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Chapter 3

Where is living labour in fashion and cultural appropriation debates?

Serkan Delice

individuals are now ruled by abstractions, whereas earlier they depended on one another. The abstraction, or idea, however, is nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master.

(Marx 1973, 164)

Introduction

The ongoing debate on fashion and so-called cultural appropriation should be taken seriously, above all, because of its emotional intensity, that is, the extent of righteous indignation shown by those who expose and denounce what they see as appropriation. Such indignation is generally a manifestation of a wider disquiet in the face of the myriad forms of dispossession and labour exploitation perpetrated by the forces of today’s egregiously unfair transnational capital accumulation, in addition to the material and psychological legacies of colonialism. Yet the symptomatic value of that indignation is increasingly eclipsed – especially in the volatile, reactive space of social media – by a nationalist and communitarian sense of ownership of *one’s* ‘culture’, ‘cultural traditions’, and ‘cultural heritage’ as if culture was a static entity that can be owned, and needs to be defended, by a specific nation or community, as if tradition and heritage are not porous and dynamic constructs of invention and reinvention.

Is there not something totalising – understandably but still problematically so – in this widely shared, angry statement made by Jeremy Lam, a Twitter user from China, in response to Keziah Daum, a user from the US, who had posted pictures of herself wearing a qipao¹ for her prom dance in Utah: ‘My culture is NOT your goddamn prom dress’ (Thai 2021, n.p.)? This high-pitched declaration of cultural ownership is understandable in the context of Daum’s initial reference to the qipao as ‘a gorgeous dress I found for my last prom’, which some perceived as a reductive, anonymising act of commodification and erasure, even though she later insisted that she had ‘meant no disrespect to the Chinese culture’ and ‘done nothing but show my love for the culture’ (Wong 2018, n.p.; Bell 2018, n.p.). Even so, how does this fathomable sense of indignation in the face of commodification solidify into a form of defensive ownership of *one’s* culture? How does culture – not just

a way of seeing the world, but also a way of making and changing it; not a sacrosanct, sovereign thing to be owned, but a productive socio-political relationship subject to change and contradiction – become ‘my culture’? Culture was always, and is still, a battleground, but should the outcome of that battle be the further enclosure and privatisation of culture as a property?

Whilst asking these questions, I am aware that they may also contain a certain amount of blindness and entitlement. After all, Frantz Fanon is always there to remind us, with his characteristic sharpness, that ‘the claim to a national culture’ does matter in the context of decolonisation since it rehabilitates native intellectuals by enabling them to achieve a ‘psycho-affective equilibrium’:

The passion with which native intellectuals defend the existence of their national culture may be a source of amazement; but those who condemn this exaggerated passion are strangely apt to forget that their own psyche and their own selves are conveniently sheltered behind a French or German culture which has given full proof of its existence and which is uncontested.

(1963, 209–210)

I write as a privileged immigrant – privileged in that I am originally from Turkey, a country that generally appropriates more than it is appropriated; privileged in that I have been ‘naturalised’ into the citizenship of the UK, another country that generally appropriates more than it is appropriated – but I am still an immigrant. It is possible that despite, or exactly because of, being a privileged immigrant, I, too, tend to forget that my psyche and self may be ‘conveniently sheltered behind’ my relatively unperturbed acclimatisation to what I perceive to be a transnational culture. Perhaps my smug identification with that transnational culture itself is enabled by my opportunity to position myself between, and beyond, what I deem to be British and Turkish cultures – two largely uncontested, unappropriated post-imperial cultures (that, regrettably, suffer from a narcissistic, anachronistic crush on the Empire, but that is another story!).

In what follows, I would like to explore what the degree of zeal, fervour, and outrage evident in debates about fashion and cultural appropriation, as well as the prevalent reclamation of culture, mean in the context of contemporary transnational capitalism. In doing so, I am guided not only by Fanon’s wake-up call to recognise the rehabilitative effects of cultural ownership in a capitalist world where the structures and ideas of colonialism continue to shape cultural representations, and not everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive by making and changing the world through culture. My thinking is also influenced by Lauren Berlant’s golden prompt that the collective sense of the historical present, according to Marxist cultural theory, manifests itself ‘first affectively and then through mediations that help or induce people to navigate worlds whose materiality is overdetermined by many processes’, such as the means and social relations of production. It is for this reason that I am interested in tracking what Berlant describes as ‘complex and historically specific affective

investments’, that is, the ways in which our very sentiments attach to abstractions like capital, private property, the nation, and national culture (Berlant 2011, n.p.).

Learning from and through affects, emotions, and feelings, however, does not preclude one from critically engaging with the collective sense of the present as it is reflected in the fiery reclamations of culture in the face of appropriation. It is troubling that much of the social media advocacy and academic discussions surrounding cultural appropriation reduce culture to an abstraction by failing to address the fundamental question of whose living labour produces and reproduces that culture. Karl Marx defines living labour as the only way through which products – including, I contend, products of culture – retain their use-value characteristics and develop into components of new use-values, serving as the means of production for a new labour process. Living labour is what creates and sustains culture, and it is this living labour, not culture by itself, that is being systemically appropriated by capital to regenerate more capital, ‘a live monster’, in Marx’s words, ‘that is fruitful and multiplies’ (1887, 136).

This chapter, therefore, aims to situate the debate on fashion and cultural appropriation within the broader, and critical, context of transnational capital accumulation and the increasing devaluation of living labour. Accordingly, the focus is neither on determining what constitutes appropriation (Young 2008; 2021; Matthes 2019; Nguyen and Strohl 2019); nor is it on interrogating the usefulness and effectiveness of ‘appropriation’ as a tool of critical engagement (Pham 2017); rather, it is on critically analysing the tenacity and emotional intensity of the cultural appropriation debate itself as a manifestation of a more profound and pervasive problem with contemporary transnational capitalism.

Elsewhere I have shown that it is rare to reach a legally and/or critically binding consensus over what counts as cultural appropriation (Delice 2022). Plagiarism, whether defined as ‘wrongful copying’ (Stearns 1999, 9) or ‘unauthorized and uncredited’ copying (Pham 2017, 68), occurs, in the context of fashion production and consumption, primarily as unacknowledged paraphrasing rather than direct copying. It is, therefore, not always possible to pinpoint who fails to acknowledge whom, or even *why* one must acknowledge, and seek consent from, another. Any critique of appropriation that is focused exclusively on the extent of derivativeness, and the lack of authenticity and originality, of the fashion commodity can be, and is often, reciprocated with forced demonstrations of the appropriator’s ‘freedom of creativity’ and ‘artistic licence’, of the ‘hybrid’ nature of their creation, and of how much they actually ‘appreciate cultural differences’ (Pham 2017; Delice 2022).

Such critique and the responses to it, with their emphasis on creativity, hybridity, appreciation, and difference, are themselves symptomatic of a predicament in which not enough scholarly attention is paid to (a) how the very right to be creative and the freedom to resort to ‘hybridity’ are not distributed equally in the capitalist system of labour hierarchies that cut across national borders; and (b) how capital itself not just appropriates but also appreciates the so-called cultural differences that it reifies and feeds upon. Otherwise, ‘cultural differences’ would ultimately

amount to little more than, in Alain Badiou's words, 'the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of humankind' (2002, 26).

The sheer difficulty of establishing what constitutes cultural appropriation and whether, and to what extent, it is problematic, however, should not lead one to believe that it is ineffective or without purpose. As will be demonstrated in the following, not only do individuals and communities around the world still fiercely argue over cultural appropriation, but they do so in a way that exudes an obvious sense of confidence. It is thus time to value, and create a realist, materialist account of, the persistence, growing global scale, and sentimentality of appropriation debates in the context of fashion.

In order to achieve this, I will start by introducing three cases of appropriation complaints that at first glance seem unrelated: Chinese people protesting against Christian Dior in France and Spain over what they believe to be the fashion house's appropriation of the Chinese horse-face skirt; South Korean politicians and social media users criticising Chinese authorities for appropriating the hanbok, which is referred to by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism as 'the unique ethnic clothing of Korea'; and a group of US-based Black creatives and fans calling out South Korea's entertainment corporations, as well as the K-pop industry as a whole, for culturally appropriating Black culture and hairstyles. I will then connect these cases to each other by highlighting how they are symptomatic of a deeper and wider malaise in the face of contemporary transnational capitalism: the fact that the latter is less about increasing the productivity of labour, more about endless, destructive capital accumulation and concentration through dispossession, including appropriation, commodification, privatisation, and financialisation of culture (Harvey 2004); the resulting devaluation of the labour that produces and reproduces culture, i.e., the unequal distribution, and general depreciation, of the right to prosper by influencing and transforming the world through culture (Dirlik 1997); and a real sense of being materially and emotionally unsettled, threatened, diluted, and diminished by the nauseating speed of capital accumulation.

Chinese protests against Dior's 'cultural appropriation'

A July 2022 article titled 'More Chinese students overseas join protest against Dior's "cultural appropriation" of traditional Chinese design', published on the website of the *Global Times*,² includes a photo purportedly showing a group of Chinese students protesting outside a Christian Dior store in Paris. One of the protesters is holding a banner that reads sardonically *emblématique de la silhouette Dior* ('emblematic of the Dior silhouette'), with a conspicuous red cross on it, over two images placed side by side depicting, respectively, a black pleated skirt designed by Dior and what the protester claims to be the original, the *mǎmiànqún* (马面裙), Chinese so-called horse-face skirt. According to the article, the student protesters also carried signs that read 'This is a traditional Chinese dress', 'Dior plagiarized the design', and 'Stop cultural appropriation',

urging Dior to 'apologize for the plagiarism and to stop selling the skirt at its stores', and there were 'nearly 100 people' present at the protest, including 'two middle-aged women from Mexico' who 'said they support our activity of defending our culture' and 'a man from Algeria' who 'said Dior has done something very similar using Algerian culture but there was little he could do to stop it' (Changyue 2022, n.p.).

The garment in question was reported to be a black pleated skirt from Dior's Fall 2022 collection, which, the fashion house declared, 'highlights the idea of community and sisterhood in looks with a school uniform allure' (Week in China, 2022). Priced at 29,000 Yuan (US\$4292 as of July 2022) on Dior's mainland China website, the skirt was described by Dior's Hong Kong website as a 'mid-length skirt ... all-new elegant and stylish piece based on the iconic Dior silhouette' (Koetse 2022, n.p.). It was this identification of the garment with the 'iconic Dior silhouette', and the lack of acknowledgement of the Chinese horse-face skirt, that several Chinese social media users remonstrated against. For example, an opinion piece published by People.cn, an online portal of *People's Daily*, fulminated: 'The so-called Dior silhouette is very similar to the Chinese horse-face skirt. When many details are the same, why is it shamelessly called a "new design" and "hallmark Dior silhouette"?' (Chik 2022, n.p.). According to *What's on Weibo*, a news site reporting on the trending topics on Chinese social media, a commenter was frustrated that the skirt was 'just exactly the same [as the Chinese horse-face pleated skirt] ... They're [Dior] copying China and then selling it to Chinese consumers, I don't know what to say', whereas another cried out: 'They're vilifying China and at the same time, they're stealing from Chinese culture. They're shameless!'. Whilst some commenters were enquiring if the 'propaganda department'³ can 'set up an organization to defend our legal rights', the 'influential history blogging account (@Qinyimo over 7 million fans)' was hoping that 'a lawyer specialized in copyright law and an expert in cultural preservation will jointly evaluate this matter and pay attention to how nasty this is' (Koetse 2022, n.p.).

It is difficult to know whether the protest organised by Chinese students in Paris actually brought together and gave voice to those ardent defenders of culture from Mexico⁴ and Algeria,⁵ but the *Global Times* published a photo of another protest outside a Dior store, this time in Madrid, just a few days after reporting on the Paris demonstration. A larger group of protesters, whom the *GT* describes as 'many Chinese people who study or work in Madrid', are seen as carrying banners condemning Dior for committing *apropiación cultural* ('cultural appropriation'), with one of the protesters emphasising that 'Chinese culture is open and inclusive. We welcome the reference of Chinese culture elements to let more people around the world know about it. But Dior has to say clearly where it is from'. By this time, the skirt, the *GT* reports, had already been 'taken off the shelves in Dior's online stores in the Chinese mainland' and was 'no longer listed on Dior's website in many countries' (Fandi and Changyue 2022, n.p.).

South Korean protests against China's 'cultural appropriation'

However, only five months prior to these protests, Lee Jae-myung, a South Korean politician who is the party leader of the Democratic Party of Korea and unsuccessfully ran for president in 2022, had accused China of 'cultural appropriation' after a performer wearing hanbok was spotted taking part in the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics alongside performers representing China's 56 ethnic groups. According to the *Korea Herald*, the leading English-language daily newspaper based in Seoul, the representation of a hanbok-wearing performer as a Chinese ethnic minority had 'sparked anger in Korea, with many criticizing the Chinese government for trying to "steal" Korea's culture'. The office of Yoon Suk-yeol, the current President of South Korea and Jae-myung's opponent at the time, also denounced China for being 'disrespectful' and 'tarnishing' the ceremony, rebuking the South Korean government for 'reportedly refusing to officially lodge a protest with the organisers [the Chinese] over the hanbok-clad woman'. The government's response was that the 'hanbok indisputably symbolizes Korean culture ... the government will continue to convey its position to China that cultural traditions need to be respected ... and to actively promote traditional Korean attire globally' (Ye-eun 2022, n.p.).

The level of outrage felt by South Korean officials and the public must have been severe enough to prompt the Chinese Embassy in Seoul to make what the *Korea Herald* described as a 'rare statement'. The Chinese responded that the hanbok belonged to ethnic Koreans in China as well as to those on the Korean Peninsula, dismissing claims of 'cultural appropriation' as 'nonsense': 'It is their desire and right for representatives of each ethnic group in China to wear their traditional costumes ... Ethnic Koreans in China and the North and South of the Korean Peninsula share the same lineage and common traditional culture, including clothing'. This proclamation by the Chinese must not have persuaded Christopher Del Corso, the then *chargé d'affaires* ad interim at the US Embassy in Seoul, whom the *Korea Herald* hailed as 'the top US diplomat to South Korea'. He posted photos of himself wearing the hanbok on his Twitter account, thereby supporting South Korea's claim of ownership: 'What comes to mind when you think of Korea? Kimchi, K-Pop, K-dramas ... and of course Hanbok #OriginalHanbokFromKorea' (Sung-mi 2022, n.p.).

Black artists and fans calling K-pop out for 'cultural appropriation'

Yet not long before this highly politically charged, and palpably instrumentalised, case of alleged Chinese appropriation of South Korean culture, the US-based Black creatives and fans had reproached SM Entertainment, one of South Korea's largest, multinational entertainment companies, and the K-pop industry in general, for 'culturally appropriating' Black culture and hairstyles. The issues of Black American songwriters and producers being underpaid or not given credit at all by

SM Entertainment, for which they write K-pop music; the general disengagement of the K-pop industry from the Black Lives Matter movement and 'the efforts, struggles and successes of Black people'; and the disappointment of many Black American fans, who make up 'a significant percentage of K-pop fans in the US', over what they perceive to be the appropriation and degradation of, for instance, the hairstyles typically worn by Black men into mere fashion accessories in music videos by prominent K-pop groups, were all brought to light in a July 2020 *Guardian* report written by Elizabeth de Luna (2020, n.p.).

Micah Powell, a songwriter and producer, is one of the Black creatives cited in the report. After noting that a dance move he created during an SM song-writing camp was used in the music video for *Devil* by the SM group Super Junior 'without his permission, and without credit or compensation', he argues that the way in which the K-pop industry treats Black culture is analogous to 'exactly how white people see us. They use our culture, they love our culture, they'll take everything from our culture, but don't pour back into our culture'. Davonna Gilpin, a Los Angeles-based K-pop fan featured in the article, conveys her disenchantment with NCT 127, a South Korean boy band that once styled one of its members in a Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt with the Confederate flag on it, as follows: 'If Black lives don't matter to them then Black dollars, Black music and Black fashion and style shouldn't either' (de Luna 2020, n.p.).

Where there is capital accumulation, there is appropriation!

Looking at these three situations and claiming that one is more of a legitimate appropriation case and the other is just a sporadic nationalist outburst would be a futile dismissive approach. After all, the debate on appropriation in the context of fashion and dress has proliferated, and is continuing to evolve, thanks to those consumers and producers of fashion and dress who have been naming and lambasting what they perceive as appropriation, especially through social media. Here, it is useful to remember Edward Palmer Thompson's pivotal delineation of social class as a historical, relational process:

We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers. And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.

([1963] 1980, 9)

What then are the common experiences that make some communities feel and articulate their shared interests as a national cultural identity as against others whom they accuse of appropriating those interests? The extent of Chinese reaction to Dior's alleged appropriation of the *mǎmiànqún* cannot be understood without

considering the Hanfu (Han clothing) movement, which is itself, however, fuelled by a variety of concerns. In the early 21st century, and within the broader context of Chinese nationalism intersecting with youth culture, a group of Chinese youths reimagined and reinvented Hanfu as ‘a unique patriotic fashion’ embodying the nation and its glorious past (Fan and Ip 2022, 9). Most of its supporters in China seem to justify their adherence to Hanfu as a means of asserting national identity, but the movement, as Linda Lee points out, also communicates a ‘search for authenticity and identity that counters China’s rapid economic growth’ (2012, 103). The national pride associated with Hanfu, according to Courtney Fu, is a sentiment that the Chinese state seeks to consolidate through a programme of ‘reconstruction and reauthentication of its native sartorial aesthetic tradition’, which Fu views as a decolonial endeavour in the context of young Chinese consumers themselves growing out of ‘a colonial system of taste which holds the West supreme’ (2023, 3). Young Chinese migrants in the diaspora, on the other hand, adopt the style to carve out a space in which to express their national pride, but this occurs against a backdrop of pervasive anti-Asian racism and what Chen Fan and Penn Tsz Ting Ip aptly describe as ‘the negative circulations of affect such as alienation, isolation, and loneliness’ stimulating ‘the desire for a sense of belonging’ (2022, 18). Still, it is not entirely apparent how these legitimate concerns morph into a more widespread apprehension about ‘cultural appropriation’, which people continue to talk about and frequently do so in a conspicuously self-assured manner. For instance, a Weibo poster who does not appear to distinguish between plagiarism and copyright infringement explains why they think that appropriation, rather than plagiarism, would be a useful method to diagnose the issue: ‘It’s not plagiarism, don’t be mistaken, the mamian skirt is not protected by copyright law so you can’t really plagiarize it. It is, however, 100% cultural appropriation’ (Koetse 2022, n.p.).

Where does this assertiveness in characterising an object of design, a fashion commodity, as ‘100% cultural appropriation’ come from? Why do people still resort, with earnestness and indignation, to ‘cultural appropriation’ as a tool of critique in these regional and transregional contestations where the relationship between the alleged appropriator and the self-declared appropriated is no longer one of one-dimensional hierarchy between ‘the West and the Rest’ or between the Global North and the Global South or between an advanced ‘centre’ and an underdeveloped ‘periphery’? Where does the currency of ‘cultural appropriation’ in terms of its power to operate transnationally come from?

‘Cultural appropriation’, at first sight, appears to be a mere empty signifier facilitating the expression, mostly through social media, of a wide range of ideas, feelings, and conditions from reactive nationalism to communal narcissism, from mundane self-promotion to genuine precarity. In the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, which is from his *Grundrisse*, Marx points out that individuals in the capitalist system are ruled by abstractions such as capital, commodity, and the market. These abstractions, Marx maintains, are at bottom nothing but ‘the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master’, namely, the hierarchical class relations and deeply unequal conditions of existence within

which individuals are defined and enter relations of exchange with one another (Marx 1973, 164). Can it then be argued that capital has reduced the dynamic concept and practice of culture as an ongoing, interdependent, and transformative activity of making and changing the conditions of existence to a free-floating abstraction? Is this to say that there is no clear structure behind the increasingly prevalent debates about ‘cultural appropriation’?

True, there are specific inequalities of power between the disputing parties in each case. At first glance, this appears to corroborate Eric Matthes’ (2019) ‘oppression account’ in ascertaining what he calls the ‘wrongfulness’ of cultural appropriation. According to Matthes, a cultural outsider appropriating the styles of a cultural insider does not necessarily constitute ‘a *sui generis* wrong’; rather, cultural appropriation becomes wrongful when such acts manifest and/or aggravate underlying inequalities and are thus linked to the oppression of specific cultural group members. To comprehend the cultural appropriation controversy, he argues, we need to understand the concept of power rather than the concept of property (Matthes 2019, 1004–1005).

It is also conceivable that in each instance, those who take offence at what they see as cultural appropriation do so because they believe it harms them and results in what James Young refers to as ‘reasonable profound offence’ in a number of ways, such as the ‘derogatory and insulting’ misrepresentation of culture, the lack of permission or consent to appropriate content that makes them feel ‘slighted or exploited’, and the misuse of something ‘sacred or private’ to their culture that leaves them feeling violated (2008, 148–149). Young, whose book-length treatment of cultural appropriation explains the wrong of cultural appropriation as wrongfully causing harm and/or reasonable profound offence to insiders, convincingly refutes Matthes’ account of oppression by demonstrating that many instances of cultural appropriation do not worsen the oppression of minority groups. He reiterates his position that cultural appropriation is not ‘morally objectionable’ unless it is harmful in a way that violates a right or ‘gratuitously profoundly offensive’ (2021, 307).

Although useful in determining what constitutes cultural appropriation and establishing the grounds for normative constraints on it, power differences and perceptions of harm and offence, in the context of fashion and the cultural appropriation debate, are always variable and contentious. As such, they fall short of offering a persuasive explanation for the transnational currency of ‘cultural appropriation’ as a means of criticism and cultural ownership, as well as the reasons why debate persists and what it is symptomatic of. For example, the shallow, stereotypical Western media representation of Chinese consumers as “‘label-obsessed’ buyers who are addicted to luxury shopping’ has been noticed, and rightfully criticised, by some of the leading consumer and industry platforms in China (Achim 2019). This – together with the allegations of ‘[Dior] copying China and then selling it to Chinese consumers’ and ‘vilifying China and at the same time stealing from Chinese culture’ – shows the acute critical awareness of some Chinese fashion consumers and practitioners regarding the representational and symbolic power of

a French luxury fashion house such as Dior, including the power to control, reproduce, and capitalise on what Stuart Hall calls the racialised 'regime of representation', that is, 'the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which "difference" is represented at any one historical moment' (1997, 232).

Indeed, back in November 2021, Chinese media and internet users had accused Dior of indulging and perpetuating Western stereotypes about Chinese people for exhibiting a photo by Chinese visual artist Chen Man at its exhibition in Shanghai. The photograph was denounced for 'kissing up Western world' and demeaning 'the Asian woman', as it featured an Asian woman holding a Dior bag whilst wearing traditional Chinese clothing. The Chinese specifically called attention to the woman's 'spooky' and 'scary' eyelids, 'dark skin', 'greasy hair', 'sinister expression', and 'gloomy face'. Dior withdrew the photo from the exhibition and posted a message on Sina Weibo emphasising that it respects the 'sentiments of the Chinese people' and would 'abide by Chinese laws ... strictly review all works that would be displayed to the public' (Global Times 2021; Shumei 2021; Changyue 2022; Holland 2022). Such power struggles over who has the privilege of establishing and maintaining the dominant regime of representation, however, do not account for the strong desire to assert cultural ownership, which underpins the insistent recourse to 'cultural appropriation' as an act of perceived theft of culture. After all, there is world of difference between, on the one hand, confronting the Eurocentric, racialised regime of representation that Dior partakes in and, on the other, clamouring that Dior is 'stealing from Chinese culture' (Koetse 2022, n.p.).

This denunciation of Dior for 'stealing from Chinese culture' is made even more intriguing in light of the rising tide of criticisms against the Chinese government itself as an appropriator for engaging in cultural appropriation as a 'soft strategy of encroachment' to gain further control by establishing its cultural hegemony (Sherman 2022, n.p.). This may explain, for example, the frustration and anger on the part of South Korean politicians and social media users who, in rebuke to China for appropriating the hanbok, accused Beijing of systematically seeking to 'subjugate and incorporate Korean history into China'. Such power tensions between China and South Korea, however, are far from untangling the fervour with which some South Koreans reacted to the hanbok-clad performer who, Chinese officials insisted, was there only to represent 'the around 2 million ethnic Koreans living in China' (Gallo 2022, n.p.). After all, in terms of its regional and transregional reach, South Korean culture is neither invisible nor powerless in the face of a purported Chinese effort to reinforce cultural hegemony.

In the case of the US-based Black creatives and fans holding the K-pop industry accountable for culturally appropriating Black culture and hairstyles, there is a clear issue of the appropriation and degradation of the Black American songwriters' labour due to a lack of compensation and acknowledgement from South Korean entertainment agencies. However, even in this case, the stark power differences between a multinational industry with colossal financial resources at its disposal and a group of economically disadvantaged and racially marginalised Black creative labourers do not fully illuminate the disenchantment felt by the aforementioned

Black American fans of K-pop who do have the power to expose and protest what they perceive as acts of appropriation of Black culture. This includes the power, for example, to make one of the members of Blackpink, the most successful Korean girl group internationally, apologise for wearing box braids (Gray 2021). In fact, far from demonstrating a sense of powerlessness, all the critical exposures of appropriation can be understood as an expression of power.

Returning to Marx, what are the material relations expressed by the 'culture' of cultural appropriation debates? Who is whose 'lord and master'? In all three cases, the 'lord and master', I argue, is capital, which, in its current, and particularly predatory, state, accumulates through dispossession, including the ubiquitous and indiscriminate appropriation and commodification of cultures (Harvey 2004). Individuals and communities in various parts of the world who resort to 'cultural appropriation' as a critical tool experience, and are disadvantaged by, the deterritorialising effects of contemporary capitalism to varying degrees depending on their class, race, and nationality. Such effects are nevertheless deeply felt across many countries and regions, which helps to explain the recurrence and circulation of 'cultural appropriation' on a transnational scale. This argument is informed by a crucial question asked by David Harvey, who builds upon Marx's and Rosa Luxemburg's conceptualisations of capital accumulation: 'What happens when the whole of the world has been organized internally within capitalism, and there is no external space for primitive accumulation to go on?' (Harvey 2019, n.p.).

Marx defines primitive accumulation as the historical, violent, and fraudulent process of robbing the labourer of possession of their means of production, or, more specifically, of severing the immediate producers from the means of production and transforming them into wage labourers. The expropriation of the immediate producers or labourers from their land, their means of subsistence, and their means of labour replaces self-earned private property with capitalistic private property, which is based on the exploitation of other people's nominally free labour, or wage labour. Primitive accumulation, as such, is the starting point of the capitalistic mode of production and, in the words of Marx, 'plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology ... from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite all its labour, has up to now nothing to sell but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work' (1887, 505).

Luxemburg, on the other hand, maintains that the survival of the capitalistic mode of production depends on the ongoing relations between capitalism and the non-capitalist modes of production, that is, between capital on the one hand and primitive accumulation occurring on the periphery of capitalism on the other. The expansion of capital, in other words, does require a place *outside* of the dynamics of capitalism, a place which capital can feed upon. Luxemburg exposes this aspect of accumulation for what it is: the 'realm of capital's blustering violence', including colonialism, the international loan system and wars, a realm where 'force, fraud, oppression, looting are openly displayed without any attempt at concealment, and it requires an effort to discover within this tangle of political violence and contests

of power the stern laws of the economic process' ([1913] 1951, 452). But does this mean that capitalism would bring about its own demise since there would be no non-capitalist territory, no potential market remaining for it to take over once it had absorbed all of the periphery or 'outside'?

Not necessarily. Capitalism, Harvey argues, internalises the predatory practices of primitive accumulation that include the conversion of common or collective property rights into exclusive private property rights; the restriction of access to the commons; and the commodification of labour power and obliteration of indigenous forms of production. These practices are neither a phenomenon of the past belonging to an original stage prior to the capitalistic mode of production nor outside of the contemporary capitalist system; rather, they continue to occur within contemporary processes of capital accumulation on a transnational scale (Harvey 2004). Furthermore, contemporary capitalism is increasingly dependent upon what Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession, that is, the ways in which already accumulated wealth 'is being appropriated or stolen away by certain sectors of capital without any regard for investing in production' (Harvey 2019, n.p.). Harvey counts the 'commodification of cultural forms, histories and intellectual creativity' and the 'appropriation and exploitation of grassroots culture and creativity' amongst the new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession that operate along with the continuing practices of primitive accumulation within capitalism (2004, 75).

Whilst some cases of cultural appropriation in the context of fashion and dress can be explained by reference to primitive accumulation, what is at stake in the majority of the cases is a form of capital accumulation by dispossession with no interest in increasing the productivity of labour of the original producers of the appropriated object or idea. The appropriation of the creative and craft skills of US-based Black creatives by the K-pop industry deprives them of their agency and means of production, demoting them to wage labourers. A part of the problem is, therefore, capital accumulation based on the exploitation of living labour in production. Both the act of appropriation and the national ownership-focused reactions to it, in the case of Dior's appropriation of the *māmianqún* and the Chinese authorities' appropriation of the hanbok, convert these objects into capital, rendering invisible their original, 'immediate producers', e.g., local craftspeople, artisans, and designers, who are not even mentioned. In none of the three situations does the act of appropriation entail an investment in production, a financial commitment to the manufacturing process or even a desire to raise labour productivity. This does support Harvey's fundamental claim that capital accumulation has been increasingly shifting towards dispossession, and growth has been diverted to accumulation by dispossession at the expense of the creation of value through the exploitation of living labour in production (Harvey 2019). The multidirectional character of such accumulation by dispossession on a transnational scale (i.e., capital breaks into wherever it can; it dispossesses and deterritorialises whomever it can) sheds light on the emergence of intense debates about cultural appropriation in a variety of contexts around the world.

Culture is liberating practice; what creates culture is labour!

To argue that capital appropriates culture and reduces it to abstraction is not to posit the existence of a uniform, transnational cultural field determined by economic forces. Culture, as understood and reclaimed in the protests against 'cultural appropriation', can also be seen as a useful symptom of the sense of deterritorialisation brought about by capital accumulation through dispossession; as a way to cope with the feeling that 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels [1848] 2004), a feeling that extends across and beyond national boundaries, and, ultimately, as offering a possibility of liberation from the capital. For culture to be understood and practised as a radical activity of making and changing the conditions of existence, however, it is essential to critically engage with the bleak prospect of its enclosure and privatisation (be it through 'cultural appropriation', reactionary nationalisms, or the so-called intellectual property rights), which relegates it to abstraction. When culture is reduced to an abstraction, it is cut off not only from the living labour of the people who produce, sustain, and reproduce it but also from the liberating possibilities it provides – the liberating possibilities that are also essential to its survival and reproduction.

In his provocative critique of what he calls 'culturalism as hegemonic ideology', historian Arif Dirlik demonstrates how culture, when reduced to an abstraction substituted for living people, merely functions as a 'strategy of containment', which in turn perpetuates cultural hegemony by suppressing alternative meanings that might challenge that hegemony (1997, 45). Culture, as such, loses its temporality and thus its capability to explain and enact social and cultural change. Dirlik defines hegemonic culturalism as follows:

A hegemonic culturalism abstracts culture from its social and political context in order to present it as an autochthonous attribute of entire groups and peoples that is exterior to, and independent of, social relationships. Culture, thus abstracted, is alienated from the social present, and is made into a timeless attribute of peoples that determines the character of the relationships into which they enter with others.

(1997, 43)

In other words, culturalism as hegemonic ideology begins with culture as an abstraction, an 'alien force ruling over living people', which is why, according to Dirlik, any attempt to reclaim culture as liberating practice must first concretise it within the realm of present social reality and social relations (1997, 44). The idea of culture as liberating practice is underpinned by the fundamental recognition that culture is an 'open-ended activity, without any central design, in which human agency creates the future out of the ingredients of the present' (Dirlik 1997, 40). Whilst this radical, present-oriented understanding of culture is essential to overcoming capital's relegation of it to an abstract populism, 'human agency' is hard

to pin down and falls short in elucidating the dynamism and possibilities of culture as liberating practice: does 'human agency' really exist, to begin with? Does it exist equally in every human? And *how* does it create a culture out of the social present? In fact, Dirlík's otherwise astute analysis does not shed much light on how the human agency would create what he envisions as an 'authentically cosmopolitan' culture that is 'at once local and universal, without any centrality assigned to either'; a culture that, in his view, does not define itself in terms of the hegemonic culture of the appropriator, but rather 'incorporates' the present and the past of those whose culture is appropriated; a culture in which 'all are universal because all are equally parochial' (Dirlík 1997, 42).

The glaring absence of the labourers, the producers of the *māmiànqún* and the hanbok, from the highly publicised social media discussions on 'cultural appropriation' itself speaks to the pervasiveness of a hegemonic culturalism whereby culture is abstracted from its socioeconomic context and thus becomes susceptible to the rapacious operations of capital. In a similar vein, whilst the US-based Black creative labourers do seem to have some visibility in the face of appropriation by the South Korean entertainment industry, there is a disconnect between their plight on the one hand and the concerns of 'cultural appropriation' raised by the fans of K-pop on social media on the other.

It is therefore more vital than ever to uphold that it is the living labour, rather than a vaguely defined human agency, that produces and reproduces culture and can enact it as liberating practice, that is, as a means of making and changing the conditions of existence. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx describes capital as 'dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' (1887, 163). Living labour refers to labour power, the capacity to work, in action that creates 'real and effective' use values as constituents of new use values or as means of production for a new labour process. As Marx writes:

A machine which does not serve the purposes of labour, is useless. In addition, it falls a prey to the destructive influence of natural forces. Iron rusts and wood rots. Yarn with which we neither weave nor knit is cotton wasted. Living labour must seize upon these things and rouse them from their death-sleep, change them from mere possible use-values into real and effective ones.

(1887, 130)

As such, living labour is essential to the reproduction not only of capitalism but also of culture, which, like everything else that is alive, is the outcome *and* enlivening condition of a labour and production process. If 'dead' labour is the vampiric capital that can amass through its appropriation of, and thus is dependent on, living labour, it follows that living labour must also entail the tools of liberation from the capital. It is therefore crucial to stress that living labour, not culture by itself

reduced to an abstraction, is what capital appropriates, in order to avoid reactionary nationalisms from absorbing that righteous indignation and sentimentality. After all, nationalism achieves nothing other than to serve the interests of capital.

In lieu of a conclusion: The importance of sentimentality and living labour

In his critical reading of what he terms the 'self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality' of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an 1852 novel by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Baldwin denounces sentimentality as the extravagant display of exaggerated and false feeling, the sign of dishonesty, and the lack of ability to feel. Sentimentality, for Baldwin, is nothing but a revelation of the sentimentalist's very 'aversion to experience', 'fear of life', 'arid heart' and, as such, intimates a 'secret and violent inhumanity' (1955, 14).

In this chapter, I have sought to read the sentimentality of the debates on fashion and cultural appropriation in a new, less dismissive light: as a symptom that merits further study because it reveals the depth of deeply felt dispossession, deterritorialisation, and unrest brought on by transnational inequalities. The fact that people and communities around the world turn to the category of 'cultural appropriation' to respond to the effects of particular regional and interregional power hierarchies indicates that such transnational inequalities are overdetermined by the predatory operations, and ever-increasing speed, of contemporary capital accumulation.

Being critically sensitive to the indignant, defensive, sentimental claims of ownership of *one's* culture, however, does not imply succumbing to the nationalist abstraction and enclosure of culture, which should be a source of concern for anyone who believes in the transformative radicalism of cultural activity. According to Berlant, sentimentality is more than 'just the mawkish, nostalgic, and simple-minded mode' with which it is commonly associated; it can also be construed as a mode of relationality in which people use emotions to convey something 'authentic' about themselves that they believe the world should accept and respect. This mode is characterised by 'affective and emotional intelligibility' as well as 'a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers' (Berlant 2011, n.p.). If such sentimentality is to lead to a genuine, and much-needed, understanding and enactment of culture as liberating practice in the face of capital accumulation by dispossession and appropriation, then the first step should be to acknowledge and free the living labour that creates culture.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to express my gratitude to Anna-Mari Almila and Caroline Stevenson for their helpful suggestions. This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Djurdja Bartlett, a trailblazing scholar, steadfast mentor, and dear friend.

Notes

- 1 Cheryl Sim emphasises that, contrary to popular belief, the term *qipao* is not just the Mandarin equivalent of the *cheongsam*, and that both terms have significant historical and political connotations: 'In mainland China and Taiwan, where the main language is Mandarin, this dress is referred to as *qipao* – *qi* which means “banner” or “flag” and *pao* which means “robe.” *Qipao* is a direct reference to the clothing of the Manchu people ... In Hong Kong, where the predominant language of use has been Cantonese, the dress is most often referred to as *cheongsam* which means “long dress” or robe and refers to the one-piece garment first worn by Han men at the end of the Qing dynasty and later appropriated by women' (2019, 15).
- 2 Wikipedia defines the *Global Times* as 'a daily tabloid newspaper under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper, the People's Daily, commenting on international issues from a nationalistic perspective' (2022).
- 3 The Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.
- 4 A country that was invaded twice by France back in the 19th century.
- 5 A country that had been colonised by France between 1830 and 1962.

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The sociality of decolonisation

Making fashion, heritage, and cultural sustainability in Vietnam

Rimi Khan

Introduction

There is an emerging wave of Vietnamese fashion designers distinguishing themselves through their allusions to cultural heritage. Recent collections from Cong Tri, Vietnam's first couture house catering to an international celebrity clientele, evoke 'tradition' and rural imagery. Garments inspired by rice fields, thatched rooves, bush marigold, and bucolic street life reflect the designer's current worldview: 'The pandemic has helped me connect with life, see things in a simple way. The fashion industry is changing, focusing on positivity and sustainability' (Tri quoted in Khanh 2021, n.p.).

'Sustainability', here, is a loose signifier. It encompasses general notions of wellbeing and longevity. In its invocation of simplicity, it also inspires a return to the past. Nguyen Cong Tri's statement attests to the expansive ways that sustainability is put to work within the fashion industry, as a marker that is both forward-looking and nostalgic. Fashion brands and consumers claim to care about sustainability in increasing numbers (BoF and McKinsey 2020), reflecting both its moral weight and cultural value. However, the concept's ambiguity also means that it is difficult to regulate its use, giving rise to 'greenwashing', and a critical discourse on sustainable fashion that is wary of such commercial opportunism (Butler 2022; Chua 2022). The diversity of academic scholarship on sustainable fashion further illustrates the malleability of the term: there is now a considerable body of research on sustainable fashion consumption, including practices of use, re-use, making, and mending (Fletcher 2016; Gwilt 2014; Heinze 2021); sustainable design innovations (Gwilt 2020); supply chains, materials, and technologies (Nayak 2019; Payne 2019); and sustainability marketing (Harris et al. 2015; Weis et al. 2014).

The aim of this chapter is to analyse how questions of diversity, decolonisation, and critiques of fashion's transnational inequalities relate to discourses of sustainability. I focus this analysis on the Vietnamese brand Kilomet109 and its founder Thao Vu, whose experiments with craft and textile heritage are shaped by a conviction that fashion's futures depend on its past. The chapter offers ways of thinking