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Bruno Zhu

My mother visited Selfridges for the first time in 2010. She was wearing skinny jeans, the low-rise kind that had taken the world by storm several years earlier. Yet by the end of the 2000s, the waistband had shifted. Could that have been a consequence of the global financial crisis? Maybe...

In the 1920s, economists speculated a connection between hemlines and the economy – the hemline index – suggesting that skirt lengths seemed to shorten in prosperous times, and lengthen during bad times. Could we flip the measuring tape and study low-rise jeans the same way? Was showing our love handles representative of free market optimism, or another kind of surplus? Was showing butt crack a response to the dot-com crash, or a trickle-down effect of it? These questions wouldn't interest my mother. Today, her only remark would be how unflattering low-rise jeans were. As a slender, petite Chinese woman, they highlighted her flat ass, her bony hips and her thigh gap. They made her look wrapped dry. But to her surprise, Londoners at the time appeared to have escaped constrictive denim. Unbeknownst to her, something had been in the air. A year prior, Phoebe Philo released a line of plain, crisp clothes for the modern woman at Céline. The industry would coin it an era-defining wardrobe reset: clothing with a capital C, harsh lines, quiet. These were clothes for women who *think*. They were garbs for sensual sapiosexuals.

I lectured my mother on khaki's intellectual worth, but she wasn't having it. To be *in* the latest fashion was sounding shockingly tedious. Shocking, for switching skin-tight to boxy. Tedious, for wearing primly tailored burlap. High-end luxury made more sense in the shape of bags because leather goods were more legible to her. They communicated social standing in a way that a black pony-hair coat simply could not. But my mother wasn't a blind follower either. When her friends showed off their Louis Vuitton Monogram bags, she bought a Mahina leather Hobo. When they were talking about Prada, she stepped into Miu Miu. Her unease to accept trends shared amongst the Chinese community in Portugal reflected her prejudice against her own kind. To follow them would be admitting her place amongst the grifters and opportunists. She saw herself as rather elevated and self-made. She was *different*, an independent thinker, which was why she was drawn to the bulbous clasp of a Chloé Elsie bag. Buying that bag would only enhance her elegance and discretion. I told her that Phoebe Philo used to design for that brand. She looked confused. Who was Phoebe? What was a Philo?

We strolled down Bond Street and sat at a Pret A Manger. She was giddy with her new purchase. In excitement, I went through my bag and gave her a small Dior pendant encrusted with crystals. I found it in a charity shop dangling from a long chunky silver chain. She was bewildered. She wanted to be grateful, but her disgust was evident. 'Why would you buy this?' she blurted out. She was disappointed, almost offended that I had bought a knock off. And so, I had inadvertently burst the bubble of frivolity by misusing my allowance. My mistake had tarnished this moment after decades of her hard work. I quickly tried to pull us back to the joy from seconds ago. I told her to stand up and passed the chain through her belt loops.

The chain was now a belt. The pendant dangled from her right hip. 'Look at that, isn't it fun?' I said. She looked down, first sceptically, then amused. She ran her fingers through it and smiled. Was she understanding how fashion is always styled and not made? Was she realising how glamour always trumps prestige? Because for us, sons and daughters of the global south *illiterati*, the highest form of luxury is to contend with the silliness of our own aspirations. When we were about to leave, she tucked her sweater in and left her jacket unbuttoned. We walked through Piccadilly, crystals shimmering with her every step.