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What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?

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For more than a decade, on catwalks in Paris, Milan, and New York, and in living rooms from San Francisco to London, Asia has been chic. Asian stylistic accents and lifestyle elements are ubiquitous, from the mandarin collars, cloth buttons, and sarong skirts on the racks at department stores, to the meditation beads and faux jade amulets adorning college students' bodies, to the shoji screens, sari curtains, and feng shui decorating tips that lend character and harmony to suburban homes.

Part cultural appreciation and part cultural appropriation, the Asian Chic trend has been criticized by many scholars as Orientalist, for both its images of an exotic Asian Other and the political economy that grants a fashion industry dominated by non-Asians the power to produce and

profit from those images. At the same time, a significant number of designers and consumers in Asia appear to have embraced the trend. Put simply, Asian Chic has become chic in Asia. This phenomenon demands critical scrutiny, both of producers' and consumers' motivations for engaging in what otherwise seems a demeaning trend, and of the broader symbolic and material repercussions of their stylistic choices.

To explore what it means for Asian Chic to become chic in Asia, we examine two episodes, one from Vietnam and one from Indonesia, in which local designers successfully marketed Asian Chic styles to local consumers. In each case, we argue that those who partook of the Orientalist trend adopted a distanced, self-Orientalizing perspective on the charms of their imagined ethnic heritage. The producers and consumers we describe seem to have derived concrete personal, cultural, and economic benefit from actively participating in Asian Chic. At the same time, the dress choices that they intended as signs of modern cosmopolitanism risk being interpreted by others as essentialized expressions of timeless ethnic traditions or "Otherness." How can we understand the effects of this gap between intentions and outcomes? We argue that when dress is used in a self-Orientalizing manner, how viewers interpret the intentions behind the use depends on the subject position of both the dresser and the audience. Combining performance theory's emphasis on self-making through display with practice theory's focus on the relationship between class status, capital, and taste, we propose a model of *performance practices* as a way of tracking how the interaction between intentionality and positionality shapes the effects of self-Orientalizing.

Asian Chic, Orientalism, and Self-Orientalization

Fashion demands innovation. It therefore is not surprising that an industry dominated by North Americans and Europeans would look to other cultures for the novel and exotic. What is surprising is that Asia has proved such an enduring and prominent source of inspiration. Nehru jackets in the 1960s, 1980s Japanese modernism, 1990s geisha chic, and the Buddha T-shirts and cheongsams of the Spring 2003 collections (see Figure 1) are just a few examples of Asia's seemingly inexhaustible ability to lend flair to designers' creations.

What are the effects of these myriad images of Asia parading down catwalks and in fashion magazines? While fashion columnists (see, e.g., Gault 1997; Hamilton 1993; *People* 2003) and the occasional academic see in Asian Chic an exciting, creative eclecticism (Steele and Major 1999), a growing number of scholars decry the phenomenon as a contemporary form of Orientalism. As famously articulated by Edward Said (1994 [1978]), Orientalism refers to a colonial-era system of knowledge that defined East and West as fundamentally opposite, with the East perpetually inferior and exotic. Using a semiotic approach (cf. Barthes 1983

Figure 1

A cheongsam-inspired dress featured in the Roberto Cavalli Spring 2003 collection. Photograph by FirstView.com.



[1967]), scholars have analyzed Asian Chic fashions as meaningful signs that, interpreted by a non-Asian audience as unproblematic representations of Asianness, breathe new life into Orientalist stereotypes. Not only does Asia emerge as a timeless, spiritual, and exotic alter to the West, but cultural, historical, ethnic, and regional distinctions disappear into the undifferentiated category of “Asian style.” Asia becomes symbolically domesticated, simply a trend to be consumed (Chu 1997; Kalra and Hutnyk 1998; Kondo 1997; Maira 2000; Narumi 2000).

The semiotics of Asian Chic's "fantasy versions of the other" (Kalra and Hutnyk 1998: 341) certainly demand critical unpacking. Yet these images do not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, as some scholars of post-colonial studies compellingly argue, the profound Orientalism of Asian Chic extends beyond its images, to the racialized political economy through which those images are produced (Kalra and Hutnyk 1998; Narumi 2000; Puwar 2002). When, for example, Madonna wore *mehndi* (henna body art) in the late 1990s, some South Asians condemned her for adulterating a sacred custom by removing it from its authentic cultural context. Although sympathetic to their position, several scholars have countered that the "proper context" argument risks a reverse essentialism in which the meanings of Asian cultural items are fixed and definable only by Asians (Dwyer and Crang 2002; Kalra and Hutnyk 1998; Maira 2000; Puwar 2002). Instead, Madonna's packaging of South Asian culture for a predominantly non-Asian audience is Orientalist because it reflects and reproduces what Nirmal Puwar identifies as "white privilege" (Puwar 2002). Madonna's race (and celebrity) gives her preferred access to economic, social, cultural, and political capital so that she can define what is attractive and meaningful about the South Asian Other. Similarly, Roberto Cavalli achieves wealth and fame by clothing Hollywood beauties in his interpretation of Chinese cheongsams. The implication is that powerful outsiders (typically elite designers and celebrities in global capitals) have the aesthetic sensibility to assess the charms of Asian cultural styles in ways that Asians cannot. This is strikingly reminiscent of colonial-era Orientalism, which held that colonized groups could not recognize the value of their own cultural, historical, and natural resources and therefore needed Western archaeologists, ethnographers, historians, and connoisseurs to discover and preserve this value (Said 1994 [1978]).¹ In the past, this stance rationalized Western political domination. Today, it justifies a system of cultural and economic power in which experts such as Madonna and Cavalli profit by transporting Asianness across cultural borders.

Race and class collude in this process. While some scholars have noted that the popularity of Asian Chic can trickle down to expand commercial opportunities for Asian designers (Bhachu 2003; Dwyer and Crang 2002), the latter's benefits are hardly comparable. Tailors in New York's Chinatown must sell cheongsams for 1/20 the price of a Cavalli, and Asian designers remain largely anonymous. Even Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo, who have been acclaimed as artistic geniuses and hence proof that Asians can succeed in fashion, do not actually make money on the collections they sell outside of Japan (Narumi 2000: 322). The problem is not simply that white people claim to know Asia, but that the Orientalist political economy of the fashion industry bestows their claims with an aura of authority that translates into profits, while foreclosing both possibilities for most Asians. The result is a "sanitized encounter with an imagined Asian 'other'" (Banerjea 2000: 265) that serves the interests of

multinational capital by both generating profit and erasing, subduing, or containing alternative, potentially more threatening, aspects of cultural and racial difference (Kalra and Hutnyk 1998).

Given that the forms of difference that generate this privilege and profit have been the very signs for which marginalized immigrant communities in Europe and North America have been ostracized, such as ethnically marked dress, then the broader commercial trafficking in difference suggests that individual dress choices are not neutral moves, but ambivalent acts that can reproduce or resist power relations. This dynamic raises two separate, but related, questions. First, does the celebration of Asian Chic in Asia participate in the problematic sanitizing of difference, as it seems to have done in much of Europe and North America? Second, how can analytical sense be made of the personal and political effects of these style choices?

When Asians reinterpret, produce, and consume the same kinds of essentialized images of what is presumed to be their own heritage, they would appear to be remaking themselves to match Western fantasies of the Oriental Other. They are, thus, engaging in self-Orientalizing. We cannot, however, assume that self-Orientalizing merely replicates or extends Orientalist knowledge/power. Rather, it may be possible for Asians to approach, produce, or use Asian Chic with the intention—and perhaps even the outcome—of countering Orientalist stereotypes. Self-Orientalizing mimicry might, as Homi Bhabha (1984) suggests, open up a critical space that exposes the contingent foundations of Orientalism. This could be an empowering move, an attempt to reclaim the authority to define the meanings associated with a style or aesthetic element.

In suggesting potentially agentive or resistant aspects to self-Orientalizing, we do not mean to celebrate the phenomenon. Rather, our intention is to follow the lead of other scholars who have highlighted the ambivalence and ambiguity surrounding self-Orientalization (Dirlik 1996; Kondo 1997; Ong 1999; Scherer 2001; Tobin 1992). Through their examinations of state, elite, intelligentsia, and middle-class discourses of identity, these accounts suggest that self-Orientalizing can be a privilege that enhances the status of those who employ it by signaling their familiarity with global discourses, such as the ideas of fashion and style with which we are concerned. At the same time, in appearing to accept the tenets of Orientalism, self-Orientalizing risks adding to the apparent truth of those claims. Self-Orientalizing is therefore a fraught endeavor, a way to internalize stereotypes, to counter them, or to reproduce them, often an uneasy mix of all simultaneously.

Performance Practices

How can we make sense of these potentially contradictory outcomes of self-Orientalization? Most scholars have responded to this question by

attending to the precise outcomes of specific self-Orientalizing moves, such as the Singaporean government's celebration of Asian Values (Dirlik 1996; Ong 1999) or Comme des Garçons' campaign to sell Japanese businessmen a "Japanese suit" that fits their racialized bodies and identities better than the dominant British suit (Kondo 1997). While these accounts are nuanced and instructive, we wish to move the discussion of self-Orientalization beyond the details of particular instances to develop a broader theoretical and methodological framework for assessing and comparing its effects. We call this approach *performance practices* because it combines insights about dress, agency, taste, and status from performance theory and practice theory, while at the same time addressing gaps in each.²

In contrast to semiotic readings that locate the meaning of dress in the item itself and its systemic relationship to other items, proponents of performance theory view dress choices as meaningful role-play by intentioned actors. Based on a Foucauldian approach popularized in academe in the 1990s through the work of Judith Butler (1990), performance theory views the self as constituted, rather than expressed, in the act of performance. Butler's ideas have been appealing because they appear to allow a glimmer of hope to remake the self against normative, disciplinary, and oppressive constraints (Morris 1995). This possibility has been particularly attractive to anthropologists for it highlights the details of agency and context on which ethnographic fieldwork also focuses. Yet, as Butler reminds us, the success or failure of a given performance as critique relies on multiple, preexisting factors. It requires a critical awareness on the part of the performer and an audience that both understands and believes the performance. These factors are often formed well before the performance itself, through structural constraints that classify the performer before she takes on her role. Some observers have noted, however, that interpretations of Butler's work have tended to focus more on the open-ended possibilities of performance, at the expense of systematic attention to the factors outside the subject that produce both her stage and her performance (see, e.g., Morris 1995; Nussbaum 1999). The somewhat ironic result is that interpretations of performance theory too easily celebrate the voluntary attempts of subjects to make their own meanings and downplay structural constraints.

These structural elements are what practice theory has sought to address. Through attention to those elements of life that masquerade as purely personal expression and taste, scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972], 1984) and Michel de Certeau (1984) have suggested that much of what we think of as daily practices operating far outside the reach of social class or material structure are in fact important sites for the experience and reproduction of those structures. Practice theory, therefore, places more weight on structural constraints than does performance theory.

In lived experience, few examples fit an either/or selection between these two perspectives: self-Orientalizing dress choices are neither simply the

pure expression of a resistant performer (intentionality) nor the reproduction of structural inequality enacted through the medium of the subject (positionality).³ Rather, they are complex performances shaped from their inception to their reception by the interplay between intentionality and positionality of both performer and audience. By focusing our attention squarely on this interaction, the framework of performance practices allows us to assess the impact and meaning of self-Orientalizing dress choices. Whether a dress performance achieves a performer's goals—particularly the status-enhancing ones of displaying familiarity with global cosmopolitan style, benefiting financially from the Asian Chic trend, exposing the contingency of Orientalist stereotypes, or seizing control over construction of images of Asia—depends on how accurately the audience for the performance reads the performer's intent. These readings, in turn, depend on the relative positionality of performer and interpreter, as defined by factors such as gender, ethnicity, and class. To demonstrate the utility of this perspective, we offer two accounts—the first from Leshkovich's fieldwork in Vietnam and the second from Jones's research in Indonesia—that chronicle how Asian designers came to popularize self-Orientalizing Asian Chic styles for domestic consumers. In the analysis following these cases, we compare and interpret them through a *performance practices* perspective. This allows us to see that as Asian Chic has become chic in Asia, international East/West imbalances fostered by Orientalist fashions have been reworked through self-Orientalist fashions into domestic differences based on class, ethnicity, or locale.

Tourist Chic Becomes Local Fashion (Leshkovich)

During the 1990s, market-oriented reforms and increased openness helped Vietnam become the world's newest exotic tourist destination.⁴ As travelers flocked to experience this previously inaccessible land, Vietnamese merchants scrambled to supply tourists with “authentic” souvenirs. One such item was a woman's two-piece outfit crafted from either raw silk or thin jacquard. The outfit consisted of a short-sleeved or sleeveless long blouse with a mandarin collar, knotted buttons, and two side slits, worn over loose, wide-legged pants (see Figure 2). A staple of upscale tourist boutiques in Saigon's hotel district,⁵ these supposedly traditional outfits were in fact rarely worn by Vietnamese women. Instead, they were crafted specifically to appeal to foreigners' preconceived stereotypes of Vietnamese culture, themselves the product of Asian Chic trends. I was therefore surprised and intrigued when, over the course of two years of fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City, I encountered an example of the reappropriation of Asian Chic by Saigonese consumers.

In 1994, I became acquainted with Lan, a widow who runs a clothing boutique in Saigon's tourist district. Most of her profits came from selling “traditionally” styled shirts, pants, suits, and sleepwear to French,

Figure 2

The silk suit popular among tourists in Ho Chi Minh City, featuring a mandarin collar and knotted buttons. Photo by John L. Buckingham/College of the Holy Cross.



American, and Japanese tourists. Over the course of fifteen years, Lan had developed her business into a shop that employed thirty workers on a piece-rate basis. She had saved enough money to send her two sons to the United States to study business. Before my next trip to Vietnam in 1995, I contacted Lan's two sons in Texas to offer to bring gifts or letters to their mother. They sent me a light but bulky package which I later learned contained six identical white silk women's outfits, of the style described above, in various sizes. I asked Lan why her sons would have me carry halfway around the world items that were commonly available throughout Saigon. Lan answered that she needed to know what styles Americans currently thought of as Vietnamese.⁶ According to her sons, these outfits were made by Vietnamese-Americans in the Los Angeles area and were marketed in local Asian "ethnic" boutiques, where they were characterized as Chinese clothes. Within two weeks, Lan's shop in downtown Saigon featured displays of these suits sewn in various fabrics and colors.

While the Asian Chic outfits in Lan's shop were enormously popular with foreign tourists in 1995, most Vietnamese women would not wear them. I was frequently told that the outfits were too Chinese, too un-Vietnamese.⁷ Fashion-conscious urban women said the outfits looked like cheap pyjamas they would wear around the house or peasants would wear in the fields, and they could not understand why wealthy foreigners would deem them fashionable suits worth US\$20–30.

I was therefore shocked upon a subsequent trip in 1996 to find hanging in a stall in Saigon's central marketplace dozens of silk blouses nearly identical to the ones I had brought to Lan. The clothing stall specialized in women's dresses, suits, tops, and leggings designed by the owner, Mai, who adapted the styles from American fashion magazines and catalogs sent to her by friends and relatives in the United States. The stall catered almost exclusively to locals, so I asked Mai why she had decided to design an outfit closely resembling the tourist fashions which Vietnamese women claimed not to like. Mai explained that she was intrigued by tourists' interest in these garments and their appearance in foreign fashion magazines, so she had purchased a suit from a boutique like Lan's and began experimenting with ways to modify the design. She shortened the tunic, narrowed the sleeves, and nipped in the waist. She kept the cloth buttons, the mandarin collar, and the side slits. The resulting style, sold as a blouse rather than a suit, became a hot seller, in large part because Mai was able to convince her customers of how popular such items were on the international fashion scene. According to Mai, her mostly young, middle-class customers commented that the blouse flattered their figures. They were delighted with what they saw as a trendy new Vietnamese twist on a Chinese style. When I suggested to Mai that my research suggested that her "Chinese" blouse was more like a Vietnamese twist on a Vietnamese-American version of American perceptions of Asian Chic, she laughed.

Selling the Orient in Urban Indonesia (Jones)

In Indonesia during the late 1990s, a handful of elite fashion designers enjoyed success by selling batik silks through exclusive urban boutiques that offered wealthy Indonesian consumers the opportunity to dress simultaneously in luxury and tradition. One such designer, Josephine Komara, professionally known as Obin,⁸ has attempted to educate customers and the Indonesian public more generally about what she feels is a dying appreciation for truly handmade textiles, particularly batiks.⁹ Obin argues that as a by-product of enthusiastic pursuit of national development, Indonesian consumers have become too enamored of mass-produced batiks made with synthetic fabrics and dyes, squeezing batiks made by hand and with natural dyes out of the mainstream. She perceives textile arts as both archaeological artifacts and living art forms, and chides Indonesian consumers for lacking sufficient knowledge of them. “We currently live in a developing country, and I have children—I do not want to pass on a product that is *degenerated* to the next generation. Sure, modernization can happen, but we must maintain our traditional values, not lose them,” explains Obin (*Dewi* 1997: 61).

Customers in her Jakarta boutique often receive her impromptu sales-pitch-cum-college-lecture on the importance of the handmade versus the mass-produced, which she describes as “cloth” versus “clothes.” In addition to arguing eloquently for the beauty and importance of traditional styles, Obin regularly wears her own designs, typically a loose-fitting silk blouse with knotted buttons, and a silk sarong. Considering that these styles are usually only worn by Indonesian women on special occasions requiring traditional dress, Obin’s daily wear of these ensembles imparts an impression that she has walked out of a sepia-toned photograph.

Even as Obin celebrates and mines the past to rediscover an authentic Indonesian identity, her professional success within Indonesia has been in part the result of her ability to reflect on Indonesia as an outsider. As she described to me, two sets of experiences contributed to her ability to see batiks as both heritage and style in a way that other Indonesians cannot. First, as an Indonesian of Chinese descent, Obin grew up with constant reminders that she was a minority in her own country.¹⁰ Her Chinese identity continues to influence consumer responses to her collections. I regularly heard women tell me that although they could not afford Obin’s pieces, they also found her designs too “Chinese” in style, referring to the loose-fitting silk blouses (rather than the tight-fitting lace *kebaya* typically worn with sarongs) and knotted button closures (see Figure 3).¹¹ Nonetheless, these same women often purchased more affordable reproductions of Obin’s designs in batik stores priced for the middle class.¹²

A second set of experiences contributed to Obin’s ability to exoticize Indonesian design elements into “fashion.” Her work outside of Indonesia has positioned her to reflect on what she had felt was just the everyday, the taken-for-granted, and the soon-to-die-out in Indonesian textiles.

Figure 3

Models wearing sarongs, *selendang*, and blouses from the 2000 Bin House collection. The loose-fitting silk blouse contrasts with the tighter lace blouse (*kebaya*) considered traditional for women. Photo courtesy of *Femina* magazine.



Much of Obin's early success, and the majority of her profits even now, come from two non-Indonesian markets: Japan and Singapore. Although she positions her styles as authentic reproductions of Indonesian tradition, some key changes distinguish her designs from historically traditional styles. Her batik wraps are a good example of the double consciousness with which she plays in designing and selling her collections. During the European and American fashion for wide, luxurious wraps in the late 1990s, she expanded her version of the typically narrow shoulder cloth (*selendang*) to several times its original width and showed it worn in a variety of new ways. Yet her approach to mixing colors and styles was more plausibly accepted by customers less familiar with the origins of the styles. Her early sales within Indonesia were to American and European expatriates in Jakarta, perhaps more easily enamored of her romantic

representations of the past and less aware of the ways in which these styles might not feel authentic to many Indonesians themselves. By the mid-1990s, however, Obin's client base had expanded to much of the local Jakarta elite, particularly through the influence of wealthy young women who found Obin's narrative about turning the past into contemporary fashion appealing.

(Re)Dressing Orientalism

These two examples highlight how Vietnamese and Indonesian fashion entrepreneurs use their knowledge of global Asian Chic trends to craft and market new versions of supposedly traditional clothes to the local consumers to whom these styles purportedly belong. Partaking of this trend requires the adoption of a distanced perspective, a self-Orientalizing gaze through which one assesses oneself as others might. What are the effects of this move? In the brief analysis that follows, we explore these cases as performance practices in which differences in position interact with agency to shape the meaning of Asian Chic at key stages of its adoption in Vietnam and Indonesia: from the motivation to partake of the trend, to the ways these performances are interpreted by others, to the repercussions of these readings for domestic and global power relations.

Designers such as Obin, Mai, and Lan were uniquely positioned to avail of, interpret, and profit from Asian Chic trends in ways that others could not. Through their designs, they narrate, perform, and sell their expertise to their consumers, expertise that they recruit through privileged access to financial and cultural capital. Their visible display of these connections makes others inclined to perceive their styles as appealing, trendy, and fashionable. Mai and Lan benefit from overseas kin networks that connect them to regimes of taste outside of Vietnam and position them as mediators between the foreign and the local. For Lan, these networks allow her to secure a niche in the competitive world of tourist boutiques. For Mai, her marketplace displays of knowledge about foreign trends performatively construct her as an expert. When she produces self-Orientalizing styles such as the Saigonese Chinese blouse, consumers are inclined to pause and reinterpret them as something attractive and new. Someone with less social, cultural, or economic capital might not be given this latitude. Similarly, Obin blends nostalgia for the past with an authority about current international trends to narrate her designs to her multiple audiences. Her expertise and self-reflexive awareness of what in Indonesian styles should be revived or celebrated (and what to ignore) comes from her access to knowledge about styles acquired through privileged connections. Like Mai and Lan, she has access to cosmopolitan standards of style, particularly through personal travel and her international clientele.

While positionality makes Obin, Mai, and Lan's performances of fashion expertise credible and status-enhancing, it can just as easily produce misreadings of intent within each domestic context. In Indonesia, the elite celebration of silk batiks such as those designed by Obin involves reading dress choices by other Indonesians as inferior. Obin's own concern with maintaining an Indonesian appreciation for traditional textiles rests implicitly on a critique of those Indonesians whom she feels have ignored their heritage. In this critique, middle-class urban consumers who choose to wear either mass-produced batiks or basic business dress are making conscious, but bad, style decisions. Although they may in fact find Obin's wraps too expensive, Obin's critique of them rests on their taste, rather than on their means. The result is the impression that the only way to self-Orientalize successfully is through considerable expense.

Strikingly, in an elite Indonesian discourse that claims women no longer fully appreciate the beauty of traditional textiles, women who do wear handmade batik sarongs on a daily basis remain remarkably invisible. Rural, often poor women, and wealthier, urban traders are both associated with this type of daily dress (see, e.g., Brenner 1998). Yet their wearing of batik sarongs is characterized as simply utilitarian and habitual, rather than a self-conscious style. Indeed, it is their very lack of self-awareness about wearing such clothes everyday that can make their appearance seem quaint and charming, but never intentionally fashionable. These women can serve as design inspiration for domestic fashion experts, much as an imagined "Asian culture" can inspire Western designers of Asian Chic. Their disadvantaged subject position, read as uninterested in or incapable of knowledge about fashion, limits them from the possibility of self-Orientalizing at all. Rather, they serve as romanticized internal Others, a necessary foil to the self-Orientalizing designer or consumer's performance.¹³

In Vietnam, the Saigonese Chinese blouse's identification with both tourist fashion and styles that urban Vietnamese view as peasant or Chinese clearly signals it as a hybrid, modern creation without any easily recognized traditional counterpart. In fact, neither peasants nor Sino-Vietnamese currently wear clothing that could be identified as direct precursors for this Asian Chic trend.¹⁴ The identification is more symbolic: just as a mandarin collar signifies "Asia" to Europeans and North Americans, so does that same collar, combined with frog closures and loose pants, denote "peasant" or "Chinese" to Saigon's urban middle class. While Vietnamese in the early 1990s might have been eager to distance themselves from such markers of internal Otherness, for both peasants and ethnic Chinese occupy disadvantaged positions relative to urban Vietnamese, by the late 1990s, the self-confidence of an increasingly secure urban middle class gave young women the latitude to appropriate these styles.¹⁵ Ethnic Chinese, peasants, and urban women whose class status was not as secure, however, eschewed the blouse. They seemed, quite astutely, to recognize that their wearing of this blouse would be interpreted

by better-heeled Saigonese consumers, not as signs of their adoption of modern fashion trends, but as proof of their traditional Otherness.

Such nuances in status position might not be appreciated by foreign outsiders. Although not as immediate a presence as Indonesians or Vietnamese, foreigners are an important audience, precisely because one motivation of self-Orientalizing performances may be to assert that one shares the foreigners' perspective on oneself and is hence equivalent to them in status. Japanese tourists who purchase Obin's collections, however, are not likely to perceive them as trendy, but as traditional batiks. At the same time, Obin's fluency in English and comfort in cosmopolitan metropolises allow foreigners to identify her as a creative agent driving the recuperation of tradition. Positioning is also paramount in interpreting the effects of the Saigonese Chinese blouse. The consumers who were likely to partake of these styles were themselves young, successful members of Saigon's middle and professional classes. When they appeared in these fashions, they were not likely to be interpreted by other Saigonese as peasants or household drudges. Instead, they would be granted the suspension of interpretive conventions, and their self-Orientalizing would more likely be read as a sign of their fashion savvy. To the foreign businesspeople who employ some of these women, the tourists who might glimpse them on the street or in a hotel, or the reader who might encounter their picture in a magazine snapshot of daily life in Saigon, the Saigonese Chinese blouse would not elicit surprise. Such viewers, inclined to see Vietnamese women as wearing traditional clothing and unable or disinclined to attend to nuances of individuation and status difference between them, would read these blouses as quintessentially Vietnamese. Asian Chic stereotypes about Vietnamese women and fashion as timeless and traditional would be reinforced. In both the Vietnamese and Indonesian cases, global differences complicate accurate or status-enhancing recognitions of intent.

Conclusion

Asian Chic fashions in Europe and North America arguably deploy differences in ways that appear to perpetuate Orientalist knowledge and power. Yet this process is multivalent, it can occur in multiple locations and by multiple agents. In this article, we have argued that designers and consumers in Asian countries participate in these trends to mixed effects. To make sense of the ambivalence and ambiguity of self-Orientalization, we have outlined a model for viewing dress choices as performance practices. By tracking the interaction between intentionality and positionality, we can determine how access to material, cultural, and social capital motivates the production or consumption of fashion, shapes the readings of specific dress performances by various kinds of audiences, and influences the material and discursive consequences of these readings for both performer and audience.

As these two cases reveal, when Asian Chic travels to Asian countries, its self-Orientalizing popularity does not have any singular meaning. These trends can provide genuine local pride in the face of perceived global fashion invasion. They can also help to market locally produced styles to a global audience. Yet those who are able to see and deploy these styles as both local pride and global cachet are uniquely positioned to create and benefit from these trends. By contrast, other individuals who do not have the same access to knowledge or forms of material and cultural capital do not enjoy the same interpretation of their dress choices. Rather than being read as confident or creative agents of their appearance, their dress is either critiqued as detrimental to national interests or read as a natural extension of their ethnic and class position. As a result, whether the celebration of Asian Chic styles in Asian countries garners symbolic or material power for those who employ them, whether it resists or reproduces Orientalist fantasies of Asian fashion—in short, what it means for Asian Chic to become chic in Asia—depends on who is dressing and who is looking.

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Notes

1. This logic motivated scholarly production of books, museums, exhibitions, and cultural performances to represent the colonized Other. See, for example, Anderson (1991 [1983]); Cohn (1983); Mitchell (1989); Norindr (1996).

2. For a more thorough discussion of this combined approach, see Jones and Leshkovich (2003).
3. Other scholars have noted the need to capture a middle ground between structure and agency not fully addressed in either one of these approaches. See, for example, Morris (1995) and Ortner (1996).
4. The number of foreign visitors climbed from approximately 130,000 in 1990 to 2.14 million visitors in 2000 (*Saigon Times Magazine* December 6 2001).
5. The city of Saigon was officially renamed Ho Chi Minh City following the end of the war in 1975. Saigon remains, however, a common designation for the city.
6. Lan was later eager to borrow my copy of a *New York Times Magazine* spread (Hamilton 1993) on Indo-chic, a Vietnam-inspired trend in Western *haute couture*, so her workers could construct samples based on the pictures.
7. Part of Vietnamese women's disdain for "Chinese" garments stemmed from longstanding ethnic tension over Chinese entrepreneurial success and suspicion of their political loyalties. See, for example, Tran Khanh (1993).
8. Other designers in this group include Poppy Dharsono, Edward Hutabarat, Baron Manangsang, Ghea Panggabean, Iwan Tirta, and Biyan Wanaatmadja. Each of these designers has a unique style and clientele, but all sell to the wealthy upper classes, have spent time abroad, and use batik and/or embroidery to produce the local color elements of their collections.
9. Batik is a wax-resist dyeing process long associated with royalty in Java and Bali.
10. Ethnic tensions formed during the colonial and nationalist periods have marked Chinese Indonesians as marginal citizens. See, for example, Winters (1996).
11. For a discussion of the history and contemporary uses of Indonesian national dress, see Jones (2003); Sears (1996); Suryakusuma (2001).
12. Blouses and sarongs sold at Bin House, the name of her boutique, can range from 750,000 to nine million Rupiah, or approximately US\$100 to over US\$1,000.
13. According to Tarlo (1996), consumption of "ethnic chic" in India involves similar elite distancing.
14. While peasant and working-class women do sometimes wear suits with tops and pants cut from the same fabric, the style, particularly that of the blouse, is quite different from that of the tourist suit. Likewise, Sino-Vietnamese women might consider mandarin collars or cloth buttons a traditional item, but most now wear dress much like that of ethnic Vietnamese.
15. Similarly, styles drawn from ethnic minority groups in the northern uplands have become increasingly popular among ethnic Vietnamese in the capital of Hanoi.

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