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**A bag of remembrance:  
A cultural biography of Red-White-Blue, from Hong Kong to Louis Vuitton  
Wessie Ling**

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Stamped with its renowned logo, could the 2007 Louis Vuitton laundry bag – a replica of the ubiquitous plaid plastic carrier bag – be an ironic visual pun in response to the countless Chinese market stalls that had relentlessly ripped off their infamous ‘LV’ design? With its little-known origin in Hong Kong via Japan and Taiwan, the striped polyethylene material of the laundry bag, or migrant bag, was first used for burlap type sacks or tarpaulin in the construction industry of Hong Kong, where it was subsequently made into carrier bags. In the 1970s and 1980s, plaid plastic carrier bags were often used to transport food and necessities from Hong Kong to mainland China through Shenzhen, the first city after crossing the British-Chinese border. Today, it is the plaid carrying bag that continues to be used widely in China and throughout the world.

Commonly known as ‘Red-White-Blue’ in Hong Kong, the bag is imbued with symbolic meaning associated with the ‘local spirit’ of an industrious, trading city built by a ‘hardy and hard-working people’.<sup>1</sup> In Hong Kong, the bag is emblematic of the city’s colonial days and serves as a potent symbol of an ever-changing city that seems to be perpetually under construction. The shortage of land and rising property prices in Hong Kong restricted the cluster of small producers of Red-White-Blue bags, who could not expand to develop economies of scale. Over the past two decades, the manufacturing of the bag has moved to mainland China to take advantage of low-cost labour and cheaper production facilities. The worldwide dissemination of inexpensive products made in China means that the Red-White-Blue carrier bag has found a global audience. Its little-known origin in Hong Kong permits new users to imagine new meanings for the bag; because of its low retail price and widespread availability, Red-White-Blues primarily suit the needs of the migrant, and is found in different corners of the world. The bag has different names in different countries, and has taken on new meanings in various localities. In the United States, it is called the ‘Chinatown tote’; in Trinidad, the ‘Guyanese Samsonite’; in Germany, ‘Türkenkoffer’, which translates as the ‘Turkish suitcase’; in the United Kingdom, ‘Bangladeshi bag’; in South Africa, ‘Zimbabwe bag’; in Thailand, ‘Rainbow bag’, and in Nigeria and Ghana, ‘Ghana must go bag’.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter discusses the extent to which a Chinese export has played a part in the realities and identities of varied communities, as

well as the re-fashioning of Chinese exports into a fashion commodity. It traces the origin and development of Red-White-Blue, and its connotations and cultural significance to Hong Kong and communities across several continents. Through its biography, this chapter unpacks how various communities adopted and (re)interpreted their versions of Red-White-Blue bags. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Louis Vuitton's replica of this plaid bag. The questions addressed here include authenticity, cultural identity, and the power dynamic between high and low culture. Specifically, the chapter juxtaposes Western fashion institutions and Asian street culture, and examines the relationship of Chinese production to the European-American fashion system. The analysis draws on empirical and ethnographic research, including interviews with makers and users, and detailed readings of the contemporary global fashion scene as represented in the traditional press and on the Web.

### **The origin of the Red-White-Blue**

It is believed that the Red-White-Blue sheeting was first manufactured in Japan in the 1960s and was imported to Hong Kong through a Taiwanese manufacturer in 1975.<sup>3</sup> Composed of materials from the outset synthetic in nature, the bag is made from plastic sheeting woven from either poly-ethylene (PE) or polypropylene (PP) threads in a crisscross weave. The low cost, strength, and durability of these plastics resulted in their widespread use in industry and construction during the 1960s. Eventually, these plastics supplanted canvas for many different industrial purposes. As Japan became unable to meet this demand, in the 1970s Taiwan overtook it to become the major manufacturer and exporter of Red-White-Blue.<sup>4</sup>

The reason why this plastic sheeting is called Red-White-Blue in Hong Kong is unknown. In the manufacturing industry, it was referred to as Red-Blue-White or 'grass-mat cloth', because its weave is similar to that of the grass mat.<sup>5</sup> However, these terms were rarely used outside of the plastics industry. A direct reading would put it down to its combination of colours, but in fact a variety of colours are available such as red, black, white, blue, green, and orange, with other colour combinations such as white-blue and red-white stripes. Some believe that the choices or combinations of colour have no definite origin and appear to be the result of economic imperatives rather than aesthetic considerations.<sup>6</sup> However, it is generally believed that, traditionally, Taiwan people held funerary and prosperity rites at home using temporary pavilions covered with blue-and-white striped fabric. Later, red – representing luck and fortune in China – was added to the colour scheme for celebratory occasions, resulting in the typical Red-White-Blue.<sup>7</sup> Although such colour combinations are common to many national flags, the evocation of national identity from the plastic sheeting had

not arisen from its colour scheme but from the endowed symbolic meaning of the material itself. More importantly, the representation and cultural affiliation of this plastic sheeting have close associations with the social reality of Hong Kong. Given the mundane nature of the material, the bag seems to have been named out of convenience. Widely circulated among the locals, 'Red-White-Blue' has consequently become the bag's official name.

In the 1970s, Red-White-Blue sheeting made in Taiwan was imported to Hong Kong to meet the huge demand of local construction projects then being undertaken. Hong Kong was undergoing an economic boom and new buildings were going up at an astonishing rate. This created great demand for Red-White-Blue on construction sites, where it was used as a covering material for scaffolding to prevent falling debris. Red-White-Blue plastic sheeting is ubiquitous in Hong Kong's landscape. It is used for temporary shelters in Hong Kong's squatter areas, where immigrants and the poor live, and in rural areas as protective covers for farmers' plots. Although large-scale construction projects have declined over recent years, numerous ongoing, small-scale city renovation projects sustain the demand for Red-White-Blue tarpaulins in Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to its industrial usage, the Red-White-Blue sheeting was made into cheap, lightweight carrier bags in Hong Kong itself, and popularized among Hong Kong's working class. One of its many connotations has evolved from the use of the carrier bag by ordinary Hong Kong citizens, who frequently travel between Hong Kong and mainland China. The low-cost Red-White-Blue carrier bag has thus become synonymous with endurance, owing in part to the material's sturdy qualities and industrial usage. The bag also symbolizes the act of border crossing, thus embodying the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. The image and nature of border-crossing travellers carrying a Red-White-Blue bag has developed especially since the 1980s, when mainland China adopted an open policy encouraging population flow between the two regions.<sup>9</sup> Red-White-Blue bags thus have an intimate connection with the social history of Hong Kong and the lives of its people. As a piece of material culture, the bag embodies Hong Kong's collective creativity while serving as a symbol of frequent border crossings.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that this transnational textile originated in Japan, the fabric has garnered its authenticity as the quintessence of Hong Kong, where it became instilled into the everyday life of the locals. Even the profile of the bag's creator, Mr. Lee Wah – now in his

ninetieth year – encompasses the enduring and industrious image of postwar Hong Kong. There, equipped with a Singer household sewing machine, Lee Wah established his Red-White-Blue bag business in 1953. He made his name with the manufacture of canvas bags, most of which were made into school bags for schoolchildren. When polyethylene was imported from Taiwan in the 1970s, Lee responded to the practical needs of industry and individuals by making the material into bags. The bag's success was due to its lightweight and water-resistant material, which made it particularly suitable for transporting goods by trucks and for use as a personal tote. Despite producing over seventy bags per day at peak times, Lee's never incorporated nor became a financial partner in a corporation. His devoted crew was a humble family of eight, equipped with a tiny shop front of less than ten square metres. All of his children were essentially raised by his bag manufacturing business.<sup>11</sup>

### **Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue**

However, it was not until recently that the Red-White-Blue material came to represent the identity of Hong Kong's people. In 2004, Hong Kong designer and artist Stanley Wong (otherwise known as 'Another mountainman') curated a thematic exhibition, entitled *Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue*, in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum. The exhibit took the plastic material as its medium and as a subject matter. Numerous artists and designers participated, along with cultural scholars, writers, and poets, in an effort to interpret the meaning of the Red-White-Blue fabric. The material was promoted as a representation of Hong Kong's identity, referring in particular to a collective image of Hong Kong's working class in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>12</sup>

The Red-White-Blue was further associated with Hong Kong's culture and people through the popular press, which published responses to the artworks in the exhibition. Moreover, the link between Red-White-Blue-inspired works of art and a unitary notion of Hong Kong's identity was further enforced by institutional discourse. For example, the museum curator maintains that this 'mundane and banal Red-White-Blue material popularized by artists' has 'assumed an illustrative visual identity through different conceptual interpretations to represent the spirit of the Hong Kong people'.<sup>13</sup>

The collective initiative saw artists, scholars, and cultural critics join forces to imbue Red-White-Blue cloth with symbolic meaning. According to cultural scholar Matthew Turner, 'red-white-blue stripes may be imagined as an unofficial kind of flag of the people'. The neatly reserved stripes 'take on an almost caricature symbolism of proletarian purity'. Accordingly, the bag is 'defiantly local and prudently patriotic', 'innocently authentic

and internationally sophisticated', 'wickedly illegitimate and institutionally legitimized'. The ubiquitous textile draws on the colonial promotion of 'the Hong Kong Story'.<sup>14</sup> Between the lines and stripes of the bag lies the perfect symbol of Hong Kong cultural identity.

### **Social fabrication**

The Red-White-Blue carrier bag is a chameleon. The multiple symbolic meanings of the Red-White-Blue bag are characterized by the particular social reality of a specific moment, and a specific community that has a history of migration, that is hardworking, and is hoping for a better future. It gained the name 'the rural worker's bag' to represent frugality, affiliated with working-class identity in Hong Kong. The highly utilitarian fabric was invested with the symbolic meanings associated with the modern Hong Kong lifestyle, leading to its establishment as a cultural icon in the city.

The rise of Red-White-Blue in post-colonial Hong Kong has much to do with the city's struggle to incorporate and negotiate itself under the iron governance of Chinese authority. Following ninety-nine years of British colonization, Hong Kong returned to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997. It is now a Chinese special administrative region (SAR) under the regime of 'one country, two systems'. Formulated by Deng Xiaoping, this constitutional principle allows Hong Kong to continue to have its own political system to oversee legal, economic, and financial affairs (including external relations with foreign countries) for fifty years following the handover of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997.<sup>15</sup> Hong Kong is a society that combines the legacy of British colonialism with a heavy Chinese influence. The economic and political separation from the Chinese mainland during the colonial era meant that Hong Kong was greatly exposed to Japanese and Western cultures. Hong Kong's culture is often described as a hybrid and sharply different from Chinese orthodoxy. The disparity in ideological and material conditions set the people of Hong Kong apart from their mainland counterparts on issues such as identity, politics, nationalism, and patriotism. Hong Kong's people have an ambiguous and complicated relationship with their nation. They have an undeniable cultural attachment to the mainland. However, their varied political ideologies are tainted with scepticism. Tensions caused by political and cultural differences cast long shadows across the mainland-Hong Kong divide. Human rights violations and corruption are widespread in China: one high-profile example is the Tiananmen crackdown on 4 June 1989, which has left a deep historical wound.<sup>16</sup> Although the inhabitants of Hong Kong started to appropriate a new dual Hong Kong-Chinese identity and came to rely

on the mainland for economic advancement,<sup>17</sup> many sensitive political issues and dubious public events disappointed the locals.<sup>18</sup> Among the many Hong Kong– mainland conflicts are those over the erosion of colonial heritage sites; the reinterpretation of the Basic Law to undermine the freedom and rights of Hong Kong residents; and the implementation of national education in which the communist and nationalist ideology of China’s government are acknowledged in the curriculum. The administrative government of Hong Kong failed to represent and fight for its people. The temptation to please the Beijing authorities saw SAR officials cooperate with the pro-mainland forces at the expense of their own citizens.

All these controversial issues have led to rising fears that Hong Kong is losing touch with its traditional values. In 2004, the year of the exhibition *Building Hong Kong: Redwhiteblue*, more than two hundred professionals and academics signed a declaration calling for the defence of Hong Kong’s core values, which they believed were being eroded. Published as an advertisement in several local newspapers, the manifesto included values such as ‘liberty, democracy, human rights, rule of law, fairness, social justice, peace and compassion, integrity and transparency, plurality, respect for individuals, and upholding professionalism’.<sup>19</sup> The organizers claimed a strong sense of helplessness and rising frustration in the community; Beijing’s then-recent interference in Hong Kong’s affairs had undermined trust and social freedom. The foregrounding of Red-White-Blue as a cultural symbol in the museum exhibition was set against a backdrop of social unrest. The popularity of the bag, the cloth, and the exhibition coincided with the fear of losing one’s soul, the call for unity in Hong Kong, and a need for a space of belonging at a time when local identity and principled values were under threat.

### **Mobilizing Red-White-Blue**

In 2005, the year following the museum exhibition, the Red-White-Blue bag was proudly displayed in the Hong Kong pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale. Stanley Wong was chosen as one of the two artists to represent Hong Kong with a Red-White-Blue art installation. The pavilion featured a Hong Kong-style teahouse with window frames and walls entirely covered in Red-White-Blue fabric. The exhibition’s theme was an ‘investigation of a journey to the West by micro and polo’.<sup>20</sup> It loosely referenced Marco Polo’s travels from Europe to East Asia. In this regard, the two selected Hong Kong artists travelled west in the computer age. Wong represented ‘micro’ while the other artist embodied ‘polo’. By creating an installation based on Hong Kong’s teahouses – another important symbol of the city – Wong addressed the importance of face-to-face communication for society in the micro-technological age.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the teahouse was intended to re-establish human contact in the

hope that interacting with others over a cup of tea would help people to reflect on societal issues and to regain focus. The juxtaposition of tea drinking on the one hand, and Red-White-Blue on the other, further fortified the material's iconic status to the world.

Following Wong's successful revamping of Red-White-Blue, more local artists were inspired to use it as a material in their artistic productions, leading to a mushrooming effect that reinforced its cultural significance. Popular culture has also taken its inherent symbolic meaning to an expanded audience. In 2013, a social enterprise called rwb330 was established to promote the spirit of 'Positive Hong Kong' through Red-White-Blue. This non-profit organization is a collaborative project between the New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (New Life) and the Urban Renewal Authority of Hong Kong. It supports holistic health and helps people recovering from mental illness to integrate into society, and hence to achieve self-reliance. Products made from Red-White-Blue sheeting are hand crafted by participants in New Life's sheltered workshops, and then sold in stores.<sup>22</sup> Here, the textile is taken to represent the organizational idea of a positive Hong Kong. In the words of the rwb330 collective, Red-White-Blue is omnipresent, at construction sites, hawkers' stalls, Lowu border, and everywhere. It witnesses the economic boom in the 60s-70s when Hong Kong people were striving for life. Accordingly, the rwb homecoming bag evokes collective memories embodying the industrial story of Hong Kong.<sup>23</sup> Here again, to the people of Hong Kong, Red-White-Blue is seen as a metaphor for fortitude, adaptability, and industriousness.

An attempt to foster holistic health by means of a piece of cloth endowed with symbolic meanings may seem novel, even wacky. The case in point is that during the process of indigenization, Red-White-Blue cloth was widely embraced by the people of Hong Kong as being emblematic of their collective memory.<sup>24</sup> When the city faced the possible loss of its cultural identity, the preservation of values and portrayal of a common destiny were called in as saviour. When history has been misrepresented and partially erased, holding on to old artefacts, monuments, and historic sites allows the community to affirm its own past and its sense of belonging to a particular geographic locale.<sup>25</sup> The transformation of Red-White-Blue into an artefact from Hong Kong's industrial past – first as a manufacturing hub with gigantic clothing and textile industries in the 1960s and 1970s, and then, having overtaken Italy, as the world's largest clothing exporter in 1973 – was completed as Hong Kong became a white-collar city with major financial and professional services starting in the 1980s. Since then, Hong Kong has become an important financial

centre and international metropolis. The economic success of the city has led to a considerable rise in people's incomes and the consumption of international fashion.<sup>26</sup> The substantially improved standard of living, and the rise of the urban landscape, stood in stark contrast to the economically retrograde mainland. In addition, Hong Kong's unique creative identity gradually took shape in the 1960s alongside the emergence of its own cultural industries, notably in art, design, fashion, literature, film, music, and television, all of which fed the daily appetites of Hong Kong audiences.<sup>27</sup> The affirmation of history and the memory of the post-colonial city thus saw Red-White-Blue framed within the city's collective memory as a fabric of remembrance, and in many ways, as a 'bag of remembrance'. It held out the hope that restoring historical memory can be achieved through engaging with the imaginings stirred by the bag. In this regard, rehabilitation through Red-White-Blue functions as a safeguard for a distinctive cultural identity, invigorating its cultural heritage to imbue Hong Kong with a strength and determination that can favourably position the city internationally, nationally, regionally, and locally.

### **Consuming Red-White-Blue bags**

Since the late 1990s, the manufacture of Red-White-Blue carrier bags has moved to mainland China, where lower labour and manufacturing costs prevail. However, users have noted a decline in quality as demonstrated by a looser weave, resulting in a material now less sturdy. Zhejiang Daxin Industry Co. Ltd, a firm situated in an eastern province of China, mass-manufactures tens of thousands of bags per order, and distributes them worldwide (see figure 12.1). Now a cheaply made export from China, Red-White-Blue carrier bags have found a global audience. Because China has remained economically competitive in low-end production, the vast majority of mainland exports that reach retail consumers are mass-market products. This includes the carrier bag, offered in a wide range of plaids and colours. It can be found in all corners of the world, in a variety of outlets, from pound shops, hardware stores, corner shops, liquor stores, street markets, and so on. Costing less than £2 each, the bag has been established as a mass-consumption product for all walks of life.

While China made cheap products available to the rest of the world, they depended, in return, on the world consuming goods from China. From textiles to home appliances, consumer goods, particularly those made in the United States and Western Europe, were generally more expensive prior to China becoming the new workshop of the world. The affordable products made in China fuelled mass consumption globally, giving rise to an increasingly wide class of mass consumers.<sup>28</sup> The abundance of Chinese consumer goods in our daily lives has made China an inexorable part of our social reality. The consumer no longer calls the origin of the product into question.



Polyethylene production in a Taiwanese factory.

### **Localizing Red-White-Blue bags**

Despite its manufacture in China, the Red-White-Blue bag's longstanding cultural and economic association with Hong Kong allows novel sensibilities, re-imagination, and representation to take place. The versatility, low retail price, and easy availability of the bag means that it has a place in countless households. It is being used in travel and transporting goods across generations, class, and ethnicities, and is not exclusive to non-Western consumers. Although to some it is not regarded as a flattering item, when it comes to practicality, users admire its limitless functionality. In particular, its reputation captured the attention of the migrant, who uses the bag for travel, and the transportation of personal effects, across borders. Red-White-Blues have been adopted as utility bags in strikingly similar ways in different parts of the world. The migrant's use of the bag has subsequently increased the visibility of Red-White-Blue. As we have seen, the bag goes by different nicknames in different places. At first glance, the common denominator in these names is their relationship to the embedded cultures of migration in the various locales. Colonialization, border control, free movement, immigration law, political turmoil, socio-economic difficulties; the paraphernalia of exile, the experience of living abroad, a sense of belonging, and identity politics: all are intrinsically woven into the bag.

Upon closer examination, each regional nickname for the bag reflects a different migration story. For instance, the 'Ghana must go' bag is entwined with a history of politics, immigration, dislocation, fear,

fracture, and sudden enforced exile. It entails the various expulsions of immigrants that Ghana and Nigeria engaged in between the 1960s and 1980s. The phrase 'Ghana must go' was directed in Nigeria at incoming Ghanaian refugees during the political unrest of the 1980s, and it was applied to the plaid carrier bags during the 1983 Expulsion Order, when illegal immigrants were given fourteen days to leave Nigeria.<sup>29</sup> Around two and a half million Ghanaians and other foreigners used the bags as makeshift luggage when they were forcibly deported. Many were barely able to pack their belongings before fleeing, expelled with only a few hours' or a few days' notice. During this tumultuous time, the 'Ghana must go' bag was exceedingly practical as luggage because of its generous capacity, light weight, and affordability. Packed in a hurry for fear of safety, the bag provided an immediate necessity for the Ghanaians. Pointing to repeated upheavals in Ghana and Nigeria, the cheap, practical, and functional 'Ghana must go' bag is now associated by many people with loss and division.<sup>30</sup>

Today, the bag continues to be used for transportation of goods and personal belongings in Nigeria and Ghana. The 'Ghana must go bag' is as familiar to the locals as world-famous celebrities. Using the phrase as a title, in 2013 author Taiye Selasi published a novel in which she told the complicated story of an African-American family.<sup>31</sup> Exploring the theme of family via the lens of immigration, the book provides insight into the cultures in Nigeria and Ghana. A metaphor for Ghanaian immigration, 'Ghana must go', while largely entailing movement within or between Ghana and Nigeria, is also about their socio-political realities. In 2016, the Nigerian film director Frank Rajah Arase released an award-winning movie using the phrase 'Ghana must go' as its title, albeit unrelated to the novel.<sup>32</sup> A light-hearted comedy featuring the conflicts between Nigerians and Ghanaians, the movie unfolds the story of the refusal of a Ghanaian father to let his daughter marry a Nigerian due to the 'Ghana must go' saga. In one dramatic scene of house-moving day, in which a pile of the signature bags has a notable presence, the character chants, 'Ghana must go bag in this house!' Not only has the bag a noticeable presence in the movie poster, it was also used as a prop for the celebrities who attended the movie premiere (see figure 12.2). Some three decades after the expulsion, Red-White-Blue bags, or 'Ghana must go' bags in this instance, are still a potent symbol of the unfortunate treatment of Ghanaian migrants in their adopted country.

It is telling that the bag acquired distinctive names only within communities of migrants and immigrants. Elsewhere in popular culture, it remains nameless or is merely referred to by its origin or functionality. In Sri Lanka, for example, the bag is referred to simply as 'China bag'.<sup>33</sup> It is very useful in the transportation of goods due to its durability and water-resistant properties, much appreciated given the island nation's unpredictable weather conditions. The plastic material itself is widely

available and is largely used to protect street stalls and rooftops from the heady sun and drenching rain. For Sri Lankans, the material, as well as the bag, is part of everyday experience. They might not come to acknowledge the cloth and the bags as identity markers, but in a nuanced way, they have acquired meaning because the material is closely associated with the local daily life.<sup>34</sup> In Africa, the bag is imbued with the emotions of a family member's homecoming after a long day of work in a faraway place.<sup>35</sup> The bag is a symbol of their hard work in the city. This diffusion of commodities and cultural practices, as analysed by Arjun Appadurai, may paradoxically enhance cultural differentiation under the rubric of globalization.<sup>36</sup> The Red-White-Blue bag is local everywhere and simultaneously global.<sup>37</sup>



Ghana Must Go film premiere poster, 2016, featuring several Ghana Must Go bags alongside the Desamour Film Company's movie actors and actresses.

### **The Louis Vuitton replica bag**

The embedded stories of the Red-White-Blue bag in various regions are nearly infinite. Yet the fame of the bag has stretched beyond migrant and immigrant communities and ventured into the fashion marketplace. The most notable and perhaps controversial example of this new iteration of Red-White-Blue is the Louis Vuitton plaid bag of 2007, by Demna Gvasalia, bag designer under the artistic direction of Marc Jacobs who was working for Louis Vuitton at the time (see figure 12.3). This new artefact by a high-end producer of luxury handbags and other fashionable items is a leather replica of the ubiquitous Red-White-Blue bag, labelled with the well-known Louis Vuitton logo in a passport-stamp style. This is not the first time that the Red-White-Blue motif has been adopted to make a high-fashion commodity. Several brands have refashioned the look to suit their collections: Helmut Lang for the spring-summer 2003 men's wear, Comme des Garçons for a handbag in 2004, and Jack Spade for the Chinatown

Collection in 2005. However, Louis Vuitton's adoption of the plaid bag in its authentic pattern and shape as a fashion commodity was a one-of-a-kind venture. The bag's release immediately generated a worldwide response. The international fashion media generally praised its creativity, boldness, and clever interpretation of a mundane item. By 2006 in Hong Kong, it was generally understood that the now-omnipresent Red-White-Blue bag was originally from China. There was a certain irony in Vuitton copying cheap Chinese produce to be sold under their label for large sums of money, given the countless counterfeit LV handbags for sale on the Chinese black market.

The critics of the Red-White-Blue replica bag described it as the quintessential example of the fashion industry's practice of 'slumming' (also discussed in relation to Vivienne Westwood in Chapter 11). One fashion blogger, Koranteng Ofori-Amaah, called it 'a trope in the rarefied heights of *haute couture*', claiming that 'we have seen much appropriation of the sort' in recent years.<sup>38</sup> The watchdogs who monitor the ethics of the fashion industry put this particular creation for Vuitton under scrutiny. In essence, two antagonists – Western capitalism and the 'Third World' slum – are at play in this case of plagiarism. Vuitton's version of Red-White-Blue bags assumed centre stage in debates on geo-cultural power relations, raising serious questions about race, gender, class, and most importantly, the inequalities as to who controls and benefits from the exploitation of cultural resources.<sup>39</sup> Such 'exploitation chic', as critics described the Vuitton reinterpretation, essentially shores up differences and fortifies cultural boundaries between rich and poor, or North and South. Another group of observers denounced the practice of cultural appropriation as 'smuggling'. Accordingly, it can only operate on a one-way power flow from the top down, from the hegemonic West to the Other.<sup>40</sup>

In Hong Kong, comments on Red-White-Blue Vuitton replicas were mixed. Detractors called it 'irrelevant' and a 'copycat'. Others, however, praised the Red-White-Blue spin-off in the belief that it would spark a trend that other global brands would follow. For its part, the Vuitton brand unreservedly denied its connection with either the original Red-White-Blue bag or with the popular culture of Hong Kong. There, pride and patriotism were engendered by this incident of plagiarism, so much so that the Red-White-Blue bag's iconic status was even more firmly embedded in its own locality. The 2005 representation of Red-White-Blue material in the 51st Venice Biennale had been a defining moment for the city of Hong Kong, showcasing its ownership to the world, so that by 2007, the authentic Red-White-Blue bag had been elevated to the status of a cultural icon and a major part of the Hong Kong community's 'feel-good' factor, which could be shared only among local people. Despite the many versions and

interpretations by artists, designers, and commercial labels, for many people around the world the essence of the Red-White-Blue lies in its authenticity and its association with Hong Kong. In the eyes of local people in Hong Kong, if Vuitton could adopt their bag for commercial advancement, so could local retailers. For example, one of Hong Kong's household product retailers called G.O.D, and known for incorporating local cultural icons and images into its product range, offered a variation of the Red-White-Blue in the form of a handbag in a contemporary style back in 2002.<sup>41</sup> In another example, the multi-brand store based in Hong Kong, The CLOT teamed up with Adidas to release RWB sneakers, resulting in a 2015 collaboration under the name CLOT Consortium x Adidas ZZ Flux. Their promotions featured ordinary Hong Kong citizens in RWB sneakers posing against the backdrop of local scenes, including a symbolic Hong Kong teahouse.<sup>42</sup> The focus was on the enduring celebration of local identity, ordinary culture, pride, and belonging within the community.



Louis Vuitton's replica of a Red-White-Blue bag in tight woven leather; spring/summer collection 2007.

In mainland China and Ghana, responses to the Vuitton reinterpretation of Red-White-Blue were not so generous. Anger, bitterness, and a sense of injustice were expressed. Comments such as 'cheap', 'working class', and 'distasteful' were recorded.<sup>43</sup> Far from the Western catwalk, countless people in mainland China continued to use traditional Red-White-Blue carrier bags as they always had, filling them with personal belongings, consumables, and gifts. Chinese factory workers who lived apart from their loved ones for much of the year saw the traditional carrier bag as a symbol of their exhaustion and their

longing to see their families. The bag accompanied their stressful journey home, and denoted hardship and poverty. It did not speak to choice, joy, or celebration. In Africa, the Ghanaians learned of the Vuitton bag and called it 'another colonial invasion rip-off'.<sup>44</sup> The bag pointed to the 'Ghana must go' saga and an era of political unrest, the consequences of which many were still living through. The 'Ghana must go' bag, to the Ghanaians, is an emblem of suffering, exigency, and division. Vuitton's rendition dug up the painful memories of exile. Further criticism pointed to the materiality of the bag and its lack of utility as luggage. The Vuitton replica contradicted the functionality of the original. It is made of two square metres of tightly woven leather, marketed at a retail price of £1,400. In another words, it is heavy, heftily priced, and impractical. If resilience and a long lifespan were meant to be part of the bag's DNA – to borrow a phrase used increasingly in high-fashion marketing – the replica was likely a faddish mutation – forgivable, perhaps, if it had been a collaboration with a Hong Kong artist. The thought process behind the bag remained a mystery: no rationale behind Vuitton's version was explained by LVHM (the French holding company, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy).<sup>45</sup> The hefty price tag of the Vuitton replica distances this interpretation of Red-White-Blue from any hint of social inequality. The replica would never withstand enduring use, underscoring its irrelevance given the short life of any fashion craze. The expensive Vuitton bag was the antithesis of the cheap Red-White-Blue. It was high-end fashion created to be discarded when the brand-conscious consumer grew tired of the look. While fashionistas took pride in their latest Vuitton creation, the users of the original bag looked on with a grim sense of humour at a distance. Vuitton's replica bag is ironic at best, mocking at worst.

### **Why Red-White-Blue matters**

Red-White-Blue bags have been endowed with meanings by artistic production, commodification, and popular culture in the specific local context of Hong Kong. The carrier bag, together with the plastic sheeting of which it is made, has come to denote the spirit of the city (see figure 12.4). It serves as the material expression of locality and is a popular cultural icon embraced by Hong Kong residents. This highly symbolic textile artefact has mobilized local communities into responding to cultural, social, and political issues, which in turn has transformed the cultural dynamics of a city once historically perceived as apolitical. The association between Red-White-Blue and Hong Kong is unquestionable: the Hong Kong-ness of Red-White-Blue lies in its meanings as assigned by the people of Hong Kong.



The now-iconic Red-White-Blue bag included in a wall mural celebrating 'All Things Hong Kong', photographed in 2014.

With the worldwide distribution of Red-White-Blue bags made in China, the little-known origins of the original artefact allows it to become part of the everyday realities of many communities, especially among particular migrants and immigrants. Around the globe, bag users invest Red-White-Blues with their collective memories and experiences that address specific social, political, and economical conditions. The Red-White-Blue has been localized worldwide, with many a place assigning a name that speaks only for the community at hand and of its particular struggles and hardship. When Western fashion turned the bag into a luxury item, communities that understood the original artefact to be part of their cultural identities responded with vitriol. Through the process of indigenization, the original Red-White-Blue bag has been endlessly reconstructed and reimagined in ways that embodied patriotism, belonging, and cultural identities. The beauty of Red-White-Blue bags lies in the eye of the beholders. In their eyes, its fullest expression is to be found in the 'four M's' of fashion – Mode: the way it is adopted; Manners: the way it serves as a means of expression for the communities concerned; Mores: the way in which it unfolds the life of the individuals in those communities; and Markets: the way these communities are defined demographically and psychologically.<sup>46</sup> Red-White-Blue bags are not considered to be fashion items for these communities, and it inarguably withstands the currency of fashionable trends. Unlike the infamous chop suey, which accentuates Chinese sensibilities only when eaten in the United States, the 'glocalization' of Red-White-Blue bags makes it at once indigenous to user localities and an artefact with universal appeal.

### Postscript

The trend of 'Chinatown chic', or 'migrant worker chic', continues to

hit the headlines in the fashion press. The fall 2013 ready-to-wear collections as shown in New York City by Céline and by Stella McCartney, included outfits that featured bright, graphic plaid prints reminiscent of Red-White- Blue. Céline denied any relation to Hong Kong or China but referred to the plaid of Tati, a bazaar-like department store situated in a section of Paris inhabited by African migrants. Tati uses a distinctive pink plaid on its store logo and on its shopping bags. On close examination, the plaid that was used by Céline clearly resembles the many different colour combinations of the Red-White-Blue material. Further, had Tati's plaid been plagiarized, the Paris fashion label would not easily get away with it.

As luxury brands venture deeper into exploitation chic, Balenciaga was the newcomer that adopted a Red-White-Blue bag into its autumn-winter collection for 2016. The press discussed the issue from the perspective of fashion law, but nothing came of the chatter about intellectual property rights and ethics. One headline that read 'Balenciaga did not "copy" traditional Thai shopping bags for F/W16' was telling in its denial of imitation.<sup>47</sup> Asian street culture and non-institutionalized practice continue to be expropriated by the Western fashion system. To the amusement of some and the dismay of others, the drawing of the ever-finer line between mere appropriation and (illegal) copying in high fashion is bound to continue.

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