落叶归根
(luòyèguīgēn)
Fallen Leaves

From a young age, I have been conditioned to equate my happiness with my consumption. Through pop culture, social media, advertisements, and trends, I have endured a ceaseless onslaught of messages telling me that more is better. I am not alone in this experience. Our entire society has been deceived by the modern consumerist belief that self-worth and happiness are defined by material goods.

The fashion industry is particularly notorious for perpetuating this mindset. Fast fashion uses cheap labor and mass production to push rapidly-changing trends. This modern business model has transformed the traditional two-season annual design cycle to a shocking 52-season cycle, causing trends to go in and out of style in as short as a week's time. An unfortunate byproduct of this model is the tremendous waste created in both the manufacturing process and post-consumption disposal.

Learning about the ugly side of fashion has presented me with a moral dilemma. I have been designing and sewing my own clothes since I was eight, and it has always been my dream to become a fashion designer. How can I reconcile this dream with the obvious ethical issues of the industry I wish to enter?

This past summer, I traveled through Singapore and Japan in search of an answer to this question. I interviewed various designers, brand-owners, and artisans to learn about how they incorporate sustainability into their businesses. I approached these interviews expecting to learn about the new technologies, innovations, materials, and methods that are helping the fashion industry become more sustainable. Perhaps I would learn about more efficient textile recycling processes, or less resource-intensive materials. Maybe I would learn how to implement closed-loop manufacturing, or how to accelerate the biodegradation of clothing.

In reality, what I learned was something completely unexpected. The most impactful interviews did not focus on anything *new.* Rather, they highlighted the *old*. What stood out most from all of my interviews was a strong emphasis on tradition and heritage. Many of the professionals I interviewed seek to highlight both traditional heritage and sustainability through their work. In fact, their sustainability goals are largely accomplished *through* their use of traditional practices.

I had never thought of looking to our past to solve our modern environmental issues, and it seems that mainstream sustainability initiatives have largely overlooked this option as well. In our post-industrialized society, "solutions" typically refer to innovations and technologies. Methods of the past are rarely considered because it is counterintuitive to find solutions in practices that were created before sustainability was an issue. But traditional crafts, with their natural materials and high quality

production, actually accomplish several of the goals that the sustainable fashion movement is striving for.

Furthermore, modern sustainable practices often focus on the sustainability of resources and quality but disregard the sustainability of *pace*. One of the most prominent issues of the fashion industry – and modern consumerism in general – is the speed at which goods are produced (and *over*-produced), consumed, and discarded; hence the term "fast fashion." Because traditional practices use slow, manual processes, it simply isn't possible for those practices to keep up with the fast-paced, trend-driven mass production that characterizes the fast fashion industry. As one interviewee put perfectly, "heritage craft itself is sustainable. The minute you make everything a slow process, it will be sustainable."

Individuals and businesses often consider sustainability with a very narrow definition. I was once guilty of this, as well. Learning about traditional crafts widened my perspective on what sustainable solutions can actually look like and on the extent to which sustainable values can actually be applied in practice. Unlike many modern sustainable practices, traditional practices address sustainability more holistically. If sustainability is what I value most as a designer, *these* are the types of solutions I want to explore.

This collection is a visual manifestation of my new perspective. I chose to highlight the two sustainable approaches that were most salient to me during this project: traditional methods and modern methods. The collection explores my questions about how each perspective will influence the fashion industry. Will larger companies follow the lead of small brands and look to the past for solutions? Would it be better to turn completely to methods of the past, or continue looking to future innovations? Can a balance between traditional craft and modern production be struck, or are the two bound to clash?

Additionally, this idea of tradition versus innovation mirrors the idea of nature versus humans. I think of nature and the pre-industrialized state of the environment as Earth's "heritage"; I think of modern human society and its creations as "innovation." Similarly, my questions about how traditional and modern practices will interact perfectly parallel my questions about how nature and humans will interact. Again, can the two co-exist or are they bound to clash?

These concepts are reflected by the shapes and forms of the garments in this collection. Stiffness and hard edges represent modernity and humans; softness and organic shapes represent tradition and nature. These opposing textiles interact in different ways: sometimes there is a clear divide between the two, sometimes they seamlessly blend into one another, and sometimes one appears to take over the other. These different types of convergences provide a visual representation of my questions about how the two sides of modern and tradition, humans and nature, can and will interact.

The collection is called "落叶归根", "Fallen Leaves", which is named after a Chinese idiom that translates as: "fallen leaves return to their roots." I chose this idiom for three reasons. First, by

using heritage crafts and highlighting the work of traditional artisans, the professionals I interviewed are essentially facilitating a return to their own roots through fashion. Second, the fallen leaves of this idiom represent the state of the fashion industry. While the fashion industry is by no means dying in the conventional sense, I do believe it is dying in a more profound sense: if we are not able to sustain the environment, the fashion industry will no longer be able to sustain itself. Without resources and materials to create clothing, the fashion industry loses its legs. But just as fallen leaves returning to their roots can nourish the tree and invigorate new life, fashion's return to its past could facilitate a rebirth of that industry. Third, leaves are an important motif in Japanese tradition. Because evergreen trees stay green and unchanging all year, their leaves are representative of longevity. This motif fits perfectly, as the very purpose of environmental sustainability is to ensure the longevity of our Earth. In fact, this very motif appears in the fabric of one of the pieces in this collection.

This tribute to Japanese culture is also a nod to the fact that all of the fabric used for this project was sourced in Japan during my travels. Some scraps were gifted to me by an obi and kimono artisan who I interviewed in Kyoto. I acquired vintage kimonos from a flea market in Kyoto. I also bought remnant fabrics from a natural dyes artisan who I interviewed in Fukuoka. By avoiding brand new fabrics, I hope to highlight the beauty of these traditional crafts while minimizing my environmental impact.

Though this collection puts the spotlight on traditional methods as a mode of sustainability, its larger theme is open-mindedness. Its purpose is not to present one singular solution, mindset, or practice. Rather, my collection is an open-ended question about the possibilities of what sustainability entails. In reality, sustainability is not a one-size-fits-all model. By constraining ourselves to a narrow definition of sustainability, we close off the very possibilities that the movement seeks to find. By opening our minds to the various forms that sustainability can take, we welcome more solutions than ever before.

But the fact is that environmental issues did not exist back then *because* the manufacturing processes we used did not directly induce environmental destruction. Thus, in order to find solutions, we must look to a time when our processes healthily co-existed with the environment.

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