

Chinese Counterfeits and Fashion Culture

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Material objects made by people have had their own experiences with social roles. These roles have given people a way to connect to materialistic things at a personal level, which vary depending on the object itself and its origin. Fashion presents the opportunity for groups to unite and relate to each other. Some objects are labeled merely on their brand name that titles them under a company. Although this may already attract a certain group of people based on the brand or style, the role the article of fashion may play can take a large effect upon the culture or environment surrounding it. Having had the opportunity to look at an item through a specific cultural lens has given me more insight on how a product has actually impacted the system of social relationships based on its production system.

Introduction

My item of choice for this research project is a ring. This ring was given to me by a family friend during my trip to Guangzhou, China during the summer of 2017. It holds a lot of meaning and memories. The ring is a reminder of the culture I have learned during my time living in a completely different environment. The ring is a size eleven platinum ring. It's about a quarter-inch thick with six rivet-like designs etched into its base. The ring is fairly simple aside from its "rivets". Engraved along the side lies the word "LOVE" in all capitals but in very small letters. The "O" holds a line in the center to imitate the same iconic rivet pattern. The rivet design is common with many Cartier jewelry pieces. This piece in particular is part of the brand's "Love" collection.

Designer Brands and Counterfeits

Cartier is a french brand in the luxury fashion industry known for their jewelry, watches, and bags. Like many luxury brands, they are broken down and analyzed in detail where they are remade and sold as counterfeits in public markets within provinces

like GuangDong, which lies north of Hong Kong. Whether it be sneakers from Balenciaga, Puffer coats from Moncler, or even Louis Vuitton handbags. These luxury remakes are sold in markets throughout the city at cheap prices. These fashion agorae are illegal, but enforcement officials seem to have turned a blind eye. This has given an opportunity for many people to have a source of income. Many roles come together to hold up this unique system of marketing that allows many who partake in it to live some form of lifestyle. What makes this system unique is the demand for fast fashion at cheap prices. This demand gives merchants a chance to exploit the opportunities given to them through the “art” of design copying. Nellie Chu states in *Culture, Theory and Critique*, that “this practice enables market participants to keep pace with the rapid turnover of new trends as well as the fierce competition for fast money (Chu, 2).” This allows a merchant to rely on the constant change of the fashion industry to stay in momentum with domestic supply and demand.

The Commencement of Economic Change

This system was born in the late 1970's after the need of Chinese economic growth. This led to the experimentation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) which had affected most of the southern coast. A SEZ is defined by the World Bank Group as a “designated geographical space where special policies and measures support specific economic functions.” These zones intended to encourage investment for industrialization. This reduction in government attention has given small industries an opportunity to grow as a result from the increase in commerce and agriculture. Vendors began to sell goods and threads in herds of markets. This practice was locally referred to as bai di tan, which translates to the act of laying out goods along the ground (Choi 2010). These merchants would receive their goods by train which would come from neighboring cities like ShenZhen where the company owned garment factories that make the clothing are located.

Growth of Counterfeit Production

This spurt of unique marketing attracted young women and mothers from the GuangZhou area. They would purchase these fabrics as an attempt to sub contract other clothing factories. In time the growing demand for merchant labor correlated with the connections of the chinese garment factory workers. The increase of factory growth extended towards the export of fashion goods overseas. These affairs gave the chinese industry a chance to expand. Which was a stepping stone towards building the now market empire we are currently acquainted to. As industries have improved their distribution and production operations, counterfeiting has become easier and easier to sustain...(Hilton, 346).” As the fashion industry enlarged, it became easier to come to contact with resources from name brand production factories.

Marketing Impact and Relations

These markets today flood the streets of GuangDong. They range on a wide spectrum of goods like jewelry, bags, accessories, toys, even shoes. Many of these cheaper alternatives are actually bought and ordered online from people across the seas. In a mini documentary that had taken place in Putian, which is one of the cities along the southern coast, a merchant gave some insight on his personal operation, explaining how he was brought into this form of business. He (Chan) explains that once he searched online for authentic sneakers he came across counterfeits. He refers to the counterfeiting market as the “backbone of the local economy(Vice, 2:52).” This source of fashion presents chances for many people to become a part of this system in their domestic society. The market introduces opportunity to connect the relationships between consultant and consumer in a way that ensures a form of mutualism with social satisfaction.

Personal Experience and Viewpoint

Now having been to GuangZhou personally I can say that I have witnessed how these markets function. Many of them open during the day. Open markets flood the streets in specific areas. These markets have adapted and enlarged enough to take up

entire malls for selling counterfeits. Once the sun goes down then a separate kind of market opens up for the night life to explore. There are not many American apps that can be used in China considering the Communist economy. There is an app called “WeChat” that operates as a social network, currency holder, and personal ID. Barcodes are used to differentiate people, accounts, and even businesses. The residence and their social lives rely on this app. That includes the public markets. These markets use the app to promote clothing by taking pictures of their goods, posting them online, and including an asking price. Consumers are able to look through the app for specific goods of interest. This technological source also allows buyers to order the clothing desired, including sizes and colors, all from the app itself. Later to pick it up once it is ready. This allows the momentum of fast fashion to increase, while also adapting to the benefits of the technological advances of the country through social media.

The Ring and Its Value/Symbolism

This ring is relevant towards this system because although it was given to me by a family friend (who was known as Dragon), I suspect that it is counterfeit. The premises that have brought me to this conclusion was that Dragon knows a lot of the marketing industry and the different ways you can participate as a consultant. He is a person who did business in the public enterprise of fashion. He has his own experience of selling counterfeit goods. Which helped increase his business connections. When he gave the ring to me, I was not aware of the actual value of the ring until I looked it up online. The price for this ring came out to \$3,650.00. Dragon had a box, and in it held dozens of other designer rings from Louis Vuitton to Bulgari with a large range of different sizes. This gave me the impression that they may not be legitimate in value. The original ring itself might not even be platinum. That ironically does not take away its value to me. The materialistic value that the ring may hold is obsolete when compared to the extrinsic value placed on it. The monetary price holds no importance in comparison to that of the memories and knowledge that have been attached to it. The ring is connected to a point

in my life where I was able to witness everyday life through the sights of a different culture. The knowledge acquired through that period in time is what exaggerates why the ring has its importance to me.

Personal Experiences of Cultural Adaptation

Considering that this different “environment” was shown to me during my experience in GuangZhou, all the knowledge I have archived in my memory I have connected to this ring. It also reminds me of the norms in culture had to succumb to during everyday life. It was a sort of experiment where I could live this very different lifestyle, while subconsciously comparing it to the everyday norms of my original home to see how they differ. Society norms would include taking your pointer and middle finger, and using the tips to tap the surface of your table to signal “thank you” to whoever it may have been that served you. Whether it was in a restaurant, or the comfort of your home. Before eating at the table, you must rinse your eating utensils and cups with boiling hot water to kill all the possible bacteria that may have been collected. Cows are limited in GuangZhou, so meat and milk was a bit scarce. People would instead eat horse or donkey. They would also drink bean/soy milk as an alternative. This change in surrounding relieved some of my cultural ignorance. While being connected to the economic "adaptation" of the Chinese government, the ring has had the ability of also holding an era of intra-cultural exploration. The experiences of the market and the things I have learned have been etched into the ring to be a reminder of its symbolism.

Connection Between Fashion and Social Roles

When looking at a piece of clothing it is usually very likely to only see it as a finished result of production and manufacturing. On the contrary to simplicity, many people had to come together to play a specific part in a system. This then ensures that garment of clothing stops in your personal wardrobe throughout its journey. When clothing travels around the world, many people need to play their part in order for that

garment to move at all. Also referring to the people who work outside of the production and manufacturing system. The physical appearance and construction of a piece of clothing holds cultural value and history behind its journey to you. Including the connection it may form once it arrives in your possession. Possessing the insight to look at the amount of social roles played into making an item changes your perspective towards the potential of increase in value that production goods may hold. This research and the information I have learned throughout it has also been added to the knowledge of culture and anthropology held by the ring.

Conclusion

This Cartier ring entails many societal norms, regulations, and behavior from the Chinese culture in Guangzhou. This is how an item and its production process was a result of policy change. This policy change introduced marketing potential which was taken advantage of by local residence as a way of adapting to the abrupt change of the status quo. This ring is a direct example of the social roles taken into action throughout the past few decades and how itself plays a role in the production system. It allows me to reconnect with those episodes in my life. The ring is a result from a change in environment, which took effect because of economic modifications that worked as an attempt to push for development in cities.

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