The Country of Origin Effect in Dolce & Gabbana's Commercial, "DG Loves China"

Yuxi Zheng

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this excerpt of her essay, Yuxi Zheng solidifies her **thesis** by **analyzing** scenes from Dolce & Gabbana commercials. Yuxi takes special care to break down the minute details of each scene to explain the messages conveyed through the dialog, acting, and directorial edits. By engaging in this **close looking**, Yuxi makes an astute argument that explains why D&G was not able to create an advertisement that successfully catered to the intended Chinese audience.*

Excerpt

Before unfolding the argument in depth, it may be appropriate to briefly recount Dolce & Gabbana's history as a luxury brand. D&G started off as a small Italian studio run by Domenico Dolce and Stefanno Gabbana in 1982.[1] Traditional Italian handicrafts and iconography is a constant theme in D&G's design.

In this campaign, D&G continues with its usual emphasis on Italian traditions while incorporating Chinese cultural elements to specifically target the Chinese audience. Through including elements from both cultures, D&G attempts to portray a process of cultural acceptance. Zuo Ye, the Chinese model featured in the commercial, disclosed in her interview with BBC that the director "told her to show first shock and disbelief, then roll her eyes, and eventually delight and satisfaction at the presumed tastiness of said Italian dishes."[2] Presumably, the director's intention is to first demonstrate an initial "shock and disbelief" towards the notion of eating Italian food with chopsticks, a symbol of culture shock. He then asked the model to show "delight and satisfaction," which can be interpreted as a demonstration of how two distinct and seemingly incompatible cultures can actually become compatible. The director is perhaps making an analogy that D&G is similar to the pizza and pasta for Chinese consumers. D&G's design style is often perceived as too heavy and dramatic in China. According to Jennifer Mak, one of the designers at D&G, the brand "is not an easy style for Chinese consumers."[3] The director probably recognized this fact, and intended to use

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[1] Nathalie Miroshnik, "Dolce & Gabbana Jewelry: Italian Motifs, Outburst of Colour & Wave of Passion ☑," https://nammu.com/eng/, accessed November 24, 2019, https://nammu.com/eng/dolce-gabbana-jewelry/.

[2] "Model Reveals Pain of 'racist' D&G Ad," *BBC News*, January 23, 2019, sec. China, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-46968750.

[3] Luisa Zargani Edelson Tiffany Ap,Sharon et al., "What to Watch: Will Dolce & Gabbana Weather the Storm?," *WWD* (blog), January 3, 2019, https://wwd.com/business-news/business-features/what-to-watch-will-dolce-gabbana-weather-the-storm-1202940754/.

the model's changes of emotions to suggest that D&G's style is in fact compatible with the Chinese society and can be accepted by Chinese consumers, just like how the model ended up enjoying eating Italian food with chopsticks.

However, D&G's portrayal of the process of cultural acceptance was established on a comical depiction of the Chinese model, who further serves as a representation of Chinese people in general. At the beginning of the commercial, the director concentrates on depicting the clumsiness in the model's actions. The narration implies that the Chinese model's actions are awkward in comments such as "clamp the piece of pizza like pliers" and "oh, don't let the cheese drop."[4] Apart from the narration, the director further emphasizes the sense of awkwardness visually, by intentionally employing close-ups on the model's hands, capturing her clumsiness when she tries to pick up the food with chopsticks. The intense red color and the dramatic music contribute to the comical effect of the scene and make the depiction of the Chinese model seem almost theatrical; the audience are put into a position to observe her behaviors as if watching a clown fooling around while listening to the narrator explaining the performance. Despite the intention of portraying a process of cultural infusion, D&G's comical depiction of the model's clumsiness mocks her as well as the Chinese image represented in the video, which appeared as derogatory and offensive to Chinese consumers.

The comical clumsiness is further associated with the general Chinese public due to the use of personal pronouns and the narrative perspective in the commercial video, which also creates an impassable barrier between the marketers and the consumers. The narrator constantly refers to Italian food and customs using the personal pronoun "we," such as "our great, traditional Pizza Margherita," while referring to the Chinese model and Chinese as "you." The narrator himself, despite narrating in Chinese, represents a western viewpoint, and thus assumes that everything that is not Italian requires additional explanation. He refers to chopsticks as "stick-like cutlery,"[5] an explanation that a Chinese audience would not have needed. The analogy that compares "chopsticks" to "sticks" implies that using chopsticks as cutlery is somewhat ridiculous and inferior to "normal" forks and knives. The use of western perspective in the narration automatically associates such absurdity with "you," a reference to Chinese consumers, and with chopsticks, a representation of Chinese culture. The narrative perspective and the distinction between "we" and "you" not only create a sense of separation that made the commercial hard to relate to for a Chinese audience, but also intensifies the derogatory portrayal of China and Chinese culture, which elicited hate from ethnocentric consumers.

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[4] *English Translation to Dolce&Gabbana All 3 DELETED Controversial Ads for The Great Show*, accessed November 25, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzoxIb2Fa74.
[5] *English Translation to Dolce&Gabbana All 3 DELETED Controversial Ads for The Great Show*.

The campaign's comical depiction of the Chinese model is contrasted with the emphasis on Italian style and elegance. D&G's depiction of its country of origin highlights Italian superiority and further solidifies the estrangement in the campaign. It reinforces the Italian country image in order to achieve the country of origin effects through its depiction of traditional Italian cuisine. Cedrola and Battaglia support D&G's strategy, by suggesting in their study that Italian country image is centered around Mediterranean cuisine as much as it is known for its design and fashion.[6] D&G chose the most staple Italian food possible in their commercial campaign: Margherita Pizza, Spaghetti and Cannoli. The commercial makes an additional twist in the standard stereotypes of Italian cuisine by including Cannoli, a well-known Sicilian dessert of Arabic descent,[7] and thus adapting the standard country image to represent D&G's unique brand image. By juxtaposing two essential elements in Italian's country image—fashion and food—in the campaign, D&G exploits the country of origin effects. As Bursi points out, Italian luxury goods serve as a symbol of wealth and high social status in Chinese society.[8] When formatting the campaign, D&G was probably under the same assumption that Chinese consumers are likely to consider D&G to be more desirable than clothing from domestic brands if the commercial campaign has an emphasis on traditional Italian values.

Nevertheless, D&G's appeal to country of origin effect turned out to be unsuccessful because it did not demonstrate cultural compatibility; instead, the narration highlights its own superiority, elegance, and style, which solidifies the barrier between the brand and the Chinese audience. The narrator speaks of Italian food with a sense of vanity, describing it as "great" and "traditional." When the model ate the cannoli as instructed by inserting the chopstick into the cream and taking small bites, he continues to comment that "This will make you feel like you're in Italy, but you're in China." These comments not only associate the image of Italy with a more elegant way of eating, but also by stating explicitly that the model is physically in China and imagining herself in Italy, the narrator portrays Italy as a more desirable destination.

The Italian superiority is aggravated by the fact that the Chinese model, who also acts as a representative of China and Chinese culture, has no agency in expressing her thoughts in the video, instead, her actions are interpreted by a narrator with a western perspective. Zuo Ye said in her interview with BBC, that she was not aware of the content of the campaign before

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[6] Elena Cedrola and Loretta Battaglia, "Italian Country Image: The Impact on Business Models and Relations in Chinese Business-to-Business Markets," *International Marketing and the Country of Origin Effect*, February 28, 2013, 81–107. 81.

[7] "Cannoli - Best of Sicily Magazine," accessed December 11, 2019, http://www.bestofsicily.com/mag/art208.htm.

[8] Tiziano Bursi et al., "Italy's Country Image and the Role of Ethnocentrism in Spanish and Chinese Consumers' Perceptions," *International Marketing and the Country of Origin Effect*, February 28, 2013, 45–64. 59.

it was released.[9] The director merely told her to act as being shocked or delighted, without telling her the reasonings behind it. The nature of the narration in the video would thus be an external interpretation of the model's unintentional action from a western viewpoint. The frequent use of imperatives in the narration, such as "come on, pick up the chopsticks" and "eat like this," automatically put the male western perspective in a superior position than the Chinese model, implying that the Chinese model does not know how to eat with chopsticks and needs instructions from the narrator.

Despite establishing a sense of cultural acceptance and a positive Italian country image, D&G's incorporation of Chinese cultural elements in the campaign achieved the contrary: it creates a sense of estrangement and highlights Italian superiority. This fact goes to show that solving the puzzle requires more than bluntly inserting a Chinese model, some red lanterns, and a pair of chopsticks into a campaign. Instead, the notion of cultural compatibility calls for considerations about how the target audience may perceive the incorporation of different cultural elements. The pitfall of DG's campaign is that it portrays the Italian country image as superior and celebrates Italian culture using Chinese culture as a backdrop, which clearly could not have resonated with ethnocentric Chinese consumers. The company failed to recognize that cultural compatibility does not derive directly from including different cultural elements but is highly influenced by the way that distinct cultures are portrayed in the campaign and how consumers perceive the connotations based on such portrayal.

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[9] "Model Reveals Pain of 'racist' D&G Ad."

Author Commentary
Yuxi Zheng

The first thing that I did when trying to analyze this piece of visual evidence was watch the commercial holistically a couple of times through, trying to understand how D&G might have strategized to use this commercial to appeal to the Chinese audience and why the Chinese audience felt offended by the video. It was relatively easy for me to rationalize why the Chinese audience reacted the way they did, being Chinese myself, whereas it was harder for me to make sense of D&G's intentions behind the commercial.

In order to help my understanding, I researched the history and the founding ideas of the brand, and I also found interviews conducted with D&G designers. These secondary sources really helped me understand the D&G's reasonings behind the commercial and its possible strategic meanings.

These sources helped me shape my main argument before I moved on to analyzing details of the commercial. Since the commercial that I was analyzing was quite short, I was able to go through it line by line, pausing after every few seconds. I wrote out my own version of a script of the commercial. I jotted down stylistic devices that caught my attention, including the narrative voice, the setting and the camera angle. Although writing a script for a visual source could be time consuming, I find it very helpful for me personally, especially when analyzing an important scene. It not only saves me the trouble of always referring back to the video while writing, as I am able to reconstruct the visual image in my head just by reading my own script, it also helps me discover striking features in the video that I may not have noticed initially. Most often, watching a video without pausing helps me give a general critique of a visual source, whereas this method of writing my own script helps me with more detailed analysis.

As for the structure of my essay, I found a technique that my professor taught my seminar class to be extremely helpful. She taught us to read through our own essays by only reading the first and the last sentence of each paragraph and see if the essay still makes sense. If not, we should try to write these topic sentences such that they provide transition from the previous paragraph and capture key ideas in the current paragraph. The goal is for these topic sentences to form a strong paragraph of argumentation on its own. Every time when I follow this method and alter the topic sentences of my essay, I always find that the structure would improve significantly, because this method motivates me to think about how the different pieces of my essay link together and challenges me to summarize my whole essay succinctly.

Editor Commentary
Alex Charles

Whereas the messages in a conventional essay are explicitly written, the messages in a visual source such as a film, television show, or, as in this case, a commercial, are often implicit and hidden behind camera angles, facial expressions, and minute visual details. As a result, conducting a close analysis of a visual source is quite difficult. To absorb the argument of a visual source, one has to take into account all of these various aspects, and piece them together like a puzzle. Moreover, once the puzzle is complete and the "argument" of the source is extracted and synthesized, a good close analysis goes a step further to extract the intentions of the author, highlighting various scenes in which the author made a deliberate choice, and formulating a judgment on the effect of such a decision.

This excerpt of Yuxi Zheng's is an excellent example of a well-executed close analysis. First, Yuxi states the intention of the commercial campaign: marketing their traditional Italian products to a Chinese audience by incorporating elements of Chinese culture into the commercial. She bolsters her argument by using specific moments in the commercial to support her claim of the director's intention, clarifying the visual cue first, before explaining its effect.

Exceptional writers, however, don't simply analyze a source's argument and claims, but they go a step further to create a thesis statement predicated on the minute details that they find in their close analysis of another scholar's work. Yuxi states the relationship between her thesis and the D&G commercial, when she writes "however, D&G's portrayal of the process of cultural acceptance was established on a comical depiction of the Chinese model." Consequently, Yuxi signifies that her close analysis of the D&G commercial has led to her own argument that D&G's commercial did not have the intended effect of appreciating Chinese culture, but rather offended it. Once more choosing specific scenes, Yuxi then supports her argument by differentiating between the intended and actual effects of various lines, actor expressions, and visual cues throughout the commercial. Because she is able to translate the implicit, visual messages of the commercial into explicit text, Yuxi's analysis brilliantly supports and strengthens her thesis statement, allowing her to produce a strong critique of D&G's commercial campaign.

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Bios

Yuxi Zheng '23 is originally from China. She is studying math and computer science and is a member of Princeton Figure Skating Club, a problem writer for PUMaC, and a COS lab TA and grader. She wrote this essay as a first-year.

Alex Charles '22 is a prospective Woodrow Wilson major who plans on pursuing a Statistics and Machine Learning certificate. On campus he enjoys working with students in the Writing Center, coaching in the Dillon Youth Basketball league, and competing on the University's men's soccer team. He wrote this as a sophomore.