Taking a look at fashion pictures

Hilary Clinton and Michelle Obama are probably two of the most famous women in the world. Although they are known for their political actions, there may be as many people who care about how the two First Ladies dress. Hilary Clinton usually appears in public in serious suits and looks like a strong-minded, astute politician. Michelle Obama, on the other hand, often looks more fashionable and popular. The first time I saw her on TV, the hot pink shiny sequined long dress impressed me, as it seemed that she was ready for the Oscars. Different dressing styles result in different public impressions. "You are what you wear" is true to world-famous celebrities, as well the general public.

This summer I did a three-month internship at the community magazine *DC Life* in Washington, DC. The magazine had fashion sections in each issue and sometimes published advertisement pictures of clothes, accessories and hair salons. In three months I had several opportunities to photograph fashion shows and fashion workers, which allowed me to improve my understanding of this industry. The best part of my internship was that I took part in a studio project, shooting advertisement photos for the magazine's clients. This was my first chance to work as a fashion photographer and take a peek at the fashion industry. It was fun, and based on what I saw in Washington, I found it quite interesting to compare American and Chinese fashion pictures and fashion concepts.

What kinds of girls go inside magazines?

It seems to me that nearly every Chinese girl wants pale skin color because people think white means beautiful. Perhaps American fashion editors may have the same idea about it. In local fashion shows and in studio projects, I met both white models and black models. However, interestingly, pictures that use white, blonde models are much more common than those that use black models. I reviewed the fashion content in back issues of *DC Life* and two other local magazines, *Washingtonian* and *Washington Life*. In their fashion pictures, over 90% of the models are white. According to the USA Census Bureau, by 2011, black people comprised 50.7% of the population in the District of Columbia and 19.8% in Virginia. In this sense, the percentage of black models in community magazines does not match the percentage of local black people.

Other facts about the models' appearance in the studied magazines include long hair, above-average height and an elegant body curve. Models with long hair are used more than models with short hair. Unnatural hair dye is hardly used. All models are slim and slender. The models usually have pleasant skin tone, either pale or tanned. Eye shadows and lip colors are used in some pictures to add color, but no dramatic makeup is used.

Another interesting thing is that the general stereotype of facial expression is emotionless. Among 158 pictures I studied, nineteen pictures have smiling models and in only two pictures the models laugh. Even in those smiling pictures, the smile is

usually restrained with no teeth showing. Most models keep cool expressions and do not often look at the camera. Although most pictures are shot from eye level, only half the models make eye contact. The body language also carries little emotion. Most models stand or sit, but in a way that looks calm, relaxed and confident.

When I shot the models in studio for *DC Life* magazine, I noticed that our art director did not tell the models to smile or look at the camera. Instead, she asked the models to relax and twist their bodies freely. It was like a solo dance of the model, and as photographer, I just kept clicking and the model never knew which moment I shot. However, when I received feedback from my editors, I found that clients preferred those pictures in which models had a little smile, neither too nervous to make the viewer uncomfortable nor too happy to distract the viewer's attention from the clothes.

What do the models wear?

Since I came to the U.S. from China in 2010, I have had the impression that American ladies have two keywords in their style of dress: simple and comfortable. T-shirts, jeans, sneakers and sports shorts are the clothes that I see most frequently on the streets. However, in magazines they rarely appear, especially non-gender specific tees and sports apparels. Blouses, dresses, skirts and high-heel pumps are mainstream. Only nine models wear pants in the 158 studied pictures, five jeans or jean shorts and one legging. Pure black and pure white seldom appear. Business casual shirt and jacket only appears once. Others all wear dresses or skirts and most of them are

colorful. It appears that colorful dresses and skirts are symbols of feminine beauty.

Although the magazines emphasize feminine beauty by using typical female clothes, they do not achieve this goal by exposing many body parts of the models. To my surprise, most models do not wear clothes that expose cleavage or too much bare skin. Among the 158 pictures, the models expose their cleavage in only thirteen pictures. Exposure of shoulders, waist, back and laps is also very rare.

Why do the local magazines choose not to visually present sexy bodies? My understanding is that all the three magazines focus their readers' group in local communities, and they want to express the idea that "you do not have to be super hot or super rich (unlike in *Elle* or *Vogue*, brands such as Chanel and LV do not appear in these magazines at all), but you can still be as lovely as the girls you see in our magazine." In this sense, they create female figures that look beautiful but still familiar and affable, and they wear clothes that are acceptable by most people and can be worn in real life, not those that can only be seen on the runway.

One interesting difference between American and Chinese fashion magazine is the way they present the clothes. American fashion gives viewers presentations while Chinese fashion teaches lessons. In the three magazines I reviewed, most fashion pictures only put models and clothes in a scene and show them to the readers with few comments. However, in a Chinese fashion magazine, it is highly possible that the editor will be patient enough to introduce the clothes one by one, telling their readers which top can go with which jeans, and why a gray scarf cannot match a green shirt.

How the photographers shoot the pictures:

In my experience of viewing fashion pictures and shooting them myself, I find the way photographers shoot fashion pictures is usually quite traditional. They use no super wide or super long lens, no dramatic lighting or high contrast, and no special background except studio, common rooms and outdoor places.

Most fashion pictures are shot from eye level. It does not cause distortion and the models look calm and relaxed. But this is not a rule carved in stone. I shot several local fashion shows in Washington, and when shooting the runway the angle was often lower and the focal length bigger. In this way I found the model looked confident, even arrogant, and strong-minded. The longer lens helped reach the subject and remove the background. But when I shot advertisement pictures in the studio, my editor made me stay on a ladder and shoot from a higher angle because from a high perspective the model appeared cute and friendly. Also, I used a relatively smaller focal length so that I could stay closer to the models in order to better communicate with them.

Generally the lighting is balanced and flattering, without hard shadows or hot spots. Usually the models' faces are bright and lit evenly. Slight over-exposure is sometimes preferred in order to make the skin tone pleasant and the pores invisible. Super big apertures create a shallow depth of field and blur out everything in the background. This is same in Chinese fashion magazines, but the difference is that in American fashion photography, shallow depth of field, evenly lit, slightly over-exposed pictures are merely one kind of the variety. In Chinese fashion

photography, this style is the mainstream.

From my experience, Chinese fashion magazines are divided into two main parties: American / European style vs. Japanese / Korean style. "American / European" means graceful, elegant, impressive, confident and strong-minded; while "Japanese / Korean" means cute, lovely, soft and warm. Affected much more by Japanese / Korean fashion, Chinese fashion pictures have the tendency to use young, petite models who have very good skin tone and straight long black hair, applying flat light and making the pictures slightly over-exposed. They also use extremely shallow depth of field to "melt" the background like melting butter and cream. In Chinese language, we call these kinds of pictures "sugar water" because they are sweet and do not carry much meaning except a romantic, comfortable feeling. "Sugar water" pictures are not a mainstream in American fashion magazines, and I believe this to some degree reveals aesthetic differences between western and eastern values. American people may prefer the bold, confident, sexy beauty. Chinese people usually like those "neighbor's daughter" girls who looks nice, kind, pure and clean.

In the three months I spent in Washington, I met and talked with many fashion workers. To my surprise, they were not always as "fashionable" in their daily lives as I thought before. The fashion photographer I met at a party looked just like a very common middle-aged man. I asked him "Phil, no offense, but you do not look like an artist." He laughed and asked me, "why should I look like one?" And my favorite street fashion photographer, Bill Cunningham, always wore a blue plain jacket. In a

documentary film about him and his career, Bill Cunningham even wore the blue jacket to some high-brow dinner party and photograph stars and celebrities.

In China, fashion is a trend, and people follow what is popular in the public eye. In the U.S, fashion is more like an attitude, and people decide how to dress themselves based on individual preferences and personalities. I would not say which is right and which is wrong, especially as in the contemporary world "fashion" is a concept shared by all people without limitation of ideology.

Personally, I prefer to treat fashion as the way one treats one's life. It reveals many things about you, such as what you cherish, what you treasure, what you pursue, what you like and dislike. By choosing what you wear today, you have decided how you will express yourself to everyone else. "You are what you wear", don't you think so?