Chapter 16

Fashion Fusion in Kazakhstan: Advanced Technology Converges With the Past

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ABSTRACT

Fashion and technology have been deeply connected in Central Asia since the dawn of time. Every piece of clothing was the result of applying technology to materials found in nature, based on an idea that originated in someone’s mind. Clothing held a mystical purpose as well as a utilitarian one, protecting the owner from all kinds of danger. What people wore signified who they were as individuals situated in the family and the cosmos. Changes in fashion went hand-in-hand with technological change as the inspiration for and outcome of new ideas. This is why one can predict with confidence that forms of high technology now emerging will be assimilated quickly by the local fashion industry. This signals a bright future for high tech fashion in Kazakhstan, where significant changes are already well underway. As the emerging fashion industry advances on its current trajectory of development, it will continue to express the beliefs, expectations, hopes and dreams of the people of Kazakhstan in a synthesis of elements from the past, present and future.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016 Kazakhstan broke into the top five most promising countries in the world for retail development according to the A.T. Kearny Global Retail Development Index, in a giant leap forward compared to its previous performance. After placing consistently among the top 30 countries in the ranking with an average annual score of 13.6 over the past five years since 2011, this time it shot to 4th place, surpassed only by China, India and Malaysia. Retail can now be seen in Kazakhstan as a viable avenue for stimulating economic growth. The timing of the announcement is auspicious -- 2016 is the 25th year since Kazakhstan became an independent sovereign state for the first time ever in the history of a region that has been inhabited by humans continuously for more than 50 centuries.

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Central Asia, defined here as the area covered by modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, is situated at the heart of a huge expanse of the Eurasian continent (Hiro, 2009; Undeland, 2015). The terrain consists of rolling plains that are loosely framed to the south by a succession of mountain ranges rising from eastern Turkey past India north of the Himalayas to China, angling up through the Altai Mountains to Siberia before extending back to the west, up around the Caspian Sea towards the Ural Mountains past the Black Sea, eventually converging with the eastern regions of Europe. The distinctive geography is dominated by semi-arid plains, with deserts, oases, and river valleys around the mountainous regions (Thubron, 1994).

For many centuries Central Asia was the economic center of trade routes that connected activities in China, India, Mesopotamia, and Europe. As Kazakhstan finds its place on the world stage in the 21st century, tapping into deep cultural roots of the golden age (Barthold, 1968; Bissel, 2003) may serve intangibly to strengthen the spirit of individuals across the country and the wider region as they go about their daily lives (Frye, 2010). In a perpetual blending of people, ideas and activities that can vary widely across physical and temporal distances (Aitmatov, 1988), high technology fashion is one more element in the stream of new ideas that come and go across the region (Allworth, 1988; Beckwith, 2009; Geiss, 2003).

Following years of consumer fixation on western brand names and stylistic preferences while local designers continued in a predictable mode, modern Kazakhstani consumers seem to be developing toward new ways to reconnect with an earlier age when Central Asia was the economic center of the known world (Boulnois, 2001; Watt and Wardwell, 1997). The rising generation of fashion designers and entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan is ramping up innovation in the creation, production and distribution of fashion for the 21st century.

Although the application of high technology to high fashion has begun to take hold, it is still at a relatively early stage of development. Contemporary designers are finding ways to reconnect with earlier times that predate the eras of the soviets and tsars. Signs of change can be detected in the awakening of a new fashion consciousness inspired by the creative fusion of new ideas with timeless concepts and practices from the far past. This evolving awareness of national fashion as a cultural expression of continuity and stability in times of change is a symbolic affirmation of faith in one’s self and in the future.

As they insert distinctive elements from ancient times into contemporary fashion, local designers and artisans are applying their specialized skills to invent original new approaches to clothing for the world of international fashion. Some of the most distinctive elements of the Central Asian cultural heritage currently appearing in the work of contemporary fashion designers can be traced directly back to prehistoric beliefs and mindsets (Byamba, 2010). At the same time, a futuristic orientation is also evident in the integration of new technologies into fashion trends at the grassroots level in Central Asia. A new fashion fusion for the 21st century, in which high technology plays a vital role, is taking shape (Choda, 2016).

Parallel trends in the spheres of culture, economics, society and technology appear to catalyze around several specific elements in the cultural heritage of the region. Before homo sapiens arrived, other early human species inhabited what is now the southern part of Siberia across the border from Kazakhstan. Sitting around their Altai mountain habitat in the Denisova cave some 50,000 years ago, one of them dropped an impressively long bone implement with a hole in one end and a sharp point at the other that is immediately recognizable today as a giant needle. One can easily imagine it being threaded with a dried animal tendon and used to stitch a few pelts and hides together to make a blanket. A slightly smaller implement of the same type that was found nearby was dated to around 40,000 years ago. The cave had actually been inhabited for more than 250,000 years (Kozlikin, 2016).