



The Hidden Heads of Hongkong's Street Sweepers

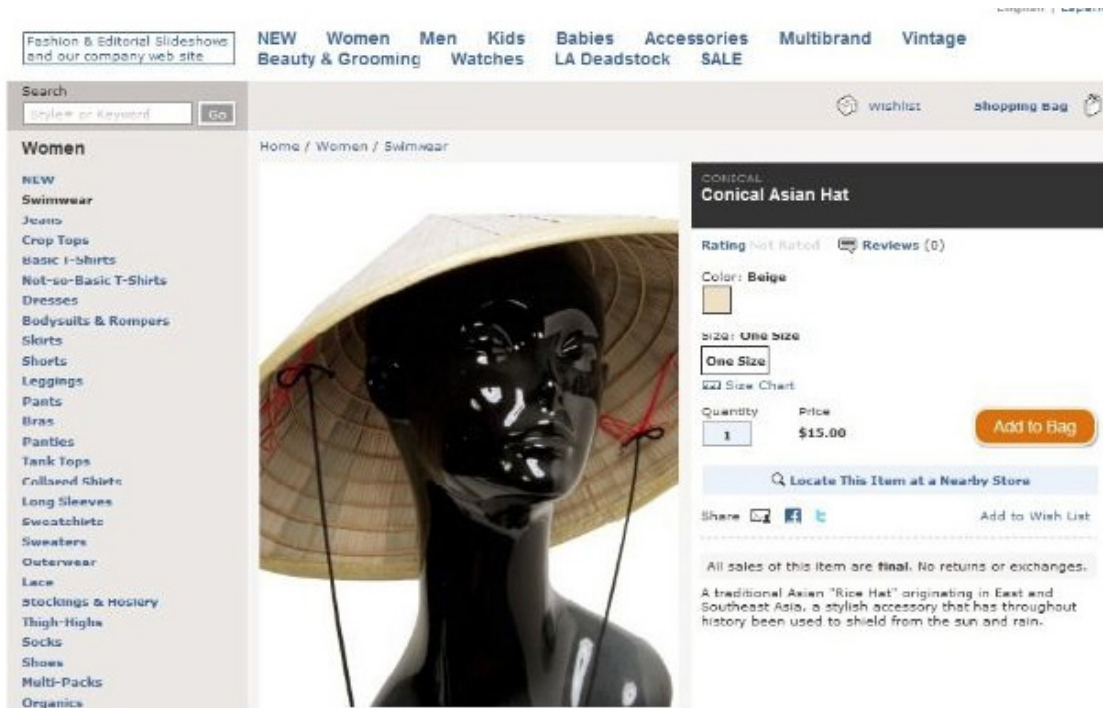
by Regine Steenbock



In Western culture the conical "rice paddy hat" is an iconic shorthand to indicate Asia.



In 1977 – shortly after the Cultural Revolution – Yves Saint Laurent released his "Chinese Collection". Its signature piece was the Asian conical hat, combined with other accoutrements evocative of the noble appearance associated with the bygone empire.



In 2011, when the retailer American Apparel (at this time already discredited for the company's exploitative working conditions) tried to launch the conical hat as a fashionable item in their clothing range, Asian Americans accused the company of behaving in a racist and offensive manner.

The conical hat was imported into America by impoverished Chinese immigrants, who had been coming to the US since the mid-19th century, wearing it for their work outside. But as it was related to the lowest social status, associated with cheap labour, it always remained separated from the American clothing culture. And for the overseas Chinese Americans – a lot of them descendants of those early immigrants – the "coolie hat" obviously remained a symbol of their humiliating treatment as working slaves in the diaspora.



(Street Sweepers in Zhuhai/Guangdong and Nanning/Guangxi, 2016)

Visiting South China in 2016 and 2017, I met the conical hat in the greatest numbers and in myriad variations, all worn exclusively by farmers and members of the lower working class.



Photo by Mr. Afong]

[Hong-kong,

The Afong Studio, active from 1859 to around the 1940s, was one of the early photographic studios in Hongkong, especially serving a Western clientele. The name “coolie” was introduced by Westerners as a derogatory term for those indentured labourers and working slaves, who immigrated from Asia to the West.



(Meizhou/Guangdong province, 2017)



(Meizhou/Guangdong province, 2017)



(Guangzhou/Guangdong province, 2016)

Pale skin remains an aesthetic ideal in modern China. But as the conical hat is attributed to the lower working class, “white-collar workers” and people from the upper classes would never consider wearing them.



(Women in working uniforms, serving some golf players, Zhuhai/Guangdong Province, 2016)



(Mai Po/ Hongkong, 2016)



(Hongkong Central, 2016)



(Hongkong Central, 2016)





The center of Hongkong seems to consist almost only in shopping malls stuffed with international fashion brands. Surprisingly there still remain some very small niches with ordinary “Chinese-style” markets within the dense modern skyscraper landscape. It was in this area that I encountered three women, who attracted my attention because of their amazing hat styles, which gave them an intimate feeling of togetherness. Only later did I realize that they wore what was evidently a modern modification of the traditional Hakka hat, images of which I had discovered in old photographs and travel guides featuring the rural lifestyle in China.



The Hakka people began to come to Hongkong as migrants from the 17th century onwards, and as the fertile plains were already occupied, a lot of them remained poor farmers and workers. There still remain several small rural villages in the New Territories of Hongkong where the majority of the population is made up of Hakka people. Hakka means something like “guest people”, and before they entered Hongkong, the Hakka people already had a long history of migration behind them. Originally coming from the Yellow River Valley, they had to leave their homelands several times, and immigrated to South China in the 13th century. Even if they are not counted among the Chinese minority ethnies, but are members of the Han Chinese majority, it is said that their communities never fully assimilated into the native communities. Instead they cultivated a strong shared Hakka identity (e.g. Hakka women never bound their feet). Fleeing from poverty, they have ended up scattered all over the world, and there is a huge diaspora living in Indonesia, Mauritius, Reunion, Jamaica, USA etc. Some of them became economically very successful, and among them are many influential political leaders, such as Sun Yat Sen (founding father of the Republic of China), Deng Xiaoping (post-Mao paramount leader of the People’s Republic of China and responsible for modern China’s economic reforms and the opening to global markets), Singapore’s president Lee Kwan Yew, and Taiwan’s president Lee Teng-hui.



Why the Hakka hat style has ironically survived as an individual identity marker of Hongkong's road sweepers remains a mystery to me.



I was surprised by the similarity of the Hakka hat to the architecture of the traditional Hakka rotunda. It is said that Hakkas prefer the circular walls, because in their folk believe evil spirits are attracted by corners.



(Modern Hakka architecture with a circular opening in the roof in Meizhou/ Guangdong, 2017)



("Hakka Wedding Cultura Industrial Park", Meizhou, 2017)



Meizhou counts as the capital of the worldwide Hakka community. I didn't see a single Hakka hat anywhere in the city, except in the form of an iconic manifestation as a brand, and as a monument in front of the newly built "Hakka Park".

Footnotes

Regine Steenbock is a Hamburg-based artist and fashion designer, managing her own fashion label, Sium, since 2000. Recently she has been teaching as a visiting professor for fashion design and aesthetics at the Beijing Normal University in Zhuhai. The observations above were made during her informal research trips in South China during her stays in 2016 and 2017.

Further Readings:

Nicole Constable, 1994: Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits: A Hakka Community in Hongkong

Annette Lynch, Mitchell D. Strauss (eds.), 2014: Ethnic Dress in the United States: A Cultural Encyclopedia

JuanJuan Wu, 2009: Chinese Fashion from Mao to Now

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Image 02: Attribution: Yves Saint Laurent

<http://www.makeupmuseum.org/home/yves-saint-laurent/> (accessed on 26 Sept. 2017)

Image 03: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/raquellaneri/2011/08/01/american-apparels-conical-asian-hat-nothing-new/#4ec5f1773bf7> (accessed on 26 Sept. 2017)

Image 05: Attribution: Lai Afong https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/Chinese_Coolies_in_Rain-coats.jpg (accessed on 26 Sept. 2017)

Image 14: <http://asiasociety.org/northern-california/defining-hakka-identity-history-culture-and-cuisine> (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

Image 15, left side: Attribution: Constantine Augustin
<https://biagkensiak.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/hakahat-collage.jpg> (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

Image 16: https://www.easytourtchina.com/images/Photo/fujian-tulou-china-s-ancient-earthen-castles/p909_d20130708143458.jpg (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

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