

MARKETING

Cultural appreciation vs. appropriation: Navigating luxury's cultural marketing in China

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Mami launched a "Mami Miao" project a collaboration that kicked off in 2019 between the brand's creative director, Francesco Risso, and the Miao ethnic group communities in China. Image courtesy of Mami

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Marketing missteps in China's luxury market have made headlines in recent years, despite global and local players showing greater awareness of their cultural and political stances.

In addition to celebrity scandals, cultural mistakes create splitting headaches that can often haunt brands into the future.

With the rise of social media, luxury brands have been placed under the microscope of discerning Chinese netizens.

Each inappropriate design, tone-deaf message, or offensive campaign can be publicized on various online platforms and go viral with heated debates.

Chinese traditional cultures and customs have become a critical source of inspiration for luxury brands, especially when it comes to localization strategies.

However, there is a fine line between resonating with and annoying Chinese consumers.

As *Jing Daily's* report *Chinese Cultural Consumers: The Future of Luxury* pointed out, luxury shoppers now approach consumption with a distinct cultural awareness and a concept of luxury that sets them apart from their Western counterparts, as well as the older generations.

Following the admission of China into the World Trade Organization in early 2000s, the collision between domestic cultural attitudes and western ones has accelerated.

As professor Li Zhonggui, who specializes in the history of China's modernity, wrote in his book *Confucianism and the Cohesion of the Chinese Nation State*, "An officially sanctioned return to traditional Chinese cultural values has

served as a way of supporting social cohesion and harmony."

This emphasis on traditional values has been consolidated under President Xi's leadership.

As China takes a bigger role on the world stage and local audiences scrutinize external representations of their heritage, how can luxury brands navigate cultural marketing to achieve long-term growth in China?

Giving credit is essential

Taking inspiration from other cultures is a common practice in modern fashion.

However, the concept of cultural appropriation was only introduced to a broader audience in China after major luxury brands such as **Dolce & Gabbana** and Dior were involved in scandals. The aversion to the practice sometimes has less to do with the designs themselves and more so the ignorance, insensitivity and lack of accreditation behind the initiatives.

China's increasing openness to the global economy in the 1990s brought prestigious luxury houses into the country, such as Cartier, Louis Vuitton, Burberry and Chanel.

While the first batch of luxury brands largely influenced Chinese consumers' definition of luxury, the generation born in the 1990s and 2000s grew up in the era of reform and opening-up, leading them to hold a different set of values..

With a growing sense of cultural, economic and national confidence, local audiences' perception of imported products today tends to be more critical.

Dior's cultural appropriation accusations in China last year reflect these sentiments. From the house's mid-length pleated skirt to the "Jardin d'Hiver" patterns in its fall 2022 collection, Dior has been involved in disputes over the plagiarism of traditional Chinese cultural motifs without acknowledgement.

In contrast, a **Loewe** campaign that similarly pays tribute to Chinese traditional cultures received admiration from local audiences.

Launched in November, the brand's spring 2023 campaign drew inspiration from Chinese monochrome ceramics. The label's new bag collection features colors such as Pale Aubergine, Tea Dust and Pale Celadon as an ode to the power and beauty of a single hue.

The campaign's viewership and engagement hit a record high on Loewe's Chinese social media platforms.

On social media platform Xiaohongshu, the campaign film collected over 8,000 likes, which is 100 times more likes than the brand's usual posts on the platform.

Xiaohongshu user Yuzu Qiaoqiao commented that Loewe deserves respect as it "acknowledged where the inspiration comes from" and "genuinely engaged local artisans and techniques."

Other complimentary reviews also focused on the authenticity of the project, affirming that Chinese netizens' judgment relies mostly on brands' attitudes.

Universal humanism matters

The idea of Orientalism and cultural appropriation may be new to the general Chinese public, but it is not foreign to those who have studied the humanities.

Nate Li, a Chinese luxury shopper who is a Ph.D candidate studying Film Studies with a focus on East Asia at King's College London, told *Jing Daily* that the understanding of cultural appropriation is quite subjective in the Chinese context.

"The anger is not about cultural appropriation but comes from the feeling of disrespect and prejudice," Mr. Li said.

In Loewe's case, the campaign not only targets Chinese customers but also global ones, as the brand states on its global sites.

As creative director Jonathan Anderson shared in a statement, he came across monochrome ceramics during a trip to China.

"The first time I saw monochrome ceramics, I was overwhelmed by its infinite charm," Mr. Anderson said. "China's monochrome glaze has had a profound impact on ceramic art around the world from ancient times to the present,

and has laid the foundation for many potters today."

The objective to introduce the culture to a broader audience, instead of just pleasing certain demographics with Chinese knowledge, allowed Loewe to earn bonus points from local consumers.

Similar practices tapping Chinese indigenous cultures include [Marni's](#) project "Marni Miao" a collaboration that kicked off in 2019 between the brand's creative director, Francesco Risso, and the Miao ethnic group communities in China.

Marni drew inspiration from the Miao's unique and elaborate use of embroidery, weaving, lace and pleating techniques, using it to explore the evolution of indigenous culture and how it shapes contemporary fashion.

In 2021, the brand continued this initiative by opening an offline pop-up exhibition in Beijing and releasing a campaign video and images starring Chinese supermodel Liu Wen.

The artistic approach of the campaign, which meshed modern aesthetics with motifs from Miao culture such as the Lusheng a musical instrument and silverware, resonated well with local audiences.

According to [Mr. Risso's interview with Vogue](#), he "spent quite a lot of time in a beautiful mountainous area in southern China" for the project.

As such, the project is a result of cultural appreciation as the creative director spent time investigating the minority group and physically engaged with the community.

"Working together with them was a marvelous experience for me, immensely gratifying both from a human and creative standpoint," he told *Vogue*.

As both Loewe and Marni demonstrate, successfully incorporating Chinese culture is not about the number of elements that have been borrowed. Rather, it is about the brands' dedication and attitude towards them. Respect will be met with respect.

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