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'Mao' & Me

Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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A note on the use of Chinese in this thesis

Romanised pinyin is used for Chinese names, with the family name first, in accordance with Chinese tradition. Mandarin pinyin has been used instead of Cantonese (for example, Sun Zhongshan, instead of Sun Yat-sen); the translated quotations and proverbs have come from referenced sources.





fig. 2

Chinese cadres wearing
variations of Mao's jacket.
1951. (Huanqiu, 2010)

The intention of this narrative project is to journey through a process of practice-led design research while re-evaluating and reflecting upon my Chinese culture in New Zealand. My analysis begins with 'Mao's Jacket', which was worn by Chairman Mao Zedong during his leadership of China. It is a symbolic piece of clothing that has a cultural/political/social identity that expresses some core values and fundamental ideologies of order, harmony and power related to governance (Tsui, 2009, pp. 6-9; Wu, 2009, p. 123). This framework supports and is the agency of collectivism representing the group that the individual serves. The jacket is the agent that becomes the means of engagement, while disseminating the various voices that are speaking from a new environment.

The deconstruction exercise of this research project involves dismantling of the jacket and its parts through steps of deformation and reformation to expose a number of conflicting issues. The term deconstruction is used in the fashion world, and is associated with the theories of the philosopher Jacques Derrida (Gill, 1998, p. 35).

Deconstruction goes through certain social and political structures...to deconstruct traditional sanctions – theoretical, philosophical, cultural – effectively, you have to displace...I would say “solid” structures, not only in the sense of material structures, but “solid” in the sense of cultural, pedagogical, political, economical structures. (Derrida, 1988, as cited in Loscialpo, 2009, p. 2-3)

My design research will grapple with contradictions that exist in my own pursuit of individualism, while staying true to the collectivist principles that I had rigidly defended. There was a need for resolve as I continued with my search for a personal equilibrium that will assist in moving forward with my personal and cultural identity. According to Catriona Mackenzie, there are three interrelated suggestions concerning self-definition: **“Point of view”** – your beliefs, emotions and desires; **“values”** – what you care about or what really matters to you; and **“self-conception”** – how you see yourself, the ideal future self (Mackenzie, 2005, p. 284). This increased understanding of my resolve provides a greater cultural acknowledgment and design position.

fig. 1 previous page

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me - Restored harmony. 2012. Silk fabric with laser cutting. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

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fig. 3

Sun Zhongshan. (Wang, 1991)

1. Background

1.1 Cultural context

Mao's jacket was the primary garment that I engaged with for this design research project, since it was central to redefining the face of China. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), it was used to break down any form of individualism and to structure peasant-driven egalitarian collectivism, endeavouring to do away with any visible class differences (McVeigh, 2010). The jacket worn by Chairman Mao was his redesigned expression of what was then known as the 'Zhongshan suit'. Dr. Sun Zhongshan was known as 'the father of modern China' (fig. 3). In 1912, he ruled briefly after the demise of Imperialism. This suit originally drew its inspiration from several different sources; it adopted the cut of the Western-style suits and Japanese cadet uniforms that were based on Prussian military uniforms, while seeking to express modernist sensibilities without appearing completely Western (McVeigh, 2010). After Chairman Mao led the Communist Party to victory over the Chinese Nationalists Party in 1949, the Mao suit arguably became China's 'national uniform'. It was widely referred to in the west as the 'Mao suit', while in China it is still referred to as the 'Zhongshan suit' (Wu, 2009, p. 123).

From the time of its inception, the Zhongshan suit grew in political significance. When Zhongshan Sun first promoted this garment in the 1920s, its various parts symbolised important political ideas and social meanings. For instance, the four symmetrically placed flap pockets, which represented four Chinese traditional moral principles – li (courtesy), yi (righteousness), lian (integrity) and chi (a sense of shame) – are at the core of Chinese culture, symbolising balance and harmony. The five buttons down the front closure of the jacket symbolised the five divisions of government mentioned in the Republic of China's constitution: administration, legislation, judicial, examination and control. The three buttons on each sleeve of the jacket reflected Dr. Sun's core principles of the new authority, to be the government 'of the people (nationalism), by the people (democracy) and for the people (livelihood)' (Wu, 2009, p. 123). The seamless back panel signified a peacefully united nation state (Tsui, 2009). With any uniform, whether it be used for military, state or any other purpose, there is a tremendous amount of thought that goes into the design to create a sense of power, authority, distinction and allegiance (Craik, 2003, p. 135). However,

during Mao's time in power, the original symbolic meaning of the Zhongshan suit took on further symbolism of Maoist egalitarianism and frugality (Wu, 2009, p. 123).

The uniform played an important role during the Cultural Revolution that occurred at the height of the revolutionary era, since this was a very tumultuous time for the Chinese people. Chairman Mao was popular among the proletariat society, with both men and women, owing to the fact that he sought equality among all people, especially for women. This was reinforced through the mobilisation of a group of young Chinese men and women who were known as the Red Guards in a revolutionary campaign, which was to further promote Mao's ideology for the new China. Their motivation was to destroy the 'four olds': old customs, old habits, old culture and old thinking (Wu, 2009, p. 2). This caused a huge panic throughout China as people (bourgeois) hid or secretly burnt books, paintings and family photos – anything that may have connected them with China's past or bourgeois capitalism. Anyone caught with material possessions of this nature were branded as counterrevolutionaries. This led people to speak, act and dress like others, to ensure their safety by blending in with the crowd. (Wu, 2009, p. 1-2; Chang, 1993) Therefore, fashion was considered antirevolutionary, since drawing attention through outward appearance was seen as disgraceful. The political

environment at the time galvanised a rigid uniformity of dress across men and women, and this was in keeping with the establishment of a proletarian society in China (Wu, 2009, p. 2). The proletariats were open and willing to follow in Mao's collectivist ideology, with the Mao suit becoming known as the 'people's suit', because it symbolised working-class solidarity (McVeigh, 2010; Wu, 2009, p. 1-2).

Chairman Mao sought to use the working class to establish an egalitarian society, and to dissolve the existing class systems in favour of a flattened social order (McVeigh, 2010). The way he saw to achieve this is possibly debatable from a humanitarian perspective, but this is not something that will be discussed further in this research paper. However, a differentiating factor did exist with the Mao suit across the varying positions of station, which involved colour. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Mao suit was adapted into military uniforms, in varying colours of army green, dark blue or grey, with an emblem of Chairman Mao. This became the only popular thing to wear. The Mao suit worn by civil servants and government officials of the Communist party was usually dark blue or grey. The colours for the working class were subdued blue, grey and a yellowish-green. Sombre colours were preferred over lighter colours, because they didn't show dirt or stains easily, and it fitted with the virtue of frugality, and because resources were scarce (McVeigh, 2010; Wu, 2009, p. 3).

The dress code wasn't necessarily controlled through government legislation; instead, it was influenced through conformity, fear and a revolutionary spirit (Wu, 2009, p. 2). As one contemporary described it, 'The more plain your clothes, the more revolutionary people considered you to be' (anonymous as cited in Wu, 2009, p. 3). It could be argued that, during the Cultural Revolution, the concept of fashion may not have existed, but this doesn't necessarily mean that China was devoid of fashion. The range of fashion choices may have diminished as people's creativity was stifled, but, owing to the fact that people were wearing the uniform across such a large nation, it differed in a number of ways. The focus had shifted to very subtle differences, for example the women's jacket differed in the type and number of pockets and the number of buttons (Wu, 2009, p. 2, 37). The type of fabric used was cotton, polyester drill or patriotic wool, which was comprised of leftover threads from the factory floor mixed with good wool (Garrett, 2007, p. 219). The jacket also had subtle differences in the cut, whether it was used by the military or civilians, male or female. At this time, these served as a form of identity in this collectivist society.

The fashion industry in China from the 1940s through to the 1970s faced many challenges from within, especially

owing to the political environment. Prior to the Communist party, the textile and clothing industry was privately owned and driven, expressing individual flair. During the 1920s through to the 1940s, the qipao (long gown) (Wu, 2009, p. 106) and the Western-style suit were worn in China along with other accessories. The fashion industry was thriving, with factories producing fabrics and clothing. However, as communism gained momentum, there wasn't the need for this type of clothing, and Chairman Mao's ideology didn't favour the bourgeoisie. Factories either closed down or were transformed under government control to produce what was needed, in keeping with Mao's focus on equality and frugality (Wu, 2009, p. 3).

I surmise that the reason people copied the dress of other nationals in China at the time of the Cultural Revolution was different from the reasons why people may copy dress in society today, even though there were common characteristics. The fundamental reason that this copying of dress took place in China on a mass scale was due to the political environment, to sustain unification. It gave people a sense of comfort, protection and belonging. This is similar to any sub-group/group in society today. Individuals, whether male or female, are usually not willing to exclude themselves through their dress, for they are looking to be part of a

collective in some sense. **“The imitator is the passive individual, who believes in social similarity and adapts himself to existing elements...”** (Simmel, 1957, p. 543). This phenomenon of copying is a psychoanalytic theory known as ‘identification’, and has been recognised as an important behavioural instinct for the producing of identities (Li, 2010, p. 451). Freud sees it as an unconscious means through which the self is established **“in relation to external objects”** (Freud, n.d., as cited in Li, 2010, p. 451). For example, there was a young generation of girls who became Red Guards who identified with female role models and their heroism that they had read about in revolutionary literature that strengthened their idealism. It became common for a young girl to desire the quasi version of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) uniform. They wore a masculine outfit that reflected the state policy set by Chairman Mao with his Communist gender ideology under his political slogan **“The time is different. Now men and women are the same.”** (Li, 2010, p. 448). They also identified, whether consciously or unconsciously, with their own desire and action in line with the existing revolutionary ideology, and this experience was acted out in everyday life in the hope of finding their own personal position (Li, 2010, p. 451).

The Red Guards wore a quasi-uniform, which imitated the PLA uniform that linked them to the ideology they sought to enforce. Chairman Mao endorsed this when he

addressed them at Tiananmen, August 1966, wearing the military uniform of a similar colour. This image of Mao had a huge impact on the collective psychology of the Red Guards. During Chairman Mao’s speech, a Red Guard girl approached him and put her red armband around his arm (fig. 4), and he publicly used the meaning of her name, ‘gentle and polite’, and said disapprovingly: **“You should be militant instead.”** Since this act, ‘being militant’ became the recognised behaviour of the Red Guards over the following years, especially the Red Guard girls (Li, 2010, p. 445-446).

I question whether the establishment of a military uniform was harmful or beneficial to China. When I think of a military uniform, it reminds me of patriotism, unity, masculinity, authority, status, power, law and order. If these characteristics are administered in a positive and well-meaning way, it could be considered to be beneficial to most of the people in society. It might be argued that the intention was not to adopt a military uniform, but that China could have its own style of suit as a national dress code. Moser (1775, p. 88, pp. 1), in his article ‘The Benefits of a National Uniform’, mentions characteristics in relation to the suit from a Western perspective: **“The dark male suit states foremost that the dresser is self-disciplined, which in bourgeois society means that he is consistent, reliable, loyal, rational, economically calculating and self-conscious.”** However,



fig. 4

People's Liberation Army uniform,
18 August 1966. (Li, 2010)

if these characteristics were to be abused in any way, then society would be made up of people that had lost their sense of individuality, freedom of speech, freedom to choose and loss of autonomy, and their creative spirit could be in danger of being squashed. Witte's (1791, p. 72) thinking is that communication

extends the idea of public speech to include clothing, recognizing that clothes have a semiotic function. They express the personality of individuals and are to that extent fundamental in any public encounter. To standardize dress would amount to stifling individual opinions.

Why were young women so determined to look like men or soldiers? Where did this desire or the pressure come from, was it from the state, was it from men, was it from the media or was it from the women themselves? In fact, this wasn't anything new in Chinese society, since women dressing up in masculine clothing dated back to 1917–19 with the May Fourth Cultural Movement (Li, 2010, p. 448). This revolutionary legacy of gender fashion ideology had been developed over many years of national revolutions before Chairman Mao's socialist China (Li, 2010, p. 448). One of the central revolutionary changes that took place was women's liberation as a social force and their desire for equality with men (Li, 2010, p. 449). The feminist revolutionary movement believed that Confucian gender ethics were the major cause for oppression of women, and that these

were partly responsible for holding Chinese society back, such as inferior education, concubine marriage and bound feet (Li, 2010, p. 448). Mao believed that the only way that woman could be liberated was by 'raising a women's revolutionary army' (Li, 2010, p. 448-449). There were many stories of heroic woman warriors, whether in school textbooks, poems, dramas or folk tales, who joined the army disguised as men, for example Qiu Jin (1875-1907) and Zhao Yiman (1905-1936) (Li, 2010, p. 451). These legends and their love for Chairman Mao, and the revolutionary cause inspired young girls to join the Red Guards. In general, the uniform seems to stimulate the emotions of people, whether it is sexual, gendered, social or organisational within its intended framework (Ivinski, 2001, p. 57). The images that they identified with were life-size posters on buildings, paintings in shop windows, stories or other external objects. It could be suggested that these young girls showed difficulty in separating themselves from the clothing styles of the mirror images that they identified with (Li, 2010, p. 448-452). This assault of imagery must have conditioned their thinking to a considerable degree for them to embrace such an altered self-identity.

As China entered into the post-Mao era of the late 1970s with the demise of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Chairman Mao, the nation found itself moving into

another transitional period, towards economic reform. The first stage was known as the Open Door policy that signalled fundamental shifts in the country's political ideology and economic system (Wu, 2009, p. 9). These policies came under the banner of economic reform, and were introduced under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Owing to the demographic locations and distances between Chinese people, there was much anxiety and many feelings of cultural dislocation and confusion (Wu, 2009, p. 9). The impact that China faced through the Open Door policy was huge, moving from a once-isolated country to suddenly trading with other nations and allowing other nationalities to visit the country. People had made a shift from a very rigid, controlled lifestyle to suddenly being bombarded with Western consumerism, fashion, cosmetics, movies, magazines, electronics, motor vehicles and global news (Wu, 2009, p. 11). It is not difficult to imagine the cultural shock, confusion, questions, distrust and disbelief in a changed cultural identity that had been so ingrained into their consciousness. The people of China faced considerable mental, emotional, psychological and spiritual challenges. This new period of China's evolution could be described as a speeding bullet train (Wu, 2009, p. 1-9).

Since China's changes under the Open Door policy and new economic reforms, dress remained controversial as the government relaxed its controls that it had maintained

throughout the previous decade. Western fashion styles began to slip into the marketplace during the early 1980s. The majority of people were unsure how to relate to these new ideas, and styles of fashion, since, after thirty long years of isolation, anything new was too troubling (Wu, 2009, p. 9-14). This manipulative tool to bring about ‘union and segregation’ at the same time generated a position of unification (Simmel, 1957, p. 544). Women in China found themselves facing a new expression of their ideology that sought to liberate them once again from the practices of the past, namely the Cultural Revolution’s asexual form of dress code that brought them freedom. Suddenly, the reform era brought them face to face with a multitude of choices and questionable meanings about dress. A major concern was how women display their femininity while still keeping the ideological and moral purity that had been indoctrinated during the previous thirty years of communism. This is not to say that women had longed to be set free from the asexual uniformity that was the trademark of the Cultural Revolution. It was possibly no coincidence that Western fashion was going through a phase of displaying unisex styles at this time. Chinese women found that these unisex styles gave them room to express their individuality and femininity without drawing attention to their gender and sexual distinctions (Wu, 2009, p. 31-32).

These new fashions for men and women slowly began to break down the tailored style and monotony of the Mao revolution years, as women in particular moved towards **“new roles, new freedom, and new fashions”** (Wu, 2009, p. 32). The young men and women were much more open to the new fashion styles and accessories, with both sexes growing their hair long, men growing facial hair and women wearing makeup and experimenting with different hairstyles. This new Western-influenced lifestyle included music, disco dancing and much greater exposure of the body. In general, the public response to the behaviour of these young people and their odd appearance was extremely negative. The newspapers and magazines labelled the dancing as sexually promiscuous, and the music was labelled as decadent and valueless (Wu, 2009, p. 10-14). Georg Simmel (1957, p. 542) states: **“The whole history of society is reflected in the striking conflicts, the compromises, slowly won and quickly lost, between socialistic adaptation to society and individual departure from its demands.”** Triandis (1990) proposed that

Collectivism includes (1) emphasis on views, needs, and goals of the in-group rather than on the self; (2) emphasis on behavior determined by social norms and duties rather than by pleasure or personal advantage; (3) common beliefs that are shared with the in-group; and (4) willingness to cooperate without demanding equitable returns.

(Triandis, 1995, p. 6)

Owing to ongoing public criticism of the way that young people were dressing, which for the majority of conservative Chinese was against the collectivist ideology, the Mao suit and modified versions were still the preferred dress of the majority (Wu, 2009, p. 51). The government was mindful of this and sought to create new ways of dealing with this individualism that was growing in momentum among the young people. The people in support of these fashions tried to separate fashion from capitalism and the collectivist ideology. This thinking to separate ideology from physical appearance was supported by Deng Xiaoping's theory 'emancipating the mind and breaking with old ways of thinking' (Wu, 2009, p. 15). On the other hand, this had to be planned with skill, since, for ideological, cultural and historical reasons, China was still a collective state that placed a high value on the group over the individual, and conformity over individuality (Wu, 2009, p. 14-16). The political leaders' influence on fashion was still great. Most people didn't want to take political risks with their appearance, even though the government was encouraging them to wear new fashions as a symbol of their "**emancipated minds**" (Wu, 2009, p. 47). If a comparison were to be made between the style of European dress and Oriental dress, one could conclude that the former is more fitted dress, while the latter is more robe dress. With fitted dress, its object is the

human body, and its function is to conform to the shape of the body. By contrast, the robe dress of the Greeks, Romans, or the qipao (long gown) (Wu, 2009, p. 106) of imperialist China didn't necessarily draw attention to the form of the body, but surrounded it and hung loosely upon the body, and only suggested the body's shape (Witte, 1791, p. 75).

Fred Davis (1985, 1992) concluded that our identities are not constructed in a void, but are affected by external social influences; these social identities are always shifting as they are influenced by politics, economics and changing fashions that could bring an interruption to how we see ourselves, communally with our social self (Davis, as cited in Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 72-73).

The encouragement voiced with the 'freeing-of-the-minds' thinking had assisted in dissolving some fashion gender issues, which continued to plague women in the 1980s. Since then, dress has evolved with more revealing and varied fashion styles throughout the urban cities in the 1990s. Modesty and conformity in dress was dismissed amongst the young, for example, with underwear being worn as outerwear on the city streets, together with strapless dresses and bare-midriff tops (Wu, 2009, p. 59). The western influence, especially in fashion, has been taken to an extreme by the wealthy and the young in China. They appear to follow the latest fashion trends through the internet and

other forms of media religiously (Wu, 2009, p. 26). At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new phenomenon began to emerge that turned Mao's egalitarian society into a distant memory, as evidenced by the expanding gap between rich and poor. The middle class, too, is growing at such a rate that it is expected to be the largest and most influential group in China's future society (Wu, 2009, p. 178). Because of this emerging wealth, there is an increasing excitement in relation to Western fashion brands and Western accessory brands, whether they be fast foods, cars, electronics or cosmetics items. European luxury brands are being consumed at an ever-increasing rate. It seems that the wealthy are interested only in European luxury brands, and the young rich are interested only in Western designer brands. They are following these with a group mentality (Wu, 2009, p. 174, 178).

As China has progressed, thirty years after the inception of the reform era, the Mao suit and its ideology has been exchanged for the Western suit. The political leaders' influence on fashion has declined and government enforcement of fashion systems has ceased (Wu, 2009, p. 181). Could this mean that the Chinese people have exchanged their collectivist identity for the individual identity of the West, or have they been left confused as to their own individual and cultural identity? This conflict that

exists within society and its members is constantly seeking a connection with the group that the individual belongs to in society, while retaining individual choice (Simmel, 1957, p. 542). A social practice known as psychological coping takes place amongst individuals that provides an easier way to fit in with one's set group (Simmel, 1957, p. 542).

There is growing concern that China may have embraced Westernisation to the extent that there is a lack of patriotism, and a deterioration in morality. The pursuit of freedom, the chasing of wealth and concerns that only surround the micro-self has left the citizens bereft of their family ancestry and the true meaning of life (Reed, 1998, p. 361). Among the Chinese, there is a re-evaluation as to how much emphasis they have placed on and given to the West, not only in their personal lives, but also as a nation. It seems a time is coming in which a new society is about to emerge in the hands of a new generation of leaders that are seeking to reclaim their identity as a nation. A point of interest with identity and self-identity is Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of identity related **“to anthropological theory, where he explains dress changes as indicative of cultural transformation and cultural conflict...”** (Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 8-9).

It seems that China has always been perfectly positioned to build a strong manufacturing industry with its stereotypical learning system that is used to educate its people and unify

the nation. The repetition that is used to drill information into children from the time they begin school establishes them as good copiers (Xu, 2002, p. 67). The way for the clothing industry to make goods cheaply is to make the same item over and over again. The Chinese reformist, Deng Xiaoping (1961), who led China after Chairman Mao's death, and who was the mastermind with his expansive economic reforms that opened China up to the West, remained true to his famous phrase: **"I don't care if it's a white cat or a black cat. It's a good cat so long as it catches mice."** (Deng, 1961 as cited in Burianek, 2009, p. 13)

China has grown to be the major clothing supplier to the world with its mass production programme; it also imports a vast amount of international brands to supply the luxury end of the market. This hasn't helped Chinese designers, for a number of reasons. There is a perception amongst brand-conscious nationals that 'China Made' is not of the same quality as imported luxury brands. This is reiterated by Wu Sophia, the general manager for Chloe in China, who makes the point that **"'Made in China' is not so much a quality issue, but a customer perspective issue"** (Fenton, 2008). The nationals do not recognise Chinese designers as having the status of their international peers. There are Chinese fashion designers who are placing an emphasis on 'Made in China'

while using European fabrics with the aim of establishing themselves in Europe. This is a strategy of establishing themselves internationally so that the Chinese consumer will recognise and support them in the long term locally (Fenton, 2008).

China has been criticised for its ability to copy and modify, which is shared by the shanzhai (Chinese imitation) economy in China (Lin, 2011, p. 23). It is recognised by the various executives in the fashion industry in China that the country will be the largest market for apparel in the future, and the emphasis will be on what is selling in China, especially amongst the young who are already expressing more individuality through their clothing (Bradsher, 2005). However, one of the concerns expressed by Chinese executives in the fashion industry is that their designers lack international experience (Bradsher, 2005). If they were to engage in research on the Chinese consumer, they would be better equipped to meet their targeted groups in the market (Fenton, 2008). Of course, the task is made more difficult when one of the challenges within Chinese society as a whole is that the Chinese consumers are somewhat confused about their identity (Wu, 2009, p. 120).

Furthermore, the fashion designers' plight is compounded by the opinions and concerns that it could take years for

Chinese designers to come up with truly original sketches with global appeal. All the while, Hong Kong designers are seen as having a more professional standard and a stronger sense of fashion. They are being favoured and used over the Chinese fashion designers at this time (Parent, 2011).

In spite of this, over the last 15 years, a succession of Chinese fashion designers have positioned themselves at the front line to change the world's, and people of China's, perception that Chinese are creative, consistent and able to produce clothing to a standard that is equal to, if not better than, international designer brands (Parent, 2011). There are a number of Chinese fashion designers who are proving this, who have been trained outside of their own country, and who are bringing their talent back home, for example, Ma Marsha and Wang Vega, who studied in England and also in Italy (Parent, 2011). Another young fashion designer was Wang Uma, who launched her own label in 2005, after studying at the China Textile University and Central Saint Martins. Chen Ziggy, the founder of 'Decoster', China's second-oldest designer brand, launched its high-end conceptual label, 'Decoster Concept', at the Shanghai Fashion Week 2011 (Parent, 2011). Meanwhile, Chinese fashion designers are finding it difficult to justify the cost of showing their collections at fashion weeks in China, when very few international buyers are attending and the retailers from

Chinese department stores are mainly taking merchandise on consignment (Jing Daily, 2010).

However, there is an ongoing challenge for Chinese fashion designers who continue to look to the West. This will remain a distraction from their own innovative search in creating designs. New sources of inspiration exist inside of them, their own narrative waiting to be developed and communicated through fashion design (Jing Daily, 2010). This political, cultural and commercial design context impacts strongly on the identity of young Chinese fashion designers working in and outside of China, now and in the future.

My design process exposes some of this context in a questioning evaluation, and of my evolving identity and position as an emerging fashion designer.



fig. 5

My father wearing a PLA uniform
standing in front of Tiananmen,
Beijing, China. 1969.
Courtesy of Wei Xianlun.

1.2 Personal context: my narrative story

I was born and grew up in post-Mao, reformist China, where Mao's suit was something out of the past, even though it still existed as an ideology in my upbringing and education. Mao's jacket; without conscious realisation, shaped my formative years. The uniform was part of my life at home and at school, while Western fashion was something that existed outside of my life. As a young working adult, I developed an insatiable appetite for fashion, and this conflicted with my parents' and some of my work colleagues' ideals. The influence of the uniform upon the wearer and society is profound (Craik, 2003, p. 128). Appearance was further down their list of priorities in comparison with this rising reverence for the virtues of self-sacrifice and self-reliance in the Cultural Revolution and the years leading up to it (Wilson, 2006, p. 177). In fact, **"New clothes were meant for replacement purposes; shopping was not meant to satisfy an appetite for change"** (Wilson, 2006, p. 177). Fashion in a sense began and continues to challenge my formative thinking. Both my parents grew up as farmers' children in a town in Jiangsu Province. While my father was serving in the army, an arrangement for my parents to meet was set up through a friend. They married after having dated a couple of times. After ten years' service in the army, my father was

transferred to a new position to work in the police force in Dandong City, Liaoning Province. He served as a policeman until retirement. The uniform was his whole life, and this was treated with reverence.

Both my parents were born in the 1940s, before Mao Zedong came to power. From memory, my parents were very positive and supportive of what Chairman Mao had achieved for China. When I was growing up, my parents continually reminded me of the virtues that stemmed from Chairman Mao's ideology, humility, conscientiousness, frugality, honesty and reciprocity. My parents were very frugal, and clothing was kept to the mere essentials only. My father mainly wore his uniform (fig. 5), and my mother was very sparing with her wardrobe. When I started developing an interest in dressing up as a teenager, my mum discouraged me from doing so, because it did not align with the virtues that she taught me. She saw this as challenging a part of the communist ideology that she had grown up with. Men with long hair or tattoos, or wearing denims were seen as liumang (hoodlums), I was reminded to keep away from them, as my parents viewed them as dangerous and able to corrupt young minds.

Dad thought Chairman Mao's achievement of bringing equality



fig. 6

Personal collection of
Chairman Mao badges,
1966-68.
Courtesy of Wei Xianlun,
Photograph Wei Feiyan.

to Chinese people was of huge benefit to the nation, as people were motivated to serve each other and help build their country. I saw both my Mum and Dad as very progressively minded people, and they often demonstrated this in my life. Whenever I excelled in my education or in my work, they were always there to remind me that there is always another mountain to climb, and not to allow pride to get in the way of further achievement. Dad never complimented me personally, but sometimes lifted me up in conversation with those who were close to him. This example of my parents' character is encapsulated with Chairman Mao's quotation: **"open-minded progressive people, proud people behind". "We should be modest and prudent, guard against arrogance and rashness, and serve the Chinese people with heart and soul..."** (Mao, 1966a)

This was part of all Chinese children's education. My parents were from the Cultural Revolution generation, people that were born between 1940 and 1956. The teachings of Chairman Mao in part influenced the shaping of their character as very principled, honest, moralistic and caring people. I remember my father having framed hundreds of badges that depicted Chairman Mao (fig. 6); this showed me how proud and loyal he must have been to this new China. Their character and lifestyle certainly emulated the philosophy of Chairman Mao, being conscientious, thrifty,

and never drawing attention to themselves. In fact, I do recall my father being very proud of his uniform; everything was about attention to detail when wearing his uniform. The message that the uniform communicated to him was one that he lived out in his work life, his family life and his community life. He is always willing to go the extra mile, and would never contemplate compromising his position for personal gain. **"What really counts in the world is conscientiousness, and the Communist Party is most particular about being conscientious."** (Mao, 1966b)

There was often an element of surprise when I would mention that I had an older sister, especially with China's one-child policy. I suppose I was one of the lucky ones, because my mother had conceived before the policy was introduced in 1978 and applied in 1979. My father's heart was set on having a son, and so his expectations were dashed and he was disappointed when he saw me arrive. Later on, however, he explained to me the reason for wanting a son, which was so that the family name would continue on to the next generation. However, the love that he showered me with was so generous that my mother often complained that he was spoiling me. I felt Dad had great expectations for my life, and it was as though he was bringing me up as his 'son'. He always had me paying close attention to what he was asking of me and putting this into practice in order

to meet his standards. I was a willing, dutiful and obedient child, because I wanted to please him. I brought this attitude into my educational learning; I wanted to excel to make my parents proud.

Patriotism and the country's political philosophy were introduced very early on in our educational learning. Primary and secondary school were regarded as basic education in China, with moral education being a very important component. It included political, ideological, moral and psychological quality education. It comes under the theoretical guidelines of 'Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory'. The aim was to nurture the students into citizens with a passionate, social ethic, civilised behaviour and observance of the laws. Moral education was a guide, so that students would have a correct outlook on the world, a basic ability to evaluate life and be consistently improving their socialistic consciousness. The objectives were to lay a solid foundation, so the students would become a new generation with moral integrity, knowledge and culture, grand ideas and would be able to observe the disciplines. (Ministry of Education, 2001)

When I started primary school, everyone had to learn the school rules (codes and conduct) and be able to recite them word for word. From time to time, we could be asked without prior warning to repeat any one of these rules out

loud in front of the class, with the expectation that there would not be a word out of place. This style of education was based on repetition, repetition and repetition until it was well and truly engraved in your memory, so that you wouldn't forget. The first of the 'Code of Conduct of Primary, Secondary School Students 2004' is **"Love the motherland, love the people and love the Communist Party. Study hard and make progress every day."** There were also the 'Norms of Daily Behaviours for Primary School Pupils Amendment 2004', the first of which is

Respect the national flag, the national emblem, be able to sing the national anthem, whenever and wherever you see the national flag being raised and lowered or when you hear the national anthem being played or sung, you are to stop, be upstanding and face the flag with your hat off in reverence, and the Young Pioneers will salute the flag.

(Ministry of Education, 2001)

To my own knowledge there is a hierarchal order that is reflected within the 'Norms' and the 'Code of Conduct', with the protocol being: always put your country first, then your parents, followed by your teachers, and finally your elders, young children and others.

This forced style of learning didn't always seem clear as to the importance of why we had to learn every piece of diction

exactly as it was written, especially when you were so young and unable to grasp any understanding of what you were expected to repeat verbally. However, further understanding of the concepts related to the codes was given through the moral class. Class wardens who had been chosen by the teachers monitored behaviour. Students whose behaviour was picked up as being inappropriate would be reported back to the teacher and this would result in their class being penalised. An individual mistake affected not only the individual, but also the group that they were a part of. This taught you to be a representative of the group in whatever way you chose to behave. A fundamental moral principal was set down for people to “... **serve the Chinese people with heart and soul...**” (Mao, 1966a). This implies that there should be no conflict between individual and collective interests, since it encouraged a moral idealism that criticised individualism and glorified collectivism (Xu, 2002, p. 14). I remember always being reminded at school that collectivism is above everything else. The learning also involved a practical element within the school and in our neighbourhoods, for example daily cleaning of the school and reporting back how we had helped others every week. This taught us to do things with initiative and a strong sense of responsibility. The teachings of the model soldier Lei Feng were propagandised by Chairman Mao in the 1960s to 1970s, whereby he instructed the people

to live by the example of Lei Feng by setting up Lei Feng in the eyes of the people as a collectivist icon (Xu, 2002, P. 174-178). One of Lei Feng’s famous remarks was that “**a person’s life is limited, but serving people is unlimited. I am willing to devote my limited life to unlimited service for the people...**” (Lei, 1969, as cited in Olesen, 2003).

Lei Feng’s example is still being taught in schools throughout China today. This learning process is the beginning stages of introducing ‘collectivism’ in theory and practice to fresh young minds. Collectivism has its roots in Confucianism with the principle of peace and harmony, and the importance of relationships. In present-day Chinese society, the practices of Lei Feng seem to have faded in reality, in exchange for people focusing entirely on making money and seeking individualism. However, society is realising that patriotism needs to be revived, and this is bringing Lei Feng’s message of ren (human-heartedness) and concern for others back to the forefront (Reed, 1998, p. 360). In every culture, there are people who act more like individualists or like collectivists, depending on the how strong the relationships are to the in-group (family, friends, political parties, religious groups, co-workers, tribe, nation). In a general sense, where East meets West, collectivism meets individualism (Triandis, 1995, p. 2). However, “**elements of a subjective culture**” are usually “**organized around a central theme**”. In relation to individualism,

“the idea is that individuals are the units of analysis and are autonomous”, whereas collectivism incorporates the thought that **“groups are the units of analysis and individuals are entangled within these groups”** (Triandis, 1995, p. 6).

Chinese culture advocates ‘collectivism’, but what is China’s brand of ‘collectivism’, and how does it view ‘individualism’? My subjective cultural perspective on ‘collectivism’, which exists within my memory, is related to the past while living in China.

From a child, as a Young Pioneer, I have been taught how to think, and how to serve my family and country. I am an individual, but I am to serve the collective. As an adult, I went on to teach the principles of collectivism to young children, so they, too, would govern their lives with these principles as they put their family members and society before themselves. As a teacher, nothing changed; I was still being instructed what to think and what to say, because I was seen as a role model for other young people to follow. However, I did discover an area where I had a freedom of choice, and this filled me with excitement: window-shopping, looking at fashion, and choosing clothes; this became a regular past-time. I enjoyed dressing up in a different outfit to go to work each day, even though this caused concern for my parents and some of my senior colleagues. They

saw my extensive wardrobe as extravagant, and there were many discussions with my parents as to how much money I had spent on fashion and remodelling some of the existing clothes with tailors. Somehow, I recognised that this was a result of twenty years of being an obedient child, and suddenly I began a search for my self-identity and self-expression. I hadn’t questioned if this passion for fashion shopping was a contradiction in relation to my formative learning.

In 2001, I left China to come to New Zealand to learn English, because having a command of the English language would offer further opportunities for my career in China. The freedom I experienced in New Zealand became so attractive to me that I decided not to return to China. I eventually chose to do further study in New Zealand in fashion design, and this has led to further cultural differences and other emotions being brought to the surface. The difficulty of being an average second-language speaker and reader, and being introduced to a different study approach that is more individualistic and promotes independent thinking, has posed many challenges for me. Studying in China was directed more towards an examination-oriented educational approach, which is more results-focused. During the last four years, studying fashion design has introduced me to a new style of learning that is more focused on the

process. I have learnt that a good design comes from being prepared to continually stay with the development of the concept, which is an ever-evolving process. Remaining in the process provides an opportunity to discover something new, and is a means of self-discovery. Mary Douglas (1966), in her anthropological work, examines a fashion change theory from the perspective of refashioning our cultural world from the margins. She discusses people who don't necessarily fit into the existing cultural system and are not recognised by the clothing that they wear. This group of people modify themselves to fit in, **“but challenge the existing systems, through their dress and appearance, and have the potential to cause change.”** (Douglas, 1966, as cited in Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 38). There are parallels with this model in my experience as a Chinese migrant. While making a replica of Mao's jacket, it revealed to me how much of China's ideology was represented in and through this item of clothing. Although the Mao suit is not being worn as the national dress today, I assert that I unconsciously wear this jacket daily. I have been able to reconcile some of the ongoing conflict between ideology and practice, which led me to a place of being able to refashion the jacket design.

There is a transformation of an individual's character that is central to their identity that takes place on the inside because of what is enforced through the wearing of the uniform on the outside of their body (Craik, 2003, p. 131-136).



fig. 7

Aihua, Wei. Bachelor Graduate collection 'Transposed!'. 2010. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Sam Lee, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

2. Design methods and process

My Bachelor of Design research fashion collection 'transposed' expressed migration from one culture to another and my personal adaptation to a new culture (fig. 7). The main materials were boning and stretch mesh fabric that were used to create avant-garde, conceptual designs. The materials I chose to work with seemed a perfect medium, the rigidity of the boning as opposed to the flexibility and the fragility of the mesh material. Braidotti (1994, p. 12-13, 19) discusses the position of bringing your culture into a new space, and finding who you are within your culture from that new space, through a process of deconstructing identity. Adaptation could be seen unconsciously as a giving up of something in exchange for something new. This was the cause for an ongoing debate between my struggles for the pursuit of individualism and my existing collective ideology, the expectations of my family in China versus what I choose to do with my life. There are recurring thoughts, whenever I am under pressure to conform, voices in my head that communicate 'myself, I don't want to... my culture, I should do...'.

The starting point for this body of work involved reflecting on my previous final year project. I felt that there were still

some areas where there was a question mark regarding who I am as a fashion designer, and who I am as a Chinese migrant. I have an eagerness to know more. Rather than being so focused on the need for resolve, I have seen the benefit that a creative process offers to help shape questions and re-position within the process. For example, finding myself in a place of conflict is not necessarily a negative space, but a place of ongoing inquiry. Hussein Chalayan's approach to fashion design through his 'Ambimorphous' Autumn/Winter 2002 collection focused on the other dimensions of today's culture, dimensions that lie beneath the surface of fashion and daily life (fig. 8). He questioned how you could turn an experience into something creative (Teunissen, 2007, p. 192-194).

There are a number of fashion designers that have inspired



fig. 8

Hussein, Chalayan. 'Ambimorphous'
Autumn/Winter collection. 2002.
(Hussein Chalayan, n.d.)



fig. 9

Mao Zedong in Zhongshan suit.
(Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.)

me in terms of how their fashion designs have revealed history, cultural identity and political concerns. Artists and designers have used clothing as an instrument to communicate and expose elements of their identity, such as Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, Maison Martin Margeila, Vivienne Westwood, Hussein Chalayan and Alexander McQueen. When I visited the GSK Contemporary Season 2010 Exhibition online of thirty leading international practitioners, I found that I was venturing down a similar path of using clothing as a vehicle that incorporates storytelling, with issues of belonging and confrontation to communicate and express identity (Royal Academy of Arts, 2010).

I chose to return to the roots of my Chinese culture to investigate my identity. The central point of my research began with the analysis of the jacket that was worn by Chairman Mao Zedong as an object of inquiry, since Mao's Jacket has a significant place in Chinese history, politically, socially and in fashion terms (fig. 9). This research involved dismantling the jacket to discover how the subconscious voice of collectivism is challenged by the actions of an eager individualistic spirit.

Jacques Derrida (1997) has provided an element of stimulus through his theory of deconstruction for the method and process in this project. 'Deconstruction' has found its way

into the fashion world and has been associated with the theories of the philosopher Jacques Derrida. The generalised meaning of the word deconstruction is the action of 'undoing' (Gill, 1998, p. 35).

Deconstruction goes through certain social and political structures, meeting with resistance and displacing institutions as it does so. I think that in these forms of art, and in any architecture, to deconstruct traditional sanctions – theoretical, philosophical, cultural – effectively, you have to displace... I would say 'solid' structures, not only in the sense of material structures, but 'solid' in the sense of cultural, pedagogical, political, economical structures.

(Derrida, 1988, as cited in Loscialpo, 2009, p. 3)

The most heralded 'deconstructive' designers are Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake and later Maison Martin Margiela, who are responsible for creating a fashion revolution (Loscialpo, 2009, p. 1). They are not designers who are driven by trends or consumption fashion, searching for change for the sake of it. Rather, they have taken hold of the higher ground that finds them in a constant dialogue with the past, which allows them to point to new landscapes (Loscialpo, 2009, p. 8).



fig. 10

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Replica of Mao's jacket series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

2.1 Replica of Mao's jacket

Design nodes: replication, uniformity, respect, restraint...

I didn't grow up wearing Mao's jacket, but in metaphorical terms I did, as my parents grew up in Mao's era and strongly believed in his principles and teachings. My father in his uniform is a strong image that is fixed in my memory. My earliest recollection of my father's uniform was a version of a Maoist military uniform. It seemed important to me to make a replica of Mao's jacket in order to experience it physically. When I asked my father if he would be able to obtain an original Mao's jacket, he was reluctant for fear of political pressure and for not wanting to cause any trouble for me. So the only other option was to build a replica of the jacket.

Working with the jacket became a personal inquiry, and it was associated with moments of frustration and times of fearfulness. These emotions were linked with getting things right, because of the position the jacket once held in my culture, and still holds in the eyes of my family.

Artists working in China throughout the Mao era found themselves having to learn a form of self-censorship, owing to political policy. Mao's official policy put forward in no uncertain terms that the function of art was to serve politics (Perkins, 2010, p. 140).

However, working with the jacket has brought me into a space of questioning that has been quite valuable, even though I have found it difficult at times. After much emotion and stress with the construction to achieve a perfect fit for myself of Mao's jacket, I realised that the excess in the front, back and side of the jacket couldn't be removed (fig. 10). I had momentarily forgotten it was meant to be loose-fitting, so that the majority of people could wear it.

A grey cotton fabric has been used for the jacket, because this was the colour that most working-class people wore, and this relates to my family background. I then turned my attention to the inside of the jacket, wondering how the jacket could be finished (fig. 11). I didn't think it necessary to line this replica jacket, but I bound the seams instead to give it strength and a more orderly appearance. Once I put the jacket on, it felt functional, comfortable, safe, inconspicuous and regimented from my Chinese point of view. However, as I continued to walk around with the jacket on, I felt very conspicuous, excluded, inhibited and uncomfortable, with these nudging sporadic thoughts of conformity.

Up to this point, I hadn't fully comprehended how much the jacket was synonymous with my own life, hence leading



fig. 11

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Replica of Mao's jacket series. 2011. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



me to question the possibility that maybe I was wearing this jacket invisibly. Another consideration was how this jacket had depersonalised the wearer from the point of view of outward appearance, but what about the person on the inside, is there not some expression of uniqueness that exists? This is echoed in the wearing of a uniform which can be seen as a form of slavery in conforming to the collective with its rules and regulations as to how one should dress and having to give up one's own self-identity in determining one's visible appearance (Moser, 1775, p. 89).

fig. 11

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Replica of Mao's jacket series. 2011. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 12

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Exposure series. 2011. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.

2.2 Exposure

Design nodes:
emotional weight, transparency, balance...

At this moment, there was a realisation of physical and emotional heaviness owing to the political significance of Mao's jacket, and I just wanted the wearers' body to be seen. This led me to make a replica from a light, transparent fabric (fig. 12). The message this transparent jacket communicates is to expose the Chinese mind, which is the conformist, collective ideology that had been carved into my thinking. Figuratively speaking, it is just like the fish in the water, it doesn't know that the water is there, for the water is always there.

If the ideology has been cemented into the Chinese people's hearts and minds, then why are their actions contradictory to their beliefs? Why is there currently a lack in patriotism due to deterioration in morality, and a more self-centred and individualistic trend (Reed, 1998, p. 361-366)? This seems to be contrary to the symbolic meaning of the four pockets of Mao's jacket: li (courtesy), yi (righteousness), lian (integrity) and chi (a sense of shame) (Wu, 2009, p. 123). How does this affect the balance and harmony for the Chinese culture? As I began to further contemplate the pockets' detailing and

position, a conflict started to arise between the ethics and the practice within my culture. The meaning that is attributed to the placement of the pockets, buttons and seamless back is something that was a reminder of how proud I am to have an association with my culture (fig. 13).

Questions which surfaced in this process are, what causes people to allow their culture and practice of codes to become blurred? Could it be the need to protect their security, or could it be the opportunity of getting ahead while believing that their activity remains hidden from view? My design reaction to distort and make the pocket transparent, putting it at the rear of the garment, with the sleeve making a connection with the pocket, points to the notion that their altered activity hasn't gone unnoticed by others. I experimented with placing the pocket on the mannequin's head to make a connection with how most Chinese people are currently consumed with the thinking of the accumulation of power and wealth (Reed, 1998; Wu, 2009) (fig. 14).

There seemed to be uneasiness that presented itself as I began to expose my emotion in relation to how I felt about the issues that surrounded the pocket. There is a cynicism that has evolved as I rethink the symbolic meaning of the pockets.



fig. 12

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Exposure series. 2011. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.



I created a series of pockets and placed them at different positions on the jacket (fig. 15). This process began with covering the mouth, which infers denial related to the exploits that some Chinese have involved themselves in for self-gain and security. The pocket over the heart alludes to the fact that their own greed has consumed them. The stylised angled pockets on the shoulder show the egotism and the desire for power that is brought through wealth. The pockets off the shoulder demonstrate the heaviness that their greed has brought and subsequent conflict between themselves and their culture.

I felt it was necessary to further embark on another series of pockets that are about being unknowingly manipulated by the culture. These pockets remind me of majiang (mahjong) tiles, a traditional game that is played by Chinese.

Even though I find myself criticising others, I have to acknowledge a contradiction that exists in the sense of my own pursuit of individualism while not staying true to the collectivist principles that I so rigidly defended. This in itself is a work in progress as I study fashion and an ultimate expression of individualism.

fig. 12

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Exposure series. 2011. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 13

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Exposure series. 2011. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 14

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Exposure series. 2011. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 15

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Exposure series. 2011. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 15

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Exposure series. 2011. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.





fig. 15

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Exposure series. 2011. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 16

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

2.3 Childhood memories

Design nodes: innocence, protectiveness, influences...

Most of my knowledge about collectivism was learnt at school, and one of the significant items of our school uniform was the red scarf, which we wore every day. Students from the age of seven were encouraged to become members of the red scarf movement (Young Pioneers Group), the first step in being part of the political movement (Donald, 2002, p. 207). The next step is the Youth League and then the Communist Party. In China, clothing wasn't used to display individuality, but to show a person's adherence in view of the collectivist philosophy within the culture.

Reflecting on the red scarf that was worn around the neck and the collar of the shirt that was buttoned up at the neck, I created a series of collars, which were made up of the red scarf and Mao's collar. By placing this collar at different positions on the body, this became a stimulus that connected me back to memories that I had with the red scarf, which reminded me of protection, restraint and Western influences. A process developed of draping the collar and the hood down the back of the body, the scarf to cover the head incorporating Western design features such as the lapel and attached pockets (fig. 16).

After inserting the scarf into the back of garment, I started to cut the garment to release parts of it to produce a falling-away effect (fig. 17). Working in this cutaway space, I began thinking again of my collectivist learning and how it was a gradual process that was progressively built upon. I thought of the philosophy and how it wasn't inserted into my thinking in totality, but in small pieces that were built upon. This somehow made it easier to start cutting away parts of Mao's jacket and the apprehension due to the respect that I first experienced wasn't as great. At least I had moved from a motionless space. I had shifted to a more comfortable space, realising this even though I was cutting the jacket to create different effects, which related to my memories and feelings. These were mainly positive from my upbringing – I wasn't cutting the jacket out of me, because it will always be there, even though it might be only in part. This seems to have pacified me and given me self-justification for my actions.

Just as my collectivist learning was gradual, so was the dismantling of Mao's jacket. The cutting process was considered and deliberate. In dismantling the jacket, it was never my intention to dismember it, but to always keep it connected. As I cut the sleeve so that it was attached only



fig. 16

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 17

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

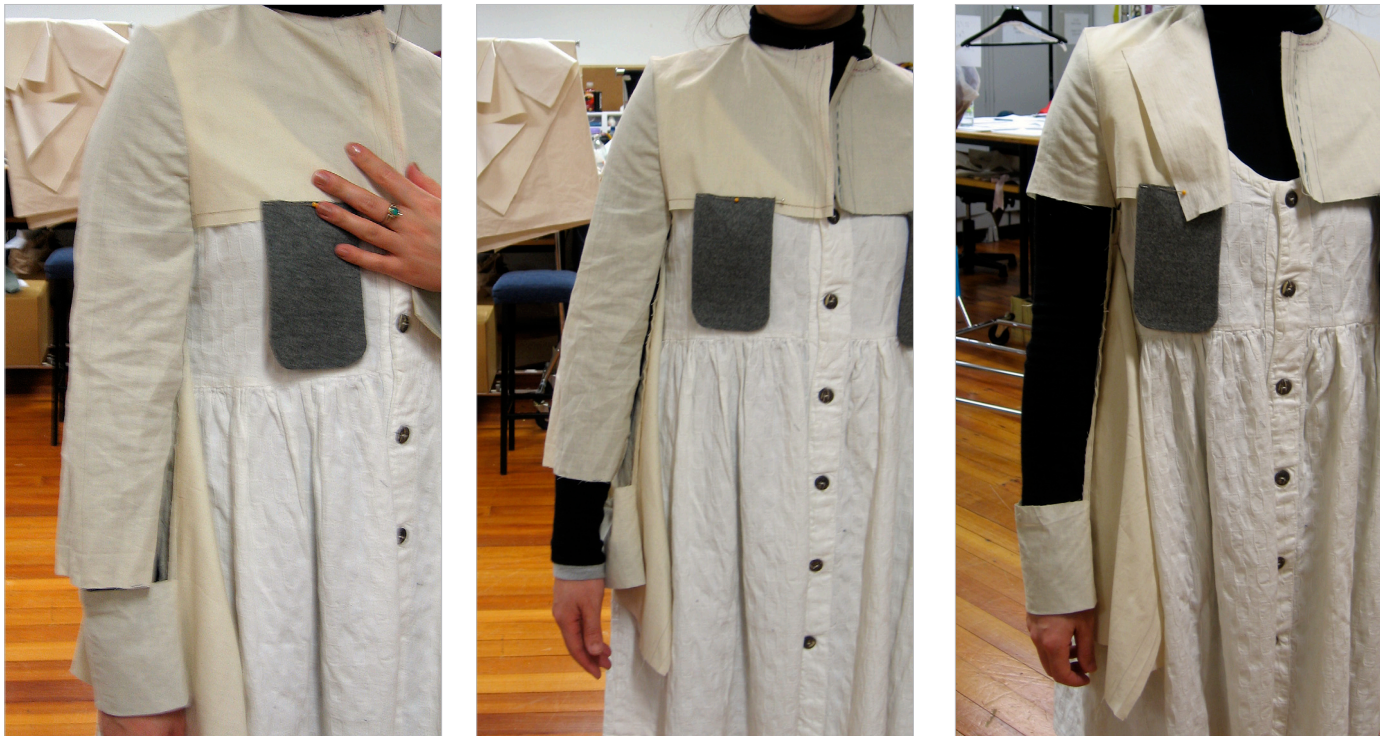


fig. 18

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 19

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

to the upper section and the bottom through the back of the sleeve(fig. 18), the thought behind this was of creating an effect with the hands being shackled psychologically. However, I found myself debating this thought because my memories towards family and country are only positive, and ones of encouragement and protection. This relates back to the concept of 'filial piety' that exists within the Chinese culture and how the child is to be nurtured and protected throughout its development and not exposed too early to anything that is beyond its age level. The protection of a child's innocence is paramount, and this is the responsible duty of a parent/elder (Yang, 1991, p. 211).

It seemed appropriate to cut a section out of the back of the jacket and leave a border that represents a frame that my culture sits inside (fig. 19), even though this picture of memory will be expanded upon and is part of an ongoing continuum. As mentioned earlier in my design development process of the lining of the jacket, I wished to cut away the breast section of the jacket so that it would remain connected to the lining (fig. 20). I wanted to expose something of myself, so that people could have a glimpse at the inside of my culture. The red organza lining represents my identity of being Chinese. Organza captures this thought of something bursting, an aliveness and vitality. However, the red colour didn't connect with my thinking of innocence and the crispness of the organza didn't fully represent the bursting



fig. 20

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 21

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 22

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

effect that I was seeking. The replacement of the pockets from the front to the back became a concern, as I felt somewhat immobilised because of the traditional meaning that is embodied with the pockets.

My decision was to retain the pockets in the front with respect to the principles that are attached to the pockets and to retain the bottom half of the jacket while slashing through the bust-line area (fig. 21). I've also chosen to move away from the red organza and to introduce pastel pink tulle that speaks to the naivety and the innocence that I experienced with my early educational development (fig. 22). Rather than continue with the concept of the lining being attached to and forming part of the jacket, I decided to abandon this idea on the basis that I wasn't born with this ideology, but that it was introduced through my education. Instead, I had this idea of developing a separate garment that would burst forward out of the jacket.

Then I decided to use a piece of grey tulle with a series of lace squares that are woven into the fabric, reminding me of a caged effect. I placed



fig. 23

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

this fabric on top of the pink tulle at first, but I felt that the effect was too obvious in relation to my childhood education, so I placed the fabric underneath the pink tulle (fig. 22). On reflection, the programming that was taking place within my education with regard to collectivism was not that obvious, but a lot more subtle and gradual, hence my innocence. My education and family life was one of enjoyment, with no concerns or doubts, just wanting to be a better person for my country and a worthy family member. As Xu (2002) mentioned:

For a long time, Chinese youths had been indoctrinated within a closely knit belief system, a central pillar of which was absolute collectivism and the requirement of selflessness. Under the state education and propaganda that had always denounced individual interests...

(Xu, 2002, p. 67)

Returning to the front of the jacket, I wanted to develop a more abstract look. I achieved this through a series of cutting into different parts of the front top half of the jacket (fig. 23). I attached a red border onto the back inside of the jacket before cutting out the back panel, and this revealed a raw, frayed edge that reminded me that a thread of my Chinese memory still remains (fig. 24). A scarf-type collar speaks of something that offers protection and imbues a sense of comfort and warmth (fig. 25).

I developed designs including a manipulation of a Chinese symbol. When I shared these initial ideas with a fellow Asian student, she said: “Ah, I like this idea, rather than using the character directly so the audience can see straight away you are Asian...” (Cho, personal communication, October 5, 2011) This comment caused me to stop and think about it. In China, especially among the young generation who are so influenced by the Western world, Western labels for the young Chinese consumer have become very popular. Some young people want to wear Western labels only (Wu, 2009). On reflection on the conversation with my Asian schoolmate, I realised my motivation to individualise who we are as people, while at the same time to not want to give up my culture. For example, when I first arrived in New Zealand in 2001, I felt that the way I dressed was excluding me from the community where I was seeking acceptance, and this had relevance to my collective thinking. Even my wardrobe began to appear mixed up and confused. Simmel (1957) discusses how various classes in society find themselves the subjects of social equalisation, differentiation and change in relation to fashion, while sharing in the country to which they belong. Fashions have a tendency to differ amongst the classes, in that the upper level seek to never be identical to those of the lower level, and when it is observed that their fashion is being copied, they abandon it for a change to

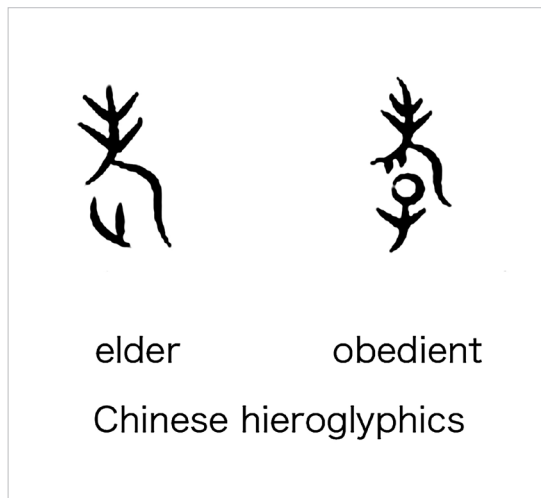


fig. 24

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 25

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



separate themselves once again. The never-ending cycle of fashion is established on the basis of these processes of the demarcation and differentiation (Simmel, 1957, p. 545).

Throughout this ongoing debate, I came to the realisation that I am Chinese and my roots will never be changed. Thinking about what my country and family has given me has allowed me to develop a greater appreciation. The outcome is that I don't mind standing apart from the group anymore, since I'm more comfortable with the sense of who I am becoming as an individual. The character I chose to use from early Chinese hieroglyphics means 'filial piety', it is a 'logical aggregate' in which two or more parts are used for their meaning: the top part represents the elder, while the bottom part represents the child (fig. 26). I didn't use the hieroglyphic character directly, but instead I designed a pattern like a snowflake. As you look more closely, it appears at the centre, as a unified group of people, while around the perimeter are the elders. This is also representative of the nation with the people of the country at the centre, while the government officials are around the perimeter. I have used this design in a laser-cut medium in fabric and also for the badges, buttons and necklace (fig. 27).

fig. 26

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fug. 26

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 27a

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
and construction by Christine Imlay.
Courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 27

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 27

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
– Childhood memories series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 28

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
- Hurt to restoration series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

3.4 Hurt to restoration

Design nodes: guilt, irrational, betrayal...

During the period after leaving China, the innocence that was intertwined with my nationalistic Chinese spirit had been penetrated, and I felt hurt. I questioned whether or not my innocence had been used to teach young children in China something that was regarded as propaganda from a Western perspective, and whether or not this propaganda could be harmful to or misleading the children. Why was the true information not available in China, but available to those outside of China? I felt a sense of betrayal as I entertained this idea.

When I thought about how my innocence had been betrayed and of the guilt I felt because I had unwittingly used my position to teach something that may have misled children, I was filled with a sense of anger. At times, mixed emotions propelled me with energy of hatred towards Mao's jacket, and I wanted to cut into it. I just wanted to grab a handful of the fabric and cut at it randomly, but once I had witnessed those jagged open holes, they somehow reminded me of open wounds. I was somewhat disturbed by what I had done and what was in front of me, and I wasn't sure what to do. The emotions that were racing around inside of me seemed to ignite

further confusion. I seemed to hate my country one minute, and feel a deep love for it the next. What was I going to do, could it be that someone else was responsible for my feelings of distrust, betrayal, hurt, guilt and love? (fig.28)

My own personal experience and education gives some insight into how love and hate are perceived within the Chinese culture. Since primary school, Chinese students have been taught to remember those nations who had attacked China throughout history: the Japanese are bad because of the Nanjing Massacre, Americans are bad because of the Korean War, the British and French are bad because they burned the Yuanmingyuan (The Old Summer Palace, Beijing) and The Eight Nation Alliance are bad because they destroyed the Palace again in 1900 in the Boxer Rebellion. Hierarchical, class and ethnic hatred in Chinese education was quite common. A historical mode of Chinese justice was to inform its people through films, education and books about the cruelty and atrocities that other nations and ethnic groups of people had perpetrated on their ancestors, families and children, reminding them not to forget a deserved hatred. This was a vehicle of propaganda, in a sense, that assisted in building nationalism and patriotism, giving a sober reason for the



fig. 28

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
- Hurt to restoration series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

continued collectivist ideology. The concept of love and hate in the Chinese culture is conditional upon how the individual or the group is treated, which is also linked to the concept of loyalty that strongly exists in the Chinese culture. For example, you treat me well and I will treat you well, but if you treat me badly I will never forget it, and am likely to hate you forever.

In New Zealand, however, I was introduced to a different kind of learning through friendships with some Catholic people, and something they talked about was a concept of forgiveness. I thought that maybe it might be possible to forgive whoever was responsible. They also talked about this 'unconditional love' that was a way of showing and giving love, like a mother towards her baby, something that doesn't expect anything in return. Nevertheless, I did have an element of compassion when I looked into what reminded me of an open wound and I felt that I couldn't just leave the holes like that; I had to do something. So I thought about pushing material inside of them to try and appease these feelings and console my actions. Maybe this would demonstrate that I wanted to be a part of some sort of healing process. (fig.28) I then turned the front of the garment over to reveal the underside, and quite liked its organic rawness. (fig.29)

Even though the emotions were quite intense, while in this place of reflection between two cultural views, I chose to stay

in this part of the process. The rawness seemed to be bringing something together. I decided to cut the front of the garment into random pieces and attach these pieces to another piece of material in a random fashion. The objective in choosing a random approach was so that my energy could be released freely. (fig.30) In comparing the first attempts with the second, I found the first stage to be more random, while the second stage seemed to be more controlled.

I repeated this process with the back of the garment to see the effect. Overall, I enjoyed the organic nature of this process and the freedom that was released through this exercise. However, after looking at these results for a few weeks, the rawness of the work contrasted with my aesthetic sense and my more subtle approach to design. I had finally come to a place of acceptance with this exercise, and definitely didn't want to abandon developing this process. At this stage, the design work was looking quite shabby, but I was prepared to take on the risk of continuing in this space. There was a new sense of boldness and excitement that had arisen through this process. I became energised with cutting and slashing the jacket, exposing many new distortions of the design. (fig.31) By the time I came to the end of this process of absolute release, the hatred had been expelled.



fig. 29

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
- Hurt to restoration series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 30

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
- Hurt to restoration series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 31

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
 - Hurt to restoration series. 2011.
 Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
 Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 31

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
- Hurt to restoration series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 31

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process
- Hurt to restoration series. 2011.
Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph
Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

This process allowed me to identify with the work of artist Zhang Hongtu. His art, as other contemporary artists who are interpreters of cultural art practice, find their art simultaneously rooted in the traditions of their native culture (Perkins, 2010, p. 143). Their understanding and familiarity with artistic practices in both realms often allows them to retain their cultural distinctiveness while adapting to the institution of 'art' and creating new functions for their work as sources of income, markers of cultural identity or catalysts for political action (Perkins, 2010, p. 143). When the contemporary artist Zhang Hongtu commented on the Mao images in his painting 'Last Banquet' he said,

I remember feeling so guilty when I first cut Mao's image for a collage, but then the creation of different images of Mao slowly became a form of psychotherapy. The series ended because Mao no longer had power over me.

(Perkins, 2010, p. 141)

The mixing of cultural forms and practices is ongoing within the heart of many artists from different cultures. In one of Zhang's landscape painting series, he adopted a position of 'hiding himself' through his intimate use with medium, style and practice, while honouring the past forms and traditional philosophies with integrity (Perkins, 2010, p. 141).

My design was evolved through a sense of restoration,

acceptance and strength of design, leaving me at a place where I could continue questioning. My culture will always be a source of inspiration, with me telling its stories as an artist through fashion design. I have realised that the conflicts I am facing are also those of other artists and designers.



fig. 33

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me - Exposed.
2011. Polyester tulle jacket. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.

3. 'Mao & Me'

- a. Altered shell (fig. 32)
- b. Exposed (fig. 33)
- c. Child innocence (fig. 34)
- d. Restored harmony (fig. 35)

This series of photographs epitomises my collection from the perspective of a Chinese–New Zealand fashion designer. The background contemporises the setting, to frame the collection from a new environment.





fig. 32

Aihua Wei. 'Mao & Me – Altered shell.
2011. Cotton jacket, polyester tulle
over jacket, copper badge. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 33

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me - Exposed.
2011. Polyester tulle jacket. Wellington,
New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn,
courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 34

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Child
innocence. 2011. Wool jacket with silk
lining, polyester tulle undergarment,
zinc buttons. Wellington, New Zealand.
Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of
Aihua Wei.



fig. 34

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Child innocence. 2011. Wool jacket with silk lining, polyester tulle undergarment, zinc buttons. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 35

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Restored harmony. 2012. Wool jacket with silk lining, zinc buttons, copper necklace. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.





fig. 35

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Restored harmony. 2012. Wool jacket with silk lining, zinc buttons, copper necklace. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 35

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Restored harmony. 2012. Wool jacket with silk lining, zinc buttons, copper necklace. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.



fig. 36

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me. 2012. Massey University MDes installation. Wellington, New Zealand. Courtesy of Aihua Wei.

'Mao & Me' exhibition (fig. 36)

Through the design process, I have arrived at a realisation that collectivism and individualism can exist in all relationships, whether family, community or country. The transparent jacket symbolises a culture whose ideology is infused with its political, social thinking. The mini-army-like positioning creates an atmosphere of a disciplined structure and system. Hierarchical in placement, the past is elevated with the invisible Mao jacket. Altered Mao jacket designs descend to represent my father and family, my childhood and finally my present position at the forefront. The variation in colour tone is indicative of the conflict that is part of my life, although the final garment in the front embodies a grounded and balanced self that is continually evolving. The badges, buttons and necklace are symbols showing the unity of nation, family and self. The audience is to view the exhibition by standing in front of the army-like procession. There is an audio recording of my voice: 'one people, one voice, one nation...'

4. Conclusion

In order to begin my design research, I chose an artefact that exemplified the voice of my Chinese culture, namely Chairman Mao Zedong's jacket. From a personal point of view as a woman and as a Chinese–New Zealand fashion designer, I was caught in a struggle between my native culture and my adopted culture, thinking that I might be forced to make a choice. The tension, anguish and conflict that I was experiencing held me in a position whereby I felt stuck. I remember my design supervisors encouraging me that this conflict was a positive thing, and I couldn't understand this at all. However, through the active process of this design research project, there was a realisation that it is all right to question something or even set up an inquiry, and still leave it in a place where you found it, but take the opportunity to find something new. There was a sense of freedom to not necessarily choose any one cultural identity over another; it's more about an awakening to new possibilities.

... The identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself; language is different from itself; the person is different from itself. Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, it's open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on.

(Derrida & Caputo, 1997, p. 13-14)

The process of deconstruction or 'undoing' in this project has highlighted questions of personal conflicts and cultural identities. Chinese fashion designers can look to their past for inspiration in order to tell their own story and create new directions.

'One people, one voice, one nation'.

It is a self-referencing to Mao's jacket, the relationship between the jacket and me, voices of the past that live through me, Mao and me. The jacket represents a strict ideology that sought to unify a nation. I hadn't realised the impact this jacket has had on my life, education, family, surroundings, thinking and behaviour.

'One people, one voice, one nation'.

Even though I didn't grow up in Mao's era, wearing the jacket as an actual piece of clothing, there is a sense that I have always been wearing this jacket invisibly, Mao and me. My identity has been shaped along with the ideology that Chairman Mao Zedong established to build a nation's identity.

'One people, one voice, one nation'.

For this stronghold of collectivism to exist, it required every individual's loyalty and obedience, as they dedicated their lives to this 'one people, one voice, one nation' philosophy. Through working with the jacket and learning about the practice of deconstruction, I've understood that the jacket is not something to get rid of, but something to question, inquire of, to discover new possibilities.

'A new voice' ...



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6. List of figures

fig. 1

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me - Restored harmony. 2012. Silk fabric with laser cutting. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 2

Chinese cadres wearing variations of Mao's jacket, 1951. (Huanqiu, 2010) From Huanqiu. (2010). Retrieved from 15 January 2011, http://history.huanqiu.com/photo/2010-08/1032311_5.html

fig. 3

Sun Zhongshan. (Wang, 1991)
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fig. 4

People's Liberation Army uniform, 18 August 1966. (Li, 2010)
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fig. 5

My father wearing a PLA uniform standing in front of Tiananmen, Beijing, China. 1969. Courtesy of Wei Xianlun.

fig. 6

Personal collection of Chairman Mao badges, 1966-68. Photograph Wei Feiyan, courtesy of Wei Xianlun.

fig. 7

Aihua, Wei. Bachelor Graduate collection 'Transposed'. 2010. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Sam Lee, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 8

Hussein, Chalayan. 'Ambimorphous' Autumn/Winter collection. 2002. (Hussein Chalayan, n.d.)
From Hussein Chalayan. Retrieved 15 January 2011, from <http://www.husseinchalayan.com/main.swf>

fig. 9

Mao Zedong in Zhongshan suit. (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.)
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fig. 10

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Replica of Mao's jacket series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 11

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Replica of Mao's jacket series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 12

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Exposure series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 13

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fig. 16

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Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Childhood memories series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 27a

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process – Childhood memories series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph and construction by Christine Imlay. Courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 28

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process - Hurt to restoration series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 29

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process - Hurt to restoration series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 30

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process - Hurt to restoration series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 31

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Design process - Hurt to restoration series. 2011. Wellington, Zealand. Photograph Aihua Wei, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 32

Aihua Wei. 'Mao & Me – Altered shell. 2011. Cotton jacket, polyester tulle over jacket, copper badge. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 33

Aihua Wei. 'Mao' & Me - Exposed. 2011. Polyester tulle jacket. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 34

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Child innocence. 2011. Wool jacket with silk lining, polyester tulle undergarment, zinc buttons. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 35

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me – Restored harmony. 2012. Wool jacket with silk lining, zinc buttons, copper necklace. Wellington, New Zealand. Photograph Mandi Lynn, courtesy of Aihua Wei.

fig. 36

Aihua, Wei. 'Mao' & Me. 2012. Massey University MDes installation. Wellington, New Zealand. Courtesy of Aihua Wei.



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