

RIMOWA vs. Alo Yoga | The Niu Lai Miracle | Fake Intellectuals & AI Endorsement Limits

Topic 1: Ambassador Playbooks: RIMOWA's Storytelling Courage vs. Alo Yoga's Traffic Gamble

Jonathan: Our first topic today: brand endorsement strategy in China has reached a critical fork in the road. Do you choose short-term commercial conversion through mass-market traffic drivers, or do you stand by a high-prestige icon to build long-term brand equity?

To kick things off, Fan, we've got two contrasting examples from major brands in China to unpick the decisions behind their ambassador choices.

First up is RIMOWA. RIMOWA embraced table tennis champion Fan Zhendong (樊振东) during a highly controversial career pivot when he moved to the German Bundesliga. In this campaign, they paired Fan Zhendong with Jay Chou (周杰伦) for a resonant, seemingly unscripted ad that Chinese internet users are calling the "Ad of the Year."

Fan, RIMOWA is a very high-prestige brand. It seems they deliberately leaned into someone going through a complex career shift. Can you help break down that decision and explain why this resonated so deeply?

Fan: First of all, Jay Chou has been a long-time brand ambassador for RIMOWA. If you look at RIMOWA's global strategy, they rarely select faces with smooth, uncomplicated public narratives. They didn't go for a standard pop pick; they went with tennis legend Roger Federer. Their strategy isn't about people with seamless careers. It's about individuals who have faced controversy, personal growth, and intense challenges.

To provide context on why the Fan Zhendong collaboration hit home so hard: my mom actually told me about this because she's a diehard fan of his. He still plays for the Chinese national team and is arguably the best player in China right now. However, due to internal organisational dynamics, he wasn't receiving the same brand partnerships or match opportunities as some of his teammates. That contributed to his decision to stop playing in the domestic Champion League and join Saarbrücken, a club in a small German town near the French border.

Suddenly, everyone in China knew about Saarbrücken. When he first announced his move to a German club, critics labelled him a traitor, and many waited for him to fail. But his dedicated fans stood by him. Before Fan Zhendong arrived, Saarbrücken could never sell

out their stadium. Tickets were around 80 Euros, and they had virtually no merchandise. Once he joined, sports tourism exploded. They literally had to expand the stadium capacity to handle the crowds.

Jonathan: He became a one-man economic powerhouse. For our international listeners: China competes in many global sports, and when a Chinese athlete succeeds abroad, like Yao Ming in the NBA, it creates immense national pride. But table tennis in China is on a completely different level. It is *the* national sport. There is intense emotional ownership over table tennis stars.

So when Fan Zhendong moved to Saarbrücken and the Bundesliga, hundreds of millions of people paid attention. At the same time, it raised questions: "*Why aren't you competing at home?*" The controversy surrounding him as a brand ambassador stems directly from that pivot.

Fan: Exactly. He was framed as the "exiled prince." When he first arrived at Saarbrücken, he struggled because European athletes have a completely different playing style compared to Asian players. He had to adapt, learn a new system, learn German and English, and rebuild his game. Now he plays in the Bundesliga for Dortmund; he's happy, and he has proved his capability on the court. He just genuinely loves playing table tennis.

That mirrors Jay Chou's early career. Jay Chou started as a songwriter writing tracks for A-Mei, Jacky Wu, and Andy Lau, and they all turned him down! So he decided, "*Fine, I'll sing them myself.*" He went on to become the undisputed royalty of Chinese pop music.

Jonathan: He really is celebrity royalty. Getting Jay Chou for a campaign is a massive seal of approval.

RIMOWA is already highly successful in China; their marketing is about brand consolidation. This campaign selected a topic with real-world friction, but framed it around personal intent, travel, and new beginnings. That aligns beautifully with the core concept of luggage.

Fan: The brand's strategy is remarkably consistent: work with people who were once underestimated, who practised relentlessly, and who reached the pinnacle of their craft through sheer perseverance.

The second reason this campaign touched so many people is the choice of music: Jay Chou's classic song *Class 3-2* (三年二班). In the commercial's behind-the-scenes clip, Fan Zhendong sings the lyrics a cappella—raw, authentic, completely unpolished.

The lyrics he sings translate to: "*How many more challenges I need to pass... do I really have to win the trophy?*" The ad doesn't explicitly explain his personal struggles; it doesn't need to. Then Jay Chou appears, signalling that the hardest part of the journey has passed. It felt genuine and deeply emotional because RIMOWA didn't just use Fan Zhendong's face; they tied the product directly to his lived experience.

Jonathan: That narrative resonates with millions across China who feel they are working hard, striving, and navigating major life shifts. RIMOWA positioned their product not as a

luxury trophy for someone who has "made it," but as a companion for those who are still striving and moving forward.

Contrast that with our second campaign: Alo Yoga. As Lululemon's rapid growth slows in China, Alo Yoga is attempting to capture market share. They chose actress Zhao Lusi as their regional ambassador: a popular, sweet, mass-market star. This feels like a completely different strategy. To me, it looks like a direct chase for fast traffic. What's your take, Fan?

Fan: It fits Alo's global playbook. To me, Alo is less a functional athletic brand and more a street-style lifestyle brand. You don't see people wearing Alo in heavy gym sessions; you see them walking down the street holding a matcha latte, driving, or walking their dog. Globally, they built their brand through high-traffic celebrity placements like Kendall Jenner, Hailey Bieber, and global K-pop stars like Jisoo and Jin. It's pure traffic-driven marketing.

China doesn't have a direct equivalent of the Kardashian/Jenner family dynamic. So Alo went after a celebrity with massive discussion value and high ecommerce conversion power. Zhao Lusi has a massive following. She also overcame significant public industry hurdles, which gave her a narrative of resilience behind her cute image. Additionally, her followers are used to buying her exact outfits.

Jonathan: You can see their logic. If you need to establish fast mass awareness in China from scratch, chasing traffic is an effective shortcut. You can't execute a slow, subtle brand image if no one knows who you are.

However, there was significant online pushback on Rednote (Xiaohongshu), with users arguing she wasn't a fit for the brand. Where did that friction come from?

Fan: The issue stems from brand expectations. Western media and AI describe Alo as an aspirational, luxury wellness lifestyle brand. Core Chinese consumers who bought into Alo early were picturing California or Valley girl aesthetics. Zhao Lusi's public persona didn't match that specific "Valley girl" vibe.

Jonathan: Furthermore, she had previously endorsed low-to-mid-tier mass consumer brands. Core luxury users made the calculation: *"Why is a 1,500 RMB activewear brand using an ambassador associated with 100 RMB products?"* That calculation is critical. Chinese consumers evaluate whether the ambassador's personal lifestyle matches the price tag of the brand.

Fan: Precisely. There's a phrase in Chinese marketing: *Hei Hong Ye Shi Hong* (黑红也是红) —"Dark red is still red," meaning negative or controversial PR is still PR. Alo achieved massive discussion volume and record opening-day sales. Was it the right long-term brand equity choice? Debatable. Did it achieve raw market noise and initial revenue? Absolutely.

Jonathan: A brand ambassador can do a lot for your visibility in China, but they are not a substitute for core brand strategy. Twenty years ago, signing a major face and running mass ads was often enough. Today, consumer dynamics are far more sophisticated.

You cannot base your entire brand identity on a celebrity whose public standing can change overnight. Are you building local community? Are you creating store-level activations that reinforce your story? If those foundational elements aren't there, even the biggest celebrity won't build long-term brand equity.

Fan: To add to that: brands need a clear selection framework. RIMOWA chooses people who overcame being underestimated. Montblanc calls their ambassadors "Mark Makers", individuals who have left a distinct mark in their field. When you select endorsers based on clear, shared brand values, you insulate yourself from backlash. If you only chase superficial buzz, your brand equity disappears the moment that buzz fades.

Topic 2: The *Niu Lai* Miracle: Abstract Culture & Anti-Perfectionism

Jonathan: Next up: cinema, and why a \$200 budget animated film ended up making millions at the box office in China.

We're talking about the viral phenomenon of *Niu Lai* (牛来). This signals a notable psychological shift in Chinese consumer behaviour: young audiences rejecting polished corporate messaging in favour of raw, chaotic, and "abstract" anti-perfectionism.

Niu Lai was an indie animated project created by a mother and son over five years. It premiered to terrible numbers, making less than 200 RMB in its first 10 days. But then moviegoers started sharing clips online; here, camcording isn't a problem but rather a way of organic promotion, treating the film's visual quirks and absurd storytelling as a giant shared meme. It turned into a cult cinema event, crossing 10 million RMB at the box office. Fan, what drove this viral wave?

Fan: First, a warning to our listeners: do not watch this movie online by yourself at home! You will be completely bewildered.

The entire phenomenon relies on the collective theatre experience. The animation was painstakingly made frame-by-frame by two people who voiced every role without a conventional script. It created an absurd "what on earth am I watching?" moment that hundreds of people in a cinema experienced together.

People simply wanted an excuse to laugh. You aren't paying for cinematic perfection; you're paying to sit in an IMAX theatre with 300 strangers who are all laughing at the sheer absurdity of what's on screen. It became a social event.

Jonathan: It's an interactive, shared cultural joke. People were posting reaction videos of entire theatres laughing uncontrollably.

This happened while polished, massive-budget films were in cinemas. Some cinema staff even got in on the joke, replacing official sleek movie posters with hand-drawn pop-up banners of cows. Are audiences growing tired of hyper-polished entertainment, or is this just pure comedy?

Fan: It's primarily pure comedy, driven by ironic juxtaposition. Technology has made it easy to produce content that *looks* expensive on the surface, even if the underlying story is lacking. *Niu Lai* looks unpolished, acts unpolished, and owns it.

We've seen similar cult phenomena globally, like the audience rituals around the American indie drama *The Room*. It's a rare, cyclic desire for collective irony.

Jonathan: Life and economic pressures in China are real. When social and professional expectations are high, participating in low-stakes, absurd humour serves as an emotional pressure-release valve.

Interestingly, local cultural authorities eventually issued statements advising audiences not to over-hype the film, arguing it didn't represent the high standards of Chinese animation. That friction is fascinating. China has invested heavily in global film co-productions and high-tier cinematic output over the last decade. So when a \$200 indie project outshines major blockbusters in social discussion, you can understand why cultural officials felt protective of the industry's image.

Fan: Officials felt compelled to respond because of the effort put into elevating cultural perception globally. But on the flip side, the viral reaction demonstrated something wonderful: Chinese youth have a sharp, self-aware sense of humour. That ability to laugh collectively is universal.

Topic 3: The Authenticity Crisis: Fake Intellectuals & AI Endorsement Limits

Jonathan: Our final topic today: Chinese digital audiences are demonstrating growing fatigue with manufactured authority. In the AI era, whether it's translated podcast plagiarism or academic scandals, consumers are actively calling out fake thought leadership.

A prime example involves viral podcaster Zhong Shu (仲树). During Christopher Nolan's Beijing press tour for *The Odyssey*, she conducted a cerebral, 17-minute philosophical interview covering Homeric mythology, fate, and repentance. The interview went viral and elevated her profile significantly.

However, that visibility prompted listeners to audit her archive of 75+ podcast episodes. They discovered that large portions of her content were translated, uncredited transcripts of Western podcasts and lectures presented as her own original analysis. Netizens revolted, labelling her a fake. Fan, you listened to her show previously. How did this unfold?

Fan: Her podcast, *One Tree Doesn't Make a Forest* (独树不成林), had a loyal following for years because she made complex philosophy accessible and engaging.

The turn happened with astonishing speed. It took her years to build her reputation, but less than a month after the Nolan interview, her platform collapsed. The issue wasn't that the information she shared was inaccurate; it was that she presented herself as an effortless intellectual prodigy who could absorb, translate, and synthesise complex texts at an impossible pace.

Jonathan: She packaged herself as an effortless genius. Researching and synthesising sources is standard practice, but translating obscure overseas lectures and presenting them wholesale as original thought crosses the line into content laundering.

In a culture where millions of students work relentlessly through intense academic systems like the *gaokao*, seeing someone shortcut their way to elite status via uncredited translation triggers a strong public backlash.

Fan: Exactly. She cultivated a relatable, hard-working persona, but her actual background involved elite private education abroad. When the audience realised her "effortless intellectual output" was largely uncredited translation, the trust vanished. She stepped into the spotlight with Christopher Nolan, and that extra scrutiny completely unravelled the narrative.

Jonathan: A similar controversy occurred with writer Jiang Fangzhou (蒋方舟), a former child prodigy whose Master's degree was revoked by Renmin University of China following an official investigation into thesis plagiarism.

Fan: In Jiang Fangzhou's case, the plagiarism wasn't generated by AI. The thesis was written years ago. Rather, digital tools and online sleuths made it possible to cross-reference academic archives and identify overlapping passages from a university library text in Taipei.

What frustrated the public further was that her public apology addressed her university and her readers, but omitted any apology to the original authors whose work was copied.

Jonathan: That brings us to how AI intersects with physical brand marketing. We've discussed virtual AI avatars and synthetic talent before. Recently, an AI star named Fang Taozi (方桃子) endorsed a contact lens brand, claiming in the ad that the lenses were "*so comfortable I didn't feel a thing wearing them all day.*"

Netizens immediately mocked the campaign. An AI avatar made of code has no eyes, no tear ducts, and no physical sensation.

Fan: We've highlighted this rule before: never use AI avatars to promote products that rely on physical bodily sensation. That applies to skincare, shoes, food, and contact lenses.

AI avatars can showcase aesthetics, virtual fashion, or digital lore. But the moment a digital avatar claims physical comfort or bodily sensation, the consumer instantly rejects the premise.

If you want to show how a colored contact lens looks on different eye shades, AI visual modelling works. But claiming physical comfort through a line of code breaks consumer trust.

Jonathan: It's a bizarre misstep by the brand. Consumers are drawing clear boundaries: they will accept AI for creative artifice, but they will not accept AI pretending to have physical human feelings or bodily sensations.

Fan: Exactly. Fang Taozi is an artistic AI illustration, not a physical entity. She doesn't feel fatigue, pain, or comfort. Claiming physical experience through a digital graphic ignores basic common sense.

Jonathan: That brings us to our conclusion for this month.

For brand executives: brand authority cannot be manufactured through superficial celebrity placements, fake intellectualism, or tone-deaf AI claims. Consumers are actively auditing brand claims, demanding transparency, and rewarding genuine human effort. Show up authentically, respect your audience's intelligence, and let real human process drive your story.

See you next month on The Hot Pot Table.