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Streetwear in China: hip-hop influence and form of expression for the Chinese youth

Streetwear in China has colorfully and poetically blossomed among gen Z with the help of hip-hop culture, national pride and a need for individual expression. US [skate culture](#) plays an important role in this movement, making streetwear and skatewear more mainstream in China.

Social media keeps Chinese youth in tune to emerging trends and cultures. Similar to the early origins of streetwear in the US, kids find brands and tap into the community they create. There is a sense of discovery and ownership resonates with teens who are forming an identity.

Thanks to popular reality shows related to [Chinese rap culture](#), street fashion went from underground into the mass market. First, *The Rap of China* launched in 2017, then the *Street dance of China* has followed the hype, and [The new rap of China](#) in 2020. The trend is still continuing, attracting more and more attention. These shows inspire Chinese consumers to talk about streetwear culture and fashion, making the market more and more attractive.

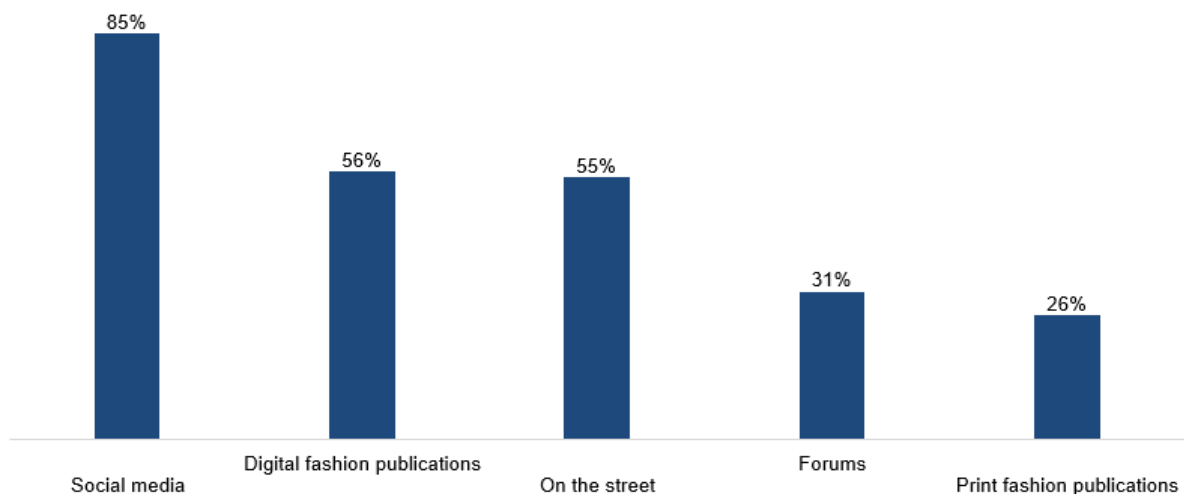


Source: Heuritech, Street Dance of China, Season 3

Millennials and Gen Z are the key consumers in the streetwear market in China

As luxury brands adapt to the tastes of newer generations, the fastest route to youth culture has been through strategic partnerships with [streetwear](#) brands in China. [Streetwear](#)-obsessed [Chinese millennials](#) and Generation Z have become a significant focus for luxury labels. The global streetwear craze has outsize influence in China, where Gen Z and Millennial consumers make 42% of luxury purchases.

Top sources of streetwear inspiration for Chinese consumers
2019



Data Source: Hypebeast, Top sources of streetwear inspiration for Chinese consumers

The savviest luxury streetwear collaborations leverage not only the popularity of global streetwear like Off-White in China, but also the influence of young local celebrities. Rimowa, for example, used [Chinese KOLs](#) to drive social hype for the Off-White collaboration. Millennial actor Zhu Yilong and members of [Chinese Gen Z pop idol groups](#) modeled with their suitcases. Additionally, youth in China are getting the streetwear inspiration from social networks, such as TikTok.

Fashion icons and rappers are the key KOLs of streetwear in China

Streetwear brands in China attract relatively few KOLs. The most popular are rappers. They often show up to interviews and events wearing distinctive and high-profile clothes. As Chinese people pay a lot of attention to their music and shows, they are at the same time quite influenced by this new fashion. From that perspective, the Rap of China is incredibly significant to brands. It offers free marketing and promotion as well as product placement for their wares.

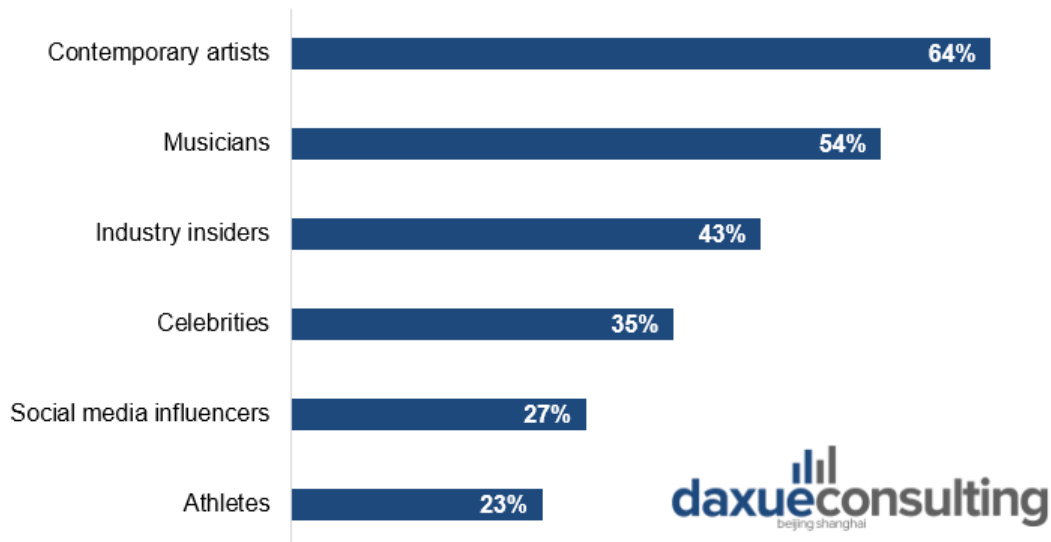


Source: Sina Fashion, Kris Wu in Rap of China

The tendency to copy the style of popular musicians some people call the “Chris Wu effect” in China. He is one of the most famous singers and actors in China with a unique personality. He is also one of four judges on the show alongside Wilber Pan, popular Chang Chen-Yue and MC HotDog. Chris Wu’s immense popularity among female consumers piqued the curiosity of the Supreme brand, which he often wore on the show. Some Chinese stars such as [Edison Chen and](#)

[Shawn Yue](#) are also leading the trend. Edison Chen even has its own brand, named CDC.

Which figures Chinese consumers consider the most credible in streetwear 2019



Data Source: Hypebeast, Which figures Chinese consumers consider the most credible in streetwear

How streetwear brands in China differ from other countries

Many [fashion brands in China](#) have benefited from the popularity of street trends. T-shirts with seemingly rebellious slogans which, in fact, have no connotations are already some of the specialties of the Chinese streetwear brands. At the same time, the so-called "[jelly generation](#)", which is a new breed of young artists, are finding inspiration in childhood imagery and nostalgia marketing. It made Chinese streetwear brands adapt eccentric details in their collections.

For instance, Chinese brand THETHING founded by Zheng Yi and Zheng Zhu launched collaborations with artists, graffiti writers and painters. Their goal was to create a label that would allow people to "express individual beauty and personality".



Source: Cool Hunting, *THETHING* Chinese streetwear brand

Korean influence in China's streetwear trends

Unlike Chinese streetwear, which gets inspiration from hip-hop, Korean street style skyrocketed since the [rise of K-pop](#). Female and male K-pop groups are encouraging fans to admire and draw inspiration from streetwear. More revealing clothing such as miniskirts and short shorts is extremely popular in Korean streetwear. Thanks to the beauty standard of long, slender legs, such clothing has become popular in China as well.



Source: Lychee, Korean streetwear styles have also influenced Chinese streetwear trends

Japanese influence in China's streetwear trends

Japan's streetwear draws inspiration from Anime and Manga, and can be seen as the most fantastical among east Asian fashion. Complete with ribbins, bows and bouncy curls, this child-like fashion is a continuous source of nostalgia. In contrast to Korea's mini-skirts, Japanese skirts are very voluminous and normally paired with petticoats, and the tops As many Chinese also grew up watching Japanese anime, this fashion certainly has its share of influence in China's streetwear market.



Source: Lychee, Japanese streetwear style "Lolita"

Chinese streetwear trends

There is one common denominator when it comes to the Chinese street style, and that is brand names. Oftentimes, Chinese streetwear is complete with designer brands and logos plastered all over the outfits.



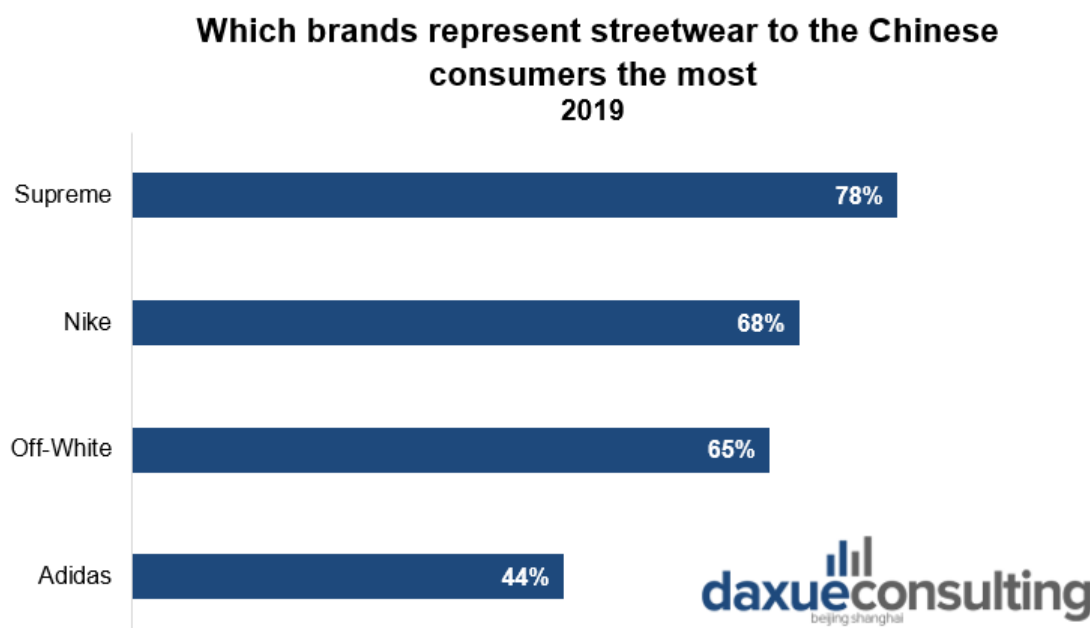
Source: Guest of a Guest, Chinese streetstyle

Luxury segment of the streetwear market in China

In addition to Chinese celebrities, brands are also tapping into the power of local digital streetwear platforms. For example, 18.6% of luxury fashion brands posted promotions in partnership with China's most popular streetwear platform Yoho!. Montblanc went a step further with a full-fledged Yoho! product collaboration.

Competition between foreign and domestic streetwear brands in China

Chinese millennials embrace Supreme



Data Source: Hypebeast, Which brands represent streetwear to the Chinese consumers the most

Supreme is a popular American streetwear brand, with only 12 stores worldwide. The Rap of China brought about an explosion of hip-hop culture in China, as well as popularity of Supreme. Despite the government's attempt to bad hip-hop, the culture and fashion still thrive. Along with it, the [streetwear grail](#), Supreme. Supreme has no physical or online store in China. The nearest Supreme store is in Japan, so fans of the brand use resellers. Chinese millennials are the key consumer group for Supreme in China.

Local Chinese streetwear brands use authenticity to attract consumers

Authenticity will always remain key to the Chinese consumers. Therefore, non-Chinese brands need to find the right partners to work with. From a business perspective, China is a whole different market with today's heavy import tax so the right partner can help navigate the culture along with the business side.

Li Ning (李宁): a home-grown sports brand competing with Nike and Adidas in streetwear in China

[Li Ning is a Chinese sportswear brand](#) established by the world-class Chinese athlete Mr Li Ning in 1990. Embracing the current wave of national pride, the brand is leading among streetwear brands in China. The brand positions itself as having a “modern and worldwide vision of Chinese legacy, educated by way of life of the road and made conceivable by the leap forward advancements of Li-Ning”.

The Li Ning brand made an appearance at New York Fashion Week in 2018. It demonstrates the capacity to incorporate both Chinese with Western styles. The brand maintains high quality standard of material and texture, which is a demonstration of the quality of [Chinese assembling](#).



Source: Li Ning, Premium collection

What is the next stage for the streetwear market in China?

2017 was an important year for Chinese streetwear. Thanks to reality shows, mainstream consumers suddenly took interest in it. “It quickly took off when a lot of people started selling their own streetwear brands via WeChat and targeting people from third or fourth-tier cities in China,” said [Jiang Yisen](#), co-founder of the Chinese streetwear e-commerce app Wargo. After the death of self-made WeChat brands, Taobao became the dominant platform for the streetwear brands in China.

This shift toward authenticity and quality design is vital to understanding how the streetwear market in China is shifting. Many streetwear brands walk a fine line between knocking off and playing off existing icons or brands. “A knock-off is sticking a Mickey Mouse to your shirt, while a play-off is tribute to Kate Moss” – said Xiaozhu, the founder of the brand Graf. As the streetwear audience in China has become savvier about [counterfeits](#), they’ve started to crave authentic brands.

As interest in streetwear continues to grow, it offers opportunities for the streetwear brands in China. Although the spirit of streetwear didn’t originate in the East, the growth of it will likely continue to thrive.