

HIP-HOP STREET FASHION, IDENTITY, AND CROSS-CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN THE ASIAN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

Hip hop fashion originates from black American youths in the 1990s. The style of clothing has replicated and evolved from street fashion in inner cities where ethnic American blacks are the majority, to suburbs where the white middle-class predominates. On a world scale, these fashions are evident not only in Asian-American and Asian-Canadian communities, but also on the streets of Japan, Korea, China, and other industrialized economies. This paper examines whether (i) Asian-Americans and Asian-Canadians serve as a bridge to Asians, or (ii) Asians are adopting fashion trends directly.

Ties run deep between the fashion styles in which a diasporic community dresses, and the hybrid identity in which they affiliate. This pattern of behaviour can be framed as cross-appropriation in the disclosing of new worlds. Contextual backgrounds are first provided on (i) clothing as a tool for identity, (ii) the origins of hip-hop fashion, and (iii) the origins of North America's diasporic Asian community. The phenomenon of hip-hop street fashion in the Asian diaspora is then described. Theories on identity and cross-cultural appropriation are outlined. Potential trends in the future are then projected.

INTRODUCTION

We will begin by discussing how fashion directly affects and displays identity. In three contextual backgrounds, (i) fashion and identity, (ii) hip hop fashion, and (iii) Asians arriving in North America.

Contextual background: Fashion And identity

Clothing is a tool for identity. Bovone and Crane argue one only has partial access to another person's identity through appearance. The body is the basic element for the

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discerning of that person's character or personality. Since the body must show itself clothed, it is impossible to disregard clothing, or consider it an irrelevant accessory to an individual's identity.

In pre-modern society, and partly in modern industrial society as well, identity was taken for granted and was established by certain variables such as your family, geographic origin, community, institution, then later by occupation and social class. In pre-modern society there then became two categories of clothing, that of nobility, and that of the peasants. Now in modern society, we have clothes for work, home, and dressing up (Bovone, 2006).

The problem of identity becomes more serious when identity is considered as something that needs to be achieved. In this sense, identity is both a modern and a post-modern problem. If the modern problem of identity was how to construct an identity and keep it stable, then the postmodern problem of identity is primarily how to avoid the fixation of your identity and how to keep your options open (Bovone, 2006). Modern identity is not entirely stable, but its mobility is guided. The choices made by the postmodern individual compares to a restless tourist or gambler, in something Bauman calls “liquid modernity.”

Fashionable clothes and accessories provide meaningful examples of the current changes, as if they were metaphors of our identity choices. In modern class societies, clothes were “closed texts with fixed meanings,” and in fragmented post-modern societies, clothes are “open texts,” that represent different social groups in different ways. In the modern age, a hat was a closed obligatory text that clearly revealed the social status of the person wearing it. In post-modern fashion, it is the t-shirt that anybody can inscribe a message on, that gives the wearer no sort of precise identity regarding gender or status, or evident geographic origin (Bovone, 2006).

Clothes are material objects, which specifically respond to our immaterial needs, and must therefore be considered as “cultural objects” to be studied through the practices that attribute meaning to them. The meanings of these cultural objects are concealed, fluctuating, and changing. Fashion products have a value on the market because they succeed in selling an idea or an experience, as well as an opportunity to communicate it to others. Fashion is a form of transferring identities. The link between personal identity and fashion is often expressed in negative terms: fashion reduces individuals freedoms and diminishes their choice. Fashion is often perceived as hegemonic. What becomes fashionable is the result of negotiation among individuals and collective actors who have different levels of economic and symbolic power. (Bovone, 2006).

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Contextual background: Hip hop fashion originated with inner city black youths in America

New York is internationally recognized as the birthplace of hip-hop culture. Trends such as baggy jeans and not wearing shoe laces were created by the disenfranchised black communities. Down-filled coats and Timberland boots came into style in the 1990's, and were worn by many inner-city young men not out of fashion, but out of necessity. Many drug dealers would be forced to wait outside in cold weather for extended periods of time, forcing them to spend the money to purchase the warmest clothes possible. The nature of the drug trade required them to stand in one spot all day and all day night, allowing them to maximize the amount of clients they could service, as well as guard the "turf" they possessed. As many hip-hop and rap groups were financed through drugs, many scenes in rap videos would depict young men wearing down-filled coats and Timberland boots, thus spreading the fashion trend (de Longville, 2005).

Trends such as as baggy jeans and shoe laces were inspired by how young black inner-city males would wear their clothing after being released from jail. In jail, men would often be given the wrong size clothing, shoes with no laces, and no belt because it could be used as a weapon. As a result, convicts returning to their neighbourhoods would become accustomed to wearing clothes in such a manner, and spawned fashion trends. Another theory states young men wore their pants low and baggy in order to conceal weapons, conceal drugs, create the illusion that they are more muscular, and to demonstrate that they were recently frisked by police (de Longville, 2005).

Drug dealers and pimps also inspired a great deal of street fashion. Big gold chains and loud flashy clothing were meant to symbolize success in the drug and sex-trade, and influenced many rappers such as Run DMC or LL Cool J, 50 Cent and Snoop Dogg.

Contextual background: How Asians arrived in North American Cities

In order to understand why there is a link between Asian diasporic communities and contemporary Asian hip-hop street fashion, we must first examine how Asian immigrants first came to North American cities.

The Chinese came to Canada in search of gold during the Fraser River Gold Rush in the 1850s , and to work to construct the Canadian National Railway. They worked in mining, railroad labour, and low paying jobs. From 1882 until the 1920's bills were passed to exclude them from buying Crown lands, excluding them from voting, and in 1885 a head tax of \$50 was introduced to discourage Chinese immigration. In 1900 the head tax was raised to \$100, leading to a 1923 Chinese Immigration Act entry exclusion (Li, 1998). The Chinese continued to migrate to Canada and the United States to become the largest East-Asian visible minority.

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Japanese people immigrated to America to escape the Shogun and lack of opportunity. Overseas immigration didn't occur until after the 19th century because it was prohibited by Japanese rule. By 1637, the Tokugawa Shogunate passed a law that would execute anybody who left or tried to return to Japan. Japanese sailors were sent out to find Western technology as early as 1834 to 1875, evidenced by over 60 Japanese shipwrecks found on the North American coast. In 1884, 80,000 Japanese began to immigrate to Hawaii to work, entering the US, Canada, and South America. There was originally a lot of tension for these Japanese immigrants, particularly in Brazil. The Japanese government even encouraged the Japanese Brazilians to return to Japan by buying their air tickets. From 1897 to 1907 15,000 Japanese arrived in Canada, with 10,000 arriving in the United States (Makabe, 1998).

Vietnamese people immigrated to North America to escape the Vietnam war. In 1975, the fall of Saigon created panicked efforts to leave the country, creating a refugee wave. The first migration wave to Canada was in the early 1950's and 1960s to Quebec Canada, which contained mostly wealthy Vietnamese students studying abroad. The second immigration wave occurred in 1978 and 1992. They were called the "boat people" and settled in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. The boat people were all ethnically Vietnamese and came from professional, bureaucratic, military and academic backgrounds. They left Vietnam for two reasons: internally, there was terror and imprisonment; and externally, the US Trade embargo had left Vietnam with a very poor economy (Darden, 2004)

Cambodian people immigrated to North America, namely California, to escape the Khmer Rouge. A large population of Cambodian immigrants were forced to flee Cambodia during the rule of the Khmer Rouge army. The Khmer Rouge was an organization that attempted to socially re-engineer Cambodia, which resulted in genocide, famine, lack of medicine, executions and torture (New Internationalist, 1993). The majority of Cambodian immigrants to Canada arrived during the 1980s under refugee status. The few Cambodians that settled in Canada before this period mainly resided in Quebec, and were Cambodian diplomats, business people, or international students (McLellan, 2008). Canadian immigration data has revealed drastic shifts in Cambodian arrival rates. In 1980, 3,269 entered Canada however, within only a year the arrival rate declined to 1,302. The arrivals increased in 1983 and fluctuated until 1990, at roughly 700 arrivals per year. In total, 55% of Cambodians were sponsored by the Government of Canada, while 45% were privately sponsored (McLellan, 2008).

Koreans immigrated to North America to learn English and because of religious missionaries. Before 1960, there were restrictions for Koreans to immigrate out of their country due to the rule of Japan from 1910-1945. There are records suggesting that back in 1915 the first small group of Korean immigrants were students who came to Canada to study. These Korean immigrants took advantage of the late immigration policy and stayed in Canada. By the end of the 1970s there was a huge wave of Korean

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immigrants to the United States changing their immigration policy and naturalization. Korean education became sponsored by American private venues or American missionaries, allowing Koreans to move overseas to further their education, and also have the option to leave (Darden, 2004).

Entry into Korean universities is very competitive, so many Korean parents saw sending their children overseas as a viable alternative. Upon graduating, some of those youths had issues finding work back in Korea, and ended up settling in Canada. By the 1990's a "kirogi" family structure phenomenon occurred. The Korean government started an English campaign, and learning English became a very high priority. Kirogi literally means "wild goose" in Korean, to describe a wife immigrating to Canada with her children for the sole purpose of educating them in English for a few years, while the husband stayed in Korea to work. Kirogi families preferred Canada because some cities allowed you to attend school for free once you had a residence permit. The Canadian government eventually figured this out and began to place policies to prevent the abuse of their educational systems.

As evident above, there were many different reasons for East-Asians to come to North America and become part of the cultural mosaic. These Asian groups mostly settled in North America's major cities, including San Fransco, Los Angeles, Vancouver, Toronto, New York and Montreal.

CULTURAL INTERMINGLING

Although historically cultural intermingling and mixing has been viewed as a negative activity, cultural intermingling within the context of hip-hop street fashion has proven to be a positive activity. Diasporic Asian street fashion is a direct result of cultural intermingling between Asians and North American black and white people. The Asian immigrants settled in North American cities, and identified with other minorities such as the black population.

How cultures intermingle

Friedman (1998) argues there are three types of cultural mixing: (i) the fusion of differences and creation of something new; (ii) the intermingling of differences and retention of some distinctness, and (iii) the mixing of the already syncretic. Friedman also argues identities cannot be located solely in the continuity of a culture or tradition. Cultural formation is an ongoing process in which the blending of differences is fully as important as their clashing. This can be seen in how Asians began in Asian culture, immigrate to North America, are educated in Western institutions, then live in black neighbourhoods and absorb all three cultures throughout their lives.

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Cultural intermingling historically has been viewed as negative, but is actually an unavoidable step in the evolution of culture. The meaning of hybridity in the English language came from the biological term referring to the cross-breeding of a plant or animal species. Common synonyms such as mongrel, half-breed, crossbreed, and mixed blood have been largely derogatory. In the 19th century, cultural hybridity became a major preoccupation of Western racialism. It was ideologically inseparable from the history of slavery and colonialism. Hybridity was debated in anthropology, religion, politics, popular culture, and the arts (Friedman, 1998).

Monogenists (believers in a single human species) and polygenists (believers in multiple human species) often used hybridity as the battleground for competing theories about race, arguing for the sterility or degeneration of mixed-race offspring or defending the common humanity of the human species (Friedman, 1998). Miscegenation became a taboo threat among colonial subjects. It involved both repulsion from desire, and was forbidden by English and American law but was still widely practiced by white men with women of colour over which they had power (Friedman, 1998).

Due to this history, many people continue to perceive the intermingling of cultures as negative. In this paper, however, the intermingling of diasporic Asians with hip-hop street fashion culture has created something positive and original. This intermingling has spawned a whole new trend of uniquely Asian hip-hop artists and Asian run street-fashion brands. Asian North Americans in the past have received the least amount of visibility and exposure on television, music, and media. In contrast, African North Americans and Latino North Americans have their own diasporic channels and slew of Hollywood actors.

Diasporic Asians in Toronto

Being Asian-Canadian in Toronto has set a foundation for cultural intermingling as an everyday activity. Asian-Canadians often speak their mother language at home. They are instructed in school in English. They eat at Asian restaurants in the Asian community. They thus straddle two or more cultural worlds on a daily basis. This opens Asian-Canadians up for a variety of cultural influences, including the modern culture of hip-hop. Although many Asian-Canadians may watch Chinese speciality channels such as TVB or Omni, channels such as BET and Much Music however are readily accessible and are included in almost all televisions. One may even argue that since Asian-Canadians are by default already disconnected from their home country, they may feel the need to search out new cultures that can be overlaid on their heritage identity.

Fashion has a great deal to do with identity. When Asian-Canadians are quite accustomed to straddling two or more cultural worlds, the influence of mainstream

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television is a next natural step. Many white Canadian young people may be able to easily identify with shows like *The OC* or *The Hills* and subsequently buy into lifestyle beach brands like *Hollister* and *Abercrombie and Fitch*. Asian-Canadians however, do not have Asian-Canadian television show role models for themselves on mainstream television, and may have found it easier to identify with hip-hop music, especially if they already reside in an ethnic ghetto. For lower income Asian-Canadian immigrants, commonalities in day-to-day social issues may result in everyday interactions more like the black minority than with the upper-class white Anglo Saxon population beyond their socioeconomic network.

IDENTITY, CROSS-CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND LEGITIMACY

The niche market for Asian-North American hip-hop is quite small right now so many of them utilize grassroots websites like YouTube to access their followers.

Hip-hop fashions from black America have become mainstream

Within the Asian world, there is Asian hip-hop, Asian rap music, and Asian gangster rap. Elements of hip-hop such as break dancing have even been re-engineered by countries such as Korea, and have invented their own unique style that is equally if not more impressive to original American break dancing. On a side note, Europe has also pioneered its own unique style of break dancing as well. Asian countries usually incorporate the positive, marketable aspects of hip-hop culture such as the clothing, music, cars, dance style, and the gangster image. They do not however incorporate negative elements such as using hard drugs, intense violence, guns, pimping, or images of poverty.

Some Asian-Americans and Asian-Canadians have been looking to black America as a source of fashion trends

Examples of prevalent Asian-North Americans employing hip-hop in their music and style are Edison Chen and *Far East Movement*. *Far East Movement* was the first Asian-American hip-hop group to become commercially successful, and most importantly, culturally accepted. *Far East Movement* started as a grassroots Asian youtube hip-hop group as members of San Francisco's diasporic Chinese community, and rose to fame after they released the song "Like a G6" by sampling another White artist's vocals. They dress in hip-hop fashion and admit in their interviews although they do hip-hop, they do not identify as gangster nor present images of guns in their videos.

Some Asians look directly to black America as a source of fashion trends

Outside of North America, Korea has done the best job of mimicking American hip-hop styles. Groups like *Big Bang* and *YG Family* have pioneered their own version of

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hip-hop and created Korean hip-hop. Korean hip-hop artists rap, have tattoos, corn row their hair, wear baggy clothing, and in some cases have even entirely mimicked American rappers in their music video concepts. They portray themselves like gangsters in music videos, and frequently flash more guns and money than their American counterparts.

Korea has made the greatest effort to mimic American hip-hop. Japan has its own very diverse music scene, and China and Vietnam both do not place as much emphasis on American trends.

Adopting the dress, music and language of black America into Asian-American and Asian-Canadian culture is a cross-appropriation of practices

Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus (1997) state cross appropriation takes place when one disclosive space takes over from another disclosive space a practice that it could not generate on its own but that it finds useful. These disclosive spaces can be at the level of whole cultures or societies of nation-states, which we designated worlds, or they can be at the more restricted levels of professions, industries, companies, and even families, which we designed sub-worlds.

This cross-appropriation can directly be seen in the Asian Diaspora. African-Americans pioneered hip-hop culture, dancing, music, and fashion, that has been adopted by the rest of the world; namely in developed and developing Asian countries such as Korea or Japan, and parts of China. These Asian countries, namely Japan reproduced the styles to suit their market and subsequently created their own fashion trends. These fashion trends were adopted by Asians living in first world states, Korea, Hong Kong, North America, Europe, and are thus dispersed throughout the world.

Trendsetters with legitimacy in both Asian-American and Asian-Canadian communities enable the disclosing of new worlds in fashion

Edison Chen is the greatest example of an Asian-Canadian enabling the disclosure of a new world within fashion. As a Canadian-Chinese actor living in Hong Kong, and acting in mainland China as well as Japan, he has become the legitimate ambassador of diasporic Chinese culture. His father was a Hong Kong media mogul, and he was scouted at the age of 18 when clubbing in Hong Kong's Lan Kwai Fong district (Fong, 2009). From then he starred in numerous films all over Asia, and released albums in numerous languages, reaching wide audiences in various countries.

Edison Chen was involved in a scandal in 2008 involving his collection of sex tapes with various Hong Kong actresses being discovered on his laptop during a repair. This transformed him into a legend, legitimizing him as a diasporic Asian hero worldwide for his rockstar-esque behaviour (Fong, 2009).

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Wang Li Hom is a Taiwanese-American superstar but he doesn't encompass the same ideals of being “gangster” and more so sticks to his Taiwanese identity. Without a “gangster” motif or focusing his music career on rap and hip-hop music, he was unable to lead fashion trends like how Edison Chen has.

Edison Chen's brand *Clot* was inspired by *Bape* and Japanese street fashion brands. *Bape* was the first Japanese street fashion brand to adopt the baggy American gangster fashion style, mimic the iconic Nike Air Force One shoe, and Nike Airmax. The brand *Clot* has allowed Chen to become a fashion icon for the Mainland Chinese, people of Hong Kong, and most of the diasporic Asian community. *Clot* is one of the few recognizable street fashion brands to ever come out of Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong has many local brands for young people, *Clot* was the first to reach the same status as the much acclaimed Japanese street brands. Edison Chen performs music in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese and he's able to fluently conduct his interviews in all three languages. Edison Chen has also released successful rap albums, which is quite unique as most Chinese pop music is dominated by singers. He has not released an album in years but due to his uniqueness as a diasporic Asian hip-hop artist, he still remains relevant, along with his clothing line (Fong, 2009). There has not been an artist like him since.

Hypebeast.com is an online fashion blog, and has become the leading source for street fashion internationally and is based out of Vancouver, Canada, and is run by a group of Chinese-Canadians who are well acquainted with Edison Chen and frequently gain insights from their encounters with him. Diasporic Asians such as Edison Chen, *Far East Movement*, and the owners of Hypebeast.com have contributed greatly to the evolution of hip-hop street fashion culture. These Chinese-Canadians form a network that greatly contribute to a large portion of the international hip-hop street fashion scene.

POTENTIAL TRENDS IN HIP-HOP STREET FASHION IN THE FUTURE

Hip-hop fashion, like all forms of art continues to evolve.

Hip-hop fashion could transform itself within black culture, and Asian diasporic fashions will follow

Hip-hop fashion these days has become merged with numerous other scenes and styles, and constantly strives towards a more higher-end European designer motif. Now that diasporic Asian brands are well established, they need not base themselves entirely off black culture anymore. The fashion world in this decade has become a lot more connected due to the internet, and the now established diasporic Asian brands are free to intermingle with other brands. Diasporic Asian brands no longer need to cross-appropriate in order to proliferate themselves.

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Asian diasporic fashions could become its own niche, and have an influence on black American styles

There is an increasing number of diasporic Asians working in hip-hop street fashion today. Jeff Staple << who is Jeff Staple? >> in an interview was asked, “Why are there so many Asian people working in street-fashion today?” His reply was, “I think it has something to do with there being 1.3 billion Asian people on Earth.” (De Longville, 2005).

Towards a new theory, my intuition and experience most of the earlier North-American Chinese diasporic immigrant generations were from Guangdong (Canton) province and Hong Kong. Cantonese culture and its people's have become the dominant Chinese culture among diasporic Asians in the world. When non-Asians think of Chinese food, they always think of Cantonese style food, despite the fact there are over 55 minorities and hundreds of cooking styles in China. In addition, a large portion of Cantonese people are from Hong Kong, which is greatly influenced by the Japanese hip-hop street fashion market. This makes the Cantonese Chinese diasporic community particularly susceptible to exposure to Asian hip-hop street fashion culture, and thus involved.

Brands such as *The Hundreds*, *Staple*, *Unif*, *N4E1*, and many others are entirely headed by members of the Asian diaspora. These brands produce clothing in a way that is not branded as diasporic Asian clothing, but sells and does very well on the market. In this aspect, members of the Asian-Diaspora are now actively pioneering and participating in the hip-hop street fashion market and are controlling a great portion of the market share. The general audience is not even aware that these brands are being put forth by diasporic Asians. Regardless though, hip-hop is a culture that accepts all ethnicities. When the CEO's of these diasporic Asian brands feature themselves in interviews, it gives the younger Asian diasporic generation a sense of pride, and stirs no controversy whatsoever. It has become generally accepted that diasporic Asians can design clothes for the hip-hop community just as well as anybody else, and sometimes better.

Clot, on the contrary borrows directly from Chinese culture and integrates it into hip-hop culture to sell it. Employing designs such as Chinese silk patterns, Chinese writing, elements and imagery of acupuncture, Chinese Lunar New Year Candy boxes, incense traditional Chinese style clothing with updated fits, *Clot* takes great pride in visually displaying their Chinese culture as a marketing tool. It should also not be overlooked that *Clot* is one of the few internationally reputable hip-hop street fashion brands out of Hong Kong.

As defined by Bovone (or Bovone and Crane), *Clot* as a firm represents an interesting case of cultural production for two reasons.

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1. *Clot* demonstrates the necessity to innovate by altering the symbolic values attached to styles of clothing. Several times each year new collections must be created which are expected to combine elements of previous styles with new and different ideas.
2. The necessity to produce clothes whose symbolic values resonate with those of consumers and to resolve the perennial problem of “demand uncertainty”.

Hip-hop street fashion has served the Asian diasporic community as an avenue to successfully enter the creative class, working in fashion and music. Richard Florida (2008) describes the creative class as a fast-growing, highly educated, and well-paid segment of the workforce on whose efforts corporate profits and economic growth increasingly depend. Members of the creative class do a wide variety of work in a wide variety of industries – from technology to entertainment, journalism to finance, high-end marketing to the arts. They do not consciously think of themselves as a class. Yet they share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference and merit.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, through websites like *Hypebeast.com*, actors such as Edison Chen serving as Asian-North American ambassadors of hip-hop street fashion, groups like *Far East Movement*, and the advent of new Asian-North American brands, Asian-North Americans are serving as a bridge to Asians in addition to Asians adopting hip-hop street fashion trend directly by themselves.

The ties between the fashion styles of diasporic Asian communities and the new found hybridized identities they possess run deep. This pattern of behaviour can be framed as cross-appropriating in the disclosing of new worlds. Hip-hop street fashion culture began in the most impoverished, disenfranchised neighbourhoods, and has now been repackaged and exported all over the world to be enjoyed in many different lights.

Clothing is a tool for identity. To some cultures what might be viewed as a simple fashion trend was a lack of basic amenities for another culture. Asian people have travelled from all over East Asia and have settled into North America in search of refuge, education, and better opportunities. The children of these immigrants are greatly influenced by their environment, and in some cases become able to employ their own hybridized identities to help their new found culture evolve. With future forms of cultural hybridity and intermingling, this culture will certainly continue to evolve in future generations.

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