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Transnational Flow of Chinese and UK Fashion Discourse: Analyses of Digital Platforms and Online Shopping in China

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Abstract

This study critically examines, on the one hand, how digital online shopping sites in China, mainly Taobao and Jingdong, have presented UK fashion to the Chinese market. Given the prevailing trend of online shopping for clothing in China, the transnational flow of UK fashion to China is largely monopolized and manipulated by these digital giants. Illustrated in this paper is China's increasing power to shape and articulate UK/British fashion discourse through various retailers as "cultural translators" in the domestic market, and however, the translation was largely made to sell "counterfeit UK fashion," resulting in a phenomenon of culture piracy. On the other hand, on the international market,

to reflect China's "going out strategy," literally these digital online shopping sites also collaborate with UK fashion designers to promote UK fashion in and outside China. The paper discusses the implications for China's extension of soft power over the fashion industry within and outside China.

KEYWORDS: fashion discourse, transnational flow, digital platform, online shopping, cultural translators

Digital technologies and fashion

Over the past two decades, digital platforms have functioned as interconnections among products, processes, and services (Bharadwaj et al. 2013), which has transformed the fashion and apparel industry regarding its conception of time and space (Crewe 2013). The new online fashion trade and transactions are steered by the use of "big data" and virtual infrastructures, resulting in speedy price comparisons, instantaneous responses and changes in virtual store layouts, and a shift toward "test and repeat" sourcing models (Wood et al. 2020). These online models, however, have begun to reshape the traditional global fashion industrial model, which relies heavily on merchandizing, distribution, and physical retailing (Dai 2020).

When "British fashion" is sold on new digital platforms in China, how has United Kingdom (UK) fashion discourse been localized—or sometimes culturally pirated—and then reconstructed by Chinese online sellers and retailers, mainly on the Taobao Marketplace and *Jingdong* (JD) platforms? This paper argues that, because there is limited exposure to physical UK stores in China, Chinese consumers rely heavily on these platforms, their affiliated digital partners, and social media. Therefore, Chinese consumers are exposed to highly localized UK fashion discourse and illustrations, which are largely framed by the Chinese platforms, retailers, and advertisers, but not their British counterparts. In considering fashion from a global perspective, this paper describes a case about China's domination over fashion discourse. At the industry level, a phenomenon of culture piracy by online retailers is observed, and it is a process in which UK fashion culture and discourse in China is re-articulated and re-interpreted to serve the purpose of driving China's domestic consumption, and mainly for selling the non-British-made Chinese clothing. At the global level, China's fashion platforms are actively "reaching out" to the UK market to partake in the formation of global and UK discourse. The problem is that the increasing power of China to define the domestic and international discourse of fashion means that UK fashion brands are bereft of the power to articulate their own discourse and their own voices.

The fashion trade in China and the UK

In the past two decades, the economic boom in China has been accompanied by an expanding dynamic consumer market with increasingly higher consumer purchasing power. The emergent social stratification in China and the rise of the middle and upper classes have also transformed from survival-oriented consumption to development-oriented consumption (Zhang 2017).

However, evidence (Xu et al. 2018) suggests that the abrupt burgeoning of consumer power which increases in tandem with the demand for fashion might result in a distorted conception (i.e., deception) of fashion values. Because of the rapid increase in wealth in China, the local market has few choices for the newly rich. Without direct avenues to purchase most high-end fashion items, thousands of Chinese tourists flock to Europe to buy fashion. Domestically, online shopping on Amazon (i.e., the UK or the US) or other international fashion portals is prohibited. Thus, desirous and acquisitive Chinese consumers could only rely on their own online retail markets (Jinyevu and Mwashu 2014).

In 2019, 74.8% of China's shopping was online, and China's total online retail sales reached 11,769 RMB, an increase of 10% annually (CIW Team 2021). Among shopping platforms, Alibaba and JD are now the market leaders. These platforms are the focus of the analysis conducted in this study. Alibaba, which is the biggest player in China, is comparable in size to Amazon. Under the umbrella of Alibaba, Taobao Marketplace and TMall comprise 55.9% of the market share in China (Next Ren 2020). Taobao Marketplace, an online customer-to-customer (C2C) commerce, which is similar to eBay, is the largest platform for retailing and reselling products. As of March 2020, its gross volume of merchandise was 3.39 trillion RMB (Statistia.com 2021a). In addition to selling made-in-China products, Taobao Global helps sellers source branded foreign merchandise overseas, among which the most profitable businesses are luxury fashion and beauty products (Zhang 2017). TMall, which is also owned by Alibaba, is a separate business-to-customer (B2C) online platform with a gross volume of merchandise amounting to 3.2 trillion RMB in March 2020 (Statistia.com 2021b). TMall Global is the biggest cross-border e-commerce platform in China. This platform offers Chinese consumers over 20,000 overseas brands and over 4000 product categories from 77 countries and regions (China Internet Watch 2020a). Alibaba's major competitor in China is JD, and JD shares 16.7% of China's online retail market (Next Ren 2020). It also manages its cross-border e-commerce operation through JD Worldwide. Launched in April 2015, JD Worldwide supports international merchants entering the Chinese market without a physical presence in China. JD also facilitates Chinese customers shopping for products worldwide (China Internet Watch 2020b). In mid-2016, JD

launched British Mall, a dedicated shopping channel specializing in British labels (Fashion Network 2016).

(Online) cultural translation

How and by what means has the British fashion discourse been constructed and disseminated? What do average Chinese consumers learn about UK fashion and what are the discourses? In China, face-to-face encounters with retail shopping have become unpopular in China and Chinese consumers largely purchase fashion, including British fashion, online. However, in China, global and British fashion discourses are blocked by the Great Firewall so that the selling of UK fashion has to count on China's domestic digital shopping platforms. Then the UK fashion discourse in China is largely constructed within the predominant online platforms, mainly Taobao marketplace and JD, which position themselves as direct-to-consumer (DTC) model platforms in China, and which include the role of relaying UK fashion to Chinese consumers. Owing to the influence on these Chinese fashion "representatives," these online channels overshadow original British fashion, UK fashion sellers, and contemporary British designers.

The problem concerns the cultural translation of Western, including British, fashion taste and esthetics, which drives the consumption of the fashion market in China (Cheang and Kramer 2017). In this case, cultural translation is in the hands of retailers and sellers on Taobao Marketplace and JD. If there were no direct UK-brand retail channel and if the formation of UK fashion discourse in China were hijacked by local sellers, cultural translation would be lost, inaccurate, discounted, or not reflect the spirit of UK designers. These local sellers and retailers offer a mix of UK-imitated, locally made fashion, and made-in-China fashion for export to the UK. In addition to fake brands, the discourse constructed by dishonest sellers in the selling, packaging, and counterfeiting process is often partial, misleading, stereotypical and simplified. Although it may not be fair to say that the discounted cultural translation of British fashion is completely fictitious, in this process, at least, the cultural discourse of British fashion is just used to sell mostly non-British China-made fashion or counterfeit UK fashion, a phenomenon of culture piracy that will be illustrated in this article.

Demise of retail shopping and the rising importance of fashion discourse online

The prevalence of discounted cultural translations of fashion online has been precipitated by the gradual demise of the fashion retail business in China. To a certain extent the impasse in retail sales and the reduced number of retail points have "pushed" customers to turn to vibrant

online markets that sometimes offer extra services (e.g., price comparisons) and discounts, which discourage Chinese consumers from buying in physical stores. In addition, the “pull” factor is evident in the changing habits of the millennium generation. Online shopping apps now include avoidances to curtail retail shopping. When Chinese consumers choose products in a physical store, they simply go to the Taobao platform, either to scan the barcode of the product or to take a photo of their selected item. On these shopping apps, the price and details of the selected item and the sellers of the same products as well as similar products are displayed. Consumers easily identify an online store or seller that lists a lower or discounted price of the same products, and finally choose to purchase the items online. Although physical stores of some fashion brands still exist, they primarily serve as experiential sites for consumers to “look-and-feel” the product.

Since the mid-2010s, many international brands started to close their retail shops and reappear as online stores on Taobao or JD. One of the most prominent UK representatives in China was Marks & Spencer, which decided to close its retail shops and relocate its business online in 2016 (Rapp 2018). My interview with a former editor of *Cosmopolitan* (Chinese edition) (Interview on January 21, 2021), who now operates a WeChat public account, revealed that major international fashion brands in China now must rely on Chinese key opinion leaders to promote their products and reach local consumers. Then, what has become more important is the fashion discourse available on online shopping sites and social media that affects consumers’ choices. However, eventually, consumers are all diverted to Taobao and JD to make purchases, including both domestic as well as foreign fashion in China.

Cultural translators at work

In practice, the *bona fide* producers of discourse on Taobao and JD are the retailers, sellers, and shops on these platforms. These “agents” produce descriptions of fashion, combined with visual images of the products, and define the fashion discourse. These agents constitute a network of wholesalers of foreign fashion products that are made in China, self-imported international clothing, and *shanzhai* Western fashion (i.e., fake brands or “knock-offs”). In other words, the online platform market has seamlessly integrated both the formal and informal fashion economies in China. In these economies, sellers and retailers serve as agents, key opinion leaders, or cultural translators who channel relevant information to consumers, not just to promote sales, but to shape their choices (Lonergan, Patterson, and Lichrou 2018; Rocamora 2018) and possibly the esthetics and fashion discourse for consumers (e.g., Molloy and Larner 2010), which, according to Entwistle (2006), is a process of the “qualification and mediation of fashion clothing” by buyers or capitalists who maneuver the chain of distribution. For

example, on Taobao Marketplace, the purchasing agents are *daigou* (i.e., petite business ladies) who help consumers acquire British fashion in the UK. In this process, first, these agents rationalize their choices of brands and post them on the platform, and secondly, they create and use fashion discourse to attract consumers to buy their pre-selected fashions. The problem here is not so much about Chinese cultural translators culturally interpreting the UK fashion discourse, which, in foreign trade, can be a natural process of market localization. It is more about constructing such discourse for selling mostly counterfeit UK fashion in the process of culture piracy, and under China's stringent Internet proxy control, no UK fashion discourse created outside the mainland China or by UK designers could enter into China as a countering "mainlandized" discourse or aesthetics.

The process of culture piracy

To further explicate such (China-) mainlandized esthetics and discourse by cultural translators, the texts and images constructed on Taobao Marketplace and JD are examined. A simple keyword search for "British fashion" (*yinglun shizhuang* in Chinese) on the general page of Taobao in January 2021 yielded 240 UK fashion items, including those displayed by individual sellers, the Taobao store, TMall, and second-hand UK clothing. The items shown included clothing, shoes, accessories, cosmetic products, and so forth. The same search in JD yielded more than 100 items. These have not included the authentic UK fashion brands that are sold on the official site of global retail shops.

The focus here is the process of disguise. There are Chinese purchasing agents who have indirectly claimed that they are privileged to have special channels for purchasing British fashion in the UK on the Taobao and JD platforms. These have been described as cultural translators through which Chinese customers acquire UK fashion information and products. While recognizing that such cultural mediation involves multiple levels and parties (e.g., Molloy and Lerner 2010), in the case of China the protected domestic online platforms (without the presence of international fashion platforms) results in such interactions only taking place among Chinese cultural translators.

There are, however, a few retailers selling authentic UK products. Their items sold are usually as expensive as those sold in the UK and elsewhere in the world. Based on my informal conversation with a woman who was a purchasing agent in London (interview online on January 15, 2021), this informal online economy is usually based on the choices of agents' collaborators in the UK. First, she identified sale or discounted items, and then the agents posted the items on Taobao Marketplace and waited for sales orders before the agents' collaborators actually purchased the items. However, what is represented as "hot"

UK fashion depends on the personal choices and networks of these Chinese agents.

However, most agents are not the type of cultural translators who sell authentic UK goods. They are those who sell made-in-China fashion or counterfeit UK fashion in the names of British fashion experts. This is where culture piracy takes place, in that Chinese retailers and distributors selectively adopt, phrase and accent certain elements of UK fashion to match the assumed imaginations of consumers over UK fashion and the features and attributes of the locally made Chinese fashion items. The explicit and yet illicit intent is to sell domestic fashion, but these cultural translators have to “borrow” the fame of UK fashion so that the Chinese items look “cool.” In other words, fashion discourse has become a rhetoric technique to sell counterfeit UK fashion. However, the argument made about culture piracy does not mean that UK fashion discourse is discredited and weakened. On the contrary, UK fashion is developed into a fashion style that appeals to local consumers. A customer (t**2) posted his selfies with the “UK fashion” purchased and said “This shop [that sells UK fashion] soon becomes my wardrobe.... [Now] I love UK vintage fashion....” Another customer (t**4) who bought a pair of “UK style” shoes said “the contour of the shoes is good. It is very comfortable... [As for] the fabric, it is made of genuine leather and very durable...” In fact, the discourse constructed helps to create a positive on British fashion style. This draws more sales of counterfeit UK fashion, and possibly more from Taobao Global in which British brands sell their own fashion. It is just that this discourse does not originate from British designers and brands but falls into the realm of Chinese cultural translators. This aligns with the Chinese authorities’ agenda which retains the power of creating discourse for itself within China.

The techniques of articulation

Establishing their legitimacy for their constructed UK fashion discourse, these cultural translators rationalize their connection to UK fashion and fashion industry in various ways. Many retailers claim to have unofficial access to UK fashion wholesalers or manufacturers. Based on the price, quality, and the specific style shown, it is obvious that these “UK goods” are not made in the UK. These retailers would not deny that these “UK products” are made in China, but they discreetly suggest that they are given access to these products (i.e., from China’s factories that export UK fashion) to sell them online. In a few cases, the legal contravention of patented brands may take place. One agent may blatantly display a fashion item with the brand’s tag (e.g., French Connection), while another blurs the brand tag just enough that the customers think they recognize the brand (e.g., Superdry). Yet, such cases of blatant piracy are not too many because they violate the rules of the platforms, which in

fact publicly announce that they attempt to ban goods that infringe copyright. In fact, the majority of retailers who serve as “British agents” avoid illegal advertising by using simple tactics. Some shops make reference to British fashion magazines, such as British or local versions of *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Using the authentic covers of these magazines, the agents imply that their fashion items are made for the UK market in China. These can be conceived as visual tactics that mimic UK discourse to attract buyers. In addition to using visual tactics, some agents use linguistic tactics to obscure the origin and authenticity of the brands they sell. Clothing advertised as “men’s polo jacket” misdirects users. A false image is created by advertising well-known brands, such as Ralph Lauren polo t-shirts. Another common tactic is having a label that resembles British brands. British brands may be counterfeited by purposely misspelling words (e.g., Reiss spelled as Reiss), using an element of an existing brand (Wills instead of Jack Wills), or creating new names that seem to resemble British brands (e.g., chou chou).

The constructed fashion discourse

The Spring season of Korean-style local made fashion with more than 4000 items in March 2021 on Taobao Marketplace is chosen for illustrating this overt cultural piracy of UK fashion and the construction of the discourse: such clothing is said to be “UK fashion style of Korean fashion” (for example, items sold from the shop Hang Hang that sells Korean Dongdaemon female “UK style shiny leather” shoes). This UK-cum-Korean fashion hype is created simply because Korean fashion is known for its modishness among young people, but which lack a kind of formality and elegance for work. Then UK fashion can precisely fill the gap. Taobao retailers then tell the Chinese buyers that they are selling Korean suits for men and trench coats for women, but such fashion carries the “British style” in a flagrant manner.

To summarize the UK fashion discourse observed, it is an amalgamation of Western universal values that ironically could not be openly discussed in China. As said earlier, universal values such as love and happiness are manifested in the discourse, but the idea of autonomy, democracy and freedom embedded in the Western version of cosmopolitanism are more expressed in visual images (Cheah 2006). Based on the persona of the model and where the photos and video were shot, such fashion represents an aspiration that is beyond what most Chinese can experience inside China. In other words, the constructed UK fashion has become an easy takeaway stylishness that China or the Chinese lack. Many Chinese models in “British fashion” are filmed along streets with classic Western architecture that are in fact colonial mansions that were erected in former colonial cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Wuhan. Such representation does not involve any complicated construction of

narratives because many of these agents come from small towns—sometimes named as Taobao villages—where villagers-turned-sellers are not of high educational level, remote from big cities and are unlikely to have traveled to the UK before. Bricks and mortar of colonial architecture then are readily accessible icons to make the cultural associations.

Background music also synchronizes with the theme of the images to provide more imagination about Western culture. For example, pop song “No Frauds” (2017), performed by New York based Spanish born rapper Nicki Minaj, Canadian rapper Drake and American rapper Lil Wayne, is the background sound of the catwalk video, that fully reflects the potpourri of Western cultures, and ironically, the original music video of “No Frauds” has images of Nicki dancing along the River Thames.

When models are featured in non-urban settings, open sky with wide horizons, seaside and white beaches (resembling Dorset beaches), and rocky and windy coastlines are common images. They are usually conceived of and disguised as picturesque scenes in Europe avoiding any images that are related to a Chinese setting. The way in which models gaze at the far horizon of the sea can somewhat be interpreted as their desire for moving out of their existing boundaries. This interpretation is well supported by videos showing models waiting at an airport (to travel out of China) and checking in at hotels (with Western abstract paintings on the wall). These represent a mobile generation who are ready to travel away from China to taste the sense of Western cosmopolitanism, the underlying message of which is that product consumption is a passport to global citizenship (Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price 2008). It may not necessarily mean that Chinese look up to British culture as the latter appears more superior, but that by the very vernacular consumption of fashion, these young buyers can partake in and be imbued with the universal values of freedom, self-determination and autonomy. At this point, such cosmopolitanism, for Chinese with consumption power and elite presence (Tyfield and Urry 2010), is a reconciliation between the global (or Western) values with the local cultures (Chong 2020). The interpretation may be that such cosmopolitanism can be achieved by acquiring UK fashion. While these customers could not enjoy the “Western” form of democracy, at least they can articulate a status of “in-between” traditional values and new values, under a nation with increasing wealth but strong control (Xu and Wu 2019). In a Zhejiang online shop selling a “UK style” scarf on Taobao, there is an explicit discourse manifested by an English-written “manifesto” put adjacent to the scarf. The slogan is “I will persist. I will win.” The values it articulates include “happiness, learning, love,” and other global values that customers can attain should they purchase this brand *Weideng Aimashi*, which is a name combining the Chinese translation of Louis Vuitton and Hermès.

China's "going out" project

Apart from dominating the domestic market and discourse, Alibaba and JD are active in the international scene to promote the Chinese fashion market. Globally they seek a closer collaboration with UK fashion brands. As early as 2017, JD supported the BFC/Vogue Designer Fashion Fund to bring British designers into the Chinese market, which had the blessing of the British Fashion Council (2018). In June 2020, in collaboration with London Fashion Week, JD organized Digital London Fashion Week, which featured three UK brands: A-COLD-WALL, Paul Smith, and Smythson. These brands established authorized online stores on JD in May 2020, June 2019, and January 2019, respectively. This collaboration then was an opportunity to promote these three UK brands in the Chinese market. During the virtual fashion week, JD's "Chinese ambassador" interviewed the designers of the three brands. For the first time, in a setting of online UK/Chinese e-commerce, the designer of the A-COLD-WALL brand explained that the "strong aesthetic style" of its menswear referenced architecture, brutalism, and modernity (Inside Retail 2020). The creative director of Smythson claimed that British fashion was "very much a combination of on one side of the world: functionality and practicality, if we think of the great outdoors ... and on the other side there is a real, ebullient, energetic sense of creativity and eccentricity." Paul Smith dismissed the notion that British fashion was only about "traditional fabrics and a particular way of dressing, like countryside dressing and city dressing," explaining that it was now more about creative contributions by young people with a "sense of humor" and a "more natural way of thinking" (Liu 2020). These Chinese subtitled video interviews with British designers apparently serve as indirect advertising of UK brands in China. Also, China's power over the global fashion market is not limited to articulation and production of discourse. There is also overt economic strategy to extend its power by purchasing international fashion channels. In June 2017, JD spent US\$397 million to purchase a stake in Farfetch and became one of its biggest shareholders. In return, all 700 brands and boutiques of Farfetch had access to the Chinese luxury fashion market through JD Luxury Express, an upmarket arm of JD. In November 2020, Alibaba and Richemont invested \$600 million in Farfetch, each holding 12.5%. The latter was integrated into the TMall Luxury Channel (Tech in China 2020). These acquisitions represent China's success in globalizing its fashion industry, not by enriching the global content of Taobao or JD but by taking ownership of one of the largest global fashion platforms. To a certain extent, the global presence of Alibaba and JD aligns with the goal of China's "going out" project announced in 2006 that encouraged China's enterprises to invest outside of China, and in this strategic plan, textile related industry is listed

along with industries related to home appliances and consumer products (Office of People's Congress 2006).

Dilemma of China's global-local fashion discourse

This paper has explored how digital technologies have contributed to China's extension of its fashion discourse from its domestic market to the global market. Regarding UK fashion discourse, their entry into the online fashion market in China, which is a jumble of extravagance, counterfeited goods and faux products, depends largely on the disproportional amount of local promotional fashion discourse. As a consequence of the culture piracy described, the UK fashion discourse seen online in China is Chinese-made rather than British-led.

In a nutshell, the UK fashion constructed in China is a tactic to borrow reputation and style of UK fashion to uplift the sales of Chinese goods, which is a phenomenon of culture piracy that is subject to potential culpability. Without any attempt to romanticize culture piracy, it is also true that culture piracy reinforces the fame of UK fashion in China, and ultimately some consumers could choose to buy the authentic UK fashion items either online in Taobao Global or JD Worldwide. Unlike studies on digital piracy that largely conclude that the latter only financially impact the stakeholders and consumers (e.g. Koklic, Kukar-Kinney, and Vida 2016), apparently, mainlandization of UK fashion on Chinese digital platforms perpetuates UK fashion hype in China. But the consequence is that China has taken over the voices of UK fashion discourse in China. In theoretical terms, against the backdrop of fashion branding is the whole process of cultural construction behind fashion with the consequences that cultivate reputation, create imaginations and eventually accumulate monetary benefits for the fashion brands. Nevertheless, as the case has demonstrated, brand construction also occurs in the process of culture piracy and it could raise profits, but this happens at the expense of an un-translatable UK fashion culture in the China-led fashion discourse. Should we conceive that fashion constitutes UK's soft power (Donaldson 2016), how could the UK fashion industry weigh this soft power against economic power? This case informs us that economic power might sometimes not be translated into soft power.

For China, in relation to such construction of UK fashion in China, an intriguing question concerns the implications of Chinese-dictated UK fashion discourse. Since 2019, China has been ranked at the top of the global luxury product market, and Chinese consumers have made more than 30% of global luxury purchases (McKinsey & Company 2019), but China has to rely on the Chinese-dictated UK fashion discourse to boost the retail fashion industry and market in China. This indirectly implies the acknowledgement of foreign supremacy and dependence on UK fashion discourse in cultural development and local market sales.

According to Liu et al. (2016), this condition is the “global-local dilemma” of foreign luxury retailers in China: the glamor and vivacity of global fashion brands in China imply that local fashion is inferior. Liu et al. (2016) claimed that Chinese consumers, particularly those residing in first-tier Chinese cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, aspire to be part of global communities in terms of their fashion purchases, which is in line with the cosmopolitanism embedded in the UK fashion discourse observed. While it is understandable that Chinese customers have developed a global esthetics in the era of cultural globalization, eventually China has to face its own citizens’ desire; leveraging on UK fashion discourse to promote its own fashion sale may not be a sustainable path to travel.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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