The "Useless" Sustainability: Chinese and American Discourses of Eco-Fashion and the Utilitarian Fantasy

Xinghua Li[1]

What can China bring to the international dialog of eco-fashion? How can Chinese ways of imagining sustainability teach us new ways to think about fashion, ethics, and environment? This paper focuses on the design practice and philosophy of China's first-generation eco-fashion designer, Ma Ke, and places her work in juxtaposition with the mainstream discourses of eco-fashion in the US. Adopting a mix of historical, rhetorical, and psychoanalytic methods, my analysis identifies an ideology of utilitarianism in the US discourse of eco-fashion that aims to maximize resource usage and minimize pollution and waste. Ma Ke's work, by contrast, criticizes utilitarianism and proposes to conceive our ethical relationship with the material world not through utility, but through memory and history. She portrays textiles as a humble medium that records the past, while the traces left from the past constitute the most seductive part of our clothes. Ma Ke's work, I argue, offers a critique of the dominant ideologies in Western eco-fashion and helps us rethink the relationship between fashion, environment, and the ethics of consumption.

1 Xinghua Li is associate professor of Media Studies in the History and Society Division at Babson College, Massachusetts, USA.

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On March 22, 2013, China's first lady Peng Liyuan accompanied her husband, President Xi Jinping, on his first state visit to Russia. As soon as their plane landed in Moscow, Peng captured international media's attention with her choice of outfit: a trench coat custom-made by Exception de Mixmind (*Li Wai*), a domestic fashion label located in Guangdong, China. Unlike most Chinese elites who prefer foreign luxury brands to domestic ones, Peng supported a homegrown label that not only showed an attachment to traditional Chinese aesthetics but also featured strong environmental appeals (Wang, Z., 2013). "The core value of oriental aesthetic is the theory of unity of man and nature," said CEO and co-founder of Exception, Mao Jihong. The brand incorporates traditional handicrafts with locally sourced organic fabrics and targets clients "domestic and international alike, who appreciate Eastern beauty" (Lin, 2013).

The first lady's patronage brought unprecedented publicity to Ma Ke—the co-founder of Exception and the rumored designer for Peng's four-country tour. Ma's fame began first in the international design community. In 2006, she created her own haute couture label *Wu Yong* (Useless) and successfully displayed two collections—*Tu Di* (The Earth) and *Qing Pin* (Simplicity)—at the Paris Fashion Week and Paris Haute Couture Week in 2007 and 2008. Both exhibited humble, earth-toned clothes that she and her colleagues crafted from scratch, from spinning, weaving, dyeing to sewing (Leong, 2008). Some were composed of recycled materials and found objects, while other were buried in dirt for months. Didier Grumbach, president of the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, said of Ma Ke: "[She] burst on to the international market with something so creative it can only be Chinese" (*ibid.*).

To most Western observers, however, the concept "Made in China" eco-fashion may sound like an oxymoron. Fashion is one of the least sustainable industries in the contemporary marketplace. Designed for quick expiration, it is notorious for intense resource use, poor labor conditions, environmental pollution, and waste generation (Fletcher, 2008; Black, 2008; Blackburn, 2009). China's place in the global fashion industry, in particular, has been central: it is both the land of large factories churning out massive amounts of cheap clothing, and home to a rising middle class voraciously seeking the high-priced luxuries and foreign brands (Tsui, 2009; Wu, 2009; Welters & Mead, 2012). These factors place China seemingly on the opposite end to eco-

fashion, in the global imagination as well as the political economy of the fashion industry.

Meanwhile, the concept of eco-fashion has always had a Western origin. The term can be traced back to the American hippie revolution in the 1970s, usually referring to the use of recycled materials, organic fabrics, and handicraft in clothing manufacture (Black, 2008). In the 1990s, designers and fashion companies such as Esprit, Patagonia, and J Crew revived the hippie idea and spread it to Euro-America to answer the widespread criticisms against the fashion industry (*ibid*.). Since the new millennium, eco-fashion emerged in China through the works of independent designers such as Ma Ke, Liang Zi, and Wang Yiyang (Tsui, 2009, 2013; Ferrero-Regis & Lindgren, 2012). Many adopted similar methods to their Western counterparts such as recycling, organics, and handicraft, but conceptualized the ecological theme very differently—often referencing the Chinese ethnic and cultural heritage they drew from (Clark, 2012). For instance, Liang Zi, the founder of Tangy in 1994, devoted herself to preserving rural indigenous textile-making methods and helped rejuvenate an ancient fabric, Shu Liang silk, from near extinction. Wang Yi-Yang, who created Cha Gang in 2002, used simple and austere designs to express nostalgia for China's Mao era and the desire to return to a "simpler and friendlier life" before the economic reform (Tsui, 2009, p. 211).

Such concerted articulation between sustainability and national identity is not a coincidence; it has been closely aligned with the government's policy initiatives. In the past three decades, environmental sustainability has gained increasing significance in the Communist Party's policies and rhetoric. Progressively, it has instituted environmental laws and regulations, launched environmental propaganda campaigns, subsidized the renewable energy industry, among others—all to remediate the social and environmental crises resulted from the economic reform (Shapiro, 2012; Man, 2013). Under President Xi (2013-), sustainability efforts have not only escalated but also been increasingly articulated with China's image in the world. In global climate negotiations, Chinese delegates readily ratified emission targets that they had previously declined, hoping to change the nation's image from a major polluter to a world sustainability leader (Li & Shapiro, 2020). Xi's "Beautiful China Initiative," a national sustainability development plan, vowed to fulfill the UN's emission targets by achieving peak carbon by 2030 (Xinhua, 2021). Even the Belt-Road Initiative, the ambitious cross-continental infrastructural and energy plan, touted itself as

a "win-win green development" for the collaborating countries (Li & Shapiro, 2020, p. 123). The discourse of eco-fashion falls closely in line with these sustainability initiatives. As an integral part of China's economic and cultural output, ethical fashion helps construct China's image as a responsible country, which assists in promoting the nation's soft power in international politics (Nye, 1990) as well as making its exports more attractive in the global market.

What, then, can China bring to the international dialog of eco-fashion? While the works of Chinese designers do align with the government's eco-nationalist agenda, I argue that the value of their philosophy and practice exceeds that of political propaganda or marketing gimmick. Adopting a mix of historical, rhetorical, and psychoanalytic methods, this paper aims to understand how Chinese ways of imagining sustainability help us rethink the Western conceptualization of fashion and consumer ethics. I do so by comparing American and Chinese discourses on eco-fashion. Due to the disparity in the market sizes, a strict "apples to apples" comparison is difficult. In the US, eco-fashion has infiltrated into mainstream consumer culture and been adopted by major fashion corporations, but its Chinese counterpart is much less developed. Thanks to the endorsement of the first lady and the growing circulation of sustainability discourses, eco-fashion is gaining media exposure and gathering a growing fan base in China. In the recent decade, it is even slowly walking out of the high-end designer studios and seeing many small start-ups in materials innovation, DIY craft, retro and vintage clothing, among others (Wang, 2021; Jiang, 2021). Nonetheless, up until this day, eco-fashion efforts in China are still small, fragmented, and far from achieving any industry-wide coordination (Xue, 2022).

For this reason, I choose the two most influential texts in their respective national contexts: major fashion corporations' mass market advertising in the US and the press and promotional materials of Ma Ke, China's leading eco-fashion designer. Conducting a multiple-case study, I select the former group for its "commonness" in representing the dominant discursive trends and the latter for its "unusualness" and "revelatory" value (Yin, 2017, p. 50). My analysis begins by examining two dominant tropes of American corporate advertising on eco-fashion: product life cycles and environmental impact assessment. Both, I argue, reflect an ideological fantasy of utilitarianism that aims to maximize resource usage and minimize pollution and waste. Recycling, in particular, sees garments as *tabula rasa* that can be infinitely reused and

remanufactured and helps release consumer guilt from overconsumption. Ma Ke's work, by contrast, stands in opposition to the ideologies of utilitarianism. In one of her most famous lines, "Useless" (*Wu Yong*), she proposes that we conceive our relationship with the material world not in terms of utility, but in terms of memory and history. Her work portrays textiles as a humble medium that records the past, while the traces left from the past constitute the most seductive part of our clothes. Ma Ke's work, I argue, offers a critique of the dominant ideologies in Western eco-fashion and helps us rethink the relationship between fashion, environment, and the ethics of consumption.

1. The Return of the Obsolescent

"Fashion is obsolescence. Fashion is change," remarks Elizabeth Cline in *Overdressed: The Shocking High Cost of Cheap Fashion* (2012). Designed for quick expiration, modern clothing culture diverges from traditional ones that had more enduring relationships with the human body. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, clothing was an "expensive, hard to come by, and highly valued" consumer item (p. 4). Often handmade, they were usually "mended and cared for and reimagined countless times" until they fell apart (*ibid*.). This deep attachment to clothes is mostly lost today. Consumers often purchase clothes at will, wear once or twice, and leave them in the closet to collect dust. This system of obsolescence, as Cline (2012) points out, is supported by a global fashion industry that rapidly churns out cheap-quality clothing only to displace them at the end of each season. It culminates in fast fashion, the sartorial equivalent to fast food, which turns chasing quick trends from an elite privilege into a mass activity.

Many critics attribute fashion's obsolescence to an issue of economics—the need for corporations to speed up the product flow and maximize capital income. My inquiry, nonetheless, dives into the consumer desire that fuels this obsolescence and the discourse of fashion that helps construct such desire. Social theorists have long pointed out that discourses perform important functions in constructing power and subjectivity (Foucault, 1978; Miller & Rose, 1990, 1997). Psychoanalysis, in addition, posits that discourses formulate ideologies—i.e. collective fantasies—that regulate the pleasure, enjoyment, and desire of a group or a society (Lacan, 1977; Žižek, 1989, 1997; Fink, 1995, 1997). Discourses about fashion certainly construct these ideological fantasies. They position consumers in relation to their unconscious fears,

anxieties, and wants, fuel their desire for certain wasteful lifestyles, which in turn drive them to participate in the mass production and mass consumption economy.

In sociology and cultural studies, fashion has always been associated with identity and the notion of the self (Goffman, 1959; Barthes, 1990; Lurie, 1981). The modern desire to incessantly change outfits, therefore, suggests certain instability in the consumer's identity. Davis (1992) observes that fashion is marked by a collective "restlessness," an effect of living in the globalized mass society. Deprived of the familial, religious, and communal networks that once provided identity and belonging, many people constantly experience a state of anxiety (*ibid.*). Fashion discourse, therefore, remediates the anxiety and the loss of belonging by staging a fantasy—of the self, which is independent and unified. Bancroft (2012) applies Lacan's notion of the mirror stage to explain the psychic function of fashion: the young child, who can barely coordinate his motor activity, identifies with his reflection in the mirror and obtains an imaginary unity (the body-*ego*) that helps organize his fragmented bodily experience. The glamorous bodies in fashion media (e.g. models, celebrities, social media influencers) perform this exact function: they provide consumers, who experience increasing fragmentation and transience in their lives, a fantasy of a unified and contained self.

However, as this fantasy seems to "unify" the subject's body, it also alienates her from it. This can be seen in fashion consumers' often cruelty towards their bodies by undergoing plastic surgery or drastic weight loss measures. The alienation effect also extends to the subject's relationship with the social and ecological environment. As what Marx termed the commodity form, the shiny product packaging and flashy advertising imagery often create a type of "attention blindness" toward the actual places and conditions where their clothes are made (Harold, 2020). In developing nations, low-wage laborers work long hours in poor conditions to mass-produce clothes for affluent nations (Claudio, 2007). Some suffer health problems from first-hand exposure to toxins and others die in deadly factory explosions or building collapses (Morgan, 2015). Textile manufacturing also consumes massive amounts of natural resources and heavily pollutes the public water, soil, and air (WWF, 2013; Redress, 2019).

What fashion tries to pass into obsolescence, nevertheless, does not simply disappear. Since the late 1990s, social and environmental consequences of fashion gradually entered the public consciousness—

thanks largely to the efforts of journalists and activist groups. Such publicity generated storms of critique against the billion-dollar industry. The Greenpeace Detox campaign (2011-2014), for example, widely circulated the figure of the "fashion victim"—models looking sick and silenced, placed next to industrial contamination sites or textile factory workshops—and mobilized consumers to boycott fashion corporations such as Nike, Adidas, Levi's, and H&M (MobLab, 2014). These disturbing images, stories, and statistics profoundly upset the public. The fantasy of the fashion subject—as a unified and contained self—was at the risk of crumbling. Žižek (2006) describes the effect as watching an overflowing toilet: when the excrement floats back up, the sight of the unsightly disrupts the body-*ego* and generates disgust and guilt in the subject.

In psychoanalysis, disgust, shame, or guilt are all operations of the *superego*. As a part of Freud's (1990a) tripartite structure of the human psyche, the *superego* is a psychic agency that internalizes social inhibitions and acts as a judge or censor of the *id*—a reservoir of the subjects' instincts, drives, and repressed desires. The activist discourse, in this case, performs the function of the *superego* (or even better, *supereco*); it reins in the consumers' desires with the moral authority of a social and ecological collective, and uses guilt to propel them into censuring the fashion corporations.

2. Rise of Eco-Fashion in the West

To answer the widespread criticism, the fashion industry started to mend its injured reputation by issuing a discourse of ethics and social responsibility. Eco-fashion, as part of this trend (with others include "ethical," "sustainable," or "slow" fashion), proclaims to minimize the industry's impact on the social and ecological environment. Black (2008) traces the rise of eco-fashion to the American hippie revolution in the mid-1970s. This stage embraced "fabrics such as hemp and natural dyeing" and adopted "homemade, ethnic and handcrafted fabrics and clothes" as the norm (p. 19). The second stage was the 1990s, when companies with eco-activism roots such as Esprit, Patagonia, and J Crew revived the hippie idea and later spread to other major corporations such as H&M, Levi's, and American Apparel (p. 21). In the new millennium, eco-fashion grew more pervasive in the US and Europe with "more small, ethical and ecologically-motivated fashion companies" joining the movement (p. 21). Today, eco-fashion has become

one of the leading trends in the fashion world. Innovations abound in the realms of technology, design, and marketing, as brands compete to enhance their competitiveness in the global market (Mora *et al.*, 2014).

Participants of the Western eco-fashion culture are highly diverse: they run the gamut from independent designers, fashion bloggers, mass manufacturers, retailers, NGOs, trade unions, consumers, academics, to fashion academia. A rough categorization could break down the practices into six types: first, clothing or accessories made from recycled materials (e.g. leaf- or garbage-made dresses); second, "upcycled" clothes made from reclaimed or reused fabric, or, vintage clothing (e.g. a repurposed wedding dress, or the "I-am-not-a-plastic bag" bag by British designer Anya Hindmarch); third, organic fabrics (e.g. cotton grown without synthetic chemicals); fourth, handicraft (e.g. handmade jewelry); fifth, cause-related design (e.g. PETA's celebrities-go-naked campaign, or cruelty-free fashion designer); six, NGOs and trade unions establishing manufacturing standards for the industry (e.g. the aforementioned Greenpeace Detox campaign, or the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, consisting of more than 60 companies and NGOs that launched the Higg Index to measure sustainability across their supply chains, Wang, J., 2013).

As eco-fashion thrives, criticisms also begin to mount. The foremost is the accusation of 'greenwashing' (Pezzullo & Cox, 2021, p. 81). In a largely unregulated market of eco-labels and green certifications, companies' claims are difficult to verify and falsehoods fly in one's face undetected (Mora *et al.*, 2014). But when brands' honesty is not in question, the discourse of green consumerism could produce problematic effects on consumer behavior. Several studies have shown that, quite contrary to the eco-friendly claims, green consumerism often leads to the perpetuation of societies' existing wasteful lifestyles. Meister *et al.* (2006) argue that green consumerism may "increase public demand for nature 'as a product', "whereby nature becomes a reflection of consumer desires" (p. 98). For Williams (2007), green consumerism could create the "SnackWell's moment," which takes the guilt away from consumption and make people consume more than what they normally could have. Moreover, the "green" lifestyle obsession might also direct the public's attention away from the political and economic roots of the environmental crisis, toward trivial commodity choices (Monbiot, 2007).

The following analysis will supplement these critiques by examining the effects the discourse of eco-fashion has on consumer desire.

Among the various voices in Western eco-fashion, in US marketing, the most prominent ones come from major global corporations. Many shifted their strategies after being challenged by NGOs, threatened by regulations, and prompted by trade unions to establish ethical production and distribution standards across the industry. Their marketing discourse will be the primary targets of my critique. Below, I identify two dominant tropes—product life cycle and environmental impact assessment. Instead of constructing the ideological fantasy of the unified and contained self, these discourses focus on the wellbeing of the social and ecological collective—by promoting a new fantasy of a unified and contained corporate industrial system.

3. First Theme: Product Life Cycle

"Recycle," "downcycle," "upcycle," "product life cycle," and "circular economy:" the notion of the "cycle" is a prominent trope in Western eco-fashion discourse. At a glance, it conjures up the imagination of a circular process of change and renewal, suggesting ideological roots in the 1970s Deep Ecology and the New Age spiritual movement. Yet its initial appearance in business had nothing to with ethics or the environment. Emerging in American marketing literature in the 1950s, Product Lifecycle Management divided the timeline of a product's market viability into four phases (birth, growth, maturity, and decline) and used the biological metaphor of a "life cycle" to assess corresponding marketing strategies (Cao & Folan, 2012). After the 1960s-70s anti-war movement brought a surge in public environmental awareness, the US Environmental Protection Agency popularized the "Reduce-Reuse-Recycle" symbol and turned "recycling" into the first recognizable sign of green consumerism. In the 1980s, as corporations struggled to cope with public pressures and governmental regulation over their environmental practices, Product Lifecycle Management returned to include the material circulation and social-environmental impact of products, with special concerns on waste management, recycling, and remanufacture (Alting, 1993).

Fashion industry certainly reflects the pulse in the wider business world. The first company I will analyze is Levi's, one of the corporate forerunners in its sustainability initiatives. In 2007, Levi's conducted a "lifecycle assessment" to examine the ecological impact of its products from "cotton seed to the landfill" (Wang, J., 2013). The data collected helped "quantify—with precision—how new designs impact the envi-

ronment" to "create the most fashionable styles with a smaller carbon footprint, using less water, and minimizing the environmental impact" (*ibid*.). The assessment found that "farming the cotton for a pair of its signature 501 jeans used up to 49 percent of the water associated it during its lifetime" (*ibid.*). As a result, Levi's joined the Better Cotton Initiative and released a range of Water<Less jeans, which purportedly only used 4 liters rather than 42 liters per pair to achieve a distressed look.

"Life Cycle of Levi's Jeans" (2010) (Figure 1) is an ad from the official webpage of the "Water<Less Jeans." It sports an infographic that illustrates the company's eco-friendly deeds during the eight steps of the jeans' "life cycle"—from "1. Cotton Production" to "8. End of Life & Rebirth." Shorthand for "informational graphics," infographics are commonly used in science and policy communication to explicate complex information to a lay audience (Atkinson & Lazard, 2015; Afify, 2018). Usually consisting of data graphics, maps and diagrams, they use visual imaginaries to simplify the complexity and ambiguity of professional knowledge (Otten *et al.*, 2015). In this ad, the complex process of the jean's material circulation is simplified down to eight comic frames, depicting Levi's participation in the Better Cotton Initiative, NRDC's Responsible Sourcing Initiative, among others. Its panoramic vision brings the audience to the "backstage" of the fashion industry, from which all the "insider" practices could be seen.

Considering the new type of consumer subjectivity these ads are responding to, this rhetorical choice would not be hard to comprehend. After environmentalist discourse ruptured the fantasy of the unified and contained self, this infographic erases the self—which has been associated with guilt and horror—from the purview of the *superego* (or, the *supereco*). The *supereco*, embodied in the god-like, all-seeing position, only sees a unified and contained corporate industrial system with "zero" leakage or excess. From its purview, the jean's life cycle is now a "closed loop": on the one hand, it draws minimum materials and resources from the outside environment and emits minimum pollution; on the other, it maximizes the utility of all resources within by subjecting them to infinite reuse, reduce, and recycle.

Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals that such an impermeable industrial system is little more than a fantasy. A small logical inconsistency—what psychoanalysis names the "symptom"—gives out its artificiality: while the last frame focuses on recycling old jeans as insulation materials, the first frame depicts growing cotton "responsibly"

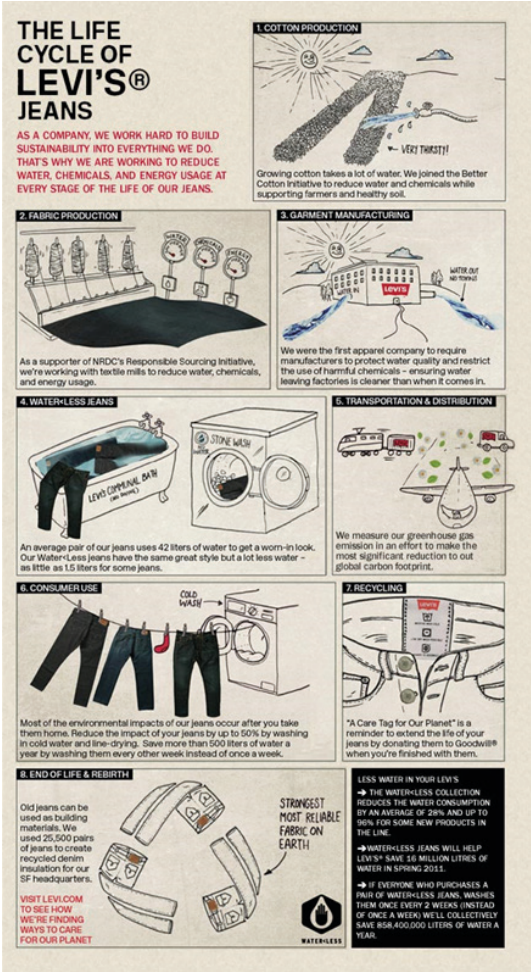

Figure 1.

from the ground up. In other words, the "closed loop" is not really closed. It is only *imagined* to be "closed." And the idea that patches up this broken loop is—recycling. In *Gone Tomorrow* (2006), Heather Rogers proposes that recycling reduces consumer guilt by convincing them that "their trash was now benign" (p. 176). Thanks to the popular imagination of recycling, the garment's lifetime now turns from a linear process of one-directional wear into a cyclical process of destruction and renewal. Recycling gives the jeans immortality: it suggests that the materials could be infinitely reused and remanufactured without wasting away. However, this is far from reality. In actual practice, recycling is plagued by numerous problems such as downcycling, contamination, transportation, and market competition (*ibid.*). It is a far less effective method of garbage disposal than commonly imagined. Rogers' critique points out the economic agenda behind the recycling hype: it is favored by businesses not because it is the most eco-friendly choice to eliminate waste, but because it "targets individual behavior as the key to the garbage problem" and "steers public debate away from regulations on production" (p. 176).

Other major fashion corporations' recycling programs follow much of the same rationale. In 1993, Nike launched its Reuse-a-Shoe program to give consumers a way to bring their old sneakers back to the store. The program still runs to this day. In spite of its emphasis on "reuse," the program simply hauls the shoes to recycling facilities, where they are combined with manufacturing waste to make "Nike Grind" material (Recycle Nation, 2012). In the same vein, H&M's garment "Don't Let Fashion Go to Waste" asked shoppers to bring in unwanted clothes for industrial recycling. The two-minute H&M commercial, "The Break Up" (2014), uses Japanese puppet theatre to stage the monologue of a personified shirt (Figure 2). After a sordid complaint about being abandoned by his owner, the shirt asks to be donated to H&M's global industrial centers to be shredded into threads for remanufacturing.

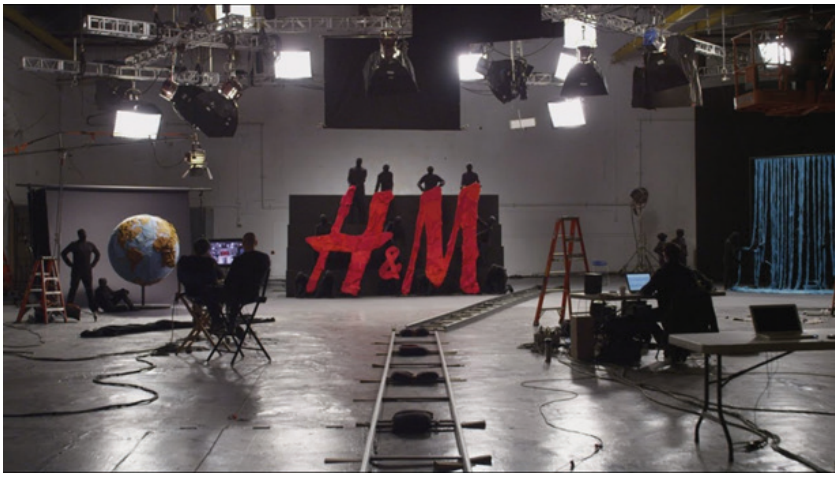

Figure 2.

The art of puppetry turns the shirt from a passive object into an active subject with feelings, motives, and memories. But in asking to be destroyed, the shirt sees no intrinsic value in itself other than the external function it can perform for the purpose of human utility. Evidently, it has become a tool of an omniscient, sustainability "god" that deems itself as nothing but a passive object of human use.

4. Second Theme: Environmental Impact Assessment

Aside from product life cycles and garment recycling, another theme that frequently appears in corporate eco-fashion advertising is

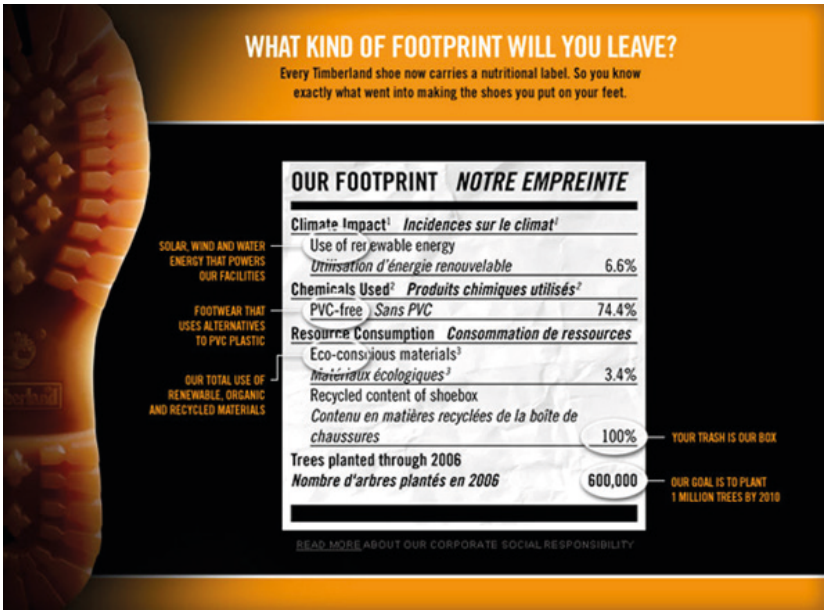

Figure 3.

environmental impact assessment. Timberland, an American outdoor footwear manufacturer and retailer, was among the first to adopt such marketing methods. In 2007, it launched the Green Index, which measured the all-around environmental impact of its products on a scale from 0 to 10. Titled "What kind of footprint will you leave?" (Figure 3), a shoebox label for its Earthkeepers presents three criteria of the rating—climate impact, chemicals used, resource consumed—in a data-filled chart. Similar to the FDA's "nutrition facts" food label, it lists smaller fonts under each criterion: "Use of renewable energy—solar, wind and water energy that powers our facilities, 6.6%;" "PVC-free—footwear that uses alternative to PVC plastic, 74.4%;" "Eco-conscious materials—our total use of reviewable, organic and recycled materials, 3.4%" and "Recycled content of shoebox—your trash is our box, 100%." To a careful observer, however, the percentages do not add up to 100%. This is a pseudo-mathematical function. Yet another "symptom," it exposes the logical contradictions in the fantasy of an immaculate corporate industrial system. This eco-label is, again, the *supereco* speaking: it represents the sustainability "god" that watches from above and monitors the product's social and environmental impact with highly quantitative, standardized, and data-packed information systems. It pretends as if all the impacts have been accounted for. But it cannot hide

Figure 4.

the fact that the numbers do not add up to the imaginary unity ("100%") that it promises.

Environmental impact assessments take a more radical form in the case of Patagonia, another American outdoor clothing retailer known for its sustainability endeavors. Patagonia's Footprint Chronicles, issued in 2012, uses an interactive website with GPS technology to map a piece of clothing's "journey" around the world. A screenshot of its webpage (Figure 4) shows the traveling path of a blue down sweater from Eastern Europe, North America, to Japan and China, and back to North America. The map pinpoints all of the company's factories and textile mills. "Every factory is clickable, allowing the user to view even more information such as the proportion of male to female workers, average age, what items are produced at the facility, languages spoken, and the address" (Tohill, 2012). This interactive website extends the surveillance vision of the *supereco* into new depth, width, and precision. The GPS technology, which positions the viewer above and beyond the earth, promotes a type of technological rationality to scrutinize, manage, and control the ecosystem as a whole. This new corporate industrial vision turns the natural environment and the workers into objects of scientific and industrial management—by policing the workers' gender, age, wage statistics to ensure their assumed representation and continued productivity.

Luke (1998) calls this type of surveillance "astropanopticism," a totalizing gaze that pervades today's geo-economic planning of governments and corporations. This epistemology could be traced back to the 1960s, when Apollo 10's picture of the Earth became widely circulated and generated technocrats' desire to "control" and "manage" the entire ecosystem. "What was once God's wild Nature becomes technoscientific managerialists' tame ecosystems" (p. 9). Yet what underlies this vision, Luke (1998) stresses, is a principle of *commodification* and *utility*: it reimagines the Earth "as a rational responsive household in which economic action commodifies everything, utilizes anything, wastes nothing, blending the natural and the social into a single but vast set of household accounts" (p. 10).

While Luke's critique is incisive, his adoption of the Foucauldian gaze—a totalizing field of vision the subject docilely accepts—leaves no room to account for desire. An additional theory is thus needed to explain the subject's motivation to identify with the corporate utilitarian view. For this, we return to psychoanalysis. According to Copjec (2004), utilitarianism is an ideological fantasy that falsely believes in "utility"—an object's ability to satisfy an "objective" human need—and that "complete satisfaction is attainable by anyone who sets about realizing a rational plan" (p. 168). Utilitarianism, the English moral philosophy initiated by Jeremy Bentham, is known for two prominent principles. The "Greatest Happiness Principle" predicates that the ultimate goal in life is the pursuit of pleasure and the reduction of pain, and all actions have no intrinsic moral value except in generating human pleasure or pain (Mill, [1861] 1969; cited in Scarre, 1996). The "Hedonic Calculus" assumes that all pleasures are quantifiable and measurable, and could be aggregated among a social collective (Bentham, 1789; cited in Scarre, 1996). Above all, utilitarianism advises the individual to "convert his self-interest into dutiful commitment to the common good" (Copjec, 1989b, p. 73), assuming that a wise authority will amass all the quantified pleasures (and minimized pains) to benefit the greater majority.

This fantasy, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, ignores the nature of unconscious thought, which does not always follow a rational plan. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1990b), Freud posits a third type of motivation that transcends the pleasure-pain dichotomy—the drives, or the compulsion to repeat. Paradoxically intertwined with both pleasure and pain, the drives seek a unique type of enjoyment (what Lacan calls the *jouissance*), which is "excessive, leading to a sense of being over-

whelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of satisfaction" (Fink, 1995, p. xii). For Lacan, this enjoyment (*jouissance*) is fundamentally transgressive: it is generated by the subject's submission to the social symbolic order but simultaneously motivates her to rebel from it. For the utilitarian subject, therefore, what offers this type of transgressive enjoyment is not what the *supereco* sees (all that saving and economizing), but what it fails to see: the waste and excess that escape its purview. Žižek (1989) calls it the "surplus enjoyment:" "if we subtract the surplus we lose enjoyment itself" (p. 53). With this said, the fact that waste and excess are the true objects of the surplus enjoyment must not be consciously recognized. It must be repressed or erased from the utilitarian fantasy because it contradicts the overt technological rationality of the system.

The above reasoning can help us understand why fashion companies are often not "honest enough about their environmental sustainability" (Webb, 2021). If the *supereco* is a critical agent for the environmental subject to hide its wasteful enjoyment from, then eco-fashion companies would desire to conceal their wasteful practices from the vision of total efficiency and utility. Given that logic, Patagonia's "brutal honesty" might seem strange. For instance, its impact assessment in the Footprint Chronicles (Figure 4) brazenly exposes the company's imperfections: "We had to increase the weight of the shell fabric when we switched to recycled polyester, and the product is not yet recyclable." Its refusal to hide the wasteful sets it apart from the obsessive, totalizing claims by Levi's and Timberland. In fact, this strategy of "brutal honesty" is becoming popular among the newly emerging Euro-American sustainable fashion brands (Webb, 2021). Reformation and Everlane, for instance, have always been radically transparent about the limitations and challenges of being sustainable; the New York label Noah even went as far as claiming in their ads: "We are not a sustainable company" (*ibid.*).

When considering the structure of desire, we realize that such radical transparency does not represent any true liberation from the *supereco*: it does not attenuate its panoptic gaze, but only changes the subject's relationship with it from *repression* to *disavowal*. Rather than hiding its imperfections, the subject is now encouraged to expose its own flaws and be at peace with it. Fink (1997) explains the mechanisms of disavowal as the splitting of the ego, where "contradictory ideas… are maintained side by side in the same agency" (p. 171). Put into the perverse formula of disavowal, the Patagonia subject is expected to say:

Figure 5.

"I know very well (that manufacturing this shirt leaves a big environmental impact), and nevertheless (I will still buy it because the company is being honest and I trust them)." This is a perfect symptom of perversion. According to Fink (1997), the pervert submits himself to be a tool of the authority's enjoyment and strives to be the "sinner," or, the "bad" guy, that the *superego* loves to hate. The pervert feels no guilt because he has "nothing to hide." Thus, he has the license, granted by the *superego*, to continue its behavior.

Patagonia's radical transparency helps it reap big dollars. The company launched its "Buy Less" campaigns since 2011 during every Black Friday to tell its consumers to buy less of everything, including its own products. Its front-page ad in *The New York Times* (Figure 5) displays a gigantic R2 coat and reads: "DON'T BUY THIS JACKET." The copy makes a heartfelt confession that everything Patagonia makes is bad for the environment, including this coat. In the fastidious numeration of its "eco-sins," Patagonia exhibits an urge to turn the self in to the *supereco*. By aligning itself with the authority, the pervert acquires the license to "sin" and the permission to buy. No wonder this "Buy Less" campaign spurred more buying. As Stock (2013) describes, "the corporate plea didn't work, which is to say it worked perfectly for a burgeoning company in the business of selling $700 parkas… From 2011 to 2013, the 'buy less' marketing had helped increased Patagonia sales by $158 million… Consumers both signed the pledge to 'wrest the full life out of every Patagonia product by buy-

ing used when I can,' and bought the jacket en mass." It seems that, either obsessive or perverse, eco-friendly marketing could eventually leads to more, not less, consumption.

To summarize, my analysis has so far identified two major tropes in Euro-American eco-fashion discourse: product life cycle and environmental impact assessment. Both embrace the ideology of utilitarianism, which claims to maximize human and natural resource usage for the benefit of a social or ecological collective. Harnessing the gaze of the *supereco*, this new utilitarian fantasy applies the 20/20 vision of industrial quantification, standardization, and digital surveillance to stage the fashion industry as a responsible guardian of the ecosystems. Within the utilitarian fantasy, different subject positions exist: the obsessive (such as Levi's or Timberland) presents a utopian vision and hides its wastefulness from the *supereco*, while the pervert (such as Patagonia) voluntarily exposes its own flaws in the panoptic gaze. Both consciously condemn wasteful consumption but unconsciously promote it by not recognizing the excessive or wasteful core (i.e. the surplus enjoyment) of the utilitarian fantasy. This sad reality raises the question about the ethics of consumption. If the ideological pursuit of utility leads to counterintuitive results, what is a more sustainable way to imagine our relationship with the material environment? The Chinese designer Ma Ke provides us with an answer. To understand how and why she chooses to articulate ecology with memory and history, it is necessary to first investigate the context from which she emerges—China's modern clothing history.

5. China's Encounter with Modern Fashion

If fashion's social and environmental problems can be contributed to its obsolesce—separation from the past—then China's encounter with modern fashion is a textbook example of this. Its process spanned across several centuries through the gradual exposure to Westernizing and modernizing forces, and the vicissitudes of national politics. Finnane (2008) traced China's modern clothing history to the Republican Era (1912-1937), where the country was thrown open to Westernization and modernization. Women abandoned foot binding and heavy costumes and adopted simplified dresses. Men gave up traditional robes and donned on suits or leather shoes. Yet China's quick taste of fashion was interrupted during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Civil War (1945-9), and the era of Mao (1949-1978). Due to political tur-

bulence and resource scarcity, the styles of the times were largely restricted to simple military and rural farm wear.

During the era of market liberalization (1978-), China was reopened to a dazzling world of changing personal appearances. "Almost every imported TV series in the early 1980s, no matter the country of origin," Wu (2009) writes, "caused a sensation and inspired millions to imitate and emulate" (p. 25). Fashion trends from Hong Kong, Taiwai, Japan, and the US especially captured the consumers. Urban youths sought new styles such as bell-bottom pants, sunglasses, or polyester shirts. Women started to perm their hair, use make-up, and wear form-fitting dresses in public. The desire for a Western look escalated in the 21st Century, when more adopted plastic surgery for bigger eyes, taller noses, and longer legs (Wen, 2013). Consumers also developed a preference for foreign brands. In Paris and New York, Chinese tourists scrambled for luxurious handbags in department stores and factory outlets; in Shanghai and Beijing, designer stores such as LV, Dior, Gucci, and Chanel shot in high-end shopping avenues.

What ran alongside China's growing fashion market is its domestic fashion industry. Since the end of the 1970s, the government began to promote the textile-manufacturing sector. Thanks to the large supply of cheap labor, by 1995, China had become the largest textile and garment exporter of the world (Welters & Mead, 2012). Known for its unbeatable power of mass-production, the Chinese fashion industry has mastered the "art of copying" but lacks originality in creating its own brand. For many, the "Made in China" label triggers the imagination of low-quality manufacturing and uninventive replication. This separation between productivity and creativity, as Aspers and Skov (2006) point out, is a common feature of the global fashion system, which centralizes intellectual property among developed nations and outsources production to developing regions (p. 806). For China, the cheap fashion model is economically unsustainable as it is environmentally unsustainable.

In the 1990s, Chinese policy makers began to envision the nation's transition from a "Made in China" manufacturing giant to a "Created in China" commerce developer (Keane, 2007). In 2001, President Jiang Zemin issued the directive "to establish the national character and create a world brand name;" a national association was subsequently founded to promote Chinese brands internationally (Finnane, 2008, p. 280). The following decades saw broad policy incentives to develop creative industries from art, fashion, to films and video games. As manufacturing jobs drift overseas, domestic creative industries are believed to foster

skilled jobs in industries with high profit margins and offer an alternative model of investment. Their outputs, presumably featuring Chinese cultural and aesthetic elements, are also expected to attract the huge domestic market, weaning the manufacturing sector from dependence on exports (Ferrero-Regis & Lindgren, 2012). More importantly, the government saw creative industries as vital in promoting China's "soft power" (Nye, 1990)—"power based on intangible or direct influences, such as culture, values and ideology"—abroad and hoped to use them to advance China's position as a hegemonic global leader (Keane, 2007).

Under this series of political, economic, and cultural incentives, the Chinese designer community began creating domestic fashion brands to revive the national heritage. The first stages to showcase such "Chinese-ness" were the international design contests and fashion festivals. According to Finnane (2008), the earliest work frequently incorporated traditional cultural icons such as "red lanterns, long tunics, and embroidery of chrysanthemums" and strived to distinguish their styles from those in the West (p. 281). However, such a revival of history was often dismissed as kitsch and did not match the taste of the domestic market. Primarily catering to foreigners, these local retro consisted of a "predictable assembly of elements [to] satisfy established expectations of China" and revolved around rigid interpretations of history and culture (p. 282). Foreigners' exotic fantasy of China also coheres with the government's official discourse of nationalism in the 1990s and early 2000s: red lanterns, *qipao*, chopsticks, Great Wall, and so on—a collage of cultural symbols and narratives put together to trigger a patriotic sentiment as "the world is watching" (as in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremony).

A younger generation of designers, nonetheless, portray the national heritage differently. Represented by Ma Ke, Liang Zi, and Wang Yi-Yang, this group hardly ever evokes the hackneyed icons such as *qi pao* or dragons; what is mostly seen are "the spiritual and philosophical facets—harmony, peace, quiet, natural—originating from traditional Chinese values" (Tsui, 2009, p. 211). More importantly, their works show a strong environmental bent and shares some practices with Western eco-fashion such as handicraft, use of natural and organic materials, recycling and repurposing. Liang Zi, who founded Tangy in 1994, makes all her clothes from natural fibers (such as cotton, silk, and linen) and helps rejuvenate an ancient fabric Shu Liang silk from near extinction (*ibid*.). Wang Yi-Yang, who created *Cha Gang* in 2002, harbors an anti-consumerist sentiment through his austere design and

expresses nostalgia for a "simpler and friendlier life" in the pre-reform period (p. 189). These designers combat the similar evils as Western eco-fashion—rampant consumerism, high product turnover, and disrespect for the clothing itself—but do so by incorporating Chinese philosophy and aesthetics.

The following analysis will zoom in on Ma Ke—the most prominent designer of her generation. In 1993, Ma Ke co-founded *Exception de Mixmind*, a ready-to-wear line with an aesthetic of "oriental minimalism, naturalism and romanticism" (Shao, 2013). All clothes were made of organic and locally sourced materials and manufactured through traditional techniques—most notably of the Dong people of Guangdong. In 2006, Ma Ke created the haute couture label, *Wu Yong*, on the "World Earth Day." Housed in a small workshop in Zhuhai, Guangdong, she and her colleagues did all stages of production in-house. Determined to preserve local handicraft, she even operated a Chinese loom dated from the 19th century (Leong, 2008). Some of her clothes were made out of recycled materials and found objects, such as "an old paint covered sheet transformed into a dress, the cracked paint creating a beautiful pattern on the garment, and an old tarpaulin constructed into a coat" ("Fashion in Motion," 2008).

Compared to Euro-American eco-fashion, Ma Ke's work displays many similarities but a major difference—her staunch opposition to utilitarianism. Naming her brand "Useless," the mission statement on her website explicitly challenges the notion of utility:

> In a highly developed society, everyone is out to do useful things; things with no immediate results are regarded useless. […] I want to create things which, though they may appear quite useless today, are the bearers of values for the future; I want to change the point of view of people, who consider as useless some things that may be most useful in the future; I hope people will free themselves of the opposition between the useful and the useless in order to find out the root of their desire. (Wuyong.org)

By distinguishing present use from future value, this statement injects uncertainty into the *spatial* coordinates of utility measurement (as illustrated in Luke's "astropanopticism," 1998) and evokes *time* as a new way to evaluate objects and skills. Throughout her design work, Ma Ke suggests that we turn to memory and history, an ever-shifting

and unpredictable force that constitutes both our material world and "the root of [our] desire," as the ethical foundation for consumption. I will now explore these ideas in-depth in her Paris exhibit "The Earth" (2007) and the namesake documentary *Wu Yong* (2007) by Jia Zhangke.

6. Wu Yong/The Earth

Paris. February 25, 2007. A group of designers and journalists entered a darkened gymnasium. At the center, human figures stood motionless on illuminated pedestals. They wore heavy, rumpled, and dusty clothes, reminiscent of terracotta soldiers recently unearthed from the ground. The audience walked amongst the pedestals to examine the clothes up-close. This was not a museum; it was a fashion exhibit for *Wu Yong* in the Paris Fashion Week. There were no runways or scurrying models. The clothes were handcrafted and buried in sand for a few months to achieve an ancient, earthy feel. Meanwhile, the venue, a one-hundred-year old French middle school playground, was covered with dirt that Ma Ke brought from China (Figure 6). This exhibit "the Earth" (*tu di*) became an instant sensation in the international fashion world. The French *Elle* magazine called it "brilliant… one of the great moments of the season" (Le Fort, 2007).

Figure 6.

The first distinction of the exhibit lies in its spatial setup. Unlike a brightly lit, eye-catching, and fast-beat fashion show, the pedestals under the dim lighting create a *temporal* distance to the figures and clothing artifacts on top. The elevation generates a sense of mystery and awe, restoring the lost aura of art in the age of mechanical production. As we lay eyes on the clothes, another distinction begins to surface. Voluminous, heavy, and loosely hung onto the body, their designs diverge from modern Westernized styles, which are usually form-fitting, light-weight, and revealing of the contour of the body. These clothes are almost "wasteful:" made from copious amounts of fabric, they are folded and stitched together to form large bulging shapes that shroud the body. They are reminiscent of the traditional clothing in dynastic China. Finnane (2008) documents that Chinese clothes used to be "loose, wrapper-style garments," but after the Democratic Revolution in 1911 they gradually gave in to the Western "close-cut, fitted" styles (Finnane, 2008, p. 296).

Yet digging a little deeper, the transition from "loosely wrapper-style" to "close-cut, fitted" clothes is in fact not a marker of Chinese vs. Western distinction, but a pre-modern vs. modern distinction. Traditional sartorial cultures around the world, especially the non-tropical ones (e.g. Native American, European, Indian, Japanese, etc.) often adopt clothing with larger volumes, made from abundant fabric, and composed of intricate layers and folds.[2] The shift started with modernity. In *The Psychology of Clothing* (1971), Flügel documents the sartorial revolution in 18th Century Europe that greatly simplified and homogenized men's dress. A concurrent event, argues Flügel, was the rise of the modern ideologies of *equality* (to erase men's class differences) and *utility* (to maximize men's functionality and productivity at work). Both led to the increasing simplicity and uniformity of men's attire. While women's dresses were temporarily spared from this revolution, they also became progressively simpler, lighter, and fitting along the years. Overall, modern dressmaking, for both women and men, had transitioned from the techniques of wrapping, folding, and draping, to measuring, cutting, and fitting. The term "tailor," which emerged in the

2 It is no surprise that several critics observed Ma Ke's affinity to the 1980s Japanese avant-garde designers, who popularized "flat shapes and loose, body-skimming garments" (Clark, 2012, p. 60) and Korean designers in the early 2000s of the same styles (Finnane, 2008, p. 286). These loose, body-modifying shapes arguably represent contemporary Eastern Asian designers' collective return to the past.

17th Century, can be traced back to the Latin word *taliare*—to cut; it refers to the professionals who create clothes that "fit" the bodies and preferences of individual customers.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the notion of cutting is more than a sartorial technique. It is a psychic-symbolic function that gives birth to the modern self. In "Cutting Up" (1989a), Copjec argues that the "cut" not only "*carves out* (or defines) a body image through which the subject will assume its being" but also "*carves up* (divides) the body image and thus drives the subject to seek its being beyond that which the image presents to it" (p. 235). The cut at once constitutes identity and leads to the failure of it, as it initiates the subject's desire for the part of itself that is "cut off" and lures him into the consistent pursuit of it. This cut-off piece is, in Lacanian terms, the "surplus object," which generates desire through its absence. In modern fashion, tailoring carves out not just a precise image of the self, but also a precise image of the fabric or garment. Like the modern bodies, modern clothing is also subject to the logic of measuring, calculating, and economizing. But due to the double-edged sword of the symbolic cut, this economizing mission often fails. Since our source of enjoyment (i.e. the surplus enjoyment) does not lie in the "saved" object, but in the surplus object that is not yet and could be "saved," we render more waste to bring the absent, fantasmic object into existence. As soon as the fantasized "saving" is brought into existence, it loses its lure and gives way to the new imagined "savings" that has yet to happen.

More savings, more waste: this paradox of desire can be found in many aspects of modern consumerism. Žižek (2004) writes about capitalism's "sin of thrift"—the miserly disposition to accumulate wealth and avoid expenditure—and how marketers are exploiting this anti-consumerist desire to generate overconsumption:

> "[I]s the ultimate message of the publicity clips not 'Buy this, spend more, and you will economize, you will get a surplus for free!'? […] The embodiment of this surplus is the toothpaste tube whose last third is differently colored, with the large letters: 'YOU GET 30% FREE!' – I am always tempted to say in such a situation: 'OK, then give me only this free 30% of the paste!'"

Of course Žižek's request will never be granted, because the "free 30%" does not really exist. It is a surplus object, created by the symbolic cut to trigger the desire for the toothpaste that one does not need. The same hoax pervades corporate green marketing. From water bottles made of 33% less plastic and hybrid vehicles with 50% higher MPGs, to LED light bulbs that consumes 84% less electricity, resource- and energy-saving claims often incur more consumption rather than curbing it. In environmental economics, this effect is known as the "Javons Paradox:" it holds that increased energy or resource efficiency tends to increase—rather than decrease—the rate of consumption overtime (York, 2006). The same paradox of desire also applies to labor-saving and time-saving technologies throughout the history of capitalism. From mechanical clocks and assembly lines, to household appliances and smart phones, technologies that promise to save time and labor have always made modern lives busier, more hurried, and less leisurely. Space-saving technologies are under the same curse: as shoppers fills up their closets, an entire home organization industry (e.g. IKEA, Home Depot, Marie Condo) rose to promise more free space, but in effect only led to more buying, cramming, and hoarding (Harold, 2020). Focusing only on the absent "saved" object (e.g. energy, resource, labor, time, space), our dominant economizing regimes face a Sisyphus task that is doomed to fail.

If eco-fashion and modern capitalism are plagued by the "sin of thrift," then Ma Ke's designs diverge away from it. She uses excessive amounts of fabric, folding, layering, and sewing to form intricate patterns and budging shapes. Along with the dim lighting, they blur the model's individual features and emphasize their collective, bloated presence. Her work demonstrates what binds us with our consumer objects is not the absent object to be saved for the future, but the excessive presence pregnant with history that provides the ultimate satisfaction of our desire. The following section will turn to the elephant in the room: her central theme of "the Earth." Already present in the Paris Fashion Exhibit, Ma Ke's creative engagement introduces a new perspective to conceive "the ecological" in eco-fashion—not through utility but through memory and history. This perspective is more clearly laid out in the namesake documentary *Wu Yong* (2007), which features a restaging of the Earth exhibit at the Paris Fashion Week and an in-depth interview with Ma Ke.

Figure 7.

7. "*Wu Yong*": The Documentary

Directed by the well-known Chinese director Jia Zhangke, *Wu Yong* (2007) (Figure 7) is a documentary with a tripartite structure. The first section depicts the life of workers in Guangzhou's mass-manufacturing garment factories; the second comprises an interview with the designer Ma Ke and a restaging of her Paris exhibit; the third returns to China's Shanxi Province and zooms onto the rural indigenous seamstress and

sartorial culture. This setup contrasts China's modernization with traditional rural culture and situates Ma Ke in the middle, as an intermediary. On many occasions, Ma Ke has stated that the rural land, people, and culture have served as her main source of inspiration. During the creation of "The Earth," she travelled many times to remote villages to study handicrafts: "Every time when I […] was far away from the urban life and in the remote countryside, the majestic grand snowy mountain and the vast luscious landscape, which where there centuries ago, it evoked a memory of our ancestors' philosophy" (Tsui, 2009, p. 182). To her, rural life not only offers a passageway to connect to traditional ways of life, but also contains the ecological wisdom to properly coexist with nature. Such wisdoms are being symmetrically wiped out by urbanization and modernization. For Ma Ke, preserving traditions and protecting the environment are one and the same: as traditions are forsaken and history forgotten, ecological degradation follows; as traditions are preserved and history remembered, ecology thrives.

The linkage between ecology and tradition allows us to better understand Ma Ke's choice of *tudi* (the earth) as the central theme of her design. Unlike the English term "the earth", which also connotes "the planet" in an astrological sense, the Chinese term *tudi* is composed of two characters: *tu* ("soil") and *di* ("land"). It testifies to the Chinese ethnic group's reliance on the land through agriculture for thousands of years. In the Paris exhibit, the notion of "the earth" has multiple incarnations. In the dressing room, makeup artists paint the models' faces with mud to make them look like ancient, terracotta soldier-like figures; before the exhibit, Ma Ke and her colleagues kneel on the ground to carefully scatter dirt across the entire venue; when the light comes up, the models appear wearing heavy, earth-toned clothing that were buried underground for months. "The earth" is everywhere: it covers the models, the venue, and more importantly, the clothes on exhibit. Why bury clothes underground? Ma Ke describes the rationale behind this unusual practice:

> Things with history are always full of attractions, because they have experiences. […] I've always been thinking if it is possible to create [clothes] by interacting with nature; that is to say, I am not the only controller of the outcome, but will leave some to nature; so I am just a basic creator, a source of the idea, but I leave the second part to nature to finish. Thus, when the clothes are unearthed, they

> will record the time and place where you buried them, all the impressions that the materials had made upon them. I always believe, *objects have capacity for memory* [emphasis added].

This dense paragraph reveals Ma Ke's design philosophy through several layers. First, "things with history are always full of attractions:" it suggests that humans are naturally drawn to things with a past and memories of the past help establish humans' emotional attachment to an object. Second, "objects have capacity for memory:" it is not just humans that are capable of memory, as objects themselves can record the past. By burying clothes in earth, Ma Ke turns fabric into a recording medium that retains the past. This material memory differs from humans' fallible symbolic memory: it is only created through an object's time-tested integration with its intimate environment. For her, this material memory could create the deepest intrigue and constitutes the root of human desire.

Ma Ke's rendering of eco-fashion sets her apart from her Western counterparts. In the American corporate rhetoric of recycling, for instance, the "ecological" is conceived as the conservation of resources and the maximization of use. Remanufactured clothes are represented as "new." Each round of recycling gives the fabric a "rebirth." It promises to restore the materials to ground zero, a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate onto which a new garment can be made. The notion of *tabula rasa*, as Copjec (1989b) points out, is a distinctively modern gesture:

> […] to wipe the slate clean, all the way down to the material support itself, pure, pristine, and generalizable: humanity itself; Being as such; a neutral, Cartesian grid; the white walls of modern museums on which paintings of all historical periods could be equally well displayed; and so on (p. 92).

In this gesture of "wiping away," "reboot," or "restored to factory condition," traces of the past are killed, forgotten, and annihilated. Utilitarianism, in particular, erases the past traces to build a new use, for a new person, in a new context. Even the recent trend of "upcycling" in eco-fashion (i.e. repurposing and remanufacturing unwanted materials into new consumer items) practices material amnesia to a lesser extent.

By contrast, Ma Ke doesn't raise the clothes from "death." She preserves their "corpuses" and allows them to be haunted by the "ghosts" of their past lives. For her, history does not claim any positive essence but exists in pure negativity. Another surplus object, history is manifested through its absence—in the form of material traces—and cannot be positively represented in the symbolic grid. Viewed within the positivistic scheme of utility evaluation, history is literally "useless" because it exists in pure negativity; viewed through the principle of desire, however, history is the most intriguing, absent cause that generates desire.[3] Different from the utilitarian subject who tries to capture and possess the surplus object (which constantly slips away and leads to more waste), Ma Ke's method keeps desire alive by coming to terms with its absence and lets her enjoyment circle its traces without collapsing her distance to it. This attitude recalls Lacan's (1997) motto on the ethics of psychoanalysis: "Do not give up on your desire." It suggests that desiring subjects should persist in their division (the cut) and stay lacking of the objects that they have lost. Material memory of the past, in all its rawness and messiness, offers an opportunity to practice this ethics of desire. It teaches us to maintain our respectful distance to history without trying to fully possess or capture it.

In several occasions, Ma Ke confesses her intellectual debt to traditional Chinese philosophies—especially Daoism. In an interview, she expressed her admiration for the concept *wu wei* (no action), which inspired her brand name *wu yong* (no use). Often interpreted as "action without action," *wu wei* refers to "natural action—as planets revolve around the sun, they 'do' this revolving, but without 'doing' it; or as trees grow, they 'do', but without 'doing.'" (Tsui, 2009, p. 242). In other words, *wu wei* promotes spontaneous actions without artificial

3 At this point, the reader might ask: what sets Ma Ke apart from American hipster fashion that intentionally pursues the "retro" effect to mark up the price tag? For example, brands such as American Apparel and Urban Outfitters often appeal to the popular demand for vintage by artificially creating a "worn-in" look in newly manufactured clothes. Many of these effects, including pre-made holes, frayed edges, and extensive fading effects, are achieved through labor-intensive and environmentally harmful techniques such as acid-washing and sandblasting. Ma Ke's "aging" technique, nonetheless, differs. It involves minimum chemical or technical interference to accelerate the process. Having been buried underground for months, her clothes bear the raw effects from their visceral integration with the environment and the sedimentation of time. Their wrinkles and creases refer to a history that resists any symbolization and, even less, standardized mass production and consumption, and refuses to be factored into the utilitarian scheme.

contrivance. Unlike Western Enlightenment thought that attempts to control every step of the action through measurement, calculation, and management, Daoism suggests that humans act in accordance to *dao* ("path," "way," "route")—the path of nature, and leaves the consequence of our actions to it. The goal of Ma Ke's project, therefore, is to open her creative outcome to environmental influences, across time, which constitutes the intrigue of her work.[4]

8. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated significant differences between Euro-American corporate eco-fashion discourses and the works of Ma Ke, China's leading eco-fashion designer. The American ads, as the analysis shows, often feature themes of garment recycling, closed-loop product life cycle, and environmental impact assessment. Dominated by the ideology of utilitarianism, such rhetoric sees "the ecological" as the wise use of resources and conceives material resources as *tabula rasa* to be infinitely reused, repurposed, and recycled. Consistent with fashion's obsolescence, it aims to create an ultimate amnesia against consumers' historical connection with their material objects and provide a buffer between consumption and its ecological consequences. This ideology is openly challenged in Ma Ke's work. She proposes that we conceive our relationship with the material world not through utility, but through memory and history. Her work portrays textiles as a humble medium that records the past and the traces reveals an intimate linkage between environment and desire. In Ma Ke's work, the historical and the ecological coincide. First, the ecological is historical: our past engagement with the environment leaves traces in our bodies, our memories, and the objects around us that refuse to be wiped away. Second, the historical is ecological: the past can only be interpreted by reading the traces left in the material and physical environment. Ma Ke's philosophy reveals that human desire, just like other forces in the universe, follows the basic principle of coevolution—the process through which the ecological and the historical becomes one.

4 Lacan, unsurprisingly, was also a student of Eastern philosophies, including Daoism. The multicultural lineage of ideas blurs the distinctions of the East versus the West, manifesting that Ma Ke's difference from the West is really a difference between small-scale, locally based handicraft and global mass production.

Thus far, I have offered a rhetorical and psychoanalytic reading of Ma Ke's philosophy and practice, which challenges fashion ideologies and illuminates paths for ethical consumption. This reading, however, is not the only way her work could be interpreted. Embedded in the larger context of eco-nationalism and the political economy of the modern art world, Ma Ke's messages and the artifacts she created could take on multifaceted and ambiguous meanings. On Zhihu, one of China's largest question-and-answer forums, a post titled "Will Ma Ke's *Wu Yong* Store Close Down Soon?" attracted divergent replies (Zhihu.com). "Proclaiming to be an Earth-loving social enterprise," the author quipped, "this company sells extremely expensive clothes that one cannot even wear to work. It proposes to be anti-consumption, but still runs like a business—isn't it self-contradictory? I heard that hardly anyone buys anything there. Will it probably close down soon?" A dozen replies below displayed virtually opposing views. Some agreed with the original post and called her pretentious: "It's just packaging in modern art—an instrument of money making." Others asked for more "leniency for those who walk the less trodden path" and emphasized the nature of *Wu Yong* as a social enterprise that "uses commercial methods to achieve public service goals."

This debate has revealed the complexity and ambiguity of Ma Ke's work. In 2014, she established the "Wu Yong Lifestyle Experiential Space," an over 10,000-square feet of exhibition and creator space in the high-end art district of Beijing (He, 2014). Objects exhibited included handcrafted clothes and furniture made from old wood; all were for sale at a high price tag (e.g. a skirt sold for over 1500 US dollars). She explained that they were to fund her nonprofit organization, whose mission was to promote traditional craftsmanship and indigenous cultural heritage. Similar to other Chinese designers of her generation, Ma Ke has shown a discernible tendency to work at the border between art and commerce. Clark (2012) describes it as "a 'dualistic culture' where the lines between art and design are blurred, providing 'an avant-garde spirit' the ability to 'dwell in an increasingly commoditized Chinese society" (p. 51).

The irony of modern avant-garde art in both critiquing and participating in commercial culture is another feature of the postmodern era. Postmodernism involves the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life, collapsing of distinctions between high art and mass/popular culture (Baudrillard, 1983; Featherstone, 1990). When artists like Ma Ke are adopting commercial means to advance their social

missions, corporations are seeking to gain cultural legitimacy by borrowing from the aura of art. Mouratidou (2020), for example, studies the "unadvertisating" tactics of luxurious fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton or Dior, who collaborated with artists to issue their products as works of art. The "Masters LV x Koon" purse launched in 2017, for instance, featured motifs from the famed Rococo painter Fragonard and was exhibited at the Louvre—on a pedestal. One can certainly find some resonance in Ma Ke's Paris exhibit. But if the similarity exists, Ma Ke must have very different patrons from the corporations. Her ties with the first lady Peng Liyuan, and President Xi by association, have been well publicized; she had also appeared in celebrity interviews, entertainment television, and popular talk shows, which demonstrated her sponsorship by China's wealthy class of cultural elites. It is thus possible that her naturalist aesthetic had been stamped with the imprint of the government's nationalist agenda, a sense of cultural superiority for the wealthy Chinese, and a clever tactic to market herself in the complex networks of art, politics, and fashion economics. To what extent is she selling another type of consumerism, one that brands the national image? To what extent are her wealthy patrons using her to gain cultural legitimacy like what Louis Vuitton does with high art? What is the ultimate impact of her eco-fashion discourse on Chinese society? These are questions to be answered by future studies.

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