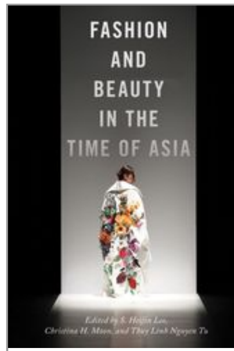

Fashion and Beauty in the Time of Asia

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Print publication date: 2019
Print ISBN-13: 9781479892150
Published to NYU Press Scholarship Online: January 2020
DOI: 10.18574/nyu/9781479892150.001.0001

Cartographic Imaginaries of Fast Fashion in Guangzhou, China

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DOI:10.18574/nyu/9781479892150.003.0010

[−] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter analyzes how Chinese rural migrants' participation in the global commodity chains for fast fashion in Guangzhou intersects with their geographic imaginaries of the "global." Specifically, it examines how migrants come to know the extent of their displacement as low-wage laborers in one of China's "workshops of the world." Through ethnographic description, this chapterreveals how migrant laborers' geographic imaginaries inform the ways in which Chinese migrant laborers come to understand the conditions of their class-based labor and displacement vis-à-vis other market participants along the wider commodity chain. Migrant laborers create mental maps of the commodity chains in which they participate, while they situate their class-based roles along the transnational production chains.

Keywords: fast fashion, displacement, migration, global commodity chains, China

One afternoon, Mrs. Wu, the owner of a small clothing factory located in the heart of Guangzhou's garment district, was diligently working at her sewing station. As she carefully constructed a garment sample using jagged pieces of fabric, she cheerfully sang the praises of Xiao Yu, her favorite and most important client. She stated, "I really respect her. For a twenty-six-year-old woman, I'm impressed by how she has already succeeded in her business. She travels around the world, and she can speak many foreign languages. Xiao Yu has the courage to go out into the world. You have to have courage just like her!" In Mrs. Wu's view, Xiao Yu possessed the unique and enviable combination of cosmopolitanism and local Cantonese identity. As a native of Guangzhou, Xiao Yu left home to attend college in Australia. After only two years of study, her mother suddenly passed away. Shortly thereafter, Xiao Yu returned to Guangzhou to take over her mother's garment business. Since their initial encounter two years ago, Mrs. Wu and Xiao Yu's professional relationship blossomed into a fictive mother-daughter kinship. Xiao Yu's cultural fluidity, transnational experiences, and business acumen led Mrs. Wu to live vicariously through her client's transnational travels and entrepreneurial endeavors.

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In many ways, Xiao Yu's stories of her worldly travels served as discursive projections of a woman Mrs. Wu could never become given her socioeconomic status. She proudly explained to me, "In the beginning, the dresses I produced for her (Xiao Yu) did not sell so well, but look at the number of international orders (*waidan*) she has now!" Indeed, Xiao Yu's experiences of traversing the global circuits of fast fashion contrasted with Mrs. Wu's migrant journeys out of Guangdong's countryside and into the mega-metropolis of Guangzhou as a factory worker **(p. 243)** before becoming a factory owner in her own right.[1] At the age of 18, Mrs. Wu left her native place to labor as a migrant wage worker in one of Shenzhen's massive garment factories while China's market reforms were gradually being implemented. For more than 20 years, Mrs. Wu's life revolved around the factory space. She met her husband in a garment factory and started a family before branching out into small-scale entrepreneurship a few years ago. Since then, Mrs. Wu's role as the factory boss fixed her firmly within the confined space of an industrial workshop that resembled a household garage. Day in and day out, she constructed each and every garment that passed through her hands before they were sent to different corners of the world, only to imagine what traveling to these places would be like. As a witness to the rise of Xiao Yu's fledging business venture into a thriving enterprise, Mrs. Wu imagined herself as a participant in her client's worldly exchanges.

To be sure, Mrs. Wu's friendship with me as a student researcher, which blossomed while I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Guangzhou from 2010 to 2012, also augmented her desire to explore a wider world. When I introduced myself as a Hong Kong–born, Chinese American student from California, who arrived in Guangzhou's garment district to study factory laborers in southern China, she seemed as interested in my experiences as an overseas Chinese as I was in her life as a rural migrant in the city. Oftentimes, Mrs. Wu asked me how flying in an airplane felt, or how long an airplane ride from China to the United States took, demonstrating her curiosity about seeing and experiencing a wider world.

Using these women's life histories as a point of departure, this chapter analyzes how Chinese rural migrants' participation in the global commodity chains for fast fashion in Guangzhou intersects with their geographic imaginaries of the "global." Specifically, it examines how migrants come to know the extent of their displacement as low-wage laborers in one of China's "workshops of the world." Their senses of dislocation are place-based and are evidenced by how they imagine the faraway people and places to which the fashion commodities they produce are distributed. Through ethnographic description, this chapter reveals how migrant laborers' geographic imaginaries inform the ways in which Chinese migrant laborers come to understand the conditions of their class-based labor and displacement vis-à-vis other market participants **(p. 244)** along the wider commodity chain, in which production processes are segmented and workplaces are geographically dispersed. Through their embodied labor in garment manufacturing and exchange, they create mental maps of the commodity chains in which they participate, while they situate their class-based roles along the production chains.[2]

In contrast to Fordist factories where assembly lines are centralized and workers can thus gauge their class-based positions as laborers vis-à-vis their managers across a hierarchical chain of command, low-waged producers in the global fast-fashion industry organize their labor and livelihood across segmented production sites where processes of outsourcing and mass assembly are often rendered invisible. Migrant laborers in southern China, including factory owners, temporary sewers, and sourcing agents, in turn, realize the class-based conditions of their exploitation and displacement through processes of envisioning the cross-regional markets that they serve. Without access to the pathways of transnational mobility that many of their clients

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possess, these rural migrants experience the paradoxical feelings of desire and confinement in the course of their business transactions with the customers and commodities they watch come and go. At the same time, their mapping practices offer migrants a means of negotiating and protecting themselves from demanding and unreliable clients who, in large part, determine the conditions of their low-wage labor. Cartographic imaginaries of the global thus enable rural migrants to orient their class-based positions along the transnational commodity chains that they serve, as they envision the faraway places that lay beyond the physical confines of their wage labor. Through these discursive practices, migrant laborers across the fast-fashion commodity chains in Guangzhou understand their relative positions along the chains of power and inequality.

Migrants' discursive categorizations of the global demonstrate what Frederic Jameson describes as cognitive mapping. In his book, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson describes cognitive mapping as an aesthetic, "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (1990: 92).[3] Cognitive mapping, as Jameson explains, underscores a person's sensibilities and imaginations of the world in connection with or in contrast to a socioeconomic world order brought about by the material conditions of late capitalism. Since **(p.245)** Jameson's introduction of the concept a few decades ago, other scholars have demonstrated how cognitive mapping practices serve as a form of critical engagement, an alternative perspective into the ways ordinary people orient their sense of personhood in relation to their imaginations of the world. As Robert Tally (1996) argues, "alternative ways of (worldly) imagining … is necessary for any pedagogical, not to say political, project that attempts to deal with the present condition (of late capitalism) (401).

In Guangzhou, migrants' experiences and cartographic narratives demonstrate the usefulness of cognitive mapping as an ethnographic method. Rather than taking global commodity chains as heuristic devices fixed concretely upon social formations as they emerge on the ground, this chapter seeks to explore the humanistic dimensions of transnational supply chains by taking cognitive mapping as a form of critical practice. Participants' cartographic imaginaries of the "global" unfold through their affective and embodied engagements with the manufacture and exchange of fast fashion. Aspirations, desires, and fears of exploitation emerge through these engagements, informing their sense of personhood as well as their "place" in an unequal world. Rural migrants' work in linking the transnational supply chains for fast fashion thus entails not only the embodied and affective dimensions of low-waged labor, but also their imagined sense of self in an increasingly globalized world.

Specifically, by appropriating the language of fashion and style, factory owners, wage workers, and sourcing agents in Guangzhou's fast-fashion sector sketch their mappings of the world, a type of embodied engagement that is tied intimately to their bodily experiences of garment exchange and manufacture. Such forms of embodiment include migrants' memories and experiences of the physical pain and sense of confinement they must endure when they work long and intensive hours in order to produce or source clothing for particular fashion markets. They also include female migrants trying on or wearing the stylish clothes that they labor to produce but could never afford to purchase.

Migrants' embodied engagements with the material objects and discursive qualities of fashion style also enable them to map the financial possibilities and risks involved in conducting

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business and wage employment in Guangzhou's factories and wholesale markets for low-cost **(p. 246)** garments. The following ethnographic vignettes trace garment producers' various cognitive mapping practices along the supply chains for fast fashion. These producers, the majority of whom are rural migrants from China's countryside, include factory owners, wage workers, and intermediary agents, who manufacture and distribute low-cost garments to fashion wholesalers around the globe. Ethnographic descriptions show how garment producers and distributors in Guangzhou chart worldly aspirations, economic opportunities, and financial losses that emerge through their encounters with clients from abroad. Through their **(p.247)** discursive cartographic practices, migrants situate their class-based labor across the transnational organization of supply chains for fast fashion. In short, they try to make sense of the transregional dynamics of power and inequality within which they find themselves.

Figure 9.1. Photo of a typical *jiagongchang* informal workshop in the garment district of Guangzhou, China.

Photo taken by author.

Imagining the World's Supply Chains for Fast Fashion

As a case in point, Mrs. Wu would often try to locate her own position as a small-scale factory owner along the transnational supply chain for fast fashion by describing the distances to which Xiao Yu's merchandise traveled. Even though Mrs. Wu's role as a garment manufacturer physically confined her within the spatial limits of the small factory where she and her husband and older son lived and worked, she and her workers frequently charted conceptual maps of the global supply chains they served. The fabrics, magazine photos, clients, and garment samples that drifted in and out of the factory floor shaped the workers' understanding and imagination of the places to which the garments traveled.

For instance, Mrs. Wu once informed me that Xiao Yu's garments were distributed to various wholesale markets throughout Bangkok and Southeast Asia. She speculated that the dresses passed through the hands of many agents and wholesalers across city, township, and national boundaries. Mrs. Wu then proceeded to draw a map of Xiao Yu's traveling dresses. She explained, "In Thailand, the dresses travel (*zou*) from large markets to the smaller ones" (*you da huo zou dao xiao de*). In her view, smaller markets branched out from larger markets, with Guangzhou as a primary production hub in Asia. As Mrs. Wu stated, "This city (Guangzhou) is the center (*zhong deem or zhong dian*) of garment and fashion production."

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Mrs. Wu further elaborated how the commodity chains that linked smaller to larger wholesale markets determined the scale of Xiao Yu's profits. She stated, "She (Xiao Yu) relies on production volume as well as geographic distance for the successes of her business." Mrs. Wu explained that as a direct wholesaler, Xiao Yu, relied on selling large volumes of clothing abroad, rather than solely on a diversity of styles in local markets in order to achieve business success. With each passing of hands, the prices of the garments would skyrocket, underscoring the speculative dynamics of the transnational exchange of fast fashion. To **(p.248)** be sure, as Mrs. Wu explained, Xiao Yu's participation in the global exchange of fashions required her to travel to countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and New Zealand. Her overseas experiences afforded her the privileged position as a globe-trotting agent and fashion entrepreneur.

As Mrs. Wu described Xiao Yu's business to me, I was surprised to hear her description of Guangzhou as the hub of the world's garment and fashion production, while neglecting to mention other metropolises such as London, Milan, Tokyo, New York, Paris, or Shanghai as popular centers of the fashion world. I wondered whether she implicitly drew a distinction between garment manufacturing and creative design, so as to place Guangzhou as the hub of garment manufacturing while reserving more cosmopolitan cities as the global cores of fashion design. Over the course of my research with Mrs. Wu, however, I began to realize that through her everyday experiences in garment production, the conceptual distinctions she drew among apparel design, construction, and manufacture had always been blurred.

In fact, in the two years that I observed her work in the factory, she repeatedly emphasized the conceptual labor involved in running a full-scale garment factory. For example, she once complained to me about the growing numbers of clients who brought new, unfamiliar designs to copy. She and her husband faced the challenge of constantly imagining and sketching new patterns that corresponded to the latest designs. During the off-season (*dam gui*), I would often catch Mr. Wu, the husband of Mrs. Wu who labored as the in-house sample-maker, hover his entire upper body over his worktable, while busily constructing original garment patterns and experimenting with new T-shirt and dress designs which he would eventually bequeath to his wife to serve as his model and muse. I also observed the couple advising their clients, including Xiao Yu, on how to best reconstruct the garment samples they wished to replicate, as well as which fabric types would be appropriate for a specific pattern or design.

Based on his wide-ranging knowledge and expertise in garment construction and manufacture, Mr. Wu identified himself as a designer (*shejishi*), though far from the globe-trotting, internationally trained, and cosmopolitan fashion designers most people would commonly imagine. "I'm a designer," Mr. Wu declared with utmost certainty during our **(p.249)** initial introductions. Indeed, the thought-labor entailed in their work as garment manufacturers compelled Mrs. Wu to describe her work as conceptual. As she once emphasized to a friend visiting the factory for the first time, "Our work requires much thinking and planning. You must first think about what you have to do, and how you're going to do it. Our work is conceptual."

The Wu's self-identifications as garment designers as well as manufacturers made them distinct from other factory owners that I encountered around the Zhongda garment district. Whereas most factories in the area oversaw merely one aspect of garment production, the Wus' factory served as a full-scale garment operation, which coordinated most production processes under one roof. These processes included sample-making, garment assembly, and packaging. Their work experiences and skills motivated them to brainstorm other entrepreneurial pursuits so as to occupy other market niches related to garment design and manufacture.

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In fact, Mr. Wu once acknowledged that he was learning to become a fashion designer through experimentation and other methods of self-teaching. In another instance, I overheard Mr. Wu brainstorm with a client from the Shi San Hang wholesale market in Guangzhou about the pros and cons of creating a line of counterfeit goods. Since competition among stall owners in the market had become increasingly fierce, the client was struggling to sustain his fledging business. With an air of resignation, he sought Mr. Wu's advice regarding the potential risks and rewards in pursuing a counterfeit fashion line. Upon overhearing the men's conversation, Mrs. Wu openly rejected their ideas by declaring, "Of course, that's a bad idea! By the time you copy someone else, that trend has already passed. Everyone knows that you have to sell original designs to make yours stand out!"

Indeed, the passing of globe-trotting clients across the shop floor, along with the transnational circulations of fabrics and garments in and out of the factory space, shaped how the couple imagined and positioned their roles as manufacturers within the transnational circuits of fashion production and exchange. By discursively claiming Guangzhou as the world center of garment manufacturing, the Wus paradoxically acknowledged their displaced positions as migrant laborers along the fashion and garment production hierarchy, while using their skilled **(p.250)** labor, hard work, and client networks to connect themselves with these transnational circuits of garments and fashion.

These connections enabled the Wus to extend their social worlds beyond the physical confines of their factory. For example, during the two years that I worked with the couple, they bequeathed countless samples of their work for me to bring back to America and show to my peers. Besides their immeasurable generosity, they prided themselves on the fact that the products of their unwavering dedication and hard work were gifted to faraway worlds beyond the spatial limits of the factory and beyond their emplaced roles as garment manufacturers. Through their everyday encounters with traveling clients, garments, and designs that floated in and out of their factory space, they adopted the discourse and practices of garment production and fashion-making in order to imagine and construct themselves as part of a wider world.

Imagining Spaces: Global Encounters on the Factory Floor

By appropriating the discourse of fashion style, factory wage workers also imagine the countries to which the garments are sent.[4] These discourses serve as the cultural signifiers through which they situate their wage labor and their migratory displacements across the global circuits of commodity exchange. Workers' practices of cognitive mapping via the discursive and material language of fashion shed light on the ways in which the spatial fragmentation of commodity production and exchange via supply chains shapes migrants' embodied encounters with the material objects linked to garment manufacture and exchange. In turn, these encounters augment rural migrants' spatial and subjective senses of displacement as factory workers in Guangzhou.

For instance, one afternoon, Mrs. Wu was working among the sewers at one of the workstations along the back wall of her factory. She was carefully attaching ruffled sleeves to a stack of girls' multicolored dresses. While she was working, I asked Mrs. Wu to which country the girls' dresses were being shipped. Mrs. Wu replied that the dresses would be sent to Xiao Yu's clients in Thailand and Singapore. She then added that these dresses were better suited for markets in Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore, because women in those places preferred bright colors, such as red, pink, blue, and yellow. In contrast, as Mrs. **(p.251)** Wu explained, Chinese consumers would deem these patterns and colors too bright and eye-catching and would prefer colors that were a bit darker and more subtle. Besides, as Mrs. Wu continued, consumers in the

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Southeast Asian markets preferred the so-called *mo nu zhuang*, or the matching mother and little girl outfits, a look that Chinese consumers would view as odd and even comical. Mrs. Wu implied that Chinese consumers tended not to prefer these styles. To be sure, Mrs. Wu and her workers were well versed in the consumption preferences of women across Southeast Asia, since they saw themselves as consumers of the very same clothes that they produced. Some workers would even wear some of the clothes that they manufactured.

Later that day, Mrs. Wu continued to explain that these flashy and eye-catching trends and styles offered Xiao Yu the opportunity to extend into the realm of women’s fashions through her experience of designing children’s clothing. She speculated that although Xiao Yu’s client base remained in Southeast Asia, her clients’ growing business and knowledge of the markets might enable her to expand farther across the geographic reaches of the world. Through Mrs. Wu’s experience in garment manufacture, she developed her personal knowledge base about the distant countries, markets, and peoples to which these garments traveled. Her impressions of Thailand were further concretized by her statement, “People say that it doesn’t cost much to fly to Thailand from here, but I have never had the chance to go. I only know the place based on the colors of these dresses.” Mrs. Wu’s revelation attested to the fact that she situated her displacement as a migrant laborer through her imagined experience of airplane travel, an opportunity she might never realize.

In another instance, I was sitting along the left-hand side of the front work table, slowly snipping loose threads off of stacks of finished girls’ dresses. An older female worker from Guangxi province was sitting closely behind me at the end station, lightly elbowing me every now and then as her hands swayed monotonously front and back, while guiding the fabric underneath the rapid movements of the needle on the sewing machine. Yang Yang, the teenage worker from Hunan, sat down at a surge machine beside the woman to sew lace borders onto a batch of light blue denim skirts that had dark blue flower trimmings embroidered along the hem. Suddenly, she gushed with excitement, “These dresses must be for Africa! I know Africans like loose-fitting styles (*pang* **(p.252)**

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pang de).” She then pressed the garment against her body in order to imagine how she would look if she had it on. I then asked how she knew this, and she responded that she had seen African styles before (possibly because she had previously encountered similar pieces in other garment factories).

Figure 9.2. Scene of street life in the urban villages that comprise the garment district of Guangzhou.

Photo taken by author.

Yang Yang’s passing comments left an impression on me, because her statement revealed how she situated the various fashion markets and places across the globe through the language and materiality of clothing styles. They also showed how the structural dynamics of displacement among low-wage migrant laborers served to create Yang **(p.253)** Yang’s discursive categorization of what she imagines “African” styles to be through the language of fashion and materiality. Her comments impressed me in particular, because Mrs. Wu informed me that these denim dresses were meant for markets in Southeast Asia, not Africa. Yang Yang’s comment signified the disjunctures or gaps in the workers’ conceptual understanding of the supply chains they critically served. Garment workers imagined but perhaps would never discover for whom the clothes were meant and where the garments were going. Yang Yang’s comment made clear to me how influential the spatial segmentation of mass manufacture across transnational supply chains operated in shaping workers’ impressions and categorical ordering of the world within the physical confines of the factory workshop.

Mapping Limits: Charting Guangzhou’s Wholesale Markets

Factory workers’ imaginative descriptions of faraway places also reveal the risks they encounter as they intensify their participation in the broader circuits of fast-fashion production and exchange, particularly when they face instances of labor exploitation. More specifically, their struggles in mass producing garments for the global supply chains for fast fashion inform the workers of the hypercompetitive and money-oriented environments of some of the world’s wholesale markets without even having to step foot inside these market spaces. Such struggles are frequently marked by bodily pain, which include exhaustion, headaches, and other physical ailments, which migrant workers must endure when they labor to keep up with the timely demands of garment mass manufacture. Their everyday experiences in low-cost garment manufacture lead them to constantly negotiate their sense of immobility as low-wage workers and their desires for physical and social mobility as small-scale factory owners.

In her study of Fuzhounese transnational migrants to the United States, Julie Chu (2010) uses the notion of emplacement to highlight Chinese rural villagers’ feelings of being out of place as a result of being immobile or “stuck in place,” while other villagers in their native places move

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abroad. She challenges theories of displacement that focus on the departure of a people from a literal or an imagined “home.” Such conceptual focus, she argues, overemphasizes migrants’ condition of **(p.254)** nostalgia for a lost “home” and their realization of their impossible return. Similarly, garment workers in Guangzhou experience the conditions of emplacement as they remain confined within the factories, only to watch clients and commodities come and go. More importantly, workers gradually begin to realize that their socioeconomic conditions of immobility leave them vulnerable to undue exploitation by transnational and domestic clients who regularly come and go on the factory floor. Their sense of emplacement underscores the relationality between the subjective conditions of mobility and immobility.

In their efforts to minimize their exposure to market risks and exert control over the production process, they assess market risks based on the geographic extensions of various commodity chains. More specifically, they evaluate the risks of disappearing clients, unpaid orders, and exploitative working conditions based on the geographic markets they serve. As manufacturers and sourcing agents in one of China’s hubs for the world’s fast fashion, they must frequently calculate the limits and possibilities of their specific roles as producers of fast fashion based on the specific supply chain they operate. More specifically, they must negotiate the risks and exploitative effects of low-wage labor. Discourses of unpaid orders or “*zou dan*” (literally meaning fleeing orders), along with the languages of quality and style, reveal the uneven terrains that constitute the world markets for fast fashion through the eyes of those who make and manufacture the very goods upon which the supply chains depend.

For instance, the Wus must frequently assess the risks of entering a business relationship with an unfamiliar client, particularly those who operated their businesses within Guangzhou’s hypercompetitive wholesale markets such as Sha He or Shi San Hang.[5] These long-standing markets sold clothes that were often exported to markets across East Asia and Southeast Asia. Because of the extremely high rents that were demanded within the buildings, the markets often featured high turnovers of small-scale shopkeepers, transnational clients, and low-cost commodities that were exemplary of fast fashion’s so-called race to the bottom. In light of Sha He and Shi San Hang’s notoriously competitive atmospheres, the Wus frequently refused clients whose garments were sold directly to these wholesale markets in their efforts to minimalize their exposure to labor exploitation. For the Wus, the practice of mapping Guangzhou’s **(p.255)** wholesale markets based on indexes of price, quality, and monetary return became matters of market survival.

The couple’s reluctance stemmed from their experiences of being mistreated by demanding clients who once worked out of the Shi San Hang market. One husband and wife duo once commissioned the Wus to produce batches of women’s trendy skirts to sell at the Shi San Hang market. They submitted daily orders for women’s skirts, each with different styles and at small volumes of two to three hundred pieces at a time. Because new styles required the labor-intensive work of drawing patterns and sample-making, the clients’ flood of orders demanded disproportionate time and effort of more than 16 hours a day of labor, even though the return for the workers’ hard work was exploitatively minimal. (The owners received about 5 RMB per garment while workers were paid only 2–3 RMB per piece). In addition to these oppressive conditions, the clients rotated around the factory space in order to monitor the workers’ movements day in and day out. In one instance, the clients penalized the Wus by deducting their pay without negotiation after flaws were discovered in one of their batches. After about three

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months of toil, Mrs. Wu admitted to the heart-breaking struggles of their back-breaking labor. She stated, “We can’t endure this any longer. We can’t eat. We can’t sleep.”

After this bitter experience, the Wus learned to filter their prospective clients’ requests by mapping the wholesale markets to which their garments were sent. Their strategy became apparent to me one afternoon when a male prospective client approached the factory doors to inquire about a garment sample. He carried a bag containing a hot pink dress with bright golden buttons attached symmetrically as decorations on its front centerpiece. The man asked whether Mrs. Wu could create a sample based on the dimensions of this garment along with specific modifications. As he tried to describe the modifications he pictured in his mind, Mrs. Wu interrupted him and suggested that he instead bring in a sample that displayed his specifications, so that she could visualize his requirements and contribute her input on the design. She then proceeded to ask him where he intended to sell his merchandise, adding that they refused any orders to the Sha He and Shi San Hang wholesale markets.

In reply, the man asked why Mrs. Wu would care whether he sold his goods in the Sha He or Shi San Hang markets. Mrs. Wu stated, “Because **(p.256)** the clothes that are sold there are too cheap! We can’t make any money with each garment priced at 3 RMB. That price doesn’t even cover the cost of hiring workers here. We pay them (the workers) at least 5 RMB. What can we make with that low price?!” The man then asked what kind of orders the Wus’ factory handled. Mrs. Wu immediately answered, “Exports (*waidan*).” Afterward, he left without a word, though Mrs. Wu continued a barrage of complaints about producing garments for the Shi San Hang and Sha He markets. She repeatedly grumbled, “Right, that’s why we don’t do business with any clients dealing with Sha He and Shi San Hang. We can’t make a living with those prices.”

Shortly afterward, another potential client, a younger, more petite-sized man with glasses, arrived with a cream and burgundy long-sleeved, lace woman’s dress. Before the man had a chance to explain his specifications, Mrs. Wu immediately jumped in by asking, “Where do you intend to sell your goods (*shemme huo*)?” The man replied that he intended to sell his goods overseas to Thailand. Immediately upon hearing the word Thailand, Mrs. Wu softened her tone of voice and cheerfully replied, “Well, the dresses that we’re making here are going to Thailand.” She then went on to explain that the dresses they produced were for children, though they manufactured women’s clothes as well. As this prospective client elaborated his specifications, Mrs. Wu beckoned him to wait upstairs in the second floor living space until Mr. Wu returned from his grocery trip. Mrs. Wu’s welcoming tone contrasted sharply from her diffident stance toward the previous client.

When a third prospective client came in that day with a long, floral-patterned summer dress, Mrs. Wu approached him with the same biting question about where he intended to sell his clothes (*shemme huo*). When the stranger replied that he worked in the Sha He market, Mrs. Wu immediately declined his offer, saying that they refused any business that dealt with Sha He. Baffled, he stumbled out of the factory floor, confused and dumbfounded by Mrs. Wu’s abrupt refusal in handling his requests. As Mrs. Wu turned away from him, her gaze met mine. She immediately flashed a smile, comically acknowledging her hasty rejection of the perplexed man.

After this series of encounters, I reflected upon Mrs. Wu’s links between her work in the factory and the geographical locations of the various wholesale markets around Guangzhou. Since the prices **(p.257)** of the garments ultimately determined the cost and labor of manufacturing them and vice versa, her conceptualization of these market places was mapped along overlapping indexes of price, quality, rent, and geographic locations. As a former wholesaler from Shi San

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Hang had previously explained, insiders within the local garment industry knew that the Sha He market featured garments with the lowest quality at the lowest price. Moreover, insiders of Guangzhou's garment industry often complained that the exorbitant rents at the Sha He and Shi San Hang markets contributed to the hypercompetitive business practices in these markets, including the extreme practice of undercutting garment prices among the stall owners. Thus, the low prices of Sha He and Shi San Hang clothing in turn determined the garment processes by squeezing the profit margins of the workers and manufacturers' labor.

The quick turnover of the styles in these markets added pressure to the Wus' already tedious manufacturing process to the point that Mrs. Wu claimed that they could not eat or sleep if they continued to manage their orders for Sha He and Shi San Hang. The Wus' experiences of physical stress and mental exhaustion on the shop floor led them to associate particular styles of clothing with the geographical supply chains that they served. As the Wus experienced firsthand, wholesalers who operated out of the Shi San Hang market frequently attempted to limit their overhead costs by maintaining strict oversight over the Wu's production processes. Clients often stayed with the Wus into the late hours of the evening, overseeing how each garment was assembled and packaged so that every fraction of their cost was tightly controlled. As a result, Mrs. Wu believed that Shi San Hang orders were simply too difficult to handle, a common struggle for low-waged producers of Guangzhou's fast fashions.

Mrs. Wu's preference for producing exports (*wai dan*) over garments for the local wholesale markets revealed the couple's strategic orientation toward specific market niches that enabled them to manage their work lives in the face of harsh exploitative practices. Producing exports not only connected them to wide-ranging networks of diverse markets, but geographic distance also demanded larger production volumes and slower turnaround time for different styles. As they once explained to me, the Wus preferred a steady flow of export orders which for the **(p. 258)** previous year had supported their business. Mrs. Wu also attested that Xiao Yu's orders for girl's dresses had been the most manageable to produce, since many of her orders were familiar styles or copies from previous orders, to which industry participants often referred colloquially as *fan ban* (or turnover of samples). As she explained, *fan ban* or in this case repeated orders were the most manageable types of orders for them since they would not have to spend time and effort in familiarizing themselves with new or different garment styles. As garment manufacturers, the Wus also received higher returns from exports, since these goods often demanded relatively higher prices.

The Wus' categorizations of markets based on prices, styles, and geographic locations demonstrate how their mapping of the global market places for fast fashions determines their strategies for minimizing the painful effects of labor exploitation while sustaining their dreams of entrepreneurship. As migrants originating from China's countryside, their connections to the wider world are enabled by their participation in the diversity of fast-fashion markets as low-end and small-scale garment designers and manufacturers. However, their precise role as manufacturers along the hierarchical garment production chain emplaces them within the confines of the factory, while exposing them to the vulnerabilities associated with market fluctuations and various forms of labor exploitation. Their strategies for market survival in the face of these market inequalities reveal how manufacturers negotiate the tensions produced by their desires for mobility and by the emplacements they confront as low-wage factory laborers. Consequently, they conceptualize the world markets for fast fashions and position their roles

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within them by situating garment styles, clients, and market places within the cultural geographies of commodity chains.

Charting Losses: The Discourse of “Zou Dan” and Conflicts over Quality

In other instances, Chinese sourcing agents, or distributors, who are positioned further up the supply chains for fast fashion, similarly draw mental maps of the customers and geographic markets that they serve. These distributors often operate as intermediaries between Chinese manufacturers and transnational consumers along the fashion supply **(p.259)** chains. As agents who are positioned along the intermediary segments of the supply chains, distributors must often balance their relationships between their foreign clients and their Chinese manufacturer-employees. This work involves coordinating the delivery of production orders with their clients’ expectations and demands for timely output and quality control. Consequently, distributors must formulate certain categorizations of the various markets they serve through the discursive ordering of place, quality, and style in order to assess the financial risks and gains of a business relationship with a transnational wholesaler. Through their discursive categorizations of place, quality, and styles, distributors strategically position themselves based on careful approximations of temporal cycles of trends, price, and client credibility. As in the case of factory owners and wage workers, mapping practices similarly reveal the uneven terms of exchange upon which the global markets for fast fashions are situated.

Fanny, an experienced sales representative for a long-standing Chinese trading company, sources women’s contemporary shoes to consumers in markets all over the world. As a wholesale agent, she negotiates with countless overseas and domestic clients who travel to Guangzhou in order to browse through the expansive showrooms displaying the latest designs in women’s low-cost shoes. At my initial meeting with her, she immediately lays out a mapping of the world markets for women’s shoes, primarily determined by geographic regions. As she explains, there are four main consumer markets for the world’s shoes for women. They are: (1) Africa, (2) North America, (3) Middle East, and (4) Europe. These regional distinctions index the discursive categorizations of styles, clients, and business practices that comprise these distinctive markets.

For example, Fanny explains that her company prefers working with clients who serve the European markets. In contrast to the United States, the markets for women’s shoes in Europe seem comparatively stable and profitable for her company’s business interests. In particular, she describes her company’s involvement with the annual trade shows in Dusseldorf and in Milan. As she elaborates, participation in the trade shows enables her company to achieve greater exposure in the global markets for fashion. Her company uses these trade shows as a form of marketing and advertising in order to attract new clients. Later in the **(p.260)** conversation, she elaborates that since the company relies heavily on its long-term clients with whom it already has familiar relationships ranging from four, six, to ten years, the company has recently deliberated whether participation in these trade shows is a worthwhile investment.

She further elaborates that styles for the European market are simpler and more sophisticated, so they require lower production costs, thereby allowing higher profit margins. Interestingly, her designation of Europe refers exclusively to Western Europe, particularly Spain, Italy, Germany, and France. She contrasts these countries with those that comprised the former Soviet bloc. According to her, these markets remain unstable primarily due to government corruption and the black market. Interestingly, she cited the case of the Ukraine, whereby businesses often have to deal with sudden changes in government policies that pertain to the taxation of imports, including women’s fashions and gold. At any time, corrupt governments may disallow the

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importation of certain commodities such as gold or raise exorbitant taxes to the point of rendering the importation of such goods unprofitable.

Fanny stresses that her company avoids cooperating with American clients, because of the high risks involved in entering into business deals with them. She describes a recent case in which the company has lost a male American client, with whom they had positive relations for nearly three years. During the course of those three years, he has successfully placed three orders of three to five containers of shoes, with nearly 40,000 pairs of shoes in each container. As a general policy, this company does not usually assist clients in shipping the containers once the goods are lifted onto boats and once they depart from ports in China. Goods are then declared Free On Board, designating the client's financial responsibility of the products.[6]

As Fanny explained, the American client dutifully submitted all his payments for his first two orders. However, during the course of his last order, the client suddenly disappeared (a practice colloquially referred to as *zou dan*), neglecting to submit nearly 60 percent of his bill for the last five containers of shoes (nearly 200,000 pairs). As she described, "We simply could not understand what happened. He paid us properly during his first two orders, but after his last order he just disappeared (*zou dan*). I just don't know why." His disappearance coincided with the US credit crisis that began in 2008, so she speculated **(p.261)** that the downward fluctuations of the global market must have negatively affected the client's shoe business. As a result of this troubling incident, Fanny's company lost nearly 60 percent of profits from the client's order. As a precaution, the company now refuses to accept credit and maintains a cash-only policy toward overseas clients, particularly those from the United States.

Though fragmented and incomplete (she remained reticent about the African and Middle Eastern markets), Fanny's discussion on the regional specificities of the fast-fashion markets underscores the difficult business strategies and market environments that contextualize the particular imaginaries of place. Her company's position as a wholesaler for shoes in the global market requires Fanny to occupy the critical vantage point of assessing market risks by conceptually situating the regional markets for shoes based on geography, client groups, and business practices. In a way, these variations in turn make up her company's conceptual mapping of market uncertainty along spectrums of market volatility.[7]

Fanny and her company's direct encounters with clients' demonstrations of unaccountability, disappearance, and sudden financial losses shape their own business practices in navigating the uneven conditions and practices of trust-building and exchange. These events also inform Fanny and her company of the world's changing market landscape, inducing them to strategically calculate the constraints and possibilities of their participation with these regional markets from the position of intermediary distributors along the fashion supply chain. For example, the company attempts to hedge unpredictable clients and unstable market conditions by requiring 40 percent deposits and by mandating a cash-only policy. In addition, they handle fewer quantities of shoe orders for new clients and bill the clients for the production costs at the end of each stage of the production process rather than bundling the costs into a single lump sum. Furthermore, Fanny stresses her company's long-standing relationships with clients based on face-to-face interactions.

My conversations with other suppliers and distributors for garments and shoes echoed similar sentiments regarding the risky business of dealing with overseas clients, particularly those from Europe, the United States, and Hong Kong. One manufacturer who operated a denim factory in Xintang, China's so-called jeans city, once explained to me the **(p.262)** challenges he faced

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when foreign clients used the quality of their merchandise as justification to reduce payments or to abscond from paying altogether. He observed that since the global economic slowdown in 2008, overseas clients frequently disappeared without submitting full payments or canceled orders on short notice. He explained, “If clients say that the quality is bad, then they just simply won’t pay.”

He recalled one specific client from France who requested a voluminous order of women’s jeans online via the website Alibaba. While in the process of preparing his order, the European consumer market slowed down, inducing the client to realize that he could not sell his merchandise in time to catch up with the fashion seasons. Fearful that he could not cover his financial obligations, the client returned all the goods to the manufacturer, citing poor quality in the dyes or wash of the jeans. The client subsequently refused to pay the remaining 60 percent of the 500,000 RMB deposit, even though production of the remaining jeans had already begun in full swing. The client eventually disappeared, leaving only a fictitious company name and a non-existent P.O. box number. Left in mounds of debt from the costs of producing those jeans, the manufacturer remained near bankruptcy for the next four to five years.

After narrating his story to me, he retorted, “I wish we (as manufacturers) would someday be in the position to flee from an order!” His comment reflected the vulnerabilities he faced as a garment manufacturer along the hierarchical supply chain for fast fashions. Despite the signing of contracts, he acknowledged the harsh reality that there was no guarantee that clients, particularly those from overseas, would pay as promised. In order to minimize the risk of fleeing orders, the manufacturer subsequently required overseas clients to pay in increments every three months before production in the factory commenced.

During the course of my research, similar cases of disappearances, unaccountability, and fleeing orders from overseas clients occurred, highlighting the ways in which the discourse of quality became pretexts for renegotiating the terms of exchange and financial obligations, often through unfair and sometimes coercive means. One friend who worked for an American wholesale company based in Guangzhou, which designed and sourced shoes for well-known retail chains in the United States, described a case in which a high-end department store chain deliberately canceled an order on short notice after it failed to meet a retail deadline. **(p.263)**

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After deliberating on a collection of women's shoes for some time, the department store chain missed the trend cycles for particular styles. With full knowledge of its miscalculations, the department store chain canceled its production orders for a large volume of shoes, leaving the wholesale company responsible for paying the entire costs of production to the local manufacturers. In an effort to protect its own financial liabilities, the wholesale company simply canceled all the orders it placed with the local manufacturer on short notice while complaining about the poor quality of its shoes. Enraged by these displays of unaccountability along with the accumulation of outstanding balances, owners of **(p.264)** the local factory later sent a number of hired security guards and workers to the offices of the American shoe company in order to protest, using picket signs and rally slogans. At one point during the demonstrations, some of the hired guards barged through the office doors of the American company, threatening to inflict acts of violence upon targeted bosses and employees.

Figure 9.3. Fashion commodities on display in a wholesale market for fast fashion in Guangzhou, China.

Photo taken by author.

Conclusion

In conclusion, industry participants' cartographic imaginaries of the world's supply chains for fast fashion in Guangzhou lead many to realize their physical and subjective displacement as migrant laborers. By appropriating the language of fashion, migrants map indexes of place, price, quality, and style in order to situate their class-based positions along the supply chains as well as to imagine the destinations to which fashion commodities are sent. These transregional connections highlight the relational conditions of fixity and mobility, as well as displacement and emplacement, in which migrant laborers in Guangzhou find themselves as they observe and speculate on the clients, objects, and stories that move around them.

Migrants' cartographic narratives also demonstrate the significance of cognitive mapping as an ethnographic method. This chapter challenges the conceptualization of global commodity chains merely as heuristic devices by seeking to explore the humanistic dimensions of transnational supply chains. Specifically, it takes cognitive mapping as a form of critical practice, whereby low-wage producers and migrant laborers understand their labor as well as their relative positions across the fast-fashion commodity chain. Participants' cartographic imaginaries of the "global" emerge through their affective and embodied engagements with the manufacture and exchange of fast fashion. Their experiences of bodily pain, immobility, and financial loss inform their sense of personhood as well as their "place" in an unequal world. Migrant laborers' struggles in linking the transnational supply chains for fast fashion entail not only the embodied

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and affective dimensions of low-waged labor, but also their imagined sense of self as producers and consumers of fashion in an increasingly globalized and unequal world.

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Notes:

(1) I use “fast fashion” as a descriptive term to denote a historically specific form of production that lends insights into the subjective dimensions of human labor characteristic of supply chain capitalism (Tsing 2009). For more conceptual analyses of fast fashion, see Sprigman and Raustiala (2006), Horning (2011), and Moon (2014).

(2) To be sure, Chinese migrants’ mapping practices may be roughly interpreted as a form of creative agency in relation to the global capitalist economy. My reading of the migrant laborers’ cartographic mapping activities attempts to extend this practice beyond the notion of agency by presenting a more nuanced picture of the everyday struggles that these workers confront. Cartographic practices do not assume that migrants, as individual actors, take on full agency in resistance to a world capitalist system. (The term, agency, tends to suggest this.) Rather, I underscore the moments of ambivalence and negotiation among migrant laborers who must balance their desires in going out into the world with the social constraints that keep them emplaced upon the factory floor. These moments emerge most clearly, as I demonstrate, when migrants participate in the transnational circuits of clients and commodities.

(3) Since the introduction of this concept several decades ago, literary critics and other scholars of cultural studies have disagreed on Jameson’s precise definition of the term. They have debated the extent to which Jameson’s use of the term adequately describes an individual’s sensibilities and imaginations of the world in connection with or in contrast to a socioeconomic world order brought about by the material conditions of late capitalism. Moreover, scholars have expressed critiques that question the extent to which cognitive mapping can potentially be counter-hegemonic by tapping into what Jameson calls a group’s political unconscious (Tally 1996).

To be sure, these critiques have underscored the dilemmas of representation characteristic of the postmodern condition, which pertain to the questions of who is doing the representing and who is represented. Collectively, they challenge Jameson’s conceptualization of cognitive mapping as a form of critical practice that is linked to a world-scale capitalist order (Tally 1996). Beverly (1996), for example, argues that cognitive mapping remains bound up with historical

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relations of domination such that the analytic takes away any form of self-representational authority from the figure of the subaltern (ibid.). In a similar vein, Bartolovich (1996) criticizes Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping based on his contention that a totalizing vision of utopia that undermines the global system of late capitalism excludes marginalized groups from adequate representation. Those from the global South, as Bartolovich points out, may not find a utopic totality as liberating as those from the developed world. He thereby highlights the unevenness of late capitalism as a world order, thereby demonstrating the impossibility of Jameson's totalizing vision of resistance or utopia. In an attempt to extend Jameson's cognitive mapping beyond the urban landscapes of the developed world, Bartolovich suggests the notion of the itinerary in lieu of mapping to emphasize people's conditions of uncertainty and displacement over even lines and stable relations (Tally 1996; Bartolovich 1996). Though these debates have elucidated the political and theoretical stakes involved in Jameson's critiques of late capitalism, I approach the study of transnational capitalism not as a totalizing entity per se, but rather as webs of social relations that have historically been organized as global supply chains. Furthermore, I echo Robert T. Tally's (1996) call to link literary theory with historical formations in order to cast a humanistic perspective onto what Anna Tsing (2009) calls supply chain capitalism. To this end, I attempt to employ Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping as an ethnographic method within the context of transnational subcontracting in southern China. By using Tally's (1996) conceptualization of cognitive mapping as a critical practice, I demonstrate the ways in which migrant workers' imaginations of faraway places across the world are linked through their participation in the mass manufacture of low-cost garment exports across global supply chains.

(4) In recent years, anthropologists have increasingly theorized fashion and adornment as social practices that critically intersect with notions of the self and of the body (Entwistle 2000). Primarily focused on marginalized groups that are conventionally excluded from Euro-American standards of fashion, their works have conceptualized the body as a site of contestation and cultural difference. Wilson, for example, celebrates the dreams and fantasies that fashion elicits among its participants. She writes, "(Capitalism) manufactures dreams and images as well as things, and fashion is as much a part of the dream world of capitalism as of its economy" (Wilson 2003: 14). Meanwhile, Jones (2007) demonstrates that certain veiling practices within Indonesia's Islamic fashion culture enable women to feel more pious and modern at the same time. While Wilson and Jones emphasize the fantasies and religiosities that certain adornment practices generate, other scholars underscore the anxieties, alienation, and violence often associated with clothing. Macaraeg (2007), for example, links clothing practices to the ornamentation and display of weaponry across various historical contexts. While Stoler (2002), Niesson, Leshkowich, and Jones (2003), and Tarlo (2007) note that particular clothing and adornment practices have enabled violence and alienation through the exercise of colonial power, Woodward (2005, 2007) explores how some women's desire to "look good" and "feel right" through clothing paradoxically produces anxiety about what they should wear for certain occasions. Although these studies illuminate the significance of fashion and adornment as practices of embodiment, their works tend to focus on the consumers of fashion rather than on the producers, particularly low-waged factory workers across the Global South. In southern China, garment laborers construct notions of the self through their bodily engagement with the mass manufacture of fashion garments and accessories. They situate their roles as migrant laborers along the supply chains for low-cost fashion vis-à-vis their globe-trotting clients through the materiality of the styles and clothing that they mass manufacture along the assembly line.

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Furthermore, Barthes's (1983) seminal book *The Fashion System* introduced a semiotic reading of fashion by deconstructing the networks of relationships and symbols that constitute the fashion industry. Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes conceptualized clothing as a system of signs that communicate meanings. By following Saussure's approaches in distinguishing the signifier from the signified, Barthes demonstrates that meanings attached to garments depend upon specific historical contexts. He thus argues that communication through clothing is a matter of individual expression, and not a systemic object of study (Carter 2003).

(5) Sha He and Shi San Hang are two of Guangzhou's largest wholesale markets. Thousands of small-scale, informal workshops like the Wu's factory across the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region in southern China manufacture clothing that is sold in these markets. Domestic and transnational wholesalers and retailers arrive here to source the trendiest low-cost fashion of the season. Garments are sold in bulk and resold to other retail and wholesale markets across China, South Korea, Japan, and countries in Southeast Asia. Many of the clothes are eventually passed onto markets across Europe and North America.

(6) As a side note, I have learned that the company usually charges clients a 40 percent deposit before the goods are shipped and then charges the remaining 60 percent sum once the client receives his or her shipment in his or her home country.

(7) At the time of this conversation, the political and economic instabilities in the Ukraine during 2014 had not yet become prominent in the international media. Therefore, at that time, Fanny assumed that the socioeconomic environment in the Ukraine was more stable than that of the United States.

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