

Sinofuturism

by Silvia Bombardini



Xander Zhou, FW18

Human beings, as experts would have it, have lived on Earth for longer than it is usual for terrestrial species such as ours. In our old age by now, species-wise, it's no wonder that we preoccupy ourselves with bittersweet fantasies of a post-human planet – think of *WALL·E*, 2008 – in the wake of our own mass extinction. But what was a dystopic fairy-tale just a decade ago would nowadays be closer to visionary social realism, a reasonable if outlandish prognosis for the common future. Sinofuturism is something like this. More than just Chinese science fiction, or chi-fi, it is a movement or a theory, absurd yet not quite so absurd to disregard as undoubtedly fictitious. It follows a school of thought centered around the myth and fear of the Other, akin to that of the Afrofuturists who reimagined the transatlantic slave trade of the 15th to 19th centuries as alien abductions, where the slaves themselves were captive but wondrous extraterrestrial beings. So too Sinofuturism, in Lawrence Lek's eponymous video essay *Sinofuturism (1839 - 2046 AD)*, conceives of China's technological development over the course of the 19th to 21st centuries as a form of Artificial

Intelligence: a gargantuan neural network unfurling by the silken roads of globalisation and diaspora across all of the sublunary world.

In Lek's film, which was shown as part of last year's exhibition 'The New Normal: China, Art, and 2017' at The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, a disembodied voiceover describes Sinofuturism as *"a movement not based on individuals but on multiple overlapping flows"*, and *"a science fiction that already exists"*. The world as we know it, it means to say, already revolves around China, slowly but surely. That's where most of everything is produced, and most of it all consumed. Take fashion, for example. Highsnobiety reports that nearly half of the luxury goods on our planet are bought by Chinese shoppers, and foreign brands have grown to rely on them so much, that Christopher Bailey had to take a 75 percent pay cut in 2015 to make up for a slowdown of Burberry's sales in Hong Kong and China. But what's sci-fi got to do with this? It's Sinofuturism, the narrator argues, this flowing movement and machinic consciousness, that propels itself forward and achieves its worldly monopoly as it self-interestedly embraces, exaggerates and subverts cultural clichés and stereotypes – such as computing and copying, gaming, studying and gambling. If this begins to sound a bit far-fetched, consider a traditional figure: the bespectacled nerd, as savvy as she is clumsy. Now think of ordinary robots with brains as wide as the world wide web, but still all thumbs when it comes to pour a glass of water or tie a knot. The line between the two can blur, Lek's essay appears to suggest, it's all a matter of intensities. Sinofuturism scales up from the individual to *"a spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals, and a million veiled narratives"*, a pervasive incorporeal intellect.



Raf Simons, SS18

If we concede that this might be the case, for the sake of the argument, it will be sensible then to conclude that Sinofuturism must have seeped into our clothing too. And if not quite yet as post-human intelligence, as a sensibility it certainly has. First and second generation Chinese designers around the globe are owning up to and revamping those very same clichés their parents might have wished to dissuade. Yang Li's fall 2018 menswear collection, *The Gambler*, embroidered with card suits and printed with hands rolling dice, nods to the casino lords of Macau. Steven Tai is drawn to the same gambling dens, and for its presentation in London next week he will recreate the atmosphere of the resort city itself, by way of some immersive augmented reality technology. For spring, Feng Cheng Wang's show in New York had the words 'Made in China', or 'MIC', featuring prominently across most looks – to elevate the ubiquitous label from mass production to the catwalk, where it is to be worn as a slogan. A Sai Ta launched his own label with a collection inspired by, as the press release put it, "*the concept, and perhaps fear of China's strength*", gifting guests with fortune cookies to appease them, and Xander Zhou blends together his signature spacecraft style with stereotyped chinoiserie, large folding fans and conical hats, the dragons and tigers of power and wealth in the East painted upon the suits and ties of power and wealth in the West. Confucius quotes and computerised graphics on wet-like leathers, for a fall 2018 collection that comes close to what a Sinofuturist dress code could look like. But it's not just Chinese designers who are doing this either. Though contemporary audiences' heightened sensitivity in matters of cultural appropriation keeps most of them from venturing foreign folklore, genius still exempts some from the rules. When Raf Simons held his spring 2018 show under paper lanterns in Chinatown, serving attendees cans of Tsingtao, nobody saw in it anything less than a tribute, with good reasons. Interestingly, the collection itself channelled *Blade Runner*, and in particular the franchise's replicants: bioengineered androids looking just like humans, but superior to us in strength, intelligence, speed.

According to a joint report by The Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company, 2018 will be the year for artificial intelligence, as in "*computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence*", to stretch its invisible fingers across all parts of the fashion value chain, because "*AI is at the verge of outperforming humans*". Another study, this one by Juniper research, confirms that global spending on artificial intelligence, only insofar as it concerns retail, will quadruple to \$7.3 billion per annum by 2022. Amazon, whose overarching convenience is on its own much blamed for the 'retail apocalypse' that made many a shopping mall superfluous in recent years, is now poised to create the first AI designer, whereas legendary make-up guru Pat McGrath has named Lil Miquela, a computer-generated Instagram model with 557k followers, as her newest muse – to join in the annals the likes of Naomi Campbell. Human beings, it seems, begin to feel a bit outdated.

It's for this reason too perhaps, that human-less dystopic narratives set in the ever nearest future have multiplied as of late, in fashion and elsewhere. On the one side there's the ills of technology, and a sense of anxiety over the assimilation of individual identity into a nameless digital ether. Hussein Chalayan told Vogue that his spring 2018 show was to do with "*the idea of the lost individuals in a digital world*", and his models wore veils on top of sunglasses, or had their faces encased into glittering, screen-like squares. On the other, the aesthetic of tough survivalism in a possibly toxic landscape has become synonym with the work of designers like

Shangguan Zhe of Sankuanz. But there's something else to it, and not just in terms of positive visions of AI that foresee a world where all work will be done by robots, and humans will be able to live peacefully in perpetual leisure. For all of our fears we're bound, as humans, to experience a measure of fascination toward a power larger and greater than ours, whether or not it might be malign. On top of the precipice, danger awed the romantic poets. Some two hundred years ago, in the grandeur of nature they found the sublime. In 2018, we might just look for it in Sinofuturism.



Yang Li, SS18 – Xander Zhou, FW18 – Sankuanz, FW18