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Articulating conceptual fashion in China: A Practice - Based Contribution and Its Pedagogic Translation

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Abstract

This thesis theorises and evidence conceptual fashion design in contemporary China through a practice-based research (PBR) methodology. Rather than a stylistic category, conceptual fashion is articulated as a practice-led knowledge method that privileges proposition over product and discourse over material permanence, mobilising dematerialisation, temporality, and situated cultural meaning to interrogate and re-configure fashion's social, aesthetic, and ethical orders. Located within China's rapidly evolving creative economy, the project integrates reflective studio practice, pedagogic prototyping, and document analysis to examine how concepts travel between theory, making, display, and the classroom.

Methodologically, the study adopts an interpretivist stance and treats practice as a mode of inquiry. I use PBR as the preferred term for coherence, while acknowledging overlapping usages of PaR/PbR in the arts and design literature. A creative dossier—including the installation project *As for Me*—iterative material and spatial tests, and curated teaching outputs operationalise conceptualisation as a cycle of framing → constraining → testing → communicating. Chinese philosophical logics—Daoist *Wu Wei* (minimal intervention, emergence) and Confucian *Li* (ritual propriety, relational ethics)—are mobilised as design heuristics to rewrite deconstruction, dematerialisation, and performance within a local epistemic frame, complemented by critical readings in fashion theory and art discourse.

Findings contribute along three linked fronts. (1) Definition (Contextual Contribution): In China, conceptual fashion functions as a knowledge practice that shifts value from material permanence to situated meaning, temporality, and discourse; this definition is proposed in Chapter 1, tested across practice in Chapters 3–4, and consolidated in Chapter 5. (2) Methodological Contribution): Practice generates evidence when ideas are formalised as constraints and tested via material, spatial, and pedagogic experiments; documentation and reflective writing secure the research warrant and transfer tacit insights into communicable claims. (3) Pedagogic Translation: A two-phase curriculum prototype—Phase 1: exploratory foundations; Phase 2: advanced critical integration—directly addresses the

research questions by demonstrating how conceptual methods can be embedded in higher education to cultivate designers who work across aesthetics, ethics, and technology.

The thesis concludes with an open, generative account of conceptual fashion as a continuously emergent practice. It identifies conditions for intensification in China—dematerialisation via AI/XR tools, renewed attention to indigenous philosophies, and the institutional consolidation of practice-as-research—while inviting future studies to test and extend the proposed definition across other regions and settings.

Keywords: Conceptual fashion; China; Practice-based research (PBR); Design pedagogy; Dematerialisation; Chinese philosophy (Daoism and Confucianism); Critical and speculative design.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Fashion design is an ever-evolving field that thrives on change, critical reflection, and creative experimentation. In recent decades, the role of fashion has expanded beyond its commercial and aesthetic functions to become a medium for socio-cultural dialogue, intellectual inquiry, and ideological critique.

Within this broader landscape, conceptual fashion has emerged as both a creative approach and a critical methodology that interrogates the structures, assumptions, and values underpinning the fashion system. Rather than treating fashion solely as a vehicle for style or commerce, it reframes design as a platform for questioning cultural norms, reimagining production and consumption models, and engaging with pressing social and environmental challenges. This includes addressing the ethics of production, the implications of overconsumption, and the pursuit of sustainability (Fletcher and Grose, 2012).

In this thesis, my understanding of conceptual fashion is deliberately approached as a dynamic and evolving idea rather than a fixed definition. While initial discussions establish its role in shifting fashion away from purely material or market-driven imperatives, subsequent chapters—particularly the practice-based components—test the boundaries of these early definitions. In doing so, I explore how conceptual fashion can express complex ideas, provoke critical reflection, and operate as a tool for cultural intervention. By foregrounding this evolving interpretation, the research contributes not only to the theory and practice of conceptual fashion design but also to a broader understanding of how such an approach can function as a bridge between academic discourse and creative practice.

This research investigates the components and expressive strategies of conceptual fashion design, providing theoretical and practical guidance for contemporary designers and educators. It is set against the backdrop of China's rapidly expanding fashion industry, where cultural, artistic, and educational shifts are transforming the landscape of fashion practice. The study is situated at the intersection of contemporary art and fashion design,

employing an interdisciplinary methodology to explore how conceptual practices can redefine fashion as a mode of cultural and intellectual inquiry.

Conceptual fashion, as an artistic reflection, further challenges the assumption that fashion must be materially grounded. It encourages designers, students, and audiences to engage with fashion from alternative perspectives that extend beyond physical garments. In the context of increasing environmental and social concerns, conceptual fashion design may also offer innovative approaches to sustainability and ethical production. By integrating cross-disciplinary knowledge, fashion designers can draw from diverse fields such as philosophy, technology, and cultural studies to create work that is not only aesthetically compelling but also socially and environmentally conscious.

With evolving socio-political and cultural discourses, fashion has increasingly become a medium for understanding and interrogating contemporary social issues (Breward, 2016; Kawamura, 2023). Conceptual fashion has emerged within this critical context, diverging from commercial fashion's utilitarian and market-driven focus. It foregrounds ideology, critique, and the intellectual dimension of design, advocating for fashion's role as cultural discourse rather than merely visual or commercial product (Evans, 2003). Designers working within this framework employ clothing as a conceptual tool to examine consumer culture, question production models, and explore socio-historical narratives. Consequently, conceptual fashion is not solely a medium for visual communication but also a vehicle for critical thought.

Moreover, conceptual fashion intersects with the postmodernist critique of modernist functionalism, highlighting fashion's capacity to subvert traditional paradigms of materiality and utility (Lipovetsky, 1994). This paradigm shift has enabled the rise of digital fashion and virtual garments, which reimagine fashion beyond its tangible form and challenge conventional boundaries between materiality and immateriality (Peters, 2021).

China is undergoing rapid urbanisation and globalisation, facing challenges related to environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and social equity. In response

to these transformations, conceptual fashion is increasingly positioned as a medium that reflects present-day realities while exploring speculative futures. Chinese designers are integrating interdisciplinary innovation by merging aesthetics with social critique, drawing on contemporary art, philosophy, and digital technology to redefine fashion as a cultural and intellectual practice.

The education sector has also played a pivotal role in fostering conceptual fashion in China. Universities and design institutions are incorporating critical thinking and experimental methodologies into their curricula, encouraging students to approach fashion as a site of inquiry and speculation rather than solely commercial production (Postlethwaite, 2020). This pedagogical shift is central to cultivating a new generation of designers who are both innovative and socially responsible—capable of contributing to China’s cultural identity while engaging critically with global fashion discourses.

The rapid advancement of information technologies has accelerated a dematerialisation trend in fashion design. Ideas and theories, rather than physical garments, are increasingly becoming the central elements of fashion discourse (Cray, 2014). Conceptual fashion aligns with this post-materialist shift, reflecting the transition from tangible commodities to intellectual and digital expressions of fashion. However, dematerialization does not imply the disappearance of materiality altogether. Rather, it signals a transformation in how materiality is conceptualized and engaged within contemporary design practice. Fashion, as a medium, continues to mediate the relationship between individuals and society, fulfilling psychological, cultural, and social functions (Svendsen, 2006). It remains an externalized expression of identity and self-awareness, shaping and being shaped by socio-political dynamics. As Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto famously stated, “When fashion is clothes, it is expendable, but when fashion is a form helping us to understand everyday life, it is essential” (English and Kim, 2013).

While all fashion operates as a semiotic system—communicating identity, status, and cultural values—conceptual fashion distinguishes itself through its primary orientation towards critical inquiry rather than surface-level signification. It deliberately foregrounds

the idea over the object, using material forms as vehicles to question the very frameworks that give fashion its meaning. In this sense, conceptual fashion is not merely participating in fashion's broader semiotic economy; it is interrogating, disrupting, and reconfiguring that economy to expose its assumptions and open alternative modes of engagement.

In China, the rise of conceptual fashion is closely linked to broader socio-cultural transformations, the influence of globalization, and the reform of local design education. Historically, fashion in China has been largely commercial, centered on the production, marketing, and consumption of garments. However, in recent years, Chinese designers have begun to redefine fashion as an intellectual pursuit, using design as a means of engaging with cultural identity, social critique, and philosophical inquiry. Chinese designer Ma Ke exemplifies a conceptually driven approach to sustainable and philosophical fashion practice. Her *WUYONG* collection, showcased at the Victoria and Albert Museum's "Fashion in Motion" series in 2008 (see Figure 1), employs raw materials, handcrafted techniques, and minimalist forms—here interpreted as sculptural expressions of cultural introspection—to reject industrialized fashion production. Rather than showcasing garments as commodities, Ma Ke presents them as performative and processual works, reinforcing fashion's potential as a critical and artistic medium (English and Kim, 2013).



Figure 1 Ma Ke, *WUYONG* collection, performance installation at Victoria and Albert Museum "Fashion in Motion" series, 2008. Source: Victoria and Albert Museum (2008).

By contrast, Ximon Lee approaches conceptual fashion through a globally influenced, architectural lens. His Autumn/Winter 2015 menswear collection (see Figure 2), which garnered the H&M Design Award, merges rigid structural silhouettes with fragmented layering to question masculinity, cultural identity, and displacement in a globalised context. I interpret the collection's exaggerated proportions and material juxtapositions as producing an aesthetic of fragmentation that reflects the instability of cultural belonging, offering fashion as both visual form and critical commentary.



Figure 2 Ximon Lee, Autumn/Winter 2015 Menswear Collection, winner of H&M Design Award. *Source: H&M Press Image Archive (2015).*

Conceptual fashion is emerging as a crucial discourse within the global fashion industry. It challenges traditional notions of materiality, expands the intellectual boundaries of design, and offers new strategies for addressing sustainability, cultural identity, and social critique. As China's fashion industry evolves, conceptual fashion has the potential to empower designers with the critical tools necessary for innovation and global engagement.

This study combines theory and practice to examine the significance of conceptual fashion in contemporary China and to articulate its methodological and pedagogic implications. Working definition. Rather than a stylistic category, Conceptual Fashion is framed here as a cultural-methodological approach that privileges proposition and critical reflection,

activating dematerialised strategies and attending to temporality and situated cultural meaning to interrogate fashion's social and ethical orders. As technological developments (including AI/XR) reshape the fashion landscape, such an approach offers China a route to lead through intellectual inquiry, critical making, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, contributing distinct perspectives to global discourse. In this thesis the definition is proposed in Chapter 1, positioned within scholarship in Chapter 2, operationalised through Practice-Based Research (PBR) in Chapter 3, and tested across studio work and a two-phase curriculum prototype in Chapter 4, before being consolidated and refined in Chapter 5. The next section states the research problem, aims, and questions that guide this programme of articulation and translation.

1.2. Researcher Statement

This research emerged from a core question: How can conceptual fashion design be defined, understood, and practiced within the Chinese context? This inquiry is grounded not in theoretical abstraction, but in my lived experiences as both a fashion design practitioner and educator.

I initially completed my undergraduate degree in fashion design in China, where my understanding of the discipline was primarily oriented around aesthetics, construction, and market trends. However, through subsequent studies in Japan, the United States, and Italy, my perspective on fashion began to shift. In Japan, I encountered a structural and philosophical approach to design; in Italy, I engaged with the integration of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary expression; and in the United States, I was introduced to conceptual fashion as a critical, cultural, and often dematerialised form of design thinking. These cross-cultural experiences fundamentally altered how I understood fashion—not merely as material creation, but as a site for critical and cultural intervention.



Figure 3 Undergraduate fashion design sketch, created during BA Fashion Design programme in China, 2007. *Source: Author (2007).*

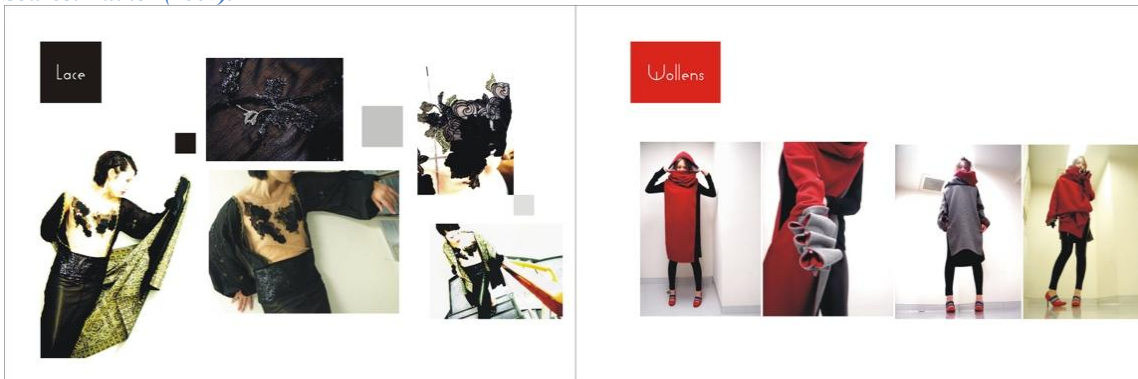


Figure 4 Conceptual garment developed during study exchange in Japan, 2008. *Source: Author (2008).*



Figure 5 Concept-driven fashion project completed during postgraduate studies in the United States, 2012. *Source: Author (2012).*

After obtaining my second master's degree in the United States, I worked for two years as a design assistant at a fashion brand. While the studio environment was commercially driven, I observed how certain design teams employed curatorial themes, conceptual sketching, and narrative-based styling to incorporate critical perspectives into their work. This professional experience revealed to me that conceptual fashion does not exist solely

within galleries or academia—it can also operate strategically within industry frameworks to question norms and provoke dialogue.

Upon returning to China, I began teaching undergraduate fashion design courses at a university in Wuhan. Throughout this role, I increasingly noticed that many students held a relatively narrow understanding of fashion—often focused on visual appeal, trend forecasting, or consumer appeal—while overlooking its potential as a medium for critical thinking, cultural critique, or social engagement. This pedagogical gap prompted me to reflect on the limitations of current curricula and to explore whether conceptual practice could serve to broaden the intellectual and cultural scope of fashion education in China.

Positioned between practice and pedagogy, this research seeks to examine how conceptual fashion design can be redefined, taught, and enacted within China's evolving and globalizing fashion education system. It reflects not only my personal academic and professional journey, but also a response to the structural challenges currently shaping fashion design education in China.

1.3. Definition of Key Terms

1.3.1. The Definition of Fashion

Fashion extends beyond clothing and personal attire; it is a cultural, social, and historical formation as well as a key medium for identity construction and social interaction (Kawamura, 2023.; Breward, 2016). Across historical periods, fashion has carried distinct meanings that register aesthetic, political, and economic change. It is therefore not merely a transformation in outward appearance but a repertoire of social behaviours through which individuals and communities engage the world. In contemporary scholarship, fashion has decisively transcended the narrow domain of dress to include aesthetic regimes, socio-cultural structures, economic systems, identity work, and technological innovation.

1.3.1.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Fashion

From a sociological standpoint, fashion is a socialised phenomenon with layered meanings. Simmel (1904) construed fashion as a dual process that negotiates conformity and distinction. Baudrillard (1981) emphasised its semiotic economy, arguing that fashion functions as a system of signs through which meanings circulate. Bourdieu (1984) connected fashion to habitus and cultural capital, tracing the term's lineage to *factio* (“making/doing”) and situating fashion within fields of production and power. Together, these frameworks reveal fashion as aesthetic expression, social identity marker, cultural dynamic, and mechanism of stratification.

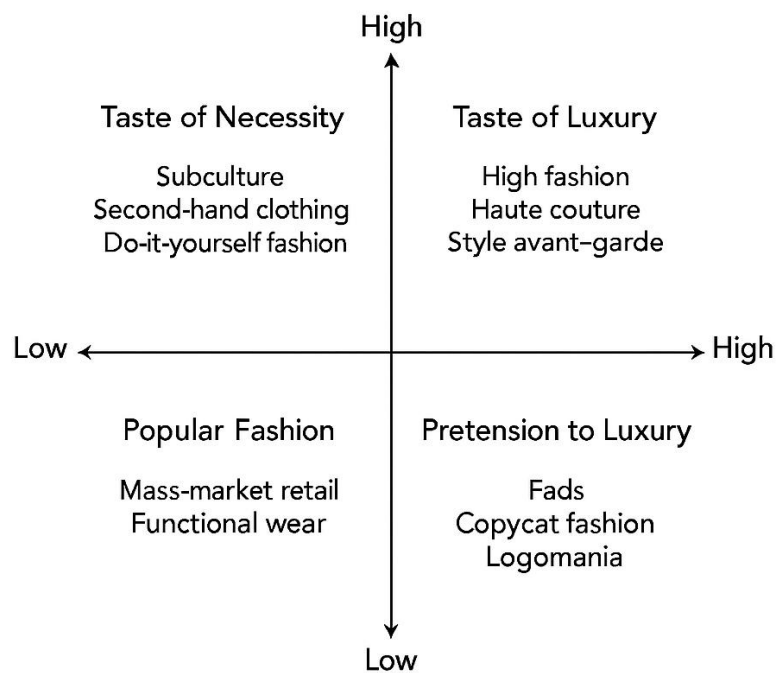


Figure 6 Fashion capital and social class: graphic representation of Bourdieu's cultural capital in fashion. Source: Author (2024).

Contemporary theorists consolidate this foundation. Breward and Wilson highlighted the emergence of a European fashion system under specific historical–technological conditions that organised production, consumption, mediation, and recognition (Wilson, 1985; Breward, 2016). Kawamura conceptualised fashion as a social institution governed by conventions and organisational structures rather than by taste alone (Kawamura, 2023).

1.3.1.2. Fashion as an Institutional System and Social Function

Institutionally, fashion operates as an industry shaped by socio-political forces. Its scope spans design, branding, media, retail and logistics, thus exceeding aesthetic preference to become a component of globalised cultural–economic production (Wilson, 1985; Breward, 2016; Kawamura, 2005) insists that individual choice is conditioned by social values and market logics; Entwistle (2015) articulates the intimate coupling of body and dress in everyday contexts; Thornquist (2018) calls for ontological and logical attention to fashion’s intrinsic structures.

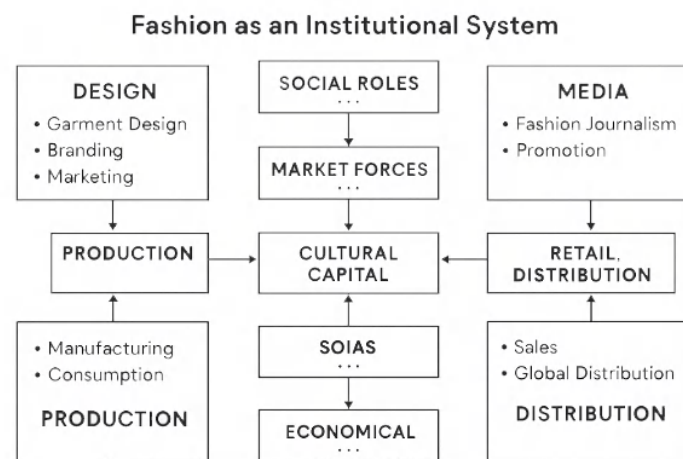


Figure 7 Fashion as an institutional system: interconnected structures of design, production, media, and distribution. *Source: Author (2024).*

1.3.1.3. Fashion in the Chinese Cultural Context and Social Transformation

Within the Chinese cultural lexicon, *shíshàng* carries temporal and evaluative connotations—*shí* (时, time) and *shàng* (尚, esteem)—foregrounding fashion’s historicity and normativity. Chen Yifei reads fashion as period-specific ideals; Sun Benwen’s classic definition—“a temporarily admired form”—emphasises social acceptance and collective values (Sun, 1983). These accounts resonate with fashion-cycle theories of emergence, diffusion and decline (Blumer, 1969).



Figure 8 Young female Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, 1960s. *Source: China People's Revolution Military Museum (1966).*

Figure 9 Fashionable youth in Beijing, 1980s, signalling the resurgence of diverse styles. *Source: Phoenix Fashion Archive (1984).* **The Holistic Definition of Fashion and Future Developments**

The contemporary definition of fashion encompasses cultural expression, technological infrastructures and economic systems (Kawamura, 2023). Aesthetically, fashion mediates identity and difference; culturally, it indexes social change; economically, it anchors global industries from luxury to e-commerce (Lipovetsky, 1994). Rapid digitisation has accelerated dematerialisation—digital fashion, virtual garments and AR/VR extend fashion beyond the physical, while AI-assisted design and smart textiles reconfigure creative and supply-chain workflows (Peters, 2021). In parallel, sustainability agendas—circularity, slow fashion, zero-waste—respond to overconsumption and environmental harm (Fletcher and Grose, 2012).

1.3.2. Definition: Conceptual and Conceptualism

In both philosophy and art, a concept is more than an abstract label; it functions as a cognitive–cultural instrument through which perception is organised and the world is rendered intelligible. In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, concepts (categories) are the a priori forms that make experience possible and structure judgement (Kant, 1998). Within art, especially Conceptual Art, the idea becomes primary and material execution secondary (Kosuth, 1991; LeWitt, 2000 pp. 12–13).

To be conceptual in this dissertation's sense is to centre thinking, critical inquiry, and symbolic construction over surface aesthetics or commercial viability. In design fields (including fashion), this reorients clothing from a commodity form to a discursive medium for cultural expression and ideological critique. Accordingly, conceptual fashion interrogates identity, politics, materiality, and systems, drawing on poststructuralist and critical theory (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016). Conceptualism names the stance that privileges meaning making and abstraction over material finish, challenging dominant assumptions about production, beauty and utility, and resonating with critiques of consumerism and spectacle (Lipovetsky, 1994; Lippard, 1973).

Closely related is conceptualisation, the process through which ideas are formed, modelled and communicated (cognition–language–context). In fashion, conceptualisation appears when garments (and para-garment media) operate as metaphors, narratives, or critiques—as in the work of Martin Margiela and Hussein Chalayan (English & Kim, 2013). Together, conceptualism (philosophical ground) and conceptualisation (method process) provide a framework for understanding fashion as knowledge-led practice. In this study's Chinese context, they enable a shift from material output to critical, cultural and pedagogical transformation.

1.3.2.1. The Emergence of Conceptualism as a School of Thought

Conceptualism crystallised in the 1960s as a radical reorientation away from modernist formalism and towards the primacy of thought/content. While modernism often judges works by material form and compositional finish, conceptualism makes the idea—rather than the perfected object—the locus of value (Kosuth, 1991). For example, Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) displaces value from fabrication to concept, rendering the idea the work itself. In “*Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*” LeWitt notes that in conceptual art “all planning and decisions are made beforehand; the execution is a perfunctory affair” (LeWitt, 2000, pp. 12–13). The consequence was a relocation of artistic rigour to proposition, rule, and system (Lippard, 1973).

As the paradigm travelled, it informed design, architecture and fashion. By the late twentieth century, conceptualism underwrote avant-garde fashion strategies—deconstruction, anti-form, abstraction—seen in Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto (Evans, 2003).

Rather than claiming that conceptualism “will” inevitably expand, this thesis argues that the conditions for its expanded significance are now unusually favourable: (i) dematerialisation accelerated by LLMs, VR/AR and computational pipelines; (ii) persistent cultural critique around identity, labour and ecology; and (iii) the viability of practice-as-research frameworks in art/design education (see Chapters 3–4). These dynamics converge directly with this project’s problematics—how conceptual fashion in China can function as critical method under technological and institutional change.

1.3.2.2. *Conceptualism in Art and Design*

In art, conceptualism is associated with the 1960s–70s movement that de-ontologised the artwork as physical object. Kosuth and LeWitt foregrounded the primacy of the idea—“the idea becomes the machine that makes the art” (LeWitt, 2000, p. 12). This displaced value from form to language, instruction, performance, documentation (Lippard, 1973).



Figure 10 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Source: Kosuth, J. (1965). Museum of Modern Art Archive.

Within design, conceptualism appears as speculative and critical approaches that privilege ideation and socio-political inquiry over market functionality (Dunne and Raby, 2013). Speculative/Critical Design extends conceptualist logics into products, systems and digital artefacts, using prototypes to pose questions rather than solve them.



Figure 11 Dunne & Raby, *Huggable Atomic Mushroom* (2004). Source: Dunne & Raby Studio Archive (2004).

1.3.2.3. Conceptualism in Fashion Design

Within fashion, conceptualism has developed into a distinct design methodology that privileges narrative construction, critique, and intellectual labour over wearability or market utility (Evans, 2003). In this register, designers such as Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, and Martin Margiela mobilise deconstruction, anti-function, and abstraction to turn garments into probes that interrogate bodily politics, temporality, and material norms (English and Kim, 2013). Rather than producing clothing as ends in themselves, conceptual fashion treats the garment—and its extensions in space, image, and text—as a vehicle for posing questions, staging cultural arguments, and making theory palpable.

Drawing on literature across art, culture, and fashion theory (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016; English and Kim, 2013), three interlinked characteristics define conceptual fashion in this thesis:

- Idea-led construction. Conception precedes and governs form: rules, propositions, and statements generate the work, with material and silhouette emerging from articulated premises rather than from trend or typology.
- Experimental form and material. Non-canonical silhouettes, asymmetric logics, and hybrid or cross-media strategies (e.g., moving image, projection, installation) are deployed to test the category limits of “the garment” and to reframe the body–object–space relation.
- Narrative and socio-political engagement. Design is used to make legible—and contest—issues of gender, identity, sustainability, and consumerism; the collection or installation functions as a critical text as much as a visual ensemble (Rocamora, 2016).

Aligned with postmodern critiques of functionalism (Lipovetsky, 1994), contemporary conceptual fashion routinely exceeds the garment’s material boundaries, incorporating digital fashion, performance, and virtual identity construction. In doing so, it couples fashion’s cultural work to a broader ecology of dematerialisation—not as a negation of matter but as a strategic redistribution of attention from object-finish to concept, protocol, and experience. This thesis adopts that stance analytically and methodologically: subsequent chapters test these defining features through practice-as-research, examining how idea-led, cross-media, and critically engaged approaches can be operationalised and evaluated within the Chinese educational and cultural context.

1.3.2.4. The Future of Conceptualism in Fashion and Design

Rather than offering a linear forecast, this thesis adopts a conditional stance: conceptualism’s future salience in fashion will depend on a set of mutually reinforcing technological, cultural, and institutional conditions. Read together, these conditions create

a milieu in which idea-led practice can move from marginal experimentation to mainstream research—and-design paradigm.

- **Technological conditions: dematerialisation and multi-modal authorship**
The accelerating convergence of large language models (LLMs), generative design, and real-time engines/VR–AR supports routine dematerialised pipelines and multi-modal narration. Under these conditions, conceptual fashion can be authored as executable protocols (prompts, rules, datasets) as much as as objects, with garments extended into projections, simulations, or interactive environments. Such workflows redistribute labour from making to model-building and from fabrication to curation of behaviours, aligning with post-material trajectories in digital fashion (Peters, 2021). Importantly, this is not a negation of matter but a strategic re-weighting of attention: physical instantiations become one state within a spectrum that also includes speculative images, parametric assemblies, and performative scores.
- **Cultural conditions: critique and construction in contested publics**
Ongoing debates around identity, labour, ecology, and resource politics demand that design operate dually as critical inquiry and world-building. In such contexts, conceptual fashion’s reflexive use of fashion’s own semiotic economy can expose normative codes (gendered fit, labour invisibility, extractive materials) while proposing counter-protocols—e.g., rule-based sharing, modular repair, or performative ownership. The shift from object-value to narrative-, relation-, and impact-value reframes success metrics beyond surface or sales and toward discursive uptake, behavioural change, and institutional influence (Fletcher and Grose, 2012).
- **Institutional conditions: practice-as-research normalization**
The increasing institutionalisation of practice-as-research / practice-based research (PaR/PbR) in higher education provides channels for the integration of concept, method, and evidence, legitimising outputs such as installations, protocols, datasets, and performances as knowledge (see Chapter 3; Nelson, 2013; Candy and Edmonds, 2018). Where assessment frameworks recognise processual rigour (documentation, reflection, triangulation) alongside artefacts, conceptual fashion can function as a research method rather than an adjunct to conventional studio production. This condition is pivotal in China’s evolving design-education landscape, where curricular

reform is opening space for interdisciplinary labs, cross-credit collaboration, and process-based evaluation.

1.4. The Research Problem, Aims and Objectives

This study investigates the development of conceptual fashion in contemporary China and its pedagogical implications. Adopting a practice-based research (PBR) methodology, it integrates theoretical inquiry with practical experimentation to articulate how conceptual fashion is defined, enacted by designers, and mobilised within higher education curricula (Candy and Edmonds, 2018). The project therefore addresses both scholarly discourse in fashion studies and professional discourse within the creative industries, with China as the primary context of application.

Through case studies, practitioner interviews, and original creative practice, the research examines how conceptual fashion responds to current socio-cultural challenges and how universities can nurture designerly capacities—critical, experimental, and interdisciplinary—that sustain conceptual work as both artistic inquiry and knowledge production.

1.4.1. Research Problem

The development of conceptual fashion design in contemporary China is closely linked to social, cultural, historical, and economic factors. While conceptual fashion has emerged as a critical and artistic design approach in Western contexts (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016), While conceptual fashion has been theorised in global contexts, its development within China—particularly in relation to creative practice and education—has received limited scholarly attention. The interplay of globalization, local cultural heritage, contemporary artistic movements, and creative industry practices presents both challenges and opportunities for conceptual fashion in China (Kawamura, 2023; English and Kim, 2013). Designers must navigate the tensions between tradition and innovation, global influences and local identity, artistic expression and commercial viability.

This research seeks to understand how conceptual fashion design in China is shaped by these dynamic influences, examining its role as both an artistic practice and a socio-economic phenomenon (Baudrillard, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984). Additionally, it explores the role of higher education in fostering future conceptual fashion designers, analyzing how universities and fashion institutions can integrate conceptual methodologies into design education to cultivate critical, experimental, and interdisciplinary design thinking (Fletcher and Grose, 2012; Wang, 2018).

This research addresses Three key questions:

- RQ1 (Definition). How can conceptual fashion be defined in contemporary China as a practice-led knowledge method—one that integrates global conceptual influences while remaining responsive to local cultural, ethical and market dynamics?
- RQ2 (Method as knowledge). How does practice function as knowledge within this thesis (PBR), i.e., how are propositions framed as constraints, tested through material/spatial/pedagogic experiments, and warranted through documentation and discourse?
- RQ3 (Pedagogic translation). How can conceptual fashion be effectively embedded in Chinese higher education so that designers develop critical thinking, experimental methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches to emerging socio-cultural and environmental challenges?

By employing a Practice-Based Research (PBR) methodology, this study combines theoretical analysis with practical experimentation, examining how conceptual fashion in China can evolve as both an artistic discipline and an innovative industrial practice (Dunne and Raby, 2013; Peters, 2021).

1.4.2. Research Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to define a methodological framework for conceptual fashion design in contemporary China, exploring its theoretical foundations, artistic expressions, and educational implications. The study aims to establish conceptual fashion as both a critical socio-cultural practice and a transformative force within China's creative industry.

To achieve this aim, the research establishes the following objectives:

- Understanding the sociological context of conceptual fashion design movements.
 - a) Conduct a comparative study of conceptual fashion and conceptual art, analyzing their intersections, differences, and cultural implications in both Western and Chinese contexts.
 - b) Investigate how social, economic, and cultural factors shape conceptual fashion in China, examining its function as both a creative practice and a form of socio-political commentary.
- Exploring the compositional elements and means of expression in emerging conceptual fashion design in China.
 - a) Analyze the design languages, material explorations, and aesthetic strategies that define conceptual fashion in China, considering their connections with experimental art, performative fashion, and digital technologies.
 - b) Investigate how Chinese conceptual designers navigate the tensions between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary artistic methodologies, balancing globalization and localization, artistic radicalism and commercial adaptability.
- Developing practice-based samples to reflect upon conceptual fashion design methodologies.
 - a) Utilize Practice-Based Research (PBR) to conduct experimental design projects, exploring how conceptual fashion can engage with cultural narratives, sustainability, and digital innovation.

- b) Establish a methodological framework for conceptual fashion design in China, providing a model for designers, educators, and researchers to integrate critical inquiry, artistic experimentation, and applied practice into their work.

1.4.3. Theoretical Premises for Conceptual Fashion Research

Based on the primary aims and objectives of this study, two theoretical premises are proposed to guide both the analytical and practice-based components of the research into conceptual fashion design within the Chinese context.

Premise 1: Fashion as Social Product.

Fashion is constituted through relations among individuals, institutions, and structures (Bourdieu, 1984). Practice is embedded in—and may resist—dominant ideologies (Adorno, 1991). In China, conceptual fashion functions as a critical articulation of evolving creative identity within global discourse.

Premise 2: Fashion as Socio-historical Configuration.

Conceptual fashion emerges at the intersection of global conceptualism and local cultural heritage, negotiating innovation/tradition under specific institutional and economic conditions (Evans, 2003; English and Kim, 2013). This premise enables analysis of how collaborative practices and educational systems shape method and meaning.

Together, these premises justify treating conceptual fashion as both a site of cultural critique and a pedagogical strategy, especially pertinent to China's reforming design-education ecosystem.

1.4.4. The Role of Fashion Education in Conceptual Fashion Research

This research also addresses how education structures enable or constrain conceptual fashion. Internationally, leading institutions (e.g., Central Saint Martins, Parsons, Central Academy of Fine Arts) have reaffirmed research-driven, practice-as-research models that

balance studio-based experimentation with theoretical embedding. Within such models' students are expected to:

- Develop critical literacies via interdisciplinary and practice-based projects.
- Engage with digital fashion (3D/VR-AR, AI-assisted design, real-time engines).
- Explore fashion as performative/discursive practice (identity, sustainability, cultural transformation).

To delineate the scope of inquiry, this thesis identifies three apparatuses that shape how conceptual fashion can be taught and evidenced in Chinese higher education. These are presented here as analytical orientations rather than prescriptions; concrete recommendations are synthesised in Chapter 5.

- Experimental design infrastructures. The study examines how modules, studios and labs that enable material trials and digital/installation experiments (e.g., projection, simulation) support concept generation, and how assessment foregrounds process, reflection and method transferability rather than finish alone (see Chapter 4.2 *As for Me*; 4.3 on multimodal and sensory translation).
- Interdisciplinary collaboration. It investigates credit-bearing, jointly taught studios linking fashion with fine art, media arts, interaction design and sustainability, with shared standards for documentation, critique and peer review (see Chapter 3 methodology; Chapter 4 cases).
- Future-oriented Practices. It analyses the integration of digital pipelines (pattern-to-simulation workflows, parametric rulesets, asset libraries) alongside ethics/sustainability constraints (circularity, dematerialisation, low-impact making) in enabling concept-first, matter-aware propositions responsive to evolving industry–culture interfaces.

These signposts frame the research questions developed in Sections 1.2–1.3 and guide the analyses in Chapters 2–4; pedagogical implications are consolidated in Chapter 5.

1.4.5. *Contribution to Knowledge*

This thesis contributes to fashion studies and to professional discourse across the creative industries by advancing a Chinese-situated methodology for conceptual fashion. Through the coupling of theoretical discourse with practice-based research (PBR), it frames conceptual fashion as a medium of knowledge production and cultural inquiry (Kawamura, 2023; Rocamora, 2016). The contribution is fivefold:

1. Conceptual fashion as a proposition–rule–system method. The thesis formalises conceptual fashion as work led by a proposition and operationalised through rules and systems rather than by finish alone. It clarifies evaluative criteria—coherence of idea, transparency of ruleset, and reproducibility across variants—illustrated through cases such as Hussein Chalayan’s *After Words* (2000) and Rei Kawakubo’s “Lumps and Bumps” (1997), where the idea governs form and process.
2. A Chinese-situated framework. It articulates how Daoist and Confucian perspectives, and regional cultures (e.g., Chu/Changjiang), inform concept formation, material choice and staging. The framework explains how designers such as Ma Ke and Guo Pei mobilise cultural memory and craft logics to generate concept-first garments and installations that exceed commercial styling.
3. A PBR toolkit for evidencing practice. The study proposes a clear documentation and analysis protocol for conceptual fashion: process logs, material trials, pattern rules, projection mapping workflows, and reflective writing. This protocol strengthens academic rigour and makes practice auditable as research.
4. A working typology and boundary conditions. It distinguishes conceptual fashion from adjacent practices (artisanal couture, wearable tech, critical design) via testable markers—idea primacy, rule-led development, and system intelligibility—thereby offering a usable typology for researchers, curators and educators.
5. Pedagogical implications for Chinese higher education. It translates the method into teachable structures—idea-first briefs, process-weighted assessment, interdisciplinary studios, and sustainability constraints (e.g., zero-waste pattern cutting, dematerialisation). These implications are signposted here and synthesised as recommendations in Chapter 5.

How the contribution is evidenced.

- Chapters 2–3 locate the method within fashion theory and research methodology and justify PBR for concept-led practice.
- Chapter 4 provides the primary evidence base through the author’s projects (e.g., *As for Me*) and studio-based experiments (material and post-material trials, projection and installation), demonstrating how rules generate outcomes.
- Chapter 5 consolidates theoretical and methodological advances and presents curriculum-level recommendations for implementation.

By targeting both academic understanding and pedagogic application, the thesis positions conceptual fashion as a transformative, multidisciplinary practice in contemporary China—one whose definitions are tested through practice and consolidated as a theoretical and methodological contribution.

1.5. Thesis Structure

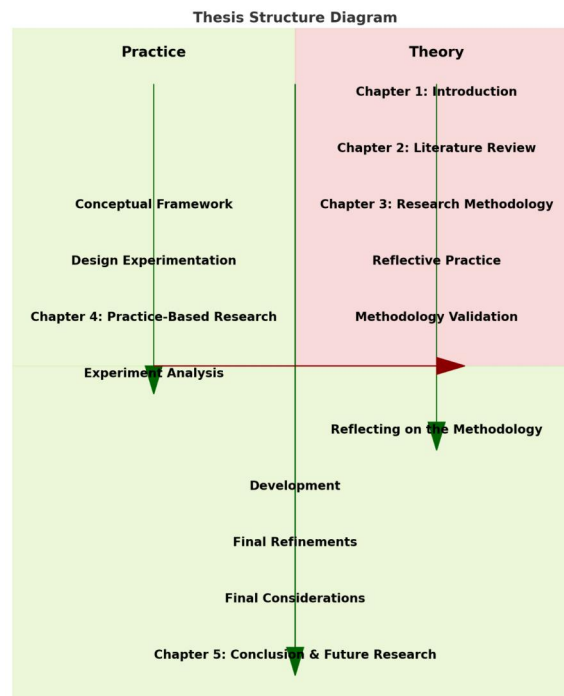


Figure 12 Thesis structure diagram. Source: Author (2024).

To achieve the research objectives and methodological framework outlined in Chapter 4, this study has undertaken an in-depth exploration to establish an appropriate research methodology that addresses existing knowledge gaps and emerging opportunities in conceptual fashion research. This research adopts a multi-method, practice-based approach, integrating artistic practice, visual analysis, academic research methodologies, and fashion research tools. The methodological framework includes literature review, contextual analysis, mood boards, and experimental fashion practices.

This thesis adopts a practice-based, interdisciplinary research approach that integrates creative experimentation with academic inquiry. Drawing from methodologies in conceptual art, cultural theory, and design practice, the study explores conceptual fashion as both a theoretical framework and a creative process.

The structure of the thesis reflects the iterative relationship between theory and practice. The theoretical chapters inform the design experiments, while the practice-based outcomes in turn reflect, question, and refine theoretical assumptions.

Chapter 2 presents a critical review of existing literature on conceptual fashion, mapping its philosophical foundations and identifying gaps in current scholarship, particularly within the Chinese context.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework, grounding the study in Practice-Based Research and Reflective Practice methodologies.

Chapter 4 documents the practice-based research, including experimental design projects that explore conceptual strategies and educational applications.

The final chapter synthesizes key findings, evaluates the contribution of conceptual fashion to academic and design contexts, and proposes directions for future research.

This structure ensures a dynamic and integrative investigation of conceptual fashion, positioning it as both an intellectual and creative pursuit within contemporary Chinese fashion research and education.

This research establishes a strong linkage between theoretical discourse and practice-based experimentation, demonstrating how conceptual fashion can function as both an intellectual pursuit and a creative practice. The iterative research model ensures that each stage of theoretical development is tested through practical application, creating a continuous dialogue between conceptual analysis and design innovation.

Chapter 2: Mapping the Evolution of Conceptual Fashion in Contemporary China: Defining the Intersections of Art and Design

The evolution of conceptual fashion in China is an intricate process shaped by the country's historical dress traditions, socio-political transformations, and global artistic movements. Conceptual fashion, which emerged as an avant-garde design practice, blends art, philosophy, and fashion, challenging conventional definitions of clothing and its social role. This section will critically explore the historical development of conceptual fashion in China, from its traditional roots in Chinese dress to its transformation in the context of Western modernism and globalization. It will also examine how these influences have shaped contemporary conceptual designs, culminating in a new Chinese fashion aesthetic rooted in both local heritage and global artistic discourse.

2.1 Historical Context: Traditional Fashion and Western Modernism

To understand the emergence of conceptual fashion in China, it is crucial to first examine the symbolic significance of traditional Chinese clothing. Historically, clothing in China, such as the Hanfu and Qipao, transcended mere functionality and became deeply symbolic. These garments were not only expressions of social status but also embodied philosophical ideals and cultural identity. For instance, Hanfu, the traditional attire of the Han Chinese, followed Confucian principles of propriety and was constructed in a manner that reflected social hierarchy and ritual practices (Steele, 2016). The garments' design was governed by

strict codes, such as color, pattern, and fabric, each of which denoted specific social positions and ritual contexts. This ritualized dress code played a pivotal role in maintaining social order and reflecting Confucian ideals, reinforcing the connection between clothing and cultural identity.

Figure 13 *Zan Hua Shi Nu Tu (Ladies with Hairpins and Flowers)*, a traditional Chinese painting depicting women in Tang dynasty attire. This image illustrates the elaborate hairstyles, ornate accessories, and layered garments that signify status and aesthetic ideals in classical Chinese fashion. *Source: Chinese Traditional Costume Encyclopedia (中国传统服饰图鉴), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company (2018).*



The Qipao, a traditional dress originally from the Manchu court, became a symbol of modernity in the early 20th century. Its adaptation and transformation, particularly through the influence of Western tailoring techniques, signified a shift towards individualism and female empowerment in China (Chen, 2019). The Qipao evolved from its roots as a symbol of imperial privilege to embodying the new socio-political ideals of modern China, reflecting a shift towards Westernized aesthetics while maintaining ties to Chinese cultural identity. Its evolution epitomizes the dynamic nature of traditional Chinese fashion, which has been shaped not only by domestic needs but also by global influences.



Figure 14 Promotional calendar poster for Kwong Sang Hong Ltd., c.1930s. Chromolithographed advertising calendar depicting two women wearing floral-patterned qipao, framed by an array of toiletry products. The poster exemplifies the popularization as a modern, urban garment in Republican-era China and illustrates the fusion of traditional aesthetics with early twentieth-century commercial visual culture. Publisher/Imprint: Kwong Sang Hong Ltd. (廣生行), Hong Kong. Address shown on poster: “250 & 252 Des Voeux Road Central, Hongkong.” (n.d.).

While scholarship on traditional Chinese dress has richly analysed its ritual, symbolic and social functions, there remains a specific gap regarding how such garments are reinterpreted within contemporary, conceptually oriented fashion practice in China. Foundational sociological accounts—e.g. Kawamura’s analysis of fashion as a social institution (Kawamura, 2005)—illuminate fashion’s role in identity formation and cultural expression, yet they stop short of examining how present-day Chinese designers mobilise historical attire as a conceptual device: that is, as a vehicle for argument, critique and speculative cultural narration rather than solely as heritage style. Addressing this lacuna, the present study investigates the conceptual repurposing of traditional forms (such as the qipao, Han-style robes and workwear uniforms), asking how these forms are abstracted, de- and re-contextualised to articulate propositions about body, technology, gender, labour and memory.

The encounter with Western modernism in the early twentieth century created the conditions for this later conceptual turn. The May Fourth milieu catalysed a symbolic break with late-imperial sartorial codes and legitimated Western dress as a signifier of scientific and social modernity (Clunas, 1997). Much anglophone literature has documented this flow of influence (Finnane, 2007; Rocamora, 2016). However, to characterise the process only as “adoption” risks reinscribing an Orientalist teleology in which Western forms are received passively in the non-West (Said, 1978). Building on postcolonial cultural critique (Chow, 1991), this thesis instead treats Chinese designers and wearers as active agents of translation: they have historically adapted, hybridised and contested imported silhouettes and techniques, folding them into local aesthetic logics, artisanal practices and philosophical vocabularies. In short, Chinese fashion modernity is not a derivative copy but a series of situated negotiations that produce new formal and conceptual languages.

Accordingly, this study contributes to this gap by analysing how traditional garments are re-authored in contemporary conceptual fashion as thinking media. Rather than treating the qipao, robe or Mao-suit purely as iconographic references, recent Chinese practice reworks cut, proportion, fabrication and display format to test ideas—about enclosure and exposure of the body, about state and market disciplinarity, about ecology, and about digital dematerialisation. In the framework developed across the thesis (see Chapters 3–4), such work is read as conceptual fashion: practice that privileges proposition over product, method over motif, and critique over nostalgia.

This reframing also clarifies the relation between globalisation and local aesthetic sovereignty. Studies that foreground Western influence on Chinese consumption have sometimes overlooked how Chinese designers reverse-engineer that influence by applying indigenous principles (e.g. *li* 礼 and *wu-wei* 无为) to Western pattern systems, or by using archival garments not as templates but as counter-factuals—starting points for speculative “what if” scenarios. The question guiding this section is thus sharpened: how do Chinese designers integrate—and strategically transform—Western modernist devices alongside traditional aesthetics to produce a distinctly Chinese conceptual fashion that is neither imitation nor nativist revival, but a critical fusion attentive to context?

In doing so, the research advances a more nuanced account of Chinese conceptual fashion's emergence: global references are not merely adopted; they are translated under conditions of coloniality and late-socialist marketisation, generating hybrid grammars that speak to both local identity and global discourse. By tracing these translations in concrete case studies, the thesis demonstrates how traditional garments, once bound to etiquette or ideology, become conceptual instruments—capable of staging philosophical problems (e.g., autonomy vs. conformity), mediating socio-technical debates (e.g., dematerialisation and AI-assisted authorship), and articulating pedagogical models for studio-based enquiry in Chinese higher education.

2.2 The Influence of Fashion Education and Globalisation

China's post-1978 economic reforms initiated a far-reaching reorganisation of the fashion field, opening markets and higher-education systems to international exchange (Postlethwaite, 2020). Design schools such as CAFA and Donghua University recalibrated curricula to include Western conceptual design methods alongside Chinese aesthetic traditions (Wang, 2018). This curricular hybridity encouraged cross-disciplinary experimentation—linking design with fine art, philosophy and media—so that fashion increasingly came to be framed not only as commodity production but also as artistic inquiry and intellectual labour.

It is important, however, not to cast pre-reform practices as simply “functional and traditional.” Historical Chinese dress has always operated as a dense symbolic apparatus of rank, ritual and gender, and, at times, as a regime of bodily constraint—especially for elite women (e.g. sumptuary codes, cut and decorum) (Steele, 2016). What the recent shift introduces is not a move away from symbolism per se, but a move beyond symbolism as representation towards conceptualism as method. Whereas all fashion communicates through signs, conceptual fashion treats those sign systems reflexively: it uses garments, performances and installations to interrogate the very frameworks that produce fashion's meanings—production logics, authorship, temporality, the politics of the body and of

space—often through dematerialised or process-led formats (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016). In other words, symbolic fashion represents, conceptual fashion questions, models and tests. Evaluation likewise shifts from finish and trend-fit towards problem framing, methodological clarity, and the generation of discourse.

The incorporation of global theory into Chinese design education accelerated this turn. Programmes increasingly asked students to mobilise research, writing and exhibitionary practices alongside making, so that fashion could operate as socio-cultural critique (Liu, 2019). Here, garments act as probes into identity, labour and sustainability rather than as endpoints of consumption (Kawamura, 2005). Yet the scholarship on globalisation has often overweighted unidirectional Western influence (Wilson, 2003), under-describing how Chinese designers adapt, translate and vernacularise imported methods through local philosophies (e.g. Daoist non-action, Confucian li) and craft lineages. Attending to coloniality and Orientalism helps avoid narratives in which Western ideas are simply “adopted”; instead, contemporary Chinese practice evidence selective adaptation and critique within unequal cultural exchanges.

Since the 1990s, designers have articulated this hybrid, concept-driven stance in different ways. Ma Ke’s practice—foregrounded in Jia Zhangke’s documentary *Useless* (2007)—performs a sustained critique of industrial fashion by championing handwork, material sparseness and the poetics of “wuyong” (the paradoxical “use of uselessness”), relocating value from product to process and presence (Finnane, 2007). Guo Pei’s couture, by contrast, re-reads imperial motifs and artisanal techniques through contemporary spectacle, demonstrating how historical vocabularies become vehicles for new cultural propositions rather than nostalgic quotation. Together, such practices show that “conceptual” in China is neither simple Western imitation nor mere symbolism; it is a situated methodology that stages arguments about culture, value and making through fashion’s expanded media.

In sum, globalisation and educational reform did not replace Chinese cultural identity; they provided institutional conditions for conceptual fashion to emerge as a research-led practice. What distinguishes it from fashion’s general semioticity is its meta-level

operation: rule-based experimentation, critical writing and exhibition-as-method; dematerialised or hybrid outputs (video, projection, installation); and assessment criteria that privilege question-posing over market resolution (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016). This distinction is central to the thesis' problematics and underpins later chapters in which these initial definitions are tested in practice.

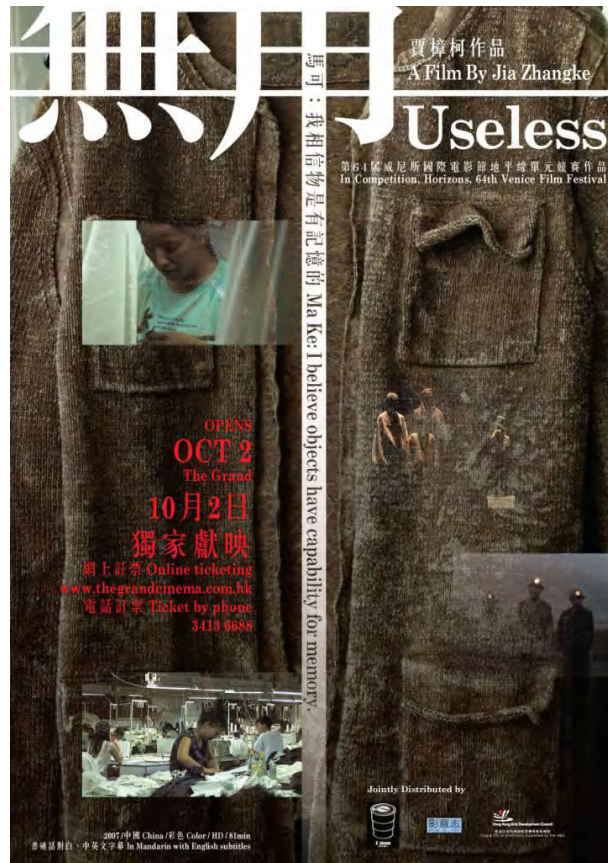


Figure 15 Poster of the documentary *Useless* (Wuyong), dir. Jia Zhangke, 2007. *Source: Chinese theatrical poster (fair use) (2015)*

Similarly, Guo Pei's couture offers an endogenous route into conceptual fashion. Her work integrates imperial symbolism and historical motifs with contemporary avant-garde sensibilities; the now-canonical yellow cape worn by Rihanna at the 2015 Met Gala exemplifies how elaborate embroidery and sculptural silhouettes can subvert received ideals of beauty while interrogating the construction of cultural identity (Steele, 2016). Read this way, Guo's collections are not merely spectacular; they operate as critical artefacts that mobilise technique, iconography and display to question the terms on which "Chineseness" is staged within global fashion



Figure 16 Rihanna wearing Guo Pei's imperial yellow cape at the 2015 Met Gala. Source: *POPSUGAR Australia* (2015).

Despite such instances, scholarship remains disproportionately focused on exogenous—often Western—vectors of influence, with comparatively little attention to how designers in China mobilise internal resources: local values, artisanal lineages and philosophical frameworks. This imbalance risks reinscribing a diffusionist narrative in which Chinese fashion appears to “adopt” Western avant-gardism rather than adapt and transform it through indigenous logics.

This study addresses that gap by examining how selected contemporary designers negotiate the interplay of global forms and Chinese cultural identity in explicitly conceptual terms. Specifically, it traces (i) how philosophical ideas (e.g., ritual propriety, non-action), craft traditions and historical dress grammars are operationalised as design methods; (ii) how material choices, narrative framing and exhibitionary practices enact critique; and (iii) how fashion education mediates this hybridisation in China. Rather than claiming a comprehensive account, the research offers a situated analysis of cases and practice-led experiments to clarify the mechanisms through which conceptual fashion in China articulates local epistemologies while engaging international discourses.

2.3 Conceptualisation as Creative and Analytical Process

Position in the thesis. -As set out in Chapter 1 (1.3.2), this thesis treats conceptualism as a theoretical orientation and conceptualisation as the operative process that turns ideas into methods and evidence. Because the project argues for a dynamic (rather than static) understanding of conceptualism, this section frames conceptualisation in the literature so that later chapters can explicitly test and extend the initial definitions through practice (see Chapters 3-4). Maintaining terminological consistency, conceptual fashion here refers to idea-led, critically oriented fashion practice; conceptualisation names the iterative procedures by which such ideas are formed, structured, materialised/dematerialised, and communicated.

Conceptualisation across domains. In cognitive terms, conceptualisation entails abstraction and categorisation (Piaget, 1952); linguistically, it operates through semiotic construction, metaphor, and narrative (Saussure, 1916/2011); socially, it is entangled with discourse and power (Foucault, 1972). Read together, these strands position conceptualisation as a bridge between thought and form: it is not merely a pre-design "ideation" phase but an analytic engine that shapes what can be said, made, and known in design.

Implications for fashion design. Within fashion, conceptualisation enables designers to interrogate norms, propose alternatives, and navigate tensions between innovation and tradition. In speculative and critical design, for instance, the priority is to provoke reflection rather than to optimise market fit; conceptualisation becomes a tool for social imagination and ethical questioning (Dunne and Raby, 2013). In practical terms this often unfolds as an iterative sequence:

- framing a question (e.g., a cultural contradiction, material paradox, or institutional constraint).
- translating the question into constraints, rules, or scenarios.
- testing these via material/spatial experiments (including digital and dematerialised modes); and
- communicating findings through writing, exhibition, and discourse.

This cycle keeps ideas and evidence in productive tension and aligns with the practice-based methodology adopted in this thesis.

Chinese philosophical inflections. In the Chinese context, conceptual fashion draws on global theory while resonating with local philosophical traditions that orient design ethos and method. Two are especially pertinent: Daoist wu wei (无为)-often rendered as "non-action" or "effortless action"-advocates minimal intervention, attunement to circumstance, and allowing form to emerge (Slingerland, 2003). Confucian li (礼)-ritual propriety-foregrounds relational ethics, situated conduct, and the cultivation of social harmony (Confucius, trans. Ames and Rosemont, 1998). Read as design logics, wu wei supports rule-based restraint and processual openness; li focuses attention on context, audience, and the ethics of display. Together they scaffold a reflective practice in which fashion is treated as an ethical-intellectual pursuit rather than solely a vehicle for commerce. This interpretive lens will be made explicit whenever the thesis extends its working notion of conceptualism in practice (see Chapter 4).

From material to (de)material practice. Contemporary conceptual fashion operates across material and post-material registers. Digital patterning, simulation, VR/AR staging, and AI-assisted workflows expand the terrain on which conceptualisation is enacted, reinforcing the field's "idea-first" orientation while opening new evidentiary forms (Quinn, 2012; Seymour, 2008; Kettley, 2016). Crucially, dematerialisation here is not the absence of materiality but a re-calibration of how material, image, code, and performance co-produce meaning. This literature perspective directly informs the methodological choices in Chapters 3-4, where garments, installations, and time-based media function as complementary knowledge instruments.

Relevance to the research problem. The literature converges on a view of conceptualisation as both creative formation and cultural analysis. That dual role is central to this project's aims (1.4): to define a methodological framework for conceptual fashion in contemporary China and to evidence how such a framework can be taught and tested. Accordingly, later

chapters will signal moments where the initial definition of conceptualism is stretched by practice (e.g., when the idea is encoded as rules; when the "garment" becomes an environment; when digital projection substitutes ornament), thereby foregrounding one of the thesis's core contributions: a developmental account of conceptualism in fashion, traced across theory, method, and practice.

2.4 Integration with Creative Fashion Research

Position in the thesis. -Building on 2.3 and the aims set out in 1.4, this section situates conceptual fashion within the wider field of creative practice research, clarifying how conceptualism (as theoretical orientation) and conceptualisation (as operative process) map onto established debates about knowledge production in the arts and design. The goal is twofold: to ensure terminological consistency across the thesis, and to specify the evidentiary standards by which the practice components in Chapters 3-4 will test and extend the initial definition of conceptual fashion.

From practice to research: frameworks and standards. Since Frayling's (1993) influential distinction between research into/for/through design, a substantial literature has formalised practice-led/ practice-based approaches as legitimate modes of inquiry (Borgdorff, 2012; Nelson, 2013; Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Sullivan, 2010). Within these frameworks, artefacts and actions are not merely outputs; they are knowledge-bearing media whose significance is argued through triangulation among:

- The artefactual record (garments, prototypes, installations, moving image);
- Process documentation (logs, diagrams, rulesets, iterations); and
- Critical framing (theory, context, reflection).

This triad underpins rigour in the present study: research claims are warranted by the coherence across idea, method, and evidence rather than by technical virtuosity alone (Biggs and Büchler, 2008; Barrett and Bolt, 2010).

Fashion-specific developments. In fashion studies, the turn to practice has broadened the field beyond consumption and semiotics to encompass making-as-knowing (Evans, 2003; Rocamora and Smelik, 2016). Autoethnographic and reflective methods-journals, rehearsal notes, rehearsal garments-are now recognised as valid research instruments (Skjold, 2018; Schön, 1983). Parallel agendas in sustainability and systems thinking have positioned practice as a site for proposing alternatives to industrial logics (Fletcher and Tham, 2019). This thesis adopts these precedents but narrows the focus to conceptual fashion, arguing that idea-led, critically oriented practice produces knowledge by reflexively interrogating fashion's own sign systems, institutions, and material conventions.

Operationalising conceptualism via conceptualisation. To keep the conceptual vocabulary consistent, the study uses conceptualism to name the thesis's stance (idea-first, critically reflexive), and conceptualisation to name the iterative procedure by which ideas become constrained, prototyped, evidenced, and communicated (cf.2.3). In methodological terms, this is enacted through:

- Rule-based generation (e.g., instructions, parameters, or scores that encode the idea in advance of form);
- Material/digital experiments that probe limits (garment-space, body-environment, material-projection);
- Dialogic dissemination (exhibition, video, writing) that invites audience interpretation as part of the evidentiary chain.

These procedures align with research-through-design logics while preserving the dynamic understanding of conceptualism advanced in Chapter 1-that is, definitions are tested and extended through practice rather than merely applied.

Integration with Chinese creative and pedagogic contexts. In the Chinese higher-education landscape, the institutionalisation of practice-based research (PbR/PaR) is creating conditions for idea-led methods to inform curricula and assessment (see 4.3). The thesis leverages this context in two complementary ways. First, the studio operates as a research laboratory, where projects are designed to illuminate specific theoretical questions (e.g.,

authorship, dematerialisation, spatial dressing). Second, teaching is treated as research dissemination and validation, since classroom critique and public exhibition feed back into the refinement of claims (Smith and Dean, 2009). The pedagogic case of *As for Me* (elaborated in Chapter 4) exemplifies this integration: students engage with rule-based briefs and reflective documentation to understand how conceptualisation translates into methods, and how methods yield publicly testable evidence.

Evidentiary modes appropriate to conceptual fashion. Because conceptual fashion often works at (or beyond) the edge of wearability, the corpus of evidence extends beyond finished garments to include installations, moving-image documentation, projection studies, and interaction traces. Following Nelson (2013), the study treats these multimodal artefacts as a composite text in which the idea is distributed across media. This approach is especially pertinent to dematerialised or hybrid works (e.g., projection-activated textiles), where the unit of analysis is the event rather than the static object. The thesis therefore specifies, in each project, how the idea is encoded (constraints), how it is tested (prototypes/performances), and how it is interpreted (audience feedback, critical writing). Contribution to methodology. Integrating creative fashion research with conceptualism yields three methodological clarifications that the subsequent chapters will demonstrate:

- Conceptual rigour is operationalised through constraints (the idea as rule), not only through ex post interpretation.
- Dematerialisation is treated as re-calibration (redistributing meaning across code, image, and space), not as the negation of materiality.
- Pedagogic enactment functions as field-testing for conceptual claims, with assessment frameworks weighted towards conceptual depth, research integration, and process innovation (cf. 4.3.2).

Relevance to the research aims. These integrations directly support the thesis aims in 1.4 by: (i) defining a methodological framework for conceptual fashion that is transferable to the Chinese context; and (ii) evidencing how such a framework can be taught, exhibited, and critically evaluated. Chapters 3-4 will therefore signal explicit moments where the working definition of conceptual fashion is extended (for example, when the "garment"

becomes a spatial interface, or when projection supplants ornament), making visible the thesis's central claim: that conceptual fashion produces knowledge by reflexively reconfiguring fashion's semiotic, material, and institutional conditions.

2.5 The Cross-Disciplinary Fusion of Art and Fashion: Characteristics of Conceptual Fashion

Position in the chapter. —Extending the theoretical ground set in 2.3–2.5, this section moves from “what has been claimed” to “what is evidenced” about conceptual fashion as an art–fashion formation. It reads key art-theoretical constructs—Krauss’s expanded field and Lippard’s dematerialisation—through fashion case studies, and specifies how these constructs are adapted, translated, and inflected within contemporary Chinese practice. Throughout, conceptualism names the thesis’s idea-first orientation; conceptualisation names the operative procedures that convert ideas into methods and evidence.

2.5.1 Interdisciplinary Influence

From the expanded field to expanded dress. Krauss (1979) argues that late-twentieth-century art displaced medium specificity, opening an “expanded field” in which practice is constituted relationally across sculpture, landscape, and architecture. In fashion, a parallel relocation is visible when clothing no longer anchors meaning solely in wearable form but is staged as installation, performance, video, or spatial interface. The consequence is methodological rather than stylistic: designers write rules, score situations, and choreograph events, treating dress as a relational device between body, space, and audience. This expanded field frames the projects analysed in Chapter 4 (e.g. spatial assemblage; projection-activated textiles) and is already legible in international precedents from Comme des Garçons’ *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body* (A/W 1997) to Lucy Orta’s participatory structures, where “garment” functions as a platform for social relation rather than a finished commodity (Evans, 2003; Rocamora and Smelik, 2016).

Dematerialisation and the event of fashion. Lippard’s account of art’s “dematerialisation” (1973) does not deny materiality; its re-weights it, distributing the work across instruction,

documentation, and encounter. In conceptual fashion this appears as a shift from object primacy to the event of display: garments become scores activated by light, projection, or movement; documentation (text, diagram, video) carries equal epistemic weight to the stitched artefact. Crucially, this is not anti-material; it is para-material—material is retained, but meaning is co-authored by time, site, and audience. Chapter 4’s video-led installation and projection studies exemplify this redistribution, where the idea is legible as much in protocols and traces as in cloth.

Translating theories beyond the Euro-American canon. Existing literature richly analyses Japanese avant-garde fashion through post-war minimalism and anti-fashion (e.g. Kawamura, 2023; Evans, 2003). The Chinese field, by contrast, is still under-mapped in terms of how global art theories are re-authored through local philosophies, post-socialist aesthetics, and policy-shaped creative industries. Chinese conceptual fashion often sutures Krauss/Lippard to Daoist and Confucian logics—embracing Wu Wei’s calibrated restraint and Li’s situational ethics—to privilege processual openness, attunement to context, and ethical display (see 2.3). This produces a practice grammar distinct from Japanese abstraction: less about negating form per se, more about slowing, emptying, and re-contextualising form within cultural memory and resource politics.



Figure 17. Comparison of Conceptual Fashion in Japan and China. Left: Rei Kawakubo, *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body* (1997). As shown in the figure below: Ma Ke, *Wu Yong* (Useless) capsule presented in “*Fashion in Motion*” (2008). Kawakubo scalar-warps silhouette to estrange the normative body; Ma Ke foregrounds craft labour, material patina, and temporal slowness, repositioning dress as cultural witness. The juxtaposition clarifies divergent readings of conceptualism: structural abstraction (Japan) versus ethical materialism and cultural quietude (China).



Figure 17 Comparison of Conceptual Fashion in Japan and China. Left: Rei Kawakubo, *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body* (A/W 1997). Right: Ma Ke, Wu Yong presentation (V&A “Fashion in Motion”, 2008). Images to be cleared for reproduction. Captions emphasise conceptual strategy (abstraction vs ethical materialism), not merely style. *Source:* Rei Kawakubo Audio Feature. *Source:* Museum of Modern Art (n.d.). *Fashion in Motion* 2008. *Source:* Victoria and Albert Museum (2008).

2.5.2 *Characteristics of Conceptual Fashion*

Drawing on art/fashion theory (Evans, 2003; Rocamora and Smelik, 2016; English & Kim, 2013) and the cases discussed across Chapters 1 and 4, the field is best understood not as a style category but as a methodological disposition with the following interlocking characteristics:

- Idea-led construction. The concept precedes the cut. Designers encode propositions as constraints (rulesets, parameters, scores) from which form emerges. This is LeWitt’s logic translated to dress: the “idea becomes the machine” (1967, p. 79), operationalised in fashion via instruction-based drape, parametric modules, or projection conditions.
- Expanded media and spatialisation. Conceptual fashion routinely crosses media (film, projection, sound), treats dressing as situated performance, and relocates reading to the exhibitionary complex (runway as *mise-en-scène*; gallery as co-author). The unit of analysis shifts from garment to event.
- Narrative, critique, and worlding. Works stage arguments about identity, labour, ecology, and value—less signifying status than interrogating the conditions under which fashion signifies at all (Barnard, 2014; Fletcher and Tham, 2019). In Chinese contexts, this often involves re-mediation of tradition (technique, motif, ritual) as critical argument rather than nostalgic citation.
- Para-material and dematerial tendencies. Meaning is distributed across material + code + context. Dematerialisation is not disappearance but re-calibration: projection

substitutes for ornament; documentation becomes part of the work's meaning-apparatus (Lippard, 1973).

- Institutional and ethical reflexivity. Projects probe the fashion system itself—production tempos, authorship, assessment rubrics—aligning with sustainability and labour critique (Fletcher and Grose, 2012). In pedagogy, assessment is reweighted towards conceptual depth, research integration, and process innovation (see 4.3.2).

Chinese articulations: from symbolism to method. To distinguish conceptual fashion from fashion's general semioticity, Chinese examples demonstrate methodological rather than merely symbolic difference:

- Ma Ke / Wu Yong (Useless). Through hand-loomed textiles, burial/oxidation processes, and austere staging, Ma Ke translates slowness and use-lessness into procedures that suspend commodity temporality and foreground material testimony—cloth as archive of labour and place (Finnane, 2007).
- Guo Pei / Couture as cultural interface. Guo's dramatic silhouettes and imperial embroideries operate not simply as heritage symbols but as scale experiments that test how ornament, labour density, and weight recalibrate the wearer–audience–nation triad in a global spectacle economy (Steele, 2016). The conceptual move is the stress-test of cultural signifiers under conditions of hyper-visibility.
- Emergent practices (digital/installation). Younger designers and studio-based projects in mainland academies hybridise bamboo, plywood lattices, or projection skins with rule-based assembly. Here, structure replaces surface; interaction replaces fit. The “garment” becomes a micro-architecture that negotiates personal territory—an argument about bodies in dense urban publics (cf. Chapter 4, Spatial Assemblage).

Together these cases show that Chinese conceptual fashion is not simply “fashion with Chinese symbols”: it is a procedural re-thinking of fashion's unit (object → event), temporality (season → duration), authorship (designer → distributed agency), and value (ornament → evidence). Within the field, conceptual fashion operates as a practice privileging proposition over product and discourse over material permanence, aligning

with debates on dematerialisation, temporality, and critical pedagogy. On this basis, §2.5.3 outlines a Chinese grammar of conceptual fashion—its constraints, heuristics, and evaluative criteria.

2.5.3 A Chinese Grammar of Conceptual Fashion

To anchor the literature review in analysis rather than prospectus, the following working grammar is distilled from the evidence and used subsequently in Chapters 3–4 to test and extend the thesis’s definition:

- Temporality of Slowness: privileging process duration (repair, patination, iterative projection) over seasonal novelty; critical of accelerationist market time.
- Ethical Materialism: materials treated as witnesses (textile biographies, labour visibility); aesthetic decisions double as resource politics.
- Spatial Dressing: garments function as interfaces that draw boundaries, invite/repel contact, and script movement; relevance to Chinese urban density and choreographies of public space.
- Text–Image–Object Hybridity: written scores, diagrams, and videos are not supplementary but constitutive; the work is legible across media.
- Pedagogic Enactment: the studio/exhibition operates as a research laboratory; audience feedback and classroom critique are gathered as data (see 4.4.4 for exhibition reflections).

This grammar clarifies how conceptual fashion differentiates itself from fashion’s ordinary semiotic character: not by adding “more meaning,” but by re-engineering the conditions under which meaning in fashion is produced, read, and contested.

2.6 Innovation Paths of Contemporary Chinese Designers

Contemporary Chinese designers have pioneered innovative practices within conceptual fashion, pushing the boundaries of conventional dress and integrating artistic, cultural, philosophical, and socio-political problematics into their work. Their practices are not derivative of Euro-American avant-gardes; rather, they re-author conceptualism through

Chinese philosophies, craft lineages and post-socialist urban experience. This section analyses two prominent trajectories—ethereal eco-affective world-building (Susan Fang) and spatially architectural dramaturgy (CHENPENG)—and then situates these developments within the pedagogical infrastructures that have enabled them, notably CAFA and Donghua. Throughout, conceptual fashion is treated as a methodological disposition (idea-led, para-material, exhibitionary), consistent with the thesis’s use of conceptualism and conceptualisation.

2.6.1 Emerging Designers and New Practices: Reconfiguring the Chinese Conceptual Fashion Landscape

2.6.1.1 Susan Fang: Ethereality, Ecology, and Embodied Sentiment

Susan Fang’s practice sits at the intersection of emotional design, environmental attunement and computational craft. Collections such as Air · Home · Dream (A/W 2024) mobilise hand-woven lattices, 3D-printed bead structures and translucent strata to produce hovering volumes that frame, rather than discipline, the body. The grammar of lightness resonates with Daoist Wu Wei (无为)—minimal intervention and emergence through circumstance—while the work’s protective cocooning refracts Confucian Li (礼) as an ethic of relational care. Read through Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, Fang’s garments choreograph atmospheres of belonging rather than spectacles of consumption; meaning accrues through affective encounter, not only through silhouette (Bourriaud, 2002). Technically, hybrid hand/machine processes yield fractal surface logics that echo post-humanist design thinking; culturally, the dematerialising palette and translucency reposition dress as an ambient interface between memory, intimacy and environment (Entwistle, 2015).



Figure 18 Look from Susan Fang's A/W 2024 "Air · Home · Dream". Voluminous floral quilting with translucent tulle articulates warmth and protective softness; a cocoon silhouette constructed via hand-manipulated lattices stages love as shelter and atmosphere. Source: Susan Fang Studio (2024).

2.6.1.2 CHENPENG: Spatial Conceptualism and Material Dramaturgy

By contrast, CHENPENG (Chen Peng) advances an architectural and confrontational conceptualism. Recent collections (e.g. *Echoes of Silence* 2023; *Reflections in Motion* 2024) deploy weighted draperies, ceramic appliqué and geometric fold-systems to turn the garment into a sculptural intervention in space. Presentation formats are immersive, enlisting viewers as co-navigators in environments that stress visibility, vulnerability and urban proximity—aligning with Groys's analysis of contemporary art's regimes of visibility and "art power" (Groys, 2008). Where Fang offers ecological harmony and emotional porosity, CHENPENG tests thresholds—of scale, weight, publicness—to interrogate identity under flux and displacement.



Figure 19 Garment from CHENPENG Studio (2024). An exaggerated, ceremonially inflected silhouette re-scales the body through minimal chromatic range and material density; a dialectic of restraint/expansion mirrors Daoist–Confucian notions of balance. Source: CHENPENG Studio (2024).

2.6.1.3 Comparative Analysis and Philosophical Distinction

Taken together, Fang and CHENPENG mark two poles in contemporary Chinese conceptual fashion. Fang's eco-affective ether dematerialises constraint, proposing lightness, mutual care and planetary attunement; CHENPENG's material dramaturgy problematises the subject's exposure in urban publics through mass, obstruction and frame. Both exceed fashion's ordinary semiotic play: each re-engineers the conditions under which meaning in fashion is produced and read Fang by dispersing meaning into ambience and relation, CHENPENG by architecturalising dress as a spatial argument.

2.6.1.4 Research Gaps and Theoretical Trajectories

Scholarship on Chinese fashion still over-indexes Western influence and nation branding (Finnane, 2007; Steele, 2016), under-describing indigenous philosophical substrates (Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism) and the methodological hybridity visible in current practice (textile innovation + emotional technology + installation). Audience reception and meaning-making within Chinese conceptual fashion spaces also lack ethnographic study. A productive trajectory therefore couples design theory, affect studies, Chinese philosophy and relational aesthetics to describe a specifically Chinese epistemology of making/feeling/being—one that is neither imitation nor inversion of Western avant-gardes, but a re-authoring anchored in local logics and materials.

2.6.2 Fashion Education and the Pedagogical Foundations of Conceptual Fashion in China

Educational infrastructures are decisive sites where conceptual fashion is learned as method rather than style. Two complementary models predominate:

- a) CAFA (Central Academy of Fine Arts): critical theory and cross-disciplinary inquiry.

CAFA's pedagogy frames the body as a site of cultural negotiation and garments as spatial–emotional propositions, privileging experimentation and philosophical discourse over market compliance (Wang, 2018). Projects that work with transparency, fragmentation and ritual staging enact Daoist

emptiness and Confucian situated ethics as design logics. The outcome is a studio culture in which writing, diagramming, prototyping and exhibition function together as research instruments. A recurrent challenge—also visible internationally—is the translation of conceptual depth into sustainable professional pathways, given market tempos and assessment regimes; this tension is addressed in Chapter 4 via process-weighted assessment and exhibition as research.



Figure 20 Lv Yue, “Second Layer of Skin” (2016, CAFA). Transparent fabrics and layered fractures probe thresholds between skin, clothing and public exposure, articulating a liminal ethics of visibility. Source: CAFA, 2016 Graduation Fashion Show (2016).

b) Donghua University: technological integration and sustainability.

Donghua couples digital fashion, smart textiles, 3D printing and sustainable systems with critical discourse, producing graduates fluent in technical prototyping + conceptual framing (Liu, 2019). Here, conceptualism is operationalised through toolchains—simulation, responsive materials, sensory interfaces—that enable para-material display and iterative world-building aligned to industry collaboration.



Figure 21 Bao Yueming, “Infinite Lines” (2016, Donghua). Accessories operate as kinetic relays responsive to corporeal motion, installation and body co-produce value over time. Source: Bao Yueming, personal social media (2016).

Synthesis. CAFA’s theory-forward laboratory and Donghua’s tech-forward platform together constitute the pedagogical ecology in which Chinese conceptual fashion thrives: one model deepens critical and philosophical literacies, the other scales technical and collaborative capacities. Both support the thesis’s contention that conceptual fashion is best taught and evaluated as idea → method → evidence (conceptualisation), not as a fixed aesthetic. Notably, this addresses the broader thesis problem of distinguishing conceptual fashion from fashion’s general semioticity: curricula and assessment shift from “what it looks like” to “what it does conceptually, ethically, spatially” (cf. 4.3.2).

2.7 From Design to Practice: Future Trends of Conceptual Fashion in China

Aligning with the research questions set out in Chapter 1 (on articulating a methodological framework for conceptual fashion in China and embedding it pedagogically), current scholarship and practice indicate two interlinked drivers of change: technological innovation and sustainability as design ethos and institutional imperative. Read together,

they are not merely instrumental trends; they are conditions of practice that shape how conceptualism and conceptualisation are enacted in China—methodologically (idea-led, para-material, exhibitionary), culturally (philosophically grounded) and pedagogically (practice-as-research).

2.7.1 Technological innovation in conceptual fashion

Emerging tools—large language models, generative/algorithmic design systems, extended reality (AR/VR), and smart/interactive textiles—are reconfiguring authorship, process and display. In the Chinese context these tools sit within a distinctive platformised media ecology (social retail ecosystems, domestic fabrication networks) and policy environment (e.g. advanced manufacturing initiatives), producing rapid cycles of prototyping and audience encounter that lend themselves to conceptual, para-material experimentation.

Designers increasingly mobilise technology conceptually rather than decoratively:

- Generative pattern systems and AI-assisted prototyping are used to set constraints and produce families of outcomes, decentring single-author signatures and aligning with conceptual art's logic of rule-driven variation (cf. LeWitt).
- AR overlays and responsive surfaces extend garments into narrative interfaces, allowing time-based readings and audience co-construction of meaning—an exhibitionary mode compatible with conceptual fashion's emphasis on idea over object (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016).
- Smart textiles (sensing/actuating) re-stage the body–garment relation as feedback rather than fit, resonating with Chinese philosophical emphases on attunement and situation (see 2.3 on Wu Wei/Li).

Illustratively, studios such as Susan Fang and ANGEL CHEN layer digital storytelling and material responsiveness to stage garments as ambient, relational media rather than static products. Early studies on Chinese fashion technology report generative toolchains in student and independent practice—virtual prototyping, parametric cut, consumer-facing customisation—shortening iteration loops and foregrounding processual thinking (Zhang and Liu, 2024).



Figure 22 Campaign image, ANGEL CHEN S/S 2025 “Nomadic Map”. Re-composition of traditional motifs within a contemporary silhouette to script mobility and hybridity as situated narratives. Source: ANGEL CHEN Studio(2025).

Existing Euro-American frameworks for “fashion tech” (e.g. couture robotics, London/Paris AR shows) are analytically rich but often under-specify Chinese specificities: the pace of digital adoption, audience behaviours on domestic platforms, and the porous boundary between exhibition and commerce. What remains thin in the literature is a theorisation of how AI/smart materiality reorganise conceptual fashion’s epistemics in China—agency (human/machine), temporality (scripted/performative), interaction (spectator/participant). Section 4 shows how such questions are operationalised pedagogically (simulation-to-installation pipelines; process-weighted assessment).

2.7.2 Sustainability and future directions in conceptual fashion

Sustainability in China operates not only as technical compliance but as aesthetic and ethical orientation. Designers draw on craft lineages and indigenous philosophies (Daoist minimal intervention; Confucian relational ethics; cyclical time) to reframe fashion’s material and temporal economies. This yields strategies consonant with conceptualism’s “minimum matter—maximum meaning” stance:

- Dematerialisation and low-impact making (zero-waste logics, substitution of projection/installation for ornament) as critique of extractive fashion temporalities (Fletcher and Grose, 2012).
- Slowness, silence, simplicity as formal ethics, seen in practices aligned with Ma Ke, where garment presence is staged as ritual and memory rather than commodity (Finnane, 2007; Steele, 2016).
- Relational sustainability—value generated through participation, perception and duration rather than material novelty.

A concise student case from Donghua, Bao Yueming’s “Infinite Lines” (2016), positions accessories as kinetic relays between body and space; sustainability is treated as relational process (movement, attention, interaction) rather than a checklist of materials.



Optical performance — / Merge yourself into an illusional space.

Figure 23 Installation view, Bao Yueming “Infinite Lines” (2016). Interactive wearable accessories convert motion into spatial visual effects, reframing adornment as installation and experience. *Source: Bao Yueming, personal social media (2016).*

Anglophone scholarship often casts Chinese sustainability as derivative of Western “green” paradigms; yet the philosophical substrates and ritual/affective registers that inform Chinese conceptual fashion are poorly described. Re-centering those logics clarifies how local practices exceed compliance to re-conceptualise what counts as sustainable fashion (ethics of relation, temporality of care, exhibition as pedagogy).

2.7.3 *Implications for framework and pedagogy*

Building on §2.5.2, where conceptual fashion is aligned with dematerialisation, temporality, and critical pedagogy, this subsection considers how such a practice-led method translates into curriculum structure, assessment criteria, and classroom display.

The foregoing points crystallise a condition → methods → evidence schema that grounds this thesis's approach to conceptual fashion in China:

- Conditions. Technical (LLMs/AR/smart textiles), cultural (Daoist/Confucian philosophies; post-socialist urbanity), institutional (practice-as-research in HE).
- Methods. Idea-led constraint-setting; para-material composition (projection, interface, installation); exhibition as inquiry; documentation as argument.
- Evidence. Iterative prototypes, performative installations, reflective texts—assessed for conceptual work done (what is questioned, re-framed, made thinkable) rather than object finish.

This schema also clarifies scope. The thesis does not attempt an exhaustive mapping of “future fashion” in China; it tests a bounded framework through practice and teaching (Chs 3–4), showing how conceptual fashion can operate under Chinese conditions while maintaining methodological coherence. In doing so, it differentiates conceptual fashion from fashion's general semioticity: the point is not that fashion has meaning (it always does), but that conceptual fashion re-engineers the rules of meaning-making—its media, sites and audiences—under contemporary technical, cultural and institutional constraints.

2.8 Identifying Research Gaps

While §2.5.2 positions conceptual fashion as privileging proposition over product and discourse over material permanence, the Chinese context still lacks systematic criteria for propositions and clear pathways for pedagogic translation—gaps this thesis addresses through PBR (see Chapters 3–4).

Despite expanding scholarship on Chinese fashion, three closely related gaps remain under-theorised in Anglophone and Chinese-language literature:

- Traditional cultural logics within conceptual practice. We lack sustained accounts of how Chinese philosophical frameworks (e.g. Li 礼, Wu Wei 无为), historical dress systems (e.g. hanfu, qipao), calligraphy, symbolism and craft lineages are embedded in (rather than merely juxtaposed with) contemporary conceptual fashion as method, form and discourse (Clunas, 1997; Finnane, 2007; Steele, 2016).
- Socio-political agency of conceptual fashion in contemporary China. Existing studies foreground diffusion of global avant-gardes and branding but under-describe how conceptual fashion in China performs critique—of labour, gender, urban precarity, ecological extraction—and how such critique is staged through para-material media (installation, performance, AR) and exhibitionary formats (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016).
- Operational articulation of sustainability and technology in conceptual methods and pedagogy. There is limited analysis of how dematerialisation, AI/algorithmic tooling, AR/VR and smart textiles are operationalised as conceptual procedures and how these procedures are taught, assessed and archived within practice-based research (PBR) and studio curricula.

Contribution and scope. Rather than attempting an exhaustive survey, the thesis makes a focused contribution on (1), with necessary intersections with (3): it analyses how selected Chinese designers embed traditional philosophical and material repertoires inside idea-led processes and exhibition practices, and it operationalises these insights practically—via design constraints, documentation protocols and assessment rubrics—that are tested in studio teaching (Chs 3–4). This keeps the argument tightly aligned with the overarching questions of methodological and practical definition and of pedagogic embedment set out in Chapter 1.

2.8.1 The Traditional in the Conceptual: Cultural Frameworks and Contemporary Chinese Conceptual Fashion

Scholarship richly documents how global avant-gardes have shaped Chinese fashion (Clunas, 1997; Finnane, 2007; Steele, 2016), often via exemplars such as the Japanese avant-garde (e.g. Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto) whose work circulates transnationally rather than as “Western modernism.” What remains thin is analysis of the traditional within conceptual practice—the ways Chinese designers internalise ritual ethics, literati aesthetics and craft epistemologies as conceptual engines rather than as surface motifs.

Two historical dress systems illustrate the stakes:

- Hanfu: historically entangled with Confucian ritual propriety (Li), rank and temporal cyclicity. Its proportional logics, layering, and choreographies of donning carry procedural knowledge—rules, sequences, gestures—that can be redeployed as idea-driven constraints in contemporary work (Steele, 2016).
- Qipao: a modern, hybrid form that mediated gender, urbanity and modernisation. Its semiotics of contour, exposure and modesty constitute a ready matrix for critical re-coding around body politics and mobility.

While hanfu has re-entered popular and platform cultures, particularly among youth communities, the conceptual re-inscription of these dress systems—where designers transform pattern canons, ritual temporality and craft procedures into rulesets, time-based installations or para-material “garments”—is under-analysed in the academic literature. The same is true for calligraphy as method (stroke order, pressure, void), symbolic ecologies (dragon/phoenix, peony, auspicious clouds) and craft lineages (embroidery, indigo resist)—all of which offer processual as well as visual resources for conceptual fashion.

Working definitions that guide the thesis are therefore both methodological and practical:

- Methodological:
- Traditional repertoire denotes transmissible logics (proportion, sequence, symbolism, ritual timing) that can be abstracted into design constraints and exhibition scripts.

- Conceptual fashion is treated as idea-led practice wherein material execution, media and display are selected to test a proposition about body, culture or system.
- Practical/operational:
- Design procedures translate cultural logics into rules (e.g. ritual layering → modular sequencing; calligraphic void → negative-space pattern cutting; cyclical time → looped projection/installations).
- Evidence and evaluation privilege the conceptual work done (what is problematised or re-framed) through prototypes, performative trials and reflective writing, over finish alone consistent with PBR criteria.

This reframing avoids treating “tradition” and “conceptualism” as separate domains that simply “meet.” Instead, it argues that in the Chinese context conceptual fashion is often saturated with the traditional, where tradition functions as a thinking technology: a set of constraints, metaphors and temporalities that generate contemporary critical form.



Figure 24 Schematic of hanfu and qipao structures. The diagram isolates proportional and sequencing logics (layering, fastening, contour) to indicate how historical dress can feed contemporary rule-based conceptual procedures. Source: Author's own work (2019)

Foregrounding the traditional in the conceptual accomplishes two things integral to the thesis aims. First, it supplies locally grounded methods for conceptual practice under Chinese conditions—methods that are transferable to studio teaching (Chapter 4) and directly assessable within PBR. Second, it differentiates conceptual fashion from fashion's general semiotic character: the project is not another symbolic citation of heritage; it is the procedural transformation of heritage into constraints, time-structures and media ecologies that make new cultural questions thinkable in and through fashion.

2.8.2 The Socio-Political Role of Fashion in Contemporary China

Conceptual fashion in China operates as a vehicle for cultural critique and identity work, yet its socio-political agency remains under-described in both Anglophone and much Chinese-language scholarship. Existing writing tends to privilege market expansion, branding, and soft-power narratives, leaving comparatively little analysis of how fashion—especially idea-led, para-material practice—articulates positions on gender, labour, nationalism, urban precarity, or ecological extraction (Wilson, 2003; Rocamora, 2016). Where socio-political readings do surface, they are often folded back into accounts of commercial success, reinforcing a persistent framing of the Chinese fashion field as primarily a commercial rather than an aesthetic-critical site.

Three dynamics help to explain this under-theorisation. First, policy and media discourses that foreground creative-industry growth tend to aestheticise or neutralise dissent, steering coverage towards export value, luxury branding, and national image. Second, global fashion media's long-standing Orientalising optics can recode culturally specific gestures as exotic spectacle, rather than reading them as situated critique. Third, academic treatments that track diffusion of Euro-American or transnational avant-gardes sometimes decentre locally specific modes of making critique legible in China's cultural sphere.

Close readings of designers already introduced in this chapter suggest how a socio-political account could proceed. Guo Pei's couture (including the widely discussed yellow cape

worn by Rihanna at the 2015 Met Gala, see Figure 16) stages imperial symbolism, courtly silhouette, and encyclopaedic embroidery as a high-stakes negotiation of cultural pride, patrimony and global spectacle. Read through nationalism and image politics, these works can be seen to mediate tensions between heritage as resource and heritage as brand (Steele, 2016). Ma Ke's WUYONG practice—developed through slow making, salvage, and performance-based installation (V&A “Fashion in Motion,” 2008, Figure 17)—critiques productivism and the commodity form, reframing value through silence, slowness and care (Finnane, 2007; Steele, 2016). Although often discussed under sustainability, Ma Ke's stance also implicates labour ethics and anti-accelerationist temporalities, locating fashion in a politics of refusal as much as in material ecology.

Beyond marquee cases, emergent designers mobilise para-material formats (installation, video, AR), restricted palettes and choreographed wear to press on contemporary questions: masculinity and displacement; the disciplining of bodies in smart cities; the affective atmospheres of rapid urbanisation. Yet these practices are still more frequently catalogued for their formal innovation than analysed for the positions they take on the social. Where Chinese-language texts do engage social themes, they often do so via cultural heritage protection, policy alignment, or industry case analysis, with fewer articles undertaking theory-led readings of specific collections or exhibitions.

For this thesis, the implication is twofold. First, a socio-political reading of Chinese conceptual fashion must treat medium and staging—craft procedure, ritual choreography, installation logic, para-material display—as constitutive of critique rather than as neutral containers. Second, it requires a vocabulary that can register nationalist marking and Orientalist reception at once: how certain symbols, silhouettes and exhibition formats accrue meanings across domestic and global circuits. Subsequent chapters apply this vocabulary to practice-based work and teaching experiments, showing how design constraints and documentation protocols can render such positions analysable within PBR frameworks.

2.8.3 *Integrating Technology and Sustainability in Conceptual Fashion*

Discussions of technology and sustainability in Chinese fashion are growing, but their integration as conceptual procedures within Chinese conceptual practice and pedagogy remains thinly theorised. Much literature charts tools (3D printing, smart textiles) or materials (recycled fibres, bio-based dyes) in instrumental terms, without attending to how designers in China fold these into idea-led methods—rulesets, temporal scores, and para-material display—consistent with practice-as-research.

Two clarifications are useful. First, in a dematerialising media ecology (digital patterning, virtual prototyping, AR/VR presentation, LLM-assisted ideation), technology is not just a production aid; it is a medium of thought that enables multi-modal narrative, new forms of collaboration, and forms of audience co-creation that are hard to stage with cloth alone (Peters, 2021). Second, sustainability in the Chinese context cannot be reduced to eco-materials; it also names temporal and ritual re-orientations (slowness, repair, care), and relational ethics grounded in Daoist and Confucian cosmologies—harmonisation, non-intervention, cyclical time—that are increasingly visible in atelier practice and exhibition scripting (Fletcher and Tham, 2019; Steele, 2016).

Designers already discussed in this chapter exemplify these re-orientations. Ma Ke's emphasis on salvage and slowness enacts a critique of acceleration and disposability while proposing alternative economies of attention (Finnane, 2007). Contemporary studios working with AR layers and responsive textiles (e.g. in recent Shanghai and Shenzhen showcases) fold interactivity into the proposition itself: garments become interfaces through which climate, gesture or proximity write the work in real time. In such cases, sustainability is not a specification but a form of meaning-making; technology is not a gimmick but a method for staging questions about agency, authorship and resource use.

Educationally, Chinese programmes are beginning to align these trajectories. Studio briefs that pair algorithmic prototyping with reflective writing and performative testing allow students to treat dematerialisation (digital lookbooks, projection, virtual garments) as both ecological strategy and conceptual medium. Assessment frameworks that weight

conceptual depth, research integration and process innovation alongside technical execution (see Chapter 4) support this shift—without over-promising on industry transformation.

This thesis remains modest in scope: it does not survey every technological or eco-innovative initiative. Instead, it articulates operational protocols—constraint design, documentation, exhibition scoring—through which technology and sustainability can be mobilised as conceptual procedures in studio and exhibition. In doing so, it responds to the paucity of method-focused accounts and shows how Chinese philosophical logics (e.g. Wu Wei, cyclical time) can be translated into rules and temporal structures that guide making, presentation and critique.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has traced how conceptual fashion in China takes shape at the confluence of dress history, art theory, design pedagogy and contemporary industry conditions. To keep the argument continuous with Chapter 1, conceptualism has been treated here as a moving thread rather than a static label: an idea-led stance that migrates across media (garment, installation, projection, virtual render), institutions (atelier, school, museum) and value systems (craft, market, care). In doing so, the review clarifies both the intellectual inheritance of conceptual fashion and the procedural mechanisms by which it is practiced and taught in Chinese contexts. The chapter also prepares the ground for the thesis's open, developmental conclusion by emphasising conditions and methods rather than closed definitions.

2.9.1 Historical situatedness: tradition as method

Work on Hanfu and Qipao (Finnane, 2007; Steele, 2016) rightly reads these garments as socio-symbolic forms tied to hierarchy, gender and modernity. What remains thinly theorised is how contemporary designers translate that inheritance into conceptual procedures: using ritual logics as constraints, pattern systems as scores, and display

conventions as curatorial scripts. Reframing tradition as method (rather than motif) aligns this thesis with a practice vocabulary attentive to rule-making, temporality and exhibition as modes of inquiry.

2.9.2 Global–local articulation: translation, not diffusion

Literatures on globalisation map flows of style and capital (Wilson, 2003; Rocamora, 2016) but often downplay designer agency in localising theory through Chinese philosophical and craft epistemologies. The question is less what global ideas arrive than how they are operationalised—e.g. folding dematerialisation into para-material display; pairing post-structuralist critique with Confucian Li (ritual attention to context, audience, ethics) and Daoist Wu Wei (minimal intervention, processual openness). This chapter has assembled evidence for such translations and kept the focus on procedures of making and showing.

2.9.3 Art–fashion convergences: the expanded field, Sinophone uptake

Krauss’s expanded field and Lippard’s dematerialisation illuminate why garments increasingly behave like installations, scores and performances. Their Sinophone uptake, however, is under-described. Situating Chinese practice within these frames shows that dematerialisation in fashion is not only an art-historical claim but a pedagogical tactic (studio briefs that prioritise idea over object) and a curatorial tactic (light, projection and choreography substituting for ornament). The upshot is a conceptually coherent account of how “less material, more meaning” is designed, taught and exhibited in China.

2.9.4 Semiotics versus conceptualism: reflexive use of signs

All fashion is semiotic, but conceptual fashion is semiotically reflexive: it turns the sign system back on itself to expose its limits, reroute readings and produce critique. This distinguishes conceptual fashion from mere symbolism. The literature hints at this difference; the present review renders it explicit as a diagnostic criterion that recurs across Chinese cases (e.g. re-inscribing imperial motifs to question nationalism; slowing couture to interrogate value; staging garments as obstructions to problematise the body-as-display).

2.9.5 Designer trajectories: from visibility to philosophical labour

Accounts of figures such as Ma Ke and Guo Pei often foreground visibility and market success. Read methodologically, their practices reveal tempo (slowness), repair, craft ecologies, symbolic statecraft and exhibition dramaturgy as conceptual tools. Newer trajectories (e.g. computational craft, spatial dramaturgy, affect-centred design) extend this toolset. What binds them is not silhouette but protocols: constraint design, iterative testing, and performance-led presentation that render thought legible as form.

2.9.6 Education as infrastructure: assessment, documentation, display

Analyses of CAFA, Donghua and allied programmes typically celebrate cross-disciplinarity and technical sophistication. Less examined are the engines that enable conceptual method: how briefs encode ideas as rules; how reflective writing and process archives substantiate claims; how assessment weights concept against craft; how exhibitions act as research outputs. Positioning education as infrastructure clarifies why Chinese conceptual fashion is not episodic but institutionally reproducible.

2.9.7 Technology and sustainability: ideas in action

Technologies (AI/LLMs, parametric modelling, smart textiles, VR/AR) and sustainability (circularity, slow fashion, repair) are often treated as parallel agendas. In Chinese conceptual practice they frequently converge as idea-led procedures: dematerialised presentation as ecological stance; algorithmic prototyping as narrative method; salvage and modularity as temporal design. The literature tracks capabilities: this review highlights conceptual uses—how tools and ethics become form-giving rules rather than afterthoughts.

2.9.8 A bounded contribution: from conditions to methods

Four needs emerge from the review and delimit the thesis's scope:

- robust ways to read tradition as method in contemporary Chinese practice.

- vocabularies for socio-political address that recognise staging, choreography and material ethics as critique.
- documentation of pedagogical mechanics (briefs, criteria, exhibits) that operationalise conceptualism.
- accounts of tech/sustainability as conceptual procedures in Sinophone settings.

The thesis responds within a modest, practice-led frame (Chs 3–4). Rather than proposing a universal definition, it articulates a developmental definition of conceptual fashion suited to the Chinese context: a mode of para-material, reflexive, idea-centred practice that is methodologically encoded (in rules, tests, displays) and pedagogically sustained (in briefs, assessments, archives).

Taken together, this review positions conceptual fashion in China as a procedural, para-material and reflexively semiotic practice rather than a stylistic label. The unresolved questions here are methodological: how ideas are encoded as rules, tests and displays, and how such procedures operate in studio, classroom and exhibition. Chapters 3–4 therefore test the initial definitions by turning concepts into methods and methods into evidence (prototypes, installations, reflective writing and audience encounter). Chapter 5 does not close with a fixed taxonomy; it gathers the tested procedures into a set of open propositions—on material restraint, semiotic reflexivity, pedagogic encoding and exhibition as research—thereby articulating an intentionally open conclusion consistent with the field’s conceptual commitments.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Theoretical Approach

This chapter details the methodological architecture of the study. It first sets out the ontological and epistemological stance that underpins the inquiry (3.1), then states the researcher's positionality and reflexive practice (3.2). It next justifies a Practice-Based/Practice-as-Research (PBR/PaR) strategy for investigating conceptual fashion in China (3.3) and outlines the design of the study, including methods of generating and analysing materials (3.4–3.6). Finally, it addresses ethics and quality/rigour (3.7–3.8), notes limitations (3.9), and summarises how the methodology operationalises the research aims (3.10).

Throughout, “conceptual fashion” is treated not as a fixed style but as a procedural, ideal practice: the chapter therefore foregrounds procedures (rules, tests, displays) that link ideas to making and to public encounter. In keeping with the thesis title—*Articulating Conceptual Fashion in China: A Practice-Based Contribution and Its Pedagogic Translation*—the approach positions articulation as both a theoretical task and a practical programme, specifying how propositions are formed, constrained, tested, communicated, and ultimately translated into pedagogic form.

Throughout this thesis I use Practice-Based Research (PBR) as the preferred term to describe a mode of inquiry in which practice generates, tests, and communicates knowledge. I acknowledge overlapping usages of Practice-as-Research (PaR) and Practice-led Research (PbR) across arts and design literature; while nuances exist—PaR foregrounds practice as the research in itself, and PbR often positions practice as the driver of inquiry—the present study adopts PBR for terminological consistency and because it best captures my cyclic method of framing → constraining → testing → communicating, and the articulation of outcomes both as works and as claims to knowledge. Where cited authors employ PaR/PbR, I retain their usage in quotations or paraphrases but subsume them under PBR for coherence across chapters and assessment criteria.

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Stance

This thesis is grounded in a constructivist ontology and a practice-centred epistemology that together position conceptual fashion design as a mode of knowledge production rather than a merely aesthetic or commercial activity. In ontological terms, the study assumes that “fashion” does not pre-exist as a fixed, essential category awaiting description; rather, it is brought into being through situated practices—of making, wearing, teaching, exhibiting and critiquing—across specific social and material ecologies (Ingold, 2013; Latour, 2005). Epistemologically, the study adopts a stance in which knowing emerges through doing ideas, rules and hypotheses are iteratively articulated, materialised, tested, revised and communicated through studio work, pedagogy and public presentation. This stance is consistent with the literature in practice-based research (PBR) and practice-as-research (PaR), which argues that artistic and design practices produce forms of understanding that are not fully capturable by propositional text alone (Frayling, 1993; Barrett and Bolt, 2010; Nelson, 2013; Candy and Edmonds, 2018).

3.1.1 *Constructivist assumptions*

Constructivism offers two core assumptions that are decisive for a study of conceptual fashion in contemporary China. First, knowledge is provisional and situated: what counts as “conceptual” is locally negotiated within the Chinese educational system, exhibition cultures and professional networks, and is therefore expected to shift as practices and discourses evolve (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Second, meaning is collaboratively produced by human and non-human actors—designers, students, audiences, fabrics, tools, display technologies and institutional protocols—such that ontological status (what a garment “is”) cannot be separated from its relational performance (what it does in a given setting) (Barad, 2007; Latour, 2005).

These assumptions are not purely philosophical; they bear methodological consequences. If fashion knowledge is emergent and relational, inquiry must be processual and reflexive, attentive to transitions, thresholds and reconfigurations rather than to static typologies. For this reason, the thesis treats conceptualism not as a stable style category but as a working

hypothesis that is continuously tested through practice and discourse. Each phase of studio making and pedagogic implementation functions as an intervention that may extend, constrain or re-specify the operational meaning of conceptualism in the Chinese context.

3.1.2 Practice-centred epistemology

A practice-centred epistemology privileges reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as the engines of knowledge development (Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987). In the studio, designers often proceed by formulating rules or constraints (“the idea becomes the machine that makes the art”, in LeWitt’s well-known formulation) and by observing how materials and bodies respond to those rules. While LeWitt’s claim sits in a fine-art lineage, it aligns with the design research view that rules, prototypes and scenarios act as epistemic tools: they organise inquiry, foreground assumptions, make contradictions legible and yield insight through breakdown and repair (Cross, 2001; Archer, 1995).

In this thesis, knowledge is treated as multi-modal. It takes textual form (analytical chapters, logs, interview transcripts), material form (prototypes, pattern logics, installations), and performative/relational form (critiques, classroom exchanges, exhibition feedback). Following Candy and Edmonds (2018), the artefacts are not mere illustrations of prior knowledge but primary sites where knowledge is generated. Hence the analysis does not “translate” practice into text so much as stage a dialogue across forms, allowing each to interrogate the others.

3.1.3 Implications for the Chinese context

The constructivist–practice stance is especially pertinent in China, where conceptual fashion operates amid heterogeneous institutional logics: market-oriented design programmes, fine-art-derived studio cultures, rapidly expanding digital infrastructures and state policy discourses on innovation and cultural confidence. In such a landscape, normatively “Western” taxonomies of conceptual fashion are insufficient. What counts as conceptual will often be negotiated through local philosophies (e.g. Confucian *li* as

relational propriety; Daoist wu wei as non-coercive emergence), educational protocols (assessment weights, crit culture) and display regimes (graduation shows, museum programmes, online platforms). A practice-centred epistemology is therefore suitable not only for generating findings but also for ensuring cultural legibility: it enables concepts to be tuned to context through iterative testing rather than imported wholesale as fixed definitions (Ingold, 2013; Barrett and Bolt, 2010).

3.1.4 From ontology to method: why “conceptualism” is treated as dynamic

Treating conceptualism as dynamic follows directly from the ontology. If fashion is enacted through practice, then conceptualism names a family of procedures—rule-setting, dematerialisation, narrative construction, socio-political positioning—rather than a single aesthetic signature. Its meaning must be worked out in action and evidenced through artefacts, classroom encounters and audience responses. This justifies the thesis structure, which places studio probes and pedagogic cases alongside literature review and theoretical articulation. The approach resonates with Haseman’s (2006) proposal for performative research, where claims are advanced through acts that make new realities available for inspection, and with Nelson’s (2013) “triangulation of know-how, know-that and know-what-works”.

3.1.5 Abduction, not induction or deduction

Methodologically, the epistemic work proceeds by abduction rather than strict induction or deduction. Abduction generates the best available explanation for surprising observations and then feeds that hypothesis back into practice for further testing (Timmermans and Tavory, 2014). For example, an initial hypothesis—“dematerialisation affords ‘minimum matter–maximum meaning’ in Chinese conceptual fashion”—is examined through specific rulesets (e.g. projection replacing ornament, zero-waste pattern strategies) and classroom implementation; the ensuing artefacts and feedback either stabilise or disturb the hypothesis, prompting its refinement. This abductive loop is more congruent with creative

inquiry than linear hypothesis testing and avoids the positivist connotations of experiment while retaining rigour through documentation and transparency (Biggs and Büchler, 2008).

3.1.6 Criteria of validity and trustworthiness

Within a constructivist–practice paradigm, validity is pursued through trustworthiness rather than statistical generalisation (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Four criteria guide evaluation:

- **Credibility:** triangulation across modalities (text, artefact, performance), member checks with interviewees, and peer debriefings in crits and reviews (Barrett and Bolt, 2010; Nelson, 2013).
- **Transferability:** thick description of contexts—studio rules, materials, institutional settings—allowing readers to judge applicability to adjacent sites such as other Chinese design programmes (Biggs and Büchler, 2008).
- **Dependability:** an audit trail comprising time-stamped design logs, rule revisions, pattern files, exhibition layouts and feedback summaries.
- **Confirmability:** explicit separation of claims and evidence, rigorous citation of sources, and archiving of raw materials for inspection where ethics permits.

These criteria align with the field’s evolving discussion of quality in artistic research, which emphasises coherence between aims, methods, artefacts and claims (Smith and Dean, 2009; Candy and Edmonds, 2018).

3.1.7 Reflexivity and positionality

Because the researcher occupies the roles of designer and educator, reflexivity is not optional but methodologically constitutive. The study therefore incorporates: (a) a reflective journal capturing decision points, failures and emergent insights (Schön, 1983); (b) peer review moments with colleagues to surface blind spots; and (c) participant validation for interview extracts and interpretive summaries. Reflexivity also extends to terminological consistency: a maintained glossary ensures that key terms—conceptualism,

conceptualisation, studio probe, ruleset, dematerialisation—are used consistently across chapters, with concept-shift flags that mark where practice has prompted re-definition. This device operationalises the thesis’s commitment to a dynamic understanding of conceptualism, helping readers follow how meanings evolve through practice rather than drift ambiguously.

3.1.8 Material agencies and ethics of making

A practice-centred stance recognises material agency: fabrics, adhesives, projection light, digital workflows and spatial constraints intra-act with concepts to produce outcomes that could not be predetermined (Barad, 2007). Accordingly, design rules are framed not as top-down prescriptions but as invitation structures that solicit responses from materials and bodies. This has ethical implications. First, care protocols are embedded in making (e.g. skin-contact tests for adhesives; safe installation procedures). Second, the study treats cultural symbols and techniques with situated accountability, foregrounding provenance and context to avoid extractive appropriation. Third, where generative digital tools are used, their role is disclosed, and outputs are critically assessed for authorship and bias.

3.1.9 Alignment with research questions

This stance directly supports the thesis’s two guiding questions. To define a methodological framework for conceptual fashion in China, the study must observe how concepts become procedures within practice; a constructivist–practice epistemology is thus not decorative but logically necessary. To embed such frameworks in education, the study must evaluate teachability and transfer: what can be codified as rules, what must remain tacit, how assessment can recognise process and not only product. These are epistemic questions about how knowledge is formed, shared and validated in disciplinary communities (Cross, 2001; Nelson, 2013), and they can only be answered by a methodology that treats practice as inquiry.

3.1.10 Anticipated challenges

Two challenges are anticipated. The first is that constructivism risks relativism. The response is that rigour here is not abandoned but re-specified: claims are bounded by context, buttressed by multi-modal evidence and opened to peer scrutiny. The second is that a practice-centred approach may undervalue textual theorisation. On the contrary, the thesis maintains robust dialogue with theory (deconstruction, dematerialisation, relational aesthetics), using practice to test and extend these discourses in Chinese settings. In this sense, the epistemology is neither text-averse nor practice-fetishistic; it is relational, asking what each mode can validly claim and how claims travel across modes.

In summary, the thesis proceeds from a constructivist ontology and a practice-centred epistemology in which conceptual fashion is made and known through situated action. Knowledge is multi-modal, abductively generated, and judged for trustworthiness rather than universal generality. This stance legitimates the treatment of conceptualism as a dynamic research thread—tracked, tested and re-specified across studio, pedagogic and exhibition contexts—thereby providing the philosophical and methodological ground on which the subsequent methods (Section 3.5 onwards) and case analyses (Chapter 4) are built.

3.2 Researcher Positionality

This section makes explicit the standpoint from which the research is conducted and the strategies used to manage its effects. The thesis is authored by a designer–educator–researcher trained and employed in mainland China, working across studio practice, higher education, and exhibition-making. The positionality is therefore insider/partial rather than external or neutral. Following constructivist and practice-centred premises (Section 3.1), I treat positionality not as a contaminant to be eliminated but as a condition of knowledge production that must be articulated, reflected upon, and methodically constrained (Haraway, 1988; Pillow, 2003; Finlay, 2002).

3.2.1 *A situated standpoint*

The research emerges from long-term engagement in Chinese design schools and independent studio work. My habitus—comprising professional dispositions, criteria of judgement, and embodied know-how—has been shaped by Chinese pedagogic traditions, encounters with global avant-garde fashion, and my daily negotiation between institutional expectations and speculative practice (Bourdieu, 1990). I therefore understand myself as occupying a position at the intersection of local educational cultures and transnational fashion discourse. This positionality grants me access to classrooms, assessment frameworks, and informal networks, while also predisposing me to perceive conceptual fashion through the values of studio experimentation, reflective practice, and pedagogic utility. To counter my inevitable blind spots, I have incorporated systematic reflexive routines (logs, peer debriefs, member checks) and placed my claims in dialogue with interviewees and published scholarship (Finlay, 2002; Nelson, 2013).

My standpoint is explicitly practice-led: I am not a detached observer but an active participant who frames rules, produces artefacts, and designs learning environments. In line with autoethnographic approaches in fashion and design (Skjold, 2018; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011), I mobilise first-person reflection where appropriate—always supported by evidence such as studio traces, assessment rubrics, and interview excerpts. At the same time, I acknowledge that my testimony is situated, partial, and contestable, in line with Haraway's (1988) insistence on the located and provisional nature of knowledge.

3.2.2 *Insider–outsider dynamics*

I am an insider to the institutional spaces that form the core field sites—Chinese design classrooms, crits, and graduate exhibitions—while simultaneously an outsider to other designers' studios and to the diverse social worlds of students and alumni (Berger, 2015). Insider status supports access and trust, enables nuanced reading of classroom cues, and allows me to trial methodological interventions (e.g., rule-based briefs, dematerialised presentation formats). Yet insiderhood risks normalising taken-for-granted practices, reproducing institutional logics, or inadvertently silencing dissenting voices. To address this, the project uses:

- Structured contrast: pairing my own studio probes with cases led by others and reading divergences as analytic signals rather than deviations to be corrected.
- Peer counter-voices: inviting colleagues from other programmes to critique my briefs and interpretations; triangulating their comments with student feedback.
- Role disentanglement: where participants are my students, data generation (e.g., interviews) is separated from assessment; where separation is impossible, the work is excluded from formal analysis and only discussed as reflective context (Berger, 2015).

As an outsider to several professional communities (e.g., couture ateliers, independent labels beyond my network), I avoid speculative claims about their internal operations. Where their practices are referenced, it is via public sources (catalogues, interviews, documented exhibitions) and framed as interpretive rather than definitive.

3.2.3 *Reflexive apparatus*

Reflexivity is operationalised through a set of apparatuses designed to surface and interrogate my influence on the research process (Pillow, 2003):

Reflective journal: time-stamped entries record design decisions, classroom observations, failures, and emergent questions; key entries are coded against the project's conceptual threads (dematerialisation, rule-based making, narrative critique).

- Glossary and concept-shift flags: a live glossary ensures terminological consistency (conceptualism, conceptualisation, studio probe, rule-set). “Shift flags” mark moments where practice alters a definition; these are later signposted in Chapters 4–5 to maintain a transparent genealogy of concepts.
- Peer debriefs periodic conversations with faculty peers and external practitioners, minuted and archived, are used to test interpretations and expose blind spots (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
- Member checking: returning interview summaries to participants for verification, correction, or elaboration; documenting disagreements as data rather than anomalies (Maxwell, 2013).

Audit trail: archiving briefs, pattern iterations, CAD files, projection tests, assessment rubrics, and exhibition layouts to enable dependability checks (Biggs and Büchler, 2008). These mechanisms align with the quality criteria outlined in Section 3.1 (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) and serve as methodological brakes on over-claiming.

3.2.4 Language, translation and cultural frames

The project is conducted bilingually (Chinese/English). Interviews are held in the participant's preferred language; translations are performed by me, with back-translation for quotations appearing in the thesis to minimise semantic drift (Temple and Young, 2004). Key culturally embedded terms—li (礼), wu wei (无为), qing (情)—carry conceptual freight that cannot be flattened into one-word English equivalents. Where such terms inform design decisions or critiques, the thesis offers brief contextual glosses and cites sources in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics to anchor usage (Ames and Hall, 2001). This acknowledges that conceptual fashion in China may be shaped by indigenous logics not fully captured by Euro-American theory and helps resist uncritical translation of Western conceptual-art canons as universal (Smith, 2012).

3.2.5 Power, ethics and speaking positions

As a teacher–researcher, I hold institutional power that could shape how students perform in interviews or studios. Ethical procedures therefore include informed consent emphasising voluntariness; the option to withdraw without consequences; anonymisation; and the clear separation of assessment from research activities (Berger, 2015; Wiles, 2013). Students are invited to decide whether their work may be reproduced and whether they wish to be named (some prefer attribution for professional visibility). Where power asymmetries remain, I practice strategic silence: not using quotes that read as performative affirmation of my views; instead, privileging disagreement or ambivalence as analytically fertile (Pillow, 2003).

The thesis is attentive to the politics of representation. Discussions of Chinese designers' work are framed to avoid Orientalist tropes or celebratory nationalism (Said, 1978; Chow, 1998). When invoking "tradition," I specify which archive, whose memory, and to what contemporary use. When citing Western theorists, I also draw on Chinese-language scholarship and practice accounts to avoid reproducing a one-way flow of validation (L. T. Smith, 2012). Finally, when addressing themes of gender, labour or sustainability, I avoid speaking "for" groups to whom I do not belong (Alcoff, 1991); instead, I foreground designers' and students' own articulations and situate my reading as one among possible interpretations.

3.2.6 Material entanglements and authorship

A practice-centred project confronts questions of authorship and material agency. Artefacts are the outcome of interactions among bodies, fabrics, tools, spaces and digital systems; they cannot be reduced to a sovereign authorial will (Barad, 2007). Where generative digital tools (e.g., pattern generators, 3D visualisation, AI-assisted image synthesis) are used for ideation or documentation, their contribution is disclosed; outputs are considered provocations to be materialised, contested or rejected in studio (Crawford, 2021). This transparency avoids over-claiming originality and positions digital systems as co-actors whose biases and affordances must be critically read.

The same applies to institutional infrastructures—curricula, studios, funding calls, exhibition calendars—which shape what can be made and shown. I acknowledge where institutional constraints enable (access to equipment, space, students) and where they limit (timeboxed modules, assessment rubrics). Claims are therefore bounded: they are valid within the ecologies that made them possible (Haraway, 1988).

3.2.7 Limitations introduced by positionality

Three limitations follow from this standpoint:

- Scope bias: As the core field sites are my own classrooms and proximate networks, findings are richest for public universities of a similar profile; they travel to other contexts by analogy, not as general law (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
- Confirmation pressure: Because I am invested in conceptual fashion's pedagogic value, I risk privileging evidence that supports this view. The reflexive apparatus (peer debriefs, member checks, documenting counterexamples) is designed to surface refutations and record negative cases.
- Visibility of failure: Studio and teaching cultures often reward polished outcomes; yet failure is primary data for conceptual and methodological refinement. I therefore archive and analyse abandoned paths, misfits and student resistance as part of the evidential base (Schön, 1983; Smith and Dean, 2009).

Recognising these constraints supports calibrated claims: the thesis advances warranted assertions about how conceptualism may be operationalised in specific Chinese design ecologies, not universal prescriptions.

3.2.8 Positionality as contribution

Finally, positionality is not only a risk but a resource. It enables the thesis to articulate procedural knowledge—how rules are set, how briefs are scaffolded, how dematerialisation is taught and assessed—that is rarely visible in secondary accounts. It also allows the project to trace conceptual drift: how initial definitions of conceptualism are tested and re-specified across practice, teaching and exhibition. This dynamic tracking of a concept across modes is itself a theoretical contribution, demonstrating how a designerly category acquires meaning in and through situated action (Cross, 2001; Nelson, 2013).

Summary. The research is conducted from a situated, insider/partial position as a designer–educator within Chinese higher education. Through explicit reflexive mechanisms, ethical safeguards, and transparent authorship practices, the thesis harnesses positionality as a generator of access and insight while constraining its distortions. This stance complements the constructivist, practice-centred epistemology outlined in Section 3.1 and prepares the

ground for the justification of Practice-Based Research (Section 3.3) and the detailed account of methods and process architecture (Sections 3.4–3.6).

3.3 Justifying a Practice-Based Research Design

This section explains why Practice-Based Research (PBR) is the most appropriate design for this thesis, clarifies how PBR is understood relative to adjacent labels (practice-led, practice as research), and sets out the evidential standards by which claims are warranted. The choice follows directly from the project’s ontology and epistemology (Section 3.1) and from the researcher’s situated role (Section 3.2): the thesis investigates conceptual fashion as an idea-driven, materially mediated and culturally situated practice within Chinese higher education and creative industries. Such a subject cannot be adequately examined through textual analysis alone; it requires making as inquiry, where artefacts, installations, briefs and performances operate as sites of reasoning (Schön, 1983; Nelson, 2013).

3.3.1 Methodological fit: why PBR for these questions?

The central research questions concern: (i) how a methodological framework for conceptual fashion design can be articulated under Chinese cultural–industrial conditions; and (ii) how such a framework can be operationalised pedagogically. Both questions are procedural (how things are done), situated (how methods respond to context) and reflexive (how doing revises knowing). PBR is designed to generate precisely this kind of knowledge: actionable, situated and evidenced in practice (Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Borgdorff, 2012).

- Conceptual fashion is processual and rule-based—forms emerge from propositions and constraints rather than from prior stylistic templates. To study this, the research must construct and test rulesets in studio and classroom, documenting how propositions translate into material, spatial and curatorial decisions.
- The Chinese context introduces indigenous philosophical logics (e.g., li 礼, wu wei 无为) and institutional conditions that shape practice. PBR allows these logics to be

worked through materially and pedagogically, rather than merely cited (Gray and Malins, 2004).

- Because the thesis aims to contribute method as much as theory, the research must produce shareable procedures (briefs, assessment rubrics, studio protocols) whose effects can be inspected—again, a core strength of PBR (Biggs and Büchler, 2008; Smith and Dean, 2009).

In short, PBR offers a design-congruent route to knowledge: it treats making, curating and teaching not as illustrations of prior theory but as instruments that generate and test theoretical propositions (Frayling, 1993; Nelson, 2013).

3.3.2 Clarifying terms and knowledge claims

The literature distinguishes related formulations:

- Practice-based research: practice produces the primary contribution to knowledge, with a written component providing exegesis and contextualisation (Candy and Edmonds, 2018).
- Practice-led research: practice informs the inquiry but the principal contribution may be conceptual or methodological rather than artefactual (Frayling, 1993; Rust, Mottram and Till, 2007).
- Practice as research (PaR): a broad umbrella emphasising the performative status of outputs as research (Haseman, 2006; Nelson, 2013).

This thesis is practice-based and practice-led: the primary evidential field is generated through studio probes, installations and pedagogic interventions; the principal contribution is a methodological framework for conceptual fashion in China, articulated and warranted by those practical outcomes and by their exegesis.

Following Nelson (2013) and Cross (2006), the knowledge claims are multi-modal:

- Know-how (procedural): how to scaffold dematerialised, rule-based conceptual fashion in studio and classroom.

- Know-that (propositional): claims about the conditions under which such methods yield critical and culturally situated work in China.
- Know-what/why (critical-reflective): rationales that connect procedures to values (e.g., minimal intervention, ritual propriety, sustainability).

These claims are traceable to material and documentary evidence (Section 3.3.4) and are bounded by the ecologies that produced them (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Borgdorff, 2012).

3.3.3 Research design as making from propositions to probes

To avoid the positivist connotations of “experiment” noted by the supervisory feedback, the project employs studio probes—purposeful making situations devised to interrogate a proposition (e.g., “the idea becomes the rule that makes the garment/display”). Probes take several forms:

- Material probes: rule-sets enacted with textiles and non-textiles (e.g., modular lattices, projection-responsive surfaces) to observe how constraints generate form and meaning.
- Curatorial probes: dematerialised presentation (video scores, light, projection, spatial scripts) that test how display modifies conceptual readings.
- Pedagogic probes: briefs, crit protocols and assessment rubrics that embed conceptual fashion in Chinese classrooms and allow comparative reading across cohorts.

Each probe is documented (sketches, CAD/3D files, process photography, bills of materials, rule cards, performance scores, reflective logs) to produce an audit trail (Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Biggs and Büchler, 2008). The documentation is not ancillary; it is part of the research argument, enabling others to see how claims are warranted.

3.3.4 Rigour, validity and evidence in PBR

The question “what counts as evidence?” is answered here through fit-for-purpose criteria from art and design research (Biggs and Büchler, 2008; Borgdorff, 2012; Barrett and Bolt, 2010):

- Credibility: triangulating studio traces with interviews, crit transcripts and public exhibition feedback; member checking of interview summaries; peer debriefs to test interpretations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013).
- Dependability: maintaining a transparent process architecture—time-lines, rule-sets, versioned files and assessment instruments—so that another researcher could follow the path even if not replicate the artefacts (Candy and Edmonds, 2018).
- Transferability: providing thick description of contexts (institutional calendars, equipment, class sizes, assessment logics) so readers can judge analogical fit to their settings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
- Confirmability: archiving decision logs and noting negative cases where probes did not produce the intended effects; these counter-examples discipline the scope of claims (Finlay, 2002; Smith and Dean, 2009).

In addition, the project adopts field-specific tests of quality (after Nelson, 2013; Biggs and Büchler, 2008):

- Articulation: the clarity with which conceptual propositions are encoded in procedures and made legible in outcomes.
- Efficacy: the demonstrable capacity of briefs, rule-sets and displays to provoke critical reflection in audiences/participants (evidenced through crits, interviews, exhibition notes).
- Originality: the re-specification of conceptual fashion methods within Chinese philosophical and institutional frames.
- Documentation sufficiency: whether the archive enables external scrutiny of the claims.

3.3.5 The role of writing and contribution types

PBR outputs are hybrid: artefacts and exegesis. The written component performs three tasks (Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Rust, Mottram and Till, 2007):

- Contextualisation: situating probes within fashion theory, Chinese philosophy and art/design research.

- Explication: making explicit the rules, decisions and contingencies that cannot be read off the artefact.
- Argumentation: marshalling evidence across artefacts, interviews and documents to support claims about method and pedagogy.

The anticipated contribution is threefold:

- Methodological: a portable framework for conceptual fashion practice in China (principles, rule-design patterns, display logics, assessment rubrics).
- Pedagogic: tested curricular instruments (briefs, crit structures) and quality criteria for conceptual fashion teaching.
- Discursive: a refined account of conceptualism as a dynamic, context-responsive practice rather than a static aesthetic category—tracked across Chapters 4–5 (Nelson, 2013; Barrett and Bolt, 2010).

3.3.6 *Addressing common critiques of PBR*

Three recurring critiques are anticipated and addressed.

- “Subjectivity undermines validity.” In a constructivist frame, subjectivity is a resource for access and insight; rigour comes from reflexive accountability and evidential transparency (Haraway, 1988; Finlay, 2002). The apparatus described in Section 3.2 and §3.3.4 counters solipsism.
- “Artefacts are ambiguous.” Ambiguity is intrinsic to conceptual fashion and is analytically productive. The thesis therefore pairs artefacts with rule-sets, process documentation and audience/participant accounts to surface multiple readings rather than impose one (Nelson, 2013; Barrett and Bolt, 2010).
- “Generalisability is limited.” The project offers theoretical transferability—procedures and rationales that readers may adapt by analogy—rather than statistical generalisation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Borgdorff, 2012). Claims are explicitly bounded by the contexts that enabled them.

3.3.7 *Ethical and institutional alignment*

PBR's collaborative, situated nature raises specific ethical concerns when the researcher is also an educator. The project adheres to BERA guidance (2018): informed consent, voluntary participation, the separation of assessment from data generation, anonymisation unless attribution is requested, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Institutional alignment also matters: Chinese universities increasingly recognise PaR/PBR within design programmes; the project works with existing structures (module calendars, exhibition platforms) while documenting where those structures shape what is possible. This transparency frames claims as ecology-sensitive rather than universal (Rust, Mottram and Till, 2007).

3.3.8 *Limitations and mitigations*

Adopting PBR introduces structural limitations:

- Context specificity: the richest data come from public universities of a certain profile; mitigation is via thick description and cross-case contrasts with external studios/exhibitions.
- Researcher investment: commitment to conceptual fashion may bias interpretations; mitigation is via peer debriefs, member checks and the analysis of failed or resisted probes.
- Documentation burden: ensuring a usable audit trail is labour-intensive; the project prioritises parsimonious, rule-centred documentation that captures decisions and effects without excess.

3.3.9 *Summary: making as method, method as contribution*

PBR is selected because it matches the object of study (conceptual fashion as idea-led, materially mediated practice) and the site of study (Chinese studio–classroom–exhibition ecologies). It legitimises making, curating and teaching as research actions; it requires documentation and reflexivity as conditions of rigour; and it yields procedural, situated knowledge that can inform both practice and pedagogy. The next sections specify the

methods architecture that operationalises this design: the composition of studio probes and pedagogic interventions (3.4), data generation and documentation protocols (3.5), and analytic procedures linking artefacts, accounts and contexts (3.6).

3.4 Research Process and Structure

This section sets out the operational architecture of the study: its phases, sites, participants and the evidential corpus. In line with the PBR rationale (Section 3.3), the design privileges making-as-inquiry and pedagogic interventions over detached observation. Two clarifications respond directly to supervisory guidance. First, no external semi-structured interviews with practitioners/educators were undertaken; the project does not include a cohort of “3–5 external experts”. Second, the data corpus is deliberately compact and comprises only: (a) a creative archive (rule-sets, process diagrams, cutting plans and modular structures, material swatches/tests, exhibition/layout schematics, audio-visual records); and (b) teaching outputs (student work images and student statements/artist texts, gathered with consent). This parsimonious scope supports transparency, traceability and alignment with the project’s ontological commitments (Schön, 1983; Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Nelson, 2013).

3.4.1 Phases and timelines

The inquiry unfolded across four overlapping phases between 2023 and 2025. The phasing structures iteration while allowing reflexive adjustments (Gray and Malins, 2004; Smith and Dean, 2009).

- Phase A — Framing and pilot probes (Q1–Q3 2023).

A preliminary set of rule-based propositions was drafted from the literature review and philosophical anchors (e.g., *wu wei*, *li*). These propositions were operationalised as pilot studio probes (small-scale material trials; micro-scores for projection and light; thumbnail curatorial scripts). Outputs were evaluated against the project’s quality criteria (articulation, efficacy, originality; cf. Biggs and Büchler, 2008; Nelson, 2013) and archived.

- Phase B — Studio development and creative archive build (Q4 2023–Q2 2024).
The studio work consolidated into an integrated body tentatively titled *As for Me*, comprising dematerialised display strategies (projection, sound, spatial scores) and rule-generated structures (e.g., modular lattices; zero-waste cutting logics). Each probe generated rule cards, process diagrams, cutting plans, material tests, and installation schemas, together with video/photographic records of rehearsals and showings. These form the first pillar of the data corpus.
- Phase C — Pedagogic interventions and classroom testing (Q3 2022–Q1 2025).
Course briefs and assessment instruments aligned to conceptual fashion (idealised, rule-centred, dematerialised presentation) were trialled in two existing undergraduate modules. Teaching artefacts include briefs, assessment rubrics, students' project images and students' written statements collected post-assessment with consent (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Berger, 2015). These constitute the second pillar of the data corpus.
- Phase D — Synthesis and public testing (Q1–Q2 2025).
Materials from Phases B–C were assembled and curated for a doctoral exhibition. While informal audience responses informed reflexive notes, no audience feedback data are included in the corpus to maintain the agreed evidential boundaries. Synthesis entailed mapping how rule-sets translated across studio and classroom, and how procedures needed recalibration within Chinese institutional ecologies.

3.4.2 *Sites and participants*

Sites. Two principal sites anchor the research:

- Independent studio. A controlled setting for studio probes, documentation and pre-exhibition assembly. The studio affords material continuity (tools, lighting, projection kit) and secure archiving of artefacts and media (Candy and Edmonds, 2018).
- University classrooms/studios. Two modules within a Chinese design school context provided occasions to embed and test conceptual fashion pedagogy within existing

calendars and resources. The modules differed in level (intermediate and advanced) and cohort size (c. 25–40), allowing comparison of rule-set uptake at different stages of learning (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Participants. In keeping with the decision to omit external expert interviews, the project engages only:

- The researcher-practitioner (designer-educator). The researcher's actions and reflections are treated as primary instruments of the inquiry under a reflexive constructivist paradigm (Haraway, 1988; Finlay, 2002).
- Student collaborators enrolled in the two modules. Students are not “research subjects” in a clinical sense; rather, their assessed outputs (images) and accompanying project statements—gathered with separate, voluntary consent after grading—serve as artefacts through which the pedagogic procedures can be read (Berger 2015). Where students requested attribution, names are used; otherwise, materials are anonymised.

The absence of external interviewees narrows the data types but increases internal consistency: every knowledge claim is warranted by artefacts and texts arising from the same ecology of practice (studio/classroom), limiting risks of analytic drift between heterogeneous sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013).

3.4.3 Scope, alignment and limitations

The deliberate omission of external interviews narrows perspective but strengthens ecological coherence: every datum emerges from the same situated apparatus of studio and classroom, the very arenas the thesis seeks to theorise. Three implications follow.

- Analytic focus over breadth. Claims are directed at procedures, rules and curatorial logics viable within Chinese studio/classroom ecologies. The thesis does not generalise to industry supply-chain reform or consumer reception; it speaks to method and pedagogy (Borgdorff, 2012; Rust, Mottram and Till, 2007).
- Depth of documentation. The compact corpus allows dense documentation and cross-referencing (rule-card → process diagram → cutting plan → swatch → layout →

video). This strengthens confirmability and dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Biggs and Büchler, 2008).

- Triangulation within limits. Triangulation occurs within the corpus (artefact–text–procedure) rather than across heterogeneous respondent types. The study addresses the potential blind spot by incorporating negative cases (abandoned rules; failed materials) and by contrasting outcomes across two cohorts/levels.

Two limitations are acknowledged. First, the absence of external voices may under-represent professional counter-readings; this is mitigated by making procedures inspectable so others can test them. Second, classroom calendars and facilities shape what is practicable; thick description of those constraints (cohort sizes, timetables, equipment) is provided so readers can judge transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013).

3.5 Reflexive practice and positionality-in-action

This project takes reflexivity as both a methodological stance and a day-to-day discipline. Beyond the positional statement in Section 3.1, the study operationalises reflexivity through structured self-documentation and procedural audits that make decision-making visible and therefore contestable (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). A working assumption is that conceptual fashion is not merely about ideas; it is the conversion of ideas into procedures that act on bodies, materials and spaces. Tracking that conversion requires situated accounts of how the researcher-designer reads a context, sets constraints, encounters resistance, and revises rules—an epistemic loop not capturable by *ex post facto* commentary alone (Schön, 1983; Nelson, 2013).

Practice-Based Research (PBR) provides the methodological foundation for the reflexive practice adopted in this study. As a research approach that integrates creative practice with critical inquiry, PBR not only attends to the final outcomes but also to the knowledge generated through the process itself (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). In the context of this research, PBR has enabled an iterative cycle of making, reflection, and adaptation, in which each design iteration is critically examined in terms of methodological choices, material experimentation, and modes of presentation, thereby informing the next stage of practice.

The mechanisms that operationalise this reflexivity include the use of a research log to record prompts, rationales, and turning points, complete with date stamps and version histories; a Concept-to-Method diagram (see Section 3.5) to structurally link the project's conceptual basis—hypotheses, rules, material choices, presentation logic, and observed affordances—with specific moments and artefacts (Gray & Malins, 2004); and a Rule Fidelity table to document instances where rules were followed, adapted, or broken, along with the reasons and consequences. By identifying and analysing examples of 'productive transgression', this approach recognises that creativity often manifests not in strict adherence to rules but in principled deviation from them. In this way, PBR facilitates a mode of inquiry that produces knowledge through practice, enabling the research to move between conceptual framing and practical exploration in a dynamic, bidirectional manner.

However, in the practical execution of this project, several of these mechanisms were not fully implemented—most notably the absence of a continuous research log, the delayed construction of the Concept-to-Method diagram, and the lack of systematic Rule Fidelity documentation. These omissions inevitably constrained the traceability and analytical depth of the reflexive process and are therefore addressed critically in the following discussion.

Reflexivity also concerns relational and cultural positioning. Working within Chinese higher education while drawing on transnational theory creates asymmetries of language, canon and institutional value. Following Haraway's (1988) "situated knowledges", the thesis treats *wu wei* (non-coercive action) and *li* (ritual propriety) as situated resources rather than timeless essences: they orient design choices toward restraint, sequencing and audience care without being cast as explanatory master-codes. To avoid essentialism, each invocation is grounded in a concrete procedural move (e.g., delaying cut lines; prioritising circulation sightlines over object legibility) and inspected for effects rather than asserted as identity (Ames and Rosemont, 1998).

A further reflexive vector is pedagogic role conflict. The researcher is both tutor and investigator in classroom settings. To mitigate role-based influence, consent for archiving student work was sought only after assessment, with opt-out routes, and analytic attention focuses on procedures and student statements, not on grading outcomes (Berger, 2015; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Where the researcher's demonstrations (e.g., projection-textile interference) might predispose student solutions, briefs were diversified across cohorts and counterexamples were shown to widen the design space.

Finally, reflexivity includes negative capability—holding open ambiguity and documenting failed trials. “Null” results (e.g., a dematerialisation strategy that collapses silhouette control) are retained in the archive and analysed for what they reveal about boundary conditions of a method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Rather than tidy away incongruities, the chapter structure in Part II foregrounds them as knowledge-bearing frictions central to the thesis's claim that conceptual fashion is a procedural and situated practice.

3.6 Limitations, delimitations and risks

Three delimitations define scope. First, the study focuses on one institutional context and the researcher's studio; it does not claim a representative survey of Chinese fashion education. The wager is depth over breadth, offering transferable procedures rather than general laws (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Second, the corpus excludes external practitioner interviews (Section 3.4); knowledge claims emerge from practice evidence and student statements. Third, artefacts are anchored in conceptual fashion rather than commercial product pipelines; findings concern idea-led methods and curatorial logics, not market adoption cycles.

Key limitations follow. Without multiple institutions and external interlocutors, the study risks institutional idiosyncrasy. Mitigation: make conditions explicit (cohort size, facilities, hours) so readers can judge fit; foreground negative cases to temper over-attribution. A further limitation is researcher influence in the classroom. Mitigation: separate assessment

from research archiving; diversify briefs; weight analysis toward student rationales rather than aesthetic convergence.

Material and ethical risks include the use of adhesives near skin, projection heat, and suspended elements. These are addressed through risk assessments, demonstrations on inert substrates, and prohibitions on direct skin adhesion where consent or testing is absent (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Cultural risks include essentialising heritage. To counter this, references to wu wei and li are operationalised as design logics (sequencing, restraint, audience care) and always grounded in procedural evidence (Haraway, 1988).

Analytically, there is a risk of post-hoc coherence—rationalising outcomes to fit prior theory. The audit trail and crosswalk templates (Section 3.5) are designed precisely to guard against this by tying each claim to contemporaneous notes, rule cards and images (Maxwell, 2013). Finally, generalisability is not sought; rather, the aim is situated transferability through clarity of conditions and reproducible rules (Biggs and Büchler, 2008).

3.7 Contribution to knowledge and methodological originality

The thesis advances a procedural account of conceptual fashion anchored in Chinese studio/classroom ecologies. Its contribution is threefold.

- Conceptual–procedural integration. The study specifies how conceptual commitments (dematerialisation, ambiguity, criticality) are translated into rules that can be enacted, audited and taught. The idea→method map, rule fidelity sheet and display logic sheet constitute a compact method-kit for practice-based research in fashion. Rather than offering a style taxonomy, the thesis delivers reusable procedures with articulated boundary conditions (Gray and Malins, 2004; Nelson, 2013).
- Situated philosophical scaffolding. By treating wu wei and li as operative design logics—restraint, sequencing, audience care—the project avoids essentialist cultural claims while demonstrating how indigenous philosophies can orient method without becoming illustrative motifs (Ames and Rosemont, 1998; Haraway, 1988). This re-

positions “conceptualism” not as a static import but as a dynamic, locally inflected practice.

- Pedagogic articulation. The classroom strand yields actionable curricular patterns (briefs, rubrics, assessment criteria) that demonstrate how conceptual fashion can be taught and evaluated beyond craftsmanship/market metrics (Biggs and Büchler, 2008). The evidence of student statements shows uptake of concept→method→evidence reasoning, offering a template for programmes seeking to embed practice research (Candy and Edmonds, 2018).

Collectively, these moves extend artistic research discourse by offering inspectable warrants—how and why particular procedures lead to certain effects—and by framing conceptual fashion as a methodological field rather than a stylistic enclave. For Chinese fashion studies, the project contributes procedure-level descriptions of dematerialisation and spatial dramaturgy within the constraints of local institutions, adding granularity to debates often framed at the level of branding or national discourse.

Chapter 4 : A Reflective Approach to Defining Conceptual Fashion Design in Contemporary China: Practical and Pedagogical Applications

Building upon the practice-based research methodology outlined in Chapter Three, this chapter presents the practical implementation of conceptual fashion design through a series of experiments and teaching projects. These practical explorations exemplify the dynamic interplay between theory and design practice, and reveal how conceptual fashion can engage with identity, spatiality, and cultural critique.

4.1 Theoretical Synthesis Through Practice

The process of conceptual fashion design in this research is not merely an act of creation but a reflective dialogue between theory and practice. Through sustained engagement with experimental methodologies, material manipulation, and embodied design processes, I have developed a clearer understanding of my own research position and the evolving nature of my design language. This meta-reflection aims to articulate how theory has informed practice, how practice has reshaped theoretical understanding, and how both have contributed to the emergence of a distinct conceptual identity within my work.

Each phase of the practice-based inquiry — from material experiments to performative installations — served as a site of critical reflection where key theoretical concepts were tested, internalised, and transformed. The influence of Sol LeWitt’s notion that “the idea becomes the machine that makes the art” (LeWitt, 1967) became a methodological anchor, guiding the construction of rule-based design systems that foreground ideas over aesthetics. However, unlike LeWitt’s call for objectivity and neutrality, my practice revealed a more fluid interplay between systemic logic and intuitive decision-making. In this space, theory was not merely applied but recontextualised within the material and cultural realities of contemporary China.

Through referencing Daoist “Wu Wei” (non-action) and Confucian “Li” (ritual), I was able to develop a framework that honours restraint, cyclical thinking, and ethical sensitivity in

fashion — positioning fashion as a form of critical cultural dialogue rather than commodity production (Zhao and Jones, 2017; Li and Sun, 2018). Practice thus became a philosophical inquiry, enabling a synthesis of Eastern metaphysics with Western conceptual art methodologies.

This project positions me as both designer, teacher and critical commentator. Rather than striving for commercial validation or aesthetic approval, my stance foregrounds criticality, social reflection, and cultural situatedness. I align with a growing body of designers — such as Hussein Chalayan, Lucy Orta, and Iris van Herpen — whose work transcends product-making and enters the realm of speculative inquiry and socio-political critique.

Through the “As for Me” installation, together with my students, I critically examined themes of fragmented identity and bodily constraints, exploring how these concepts manifest within contemporary fashion discourse and experimental design practices. By juxtaposing soft, translucent materials with rigid structuring devices (e.g., binder clips on skin-like fabric), the body was framed as both vulnerable and resistant. This aesthetic and symbolic tension underscores my positioning: conceptual fashion as a performative, critical, and culturally entangled act.

From this reflective practice emerged a design language rooted in contradiction: softness versus structure, fluidity versus containment, transparency versus opacity. My repeated use of translucent organza and digital projection is not merely material preference but a conceptual gesture — one that challenges fashion’s obsession with surface and form by inviting audiences to engage with the invisible, the emotional, and the ephemeral.

Moreover, my integration of zero-waste principles, experimental pattern-cutting, and interactive installations signal a design language that is systemic, responsive, and inclusive. It is not defined by silhouette or signature motif but by method: a commitment to rule-based improvisation, critical materiality, and socio-cultural reflexivity.

4.2 Practical Application of Conceptual Fashion Design: As for me

This practice-led project, *As for Me*, reflects my evolving understanding of conceptual fashion as a critical methodology rather than a fixed genre. Situated within the socio-cultural landscape of contemporary China, the project interrogates how fashion can operate as a form of embodied philosophy and cultural reflection, rather than as an aesthetic or commercial pursuit.

Initially, my approach to conceptual design was shaped by Western avant-garde frameworks—prioritising form disruption, abstraction, and artistic provocation. However, through iterative experimentation with materials and the body, my understanding shifted.

The practice process itself became epistemologically generative.

Working with translucent fabrics such as silk organza and stiff mesh, I discovered the capacity of materials to speak through weight, opacity, resistance, and movement. The use of sheer layered fabrics and elastic structures created garments that were not static forms but responsive systems—modes of interaction between the body, space, and environment (see Fig. 25).

Figure 25 *As for Me* project – conceptual garment design sketches exploring geometric silhouettes and digital textile projections. Source: Author's own work (2024)



In this context, *As for Me* became an exploration of what it means to *design without determining*. The final garment forms were shaped by the gestures, breath, and postures of

the wearer, making each performance a unique realisation of the design. This performative ambiguity was intentionally aligned with Daoist notions of “Wu Wei” (无为)—a design logic of minimal intervention, where constraint becomes a medium for emergence. As the garment responded to gravity and movement, it questioned the boundaries between self and clothing, performer and medium.

I also drew upon deconstructive design practices from figures such as Martin Margiela and Hussein Chalayan, who use fashion to destabilise assumptions about utility, authorship, and permanence. In my own project, garments were constructed with modular seams, detachable panels, and embedded openings for digital projection. These projections—composed of flickering imagery sourced from urban life, archival Chinese iconography, and algorithmic patterns—animated the fabric surface and transformed the garment into a time-based media installation. The body became both canvas and participant, destabilising the linear temporality often assumed in fashion presentation.

This work also builds on the methodology outlined in Chapter 4 by applying a structured, rule-based system to the creation process. Inspired by Sol LeWitt’s conceptual art statement—“the idea becomes the machine that makes the art”—I developed pre-determined conditions for the garment’s evolution: constraints on stitch type, modular layering logic, and material responses to motion. The garment thus functioned not because of freeform design, but because of embedded instructions activated by use. In this way, the *idea* itself became the engine for creative unfolding.

Reflective documentation served as a critical layer of analysis. Through process videos, installation photographs, design notebooks, and post-performance annotations, I mapped how meaning was negotiated between concept, material, and embodied performance. This reflexive process ensured that the research did not simply produce artefacts but also generated critical insights about the relationship between fashion, body politics, and social structures.

Ultimately, *As for Me* contributes to this thesis not only as a creative artefact but as a research instrument—a means to question and reconfigure the epistemologies of fashion in

China. It offers an alternative to form- or market-led approaches by positioning design as an exploratory and speculative act, informed by cultural specificity, material encounter, and philosophical depth.

By embedding this project within broader debates around sustainability, posthuman materiality, and identity politics, I argue that conceptual fashion should be understood as a dynamic cultural tool. It bridges sensory experience, critical thought, and interdisciplinary experimentation—affirming fashion’s role as a site of socio-cultural agency in contemporary China.

4.2.1 Project: As for Me (2023)

As for Me is a conceptual fashion installation that challenges conventional understandings of garment construction, materiality, and the socio-cultural function of fashion. Developed as part of a practice-led inquiry, the project consists of six modular garments made from multi-layered transparent silk organza, suspended within a spatially controlled installation framework. Through the integration of digital projection mapping, motion-responsive light, and reflective surfaces, the garments function not as fixed wearable items but as dynamic and ephemeral visual experiences that evolve in response to environmental and perceptual conditions.

The use of translucent fabrics and layered structures is central to the project's disruption of garment rigidity. As light penetrates and refracts through the gauzy silk, the garments create a shifting visual field that renders their form unstable and indeterminate. This material ambiguity mirrors the conceptual focus of the project: to interrogate the fluidity of identity, the instability of authorship, and the temporal nature of fashion itself. These garments do not propose to be worn in a conventional sense but instead invite viewers to engage with fashion as a time-based, perceptual, and philosophical medium. The installation becomes a performative site of emergence, where viewers' movement and position in space co-create the visual and conceptual reading of the work (*see Fig.26*).

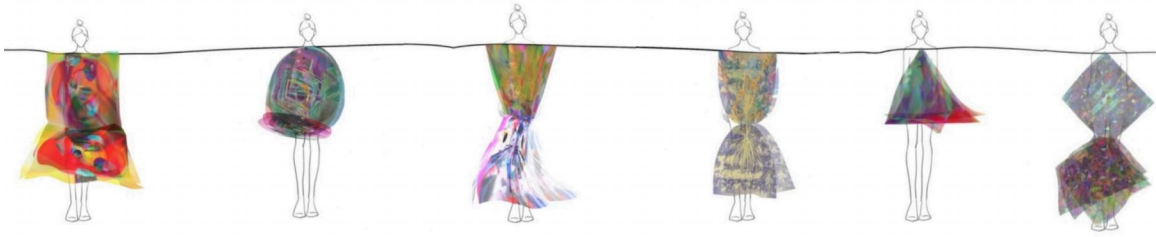


Figure 26 *Installation Overview* – Animation simulation of projected garment effects – silk layers visibly interacting with spatial arrangement. Source: Author's own work (2024)

Beyond visual experimentation, *As for Me* embodies zero-waste principles and explores alternatives to traditional fashion production. By eliminating pattern off-cuts and avoiding excess surface decoration, the project minimises material waste while maximising conceptual output. Digital projection replaces ornamentation, offering a dematerialised aesthetic strategy that foregrounds fashion as idea rather than commodity. In doing so, the work critiques the logic of overproduction and overconsumption that underpins much of the fashion industry. It encourages audiences to reflect on the symbolic economy of fashion—how cultural capital, identity, and value are produced not through material accumulation but through meaning and narrative (Bourdieu, 1984).

The project also problematises the role of the designer and wearer. By decentering the body and resisting functional garment norms, *As for Me* dissolves the boundary between fashion object and installation art. Viewers are not passive spectators but co-constructors of meaning, their presence activating the garments' performative potential. This interactive structure repositions fashion from a consumer good to a discursive apparatus—a site where critical engagement and conceptual speculation take precedence over aesthetic consumption (see Fig. 27).

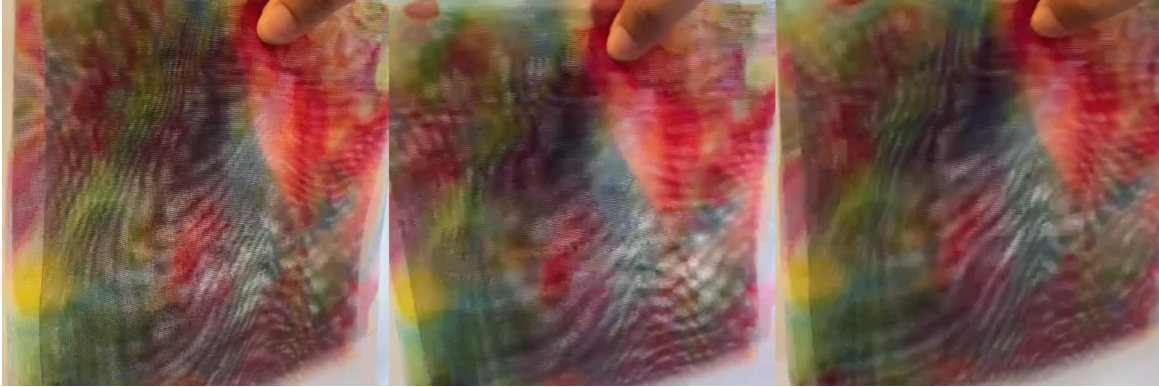


Figure 27 Digital lighting creating layered shadow-play and movement-triggered transformation on fabric surfaces. Source: Author's own work (2024)

Crucially, *As for Me* also marked a significant methodological shift in my own design approach. Initially, my process was led by concept but remained materially formal and outcome-oriented. Through extended experimentation, however, I began to perceive materials not merely as passive substrates, but as thinking tools—agents of disruption, dialogue, and transformation. For instance, the fragility of silk organza introduced unexpected structural tensions during construction, which altered the form and conceptual intent of the garments. Rather than correcting these deviations, I began to work with them, allowing the materials to shape the conceptual possibilities of the piece. This shift reflects Nelson's (2013) view of practice as a form of epistemology: thinking *through* making, not simply illustrating pre-conceived ideas. The iterative processes of cutting, failing, reassembling, projecting, and documenting became acts of inquiry, forging a feedback loop between material action and conceptual reflection.

In conclusion, *As for Me* advances a vision of fashion as a cultural and intellectual practice, capable of provoking discourse, engaging publics, and addressing contemporary anxieties surrounding identity, sustainability, and perception. Through its emphasis on interactivity, dematerialisation, and philosophical engagement, the project exemplifies a conceptual methodology that repositions fashion within the broader domain of critical design and cultural theory.

4.2.2 *Design Methodology and Process in As for Me*

The methodology underpinning *As for Me* is structured around a rule-based, concept-led design system, influenced by Sol LeWitt's principles of conceptual art—particularly his assertion that “the idea becomes the machine that makes the art” (LeWitt, 1967). This systematic framework informed the generation of three primary design constraints at the outset of the project:

- **Transparency and Layering:** Utilising multi-layered translucent silk organza to destabilise fixed silhouettes and generate garments that shift in perception depending on light and movement.
- **Digital Light Projection:** Integrating responsive projection techniques to alter surface perception and create time-based experiences.
- **Modularity and Adaptability:** Constructing garments with open structural systems to accommodate various body types and interpretive configurations.

Rather than relying on traditional garment construction logic, the process evolved through an iterative and reflexive engagement with materials, in line with Schön's (1983) model of the reflective practitioner. In this model, knowledge is produced through cycles of experimentation, failure, adaptation, and reflection. In *As for Me*, this methodology was enacted through continuous material testing, structural manipulation, environmental prototyping, and installation-based thinking.

4.2.1.1 *Fabric as Conceptual Medium*

In *As for Me*, fabric was not merely a material choice but a critical conceptual tool shaping the interactive and expressive potential of the design. The project employed multi-layered translucent textiles—particularly silk organza—to challenge conventional applications of fabric and expand the perception of materiality in fashion design. By utilising sheer, lightweight textiles, the garments encouraged fluid movement, layered depth, and optical transformation, enabling light and air to dynamically alter the wearer's or installation viewer's experience.

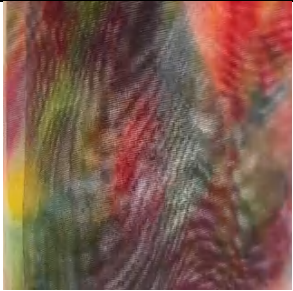
A crucial element of the project was the exploration of textile properties through sensory engagement. Drawing inspiration from pedagogical models employed in institutions such as Central Saint Martins and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (Evans, 2003), the project pursued an experimental approach to fabric selection and manipulation. Rather than treating fabric as a passive substrate, *As for Me* emphasised its capacity to evoke emotions, memories, and abstract concepts. This approach positioned textiles as active agents of meaning-making within the conceptual framework of the work.

Silk organza was specifically chosen for its transparent and ethereal qualities, which blurred the boundaries between body and garment, and between presence and absence. When suspended in space and illuminated by projected light, the material generated a dynamic interplay of shadows and movement, effectively transforming the fabric into an active participant rather than a static design element (Graw, 2006). This immersive visual and tactile experience invited audiences to engage with the work on a sensory level, reinforcing the idea that fashion can transcend physical form to become an experiential and artistic medium.

In the conceptual fashion context, fabric manipulation operates as a communicative act as much as a technical skill. In *As for Me*, textiles were stretched, folded, layered, compressed, and released to create shifting visual narratives that challenged the notion of fashion as fixed and immutable. Influenced by the experimental techniques of Issey Miyake and Hussein Chalayan, the project explored how dynamic material behaviour could convey concepts of fluidity, transformation, and impermanence (Wilcox, 2009).

Central to the project was the redefinition of fabric as an agent of thought, rather than a neutral substrate. The fabric selection process prioritised emotional and atmospheric resonance over functionality, reflecting the pedagogical emphasis on exploratory material practices found in leading institutions such as Central Saint Martins and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (Evans, 2003). Key materials included:

Table 1 Key Material Experiments

Material	Conceptual Role	Application in Project	Fabric Experiment Image
Silk organza	Transparency, impermanence	Created floating forms responsive to light and air; layered to produce visual ambiguity.	 (Author, 2024)
Elastic Fibers	Tension, adaptability	Embedded in modular zones; introduced kinetic response and structured deformation.	 (Author, 2024)
Gauze	Fragility, softness	Draped to evoke ephemerality and vulnerability; suspended in space for environmental play.	 (Author, 2024)
Rigid textiles	Constraint, durability	Structured frames provided contrast to soft layers, evoking tension and duality.	 (Author, 2024)

This material system enabled philosophical and emotional expression through spatial, tactile, and responsive dimensions. Materials were treated as co-authors of meaning, allowing for unexpected deviations to become conceptual catalysts.

By integrating manipulatable fabrics into an interactive installation, *As for Me* expanded the conceptual boundaries of fashion design, demonstrating that materials themselves could function as storytelling devices—capable of engaging with themes such as identity, impermanence, and self-expression. The fabric was no longer an inert medium but an active collaborator in generating meaning, placing material agency at the core of the design process.

4.2.2.2 Fabric Manipulation and Dynamic Interaction

The project emphasised fabric manipulation as a language of transformation, challenging the static role of materials in conventional fashion. Techniques such as compression, layering, stretching, and glue application became communicative strategies. These were used not to perfect form, but to provoke ambiguity, tension, and spatial responsiveness.

- Compression created sculptural density, suggesting emotional containment or spatial resistance.
- Flow and drape indicated movement, dissolution, and emotional release.
- Layering with projection generated shifting shadows and depth, reinforcing the immersive and impermanent qualities of the installation.

Moreover, garments were suspended within the installation environment rather than displayed on mannequins or bodies. This detachment enabled interaction with air currents and motion sensors, activating a real-time feedback loop between fabric, light, and viewer movement. As shown in table1 the use of suspended silk organza and ambient projection enabled each garment to evolve as a living image.



Figure 28 Suspended Garment Structure with Environmental Interaction – Prototype garments in muslin *Source: Author's own work (2024)*

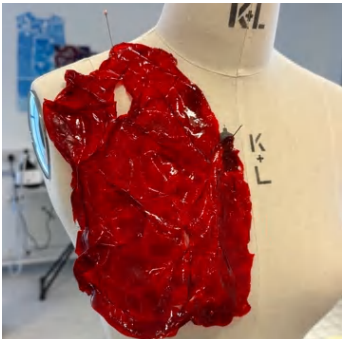
This interactive system resonates with Chalayan's (2011) use of garments as performative and conceptual platforms, where fashion becomes a tool of spatial storytelling.

4.2.2.3 Material Reconfiguration through Adhesives

In a further stage of experimentation, the project tested the ability of adhesives to alter textile behaviour, inspired by material manipulation practices at Bunka Fashion College

(Kawamura, 2023). Glue was applied in targeted zones to shift the tactile and structural properties of fabrics:

Table 2 Material Treatments and Resulting Conceptual Effects in the As for Me Project

Material + Treatment	Resulting Effect	Fabric Experiment Image
Silk organza + glue	Hardened into rigid forms, transforming fluidity into sculptural dimensionality.	 (Author, 2024)
Elastic fibre + glue	Lost elasticity; introduced conflict between expected softness and actual tension.	 (Author, 2024)

These hybrid surfaces—part textile, part sculptural form—challenged assumptions about fabric as a soft, mobile medium. The reconfigured materials suggested emotional complexity and served as metaphors for psychological states—fragility turned rigid, or flexibility rendered inert.

4.2.2.4 . Emotional and Conceptual Expression

As the project progressed, material decisions were increasingly shaped by emotional resonance and narrative potential. Fabric combinations were selected to express nuanced oppositions: warmth vs. restraint, softness vs. rigidity, intimacy vs. alienation. In doing so,

the designer recognised fabric as an embodied conceptual vocabulary, capable of articulating abstract emotional conditions.

For example, the juxtaposition of flowing gauze with rigid panels did not only create visual contrast, but communicated complex affective conditions: vulnerability, memory, loss, resilience. This reframing aligns with Graw's (2006) understanding of conceptual fashion as a medium of critical subjectivity.

Through this reflective process, materials ceased to be passive tools and became active collaborators in the creation of emotive and intellectual depth.

4.2.2.5 Summary: Conceptual Fashion as Process and Inquiry

The *As for Me* project repositions fashion not as a product, but as a process of material inquiry, emotional articulation, and conceptual experimentation. Through fabric selection, manipulation, projection, and suspension, the project advances a vision of fashion as a discursive medium, where materials perform meaning, space generates emotion, and interactivity facilitates interpretation.

This approach aligns with global conceptual fashion practices while also offering new insight grounded in Chinese cultural and philosophical contexts. It exemplifies the value of practice-based research in expanding what fashion can do—and more importantly, what it can *mean*.

4.3 Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Conceptual Fashion in China

In the evolving landscape of Chinese higher education, the teaching of fashion design has traditionally prioritised technical mastery, garment construction, and responsiveness to market demands (Li and Wang, 2019). While these competencies remain essential for employability, they often limit students' capacity to engage with fashion as a critical and cultural medium. In contrast, conceptual fashion pedagogy emphasises intellectual inquiry,

socio-political engagement, and the integration of interdisciplinary knowledge into design practice (Evans, 2003; Kawamura, 2023). This shift responds to broader global trends in design education, where the focus increasingly lies on cultivating designers who can address complex societal challenges and propose transformative cultural narratives through their work (Steele, 2010; Wilcox, 2009).

From a Chinese perspective, the rationale for adopting a conceptual approach in fashion education is twofold. Firstly, it aligns with the state's call for educational reform towards creativity-driven, innovation-oriented teaching models that can contribute to cultural confidence and national soft power (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2020). Secondly, it resonates with the country's socio-cultural context, where fashion is positioned not only as a site of consumption but as a form of cultural discourse capable of reflecting and shaping identity, values, and collective memory (Wu, 2016).

In my own teaching practice, I have found that conceptual fashion design serves as a powerful pedagogical tool for encouraging students to explore the philosophical, political, and personal dimensions of design. By framing fashion as a medium of visual and material storytelling, students are prompted to interrogate not only what they design, but why and how they design it. This approach also facilitates the integration of Chinese cultural heritage—such as Taoist and Confucian aesthetics—into contemporary creative processes, enabling students to produce works that are culturally situated yet globally relevant (Zhao, 2021).

Conceptual pedagogy's adaptability is particularly suited to China's rapidly evolving fashion industry, which is increasingly influenced by sustainability, technological innovation, and cultural hybridity (Xiao and Ma, 2022). By moving beyond the narrow confines of seasonal trends and technical proficiency, conceptual fashion education cultivates graduates who are critically aware, culturally engaged, and capable of responding to emergent societal challenges through creative practice.

4.3.1 Comparative Analysis: Traditional vs Conceptual Fashion Education

The shift from traditional to conceptual fashion pedagogy requires a re-evaluation of teaching objectives, course structures, and assessment criteria. While traditional approaches have historically been effective in equipping students with technical skills and industry readiness, they often fall short in fostering critical engagement with fashion as an intellectual and cultural practice (Fletcher and Tham, 2019).

Table 3 Summarizes the key differences between the two pedagogical paradigms: (Author, 2023)

Traditional Fashion Design Education	Conceptual Fashion Design Education
Focuses on technical skills, craftsmanship, and garment construction.	Prioritises intellectual engagement with design concepts, emphasising fashion as a critical discourse.
Heavily influenced by market demands, seasonal collections, and commercial viability.	Encourages students to see fashion as a social, cultural, and artistic practice rather than just a consumer product.
Emphasises aesthetic appeal and adherence to industry trends.	Moves beyond aesthetics to explore philosophical, political, and psychological dimensions of fashion.
Relies on standardised pattern-making and tailoring techniques.	Uses deconstruction, experimental draping, and non-traditional materials to explore new forms.
Evaluation is based on technical execution and craftsmanship.	Assessment includes critical thinking, conceptual depth, and innovative processes.
Follows a linear design development process from sketching to production.	Embraces a non-linear, iterative process involving theory, experimentation, and interdisciplinary exploration.

This comparative framework reflects my own classroom observations. Students who are trained exclusively in the traditional mode tend to excel in craftsmanship but often lack the ability to articulate the socio-cultural implications of their work. In contrast, those exposed to conceptual pedagogy develop a stronger critical vocabulary, demonstrate greater experimentation with materials, and show a heightened awareness of the symbolic dimensions of fashion (Kawamura, 2023; Niinimäki, 2013).

Furthermore, the conceptual approach fosters interdisciplinary integration. For example, assignments may draw upon anthropology, sociology, or media studies, enabling students to situate their fashion practice within a broader cultural and intellectual framework (Findeli, 2001). This aligns with international precedents, particularly in institutions such as Central Saint Martins (UK), the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (Belgium), and Bunka Fashion College (Japan), where conceptual experimentation is embedded into the curriculum alongside technical skill development.

4.3.2 Reflection and Evaluation: Assessing Pedagogical Outcomes

The implementation of conceptual fashion pedagogy in the Chinese higher education context has yielded several notable outcomes, both in terms of student development and the broader discourse surrounding fashion education. This section reflects critically on these outcomes, drawing on classroom observations, student feedback, and the quality of project outputs over multiple academic years.

One of the most significant achievements has been the visible shift in students' ability to articulate the intellectual and socio-cultural dimensions of their work. At the beginning of the programme, most students approached design problems through a primarily aesthetic or functional lens, relying on visual appeal or technical execution as their primary measures of success. By the end of the course, however, many demonstrated the capacity to engage in critical discourse, employing concepts from philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies to frame and support their design decisions (Wu, 2016; Zhao, 2021).

A particularly telling example emerged from a third-year cohort's collaborative installation on the theme Urban Dislocation. The project combined wearable structures, large-scale photographic prints, and an interactive soundscape, exploring the psychological impact of rapid urbanisation on youth identity. Students cited both Chinese urban theory and international conceptual fashion precedents (e.g., Chalayan, Margiela) in their project rationales, demonstrating an ability to situate their work within global and local contexts

simultaneously. This reflects the core aim of conceptual pedagogy: to produce designers who are both culturally grounded and globally conversant.

Evaluation Criteria were adapted to align with this pedagogical shift, balancing technical skill assessment with evaluation of conceptual depth, research integration, and process innovation (Table 4).

Table 4 Assessment Framework for Conceptual Fashion Projects (Author, 2024)

Criterion	Weighting	Indicators
Conceptual Depth	30%	Ability to articulate the philosophical, socio-political, or cultural significance of the work.
Technical Execution	25%	Craftsmanship, material handling, and structural innovation.
Research Integration	20%	Use of relevant theory, precedents, and interdisciplinary sources.
Process Innovation	15%	Evidence of experimentation, iteration, and risk-taking in design development.
Presentation & Communication	10%	Clarity of visual, oral, and written communication.

Student feedback also indicated that the non-linear, iterative process central to conceptual pedagogy encouraged greater resilience and adaptability. Many noted that working with open-ended briefs initially provoked discomfort, but this discomfort became a productive driver for exploration and innovation. This mirrors Schön’s (1983) “reflective practitioner” model, where uncertainty is embraced as an essential part of design thinking.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Some students struggled with the ambiguity of conceptual briefs, preferring the clarity of market-oriented tasks. Others found it difficult to reconcile conceptual experimentation with the portfolio requirements of commercial fashion employers. Addressing these tensions will require a nuanced approach that balances conceptual depth with industry relevance—a balance that global institutions like

Central Saint Martins and Antwerp Academy have negotiated over decades (Evans, 2003; Steele, 2010).

4.3.3 Implementation in Teaching Practice: Structured Application in Chinese Higher Education

The proposed Chinese conceptual fashion education model is operationalised within my teaching practice through two structured phases designed to correspond with students' development and institutional structure. These stages demonstrate how the model's components—Cultural Grounding, Critical Engagement, Technological Adaptation, and Iterative Experimentation—are enacted progressively.

4.3.3.1 Phase One: Introducing Conceptual Design Principles to Second-Year Students

In the Chinese higher education system, disciplinary-specific specialization typically begins in the second year, after the completion of general education studies. This provides an ideal juncture to introduce students to conceptual design before they become embedded in technical specialisation. At this stage, the emphasis lies in cultivating an exploratory mindset and familiarity with design as a cultural and narrative-based medium.

Students are encouraged to develop small-scale conceptual experiments grounded in personal narrative—using verbs or adjectives that reflect self-perception as the conceptual bedrock. This aligns with the “design from the self” pedagogical method seen in international art and design education, which fosters emotional engagement and critical reflexivity (Gray & Malins, 2004)

Material experimentation is central: students manipulate non-traditional media such as translucent plastics, found objects, alongside conventional textiles. Simultaneously, they engage with philosophical concepts drawn from Chinese thought—Taoist Wu Wei (non-action) and Confucian Li (ritual propriety)—encouraging design decisions that resonate with cultural context while generating innovative form and narrative.

Model Validation: This phase embodies Cultural Grounding and Iterative Experimentation, reinforcing the model's embrace of cultural specificity and exploration through material and concept interplay.

4.3.3.2 Phase Two: Deepening Critical & Interdisciplinary Practice for Senior Students

For senior students (third- and fourth-year cohorts), the pedagogical focus shifts to critical interrogation and interdisciplinary collaboration. Building on earlier foundational exploration, students now situate design within socio-political, environmental, and technological discourses.

Assignments engage students with themes such as cultural hybridity, sustainability, and embodied identity. A representative example is a project titled Boundaries and Bodies, in which students design structures that physically restrict movement, prompting reflection on autonomy, societal constraint, and the body as a cultural site.

Interdisciplinary collaboration amplifies this stage's conceptual depth. Students from fashion, media arts, and product design co-create installations, performances, and interactive environments. This mirrors broader shifts in global fashion practice and aligns with sustainable and technological design methodologies (McQuillan, 2009).

Model Validation: This phase actualises Critical Engagement and Technological Adaptation, demonstrating how advanced conceptual thinking and collaborative innovation fulfill the model's aims.

4.3.4 Toward a Chinese Model of Conceptual Fashion Education

Drawing on the outcomes of my own teaching practice, as well as comparative studies of international models, it is possible to outline the foundations of a distinctly Chinese approach to conceptual fashion education. This model is not a replication of Western

paradigms but rather a hybrid system that integrates global best practices with China's unique cultural, historical, and socio-economic conditions.

Core Principles of the Chinese Conceptual Fashion Model:

Cultural Grounding – Embedding Chinese philosophical frameworks (e.g., Taoist Wu Wei, Confucian Li, and notions of harmony between humanity and nature) into design methodology, ensuring that conceptual work is not an imitation of Western avant-garde but an authentic extension of local thought traditions (Wu, 2016; Zhao, 2021).

Interdisciplinary Integration – Encouraging collaboration across disciplines, particularly with media arts, product design, and performance, to reflect the hybrid nature of contemporary fashion practice (Findeli, 2001).

Critical Engagement – Positioning fashion as a tool for social critique, capable of addressing issues such as overconsumption, gender identity, environmental degradation, and cultural preservation (Fletcher and Tham, 2019).

Technological Adaptation – Leveraging digital tools such as 3D garment simulation, projection mapping, and AI-assisted design to expand the possibilities of conceptual practice without compromising its philosophical foundations (Niinimäki, 2013).

Process-Driven Assessment – Evaluating students not solely on final outcomes but on their research, experimentation, and iterative development processes, recognising the value of “failures” as learning opportunities (Schön, 1983).

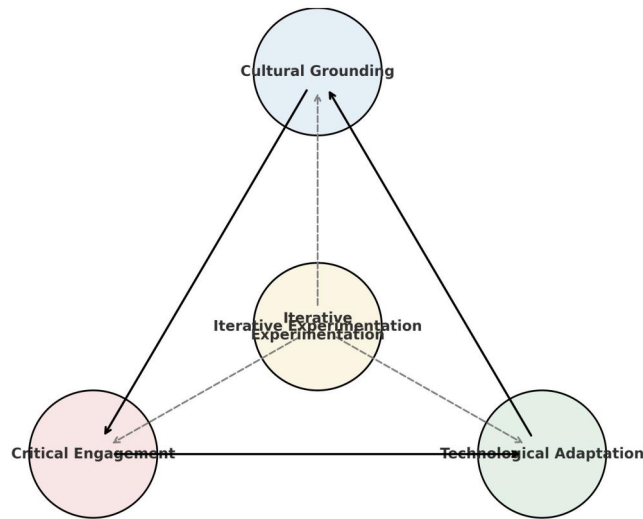


Figure 29 Proposed Chinese Conceptual Fashion Education Model *Source: Author's own work (2024)*

Figure 29 illustrates the cyclical nature of this model, where cultural grounding, critical engagement, and technological adaptation continuously inform each other through iterative experimentation.

This model offers a framework for producing graduates who can navigate the demands of a global fashion industry while contributing to the development of China's cultural voice in the creative economy. Crucially, it also aligns with national policy goals for creative education, emphasising originality, innovation, and cultural self-confidence (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2020).

In conclusion, the validation of the methodological framework outlined in Chapter 4.2 through my teaching practice demonstrates the viability of conceptual fashion pedagogy in the Chinese higher education context. The experiences documented in Sections 4.3.1–4.3.5 confirm that when students are encouraged to integrate personal narrative, cultural heritage, and interdisciplinary experimentation into their work, they develop the intellectual and creative agility required to address both local and global challenges in the 21st-century fashion landscape.

4.4 Teaching Practice: Case Studies

4.4.1 *Curriculum Positioning and the Role of Conceptual Fashion in Cross-Disciplinary Design Education*

In contemporary Chinese higher education, fashion design is increasingly recognised as part of the broader design discipline, sharing common theoretical foundations and methodological approaches with environmental design, product design, and media arts (Liu, 2020). This structural shift reflects a global trend towards interdisciplinary integration in creative education, where design programmes are expected to address complex socio-cultural and technological challenges that transcend the boundaries of a single field (Findeli, 2001; Cross, 2011). Within this context, conceptual fashion design serves not only as a specialised creative practice but also as a critical pedagogical tool for cultivating transdisciplinary thinking, material literacy, and socio-cultural awareness among students. The positioning of conceptual fashion within the curriculum at Hubei University reflects both global pedagogical precedents and local educational needs. While traditional fashion education in China has historically focused on garment construction, patternmaking, and market-oriented product development (Zhang, 2018), recent reforms emphasise the necessity of fostering students' abilities to conceptualise design as an intellectual and cultural process. This aligns with the Design Grand Category framework introduced in Chinese higher education, which groups multiple design sub-disciplines under a shared academic umbrella. Such an approach facilitates resource sharing, collaborative teaching, and the integration of methodologies across fields (MOE, 2018). In this model, conceptual fashion design acts as a bridge, linking fashion-specific skills to broader discursive and speculative design practices.

From a talent development perspective, this integration addresses two critical challenges. First, graduates must demonstrate adaptability across industries, with the capacity to apply design thinking to diverse contexts such as cultural tourism, exhibition design, and smart product development (Sun and Zhao, 2021). Second, the rapid convergence of digital technology and creative industries requires designers who are proficient in interdisciplinary collaboration, capable of engaging with engineers, anthropologists, and cultural theorists

alike (Oxman, 2016). Conceptual fashion, with its emphasis on idea-driven creation, speculative prototyping, and embodied experimentation, offers a fertile ground for developing these competencies.

The pedagogical structure of conceptual fashion courses is therefore intentionally aligned with the university's broader design education objectives. Rather than being confined to the fashion major, the curriculum is designed to be accessible to students from other design-related programmes, enabling cross-enrolment and collaborative project work. This approach reflects international precedents, such as the Fashion Communication and Critical Studies pathway at Central Saint Martins (UK) and the Hybrid Design studio model at Parsons School of Design (USA), both of which promote the blending of conceptual design with media, spatial, and technological practices (Rissanen & McQuillan, 2016).

At the core of this pedagogical model is the belief that conceptual fashion can serve as a methodological testbed for broader design inquiry. By situating fashion as a spatial, performative, and narrative medium, the curriculum enables students to explore design not only as a means of producing artefacts but as a critical mode of thinking and cultural engagement (Foster, 2002). For example, introductory exercises on material experimentation—such as those demonstrated in Figure 30 encourage students to reconsider conventional textile use by introducing alternative materials, including bamboo, wire mesh, and paper. These exercises dismantle the perception that fashion is limited to fabric-based solutions, opening pathways for hybrid material applications and cross-disciplinary integration.

Moreover, the curriculum incorporates reflective practice as a key learning strategy, consistent with the methodology outlined in Chapter 3. Students are guided to document their process through visual diaries, iterative prototypes, and critical discussions. This process not only reinforces technical learning but also encourages the articulation of conceptual intent and socio-cultural relevance. Such reflective cycles are essential for validating the practice-based research model employed in this study, ensuring that teaching

outcomes directly contribute to the evolving body of knowledge on conceptual fashion pedagogy in China.

In summary, the curriculum positioning of conceptual fashion at Hubei University serves as both a disciplinary anchor and a cross-disciplinary catalyst. By embedding conceptual design principles within a broader design education framework, the programme equips students with the cognitive flexibility, material fluency, and critical literacy necessary to operate within China's rapidly transforming creative industries. This approach aligns with the national agenda for new liberal arts (新文科) development, which advocates for interdisciplinary integration, innovation-driven learning, and the cultivation of socially engaged designers.



Figure 30 Classroom demonstration introducing non-textile materials Source: Author, (2022-2-24).

4.4.2 Implementation in Teaching Practice: Case Studies from Chinese Higher Education

The implementation of conceptual fashion design pedagogy within Chinese higher education requires a deliberate and contextualised approach that bridges global theoretical

frameworks with the realities of China's design education system. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the pedagogical strategy employed here integrates practice-based research (PBR) principles, rule-based conceptual generation, and reflective experimentation (Gray and Malins, 2004; Candy and Edmonds, 2018). This section presents four case studies from my teaching practice with third- and fourth-year undergraduate students in the Environmental Design programme, in which conceptual fashion was employed as both a medium of design research and a vehicle for critical discourse.

These case studies serve to verify and extend the methodological propositions outlined in Chapter 4.2–4.3, particularly the emphasis on breaking material preconceptions, expanding the definition of fashion beyond aesthetics, and engaging students with broader cultural, philosophical, and societal contexts. Each case explores a different thematic and methodological trajectory:

- Case 1 examines the shift from textile-centric thinking to a modular, non-textile conceptual framework (Modular Skin).
- Case 2 explores bodily constraint, emotional provocation, and discomfort as deliberate conceptual devices (Clipped Body).
- Case 3 investigates architectural thinking in wearable systems, merging fashion and spatial design (Spatial Assemblage).
- Case 4 interrogates functionality and transformation, positioning fashion as a dynamic, participatory structure (Transformable Geometric Membrane).

In the context of Chinese higher education, where the first year is largely devoted to general education courses and the second year marks the entry into specialised study, these projects were implemented primarily with second-year students transitioning into professional design training, and third- and fourth-year students capable of advanced conceptual exploration. This alignment reflects a key adaptation of international conceptual fashion pedagogy to Chinese curricular structures, ensuring that students are introduced to conceptual design thinking at the right developmental stage (Li, 2017; Wang and Chen, 2020).

The following sections provide a detailed analysis of each case, structured to highlight the teaching objectives, design process, theoretical grounding, critical reflections, and implications for future design practice. In each, the integration of conceptual fashion within a broader design discipline context is made explicit, positioning fashion as a critical and cross-disciplinary domain within the Chinese design education landscape.



4.4.2.1 Case 1: Modular Skin – Rethinking Materiality in Fashion Design

The Modular Skin project was conducted with third-year students in the Concept Fashion Design course (Environmental Design programme), 2023 cohort. The primary aim was to dismantle the prevailing assumption among students that fashion design must begin with fabric. In the Chinese higher education context, where design disciplines are often categorised into rigid professional boundaries (fashion, product, interior, etc.), students tend to develop material and process biases early in their training (Zhao, 2019). This project was designed to counteract such biases by placing structural systems and non-textile materials at the centre of fashion creation.

Figure 31 Modular Skin – wearable modular system assembled from laser-cut wooden discs and elastic cord. Source: Third-year student, Concept Fashion Design (2023).

The project drew on Sol LeWitt’s conceptual art principles, particularly the notion that “the idea becomes the machine that makes the art” (LeWitt, 1967). Students were tasked with

creating a wearable system composed of rigid modular units, applying a self-imposed generative rule to guide form development. In this instance, laser-cut birch plywood discs—each perforated with equidistant holes—served as the base unit. The units were connected using elastic cords, allowing multiple permutations of assembly.

The design process unfolded in three phases: Material Familiarisation – Students engaged in hands-on exploration of the wooden discs, testing various connection strategies and documenting structural stability and flexibility.

Bodily Engagement – The modular structures were assembled directly on the body, prompting the wearer to adapt posture and movement in response to the rigidity of the material.

Iterative Reconstruction – The assemblies were repeatedly dismantled and reconfigured, exploring how different arrangements altered the relationship between body and structure. This parametric and rule-based approach shifted the design focus from surface decoration to spatial negotiation, inviting students to engage with constraint, protection, and exposure as conceptual variables rather than purely aesthetic choices.

The *Modular Skin* project aligns with Roland Barthes' (1983) notion of fashion as a semiotic system, where material choices and construction methods carry cultural and symbolic weight. By using wood—an unconventional, non-textile material—students were forced to reconsider the communicative role of the garment. The rigidity of the modules contrasted with the fluidity traditionally associated with clothing, producing a tension that embodied both restriction and protection.

Furthermore, the project reflects current discourses in material-driven design research, where the affordances of a material shape both form and meaning (Karana, Pedgley and Rognoli, 2015). The choice of birch plywood and elastic cord not only dictated structural possibilities but also introduced metaphors of resilience, adaptability, and modularity—

qualities relevant to broader socio-cultural narratives in contemporary China, such as adaptability in urban living environments.

The final wearable structures resembled partial exoskeletons, enveloping the body in geometric patterns that altered its silhouette and movement. In critique sessions, students reported that working without textiles challenged their assumptions about the limits of fashion, expanding their understanding of garment as architecture. One student described the experience as “learning to think about clothing like building a pavilion—where the body is both the site and the inhabitant” (third-year student, Concept Fashion Design, 2024).

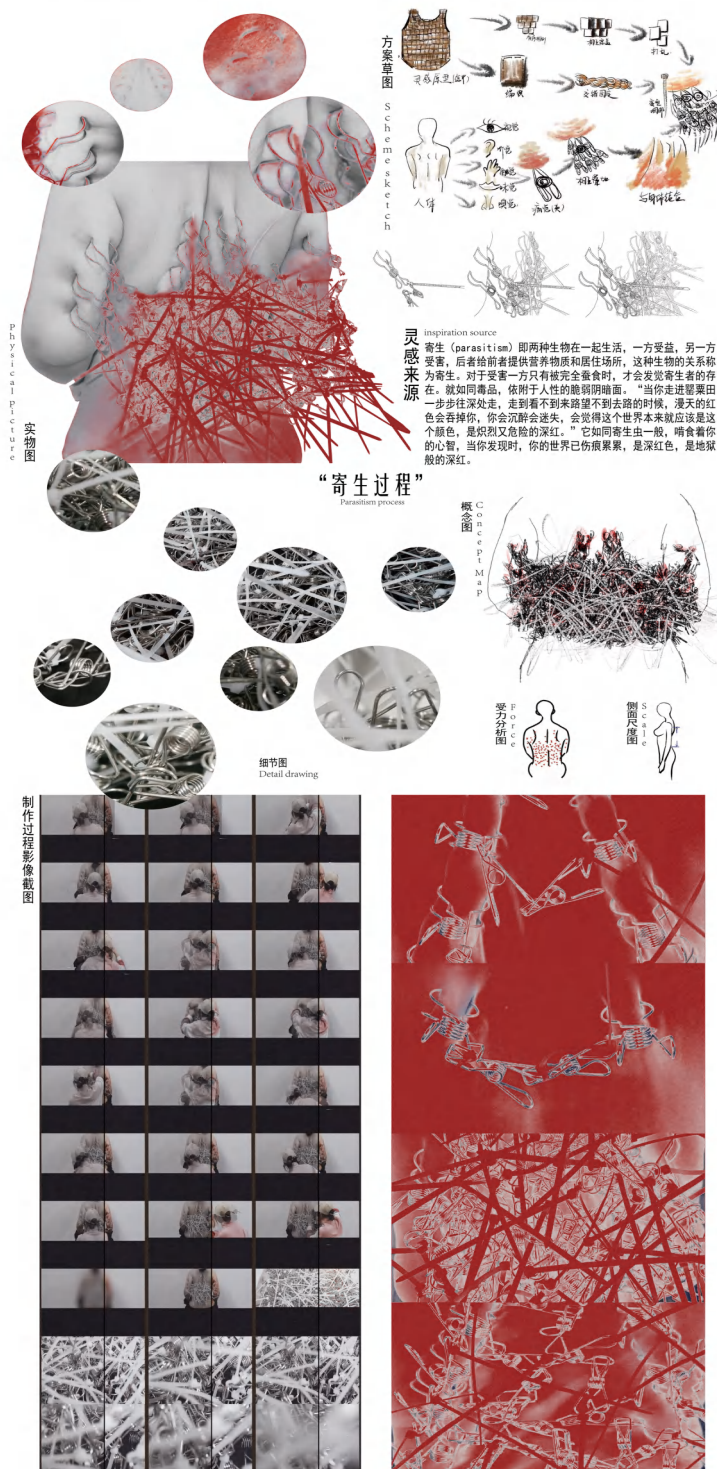
Importantly, the project encouraged critical reflection on the role of discomfort and restriction in design. The rigid modules imposed physical limitations, compelling students to consider how garments can influence not just appearance but also bodily behaviour—a perspective rarely addressed in conventional Chinese fashion education.

In the Chinese educational context, where emphasis is often placed on technical mastery and commercial viability, *Modular Skin* provided an alternative model that foregrounded conceptual depth, cross-disciplinary thinking, and speculative exploration. By bridging methods from fashion, product, and architectural design, the project exemplified how conceptual fashion can function as a nexus for design integration across fields.

This approach also resonates with emerging global discourses on sustainable design. Modular, reconfigurable systems suggest a path toward adaptable garments with extended lifecycles, offering a subtle critique of fast fashion’s disposability. While sustainability was not the primary focus of this case, the underlying methodology supports its integration into future projects.

Modular Skin demonstrated that when students are freed from the constraints of conventional textile thinking, they can engage with fashion design as a form of material storytelling and spatial negotiation. The project validated the methodological premise that conceptual fashion pedagogy in China should prioritise breaking disciplinary silos,

challenging material assumptions, and fostering critical engagement with form and meaning.



4.4.2.2 Case 2: *Clipped Body* – Bodily Constraint and Emotional Provocation in Conceptual Fashion

The *Clipped Body* project was developed within the same third-year Concept Fashion Design course in 2024 but targeted a different conceptual trajectory: the deliberate use of bodily constraint, provocation, and discomfort as vehicles for conceptual exploration. Whereas *Modular Skin* encouraged spatial negotiation through modularity and structure, *Clipped Body* aimed to confront the student with the ethical, sensory, and aesthetic implications of discomfort in design.

Figure 32 *Clipped Body* – wearable structure composed of multiple metallic clips attached to the skin and transparent elastic supports. Source: Third-year student, Concept Fashion Design (2024).

The guiding pedagogical question was: Can a garment's ability to unsettle or discomfort be as valuable as its ability to please or beautify? In the Chinese design education context, where fashion is often framed within narratives of elegance, desirability, and consumer acceptance (Guo, 2016), this proposition challenged students to see discomfort not as a failure of design but as a deliberate and communicative choice.

The *Clipped Body* piece was constructed from dozens of small metallic clips; each directly fastened to the skin or attached to thin strips of transparent elastic to mimic the visual effect of direct contact. This unconventional material strategy created a paradoxical tactile experience: the minimal surface area of each clip contrasted sharply with its visual density when applied in clusters.

The design process unfolded in three key stages:

Conceptual Grounding – Students explored philosophical frameworks such as Foucault's notion of the disciplined body (Foucault, 1977) and Elaine Scarry's discussions on the relationship between the body, pain, and expression (Scarry, 1985). These readings provided a theoretical backdrop for understanding bodily constraint as both a political and aesthetic act.

Material Testing – Working with metallic clips required careful ergonomic consideration. Initial trials explored clip spacing, pressure levels, and combinations with elastic supports to ensure wearability while maintaining the intended conceptual tension.

Embodied Experimentation – The clips were applied directly to the wearer's skin in various configurations, generating immediate sensory feedback. Students documented their emotional and physical responses, as well as audience reactions during informal studio presentations.

From a conceptual standpoint, *Clipped Body* engages directly with the tradition of body art and performance, recalling the work of artists such as Marina Abramović, whose endurance-based performances explore vulnerability, pain, and the limits of the body (Westcott, 2010). In fashion terms, it aligns with Hussein Chalayan's early experimental

works, which often subjected the wearer to material and spatial constraints as a form of critical commentary (Wilcox, 2009).

In the context of Chinese culture, bodily constraint carries specific socio-cultural resonances—from historical references such as foot-binding to contemporary debates about body image, control, and autonomy (Liu, 2018). By integrating these cultural undercurrents into the design process, the project extended beyond formal experimentation into the realm of cultural critique.

During critiques, the student reported an acute awareness of how wearing the piece altered both self-perception and social interaction. The physical sensation of the clips—sometimes pressing into the skin, sometimes merely grazing—produced a fluctuating state of embodied vigilance. This mirrored broader themes in conceptual fashion, where the body is treated as a site of negotiation between comfort, vulnerability, and expression (Evans, 2003).

Audience responses were equally telling. While some viewers found the piece visually intriguing—describing it as “a constellation of tension points”—others expressed discomfort or unease, particularly when imagining the tactile experience. This divergence underscored one of the project’s central pedagogical goals: to teach students that the value of a conceptual piece is not measured solely by its capacity to please but by its ability to provoke reflection and dialogue.

The *Clipped Body* project served as a practical investigation into the ethics of provocation in design. While the discomfort experienced by the wearer was intentional, it was carefully calibrated to avoid harm, raising broader questions about where the boundary lies between challenging the body and violating it. This ethical balancing act is particularly relevant in the Chinese educational context, where risk-taking in design is often constrained by institutional conservatism (Xu, 2021).

From a material innovation perspective, the use of metallic clips transformed an everyday utilitarian object into a medium of conceptual storytelling. The modularity and adjustability

of the clips allowed for rapid prototyping and variation, reinforcing the methodological value of non-linear, iterative processes in conceptual fashion pedagogy (Gray and Malins, 2004).

This project's significance extends beyond fashion into other design disciplines. The exploration of discomfort as a design principle can inform spatial design (e.g., restrictive architectural forms), product design (e.g., ergonomic provocation in interactive devices), and performance art. It demonstrates how conceptual fashion can act as a testing ground for affective design strategies that manipulate sensory and emotional states.

In the long-term trajectory of Chinese design education, integrating projects like *Clipped Body* could help dismantle the entrenched belief that successful design must be universally appealing. By legitimising emotional complexity and discomfort as design outcomes, educators can better prepare students for the pluralistic and critical demands of contemporary creative industries (Wu, 2022).

Clipped Body reinforced the methodological claim that conceptual fashion pedagogy must cultivate students' willingness to embrace risk, discomfort, and cultural critique. In doing so, it expanded the educational conversation beyond technical skill and aesthetic refinement toward a deeper engagement with the body as a contested site of design inquiry.

4.4.2.3 Case 3: *Spatial Assemblage* – Rethinking Garment as Architectural System

The *Spatial Assemblage* project emerged in the 2023 third-year Concept Fashion Design module, conceived as an inquiry into how architectural thinking can transform the language of fashion. Unlike previous projects that emphasised modularity (*Modular Skin*) or bodily provocation (*Clipped Body*), this case shifted the focus to space-making through wearable structures. The aim was to dismantle the conventional hierarchy in which garments are secondary to the body and to instead treat the garment as a primary spatial entity—a mobile, adaptive architecture in which the body participates.

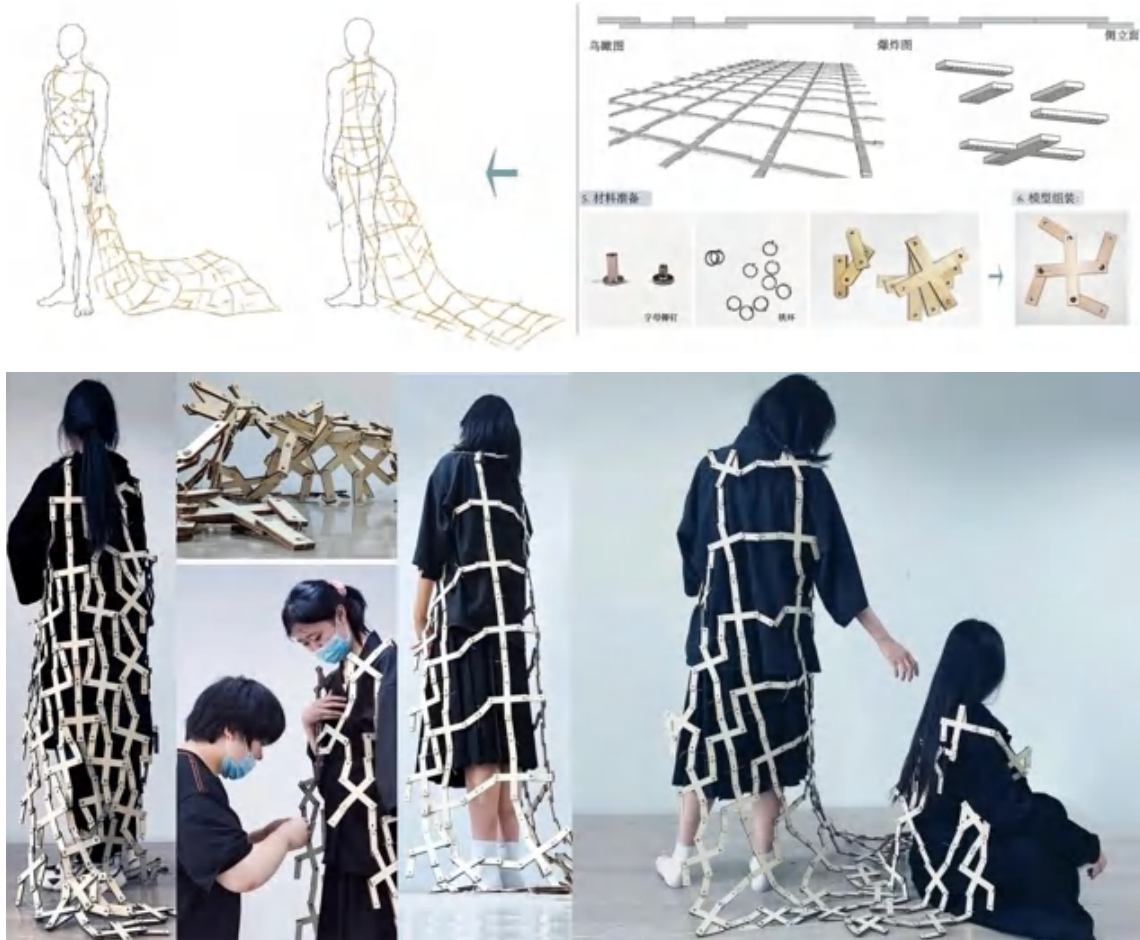


Figure 33 Spatial Assemblage – Wearable bamboo structure forming spatial volumes around the body, designed as a microarchitecture. Source: Third -year student, Concept fashion design (2024).

This pedagogical strategy drew from interdisciplinary design theory, particularly Bernard Tschumi’s notion that architecture is defined by the interaction between space, movement, and event (Tschumi, 1994). By adopting this framework, students were encouraged to see garments not as passive coverings but as spatial events—interactive zones in which materiality, movement, and bodily engagement co-exist.

The *Spatial Assemblage* piece was constructed using a series of rigid modules fabricated from bamboo strips, chosen for their high tensile strength, flexibility, and cultural resonance in Chinese material heritage (Sun, 2019). Bamboo’s ability to bend without breaking allowed the creation of curvilinear geometries that departed from the flat, two-dimensional logic of pattern-making.

The design methodology unfolded in four stages:

Spatial Sketching – Students began with three-dimensional sketches made from thin bamboo skewers, mapping potential volumes around the body without touching it. This exercise forced them to think of the body as a spatial anchor rather than a tailoring template.

Material Prototyping – The use of split bamboo strips required extensive steam-bending tests to achieve the desired curvature without fracturing. The process foregrounded *material-led design thinking* (Ashby & Johnson, 2014), where form was discovered through tactile negotiation with material limits.

Assemblage Logic – The modules were joined using leather cord and metal fasteners in a lattice formation, allowing rotational flexibility at each joint. This gave the structure the capacity to shift in response to bodily motion while retaining its spatial presence.

Body Integration – In the final stage, the structure was worn so that certain bamboo arcs extended away from the body, creating shadow volumes and negative spaces. The garment no longer “fitted” the body but instead created micro-architectures that expanded its spatial boundaries.

From a conceptual standpoint, *Spatial Assemblage* aligns with Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby’s speculative design approach, in which objects are understood as prompts for reflection rather than purely functional tools (Dunne and Raby, 2013). In this project, the garment-as-architecture prompted questions such as:

Can a garment define personal territory in public space?

If clothing becomes architectural, does it shift its role from decoration to environmental mediation?

How might a garment negotiate between openness (invitation) and closure (protection)?

These questions resonated particularly in the Chinese urban context, where dense spatial conditions heighten awareness of personal boundaries in public life (Ren, 2018). By

reframing clothing as spatial negotiation, the project encouraged students to think about fashion as a social, cultural, and environmental mediator.

The student behind *Spatial Assemblage* reported a transformation in their design thinking—from focusing on surface embellishment to exploring the three-dimensional spatial agency of garments. They noted that the bamboo structure altered not only their movement but also the way they occupied space:

I realised that my body was no longer moving through space unnoticed; it was shaping space with every step.” – Third-year student, Concept Fashion Design, 2024.

This insight aligned with the course’s broader pedagogical aim of pushing students toward experiential design thinking—where the success of a piece is measured not only by its appearance but also by the lived, sensory, and social experiences it generates (Kolb, 1984).

During a public critique, observers described the piece as “a walking pavilion” and “wearable architecture,” reflecting its departure from garment norms. Some commented on its elegance and lightness, while others questioned its practicality—an expected reaction within conceptual fashion, where function is often provocatively destabilised (Evans, 2003).

The critique discussions also touched on issues of sustainability, given bamboo’s renewability and low environmental impact. This sparked a wider conversation about how conceptual fashion can intersect with ecological ethics—an area of growing significance in Chinese design education, especially under the government’s call for sustainable innovation (Zhang, 2021).

The architectural logic in *Spatial Assemblage* suggested pathways for collaboration between fashion, architecture, and product design. For instance, its joint system could inspire deployable shelters, theatrical sets, or responsive stage costumes. This reflects a key objective of the Concept Fashion Design course: to prepare students for post-disciplinary creative practice, where fashion operates in dialogue with other design domains (Walker, 2014).

Spatial Assemblage expanded the scope of conceptual fashion pedagogy by demonstrating how architectural thinking can redefine the role of clothing as a spatial and cultural interface. In doing so, it challenged students to see garments not merely as personal adornment but as agents in shaping lived environments.

4.4.2.4 Case 4: *Spiked Extensions* – Sensory Provocation and Bodily Alienation

The *Spiked Extensions* project originated within the advanced stage of the third-year Concept Fashion Design curriculum, conceived as a deep engagement with the sensory and psychological dimensions of wearable form. Building on earlier exercises that explored modularity (*Modular Skin*), provocation (*Clipped Body*), and architectural space (*Spatial Assemblage*), this case sought to interrogate how material aggression and bodily estrangement could be used as deliberate design strategies.

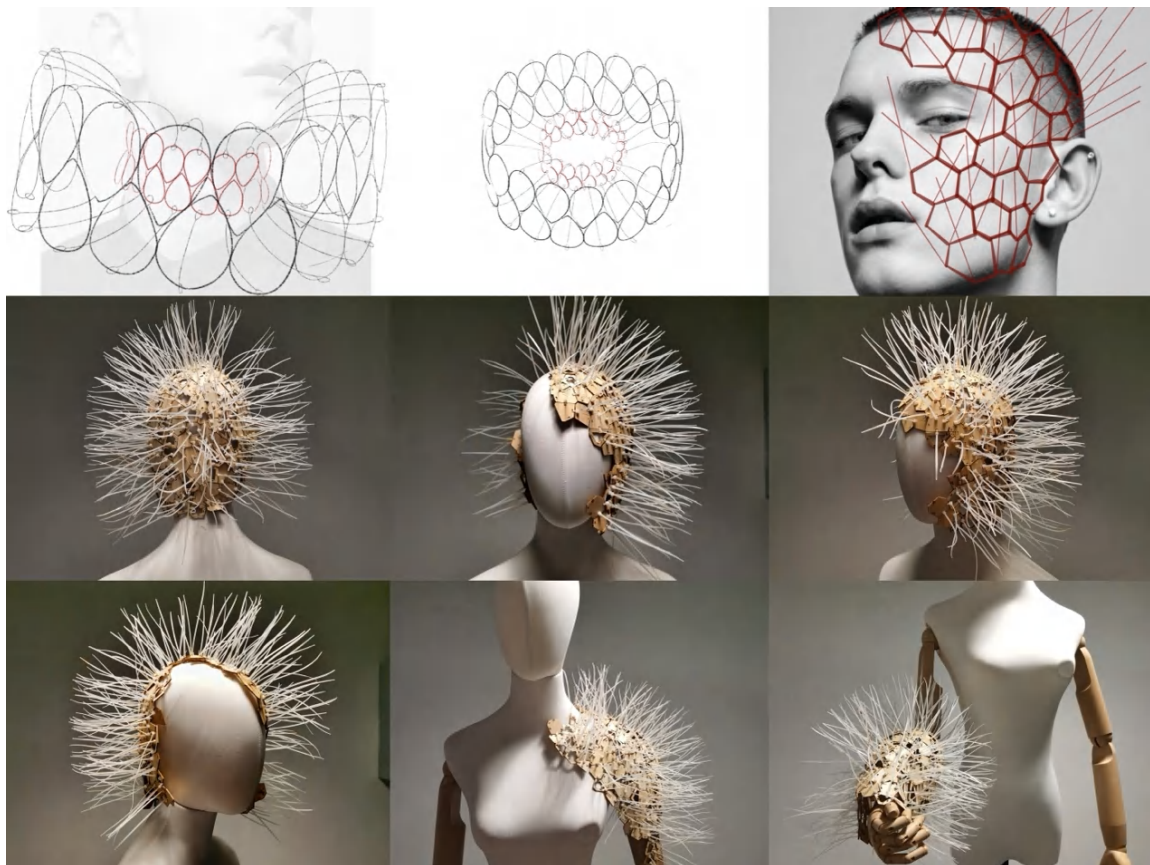


Figure 34 *Spiked Extensions* – headpiece and shoulder prosthetics composed of modular wooden bases embedded with spike-like cable ties.

Source: Third-year student, *Concept Fashion Design* (2024).

Pedagogically, the project aligned with the course's overarching goal of pushing students beyond aesthetic satisfaction into territories where fashion engages critical discourse—including discomfort, confrontation, and redefinition of the body's boundaries. This follows the critical design stance outlined by Dunne & Raby (2013), in which artefacts provoke reflection by challenging habitual expectations.

The conceptual seed for *Spiked Extensions* emerged from discussions on the protective and aggressive duality of bodily augmentation. Students were introduced to historical and cultural precedents, from medieval armour and indigenous ceremonial wear to avant-garde works by designers such as Alexander McQueen and Iris van Herpen, who have explored the interplay between beauty, danger, and bodily transformation (Bolton, 2011; Quinn, 2002).

The project's critical question was:

Can a wearable object both protect and expose, empower and alienate, through the same formal language?

This question was situated within a broader discussion on the body as contested space—a site where issues of autonomy, vulnerability, and social interaction are negotiated (Entwistle, 2000; Entwistle, 2015). In the Chinese context, where public space is often negotiated through dense interpersonal proximity, the notion of physically asserting personal boundaries through wearable extension took on additional cultural significance (Ren, 2018).

The *Spiked Extensions* ensemble comprised a headpiece, shoulder structure, and hand prosthetics, each designed to alter the wearer's sensory experience and their spatial presence.

Core Structure – The base of each component was constructed from laser-cut birch plywood units connected in a mesh formation. This modular approach echoed the *Modular Skin* methodology but was adapted for greater flexibility and targeted anatomical fit.

Extension Elements – Hundreds of white, spike-like rods, fabricated from trimmed plastic cable ties, were embedded into the structure at calculated angles. The material choice was intentional: cable ties, associated with industrial fastening, were recontextualised as aesthetic yet aggressive elements, balancing formal elegance with tactile hostility.

Surface Strategy – The uniform white colour of the spikes created a cohesive visual field, allowing the form's aggression to be read through texture and volume rather than colour symbolism.

This construction process exemplified *critical materiality*—where the inherent properties and cultural associations of materials become part of the conceptual narrative (Fletcher and Grose, 2012).

When worn, the headpiece enveloped the cranial form in a radiant halo of spikes, extending beyond the wearer's immediate body-space and visually confronting onlookers. The tactile pressure of the spikes against the scalp and shoulders heightened the wearer's proprioceptive awareness, while the sound of spikes brushing against each other during movement introduced an auditory layer to the sensory experience.

From a psychological standpoint, the ensemble operated in a paradoxical zone: it could be read as armour—shielding the wearer from physical contact—yet it simultaneously made the wearer hyper-visible, inviting attention and potential scrutiny. This tension mirrored real-world negotiations between self-protection and social exposure, particularly relevant to discussions of gendered space and public safety in urban China (Li, 2020).

The student reported that working on *Spiked Extensions* fundamentally altered their perception of what fashion could do:

“I realised fashion doesn’t have to be comfortable or beautiful in the conventional sense—it can be about provoking a response, about making someone think or feel differently.” – Third-year student, Concept Fashion Design, 2024.

This shift in perspective reflected one of the primary educational goals of the course: to expand the functional definitions of fashion beyond clothing the body, positioning it as a medium for critical engagement with society and culture (Kawamura, 2023).

The iterative feedback process in class critiques reinforced the importance of aligning material language with conceptual intent. For example, peers suggested exploring biodegradable spike materials to address environmental considerations, thereby linking conceptual provocation with sustainable practice—a connection increasingly emphasised in contemporary fashion education (Gwilt, 2014).

At the public exhibition, *Spiked Extensions* elicited strong audience reactions, ranging from fascination to discomfort. Some viewers were drawn to its sculptural beauty and precision, while others recoiled at its aggressive physicality. This spectrum of responses validated the project’s goal: to create a work that cannot be passively consumed, forcing active engagement and interpretation.

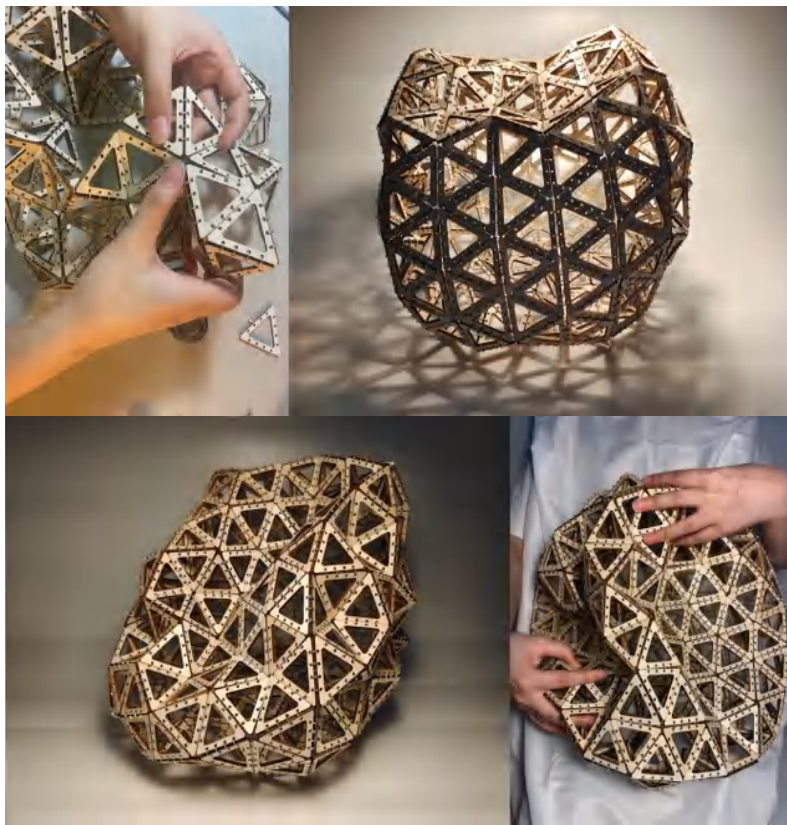
The piece also prompted conversations around the role of discomfort in design—a theme that remains underexplored in much of Chinese fashion pedagogy, where beauty and commercial viability often dominate the evaluation criteria (Zhao, 2019). By foregrounding discomfort as a deliberate design tool, the project demonstrated an alternative evaluative lens that values emotional impact and criticality alongside technical skill.

Beyond fashion, the principles explored in *Spiked Extensions*—such as modular assembly, sensory augmentation, and spatial occupation—have applications in performance art, interactive installation, and speculative product design. The project’s visual aggressiveness

and structural adaptability make it a viable reference point for disciplines interested in exploring the interface between human and object in public space.

Spiked Extensions stands as a compelling example of how conceptual fashion education in China can move beyond the confines of garment-making to embrace broader critical and sensory territories. Through deliberate material choice, structural experimentation, and engagement with discomfort, the project redefined fashion as a site of negotiation between aesthetic form, bodily experience, and socio-cultural discourse.

4.4.2.5 Case 5: *Kinetic Triangular Membrane – Responsive Structure and Wearable Transformation*



The *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* project was developed as a capstone exploration for senior students in the Concept Fashion Design stream, intended to synthesise the technical, conceptual, and critical skills accumulated across the previous modules. It occupied a strategic position in the curriculum—designed to challenge students to work at the intersections of material engineering, bodily performance, and spatial adaptability.

Figure 35 *Kinetic Triangular Membrane – transformable modular structure in birch plywood and metal rings, demonstrating adaptable silhouettes through bodily interaction.*Source: *Third-year student, Concept Fashion Design (2024).*

In pedagogical terms, this project embodied the culminating phase of the conceptual fashion education model introduced earlier in this thesis, where cultural grounding, critical engagement, and technological adaptation converge in a cycle of iterative experimentation. By working with a highly structured yet transformable modular system, students were invited to explore how kinetic responsiveness could be embedded in a garment-like object, allowing the wearer to actively participate in shaping its form.

The conceptual proposition for the *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* emerged from class discussions on the idea that garments are not static artefacts, but dynamic interfaces between body and environment. Students were encouraged to question the permanence of form, reflecting on how fashion could operate within the logics of adaptability, ephemerality, and user interaction.

The guiding inquiry was:

What happens when a garment resists a fixed identity, instead existing as a continuously negotiable structure shaped by bodily movement?

This line of questioning was supported by reference to Hussein Chalayan's transformable garments, Lucy Orta's participatory structures, and Issey Miyake's A-POC (A Piece of Cloth) system, which similarly blurred the boundaries between textile, architecture, and user agency (Bolton, 2005; Kawamura, 2023). In the Chinese context, this investigation also resonated with philosophical notions of fluidity and impermanence found in Daoist cosmology, where change is seen as the only constant (Fang, 2012).

The *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* was constructed from approximately 450 equilateral triangular modules, each measuring 5 cm in edge length, laser-cut from birch plywood. These units were perforated at each vertex and linked using 6 mm metal rings, forming a porous, semi-rigid shell.

Modularity as Principle – The triangular geometry allowed for both flexibility and stability. It could articulate around curved bodily forms while retaining a coherent lattice structure.

Material Behaviour – Birch plywood offered a unique combination of lightness and rigidity, enabling large-scale form without excessive weight. Its natural grain introduced a subtle organic texture, contrasting with the geometric precision of the modules.

Assembly Logic – The open-ring connections permitted rotational movement between units, creating a semi-fluid membrane that could expand, contract, and twist in response to bodily gestures.

This construction process mirrored architectural deployable systems, and students were encouraged to draw from engineering references such as geodesic domes and tensegrity structures. By treating the garment as a kinetic surface, the design shifted from being an aesthetic overlay to becoming an extension of the wearer's movement vocabulary.

When worn, the *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* occupied a liminal zone between clothing and portable architecture. It neither draped like fabric nor sat rigidly like armour; instead, it followed a logic of continuous negotiation with the body.

Movement Response – Small bodily shifts caused the triangular units to ripple, producing a visual effect akin to scales or origami tessellations.

Postural Influence – The semi-rigid structure encouraged deliberate, slow movement to avoid excessive jostling, thus shaping the wearer's performative presence.

Transformability – By repositioning connection points, sections of the membrane could be expanded into protrusions or collapsed into denser protective zones, altering its silhouette in real time.

In performance-based critique sessions, students demonstrated these transformations in front of peers, highlighting the co-authorship between body and structure. The audience was invited to consider whether this adaptability constituted a functional improvement, an aesthetic innovation, or both.

From a conceptual standpoint, the *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* reframed the idea of fashion temporality. Rather than producing a single resolved form, it embraced the possibility of multiple identities coexisting within one system. This approach resonates with postmodern critiques of fixed identity in fashion, as articulated by theorists such as Barthes (1983) and Crane (2000).

In the Chinese educational context, where students often enter with a preconceived notion of “the finished garment” as the endpoint, this project disrupted the teleology of design. It foregrounded process over product, interaction over resolution, and adaptability over finality—principles increasingly relevant in a globalised, fast-changing cultural and technological landscape.

The student responsible for *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* reflected:

“I learned that fashion can be a conversation, not just a statement. The piece changes because I change—it’s alive in that sense.” – Third-year student, Concept Fashion Design, 2023.

This perspective indicated a successful internalisation of the course’s emphasis on non-linear, iterative design processes. From a teaching standpoint, the project validated the methodological framework introduced in Chapter 3, demonstrating that sustained engagement with material experimentation and bodily interaction can yield both conceptual richness and technical innovation.

The design principles underpinning *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* extend beyond fashion into fields such as wearable technology, responsive architecture, and interactive art installation. Its modular and reconfigurable nature offers potential for integration with smart materials, sensors, and robotics, aligning with emerging design agendas in Industry 4.0 and the “Internet of Bodies” (Roden, 2014).

At the year-end exhibition, the piece drew significant attention for its sculptural presence and its performative adaptability. Viewers were intrigued not only by its aesthetic but also by its invitation to imagine alternative futures for fashion—where garments might be rented as structural frameworks, adapted for multiple uses, or shared across different wearers without losing individuality.

Critics noted its potential as a speculative design prototype, situating it within broader discussions on sustainable modular systems that could reduce waste by replacing linear production-consumption-disposal cycles with circular reconfiguration models (Fletcher and Tham, 2019).

The *Kinetic Triangular Membrane* encapsulated the ambitions of the senior-level conceptual fashion pedagogy: to merge intellectual inquiry, material experimentation, and performative embodiment into a cohesive design practice. It challenged conventional Chinese fashion education's prioritisation of fixed form and commercial readiness, offering instead a model where responsiveness, adaptability, and co-creation are central values.

By positioning structure not merely as a support for fashion but as an active partner in its expression, this project illustrated how conceptual fashion can function as a bridge between design disciplines, philosophical reflection, and technological exploration. In doing so, it reinforced the thesis's broader argument that Chinese conceptual fashion education, when critically and experimentally applied, can become a driver for both aesthetic innovation and socio-cultural discourse.

4.4.3 *Summary of Case Studies*

The five case studies presented in Section 4.4.3 collectively demonstrate the diverse ways in which conceptual fashion pedagogy can be implemented within Chinese higher education to foster critical thinking, material experimentation, and cross-disciplinary awareness. While each project employed different materials, methodologies, and

conceptual provocations, they all shared a commitment to challenging traditional garment-making paradigms and reframing the body–garment–space relationship.

From the Modular Skin and Clip-based Bodily Assemblage, which explored themes of confinement, discomfort, and bodily vulnerability, to the Architectural Assembly and Spiked Prosthetic Forms, which interrogated spatial extension and sensory provocation, the projects revealed the capacity of fashion to operate as a medium of embodied critique. The Kinetic Triangular Membrane further expanded this by embracing transformability and co-creation, positioning the wearer as an active collaborator in defining the garment's identity.

These case studies also demonstrate the pedagogical shift from a purely aesthetic or commercial orientation towards a research-based, inquiry-driven approach to fashion education. The structured integration of philosophical frameworks (e.g., Daoist non-action), critical theory (e.g., posthumanism), and contemporary fashion discourse allowed students to see design as a vehicle for cultural commentary, political engagement, and speculative thinking.

Furthermore, the projects embody the Chinese Conceptual Fashion Education Model outlined earlier in this chapter, where cultural grounding, critical engagement, and technological adaptation form an iterative cycle. They not only validated the methodological strategies introduced in Chapter 3 but also showcased the adaptability of conceptual fashion principles within the constraints and opportunities of the Chinese higher education system.

4.5 Integration of Personal Practice and Pedagogical Outcomes

This section synthesises my conceptual fashion design practice—particularly the As for Me project—with my pedagogical work in Chinese higher education. It aims to demonstrate how the practical outputs discussed earlier (Chapters 4.2–4.4) are not isolated creative acts, but rather embedded in a cyclical process of theorisation, experimentation, and reflection, as outlined in the methodological framework (Chapter 3). Through

combining my own design research with student-led projects, this chapter evidences how conceptual fashion pedagogy can function as both a research methodology and a transformative teaching strategy.

4.5.1 Positioning As for Me in the Pedagogical Framework

The As for Me project served as a keystone in linking my doctoral research to classroom teaching. Developed initially as an exploration of materiality, identity, and sensory disruption (see Section 4.2.2), the project became a live case study for students to engage with the processes of conceptualisation, material experimentation, and interdisciplinary thinking.

The presentation of As for Me in the teaching environment allowed students to interrogate how abstract concepts—such as fragmented identity, embodiment, and impermanence—could be translated into wearable forms. In workshops, students deconstructed elements of the project, examining the spatial, tactile, and performative qualities of silk organza, glue-treated fabrics, and projected light interactions.

4.5.2 Student Engagement and Reflection

By showcasing As for Me as both an artefact and a process, I aimed to dismantle students' preconceptions about what constitutes a garment. Several students reflected that they had previously considered fashion primarily as fabric-based, functional, and aesthetically pleasing. Exposure to As for Me shifted these assumptions, opening a discursive space to consider fashion as a critical medium for narrative, cultural critique, and sensory engagement.

For example, one third-year student in Conceptual Fashion Design (2024) responded by producing a work centred on “body as resistance,” utilising rigid modular components to create a physically restrictive wearable structure (Figure 26). Another student explored the

absence of fabric entirely, constructing a “garment” from bamboo strips to investigate the possibility of functional expression without textiles (Figure 27).

4.5.3 Integration in the 2025 Doctor of Professional Practice Exhibition and Feedback Integration

As part of the doctoral programme, my work was presented in *Llifo (Flowing)*, the 2025 Art and Design Professional Doctorate Degree Show, hosted at Swansea College of Art, University of Wales Trinity Saint David. I presented *As for Me* alongside a curated selection of my students’ conceptual works. These were brought together in a short video entitled *A Practice Called Fashion*, which integrated my conceptual animation for *As for Me* with visual documentation of student projects. The exhibition combined physical installations with the video presentation, creating a spatial dialogue in which *As for Me* occupied the central installation space while student works formed a surrounding constellation. This curatorial configuration illustrated a clear pedagogical lineage from research to teaching to exhibition, foregrounding the interconnectedness of individual practice and collective learning outcomes. The video component was projected as part of the exhibition environment, enabling viewers to trace conceptual development across multiple scales and perspectives. *A Practice Called Fashion* is also available online as supplementary material (Appendix; Zhang, 2025).

Following the installation and public presentation of the *A Practice Called Fashion* project—which combined *As for Me* with selected student projects in a unified curatorial framework—feedback from academic staff and audience members offered valuable insights into the perceptual and intellectual impact of the work. The exhibition adopted a dual-channel video format, integrating a large monitor and a wall projection to construct a multi-layered narrative space. This setup allowed the audience to navigate between visual documentation of practice, conceptual framing, and reflective commentary, reinforcing the dialogic relationship between practice and pedagogy (Figure 36).



Figure 36 Installation view of *A Practice Called Fashion*: dual-channel video combining *As for Me* and student works into a layered narrative presentation. *Source: Author (2025)*

One of the most discussed elements was the Clipped body sequence from *As for Me*, in which binder clips were directly attached to fabric positioned on the body. This intervention provoked strong visceral responses: some viewers described an immediate sense of physical discomfort, while others reported a more layered intellectual reaction. The discomfort was frequently interpreted not as purely negative, but as a productive provocation that prompted associative thinking. In audience discussions, several participants drew analogies between the act of clipping and broader forms of restriction and control—relating it to the ways humans, animals, and plants are subjected to physical, systemic, or symbolic constraints in daily life. Some further speculated on the paradoxical nature of the object itself, questioning whether the Clipped piece was, in a metaphorical sense, “clipped” by the very conditions of its making. This kind of associative extension aligns with my long-standing emphasis on the essence of conceptual fashion: its capacity to generate reflective space where visual form serves as a catalyst for broader philosophical and socio-political questioning.

The installation also featured the Kinetic Triangular Membrane project, a geometric modular prototype constructed from over 450 laser-cut wooden panels. While some visitors

questioned its relationship to fashion design, I interpret such queries as integral to the conceptual framework. Within the scope of accessory or jewellery design, there is no inherent need to restrict scale; in this context, the work's non-prescriptive size and spatial form open possibilities for conceptual, disciplinary, and cross-disciplinary integration. The piece therefore occupies a deliberately ambiguous position, existing at the intersection of wearable design, spatial installation, and sculptural experimentation. This ambiguity is not a weakness but a strategic device—challenging categorical boundaries and inviting multiple modes of reading.

Another key visual projected the notion of “psychological defence” and “personal enclosure,” reinforcing the thematic link between bodily autonomy and environmental boundaries. This conceptual strand situates *A Practice Called Fashion* within broader debates on the political agency of fashion—how garments and fashion-related artefacts can act not merely as functional or decorative forms, but as critical agents that interrogate and destabilise prevailing social norms.

Due to technical, equipment, and spatial limitations, the *As for Me* project was not presented in its physical, interactive form during the exhibition. Instead, an animated rendering of the work was incorporated into the video sequence. Audience feedback suggested that while the animation conveyed the conceptual intent effectively, the absence of a physical, interactive component altered the mode of engagement. Several visitors speculated that an in-situ interaction—allowing the public to physically approach, touch, or activate the work—would have deepened the experiential dimension, potentially amplifying the themes of bodily negotiation, spatial power, and material resistance embedded in the design.

Despite the time constraints in preparing the exhibition, both academic and public audiences perceived the overall presentation as refined, professional, and conceptually coherent. As one exhibition attendee observed, the work “effectively summarised both the conceptual problem and the experimental process,” achieving a balance between intellectual clarity and emotional resonance. The exhibition thus served not only as a site

of dissemination but also as an active site of knowledge exchange—where feedback became part of the research process itself, informing future iterations and reinforcing the understanding of conceptual fashion as an evolving, reflexive practice.

Photograph of the 2025 practice-based doctoral graduation exhibition, showing the author's video installation which integrated selected student projects from the conceptual fashion design teaching practice with animations from the author's "As for Me" project. The installation created an immersive narrative environment where teaching outcomes and research practice intersected, encouraging viewers to engage with conceptual fashion as both a pedagogical and artistic process.

4.5.4 Key Insights and Pedagogical Implications

From this integration, several pedagogical insights emerged:

1. Material as Epistemology – Students developed an understanding of materials as carriers of meaning rather than passive construction tools, aligning with my conceptual framework from Chapter 3.
2. Deconstruction as Renewal – The dismantling of fashion's conventional boundaries encouraged students to reconstruct design values based on philosophical, cultural, and social inquiry.
3. Non-linear Learning Processes – The iterative exchange between my practice and student experimentation reinforced the value of cyclical learning models, as illustrated in Figure 4.3 of Section 4.3.
4. Cultural Contextualisation – Situating conceptual fashion within Chinese socio-cultural realities allowed students to connect global methodologies with local identities, producing more grounded yet experimental work.

4.5.5 Conclusion

This integration of personal practice and pedagogical implementation demonstrates that conceptual fashion design, when positioned as both artistic research and teaching methodology, has transformative potential in Chinese higher education. The As for Me project not only served as a vehicle for advancing my own doctoral research but also acted

as a catalyst for student innovation, pushing them to interrogate, disrupt, and reimagine the boundaries of fashion.

In aligning practice, teaching, and exhibition, the research validates the methodological proposition that conceptual fashion can function as a critical educational framework—one that equips students with the intellectual flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and creative resilience necessary for navigating the complexities of the contemporary design landscape.

Chapter5. Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

Although the term “conclusion” conventionally implies a definitive closure, the theoretical framework underpinning this research—particularly informed by deconstructivist thought—emphasises openness, discursiveness, and the continuous questioning of knowledge structures. In this sense, the conclusions presented here are deliberately framed as generative rather than conclusive. The aim is not to reach an immutable resolution, but to stimulate ongoing dialogue, critical reflection, and experimental practice among designers, educators, and researchers in the field of fashion.

This position is consistent with the broader epistemological stance of practice-based research (PBR), in which knowledge is produced through the cyclical processes of making, reflecting, and remaking. As outlined in Section 1.4.1, while international scholarship has increasingly acknowledged the significance of practice as a mode of inquiry—with platforms such as *Fashion Practice* and *The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry* contributing to this discourse (Groves and Marmalade, 2012; Postlethwaite, 2020)—there remains a notable gap in research that critically reflects on practice from the practitioner’s own standpoint, particularly in the Chinese context. This thesis seeks to address that gap by combining reflective methodologies, interdisciplinary

strategies, and cultural contextualisation to articulate an evolving definition of conceptual fashion design.

The structure of this study was intentionally designed to move from contextual grounding to critical experimentation. Chapter One identified the core research questions by examining the tensions and opportunities confronting conceptual fashion practitioners in China, positioned between globalised creative economies, local cultural heritage, and the pressures of commercial viability. Chapters Two and Three provided the theoretical and methodological frameworks, situating conceptual fashion within the intersections of fashion, fine art, and spatial design, while also tracing relevant historical trajectories. Chapter Four operationalised these frameworks through reflective practice, with the “As for Me” project and associated teaching experiments serving as case studies to explore the material, spatial, and conceptual dimensions of the field.

The doctoral exhibition in 2025 became an important point of synthesis. Here, the conceptual animation of *As for Me*, alongside projections, spatial installations, and selected student projects, was not only a presentation of creative outcomes but also an active site for testing theoretical propositions in a public forum. Audience engagement and peer feedback confirmed the potential of conceptual fashion to act as a catalyst for critical discourse, enabling connections between personal authorship, material experimentation, and socio-cultural commentary.

This chapter consolidates the thesis’ findings and answers the three research questions. RQ1 is addressed by articulating a contextual definition of conceptual fashion as a practice-led knowledge method for contemporary China. RQ2 is answered by evidencing how practice functions as knowledge within a PBR framework through the inspectable chain of framing → constraining → testing → communicating and the coupling of artefacts with discourse. RQ3 is addressed by translating these insights into a two-phase curriculum that supports progression from conceptual proposition to cultural critique and public communication. The chapter proceeds by first consolidating the definition, then

synthesising practice-based evidence, before mapping pedagogic outcomes to the research questions, clarifying limitations and outlining directions for future research.

Thus, the conclusions that follow do not seek to close down the conversation. Instead, they reflect on the implications of this research for the practice, pedagogy, and theorisation of conceptual fashion, particularly within the Chinese creative context. They also acknowledge the limitations encountered, both methodological and institutional, and propose directions for future research that could extend the work initiated here. In doing so, this chapter remains aligned with the spirit of conceptual fashion itself: provisional, questioning, and oriented toward new possibilities rather than fixed end points.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study has developed not only as a theoretical critique of fashion design but also as a conceptual and practice-based exploration grounded in three years of artistic research. Initially motivated by sustainability concerns and the ethical implications of production, it interrogated the ecological consequences of overproduction and the structural instability of the global fashion system, framing fashion as a site of economic, environmental and ideological crises (Fletcher and Tham, 2019; Niinimäki et al., 2020). As the project evolved, its focus shifted from the question “How can fashion become more sustainable?” to the more fundamental inquiry “What is fashion?”—specifically, whether in contemporary China fashion can be redefined through practice as a mode of thought, cultural reflection and knowledge production. This re-orientation transformed the research from a response to industrial problems into a speculative and critical reformulation of the field, aiming to articulate a methodological framework for conceptual fashion in China.

Drawing together Chapters 1–4, the thesis consolidates conceptual fashion as a practice-led knowledge method that privileges proposition over product and discourse over material permanence, mobilising dematerialisation, temporality and situated cultural meaning to interrogate and re-configure fashion’s social, aesthetic and ethical orders. Chapter 1 proposes this definition against style-based labels; Chapter 2 positions it within debates on

avant-garde fashion, dematerialisation and critical design; Chapter 3 operationalises it through PBR as a cycle of framing → constraining → testing → communicating; Chapter 4 tests and extends it via material/spatial experiments and pedagogic prototypes. Evidence from *As for Me*, iterative studio trials and classroom translations refines an initial emphasis on dematerialisation into a broader constellation that includes time-based articulation (temporality) and contextual discursivity (situated meaning). In the Chinese context, Daoist Wu Wei (minimal intervention, emergence) and Confucian Li (ritual propriety, relational ethics) function not as motifs but as design heuristics, shaping constraints and evaluation criteria that guide both making and assessment.

Conceptual fashion, as developed here, resists fixed definition and instead operates as a fluid, critically generative field that reframes fashion as philosophical and cultural practice, moving beyond consumable aesthetic objects (Skjold, 2018; Rocamora, 2016). Addressing persistent limitations in fashion studies—especially the emphasis on consumerism, visual aesthetics and functionality—the research advances fashion as an unstable, dynamic process of questioning, disruption and cultural dialogue. In dialogue with poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought (Derrida, 1997; Kawamura, 2023), it values ambiguity and incompleteness as productive conditions for knowledge-making. Methodologically, the project demonstrates how practice-based research can interrogate cultural, social and philosophical dimensions through material experimentation, theoretical synthesis and contextual analysis, intervening in discourses of identity, representation and authorship (Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Grose, 2021). The original contribution lies in articulating conceptual fashion as an open-ended, intellectually engaged and reflexive mode of practice—one that bridges theory and practice by showing how creative processes can function as philosophical engagement. Situated within China's rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape—marked by tensions between tradition, innovation and globalisation—the thesis offers a timely framework for reimagining fashion as meaningful academic and cultural practice, robust enough to guide pedagogy and research while remaining deliberately open to revision as new cultural, technological and institutional conditions emerge.

5.2.1 The Evolving Path and Conceptual Uncertainty of Conceptual Fashion Design in China

Building upon the methodological explorations detailed in Chapter Four, this section reflects on the evolving trajectory and epistemological ambiguity of conceptual fashion design in China, situating the findings within both professional and pedagogical contexts. The As for Me project, serving as the central case study of this research, has not only tested the viability of a practice-based research (PBR) approach but has also demonstrated the potential of conceptual fashion to operate simultaneously as a philosophical inquiry, a material experiment, and a socio-cultural critique. This reflective synthesis integrates the outcomes of the project with the observational insights from the graduation exhibition, alongside the diversity of student works, to articulate the future possibilities of conceptual fashion in the Chinese context.

From its inception, As for Me was conceived as a methodological testing ground—a way to critically evaluate whether conceptual fashion could be developed as both a practical and theoretical framework within contemporary China. Rather than adhering to a predetermined design outcome, the project embraced a process-oriented approach in which material experimentation (e.g., silk organza rigidified with glue, elastic fibre tensioning) served as a form of epistemic investigation. The deliberate destabilisation of material expectations not only challenged conventional readings of fabric functionality but also acted as a metaphor for resisting the industrial fashion system's fixation on fixed form and commercial value. Through iterative making, projection mapping, and spatial reconfiguration, the project demonstrated how garments could function less as wearable commodities and more as dynamic, discursive artefacts—provoking reflection on identity, embodiment, and authorship. This approach validated the central methodological premise of the research: that practice itself can generate theory, and that the designer, operating as a cultural critic, can use disruption and ambiguity as tools for knowledge production.

The culmination of As for Me was its presentation at the graduation exhibition, where it occupied a semi-enclosed, sensorially charged environment. As documented in Figure 4.12, the suspended garments were arranged at varying heights, illuminated by ambient and

projection-based lighting that shifted in response to movement. Digital projection overlays created layered shadow-play, merging the physical and virtual to produce an ephemeral, time-based dimension to the work. The installation invited audiences to walk amongst the garments, encountering unexpected material stiffness, shadow distortions, and light-responsive textures. This interaction extended the project's philosophical inquiries into the realm of public reception—audience hesitation, bodily adjustments, and spontaneous discussions became an integral part of the work's meaning-making process. The exhibition space thus operated as both a display and an experimental laboratory, reaffirming the study's claim that conceptual fashion can transcend object-making to become a performative and relational act.

Parallel to this, the broader graduation show featured a spectrum of student works that, while not all operating under the banner of “conceptual fashion,” collectively revealed an emergent appetite for interdisciplinary and critical approaches in Chinese fashion education. Some students incorporated AI-generated prints to explore the aesthetics of algorithmic authorship; others used found objects and recycled materials to create narrative-driven installations addressing environmental degradation; a few engaged with performative fashion, using choreographed movement to activate their garments. This diversity of expression not only highlights the latent potential for conceptual methodologies in the next generation of Chinese designers but also reflects a gradual, if uneven, shift in pedagogical culture—from output-focused production towards process-driven experimentation.

The implications of these observations are twofold. Firstly, the *As for Me* project demonstrates that methodological openness, material subversion, and spatial engagement can successfully be mobilised to produce fashion that is intellectually generative rather than commercially deterministic. Secondly, the diversity seen in student works suggests that when educational environments support risk-taking and cross-disciplinary inquiry, designers are more likely to produce work that challenges cultural narratives and engages in socio-political critique. In both cases, the central thread is the embrace of conceptual uncertainty—not as a lack of direction, but as a productive state that fuels creative inquiry.

As such, the findings reinforce this research's argument that the evolution of conceptual fashion in China will depend on sustaining educational and professional spaces that allow for indeterminacy, criticality, and cross-pollination of disciplines.

5.2.2 The Role of the Educational System in Conceptual Fashion Practice

Building on the reflective outcomes presented in Section 4.2.1 and the case studies in Chapter Four, it becomes clear that the trajectory of conceptual fashion design in China is inextricably linked to the structures and priorities of its higher education system. The pedagogical environment directly shapes the conceptual maturity, critical engagement, and methodological diversity of student work. The As for Me project, alongside the student-led installations exhibited during the 2025 graduation showcase (see Figure 4.12), demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations that currently exist within these structures. While these projects affirm the creative potential inherent in adopting experimental, cross-disciplinary, and process-led approaches, they also expose the systemic constraints that hinder the wider adoption of conceptual fashion as a legitimate academic and cultural practice.

The current landscape of Chinese fashion education remains predominantly rooted in a product-oriented paradigm. Most curricula prioritise skill acquisition in pattern cutting, garment construction, textile development, and market forecasting, with an implicit emphasis on commercial viability. Although these skills are indispensable for professional readiness, they inadvertently position fashion design within a narrow utilitarian framework, leaving limited space for philosophical inquiry, critical reflection, and speculative practice. This orientation reinforces the view of clothing as primarily a functional or marketable object, rather than a potential site for cultural dialogue, intellectual critique, and interdisciplinary knowledge production.

The challenge, therefore, lies in reimagining fashion education so that clothing can be understood not only as a product but as an intellectual and cultural medium. Within such a reframed pedagogy, garments might operate as carriers of narrative, sites of identity

negotiation, and tools for questioning social norms. The *As for Me* project exemplifies this shift: while the work emerged from a personal conceptual framework, its execution—combining installation, projection, and spatial interaction—demonstrated that fashion can transcend its conventional disciplinary boundaries to enter into dialogue with architecture, performance, and fine art.

To enable this transformation at scale, Chinese higher education institutions must restructure their curriculum philosophies, teaching methodologies, and assessment models. Introducing pedagogical strategies such as problem-based learning (PBL) and practice-based research (PBR) would encourage students to originate design propositions from philosophical questions, socio-political concerns, or cultural narratives. These strategies are not merely additive to existing structures; they demand a rethinking of the role of the fashion programme itself—from a vocational training pipeline to a cultural and intellectual incubator.

However, as evidenced in my own teaching experience, structural barriers persist. Institutional assessment often privileges the completion of a finished product over the documentation of process or the articulation of critical intent. Students producing abstract, process-led, or non-material works can find themselves marginalised within grading frameworks that privilege craftsmanship and market-readiness. This “production-outcome” model is fundamentally at odds with the “open-process” ethos of conceptual fashion design, where the value lies equally—if not more so—in the conceptual proposition, the processual evolution, and the interdisciplinary connections forged during development.

A redefinition of the designer’s role is therefore essential. Traditional fashion education tends to frame the designer as a trend-maker, brand builder, or product developer—roles tied to economic production. Conceptual fashion, by contrast, positions the designer as a questioner, cultural interlocutor, and critical thinker. Facilitating this shift requires educators to operate not merely as instructors of technical skills, but as co-researchers, curators of dialogue, and facilitators of intellectual growth. The 2025 graduation exhibition underscored the impact of this approach: students who had been encouraged to interrogate

their own assumptions about materiality, function, and the body produced works that provoked strong audience engagement and challenged normative definitions of clothing.

Institutionally, the introduction of “laboratory-style” modules could serve as a catalyst for this change. Such modules would function as experimental studios, bringing together students from fashion, spatial design, sociology, anthropology, and digital media to co-develop projects that address contemporary societal issues. In my own pedagogical practice, these interdisciplinary collaborations have proven to be fertile ground for unexpected design methodologies—often producing results that neither discipline could have achieved independently.

An equally important consideration is the integration of theory and practice within the same pedagogical frame. At present, theoretical instruction is largely text-based and isolated from practical studio work, while practical projects are evaluated primarily on visual and material outcomes. This separation creates a missed opportunity for students to understand how design can embody theory and how practice itself can generate new forms of knowledge. Future educational models must encourage multimodal outputs—where a single research question might be articulated simultaneously through writing, garments, moving image, and spatial installation.

In this respect, the *As for Me* project serves as both a proof of concept and a pedagogical tool. Its development required iterative material experimentation, theoretical framing, and public engagement—each stage informing the others in a cyclical process. By presenting the project alongside student works in a shared exhibition context, the educational environment became both a site of production and a site of discourse, allowing students to see themselves as participants in an ongoing critical conversation rather than isolated creators of individual products.

In conclusion, the reform of China’s fashion education system to fully embrace conceptual fashion practices is both an urgent necessity and a long-term cultural investment. By moving beyond the constraints of market-oriented pedagogy, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and integrating theory with material experimentation, educational

institutions can cultivate designers who are not only skilled makers but also critical agents of cultural discourse. This shift will ensure that conceptual fashion design in China evolves not as a marginal niche but as a recognised and influential field within the global landscape of design and cultural production.

5.2.3 Conceptual Fashion as a Continuously Emergent Practice

Drawing upon both the practical explorations outlined in Chapter Four and the pedagogical reflections in Section 5.2.2, this research positions conceptual fashion not as a definable style, a fixed disciplinary category, or a static design methodology, but as a continuously emergent, open-ended, and reflexive practice. The fluidity of conceptual fashion is not merely a by-product of its interdisciplinarity but a constitutive element of its identity. It evolves in constant dialogue with shifting socio-cultural, political, and technological contexts, resisting closure in favour of perpetual reconfiguration. In this sense, its value is not determined by tangible material output or surface aesthetics, but by its capacity to generate questions, destabilise dominant narratives, critique established design conventions, and reimagine the role of fashion in cultural discourse.

This orientation stands in direct contrast to product-driven, market-oriented design models that dominate much of the global and Chinese fashion industry. Whereas commercial fashion often begins with consumer demand and ends with optimised production, conceptual fashion foregrounds critical awareness, cultural positioning, and theoretical inquiry—processes that are iterative, disruptive, and dialogic. As discussed throughout this thesis, within the specific cultural and institutional landscape of China, conceptual fashion emerges through a complex interplay between educational frameworks, socio-cultural narratives, and industry logics. While experimental and interdisciplinary approaches have entered some design curricula, the prevailing emphasis on technical proficiency and market competitiveness means that fashion is rarely framed as a legitimate site for knowledge production (Skov, 2011; Kawamura, 2023).

By contrast, this research asserts that conceptual fashion should be understood as a critical design language—a dynamic cognitive and expressive system rather than a closed grammar of form. Designers operating within this paradigm are not merely fabricators of visual statements or suppliers of functional goods; they are constructors of meaning, crafting narratives through juxtaposition, deconstruction, material reconfiguration, and conceptual reassembly (Evans, 2003; Rocamora, 2016). The instability of such practices—their refusal to settle into a singular aesthetic formula—is not a weakness but a methodological strength. It is precisely this openness that enables conceptual fashion to participate in, and often lead, broader cultural critique.

From both personal practice and observation of design pedagogy in China, this study finds that the generative and unresolved nature of conceptual fashion is central to its capacity as a socio-cultural practice. The *As for Me* project, for example, was deliberately structured to remain in a state of conceptual fluidity, encouraging reinterpretation at each stage of its development—whether in material testing, spatial installation, or projection-based simulation. This openness mirrors the qualities needed in conceptual fashion education: flexibility in meaning, acceptance of ambiguity, and engagement with contradiction. Such qualities cannot be sustained if conceptual fashion becomes overly defined, disciplined, or institutionalised; its potential lies in resisting such containment.

However, current pedagogical structures in China often train students to be “problem-solvers” who efficiently deliver solutions, rather than “problem-posers” who interrogate the conditions of the problem itself. Assessment rubrics reward output completion, polish, and adherence to industry-ready formats over intellectual exploration and speculative process. Conceptual fashion demands the opposite. It requires withdrawal from completion-driven thinking, inviting prolonged engagement with processes that question the assumptions underpinning design, materiality, and meaning. As Fletcher and Tham (2019) argue, shifting from a product-oriented to a thought-oriented approach enables the integration of immaterial and non-traditional design languages—including performative acts, spatial arrangements, speculative narratives, and deliberate material negation—thus transforming design from a process of making into a process of thinking.

Furthermore, within the Chinese socio-cultural environment, conceptual fashion possesses unique generative potentials. Positioned at the intersection of global art discourses and indigenous cultural heritage, it operates across multiple axes of identity, value, embodiment, gender, and sustainability politics. Practitioners in this context are compelled to construct multidimensional languages that are not aimed at persuasion or market acceptance but at provocation, resonance, and the continual posing of new questions. This aligns with the role of fashion as a form of cultural inquiry, where the designer's task is not to offer definitive answers but to sustain conditions for ongoing reflection.

The strategies observed in conceptual fashion practice—both in this research and in wider case studies—can be summarised across three interrelated domains:

- Deconstructing form – reconfiguring garment structures, material typologies, and presentation modes to question the ontological foundations of fashion.
- Decentralising production logic – disrupting fixed notions of authorship and embracing processes that allow for collective, iterative, and unpredictable outcomes.
- Retraining perception – moving audiences away from passive consumption towards active, reflective, and participatory modes of engagement (Barthes, 1983; Barnard, 2014).

To support these strategies, educational systems must cultivate learning environments that privilege critical inquiry, tolerate uncertainty, and foster productive tensions between self, society, and symbolic meaning. This cannot be achieved through token curricular additions or isolated theory modules; rather, it requires a fundamental rethinking of how design is taught, valued, and assessed.

In conclusion, this research affirms that conceptual fashion is not a stylistic endpoint but a continuously emergent cultural method. It is, above all, a way of asking—rather than answering—questions, and a mode of practice that situates fashion within broader philosophical, social, and political conversations. By positioning conceptual fashion as an ongoing process of cultural inquiry, this thesis not only expands the theoretical understanding of fashion as an open system of knowledge production but also provides a

foundation for reimagining Chinese fashion education as a site for reflective, critical, and culturally engaged design practice.

5.2.4 Methodological Reflection and Interdisciplinary Potential

This research affirms that conceptual fashion design should be understood not as a stable category or a fixed stylistic formula, but as an evolving, process-led mode of critical inquiry. As outlined in Chapter 3, the methodological framework was grounded in practice-as-research (PaR), reframing design from a product-driven outcome into a site of knowledge production, philosophical reflection, and socio-cultural intervention (Nelson, 2013; Candy and Edmonds, 2018). By prioritising the act of making as a generative process, the project challenged dominant assumptions in the fashion system, particularly regarding the role of the body, materiality, authorship, and presentation.

This methodological orientation was tested and refined through the "As for Me" project discussed in Chapter 4. The project integrated material experimentation, spatial installation, and digital projection to create a layered, multisensory engagement with the audience. The iterative cycles of making, reflection, and re-making served as both a generative research process and an embodied critique of conventional garment logic. For example, the interplay between rigidified silk organza and interactive projection did not aim for a finalised garment but produced an evolving spatial-textile narrative that questioned the stability of form and the hierarchy of visual over tactile perception. These methodological decisions validated the potential of PaR to reveal new knowledge through disruption, incompleteness, and the integration of diverse media.

A central methodological contribution lies in the integration of interdisciplinary strategies. By drawing on art theory, cultural critique, and spatial design, the project extended fashion beyond its market-defined borders, positioning it as a platform for cultural narration and critical dialogue (Rocamora, 2016; Evans, 2003). This interdisciplinarity was not treated as an external supplement but as an intrinsic condition of conceptual fashion practice. The project demonstrated how collaborative exchanges between fashion, fine art, and spatial

studies can generate hybrid forms that resist categorisation while retaining critical coherence.

However, this complexity demands a high level of theoretical literacy, critical self-awareness, and methodological reflexivity from the practitioner. Without these foundations, there is a risk of superficial appropriation in which conceptually styled aesthetics become detached from their intellectual grounding. The study thus stresses that the integrity of conceptual fashion depends on the designer's ability to articulate and contest cultural narratives, rather than merely visualising abstract ideas (Kawamura, 2023; Fletcher & Grose, 2012). This insight holds particular urgency within Chinese fashion education, where curricula still privilege technical mastery and market readiness over open-ended, exploratory methodologies. As seen in the analysis of current teaching frameworks, students are often trained as problem-solvers within predetermined parameters, rather than as problem-posers capable of reframing the terms of design inquiry.

To address this pedagogical gap, the study proposes a restructured educational model that integrates process-oriented making with theoretically embedded reflection. In such a model, practice operates as a cognitive method, prompting students to interrogate assumptions during the act of making, while theory serves as a dynamic framework tested and reshaped by the outcomes of practice. The “As for Me” project exemplifies this dual movement, where the unresolved nature of the work was not a limitation but a deliberate strategy to sustain critical openness. This pedagogical stance values the generative potential of incompleteness, failure, and iteration—conditions that align closely with the ethos of conceptual fashion.

At an institutional level, these findings point towards the value of “laboratory-style” educational environments that encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and foster experimental risk-taking. Within such environments, students can draw from sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and media studies to expand fashion's capacity for social critique. Rather than evaluating success solely through final product quality, assessment should prioritise the rigour of the research process, the clarity of conceptual framing, and

the capacity to connect design propositions to broader cultural and political questions. This aligns with progressive pedagogical perspectives that treat the classroom as a site of negotiation, contestation, and co-creation (Biggs & Büchler, 2008; Barrett & Bolt, 2010).

Looking forward, the methodological implications of this research extend beyond the Chinese context. As global fashion systems increasingly grapple with issues such as sustainability, digital dematerialisation, and posthuman identity politics, conceptual fashion offers a flexible, critical framework adaptable to emerging cultural and technological challenges. Future research might explore the integration of generative AI, extended reality (XR), and virtual prototyping into conceptual fashion methodologies—not as tools for efficiency, but as mediums for new forms of critical expression and cross-cultural dialogue. Comparative studies between Chinese, European, and Japanese conceptual fashion education could also provide further insight into how localised traditions and global influences interact within pedagogical and professional contexts.

In conclusion, this study positions conceptual fashion as both a research methodology and an educational strategy capable of transforming the role of fashion from a commercial discipline into a platform for cultural, political, and epistemological engagement. By embedding process-oriented, interdisciplinary, and critically reflexive approaches into both practice and pedagogy, the field can cultivate designers who operate not merely as makers of garments, but as constructors of meaning and agents of cultural change. The methodological trajectory demonstrated in this research—and embodied in the “As for Me” project—offers a scalable model for rethinking fashion as a continuously emergent, socially embedded, and intellectually rigorous discipline.

5.2.5 Pedagogic Translation: Mapping findings to the research question

RQ1. How can conceptual fashion be defined in contemporary China?

Phase-1 (Exploratory Foundations) established definition through practice by operationalising “proposition over product”. Rule-based concept laboratories and dematerialised, non-visual trials (e.g., sound, weight and tactility prompts) required students to articulate an idea before any commitment to garment typology or finish. These

probes foregrounded conceptual clarity and discursive intent as the primary design variables. Phase-2 (Advanced Critical Integration) translated those propositions into situated meaning via contextual briefs anchored in local culture and ethics (e.g., Chu cultural motifs, supply-chain narratives), asking students to stage, write and defend their claims in crits and public-facing displays. Across studio logs, material matrices and crit transcripts, the evidential pattern shows the definition consolidating along two additional axes—temporality (time-based articulation in process, display and reception) and situated cultural meaning (contextual discursivity). In sum, the definition advanced in Chapters 1–4 is not merely descriptive but operational: it specifies how conceptual fashion functions as a practice-led knowledge method within the Chinese context.

RQ2. How does practice function as knowledge in this thesis?

Phase-1 framed ideas as explicit constraints (materials, treatments, spatial interactions) and tested them iteratively across material and environmental conditions. This produced inspectable trails of decision-making (sketch–rule–test–revision) in the dossier (including *As for Me*), installation records and reflective writing. Phase-2 extended testing into communication, requiring students and the researcher to externalise propositions through exhibition, writing and oral defence; discourse was treated as part of the outcome rather than a post-hoc commentary. The warrant for knowledge thus rests on the documented chain constraints → tests → discourse, where methodical traceability and reflective synthesis convert tacit studio judgements into communicable claims. Within the PBR cycle, evidence is secured not only by the artefacts themselves but also by their argumentative framing, criteria of success/failure and the extent to which they generate critical dialogue.

RQ3. How can these insights be embedded pedagogically?

Phase-1 provided scaffolded exercises, rubrics and formative feedback designed to de-centre “finish” as the primary assessment criterion and to privilege clarity of proposition, appropriateness of constraint-setting and quality of reflection. Phase-2 integrated these foundations into complex projects that combine aesthetics, ethics and technology (with optional AI/XR components), culminating in displays and critical texts intended for external audiences. Student artefacts, assessment sheets and post-project reflections

indicate that the two-phase structure supports transfer from concept generation to cultural critique and public communication. Pedagogically, this amounts to a reproducible curriculum architecture in which conceptual fashion is taught as a research method: ideas are formalised, tested and debated; documentation and discourse are integral to assessment; and “making” is consistently coupled to critical positioning.

Together, the two-phase model demonstrates that the thesis’ conceptual definition is teachable and testable. By showing how propositions are formed, situated and defended, the pedagogy directly answers the research questions: it defines conceptual fashion through use; it evidences practice as knowledge via traceable warrants; and it translates these insights into higher-education practice capable of cultivating designers who operate across aesthetics, ethics and technology.

5.3 Limitations

This study has advanced the theoretical framework, practical exploration, and educational implications of conceptual fashion design in contemporary China, generating original insights through a practice-based research (PBR) approach. By positioning conceptual fashion not merely as an aesthetic style but as a critical, process-based methodology, the research has foregrounded its capacity to interrogate cultural, social, and pedagogical structures. Nonetheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. Identifying these constraints not only clarifies the boundaries of the present study but also opens pathways for future inquiry.

5.3.1 Sample Scope and Representativeness

The empirical dimension of this research relies primarily on the author’s creative practice—most notably the As for Me project—and a selective range of avant-garde case studies. While these have provided deep, situated insights into the trajectories, ideological currents, and expressive strategies of conceptual fashion in China, the sample size and diversity remain limited.

Regional cultural differences, diverse practice typologies, and variations in practitioners' educational backgrounds, career trajectories, and socio-economic contexts have not been comprehensively mapped. As a result, the conclusions drawn here may not fully represent the heterogeneous and evolving ecology of conceptual fashion across China's vast and culturally diverse regions.

Future research would benefit from expanding the case-study base to include designers from multiple provinces, minority ethnic traditions, and varied institutional contexts. Such an approach could construct a more comprehensive ecological map of conceptual fashion practice in China and test the transferability of the methodological frameworks proposed here to other cultural contexts.

5.3.2 Theoretical Systematisation and Pedagogical Application

The study draws upon deconstructionist theory and other critical frameworks to frame conceptual fashion as an “unfinished practice” marked by openness, fluidity, and resistance to institutional closure. While these perspectives effectively articulate the instability, non-linearity, and de-commodified nature of such practice, they also pose challenges in pedagogical contexts.

Students and early-career practitioners may misinterpret conceptual openness as a lack of methodological clarity or evaluative criteria, thereby hindering effective knowledge transmission and skill development. Moreover, the inherent resistance of deconstructionist frameworks to fixed structures can complicate the design of curricula, assessment methods, and teaching resources that require some degree of systematisation.

Within the PBR paradigm adopted here, integrating theory into practice without diminishing the generative, exploratory qualities of making remains a complex challenge. In China, where theoretical discourse on conceptual fashion is still emergent, practitioners often lack training in academic writing, and institutional mechanisms for theoretical evaluation remain underdeveloped. This has created a structural tension between theory

and practice, limiting knowledge reproduction and constraining meaningful engagement with international scholarship.

5.3.3 Interdisciplinary Collaboration Constraints

While the research affirms the value of interdisciplinary engagement—incorporating art theory, cultural critique, design research, and social commentary—the practical implementation of such collaborations encounters significant barriers. Cognitive and methodological differences between disciplines can impede sustained dialogue, and existing academic and industry infrastructures often lack formal mechanisms to support cross-disciplinary projects.

The highly commercialised structure of China's fashion industry further exacerbates these challenges, as institutional and financial resources tend to prioritise market-oriented design and brand promotion. Consequently, opportunities for experimental, non-product-driven conceptual work are often marginalised.

5.3.4 Structural and Institutional Barriers in Education

In many higher-education institutions, rigid separations between theoretical and practical courses limit the potential for genuine integration. Few programmes provide sustained support for experimental projects that defy conventional formats or combine material practice with reflective theoretical analysis. Moreover, assessment systems typically privilege technical proficiency and visual finish over conceptual depth and methodological innovation.

These structural limitations also influence how conceptual fashion is disseminated and archived. Academic evaluation still favours linear, text-heavy outputs—such as journal articles and conference papers—over hybrid, practice-led formats like multimedia installations, interactive platforms, or non-linear digital publications. This limits the

academic recognition of practice-based conceptual outcomes and inhibits the development of archival strategies suited to the ephemeral, open-ended nature of conceptual fashion.

5.3.5 Summary of Limitations

In sum, while this study has advanced the understanding of conceptual fashion in China's local context, its scope is constrained by:

- Limited sample diversity and cultural representativeness.
- The tension between open theoretical frameworks and the need for pedagogical structure.
- Underdeveloped institutional mechanisms for interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Structural barriers within higher education that marginalise open-ended, experimental practices.
- Dissemination and archiving systems unsuited to the documentation of conceptual, practice-led outcomes.

Recognising these constraints points directly to the areas where future research, educational reform, and institutional restructuring are most urgently needed.

5.4 Future Research Directions and Facilitating Discussion

While this thesis has made original contributions to the theorisation, practice, and pedagogy of conceptual fashion, it is intentionally positioned as an open-ended platform for further exploration rather than a definitive conclusion. The future of conceptual fashion—particularly in the Chinese context—will depend on its ability to engage dynamically with shifting cultural, technological, and socio-political paradigms while retaining its critical integrity.

5.4.1 Expanding Cultural and Regional Perspectives

Future studies should broaden their cultural and geographical scope to include a wider variety of regional aesthetics, ethnic traditions, and socio-economic contexts. Engaging

with indigenous design vocabularies and traditional craftsmanship could enrich the conceptual fashion paradigm, fostering novel hybrid forms that are both globally relevant and locally grounded.

Such diversification would also allow researchers to investigate how conceptual fashion negotiates the tension between globalised aesthetic languages and local cultural identities, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural specificity shapes conceptual practice.

5.4.2 Innovating Educational Frameworks

The integration of conceptual fashion into China's higher-education system remains underdeveloped. Curricula are still largely oriented towards technical proficiency and market responsiveness, offering limited opportunities for speculative, critical, and interdisciplinary work.

Future pedagogical innovation could include:

- Project-based learning models centred on problem-posing rather than solution-finding.
- Interdisciplinary workshops connecting fashion students with peers in sociology, philosophy, media, and technology.
- Assessment criteria that reward conceptual risk-taking, reflective documentation, and critical engagement over purely technical execution.

Such changes require institutional commitment to valuing process as much as product, and to legitimising open-ended experimentation as a valid form of academic achievement.

5.4.3 Deepening Interdisciplinary Collaboration

The future vitality of conceptual fashion will also depend on sustained interdisciplinary partnerships. This could take the form of dedicated research centres or collaborative platforms that bring together practitioners from fashion, visual arts, performance, digital media, and cultural studies.

For example, integrating digital projection, XR environments, and AI-mediated tools into conceptual fashion could open new methodological possibilities, further blurring the boundaries between the material and the immaterial, the body and its mediated image.

5.4.4 Rethinking Dissemination and Audience Engagement

Conventional dissemination formats—such as runway shows or academic papers—are often ill-suited to conveying the iterative, processual, and participatory nature of conceptual fashion. Future research should experiment with alternative modes of presentation, including immersive installations, virtual exhibitions, interactive online archives, and audience-participation projects.

Such strategies not only enhance accessibility and audience engagement but also position conceptual fashion as part of a broader cultural dialogue, reaching beyond the confines of academic or industry-specific audiences.

5.4.5 Addressing Structural Divides Between Theory and Practice

Finally, the integration of practice-as-research methodologies offers a critical avenue for overcoming the entrenched divide between theory and practice in both education and industry. Embedding reflective writing and critical inquiry directly into design processes can cultivate practitioners who are equally adept at conceptual framing and material execution, and who can contribute meaningfully to the global discourse on fashion as cultural practice.

5.4.6 Open Conclusion

This study positions conceptual fashion not as a marginal aesthetic experiment but as a critical, culturally embedded methodology with the capacity to redraw the epistemological, pedagogic and professional boundaries of fashion design. As for Me exemplifies this capacity by choreographing material manipulation, spatial installation and digital projection into a co-interpretative encounter among designer, audience and environment. In evidencing how propositions are framed as constraints, tested across materials and space,

and secured through documentation and discourse, the thesis shows how practice can function as knowledge rather than illustration.

From a personal standpoint, conceptual fashion is a living methodology: its value lies in generating questions rather than dictating answers, and in unsettling normative assumptions about body, identity and cultural participation. Its relevance is renewed through responsiveness to change, commitment to critique and a refusal to ossify into fixed forms. Accordingly, the implications for educators, practitioners and scholars are clear: future vitality depends on structural openness, interdisciplinary connectivity and cultural responsiveness, supported by assessment architectures that recognise proposition, process and public discourse—not finish alone.

In closing, the thesis articulates conceptual fashion as a practice-led knowledge method robust enough to guide making and pedagogy, yet deliberately open to revision. In China's fast-moving cultural economy, conditions likely to intensify the field include AI/XR-enabled dematerialisation, renewed attention to Daoist Wu Wei (minimal intervention, emergence) and Confucian Li (ritual propriety, relational ethics) as design heuristics, and the institutional consolidation of practice-as-research (PBR). These contributions are therefore offered as generative commitments, not fixed prescriptions—an invitation to re-test, adapt and extend the framework across regions, publics and platforms. The argument is intentionally provisional in the strongest sense: it sets criteria for further inquiry while acknowledging that conceptual fashion, as practiced and taught, remains a continuously emergent negotiation between ideas, materials and contexts.

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Video Link Appendix

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