

# **Making the Ordinary Fashionable: New sartorial languages from Russia and China.**

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Across the twentieth century the politics, histories and culture of both Russia and China resonated with one another, and in addition the dress of both countries served as ‘inspiration’ for Western fashion designers. As we know, this referencing drew in particular on spectacular and extraordinary garments from imperial Russia (e.g. Yves St Laurent’s ‘Russian’ collection 1976/77) and China (Christian Lacroix, *Frontière Chinoise* F/W 1992/3). It also impacted, in the late 20c, the aesthetic adopted by some emerging Chinese and Russian designers and brands towards self-Orientalization.

We can mention in this context the enormous attention given to the work of Chinese haute couture designer Guo Pei in the Metropolitan Museum, Costume Institute exhibition, *China Through the Looking Glass* (2015), including the dress she designed for Rihanna to wear at the Met Ball. Similarly, Russian designers Ulyana Sergeenko and Vika Gazinskaya became regulars on the Paris haute couture and ready to wear fashion week schedules, with designs referencing Russian imperial and folk dress.

Other Chinese and Russian designers, however, have taken less predictable - and arguably more interesting - directions. For this paper we have chosen to look at two - Russian Gosha Rubchinskiy and Chinese Ma Ke. While working with different aesthetics, both have developed design strategies that are informed by ordinary garments and aspects of everyday life in their respective cultures and nations. In a broader sense, they are also affiliated by the historical synergies and political alliances between their two countries, in particular in the first half of the twentieth century, between the Soviet Union and Communist China (the complexities of which we will consider more in the book chapter). During Gosha and Ma Ke’s lifetimes their countries have each undergone ‘transitional times’ as a result of significant cultural, political and economic changes (including the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the ‘opening up’ of China c1989).

This investigation has led us to a series of questions which frame this paper.

## Questions:

1. What might be the rationale for and the nature of Gosha and Ma Ke's referencing different interpretations of the 'everyday' in their own countries and cultures?
2. How is this approach leading to particular/new sartorial languages and fashion practices
3. How does it relate to wider global fashion interests and concerns?
4. Is there a relationship to Michel de Certeau's notions of everyday 'tactics' and 'strategies'.

**To begin** we will briefly introduce the designers and their work.

## Gosha Rubchinskiy

Photographer, designer, and filmmaker, Gosha Rubchinskiy has become in recent years, a household name for the international fashion cognoscenti based on his associations "with a tribe of disenfranchised youth" (Fury, 2016). Yet his design references, including slogans in Cyrillic on clothes, the origins of his models, and the sites of most of his shows are distinctly Russian - representing a Russia in transformation, where Soviet, post-Soviet, and historical Russian narratives are coming together.

Born in Moscow in 1984, Rubchinskiy came out of age in the turbulent era of the 1990's experiencing firsthand the transition of his country from Socialism into a new, unknown, and often insecure reality. This was characterized by the availability (legally) of Western cultural goods: music, magazines, and fashion, set against the chaos of the country's new capitalism which gave the population access to an eclectic range of products, including clothes - often of shady origins. Despite the danger and the high presence of criminal activities at the time, Rubchinskiy talks with nostalgia about the excitement of the exposure of highly coveted artifacts of the West. "Everything was branded with logos," he recalls "We knew about [...] the brands, the logos - we just couldn't get [them]" (*The Guardian* 2016). The austerity of those years has become his biggest design inspiration: a sportswear-centric logo-induced street style unique to the 1990s Muscovite youth (Madsen, *i-D* 2017) that Rubchinskiy combines with the styles and aspirations of contemporary young Russian skateboarders. It is through this combination of his own past and the present of these young Russian men that Rubchinskiy constructs his own narrative of a "new Russia" little known to those outside of the country.

Rubchinskiy considers himself a story-teller. His work evolves through the observation, documentation, and narration of the everyday lives of the Russian teens who are his subjects, mainly presented through the medium of photography exhibitions or in books - published in photo album format and in filmmaking. In the latter, images of boys alternate with Soviet or post-Soviet landscapes of grey apartment buildings and Soviet monuments to reinforce the connection between subjects and places. (*Transfigurations* 2012, *Crimea Kids* 2014, *Youth Hotel* 2015) The clothes he designs are informed by these everyday realities and are dedicated to Rubchinskiy's subjects.

The first of his unconventional shows, held in a Moscow sports stadium in 2008 ("Empire of Evil"), featured a group of street-cast teenagers. His second collection, staged in a disused Orthodox church- turned-gym in the suburbs of Moscow, drew the attention of the foreign fashion press for the first time. They have continued to follow Rubchinskiy. Also, in 2012 he was singled out from other Russian designers by Adrian Joffe, who gave him a season in Dover Street Market London, and then offered him the operational support of Commes des Garçons. In 2016 Rubchinskiy was invited as a guest designer at the venerable menswear fashion venue Pitti Imagine. For the event described as homage to Pier Paolo Pasolini, Rubchinskiy created a three-part project: his Spring/Summer 2017 collection, a specially produced art film and a book of photography. In the interviews addressing the event Rubchinskiy states: "I don't want to answer. I only pose a question. I ask, what is Europe now? What is Italy now? What is Russia now? [...] It's ideas on the map and I'll only pay attention to what's happening now — what's in the air." (Pitti Immagine Press Release 2016 ) Until May 2018, before announcing the transition of the brand into a new phase (which is still to be determined), Rubchinskiy was distributed by high-end boutiques and online retailers around the world, including Corso Como 10, The Broken Arm, DSM, ssence.com, vrient.it, farfetch.com, and many more.

Now a few words about Ma Ke, who has a parallel though different interest in aspects of the ordinary and everyday in China.

In 1996 Ma Ke started the successful Chinese fashion brand Exception de Mixmind with then husband Mah Jihong (who now runs the company alone). Since 2006 she has focused on more conceptual activities, under the name of Wuyong ("Useless"), a nonprofit workshop based in Zhuhai in Guangdong province, South West China.

Having been referred to as 'China's most famous fashion designer' her work with Wuyong has involved a range of media and outputs, including exhibitions and installations. A selection of her activities have included:

2007 Wuyong (Useless) film collaboration with renowned Chinese filmmaker by Jia Zhanke - Documenting

- (i) the work and lives of anonymous factory workers in Zhuhai, producing 'Exception' clothes;
- (ii) Ma Ke's own narrative of her first fashion show in Paris, 2007;
- (iii) the lives of rural people in Shanxi Province, northern China.

Her second presentation in Paris of Wuyong, a performance during haute couture week, 2008 gained her praise by Didier Grumbach, then chair of Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture as a "real talent" who he compared favourably to the "more banal" designs of Exception de Mixmind. ([https://www.lesechos.fr/03/11/2008/LesEchos/20292-051-ECH\\_la-chine-cherche-ses-marques.htm](https://www.lesechos.fr/03/11/2008/LesEchos/20292-051-ECH_la-chine-cherche-ses-marques.htm))

In 2008 she also presented an installation as part of 'Fashion in Motion,' V&A, London. In the same year she authored a manifesto: *Design with Conscience, Live with Simplicity* (a rare project for any fashion designer). In it (p3) she describes how she "used to be a fashion designer," then a garment designer, and later a designer and almost even an artist, but now, she says, "I am none of them" and describes how after moving to Zhuhai she downsized her clothes closet by two thirds. She expresses the belief "that the ultimate luxury is not the price of the clothing, but its spirit .. and thus the role of the designer should be the bearer of social responsibility, ...and an ethical leader.

Ma Ke outlines (2008, p16) – 3 responsibilities for the designer

1. Ethical responsibility (responsibility to the present).
2. Ecological responsibility (responsibility to the future).
3. Responsibility to pass on cultural heritage (responsibility to the past).

Her ideas are also developed from an interest in the ordinary which was made more explicit in a project: *My Land, My People* (2011) which involved written, visual and material ethnographies collected from peasants and the poor in remote mountain areas of China in Shanxi & Sichuan provinces (since exhibited as photographs, stories and clothes). Similarly, *Wuyong Living* (2014), Beijing, a project conceived as a home/retail space/exhibition space - styled as a rural home

## **ANALYSIS/COMPARISON**

So, to return to our points regarding the cultural translation of Russian and Chinese everydayness in the work of these two designers, we are considering:

1. Different interpretations of the 'everyday' in their own countries and cultures.
2. New sartorial languages and fashion practices.
3. Wider global fashion interests and concerns.
4. Everyday 'tactics' and 'strategies'.

We argue that the interest of each designer in the unassuming and mundane sartorial languages are informed by the cultural and historical circumstances of their respective countries.

In fact, the designers' fascination with the ordinary and the everyday is not necessarily shared or understood by their compatriots. Katerina Zolototrubova, fashion editor of Russian *Vogue*, describes Rubchinskiy looks as "Gopnik," a Russian derogatory term used to refer to uneducated lower-class young men from suburban areas often associated with petty crime, while the "Russians not closely familiar with the fashion discourse do not understand why a bunch of sport basics is called fashion" (*People Talk*, 2016) This ordinary/everyday image of poverty and desperation is not the preferred cultural ethos the majority of Russian citizens would like to export.

Equally Ma Ke is best known and celebrated in China not for her interest in indigenous culture, but because of her work for Exception de Mixmind and since 2013, for producing personalized designs for China's first lady Peng Liyuan in high-profile international trips.

## **HOW..?**

For Rubchinskiy, the Russian context, language, sites, and his models are central in the narrative of the new Russia that he aspires to tell. His work is compelling to those outside Russia due to its revelation of an unassuming, relatively recent, but unknown parts of Russian history. Yet, this interest is informed by and dependent on the historical mythology of Russia existing in the world. Likewise, Ma Ke has referenced people living very modestly in remote and relatively inaccessible rural areas, whose lives are not well-known but are appealing to outsiders due to an over-arching fascination with the varied possible manifestations of the "otherness" of Chinese culture.

The fact that both designers are accessing powerful visual means - film, photography, exhibitions, - brings to mind Gilles Lipovetsky's referencing of the contemporary concerns of fashion photography, as promoting neo-individualistic culture that places the accent on: self-expression, emotional participation, affective authenticity, direct experience (2002). This type of photographic narration privileges the undisguised capturing of reality, resonating with the designer's interest in the everyday and the ordinary. The way these designers engage with visual media can be understood as an attempt to resurrect what Patrizia Calefato has referred to as "the intimacy with things, sensoriality" (Karaminas and Geczy, 2019, 42), which we can recognize in the connections that Rubchinskiy and Ma Ke make between the clothes and the (mundane everyday) lived experiences of the people from their countries.

In this process photographic narration becomes a powerful tool for both designers: as an ultimate documenting device, (not least of the everyday) authenticating the references and experiences they draw on. But also one that is subject to careful curation in their work - which amplifies thoughtfully chosen aspects of the narrative - to make the ordinary fashionable, or at least to incorporate it into fashion's ever-increasing reach. In Rubchinskiy's case, it takes the form of the framing of images, montage in terms of visual sequencing in the edited books, and the selection of sites of distribution where images and clothes are displayed side by side; for Ma Ke-- carefully selected, institutionalized sites of display, e.g, the V&A, the Venice Biennale, her own exhibition space, connect to the notion of museumization of fashion – (cited by Calefato - and others) e.g. 'artification of fashion. (Bai Yuli in Vanska and Clark, 2018).

While the activities of both designers might start from the ordinary and everyday, they also demonstrate the wider reach and definition of fashion in the 21C - well beyond only product and market e.g. as images, as installation, and as discourse.

### **WHY...?**

To sum up, Russian youth and their day-to-day experiences are central to Rubchinskiy's work, reminding him of his own coming of age that he considers the time of the strongest emotional experiences, and providing him with the realistic outlook on the contemporary zeitgeist. The combination of his personal experience with those that he observes constitutes the core of his work, in which clothes are instrumental but not necessarily central. They reflect this emotional state, the interests and concerns of new generation of Russians and in this way tell the story of the place Rubchinskiy is eager to reveal.

Yet, the narratives featured in Rubchinskiy's work proved to be as relevant to the youth in Russia, as to the same age group of guys in New York, Manchester, Seoul, or Sydney. Sharing and circulating the images through the social media platforms -- an ultimate 'fashionscape,' to use Karaminas term (extrapolated from Appadurai's broader notion of 'scapes')-- these boys become a community united by the similar interests, sport, and music, and these clothes become their 'uniform'. (Fury, 2016) This completes the cycle of translation, where the everyday of one group of people becomes re-interpreted and shared in new context. In this way, his work reorients the fashion discourse towards a community of young men united by the everyday experiences, signaling a shift in the role of perception of fashion from a self-referential system focused on the circulation of clothes, to the powerful agency capable of responding to wider social concerns.

Ma Ke's interest in the ordinary and the everyday by comparison informs her response - and current debates globally - towards more 'ethical fashion' and situates her concerns about over-production and consumption, the alienation of workers, and the lack of relationships between people and their clothes. Informed by her ethnographic research, her perspectives are also influenced by her reading of Chinese and Western philosophy. The Chinese doctrines of Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism underlie her ethical thinking. Ma Ke (p5) sees relevance in "...the Buddhist explanation of "mortal life" - where "mortal life is neither paradise nor hell, but a frustrating and interesting world." It is from this world, and its mundane realities she draws her inspiration, as referred to in her manifesto: "Genuine fashion today should not follow the glamour of trends. It should instead uncover the extraordinary in the ordinary." This quotation turns our attention and places our designers relative to the wider concerns of their times - our times, characterized by radically changed relationships between time and space, collapsing global and local boundaries, in which the "imagination [becomes] an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (Appadurai, 1996: 31).

These changes allow the opportunity for designers (Rubchinskiy and MaKe), geographies (Russia and China) and concerns (with the ordinary and the everyday) to impact and inform fashion - to apply new forms of tactics to redefine fashion's established strategies (to reference de Certeau). This will enable a manipulation and transformation of fashion's drives and values, and moreover the perception of it as a Eurocentric phenomenon - into sets of multicultural events, practices and works of the imagination, where what and who were once considered mundane or excluded, gain significance.

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