

# Chapter 3

## Multisemiotic Discourse on Fashion and Clothing in Contemporary China



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### 3.1 Introduction

The past decades have witnessed a dramatic expansion in the development of contemporary Chinese fashion. With the reform of Chinese economy since 1978, China has gradually grown to be one of the most influential and promising fashion countries. Given the increasingly crucial position of China in the fashion world, it is perhaps not surprising that Chinese fashion has become a pivot subject for considerable research and industries to explore in recent years, an inevitable consequence of unprecedented economic and cultural changes. A notable feature of this burgeoning field is that a significant proportion of studies have been conducted in contexts such as aesthetics, business, education, history and practice with regard to China. Scholars who have contributed to the literature cover Bao (2008), Clark (2012), Finnane (2008), Steele and Major (1999), Tsui (2009, 2015, 2019), Wu (2009) and Zhao (2013). These achievements provide valuable academic orientation and practical information for the understanding of Chinese fashion and its design within a contemporary environment.

Another key characteristic of this roaring exploration unveils a pressing need for theoretical and methodological justifications to thoroughly delve into fashion phenomena in China. In considering its inextricably cultural hybridity, interpreting contemporary Chinese fashion faces serious challenges. The complexities and ambivalences are reflected in a variety of transitional phases that Chinese fashion has experienced. Since its inception, contemporary Chinese fashion has suffered from the huge impact of various cultures, whilst it has incorporated many traits of indigenous thoughts and practices (Tsui, 2013; Welters & Mead, 2012; Wu, 2012). The integration of these differing cultures brings out the uniqueness of contemporary Chinese fashion. Such evolutionary transformations directly result in the emergence of abundant meanings in society and therefore feed rich resources to examine their

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relationships with the social environment in which they are produced. The progress of research into Chinese fashion and clothing, however, suggests—as far as communication is concerned—the dearth of studies in contemporary Chinese settings at present. In the absence of detailed research in this area, the only sources of information available to scholars and practitioners are generally confined to a superficial analysis or still deal with semantic or pragmatic features of clothing with their foci primarily on a single resource, ignoring, for the most part, multimodal components and implications. Furthermore, the significance of practical industry in the process of communication is often disregarded by most scholars, which accordingly highlights the possibilities for this study in seeking to narrow the gap among theory, practice and methodology.

Based on these inspiring situations, the present study is designed to bridge some of the gaps in our knowledge of meaning making in contemporary Chinese fashion and thereby endeavors to formulate a systemic picture towards fashion communication within an extended range of social contexts. Distinct from traditional approaches, the theoretical principles for this study originate from social semiotic theories, that is, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and multimodality. Working with their pioneering studies, the chapter addresses typical semiotic phenomena that occur within contemporary Chinese fashion, relating them to sociocultural contexts and indicating how these patterns may be generalized to decipher fashion and clothing as social semiotics throughout a broad reach. As a part of doctoral research project (Xu, 2019), the purpose is to present the preliminary findings about fashion communication in contemporary China and to raise a meaningful approach regarding how practitioners manipulate semiotic resources, deliver information and interact with audience in terms of product design. The study of fashion and clothing is interdisciplinary and traces its knowledge base from different fields. To fully elucidate the complicated phenomena in question, the chapter adopts an interdisciplinary standpoint by incorporating widespread knowledge of sociology, psychology, anthropology, aesthetics, linguistics and other subjects. Such vibrant exchange across disciplinary boundaries offers a comprehensive description of fashion and clothing and contributes to a new perspective in accessing meaning from the fashion phenomena.

## 3.2 Literature Review

### 3.2.1 *Contemporary Chinese Fashion Designers*

The remarkable booming of Chinese fashion exerts a profound influence on those who participate in the industry. As a group of creative people, Chinese designers are riding the waves on international fashion scenes right now. To construe their development, Ferrero-Regis and Lindgren (2012) classifies Chinese designers into three collections: immigrant, mainland Chinese, Hong Kong and other place-based designers. In Tsui's (2009) depiction, designers from mainland China can be further

divided into three generations: “the pioneers”, “the practitioners” and “the prospects”. Among them, “the prospects” represent the third generation who was born after the 1980s. For the moment, they have begun thriving in the field and are growing to become a fledgling force for fashion in China.

Tsui (*ibid.*) discusses the characteristics from the first to the third generations and explores the formation and outgrowth of these designers within a political and economic setting. The differences among three generations are reflected in various areas, including educational background, design style, marketing orientation and career development. As Tsui (2009, 2013) observes, designers of the new generation have distinctive characteristics. One notable characteristic is Chinese identity (Finnane, 2008; Segre Reinach, 2012; Steele & Major, 1999; Tsui, 2013). Unlike most designs of the previous time, their creativity and originality spring from both China and the West. They prefer indirect, abstract or conceptual forms to deliver cultural identity (Tsui, 2013). In their creations, you rarely see certain traditional Chinese components. They employ alternative elements to feature their designs—color, cutting, fabrics or silhouette for instance. Therefore, design for this generation is no longer restricted to such old concepts as geography or background. What they search is not only new forms of clothing but also a way of self-expression that can differentiate China from the West and their generation from predecessors. Actually, they are reluctant to embrace the aesthetics expressed in Western Chinese designs, which is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese symbols. They are also reluctant to accept the current standards of beauty and fashion established in the West. Instead, they advocate a fundamental change in Chinese views of what beauty and fashion are—views that are now influenced by Western views. These conflicting yet interweaving views are completely manifested in their designs, which cross through a multitude of areas. By means of this way, they attempt to deliver a strong statement about their individual creativity, identity and philosophy towards fashion. Wu (2009) mentions a new Chinese aesthetics initiated by the young generation, which melds the civilizations of China and the West. She (*ibid.*) affirms that this aesthetics will ultimately define Chinese fashion and characterize Chinese identity.

### ***3.2.2 Social Semiotic Theories***

The theoretical foundations underpinning the analysis are inspired by systemic functional theories (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Matthiessen, 2007) and its application to multimodal research (Bezemer & Kress, 2014; Djonov & van Leeuwen, 2011; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O’Toole, 2011). SFL, derived from Halliday, is a theory for viewing language as a socio-semiotic system and therefore is generalized as “social semiotics” (Nöth, 1990). This theory emerges from the study of language and its social context, where language is regarded not as a set of rules but as resources for making meaning. One of its solid cornerstone is that all semiotic activities are socially motivated and meaning is generated in terms of its relationship to context.

Multimodality draws on the principles of systemic functional theories and examines how diverse semiotic resources combine to yield meaning within a culture. As a newly emerging field in discourse studies, multimodality has grown from a linguistic branch towards an interdisciplinary field that encompasses knowledge across different disciplines. Therefore, multimodality is considered “a field of application” (Jewitt, 2014) and has great significance in theoretical, methodological and interdisciplinary domains. The recognition that all types of communication are multimodal can have influential implications for applied linguistics and contribute to the interpretation of semiotic products or events. The development relating linguistic theories to other semiotics resources begins with visual images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O’Toole, 2011) then is extended to a variety of meaning-making resources. Such fruitful contributions to multimodal research can be found in the works of music and sound (van Leeuwen, 1999), color (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002; van Leeuwen, 2011), gesture and movement (Martinec, 2000; Norris, 2004), tactile communication (Bezemer & Kress, 2014; Djonov & van Leeuwen, 2011), fashion and clothing (Owyong, 2009; Podlasov & O’Halloran, 2014; Tan & Owyong, 2009; Xu, 2019), among many others.

### 3.3 Research Design

This chapter aims at developing theory and thus synthesizes case study research and grounded theory methodology to gather empirical data. Research follows the procedures of grounded theory proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Corbin and Strauss (1990), which starts from literature review and data selection then moves to data collection. Data are analyzed through grounded theory coding—open, axial and selective—for constant comparison until theoretical saturation. The final stage is literature comparison. To triangulate evidence and strengthen the validity of theory, the study considers multiple sources of data: document examination in relation to the phenomena under investigation; in-depth and semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of fashion designers in contemporary China; observations during interviews to view the examined subjects from a non-participant’s perspective and case studies involving the selection of interviewed designers and their works. The interviews and observations are executed respectively on the basis of a prearranged interview guide and observation checklists, covering the main topics related to the phenomena. Various methods are included to foster divergent perspectives and further ground the research in reality.

Data from contemporary Chinese fashion are chosen for case study research, which contains designers and their works from Hong Kong and mainland China. Apart from geographical location (Ferrero-Regis & Lindgren, 2012), the study notices the classification of generation (Tsui, 2009) in the selecting process. Designers born in the 1980s are preferred, considering an active role they are playing on domestic and international stages for the moment, and whereby they may provide

**Table 3.1** Selected fashion designers

Designer	Gender	Brand	Year	Location	Orientation
Derek Chan	M	DEMO	2013	Hong Kong	Gender and Tradition (Balance)
Kay Kwok	M	KAY KWOK	2013	London	Individualism (Imagination)
Kenax Leung	M	KENAX LEUNG	2012	Hong Kong	Society (Innovation)
Kurt Ho	M	KURT HO	2014	Hong Kong	Individualism (Perception)
Lilian Kan	F	KanaLili KanaLili Fleur	2013	Hong Kong	Feminism (Idealization)
Masha Ma	F	MASHA MA MA by MA MATTITUDE	2011 2013 2016	Paris Shanghai	Feminism (Juxtaposition)
Moti Bai	F	BLACK SPOON BLACK BRIDGE	2012	Beijing	Classicism (Contradiction)
Mountain Yam	M	112 mountainyam MOUNTAIN YAM	2011	Hong Kong	Feminism (Mixture)
Nelson Leung	M	NelsonBlackle	2013	Hong Kong	Society (Playfulness)

pertinent insights into current occurrences. In addition, designers of this new generation own distinctive characteristics in the local and global fashion industries. These multiple voices are assumed to cultivate multifaceted information, promote complete understanding towards the studied phenomena and eventually enhance theoretical constructions.

Given a large number of designers involved, additional criteria are required to narrow down the scope. They are specified as follows: professional qualification (currently employed in agencies), industry experience (more than three years), brand recognition, signature style, international reputation and other criteria (age, gender, geographical and educational backgrounds). Based on the guideline, we select nine emerging designers and their works as subjects to explore (Table 3.1). Areas for investigation cover the background of designers, their creations, design practice and other relevant issues. The information deriving from these designers serves as a reference point, from which research is conducted and grounded theory is generated.

### 3.4 Fashion and Clothing as Multisemiotic Discourse

This study develops a social semiotic approach to meaning making in fashion and clothing, with its particular focus on the role of different semiotic resources or multisemiotic. The fundamental principles of SFL and multimodality provide analytical

models for a comprehensive semiotic study of fashion and clothing. The guiding ideas from case study research and grounded theory methodology navigate a methodological roadmap for empirical data gathering and grounded theory building of the phenomena. Based on these significant insights, the resultant viewpoints and discussions about fashion and clothing as multisemiotic discourse are outlined.

### 3.4.1 Nature of Semiotic Resources

One underlying concept of fashion and clothing in relation to semiotic phenomena is multimodal or multisemiotic. In our proposal, fashion and clothing includes not a single semiotic resource rather an array of more than ones. A close examination of the data collected exhibits that designers employ multiple semiotic resources, which incorporate the sensory modalities of visual, tactile, verbal, kinetic, aural and olfactory. All the participants are not isolated from one another but work in close collaboration to create viewing effects and make meaning to the audience. By using this approach, we can understand that fashion and clothing is a complex interaction of multisemiotic elements, instantiated in the form of ensemble, garment, component, element and accessory (Table 3.2). According to our analysis, meaning is ascribed to designers' selection of semiotic resources and the particular context in which they are situated and realized. To describe the multisemiotic nature of fashion and clothing, Fig. 3.1 displays semiotic resources of fashion and clothing in terms of meaning making within a multimodal environment.

For a clear presentation of semiotic relations, a specific example from the designer Masha Ma is listed, from which a multisemiotic system is combined for illustration. Recognized as one of the most representative rising designer in contemporary China, Masha Ma garners instant attention for her minimalist, deconstructivist aesthetics and an exploration of youth subculture. Her design aims to challenge existing social conventions and construct new femininity characterized as the juxtaposition of seductiveness and female strength, conformity and defiance. The sample collection "Collection P" (Punk) comes from her namesake label MASHA MA, which was presented in Paris Fashion Week Autumn Winter 2017 (Fig. 3.2). Within the collection, the designer was inspired by the streets of London and its punk heritage, through which she delivered an interpretation towards modern femininity featuring female empowerment and self-awareness. By means of such way, she strived to reconstruct a lifestyle for new generations and encouraged the audience to daringly make their voices heard. For this reason, all semiotic resources involved, either visual or texture (also others), were selected and orchestrated by the designer to make meaning in particular situations and to reflect the properties of this underground culture in terms of qualities, variations and arrangements.

For Masha Ma, *fabrics and materials* were a main outlet to construct information and demonstrate femininity, where suiting fabrics and velvet represented tradition,

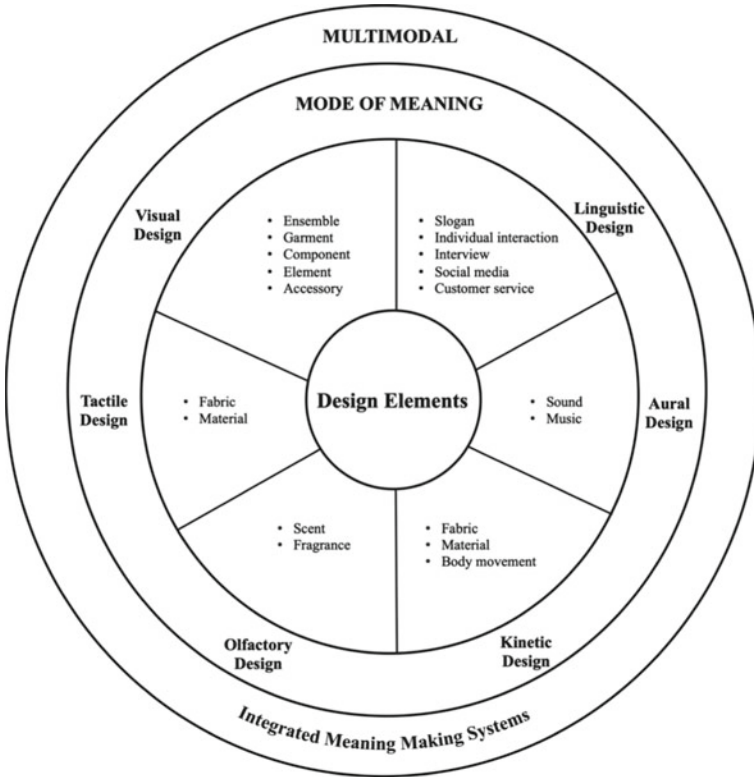


Fig. 3.1 Multimodal construction of fashion and clothing (Xu, 2019)



Fig. 3.2 Design works from MASHA MA AW 2017 “Collection P”(Courtesy of MASHA MA Studio)



leather and denim reflected modernity and silk symbolized femininity. The combination of these fabrics and materials accordingly created two prominent oppositions between conformity and defiance (suiting fabrics, velvet in contrast to leather, denim), between seductiveness and strength (silk, velvet in contrast to leather). In addition, *visual* design played a pivotal role in the articulation of message. All display elements at different ranks were selected and arranged in relation to theme and style. With multimodal paradigm as basis, nuclear elements were therefore distinguished including sharp tailoring, deconstructed element, simple cutting and architectural shape, which represented her signature style and formulated brand identity. One of her significant characteristics was to integrate masculine garment items and construction (sharp tailoring, exaggerated shoulders, boxy silhouette, etc.) into womenswear (delicate details, collapsing volumes, soft shades, exposed skin, etc.). From this aspect, the types of opposing relations were identified: strength and empowerment versus seductiveness and femininity; defiance versus conformity. Through manipulating such contrasts, the duality of femininity emerged. The importance of *linguistic* design was also corroborated by evidence analyzed from interview and observation. It was not an often process in the analysis of fashion and clothing semiotics, as the focus of attention in design was generally on the information presented through visual, tactile, kinetic and aural coordination. Apart from interview, other possible ways were available for the designer to set up a dialogue and deliver information. Taking Masha Ma as an instance, each of her collections had narrative passages to introduce the collection (Fig. 3.3). These supplemental sayings were important resources that functioned to clarify design issues and created interaction with the audience. In addition, she utilized theme to establish a potential dialogue which might find in “NEVER BE SILENCED”. Another type of verbal design was slogan as a component of garment to presumably represent the process of saying emanating from the designer. Examples were traced in collections: “ADOLESCENTS”, “TRANS-GRESSION” and “SOCIAL DISTORTION”. These linguistic descriptions in large and bold capital letters made direct reference to punk heritage and indicated the spirits and attitudes towards youth culture, which echoed to other semiotic resources in terms of message. Fashion and clothing in context often involved *aural* and *kinetic* design. In this situation, underground techno music and movement of texture during the presentation portrayed the characteristics of punk and deconstruction. Therefore, they accurately mattered in producing and disseminating meaning for the audience. As could be seen from the depiction outlined above, her creations were full of oppositions and contrasts which exactly reflected her design style and philosophy—“enjoy the struggle and embrace the chaos” in her own words. Hence, design philosophy, theme and style formed powerful strategies to guide the choices of multiple display elements made by the designer.

*Olfactory* semiotics is another component in multisensory design. However, it is not a key element of clothing and thus not frequently used by designers during the process. In our investigation, the designer Lilian Kan made full use of olfactory organs to create works and deliver message. Her design brand KanaLili, together with KanaLili Fleur (fragrance), was inspired by the beauties of nature. Therefore, nature and beauty became the DNA of her brand identity. To signify female characteristics,



# MASHAMA PARIS

## COLLECTION P

**MASHAMA AW17 IS A WAR CRY FOR WOMAN THAT DEMAND TO BE SEEN AND DEMAND TO BE HEARD. A CONFIDENT WOMAN IS A CONTINUAL REFERENCE FOR ANY MASHAMA COLLECTION. THIS SEASON, HOWEVER, MA USES HER RUNWAY TO JOIN WITH THE CURRENT UPRISING OF FORMIDABLE FEMALE VOICES AROUND THE GLOBE.**

**AW17 SENDS OUT AN EMPOWERING UNIFORM OF SHARP TAILORING – EXAGGERATED SHOULDERS TEAMED WITH NARROWLY CUT TROUSERS, SKIRTS CUT SHORT OR IN BOXY STRAIGHT STYLES THAT HANG ABOVE THE ANKLE. IN KEEPING WITH THE BRAND'S ON-GOING NARRATIVE OF SUB-CULTURES, THIS SEASON MASHAMA LOOKED TO THE STREETS OF LONDON AND ITS PUNK HERITAGE, ITS SPIRIT OF ANARCHY AND YOUTH FUELLED REBELLION. UNDER THESE INFLUENCES THIS SHARP TAILORING IS CORRUPTED BY AN ATTACK OF OFF-KILLER DETAILS – DETACHABLE PLEATING, D-RING STRAPS, HARNESS BELTS AND EXPOSED MIDRIFTS; PARADOXICALLY CREATING A UNIFORM FOR A NON-CONFORMIST. THE USE OF LUXURIOUS ENGLISH AND ITALIAN TRADITIONAL SUITING FABRICS IN CHECKS AND TARTANS ALSO NOD TO A JUXTAPOSITION OF CONFORMITY AND DEFIANCE.**

**DESPITE THE WEIGHTY ISSUES THAT WERE A PRE-OCCUPATION OF THE COLLECTION, THE SPIRIT OF THE MASHAMA GIRL IS DEEPLY INTERTWINED WITH BERLIN'S UNDERGROUND SCENE, AND FROM THIS COMES GLIMMERS OF JEWEL COLOURED VINYL – SILVER, EMERALD, FUCHSIA – CUT INTO BOXY SKIRTS AND OVER-SIZED JACKETS, LAYERED OVER HOODIES, SLOGAN TEE-SHIRTS AND NETTING. SHIMMERY DRESSES ARE COMPOSED OF HAND-CUT LEATHER STRIPS ON PLEATED VELVET. PVC AND LEATHERS ARE BLACKOUT BLACK AND WORN HEAD TO TOE.**

**MASHAMA AW17.**

**NEVER BE SILENCED.**

**Fig. 3.3** Promotion poster of MASHA MA AW 2017 “Collection P” (Courtesy of MASHA MA Studio)

**Fig. 3.4** Design works of KanaLili Fleur and KanaLili (Courtesy of KanaLili Studio)



Lilian Kan showed plenty of nature-inspired elements in her design, including airy space, curvy line, watercolor, flower pattern, feminine silhouette, exquisite details (smocking, ruffles, layers) and soft fabrics (silk chiffon, silk satin, silk organza, lace). Her fragrance products were designed around similar properties in terms of fragrance families (floral), composition of ingredients (natural) and intensity (light). In addition, names, promotional texts and presentation of fragrance products were naturally arranged in a corresponding way. All these elements she utilized related to the beauty of nature and the soft, delicate quality of women. Gradation was her signature look to symbolize the dynamic, flowing atmosphere of nature which was like the notes in fragrance. As she shared, her dresses were actually inspired by flowers. To visualize perfume was an approach when she made different products. In her opinion, there was a very close association between perfume and clothing design. From this sense, we interpret that multisensory design elements are organized into a unified whole to show the cohesive relations of nature and women, as exemplified in Fig. 3.4.

### 3.4.2 Selection of Semiotic Resources

Fashion and clothing is considered to be primarily a multisemiotic discourse, which creates meaning through a variety of semiotic modes or resources. During our analysis, systemic functional theories and their implications to other communicative modes or resources offer robust theoretical bases for the development of multimodality in fashion and clothing. To specify, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and

O’Toole (2011) pave a way for the exploration of visual semiotic construction in fashion and clothing. Bezemer and Kress (2014) as well as Djonov and van Leeuwen (2011) lay solid foundations for the investigation of fashion and clothing as meaning-making systems in texture. Drawing on their seminal frameworks, a multisemiotic examination of fashion and clothing as systems is set out in terms of semiotic resources selected by designers in the process of communication. Since visual and texture resources form the core features of fashion and clothing, these two systems are elucidated in detail throughout the analysis.

Adopting the rank scale, the present study at first models fashion and clothing as *visual* semiotic system, where participants of clothing across different ranks are comprehensively examined to achieve a holistic framework. Details about visual semiotic description in clothing design are summarized in Table 3.2. This visual

**Table 3.2** Visual semiotic system in fashion design

Category	Subcategory	Property and Dimension
Style	Stylistic features	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subculture</li> <li>• Aesthetics</li> </ul>	Qualities of style in subculture/aesthetics
Collection	Typical themes	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrative theme</li> <li>• Conceptual theme</li> </ul>	Degree of abstraction
Ensemble	Stylistic organization of garments	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Layout structure</li> <li>• Surface structure</li> <li>• Light structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three-dimension manipulation</li> <li>• Two-dimension surface</li> <li>• Light and shadow effects</li> </ul>
Garment	Garment pieces	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upper body</li> <li>• Lower body</li> <li>• One piece</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Function</li> <li>• Structure</li> <li>• Decoration</li> </ul>
Component	Garment parts and details	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parts</li> <li>• Details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Function</li> <li>• Structure</li> <li>• Decoration</li> </ul>
Element	Design elements	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Space</li> <li>• Line</li> <li>• Shape and form</li> <li>• Color</li> <li>• Texture</li> <li>• Pattern</li> </ul>	Qualities and variations in space/line/shape and form/color/texture/pattern
Accessory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carried</li> <li>• Worn</li> <li>• Detachable</li> <li>• Body adornment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Function</li> <li>• Structure</li> <li>• Decoration</li> </ul>

framework is devised according to a variety of literature from different theoretical distances (e.g. Angus et al., 2015; Eicher & Evenson, 2015; Fashionary International Ltd., 2016; Kennedy et al., 2013; Tortora & Eubank, 2010). Under the umbrella of each rank, there exist several subcategories attached to properties and dimensions. As observed, a considerable amount of subcategories with different styles are available for designers to utilize and communicate. Besides, the variations of these categories within or across rank(s) are considered a means for designers to construct information. All the basic elements depicted therefore supply rich sources with respect to meaning making in design landscape. The study then suggests a framework for exploring meaning delivery in *texture* semiotics (Table 3.3). Within this system, clothing texture is divided into four segments: visual, tactile, aural and kinetic. Each texture has distinctive characteristics and consequently can be described through respective properties. In proposing such a statement, the systemic networks are similarly drawn from the existing literature across an expansive domain, which encloses Bezemer and Kress (2014), Davis (1996), Delong (1998), Djonov and van Leeuwen (2011) and Fiore (2010). By distinguishing various qualities of texture, the interaction among visual, tactile, aural and kinetic textures in design can be clearly identified.

**Table 3.3** Texture semiotic system in fashion design

Category	Subcategory	Property
Texture	Visual texture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surface contour (smooth/rough)</li> <li>• Surface friction (slippery/harsh)</li> <li>• Temperature (warm/cool)</li> <li>• Luster (dull/shiny)</li> <li>• Opacity (transparent/opaque)</li> <li>• Density (sparse/dense)</li> <li>• Consistency (homogeneous/heterogeneous)</li> <li>• Regularity (regular/irregular)</li> </ul>
	Tactile texture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility (supple/rigid)</li> <li>• Compressibility (soft/hard)</li> <li>• Extensibility (stretchy/non-stretchy)</li> <li>• Resilience (resilient/limp)</li> <li>• Density: Fabric (fine/coarse), Structure (open/compact), Thickness (thin/thick)</li> <li>• Liquidity (wet/dry)</li> <li>• Temperature (warm/cool)</li> <li>• Relief (flat/relief)</li> <li>• Durability (low/high)</li> <li>• Consistency (homogeneous/heterogeneous)</li> <li>• Regularity (regular/irregular)</li> </ul>
	Aural texture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loudness (quiet/loud)</li> <li>• Pitch range (low/high)</li> <li>• Roughness (smooth/rough)</li> </ul>
	Kinetic texture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flow (static/dynamic)</li> <li>• Direction (left/right; forward/backward; up/down)</li> <li>• Force (weak/strong)</li> </ul>

Hence, we assume that the perception and interpretation of texture do not lie in a single quality, but in a complex orchestration of varied qualities. For this reason, the integration of different communicative modes needs to be drawn on to fully construe the texture of clothing.

The study initiates two analytical frameworks for visual and textual interpretations of fashion and clothing. Working on this guidance, the resources of choices made by designers can be generalized in a systemic and elaborate way. From the analysis, diverse kinds of participants are involved in fashion discourse, taking verbal, visual, tactile, kinetic, aural and olfactory modes as instance. All the components are considered participants for designers to disseminate information. Among them, visual and texture semiotic systems constitute dominant elements in the construction of meaning. To further clarify the social nature of fashion and clothing semiotics, we characterize the results of resources in designers' works (Table 3.4).

**Table 3.4** Semiotic resources in designers' works

Designer	Texture design resource	Visual design resource
DC	Wool, tweed, cotton, pattern and natural fabrics as the core plus other thematic and stylistic fabrics and materials	<b>GARMENT</b> ( <i>various styles</i> ) (Upper body) Jacket, coat, waistcoat, shirt, top, knitwear (Lower body) Pants, skirt (One piece) Dress, suit, jumpsuit
KK	Neoprene, leather, cotton, mesh, plastics as the core plus other thematic and stylistic fabrics and materials	
KL	Traditional fabrics and materials in combination with innovative fabrics and materials (cotton, wool, silk, knitwear, denim, mesh, neoprene, jacquard, fur, etc.)	
KH	Common fabrics and materials as the core plus other thematic and stylistic fabrics and materials (cotton, suiting fabrics, linen, wool, silk, leather)	<b>COMPONENT</b> ( <i>various styles</i> ) (Parts) Shoulder, neckline, collar, lapel, bodice, sleeve, cuff, pocket, waist (Details) Cutting, layering, dart, seam, pleat, decorative stitching, edge finish, hem, neckline, waistline, fastener, opening, stitches, panel, accessory, surface treatment, trimming, embellishment, patchwork
LK	Silk satin, silk chiffon, silk organza, lace, etc.	
MM	Leather, suiting fabrics, silk, denim, net as the core plus other thematic and stylistic fabrics and materials	
MB	Traditional fabrics and materials (silk, velvet, linen, cotton, wool, fur, etc.)	
MY	Natural fabrics and materials (cotton, silk, wool, calf) in combination with functional, sporty fabrics and materials	<b>ELEMENT</b> ( <i>various styles</i> ) Space, line, shape and form, light, color, texture, pattern
NL	Combinations of high-end fabrics and materials (wool, cashmere, silk, leather, etc.)	<b>ACCESSORY</b> ( <i>various styles</i> ) Worn or carried accessories

The finding shows a variety of choices displayed by designers, which are strikingly different from one another. These participants represent distinct qualities in relation to theme and style (Table 3.5). There are some statements arising from the analysis across designers. In terms of *theme*, (1) themes reflect the issues of society, culture, politics, history, aesthetics, environment, technology and innovation; (2) themes are developed through the sequences of ensembles, garments, components, elements and accessories; (3) themes are connected to design concept, design inspiration, brand identity, design style and target market. In terms of *style*, (1) various styles are found in subculture and aesthetics; (2) design styles are endowed with personalized characteristics; (3) design styles are related to design philosophy, aesthetics and target market; (4) design styles are associated with interest, experience, values, family, education, practice, nature, society, culture, history, trends, technology, innovation, target market and lifestyle. To summarize, differences of selection are mainly derived from several contextual factors within and around the designers. Therefore, semiotic

**Table 3.5** Attributes of semiotic resources

Designer	Theme	Style		
		Subculture	Aesthetics	Signature
DC	Contemporary classic and soft masculinity within a cultural domain	Dandy Androgyny	Classic Minimal Sporty	Balance between contradictions
KK	Mysteries (space)	Futurist Hip hop	Minimalist Sporty	Contemporarily futuristic Modern Daring
KL	Construction of lifestyle (youth culture) through contemporary art and subculture	Hip hop Grunge Androgyny Futurist	Sporty Deconstructivist	Experimentation Combination
KH	Garments through personal thinking or experience	Retro Androgyny	Minimalist Deconstructivist Antifashion	Mixture Fashion independence
LK	Nature	Feminine	Romantic	Aesthetic beauties
MM	Narration of (sub)cultures	Punk Grunge	Minimalist Deconstructivist	Juxtaposition of seductiveness and female strength, conformity and defiance
MB	Classicism through a contemporary approach	Surrealist Gothic Feminine	Neoclassic Romantic	Contradiction Comfort
MY	The self in modern femininity	Feminine	Sporty	Mixture Contradiction Design for purpose
NL	Stories oriented to Hong Kong society and life	Hip hop	Sporty	Playful combinations

resources should be situated within the social context in which they are produced to discuss and interpret.

### 3.4.3 Manipulation of Semiotic Resources

Such multimodal phenomenon in clothing has accordingly given rise to a range of possible ways in the manipulation of semiotic resources. One common way is achieved through design principles and Gestalt theories (Davis, 1996; Delong, 1998; Fiore, 2010). The principles of design include repetition, parallelism, sequence, alternation, gradation, transition, radiation, rhythm, concentricity, contrast, emphasis, proportion, scale, balance, harmony and unity (Davis, 1996). The Gestalt theories arising from psychology refer to the perception organization of visual information for the creation of a unified whole. Gestalt's notion follows the basic laws of such as proximity, similarity, closure, continuation, past experience, figure and ground, based on its application to fashion and clothing (DeLong, 1998; Fiore, 2010). These manipulative techniques provide a basic method for designers to create visual effects of clothing. Therefore, they are widely recognized as essential means to make sense of resources, to generalize the patterns of their relationships and to construct the meaning that designers attempt to deliver.

The visual effects designers create are greatly different, which are exhibited in many aspects including the elements they use, the degree of complexity, the types of principle and the perceptual organization. These aspects are considered dependent on design philosophy, personal style and the target market they wish to cater for. However, designers share similar ways in terms of design principles and Gestalt theories during constructing semiotic resources. A striking feature when reading their collections is contrast and balance (Fig. 3.5). These manipulative techniques can be found in two aspects: (1) *semiotic resources*, for example, classic clothing items with contemporary parts, details and elements; conversion of dress code from conventions



**Fig. 3.5** Examples of contrast and balance in designers' Works (Designers: Kay Kwok, Masha Ma, Moti Bai, Derek Chan; Courtesy of Designers' Studios)



to new personalized interpretations; conversion of dress code from masculine items and garment construction into womenswear and vice versa; adoption of contrasting combinations in upper-lower, in-out ways and (2) *signature style*, for example, playful combinations (Nelson Leung); seductiveness and female strength, conformity and defiance (Masha Ma); contemporary classic and soft masculinity (Derek Chan); femininity and masculinity, sportswear and partywear, nature and function (Mountain Yam); experimentation and combination (Kenax Leung); contemporary and classicism (Moti Bai); modernism and futurism (Kay Kwok); natural beauties (Lilian Kan).

We argue that the frequent use of contrast and balance among these emergent Chinese designers is related to two contextual factors: the development of contemporary Chinese fashion and personal attributes encompassing gender, generation, education, activity place as well as design orientation. These designers, who were born around 1985s, are all from the “new generation” (Tsui, 2009). Because of this classification, they partake similar characteristics with regard to educational background, design style, marketing orientation, career development and sociocultural environment, among others. The 85s period is crucial for the research on the development of contemporary Chinese history when it happened to meet social movements: Deng Xiaoping’s modernizing policies of the late 1970s, the burst of the “85 New Wave” and the culmination of the “1989 China Avant-Garde”. During this period, a profusion of different styles and experimental tendencies subsequently emerged, thereby shaping social changes for creators who work in the fashion industry. In the meanwhile, the transformations of society provided contemporary Chinese with more opportunities to gain knowledge from the world, as well as the ability to work independently from the state commission and sanctioned socialist realist style. Under the myriad of social influences, contemporary Chinese fashion exhibits distinctive characteristics, featured by the negotiation of multiple cultures between Chinese and Western, between tradition and modernity. Such complexity within and outside the designers ultimately promotes the emergence of seemingly integrated but actually contradictory presentation in their collections. In this sense, designers from this generation might clarify the spirits of contemporary Chinese fashion, from either the attitude and interpretation towards design or the definition and reconstruction of identity. Such multiple voices from the designers offer sufficient materials for us to delve into meaning potential in fashion and clothing on the one hand, and form useful contextual motivations to demonstrate the essence of this study regarding investigating fashion and clothing through society on the other hand.

#### ***3.4.4 Semiotic Resources Within Social Context***

To date, we have summarized the semiotic resources and manipulative patterns that derive from the analysis of contemporary Chinese fashion designers. As discussed, these are the choices made by designers in relation to the social contexts that surround them. For this reason, the role of context for structuring fashion discourse is well

recognized within the study. Based on previous findings, several contextual patterns have been developed in designers' making-meaning processes: design philosophy, design style and target market. These patterns are considered the fundamental principles that guide the development of creations across designers. In this way, all display elements in terms of qualities, variations and arrangements are selected and orchestrated by designers to make meaning in particular situations and to reflect the properties of the three contextual parameters. Designers always hold differing views towards the three principles; hence, we can also regard the principles as distinctive characteristics that help designers to distinguish one from another.

Such *diversification* into the patterns of design philosophy, design style and target market can be seen as the result of multiple situational contexts. In the present study, situational contexts are interpreted as interest, experience, values, family, education, practice, nature, society, culture, history, trends, technology, innovation, target market and lifestyle. Therefore, the selection of design philosophy, design style and target market is motivated by two broad contextual factors, namely, inside and outside. The environment inside designers determines which choices they prefer to make; the environment outside designers provides the explanations as to why they have made such decisions. On this account, fashion and clothing as social semiotics is an outcome from the intricate contextual interaction of designers' social, cultural, psychological, aesthetic and emotional origins, a point corresponding to Jewitt's (2014) view. It may be assumed here that a designer's origins determine the presentation of fashion and clothing and influence the generation of meaning within.

Despite different ways designers attempt to construct in creations, *common features* have emerged from the analysis. In a similar vein, findings reflect such contemporary phenomena in China as individualization, contradiction, conceptualization and globalization, which are realized through the selections and arrangements of semiotic resources. These general points exactly correspond with Tsui's (2013) study on the evolution of national identity in Chinese fashion. To be explicit, designers are mainly concerned with personal expression during the design process, which can be displayed through theme use, signature style, design inspiration, target market, core message, the choice and manipulation of semiotic components—that is *individualization*; their works are full of remarkable contrast and balance, which elucidates individual characteristics and social environments originally elicited by the development of contemporary China—that is *contradiction*; they choose to construct experience based on conceptual structures, which marks a cultural transformation of design products from concreteness to abstractness—that is *conceptualization*; at the same time, they focus on the worldwide issues and their creations are enormously influenced by Western culture in comparison with Chinese tradition—that is *globalization*. These similar characteristics arising from the process of modernization in contemporary China demonstrate fully the nature and development of Chinese fashion at the moment. Most importantly, designers reiterate a clear yet powerful statement that what they have been doing is to seek a feasible way of reconstructing Chinese identity instead of repeating the past. This thus signals a conspicuous change in the emerging generation (cf. Tsui, 2009, 2013; Wu, 2009), from which the transition of Chinese fashion is gradually marked and a new type of Chinese identity is

accordingly established. As we initiate, the transformations can be retrieved from multisemiotic involvement in terms of nature, selection and manipulation (see Sects. 3.4.1, 3.4.2 and 3.4.3). In addition, a dialectic relation emerges from the findings regarding the interaction between fashion and social system. That is, fashion and clothing illuminates the social system, in turn is illuminated by the social system, an interpretation similar to that of language defined by SFL (Halliday, 1978). Therefore, fashion and clothing is elaborated as social semiotics in the study that works particularly via resources for meaning making. Such multisemiotic approach not only unravels the mystery of meanings behind fashion and clothing through which a close connection between meaning and its social context is established, but also enables us to gain a deep understanding of practical process where designers engage with semiotic resources to create meaning for the audience.

### 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter examines the nature and feature of multisemiotic presentations in contemporary Chinese fashion, together with discussions on similarities and differences that designers produce when presenting clothing in social contexts. Distinct from other approaches, the ideas are built on the basis of SFL and its accompanying multimodality which emphasize the intermingling of text analysis and contextual involvement. In addition, theories from multiple disciplines are incorporated to conceptualize the semiotic resources of fashion and clothing. The findings indicate that fashion and clothing is not only just semiotic but also accurately multisemiotic. A fundamental premise in the study of meaning making within fashion and clothing is to investigate a range of semiotic resources and to explore the interplay among semiotic resources in the orchestration of meanings made. This proposition is established on the fact that meaning emerges from a composite of information from various semiotic sources instead of mere addition of one to another. Most importantly, we realize that communication should be situated within the social context in which a text is generated. On this account, the necessity for theoretical modeling of semiotic resources and their interactions is recognized in order to effectively design, communicate and holistically interpret the complicated fashion phenomena. This in-depth analysis has the potential to enhance literacy skills, facilitate communication strategies and develop contextual awareness. The multisemiotic perspective and frameworks proposed in the chapter initiate a substantial exploration for practitioners and audience in the designing and appreciating of texts, which is particularly vital in fashion communication. Hence, the study may inspire future studies in the field and contribute to the literature in terms of theory, methodology and practice.

## Appendices

See Tables 3.2 and 3.3.

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