended to trainer design, as evidenced by Nike’s collaboration with the US basketball player, Kobe Bryant, whose travels between Italy and China motivated Nikes’ designers “to think about the legendary Silk Road”, which served as the ultimate inspiration for the ‘KOBE X Silk shoe’. Also,

in addition to evoking the Silk Road via Shang Xia, Hermès created Poivre Samarcande eau de toilette, a fragrance (designed by Jean-Claude Ellena) inspired by the Mediterranean routes of the Silk Road, and named as “a homage to the city through which spice caravans once passed on their way from East to West” (Frankopan 2019, 10). As a result, the evocations of cultural memories drawn from the Silk Road can be specific, or they can be more abstractly ‘orientalist’ in their appeal to a more romanticised and ‘imagined’ historic culture. But nevertheless, they are pervasive within fashion design, in both the East, West, and in the work of those designers who hybridise these cultures. In this sense, cultural values and traditions serve to “provide designers with a rich and varied set of materials that inspire new design ideas” (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling Hudson 2010, 175-176), and the Silk Road, as I have argued, represents a distinctive and enduring illustration of this process within the context of fashion design. At one level, it could be argued that the Silk Road can act as a postmodern-style ‘free-floating signifier’ rather than a set of clearly-defined cultural practices. Yet, while much of Moalosi et al’s work has been based upon ethnographic studies of culturally-led product designs that are observably ‘concrete’, an imagined sense of history is actually no impediment to such use. This is so because, as they further iterate, what the use of culture can practically do for product design is to “provide users with artefacts that have narratives and fantasies around them” (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling Hudson 2010, 186).

While the examples examined within this article differ in their use of traditional culture, (from the drawing upon of historical craft techniques and materials, to expressing affective, abstract, or even mythically romantic expressions of national culture and historic heritage), their collective allusions to the Silk Road illustrate the efficacy of Moalosi et al’s approach within the context of fashion practice, and in relation to a specific cultural example. Therefore, a fashion-based culturally-oriented set of approaches is evident within the work of a number of Chinese, but more evocatively in relation to a series of Chinese-inspired, designers, whose distinctive use of culture coalesces around traditions, garments, textiles, cultural motifs, or even ‘imagined’ cultural attributes associated with ancient China,

and the traditions of the Silk Road within this cultural history. And so, given the dynamic ways in which historical Silk Road sites have been revitalized within twenty-first century China in the name of enhancing “national pride” (Thorsten 2005, 309), and the increasing primacy and reach of the modern One Belt, One Road development, it is probable that many more designers will continue to walk the Silk Road in search of cultural-led fashion inspiration.

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#### Captions:

Fig 1. Map of the Silk Route during the Han Dynasty.

Fig 2. Typical Shanghai Tang store in 2004.

Fig 3. Vivienne Tam store in Hong Kong with Christmas window display, 2015.

Fig 4. Vivienne Tam spring 2010 *Butterfly Lovers* collection based on a classic Chinese love story, applied to Hewlet Packard computer.