

# Taking the Pulse of China

by Silvia Bombardini



For Shaway Yeh, sustainability is the key to a reformed system of values – *“a new epiphany for an alternative epistemology of human beings, nature and culture”*. The awakening of wisdom, a perspective unlocked. It’s as a theory of knowledge and as science, as well as a profitable opportunity, that sustainability takes centre stage ever so urgently at the Copenhagen Fashion Summit, the world’s leading annual business event on the subject. On the 2nd day of its sixth edition last month, Yeh, Editorial Director of Modern Media’s Group Style, welcomed on stage at the DR Koncerthuset three chief executives from China’s best-known fashion groups, to speak of the measures they’re taking to implement change, and question if local *“customers, let’s not call them consumers”* will be ready for it or not. Whether a sustainable future for fashion in the country may be speculation, that is, or a promise. Dee Poon, the Esquel Group’s Managing Director of Brands and Distribution and a Young Global Leader selected in 2014 by the World Economic Forum, Tana Dai, Executive General Manager of the ERDOS Fashion Group’s Business Division, and Robby Gu, the JNBY Group’s Vice President of Investment and Innovation, shared their insight and predictions with an audience of 1,300 insiders from the

**fashion sector, but also politics and NGOs, academia and the media, who had gathered in the Danish capital once again from over 50 nations around the world, with a 60% growth in participation from Asia this time.**

That China in particular should have a vested interest in the environmental sciences should come as no surprise, given the country's notoriously low, if rapidly rising, performance on the global pollution charts. National fashion in this respect, has much to answer for. *The Pulse of the Fashion Industry*, the Copenhagen Fashion Summit's yearly published data bible, counts that an estimated "two-thirds of China's rivers and lakes have been polluted by the 9 billion litres of contaminated water discharged from textile factories" – otherworldly images of magenta rivers will by now be familiar to most. On top of it, the Natural Resources Defense Council reported in 2011 that the Chinese textile industry was releasing about 3 billion tons of soot in the air each year from burning coal for energy, a major cause of pollution that surely contributed to the tipping point of Beijing's 'airpocalypse' of January 2013 – when hazardous particles in the atmosphere were forty times as many as the World Health Organisation had deemed safe there to be. Still China's resulting 'war on pollution', according to a research published in March in the New York Times, has by far outpaced expectations in the four years since its launch: coal is being replaced with natural gas, and the author suggests that because particles' concentrations in Beijing have already declined by 35 percent, should these declines persist, Beijingers can already expect to live on average 3.3 years longer.

*The Pulse* also predicts that China's ban on plastic waste imports, since January 1st, "is likely to have a significant effect on how the fashion industry uses and discards this material". For reference, Greenpeace has revealed that the UK alone has sent over 2.7m tonnes of plastic scrap to be recycled in mainland China and Hong Kong since 2012 – reportedly, this was often unfit for purpose, unsorted or not properly clean. Now Britain, and the rest of the world too, will have to figure out an alternative solution for their plastic waste, and the simplest one would be to produce less plastic to begin with. A chain of reactions that might finally lead the way for the world at large toward an uncomfortable, but necessary, shift away from our widespread disposable culture, in particular as it pertains to single-use plastics. What's more, China, which is presently the world's largest producer of textile waste, and where only between 10 and 15% of clothing is collected at the end of its lifespan, is now working "to generate 4.5 million tons of recycled textiles by 2020".

This year's edition also includes what's been called a 'Pulse Curve': a graph of subsequent phases which hopes to help companies measure their own sustainability efforts against those of other players in the industry, to better understand how to move forward – from a pre-phase of 'taking uncoordinated actions' to phase four, 'unlocking the next level'. From damage control to technical innovation, the measures so far described would take China through from phase one, two, and three: 'building the foundation', 'implementing the core', 'expanding to scale'. What would qualify as phase four, however, may well be the multiplication in recent years of sharing-economy initiatives in the country. Sharable bikes, sharable brollies, and sharable luxury too. What was previously thought of as idealistic – the turn from taking pleasure in private ownership to the rediscovery of

collective enjoyment – begins to sound like potential. If it's new values that will save our species, here's one to embrace wholeheartedly.

A piece titled '*China's Booming Sharing Economy*' in the Foreign Affairs website, cites the high cost of living in first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai as a possible reason for the newfound 'spirit of frugality' that offers fertile ground for the Chinese sharing economy to grow. On stage at the Summit, Tana Dai also mentions this spirit of frugality, if not quite as a defining feature of contemporary metropolitan life, as a long-standing Chinese tradition. "*Customers in China understand fashion sustainability in their own way*" she says, "*they want to use things for a longer time and produce less waste*". At ERDOS, which among other product categories produces over 30% of the world's cashmere, and 40% of China's, they offer a service which allows clients to send the sweaters back for repairs. "*It's quite often that we get requests from customers who bought our sweaters twenty or thirty years ago*", she adds. It is this combination of cultural disposition and present circumstance, that can make 'A Sustainable Future for Fashion in China?', the panel's title, lose its question mark and become a reality.

A major driving force for a more sustainable fashion system, in the country but in the rest of the world as well, is also a new generation of upper and middle class Chinese customers whose priorities and worries often differ significantly from what were their parents', and whose influence spills way beyond national borders. As Shaway Yeh puts it, "*a rising middle class with tremendous purchasing power has put China on the top business agenda of almost every single one of fashion's largest companies. In the year 2017 alone, 32% of the world's luxury goods were purchased by Chinese, surpassing the 22% by Americans and 18% by Europeans. Just imagine how such a purchasing power can influence the future of our industry*". Indeed, the days of China as the world's factory give way to those of sought-after, high-living Chinese shoppers. For any one brand who wants to dress them, Robby Gu insists that sustainability is not just an ethical choice, it's a business decision. "*The market is more than ready*" he argues, "*today we deal with environmental issues and workers' safety issues all the time. We talk about air pollution, water pollution. Especially with the millennial group entering their thirties, and having children, the level of anxiety about such matters just explodes by a multitude of times*".

Dee Poon's response is slightly more cautious. "*I do not believe that the majority of consumers will pay more for sustainability or will not buy something because it's not sustainable*" she admits, "*but that does not mean that today as brand owners, as manufacturers, we cannot give them great product that is sustainable*". And if they aren't quite there yet, they're well on their way to be. The Esquel Group's water and energy footprint has come down by more than 50% since 2005, and at ERDOS they're using customers' shopping cart data to make just as many garments as need to be, reducing unnecessary stock and pre-consumer waste. And JNBY will launch in September a new athleisure and gender-fluid brand, led by an overarching sustainable approach on every step of the way – from design, to sourcing, to marketing. Long live the 'Made in China' of the future.