The Construction of Chineseness in the International Fashion System: A Case Study of Chinese and Diasporic Designer Brands

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Abstract: This study examines how Chineseness is constructed among Chinese and Chinese diasporic designer brands within the international fashion system. It focuses on three questions: how designers position the cultural identity of their brands, how this positioning is expressed through design and brand narratives, and how media, buyers, and other external actors interpret meanings in these brands. Using an interpretive qualitative case study approach, the research compares five brands: Feng Chen Wang, SHUSHU/TONG, Sandy Liang, ZHAOYI YU, and AO YES. Data were collected from official brand materials, brand books, fashion and retail media, social media, and semi-structured interviews with the designers of ZHAOYI YU and AO YES. The analysis is organized around three dimensions: subject positioning, expression strategies, and external reading. This study found that Chineseness is not determined by cultural background alone. It is first shaped by designers' own choices, then expressed through materials, silhouettes, craftsmanship, brand narratives, and collaborations. As brands circulate through media and retail systems, these meanings may be amplified, reduced, or reframed by external actors. The study therefore argues that Chineseness is produced through the interaction between designers, brands, and the wider fashion system.

Keywords: Chineseness, Chinese and Chinese diasporic designer brands, brand narratives, cultural intermediaries, international fashion system

Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of independent Chinese and Chinese diaspora designers have entered international fashion weeks, overseas retail, and fashion media networks, where they are often introduced as "Chinese designers." Some designers actively employ traditional craft or visual elements with explicit cultural orientations, whereas others focus more on popular culture. Even when brands themselves do not particularly emphasize cultural identity, fashion media, buyers, and consumers may still identify and describe them as Chinese designers or frame their brands as culturally Chinese based on the designer's nationality, upbringing, brand location, or visual features.

This study examines whether the relationship between a brand and Chineseness is established by the designer and the brand itself or ascribed externally. Designers may decide whether to use Chinese elements and whether to emphasize their cultural identity. However, they cannot control how the outside readers ultimately interpret the brand.

Research Questions

Based on the phenomena described above, this study poses three questions:

First, how do designers position the cultural identity of their brands?

Second, how is this positioning expressed through design and brand narrative?

Third, how do media, buyers, and other external actors interpret and frame these brands, and how do these readings relate to the designers' own positioning?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study focuses on Chinese and Chinese diasporic designer brands that have entered the international fashion system and are connected to Chinese culture or Chinese diasporic experience. These brands may all face questions about how cultural identity is translated into design, expressed through the brand, and interpreted by external systems.

As used in this paper, *Chineseness* primarily refers to the meanings produced through connections between a brand and "China" as a cultural, geographical, and identity category.

Subject Positioning: The Diversity of Cultural Identity

Before discussing how designers express culture, it is necessary to first examine how they understand their own cultural identities. Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is not fixed but is continually formed as "positioning" in different historical and social contexts. Even among individuals with similar ethnic or cultural backgrounds, understandings of one's own identity and cultural belonging may still differ.

Such differences are particularly evident in research on the Chinese diaspora. Drawing on her own experience as an ethnic Chinese person born in Indonesia and raised in the Netherlands, Ang (2001) discusses the complexity of Chineseness in overseas Chinese identity.She points out that how individuals understand their own Chineseness is shaped by their upbringing environment, migration experience, and specific social context—an ethnic Chinese background alone cannot determine the extent to which an individual identifies with or emphasizes "Chinese" identity.

Likewise, in the field of fashion design, Tsui (2022) finds that the inspiration sources and identity perceptions of a new generation of Chinese designers are becoming increasingly diverse, making it difficult to characterize them through a single, unified "Chinese identity." Some designers do not even actively explain their work in terms of "Chinese elements."

Design Practice and Expression Strategies

Existing research shows how Chinese designers' approaches to cultural expression in their creative work have evolved over time. Tsui (2013) notes that Chineseness in Chinese fashion has not disappeared since China's reform and opening-up, but its modes of expression have changed. Designs of the 1980s and 1990s often employed readily identifiable traditional cultural symbols. For instance, in her award-winning 1993 collection, Haiyan Wu drew inspiration from Tang dynasty costume and Dunhuang murals, directly applying traditional hand-painted patterns to long coats and skirts. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, such expression has gradually shifted toward more abstract and subtle forms. Tsui also observes that a group of "zen" designers, such as Ma Ke and Wang Yiyang, convey an Eastern sensibility of harmony and restraint through neutral colors, natural fabrics, and clean lines. In such designs, Chineseness is internalized in the pattern, materials, and overall aesthetic structure. Lindgren (2013) also mentions that some Chinese designers draw on philosophical traditions such as Buddhism to explore more universal aspects of the human condition through their work, including humanity's relationship with nature and the pursuit of truth and harmony.

Tsui (2022) argues that this trend toward implicitness has evolved into "de-labeling" among a younger generation of designers. Third-generation designers born in the 1990s and educated at leading international fashion institutions draw on a large variety of sources of inspiration, as exemplified by Angel Chen, whose work references Yoruba and Maori cultures as well as Chinese painting. They favor deconstruction and reconstruction techniques, while maintaining a relaxed and playful tone. Tsui links this generational change partly to young designers' international fashion education. Their work also places greater emphasis on personal experience, individual design philosophies, and diverse cultural influences.

Compared with research on design practice, less attention has been paid to how brands articulate their cultural identities. Existing studies nevertheless offer several useful starting points for examining this question. Using Sino-Italian fashion collaborations as a case, Ling and Segre Reinach (2019) question the "supposed separation of manufacture and creation" (p. 408) between China and Italy. By tracing the shift from joint ventures to Chinese acquisitions of Italian brands, they show how transnational co-creation makes it difficult to assign brand identity and creative authorship to a single nation. They also emphasize that country-of-origin labels capture only part of a fashion product's production history. Relatedly, Lindgren's (2013) notion of "self-legitimation" can be read as a narrative strategy: by explaining their design philosophy, designers establish their own legitimacy before receiving recognition within the Western-dominated fashion system. However, existing literature has not systematically examined whether and how brands adapt their expression strategies for different audiences, including international buyers and media as well as domestic consumers.

External Reading: Intermediation, Naming, and Center-Periphery

This study selects brands that have entered the international fashion system because this system is characterized by hierarchical distinctions between center and periphery (Kuipers et al., 2022). Once brands enter this system, media outlets, buyers, and other intermediaries help determine which characteristics are amplified and which are overlooked.

Meanings are reshaped through circulation and interpretation. Smith Maguire and Matthews (2010) note that cultural intermediaries, such as media outlets and buyers, assign brands to recognized categories through reporting, categorization, and recommendation. Mazzarella (2004)

proposes “nodes of mediation”; designers’ experiences, brand narratives, media labels, buyer classifications, and platform circulation all shape how a design is ultimately read as “Chinese,” “Asian,” “Eastern,” “minimalist,” or “avant-garde.”

Entwistle and Rocamora’s (2006) study of London Fashion Week shows that fashion weeks decide who is seen and who is recognized. Who can gain entry, who sits in the front row, and who receives media attention continuously reproduce the hierarchical order within the field. Kuipers et al. (2022) point out that peripheral positions produce inequalities: designers at the center are regarded as the standard, whereas those at the periphery are considered local or ethnic. This is particularly useful for explaining why certain brands continue to be labeled as Eastern.

Research Gap

In summary, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most studies focus on diaspora designers who are already embedded in Western fashion systems, with less attention paid to Chinese designer brands that originate within local systems and proactively enter overseas markets. In addition, few studies compare designers’ own cultural positioning with the ways their brands are interpreted by others. The ways in which media, buyers, or other external actors understand a brand’s cultural identity may differ from both designers’ own perceptions and images that brands actively present.

Methodology

Epistemological Stance

This study adopts a constructivist epistemological stance. Epistemology focuses on how knowledge is produced and how researchers gain understanding of their research subjects (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism holds that people’s understanding of the meaning of the social world is shaped within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts; therefore, the same phenomenon may give rise to different interpretations (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Based on this stance, this study treats Chineseness as a context-dependent category and examines how it is understood by designers, brands, and media outlets. Since the researcher’s own background may also influence case selection and interpretation, this study seeks to make the interpretive process more transparent by clearly specifying the analytical framework, comparing different data sources, and engaging in research reflection.

Research Design

This study uses an interpretive qualitative case study approach, drawing on publicly available text analysis and interviews with designers. Case studies are suitable for research that requires an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). In fashion brand research, Fionda and Moore (2009) also adopted this method to incorporate a brand’s developmental background, specific practices, and operational environment into their analysis.

In this paper, Chineseness extends beyond the only use of explicit Chinese cultural elements. Understanding why and how brands translate cultural resources into design, and how those designs are interpreted across media and market contexts, requires attention to each brand’s developmental context and specific practices.

Case Selection Criteria

Case selections followed a purposeful sampling strategy, specifically maximum variation sampling. Purposeful sampling primarily identifies information-rich cases relevant to the research questions; within this approach, maximum variation sampling selects cases that exhibit marked

differences in key conditions to capture common patterns and divergent pathways through comparison (Palinkas et al., 2015).

In selecting specific cases, this study first established three basic criteria. First, the case must be a designer brand founded and led by a Chinese or Chinese diasporic designer. Second, the brand must have entered the international fashion system through international fashion weeks, international media, retail channels, or multinational collaborations, and have achieved a certain level of public visibility. Third, the case must have sufficient and traceable public information, including brand positioning, collection designs, the designer's perspectives, and external media coverage. Among the eligible cases, brands with contrasting cultural positioning and modes of expression were selected through maximum variation sampling.

The five brands ultimately selected for this case study are Feng Chen Wang, SHUSHU/TONG, Sandy Liang, ZHAOYI YU, and AO YES. The designer Feng Chen Wang was born and raised in Fujian; she later studied fashion in London and established her brand there, actively incorporating her hometown craftsmanship, family experiences, and Chinese culture into her contemporary designs (British Fashion Council, n.d.). SHUSHU/TONG was founded in Shanghai by Liushu Lei and Yutong Jiang; the brand is mainly defined as femininity, girl-next-door culture, and pop culture (SHUSHU/TONG, n.d.). Sandy Liang is a Chinese American designer who grew up and established her brand in New York; her designs are shaped by the city's fashion and urban culture while maintaining connections to her Chinese family, Chinatown, childhood experiences, and intergenerational memories (Hines, 2014). ZHAOYI YU focuses primarily on haute couture, with designer Zhaoyi Yu's work centered on handcrafted elements, material manipulation, and experimental techniques in clothing (ZHAOYI YU, n.d.). AO YES is a Shanghai-based ready-to-wear brand co-founded by Austin Wang and Yansong Liu. The brand emphasizes the relationship between Eastern culture and contemporary fashion, integrating Eastern cultural experiences into modern clothing and overall styling (AO YES, 2025).

Following brand case selection, this study also made purposeful selections regarding the specific collections to be analyzed. Collections from recent years were chosen first, so that the analysis could reflect the brand's relatively recent style and context; consideration was also given to whether the selected collections could demonstrate design characteristics that appeared consistently and continuously across multiple seasons in one brand. Where appropriate, collections with different styles from the same brand were also selected for comparison, in order to observe how these collections contribute to the brand's overall image.

Data Collection

This study employs data source triangulation, collecting data from official brand materials, external media, and interviews with designers (Carter et al., 2014). Together, these materials address the core research question: How do Chinese and Chinese diasporic designer brands that have entered the international fashion system understand and articulate their relationship with Chineseness, and how is this relationship interpreted by external systems?

The data for this study was primarily sourced from publicly available materials, brand books provided by the two interviewed designers, and interviews conducted by the researcher with the two designers. Publicly available materials mainly included brand websites, collection notes, published interviews with designers, fashion and industry publications such as *Vogue Runway* and *Jing Daily*, retail platforms such as SSENSE, and public social media content on platforms like Instagram and

Xiaohongshu (rednote). The brand books contain information such as the brand's development history, brand positioning, design philosophy, and representative collections. When understanding the designers' perspectives, priority was given to official brand materials or direct interviews with the designers. Social media materials were used to supplement observations of recurring labels and styling trends in public posts.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the designers of ZHAOYI YU and AO YES in April and May 2026. The questions focused on cultural identity, design choices, brand narratives, domestic and international audiences, business environment, and external labels. Designer Zhaoyi Yu participated in a telephone-based semi-structured interview, which allowed for immediate follow-up questions based on the responses; The designers of AO YES, on the other hand, participated in an asynchronous written interview, in which the researcher sent questions and received written responses. The interviews provided deeper firsthand material for these two case studies, offering further insight into the designers' pre-decision considerations and perceptions of external feedback—aspects that are difficult to observe in publicly available texts. The two interview formats may yield different levels of informational depth, and this will be further discussed in the researcher's reflection section.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a primarily deductive thematic approach, with literature-informed analytical categories guiding data collection and subsequent material analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Drawing on the literature reviewed above, the case analyses are organized around three dimensions: subject positioning, expression strategies, and external reading. Subject positioning focuses on how designers describe a brand's cultural identity and interpret their own creative work; expression strategies bring together specific design practices, brand narratives, market adaptations, and commercial collaborations; external reading compares how the media, buyers, and the general public reinterpret and redefine the brand, examining which characteristics are amplified and whether their interpretations differ from those of the designers or brands themselves.

During the analysis, all collected materials were first organized according to these three dimensions. More specific subthemes were then developed within each dimension, such as the selection of traditional craftsmanship, dual audiences, commercial partnerships, and media labels.

Research Ethics

The interviews in this study focused on the participants' professional experiences, design approaches, and brand practices. The researcher explained the purpose of the paper to the participants before the interviews and clarified that they could choose which questions to answer. Participants were free to withdraw from the interview at any time or request that certain portions of their responses not be included in the paper. The study utilized only the information voluntarily provided by the participants; if a participant were unwilling to elaborate on a particular question, the researcher did not ask for further details. The study obtained consent from the designers to participate in the interviews and to have their responses attributed to their real names.

Reflection

The way the interviews were conducted directly affected the data collected. The researcher initially planned to conduct semi-structured telephone interviews with both designers for immediate follow-up questions based on their responses. However, during the interview period, the designers

of AO YES were busy with preparations for Fashion Week and other brand-related responsibilities, leaving limited time for continuous interview; therefore, after consultation, a written interview was used instead. While this adjustment was more convenient for the interviewee, and they had more time to think about their responses, written replies are often more thoroughly organized and filtered. As a result, some statements may align more closely with the brand's established public narrative, and it is more difficult for the researcher to observe the designer's immediate thought processes, hesitations, and how their views take shape—as would be possible in a real-time interview. By contrast, the telephone interview with Zhaoyi Yu allowed for easier expansion of the original questions into new topics. Hence, the use of two different interview formats resulted from adjustments made by the researcher based on the actual interview conditions, which also led to certain differences between the two sets of interview data in terms of expression and information depth.

Besides, the identities of the interviewees and the researcher alike can influence the interaction. The interviewed designers and the researcher were not very familiar with one another beforehand, and their contact was established through intermediaries in the fashion industry. Therefore, interviewees' responses to a student researcher may not necessarily be the same as what they would express to colleagues, the media, or long-term partners.

The researcher's initial assumptions also influenced the design of the interview questions. When initially preparing the questions, the researcher focused on whether the designers' intentions might be "misinterpreted" by the media or the public. Nevertheless, the responses during the interviews did not fully support this hypothesis. This led the researcher to realize that the very use of the concept of "misinterpretation" was itself laden with their own judgments. Consequently, subsequent analysis no longer treated the designers' intentions as the standard for judging whether external interpretations were "correct." Instead, it focused on why different interpretations arose and how these external interpretations, in turn, influenced the brand's later expressions and decision-making.

Limitations

This study has three limitations.

First, this study focuses on brands that have already entered the international fashion system, so it cannot shed light on the situation of designer brands that have not yet gained international visibility. If research conditions permit in the future, the study could further expand the scope of interviewees to include both well-established brands that have entered the international fashion system and independent designer brands with lower media visibility that are still in their early stages of development.

Second, the interviews covered only two of the five case studies. The other three brands were analyzed primarily through publicly available information, resulting in an imbalance in the depth of material across the different cases. If further interviews could be conducted with designers from case studies such as Feng Chen Wang, SHUSHU/TONG, and Sandy Liang, this would create a more direct correlation between public materials and firsthand interview data, enabling a more accurate comparison of the relationship between the brands themselves and the external actors.

Third, this study did not directly conduct large-scale consumer interviews or surveys. Although the social media data collected can reveal some of the labels circulating in public discourse, it is influenced by platform algorithms, user demographics, and content selection. This can only serve as

a window into external perceptions and does not provide a comprehensive view of consumers' overall attitudes.

Case Analysis

This case analysis compares five brands—Feng Chen Wang, SHUSHU/TONG, Sandy Liang, ZHAOYI YU, and AO YES—to examine how Chineseness is defined, expressed, and interpreted among Chinese and Chinese diasporic designer brands in the international fashion system.

The analysis follows the three dimensions introduced earlier: Subject Positioning, Expression Strategies, and External Readings.

Feng Chen Wang

Feng Chen Wang is a case in this study where Chinese cultural experiences have been actively incorporated into the brand. Designer Feng Chen Wang has described the brand as an "international Chinese design brand," characterizing her designs as "future-modern," "authentic," "emotional," and "multidimensional." She launched the SS18 "Made in China" collection because the international market had historically associated "Made in China" with low prices or poor quality, and she sought to redefine the term "China" in a more confident manner (Cheung, 2021).

Rather than relying primarily on highly recognizable Eastern symbols such as Chinese knots or embroidery, Wang approaches her work through craftsmanship. She draws inspiration primarily from Fujian's local crafts, family memories, and traditional culture, translating these sources into contemporary menswear with a strong emphasis on functionality. For example, in SS20, she incorporated blue-and-white printed fabric and bamboo weaving techniques, integrating resist dyeing and bamboo structures into contemporary hoodies and workwear jackets (Feng Chen Wang, n.d.-b). The blue-printed fabric was transformed into bright green textile, while the bamboo weaving became the geometric structure of the sweaters. Without knowing the background, viewers would probably find it difficult to recognize these designs as coming from Fujian.



Figure 1 *Feng Chen Wang SS20 Collection*

Unlike SS20, AW21 relies more on the brand's own description to convey Chineseness. This collection incorporates traditional elements such as brush paintings, the phoenix, and the color red into the garments; the brand officially describes the red used in the collection film as a celebrated color in China with ceremonial tradition (Feng Chen Wang, n.d.-a). Nonetheless, red is a very common color in fashion photography, and it is difficult to determine from the images alone

whether it specifically references Chinese culture. The reason it takes on a more explicit “Chinese” meaning in this collection stems largely from the brand’s proactive interpretation of this color and the collection’s concept.



Figure 2 *Feng Chen Wang AW21 Collection*

International fashion media may not offer praise simply because a design incorporates traditional Chinese craftsmanship; they judge, mainly based on the professional standards of the international fashion industry, whether these cultural elements can be effectively integrated with the garment’s structure, materials, and style. Vogue Runway, a platform dedicated to covering global fashion weeks and publishing reviews, noted in its review of the SS20 collection that bamboo weaving techniques added sculptural dimensions to sweatshirts and denim jackets. However, when the bamboo structure directly covered large areas of the body, the concept itself became overly prominent and conceptual. In comparison, the reviewer found Wang’s experiment with blue-and-white printed fabric more compelling, particularly its use on a workwear jacker (Nnadi, 2019).

Once the brand enters retail and mass-media circulation, its Chinese cultural references take a back seat. Retail platforms such as SSENSE often summarize the brand using terms like “deconstruction” and “layering,” while coverage of collaborations primarily emphasizes detachable structures and functional designs (Sacal, 2023; SSENSE, n.d.-a). Styling videos and fashion accounts on social media platforms and websites such as Instagram and Xiaohongshu also frequently highlight footwear collaborations, functional outerwear, and pieces with distinct structural variations. As a result, Feng Chen Wang’s deconstructed and functional designs are more visible and widely disseminated than its Fujian local culture.

SHUSHU/TONG

The official SHUSHU/TONG website first states that it is a Shanghai-based brand, defining its core style as “feminine style with a twist.” The brand emphasizes ruffles, bows, unique silhouettes, and imperfect details, aiming to portray a modern female image that is more relaxed and independent, unbound by the constraints of conventional propriety (SHUSHU/TONG, n.d.). Its sources of inspiration include pop culture from the 1990s and early 2000s, rebellious high school life, Japanese manga, video games, and the designer’s experiences studying and working at European brands (Kessler, 2024).

SHUSHU/TONG frequently reworks the roles and behaviors traditionally associated with feminine clothing. For example, the SS25 collection drew inspiration from the female characters in

the film *The Piano Teacher*: cropped cardigans shaped like boleros reveal the collarbone or midriff, while lace insets in the skirts became visible only in movement; what were originally neat bows appeared loosened and untied, trailing behind the models (Criales-Unzueta, 2024). Compared to other high-end womenswear that emphasizes elegance and polished, complete looks, SHUSHU/TONG's use of cutouts and loosened details disrupts the neat and demure visual impact traditionally related to these garments, while also reshaping the feminine image they evoke. SS26 pushed this idea further by asking, "What is left after beauty decays?" Aged cotton, leather, lace, and exposed underwear brought signs of exposure and disorder into garments that had been previously thought about polish and completeness (Criales-Unzueta, 2025). AW26 addressed similar issues through character and narrative. Inspired by the French film *Violette Nozière* and clothing from the 1930s and 1940s, the collection used feminine forms such as plaid pencil skirts, Peter Pan collars, velvet gowns, and bows to construct a female character attempting to define herself beyond the expectations of her family and reshape her own identity (Leitch, 2026).



Figure 3 *SHUSHU/TONG SS25 Collection*

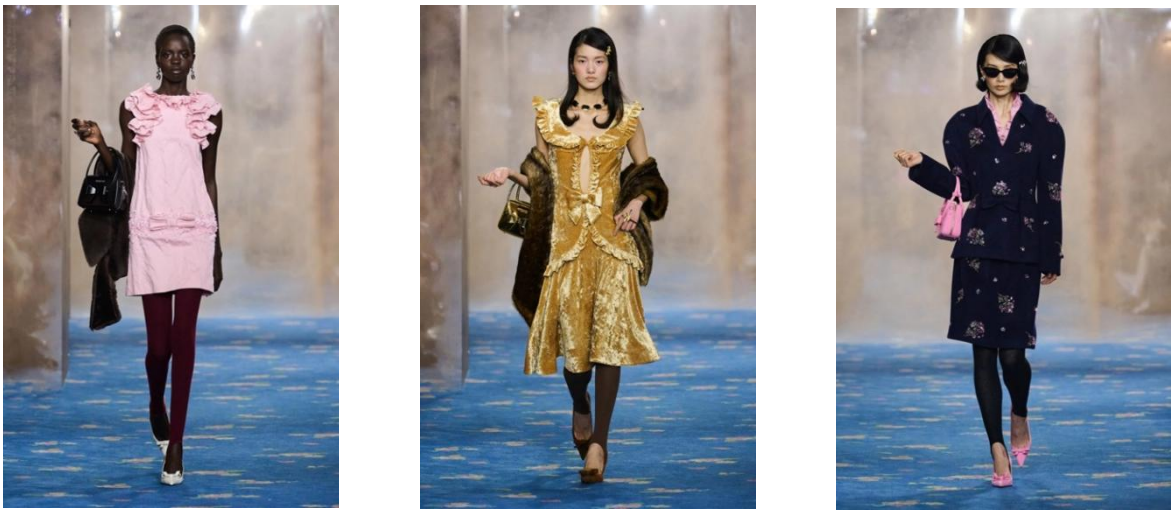


Figure 4 *SHUSHU/TONG AW26 Collection*

SHUSHU/TONG's ongoing exploration of the female identity can be understood within the context of the growing agency of young women today. In the transmission of some traditional Chinese crafts and family memories, women have often taken on caregiving roles. Feng Chen Wang's memories of Fujian craftsmanship, for instance, are closely tied to the life experiences of her grandmother and mother. However, SHUSHU/TONG places less emphasis on preserving memories of women within Chinese tradition and instead focuses more on what contemporary women are able to become. Its designs allow feminine clothing to simultaneously embody sensuality, desire, rebellion, and personal choice. Here, women are not merely objects to be viewed and dressed up; they also become subjects who can define how they wish to present themselves.

Chineseness becomes more apparent when reports introduce the brand's origins. Jing Daily directly refers to SHUSHU/TONG as a "Chinese designer brand" and emphasizes its Shanghai background, its foundation in the Chinese market, and its entry into the international retail system (Nan, 2021). However, in most external readings, SHUSHU/TONG is framed as "coquette" or "ultra-feminine." Celebrity styling on social media and "SHUSHU/TONG Girls" content further reinforce labels such as "girly" and "sweet-and-edgy" (Brandstar, 2025; Kessler, 2024).

Sandy Liang

Sandy Liang's positioning is rooted first in her personal experiences. In interviews, she has explained that her design references come from movies, books, characters, and daily experiences she has been interested in since childhood. "Chinatown grandmothers" are one of these recurring sources of inspiration. Liang has been drawn to these women's mixed patterns, florals, bold colors, and seemingly effortless way of dressing (Hines, 2014). For her, her grandmother, the family restaurant, Chinatown, childhood cartoons, and New York girls all belong to the same set of personal memories. Her Chinese American identity is merely a part of her lived experience, rather than a brand theme that needs to be articulated in every collection. She also does not first generalize these experiences as "Chinese culture" and then design based on that concept.

In SS26, however, experiences of New York's Chinese community found their way more explicitly into the clothing. Liang drew on the dress of older women in Chinatown, including floral prints, protective arm coverings, and mixed patterns, while also layering swimwear over outer garments. Some prints and T-shirts also featured a slightly altered version of the brand logo, creating a connection to the clothes her parents brought back from China during her childhood and, more broadly, to the culture of knock-off goods on Canal Street (Kim, 2025b).



Figure 5 *Sandy Liang SS26 Collection*

Compared to SS26, FW25 also drew from Liang's personal memories, but focused more closely on her own childhood and life experiences. She returned to childhood objects such as Furbies and Morning Glory planners, and redesigned the brand's fleece pieces inspired by memories of borrowing her father's polar fleece when she was younger. The collection notes similarly described this season as "a still life of growing up" and "a childhood fantasy realized," framing it as a reflection on childhood and the process of growing up (Frischer, 2025; Kim, 2025a).



Figure 6 *Sandy Liang FW25 Collection*

The brand's external readings are more layered. Media outlets focusing on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) themes emphasize Liang's Chinese American heritage, her grandmother, Chinatown, and her experience growing up in an immigrant family (Phung, 2023). Retail platforms, on the other hand, focus more on design features that can directly characterize the products; SSENSE describes the brand as a womenswear brand built on "cultural nostalgia," highlighting the combination of feminine silhouettes and androgynous grunge, as well as its signature jacket (SSENSE, n.d.-b).

In broader popular discourse, Sandy Liang's most consistent labels are "girlhood," "balletcore," and "downtown princess." Vogue's coverage of the Spring/Summer 2024 collection described pleated skirts, ballet flats, and bows as signature elements of the "Sandy Liang girl," noting that these pieces had come to form a "downtown-princess uniform" that is instantly recognizable and easily imitated (Spellings, 2023). As the brand's exposure has increased through street style,

collaborations, and celebrity endorsements, these signature visual elements have become increasingly easy to recognize (Kim, 2024). Such style labels have further solidified as the primary way the public perceives the brand. Therefore, for Sandy Liang, Chineseness has not become the default framework through which the brand is understood by a broader audience.

ZHAOYI YU

ZHAOYI YU is characterized by haute couture, material experimentation, and traditional craftsmanship. The brand centers on the relationship between human emotional states, the human form, and materials (ZHAOYI YU, n.d.). Its brand book also emphasizes emotional storytelling, quiet power, delicate fragility, and the balance between vulnerability and strength.

During the interview, when asked how he would like to be introduced in the paper, Zhaoyi Yu chose the simple term "designer." For him, his upbringing in China and his Western education have each influenced his aesthetic sensibilities and design methods. He explained the relationship between the two as follows:

"The East influenced why I came to love mother-of-pearl inlay craftsmanship, while the West influenced how I integrate that craftsmanship into clothing—and the innovative ways I use to do so."



Figure 7 *ZHAOYI YU Collections*

In his specific designs, Zhaoyi Yu's use of Chinese cultural resources involves the material transformation of traditional craftsmanship. One of the brand's most representative approaches is the application of traditional Chinese mother-of-pearl inlay technique to contemporary haute couture. In the interview, Yu explained that mother-of-pearl inlay was not the cultural element they had settled on from the very beginning. The team experimented with a wide range of traditional crafts and intangible cultural heritage materials, but some techniques, although effective in their original forms, proved difficult to integrate with fabrics and the brand's overall design language. Mother-of-pearl inlay was eventually chosen because it created a relatively harmonious balance between visual impact, material characteristics, the brand's style, and haute couture products.

Shell inlay is not merely a surface decoration in these garments. Each piece of shell is selected, cut, and affixed by hand, and it shifts and changes in response to light and body movement. It not only creates a reflective surface but also contributes to shaping the garment's structure and texture.

In this way, the traditional craft no longer replicates original patterns found in furniture or lacquerware, but instead has evolved into a new material language for fashion (ZHAOYI YU, n.d.).

These material traits also connect to the brand's exploration of vulnerability and strength. Mother-of-pearl is inherently fragile, hard, and responsive to changing light, allowing it to express fragility, resilience, and transformation simultaneously (ZHAOYI YU, n.d.). Designer Zhaoyi Yu further explained that vulnerability, for him, mainly refers to the unstable emotional state between two relatively stable periods in their lives, when feelings are constantly shifting and difficult to define. He believes that this unstable state, which is often overlooked or rejected, holds many possibilities. Therefore, through the selection of and experimentation with different materials, he hopes to transform abstract emotions into garments that can be visually perceived.

Yu also stated that he intentionally avoids overly representational subjects such as ink painting, traditional landscapes, architecture, and patterns from classical furniture. He believes these forms have already been fully developed by traditional artisans, and that direct reproduction would make it difficult to surpass the original works. Instead, he prefers to preserve the material qualities and aesthetic spirit of traditional craftsmanship and reorganize them through contemporary design methods. He summed it up in a simple sentence: "So it's an Eastern sensibility, but still takes on a modern form."

Commercial collaborations also change the conditions under which Chinese culture enters the design process. Zhaoyi Yu views independent collections and IP collaborations as two distinct creative contexts. Independent collections allow designers to start with personal ideas and develop the concepts more freely; when collaborating with established IPs such as Disney that feature clearly defined characters, designers must work within predetermined colors, character personalities, and narrative settings, seeking points of overlap between the partner's system and the brand's own design language. Hence, compared with independent collections, the space for incorporating Chinese cultural elements in such collaborations is constrained by the specific themes of the partnership.

Once a garment enters external circulation, it can be read in different ways. Yu believes that buyers tend to first consider whether a garment is suitable for sale and wear, while fashion media place greater emphasis on whether a collection offers fresh themes and newsworthy content. In recent years, domestic fashion coverage has shown strong interest in traditional Chinese culture and intangible cultural heritage, making them more likely to identify and highlight such elements within a brand. International media, by contrast, may first be drawn to the visual impact of the garments themselves before delving deeper into the cultural origins behind the designs.

Yu has also noticed that some reports actively highlight his Chinese cultural background, even when his work does not feature very explicit elements of traditional Chinese culture. He does not necessarily view such labels negatively, but he does wonder why a "Chinese background" is chosen as the headline or the focus of the report as it's not in itself unusual.

Public interpretations of the work may not always align with the designer's original intentions. Zhaoyi Yu mentioned that some people read his work as an expression of feminism, while others mistakenly judge the designer's gender based on the style of the clothing. He considers such discrepancies in interpretation quite common, and also sees external responses as a way for designers to understand how their brand is perceived by the public.

AO YES

AO YES uses “Modern Oriental” to describe its overall design, emphasizing the combination of Chinese culture, high fashion, and contemporary style (AO YES, 2025). However, the designers clarified in the interview that “Modern Oriental” does not mean the brand first establishes a fixed set of Chinese symbols and then applies them to clothing. They stated that their initial goal is to create fashion that aligns with contemporary aesthetics, and that Eastern aesthetics naturally enter the products and visual language through the design process.

In practice, AO YES draws on cultural references in a way that is more closely tied to everyday observations. For example, the Fall/Winter 2024 “Mr. Sensei” collection drew inspiration from the attire of early 20th-century intellectuals, but the designers did not intend to reconstruct a fixed historical persona. Scarves, cheongsam-inspired proportions, shirts, and a relatively restrained color palette were incorporated into contemporary ready-to-wear pieces (Chen, 2025).

AO YES’s selection of cultural references also reflects the designers’ familiarity with their own culture.

“First of all, we use elements from our own culture. We feel this comes naturally to us because it is our culture—we live in a world shaped by it, and it runs through us. Using this aesthetic in our designs is just as natural as breathing.”

They believed that if asked to design using elements from African or South American cultures, they would not have the same level of judgment and confidence. This suggests that whether cultural elements can meaningfully enter the design process depends in part on whether the designers possess sufficient life experience and cultural understanding.

This cultural expression becomes even more prominent in certain commercial collaborations. Brand materials show that the Zara Year of the Snake collaboration brought together cultural elements such as Chinese knots, the Lunar New Year, red tones, and family reunion (AO YES, 2025). The Disney collaboration combined Mickey Mouse with longevity locks, embroidery, and Eastern-inspired styling (Chen, 2025), while the Nike project further linked Chinese kung fu with athletic apparel (Shanghai Fashion Designers Association, 2025). Compared with the brand’s regular collections, the cultural references in these collaborations are more easily recognized by consumers. Clear themes such as the Lunar New Year and Disney characters allow AO YES’s otherwise more dispersed Eastern cultural references to be organized and presented in a more concentrated form.



Figure 8 *ZARA | AO YES Collaboration of the Snake Year, 2025*



Figure 9 *AO YES × Disney: MICKEY AND FRIENDS, 2024*

Within external communications, AO YES has often been categorized by the media and consumers as “New Chinese Style.” However, AO YES prefers the term “Modern Oriental.” “New Chinese Style” tends to bring to mind recognizable features such as Chinese-style collars, frog buttons, or traditional garment silhouettes. The designers explained that their starting point is not to make products look sufficiently “Chinese,” but whether it works as contemporary fashion. They also acknowledged that this approach may appear contradictory to some consumers: the brand actively emphasizes its Eastern identity, yet does not prioritize the production of highly recognizable Chinese-style clothing. However, it is precisely this tension that sets the brand apart from some other “New Chinese-style” brands.

Wang and Liu did not believe that audiences need to interpret all cultural cues precisely. Since

people differ in their aesthetic preferences, knowledge, and bodily experiences, it is normal for them to form different judgments about the same garment. For most consumers, simply finding the clothing appealing and feeling confident while wearing it can already constitute effective acceptance in and of itself. The brand nonetheless still pays attention to these external labels. As the designers explained: “We think about why a certain label has emerged, whether it’s the one we want, and whether we should keep it or move away from it—and from there, we naturally gain a clear sense of what to do next.”

In short, external readings can feed back into the brand’s next stage of decision-making. Although designers cannot control every interpretation, they can adjust future products and communication strategies based on such feedback.

Cross-Case Comparison

Before Chineseness enters a brand, it has already undergone the designer’s own judgment and selection. Regardless of whether the designer actively emphasizes a Chinese identity, cultural experiences may be reworked into materials, structures, silhouettes, or overall design language when incorporated into clothing, meaning that their Chineseness may not always be immediately recognizable. Conversely, brands that do not position Chinese culture as a central theme may still selectively bring Chinese or Eastern experiences into particular collections. From this perspective, there is no direct correlation between a designer’s understanding of their own cultural identity and the ultimate visibility of Chineseness in their garments.

Across the five brands, differences in how they address domestic and international audiences are generally limited. The available materials do not indicate that Feng Chen Wang, Sandy Liang, ZHAOYI YU, or AO YES develop two separate sets of cultural expression for the domestic and international markets; they generally maintain a relatively consistent design language across different regions and platforms. SHUSHU/TONG shows a somewhat clearer tendency to adapt its product and communication to different markets. For instance, the brand has adjusted its product mix and color palette in response to different preferences between Western and Asia-Pacific consumers (Maguire, 2024). However, these adjustments remain largely at the specific product level and have not developed into separate cultural languages that appear more “Chinese” for the domestic market while downplaying Chinese identity overseas.

As brands move through wider systems of circulation, Chineseness is further shaped by external readings. In retail and mass media, Feng Chen Wang’s Fujian cultural heritage and traditional craftsmanship are often overshadowed by deconstruction, layering, and functional design. Even when ZHAOYI YU’s work lacks direct symbols of Chinese tradition, some media still foreground the designer’s Chinese cultural background. AO YES actively embraces “Modern Oriental,” yet is frequently reclassified by external media into the narrower category of “New Chinese Style.” By comparison, SHUSHU/TONG and Sandy Liang are more often framed through styles and themes such as girlishness, girlhood, or pop culture.

Consequently, Chineseness is first shaped by designers’ choices regarding their own identities and cultural experiences, and then concretely articulated through design, brand narratives, and commercial collaborations. As these expressions circulate through media, retail, and mass communication, they are again renamed and reinterpreted by external actors.

Conclusion

Key Findings

This study seeks to answer: how is Chineseness negotiated among Chinese and Chinese diasporic designer brands within the international fashion system?

First, designers' understandings of their own cultural identities vary greatly. Before Chineseness enters a brand, it has already been filtered through the designer's own perspective. How they decide which experiences are relevant to their creative practice determines whether Chineseness ultimately manifests as brand narratives, design practices, or as background information.

Second, design practice and brand narrative together shape how Chineseness becomes visible. Design practice transforms cultural experiences into materials, structures, silhouettes, and overall styles; brand narrative, through collection descriptions, brand positioning, and commercial collaborations, renames and reinterprets these designs. Therefore, the way Chineseness is perceived depends not only on whether Chinese cultural sources are present in the designs but also on whether the brand actively interprets these sources.

Third, external interpretations reshape the visibility of Chineseness. The five brands' approach to their dual domestic and international audiences is not particularly distinct. As brands circulate through media, retail platforms, and mass communication, external actors select certain features to emphasize. In this process, Chineseness may be amplified, downplayed, or reframed, depending on which aspects of the brand are highlighted and how they are categorized.

Research Contributions

This study moves beyond a binary distinction of classifying brands as "Chinese-style" or "non-Chinese-style" and avoids determining whether a brand possesses Chineseness based solely on visual symbols. A brand may choose to actively emphasize its Chinese identity or not; it may choose to deliberately include Chinese elements or avoid them. Ultimately, however, whether a brand is perceived as "Chinese," and to what extent, can only be understood through the interaction among the designer, the brand, and the external system.

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