Traduttore, traditore. The expert work of producing global (yet local) market classifications

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Introduction

In my new book, *The Perfect Fit. Creative Work in the Global Shoe Industry* (Benzecry 2022), I study the work of repair and maintenance necessary to keep the global scale going. I do so by studying the work and lives of experts in charge of design and development of shoes for the US market. Research for this project began in 2012; I conducted five years of research in between New York City (USA), Dongguan (China), and Novo Hamburgo (Brazil), scrutinizing the friction (Tsing 2005) between expert work and cheap labor in the production of a ubiquitous commodity: shoes. Low-level commodity production is not usually thought of as a place where knowledge is produced; rather, it is studied either through a global value-chain approach or an attention to shop-floor politics. In this unexpected match between case and theory, I aim to defamiliarize the work of coordinating tacit and embodied forms of knowing.

The focus on experts (in this case Taiwanese developers, Brazilian technicians, and US designers) who all work together in Dongguan, in South China, underscores the accumulated embodied knowledge – stored in people, routines, buildings – as the epistemic culture (Knorr Cetina 1999) that makes "disposable" bodies possible. These specialized skills – we could posit – are the condition of possibility by which other "disposable" bodies become key sites of capitalist accumulation.

Ethnography for this project began in 2013 when I started "shadowing" a New York design team, visiting their offices weekly, attending some review meetings, and accompanying them on shopping trips. In some cases, I also had access to email communication between designers and their Dongguan office. My first trip to Dongguan took place in June 2014. I went there with the design team to see their development process. I returned in December 2014, and then twice a year in 2015 and 2016. I moved slowly away from the design team into the work of trading offices, sample rooms, and showrooms. I later interviewed technicians, managers, developers, and fit models as well – seventy-nine in total.

In the book I describe at length several instances of the interaction between local cultures of expertise and global markets; in this essay I want to emphasize one: the work that designers, technicians, and models perform of translating the "standard" foot of fit models into multiple markets, taking into account the perceived ethnonational variations of those markets as the horizon that orients the translation work, and the modelized ways in which this happens. In doing this, *The Perfect Fit* performs a classic ethnographic trick: it takes what has always and a priori been considered macro and inverts it, centering its explanatory power on the most micro element possible in the social sciences (i.e., embodiment), or more precisely, the right foot of a fit model. Fit models allow for the production of standardized shoes. They are an obligatory point of passage for design ideas, materials, and sketches, as well as central players in a larger infrastructure of scale-making.

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In other parts of my book, I have shown how a world was made to travel toward designers via images of other designs, products, shops, and customers. In this essay, we'll see another procedure of miniaturization in a double sense – of the comparative scope of a foot, usually the smallest female shoe size, versus the whole range of size variation in multiple locales – for making the world flat.

This results in a foot that becomes an immutable mobile (Latour 1986; Law 1986), moving from China to the US, or from the US to China, without distortion. Moreover, through the fit model's foot, we see all the translation between multiple cultural standards – sometimes across size conventions in different regions, other times according to gendered expectations – and how both sets of standards are intertwined with imputed racial and national bodily characteristics.

What's in an "American" leg?

On my first trip to Dongguan during January of 2014, I witnessed a scene that would repeat itself all throughout the four years of fieldwork, at the end of many detailing and fitting sessions: once the fit model tried on a shoe, the US designer tried it on herself too. The scene points to what happens when the standard foot is not enough. One part of the answer to that question is easily understood via participant observation, as what designers do is to bodily restore tactile knowledge: some of the key things they check for are the leather's quality and resistance, how much it will "age" and crack with use, and whether it bends if pulled. The fit model narrates these issues, but they are hard to transfer from one body to the next. The second part of the answer is more surprising, as designers explained what they are doing is to try it out on an "American" leg.

The designer will not just see how the shoe fits the foot model but will also try it on herself, to see the fit on a "US" leg like hers. Part of what explains this new trial of strength (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) of the shoe prototype is the movement from the model's standardized foot to the designer's "American" leg and foot. Designers – as I'll show in more detail in the next section – point to the anatomical differences between US and Chinese calves, feet, leg length, and distance between knees and feet as things that need to be accounted and adjusted for. Though in most cases – when working on pumps, flats, or sandals, for instance – designers let the model be the key site for validation to happen, the belief in differences not at the foot but at the leg level inspire them to act differently when working on boots. In this trial we get to witness once again – and at a different site and moment of the process – the tension between standardization and tacit knowledge.

All the developments described are based on being able to transfer findings, techniques, and infrastructures from one kind of body to another. There is a tension in the process of standardization between the need for generalizability and the local test scenario, framed by tacit and local knowledge. So, one of the key issues as the production of a shoe progresses is how to loosen the boundary between the sample room as a laboratory and the "outside" world. The section that follows interrogates in full what happens when trying to replicate with an Other – in this case, usually a US customer – in mind. In the next few pages, I describe the kinds of translation issues that arise.

Between market, culture, and biology

Carrying out something similar to what in scientific contexts has been called a bridge study (Epstein 2007), US designers engage in translation work to imagine how a future shoe will look on an "American" foot. This kind of ethnonational conversion involves a comparison – especially at the level of the calves for boots, the main item in Fall collections – between the model's leg and foot and what they consider a typical US foot. The alleged differences intertwine cultural and biological attributes. Sometimes the differences are explained as "cultural" – in the US the prevalence of sports and of wearing fashion early on in life leads to more muscular feet; in China women have flatter feet because they don't grow up wearing heels. And sometimes differences are presented as biological, so "Chinese" models have narrower feet, wider calves, and shorter toes in the designers' descriptions.

The first time I heard of the difference between US and Chinese feet wasn't from an American designer, though; it was when, after figuring out the existence of fit models, I was interviewing Marshall, a business partner in a trading company in Dongguan. Marshall is a Taiwanese man in his mid-thirties who had studied in the US. His explanation of the distinction between US and Chinese feet was not a direct answer to a query about national variations, but rather one about how they cast women for fit modeling. He asserted that what matters the most is that customers get the foot they want – and in a company like theirs, which produces shoes for many different markets, that means having multiple fit models to suit a range of clients' needs. When asked to clarify a bit about those needs, Marshall went beyond the "wide versus skinny" foot dichotomy I was expecting:

You know the feet of different ethnicities is very different, the Chinese foot is very different from European, American or Russians. For instance, the Russians – at that time I learned later they were producing shoes for a Russian brand – they have a very special foot, so if they found someone like that, they always want to see the same one, you know, the bone is more protruding here, something like that. And lots from Europe and the US, because they do a lot of sports when they are young, so more muscle on the foot, not as boney, you know. A lot of Chinese, they don't do a lot of sports or activities, so the foot is very thin, and also very wide. Yeah, every country is very different … It's not only the perfect foot, sometimes the foot is big; in China, you see, the girls are short so they have small feet, it's sometimes you can hire someone with a big foot, you want to do that because you don't have 7.5 or 8 or 9.

This procedure works by anticipating a different idealized future (Beckert 2013; Schutz 1959): that of the peculiarities of a niche market, with companies orienting themselves accordingly, by having a clear understanding of what the fit model's actual foot can perform in relationship to the feet of most of the customers in the markets they are producing for. In doing so, designers, technicians, production managers, and even fit models work with an implicit stereotypical theory of cultural difference. In this local theory, culture, biology, and markets become intimately intertwined, explaining why a particular kind of model is better for a particular region of the world (or the opposite).

Looking into how markets are matched with models, and especially at what explains the difference among feet, is yet another important window for observing how the global is both imagined and produced concurrently, as much at the infrastructural level as it is when designers scout for ideas and trends to translate into designs. For instance, Chinese feet are described as flat – in comparison to the US – and thinner, and the explanations given for these sometimes have to do with biology, as when accounting for shorter toes and rounder calves, and sometimes with culture, as when explaining how some of these characteristics are a consequence of not growing up wearing heels, or of weighing less because of diet and having not engaged in competitive sports at an early age. The peculiarities of US women who play soccer – something much less prevalent in the rest of the world – are usually highlighted when explaining this phenomenon.

The variability in ethnonationality when aiming to replicate through sympathetic magic (Taussig 1993) a distant Other's feet is presented as an advantage of South Brazilian trading companies vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts. Brazilian feet in Novo Hamburgo are portrayed as less limited than Chinese feet, since, to quote Christian, a developer for the higher-end US market, "South Brazil has all kind of girls; we have Brazilians, Germans, and Italians" – he refers here to the large Italian, Portuguese, and German migrations to the area – "so we can serve better multiple markets."

There is a tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity in all of these accounts, with internal homogeneity complicating the possibilities for replication, and with a variability in which market is presented as more or less homogeneous depending much less on the country's actual ethnic composition than on the volume of product they produce for that region. In that respect, Brazil appeared in most of my interviews as divided between north and south – not at the level of consumers, but of models – as women in the north have to walk more, and because of the temperature usually wear sandals and open-toe shoes, which results in them having both stronger calves and flatter, wider feet. Europe, on the other hand, when named appeared not as divided into multiple national markets but rather as a unit when it came to replicating feet in Dongguan. Regardless of whether a fit model works for a Spanish company, for the Dutch market, or for a British department store, the name under which standards are subsumed when the model is asked who she works for is always the same: "Europe." While an order from a US client will include anywhere from 30,000 to 200,000 pairs, orders from European buyers can be as small as 2,500.

In this intimate relationship between bodies as they are imagined and invoked and bodies as they are part of an actual infrastructure, we manage to see the cultural work of producing classifications that are presented as abstract and universal. This nevertheless generates certain features that are incorporated into artifacts that will then be circulated back to consumers. In trying to understand where they come from, I want to point to one ethnographic scene I have already presented, one testimony obtained in an interview, and the step-by-step process of assembling the infrastructure of production for a new market in Mexico for a trade company that had worked until then just with the US.

Sometimes the relationship between ethnonational variation and replication has been learned the hard way, as, for instance, when the fit models from the market the shoe is being developed for are unable to try on the finalized samples successfully. This happened on several occasions during my fieldwork and, as I've explained, resulted on at least two different occasions in the US reference fit model traveling to China to try some of the comfort shoes being developed on a wider foot. This kind of taken-for-granted routine at the epistemic level collided also with the re-

alities of how the infrastructure was set up when Marcio, one of the Brazilian technicians I interviewed extensively, described to me how complicated it was for him to work for the Russian market, given that the standards put in place for that market were different enough to alter, for instance, the proportions of boots. Both Brazilian and Chinese traders follow the proportions set historically by German and Italian makers. This requires not only the hiring of a model just for that market – one with a protruding metatarsal, as signaled by Marshall, the Taiwanese production manager – but also the development of different lasts than those used for the US or Europe at large. This leads to Marshall compromising his own technical expertise in trying to generate the proper replica, and forcing him to learn some procedures anew.

Translation issues are relatively common knowledge, and technical workers have learned to work around them or to replace the nonworking parts (usually the fit models) when necessary. Stereotypes about what the feet of a consumer for a certain market are like are accepted as received lore and presented to outsiders like me as facts to deal with. That is why I found the "putting a foot for a market anew" experience of Venus – an Afro Latina US designer who has a sample room and factory in China – working for Mexico very much revelatory of how those stereotypes are produced. She described the experience to me as one in which she sat in multiple trips, for days at a time, at different locations of the department store she was producing shoes for in Mexico City, observing the feet of the female customers who were going to the floor where shoes were sold. While she also paid attention to what they said about the shoes on display, she was far more interested in listening to their complaints as they tried shoes on – paying attention to where the shoes pinched them, the areas where the foot hurt against the leather, or where they looked too loose – and, more importantly, in taking notes, pictures, and sketches of feet and legs. This happened so frequently that sometimes clients felt uncomfortable around her and wondered "Y esta qué mira?" as she would scan them from the floor up. When pointing at a picture of one of the samples developed in Dongguan, she explained to me that the lady in the image "tiene un pie más mexicano." By that she meant with a much higher instep than in the US (but relatively similar to China) and with a smaller ball.

In her narrative, biological and cultural explanations were intertwined once again in producing the alignment:

A lot of women in China have a very high instep. And Mexican women have a foot that is flatter, like in China too, but the difference is that they have a very pronounced heel, because girls start wearing heels when going out much younger than in China or even the US. For the US market the foot is wider; in Mexico women are more delicate than in the US, the ankle is thinner.

The explanation she gave involved received cultural stereotypes, as most scholarship would expect; but it was also the result of typification work, achieved after multiple years and locations handling feet. (Venus worked for Inditex – owner of ZARA – for years as a technician developing their lasts for multiple markets, the rare case of a female technician.) Unlike the rest of the companies, designers, and technicians covered in the book, Venus's small line has a different challenge: to triangulate production, fit, and development between South China and New York for a consumer on a third, relatively new market. Her work of bracketing – while recognizing niche standardization so as to make the "Mexican" standard possible – revolves around constantly comparing the "Mexican" Chinese fit model (the company had to do a special casting in order to find her) and the "US" Chinese fit model (who works with her in most other lines, and who sometimes tries shoes on if the first model is unavailable) with the US fit model. If a shoe looks a bit loose on the "US" Chinese fit model, for instance, the shoe will get approved for development.

Regardless of which of the Chinese models is being used, if the instep is tight it is OK for the Mexican market – but wrong for the American one; on the other hand, if the US model in New York reports that a shoe is too tight on the instep, it means it needs to be modified to be loose on her. The measurements of the ball and the girth of the heel present similar issues, with a Mexican shoe needing 46 millimeters of ball circumference, which would be too narrow in the US. Hence, if shoes are too tight at the ball level in China, they would not be OK for the US market but would work for the Mexican consumer. Unlike other industries, replication and transposability here are not the product of the movement from flesh to metal, from the bodies to an outer bar, since all standard holders are actual bodies; rather, they are products of the meeting of flesh at one location with flesh at a different one.

Given that there is a potential for standards to be constantly corroded, the work of surveillance to make sure the measurements are the right ones for the market in question is a continuous endeavor (Alder 2002); it's not about disembodying embodied features but rather about the constant dis- and re-embodying of measurements and quirks. The standardization-producing strategy of the export shoe industry works by combining two styles of modelization that are at odds in other fields that use humans to produce generaliz-

able results. The first style is universalization, wherein a whole infrastructure works around and brackets the peculiarities of a particular foot to conform to an abstract and idealized measurement scale, and in doing so is always using people from one nationality to represent multiple ethnonational differences and generalize from them, so there are "Russian," "American," and "Mexican" Chinese models.

The second style is niche standardization (Epstein 2007) and surrogacy (Bolker 2009; Friese and Clarke 2012), as fit models are stand-ins for a particular segment of the population broadly conceptualized – US women – and the work to maintain the standard is not about adapting the infrastructure to the fit model's foot but rather to the imagined consumer's foot. This relationship between particular and universal structures the industry at large, as trading companies and factories deal with it by segregating workers by ethnonational standards, having different teams of models and technicians working for different national markets. What I've described here, zoomed into, and shown is the actual work of translating Chinese (and sometimes Brazilian) feet and legs into objects that anticipate the problems expected when aligned with one market, in this case that of the US.

This is the local expert work during and after standardization, predicated on the ideas that designers, technicians, and line builders have about their customers, and in consequence about how to transpose and modelize a model's measurements into a body different than her own. After all, the development of shoes is based on a foot that exists as an outside referent and is yet in tension with the consumer's imagined (and actual) foot.

Some concluding words

Translation work operates in the tension between the role of mimesis and the power to replicate a distant Other, in some cases known somewhat directly – as in the case of US designers, who are nevertheless from New York – and in other cases imagined (by fit models and technicians). Anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993) has called this "sympathetic magic," drawing attention to the power of replicas to explore difference and eventually become the Other. For him this mimetic faculty – the ability to make models and to imitate – has been unleashed by the modern technologies of reproduction and accelerated the chance for the replica to take the power from what it is purported to represent. This magic is a key component to understand and investigate how local experts produce global classifications. This essay was an attempt to show how said magic is produced and the performative effects it has.

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