

China Fashion Power - Fashioning Power through South-South Interaction: Rethinking Creativity, Authenticity, Cultural Mediation and Consumer Agency along China-Africa Fashion Value Chains

My ERC project China Fashion Power investigates how, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's global power is manifested, negotiated, and resisted in people's daily life in a South-South setting using fashion as an exemplary case. Fashion is recognised as a significant economic force globally and one of the most poignant indicators of cross-cultural exchange. By critically examining China-Africa networks of fashion production, trade and consumption, this project will theorise how fashion is created, circulated, valued, and consumed in and through Global Souths Value Chains (Guangdong-Nairobi-Maputo), dissecting complex dynamics and expressions of power.

Using a multi-disciplinary, multi-method, multi-sited, and multi-scalar approach, the following questions frame this project and its four subprojects: 1) How are everyday fashion products designed and produced in China for African markets; 2) How do Chinese and Africans interact to value and trade fashion products for Kenyan and Mozambican markets; 3) How and by whom are cultural differences negotiated and mediated in the marketplace; and 4) What values, meanings and "power" do African consumers derive from consumption, and what ideas and constraints are imposed on them?

This project's major contribution is threefold. Theoretically, it will move beyond a Western-centric epistemology to map the chains, restraints and materialities of China's power expansion through fashion. Methodologically, this project will synergistically collect and triangulate empirical information along complete South-South commodity chains through multi-sited ethnography, semiotic and visual analysis, individual and focus group interviews, and wardrobe archival studies. Empirically, it will provide evidence of how Chinese-African fashion industries impact upon the social, cultural, economic and affective lives of African consumers in the context of increasing globalisation, digitalisation, consumerism, and China's ambition abroad.