Sustainable development and the aspirational male consumer: Tengri, making the case for sustainable luxury

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Sustainable development and the aspirational male consumer: 
Tengri, making the case for sustainable luxury

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Abstract
Luxury is an industry that defines its value through the quality of its raw materials, that fosters creativity, elevates artisanship and relies on brand heritage and local production to underpin the provenance of its products, and justify its pricing strategy, and as such can be considered as embodying many of the practices of sustainability. Yet despite public commitments and pledges for better business, both financial and cultural factors have contributed to a lack of progress in implementing the necessary system changes implied by slow fashion, sustainable development and circular economy.

Social enterprises use business to address social and environmental issues. In Tengri’s case founder Nancy Johnston was inspired by her experiences travelling with Mongolia’s yak herders where she was confronted with the harshness of the nomadic way of life and threats to its continuing existence. She was driven to action when she juxtaposed these conditions with the promoted glamour of the luxury fashion industry, which relies on supplies of ingredients from just such workers. This article explores how Tengri combines social and environmental awareness with luxury product development incorporating the UN SDGs into a sustainable luxury menswear brand in a virtuous cycle of ethical fashion consumption and production.

Keywords: sustainability, luxury, fashion, social-enterprise, innovation, sustainable development
Sustainable Development and the Aspirational Male Consumer: Tengri, Making the Case for Sustainable Luxury

Our Manifesto
We believe in a world where land, animals and people are cherished, nurtured and respected. To build a society where sustainable and fairshare business is the norm, not an alternative. Where consumer choice and spending power create a more equitable world. We embrace adventure, defy convention and change the status quo of the fashion and textile industries. We work as equals and embrace our differences, accept everyone for who and what they are, fighting to defend the ‘I am’. We will blaze new trails, with no boundaries limiting where we can go and what we can achieve. Working with ‘in-tengri-ty’, pride and spirit. Giving freely and leaving a legacy. More than just a label, we are a collective movement doing good. Join us.

Introduction

For the last decade luxury industry watchers have been reporting consumers’ increased interest in Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) issues. The current extractive take-make-waste system, widely reported as prevalent in the fashion and luxury sectors, is extremely resource intensive and research highlights a dearth of examples of sustainable luxury; yet sustainability has become an increasingly key pillar of luxury strategy (Amatulli et al. 2017). And whilst an intention-behaviour gap undoubtedly persists, the risk of not complying with consumers’ expectations with regards to environmental and social impact can no longer be ignored. There has been an increasing emphasis on sustainability in the fashion and luxury industries but few examples of how to successfully reimagine the entrenched extractive and exploitative systems (Goworek et al. 2020).

For luxury menswear business Tengri, launching a social enterprise in this new era of slow fashion and conscious consumption has enabled organic growth for a business model that combines social and environmental awareness with luxury product development, to create a virtuous cycle of ethical fashion production and consumption. Social enterprises ‘operat[e] as a hybrid business model being both ethically and profit-driven’ (Radclyffe-Thomas and Roncha 2016: 84), using business activities to address social and environmental issues. In Tengri’s case, founder and CEO Nancy Johnston was inspired by her experiences travelling with Mongolia’s nomadic yak herders and observing their connection with the land and animals. The luxury industry relies on supplies of ingredients from just such workers in supply chains that stretch across the globe, who often bear the social inequalities and environmental costs inherent in a global luxury industry whose negative impacts have hitherto been obscured behind a glamorous façade. Confronted with the harshness of the nomadic yak herders’ way of life, and detecting how land degradation and exploitative business practices due, at least to some extent, by the externalities of luxury textile production threatened its continuing existence, she was driven to action.
Based on longitudinal explorative qualitative research comprising interviews, field studies and with a specific focus on a fashion installation during London Fashion Week 2019, this article explores how Tengri has incorporated supply chain innovation and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN: n.d.) into a sustainable luxury menswear brand aimed at the new global sustainable luxury consumers, a group described by Director of Globescan Caroline Holme as the ‘Aspirational’ consumer – ‘a segment that combines a desire to be ethical with a love of style, design and shopping’ (Radclyffe-Thomas 2018). By examining a case of a ‘fair-share’ business it seeks to answer questions such as: how do you enact business ethics? How do you create value without being exploitative of the people you are trying to help? How is Tengri addressing the issues of transparency, traceability and textile waste? What does it mean to be a fashion activist working in luxury? And how do you build a product, marketing and communications strategy that supports sustainable development?

In so doing it aspires to address the need to expand the knowledge base on sustainable luxury in order to better understand ‘what the characteristics of a sustainable luxury product, service or experience are’, highlighted by Atwhal et al. (2019: 417) in their review of the sustainable luxury marketing literature, that proposes more qualitative, exploratory research into luxury industry marketing and consumer behaviour, to support the development of a sustainable luxury marketing strategy.

**Sustainability challenges for the luxury industry**

The luxury fashion industry is dominated by European brands which have constructed a growth model that relies on the speeding up of the fashion calendar. Homeostasis makes the current system resistant to fundamental change, and efficiencies in production, marketing and distribution have been exploited to introduce multiple collections and product drops that increase revenue and satisfy consumers’ desire for novelty. The scale of global expansion, fuelled by the promotion of increased consumption, and the associated social and environmental impacts emanating from its activities, mean that the luxury industry is seen by many as antithetical to sustainability (Kapferer 2020). Many of today’s headlines about luxury fashion are less about the glamour and glitz and more about the negative social and environmental impacts resulting from its largely unregulated global supply chains. Accusations of contributing to social and environmental mismanagement have been levelled at luxury brands, for example in regard to unethical sourcing vis-à-vis raw materials and contracting manufacturers with questionable labour practices and/or environmental standards (Amatulli et al. 2017). When Dior showed a €30,000 jacket for pre-Fall 2017 that closely resembled a Romanian traditional design, the resulting #GiveCredit social media campaign drew attention to the practice of cultural appropriation endemic to the luxury industry, where ‘cultural outsiders’ (designers or brands) take or use cultural products (ideas, design or textiles imbued with another group’s cultural heritage) and recreate them without paying or crediting the ‘cultural insiders’ (indigenous people and artisans) (Young 2005: 136).

The number of garments produced annually has doubled since 2000 and exceeded 100bn for the first time in 2014; an estimated 92m tons of textile waste is created annually from the fashion industry (GFA 2017). Every second, the equivalent of one garbage truck of textiles is landfilled or burned globally (EMF 2017). Pre and post-consumer textile waste is built into both the fast fashion and luxury fashion systems in different ways. What has been described
as the democratisation of fashion by the fast fashion business model has generated high volumes of comparatively low quality products that are sold at low prices, underutilised and ultimately discarded (Varley et al. 2018). The luxury industry is renowned for the quality of materials used in its products, yet despite its focus on quality materials and products, counterintuitively, luxury fashion builds textile waste into its supply chain. Overproduction results in excess stock being destroyed through incineration - it was reported that British luxury brand Burberry destroyed unsold clothes, accessories and perfume valued in excess of £90m in the five years to 2018 (BBC News 2018).

The externalities of luxury fashion are not always visible, even to designers. Raw material selection has an enormous influence on the sustainability of textiles and luxury fashion; textile processing can involve using over 8000 toxic chemicals in a single garment (Karthik et al. 2015). When dyeing is carried out by boiling at high liquor ratios it is an extremely energy-intensive process (Hassan 2015), and luxury houses often employ quality control protocols that reject any variation from uniformity of hue across dye lots. Cashmere, once a highly exclusive material taking four cashmere goats to produce enough fibre to make a cashmere sweater, is still considered a core luxury material (Faust and Surchi 2015). An expansion in demand for cashmere has led to increased flock sizes in Mongolia where raising cashmere goats has become a major source of income (Yembuu 2016). This increase has resulted in overgrazing leading to desertification which threatens an ecological crisis for the Mongolian grasslands (Karthik et al. 2015). When sustainable luxury designer Stella McCartney applied Kering’s Environmental Profit and Loss accounting formula to her designs in 2016 one of the surprising results was the enormous impact of using virgin cashmere - roughly 100 times the environmental impact of wool (SMcC 2016). Stella McCartney now uses only recycled cashmere in their collections, however the worldwide demand for virgin cashmere continues to grow; ironically marketed on its rarity and associations with the cultural heritage of Mongolia.

Sustainable luxury: An oxymoron?

Amongst the multiple definitions of what constitutes luxury, the European Cultural and Creative Industries Alliance (ECCIA) specifies five features of luxury companies: aura, craftsmanship and creativity, intellectual property, selective distribution and development of new markets (Berghaus et al. 2018: 4). Amatulli et al. (2017) suggest the following key characteristics as generally accepted definitions of luxury: excellent quality in materials and craftsmanship; exclusivity; aesthetics; heritage and personal history; symbolism and high prices. Ko et al.’s (2019) review of the luxury literature highlights the role of consumer evaluation in denoting a branded product or service as luxury and suggests a theoretical definition of a luxury brand as one commanding a premium price and capable of inspiring a deep connection with its consumers through its: high quality; authentic value via functional or emotional desired benefits; and prestigious image relating to artisanship, craftsmanship, or service.

Sustainability has been suggested as a legitimate facet of luxury essence (Kapferer 2010; Shih and Agrafiotis 2016); writing in 2012 Kapferer declared: ‘luxury is special’ (2012: 68). Yet, the expansion of the luxury market, including the development of accessible luxury has
resulted in increased volumes of luxury products made available at lower price points, and increased consumption of previously unattainable luxury materials. Indeed, sustainable luxury appears an oxymoron when we consider the origins of the concept of luxury as derived from the Latin ‘luxus’, meaning excess. Kapferer and Bastien (2012) conceive the central contradiction between sustainability and luxury as relating to the dissonance in their respective DNAs; achieving sustainability requires collaboration and rejection of the vertical social stratification upon which luxury’s existence depends. It is hard to reconcile the enormous global expansion and excesses of the luxury industry with the ‘frugal lifestyle attached to sustainability and the preservation of rare ingredients and limited resources on earth’ (Kapferer 2020: 37). Dean (2018 npag) suggests ‘an ethnometaphysical gulf between luxury and sustainable luxury’ highlighting the dissonance encountered by luxury industry professionals when faced with the challenges of integrating the ‘physicality of manufacture and supply chains’ into luxury marketing practices that have primarily communicated luxury as an intangible.

According to Atwhal et al. (2019), the first mention of ‘sustainable luxury’ as a distinct construct appears in a 2007 World Wildlife Fund (WWF) report ‘Deeper Luxury’ wherein the authors anticipate the emergence of authentic luxury brands positioned with sustainability at their core. One of the outcomes of the recent focus on sustainability has been an increased scrutiny of fashion brands’ activities - people and processes that were previously invisible to the consumer have become visible due to calls from environmental and social activists for radical transparency and reporting mechanisms including the Fashion Transparency (Fashion Revolution 2020) and Higg Materials Indices (SAC: n.d.). Some authors see the opportunity for adding value in promoting a business or brand’s sustainability activities (Van de Ven 2008), whilst others argue for a more cautious approach (Kotler and Lee 2008). Luxury brands use of storytelling for marketing often utilises picturesque imagery of its artisans and craftspeople, and the increase in behind-the-scenes access granted by luxury brands has not only educated prospective consumers in the ways, or savoir faire, of luxury (Batat 2019), but has led to an upsurge in interest in the income distribution and working conditions of those workers whose skills and labour add enormous value to luxury products but who, on the whole, remain anonymous and uncredited.

More recently, ‘sustainable luxury’ has been defined as ‘the production and commercialization of luxuries that respect sustainability principles as well as the responsible consumption of such products/services’ (Amatulli et al. 2020: 822) and furthermore as ‘oriented toward correcting various perceived wrongs within the luxury industry, including animal cruelty, environmental damage and human exploitation’ (Atwhal et al. 2019: 406). For those operating in the luxury sphere radical transparency and supply chain innovation are becoming increasingly necessary to achieve and maintain positive brand equity and competitive advantage and many of the big names of luxury are discovering how a new normal of radical transparency (Positive Luxury, 2016; Zerbo 2016) challenges historic practices and business models. In the spring of 2020 a New York Times exposé revealed the poor working conditions and inequitable wages of workers based in India providing highly skilled embroidery for a range of French luxury brands (Schultz et al. 2020). In a system that devalues artisanship and tolerates social injustices, the disrespect for the human side of luxury is shown in practices such as cultural appropriation that can only exist as a result of
social inequalities (SEP 2018). Given that much of its premium-pricing is based on notions of authenticity and quality production (Kapferer and Bastien 2012), the luxury sector has much to lose in terms of reputation by such revelations of exploitation and irresponsible environmental actions.

The sustainable luxury consumer

2018 was dubbed the ‘Year of the Influential Sustainability Consumer’ by global market research organisation Nielsen, who reported that nearly half U.S. consumers would change their habits to reduce their environmental impact (Nielsen 2013). Calls for environmental and social justice from organisations and activists from the United Nations to Extinction Rebellion have inspired multiple panels of international fashion industry experts and innovators decrying the wastage and inequality built into the current system and proposing various material, technological and business variations on a theme of sustainable fashion. Despite the potential paradox of the term sustainable luxury, Kapferer and Michaut (2015) argue that the more consumers rate high quality as the primary defining trait of luxury, the less they see any contradiction between luxury and sustainability. This aligns with findings from insights and strategy firm Globescan, who have been working with SustainAbility and BBMG, tracking the beliefs and behaviours of a segment they refer to as the ‘Aspirational’ consumer; materialists who still use brands to define themselves but believe they should purchase products that are good for the environment and society. As long ago as 2013 they estimated this segment to include up to 2.5 billion consumers globally, who they saw as redefining consumption through their proclivity to unite style, social status and sustainability values (Globescan 2013).

A May 2020 McKinsey survey found that more than three in five consumers reported a brand’s promotion of sustainability as an important factor in their purchasing decisions (McKinsey 2020). 38 per cent of millennials say they have initiated or deepened relationships with businesses that have a positive impact on the environment (Deloitte 2020) and a survey on post-Covid luxury consumption found sustainability a key factor in purchase intention (GWI 2020). Positive Luxury, whose Butterfly mark accredits luxury brands on their sustainability credentials, reported on a prevailing introspective mood with people and organisations reflecting on what is important and ‘redefining what constitutes prosperity and value’ (Positive Luxury 2020: 10).

Slow fashion, sustainable development and the circular economy

Although a lot of attention has been given to the environmental aspects of sustainability, achieving this also requires attention to the interdependent social and economic factors. Models such as Elkington’s (1997) triple bottom line were initially developed to encourage businesses to become more sustainable by addressing their social and environmental ‘costs’ through balance sheets that recognised people, planet and profit. Another approach aimed at system change was ‘slow fashion’, an alternative philosophy for fashion production and consumption (Fletcher 2008). Inspired by the ambitions and methods of the slow food movement, slow fashion champions mindful consumption and advocates we ‘buy less but buy better’, favour quality over quantity, and invest in timeless pieces instead of trend-led
fashions; it implies a mindset shift away from see-now-buy-now to patience, reflection and delayed gratification (Shi and 2016). In this regard there is acknowledgement that building the ‘fair practice ecosystem’ integral to slow fashion production requires respect for materials and traditional skills, local sourcing and ethical labour practices (Shih and Agriofitis 2016).

It may be useful to introduce a distinction here between sustainability and sustainable development. Sustainable development is commonly accepted as defined in the Brundtland Commission as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (UNa 1987: n.pag.). Thus sustainable development refers to the multiple processes and pathways towards achieving the long term goal of sustainability across the interrelated social, environmental and commercial (economic) aspects:

- Social sustainability concerns the human aspects of production, the well-being of individuals and communities; in recognising how people contribute to business success it acknowledges that poverty and exploitation are systemic, and maintains that their eradication is imperative for the long-term viability of industries;
- Environmental sustainability focuses on reducing the negative environmental impacts inherent in supply chains and on increasing the scope and reach of positive environmental initiatives through awareness raising and investment;
- Commercial sustainability concerns the business and financial aspects of sustainability with a focus on creating effective strategies to develop high-quality products and services that are marketed fairly to meet society’s needs and wants (adapted from Varley et al. 2018).

Central to the Agenda for Sustainable Development are the 17 SDGs adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 (UNb) that acknowledge that ending poverty and other deprivations requires strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequalities, and promote economic growth – whilst simultaneously addressing climate change and environmental degradation. Sustainable development provides a framework to measure progress towards sustainability and has been widely referenced by key fashion and luxury industry players. In 2018 COP24 Katowice, Poland, saw the launch of the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action (UNFCC 2018); a commitment to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. The Fashion Pact launched by luxury conglomerate Kering’s Chairman and CEO, François-Henri Pinault at the 2019 G7 Summit in Biarritz, France, marked a commitment by signatories to stop global warming, restore biodiversity and protect the oceans by aligning their operations with the SDGs through Science-Based Targets (Fashion Pact). Aligning industry with the SDGs has been promoted as having the potential for releasing US$12tn of new business value a year, equivalent to 10 per cent of global GDP forecast by 2030 by SDGs (Business and SD Commission 2017).

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation proposes a circular economy for fashion which reimagines production and consumption as regenerative rather than extractive; waste is ‘designed-out’ with products, materials, and components that are wasted in linear systems either eliminated, introduced as inputs for other production processes, or returned safely to the biosphere (EMF 2017). Proponents of ‘circular fashion’ highlight the commercial benefits of preventing waste and creating new value from materials, processes and systems. But the key aspects of
traceability and transparency also recognize the need to understand the socioeconomic implications of the activities of the fashion industry and ensure imbalances are addressed (Gonçalves and Silva 2021).

Activists and innovators have alerted the industry and public to the folly of pursuing an extractive, linear system and called for a reset that recognises and ameliorates the wastefulness along the supply chain from pre to post-consumer. And although the slow and circular visions of fashion are not aimed exclusively at the luxury sector, the attention to materials through good design, product longevity and reduced volumes, mindful consumption messaging and higher prices are more easily adopted by luxury brands.

Tengri SKY

Over five days during 2019’s Spring London Fashion Week, a Mayfair art gallery was the site of a fashion installation exploring the links between natural materials, heritage crafts, cultural heritage and luxury menswear in the social enterprise Tengri. Over two floors using photography, textiles, machinery, garments and accessories ‘Tengri SKY: An exploration of natural materials and sustainable style’ told the story of the London-based luxury menswear label; its intention to trace ‘the spiritual journey behind one of the world’s rarest natural fabrics.’

[Image 1 about here – Nancy Johnston and the Tengri Manifesto]

Research is often serendipitous and my first introduction to Tengri’s Founder and CEO Nancy Johnston was a chance encounter on London’s Savile Row. We were both taking part in a London Design Week event celebrating the heritage and craft of tailoring in the undisputed centre of luxury menswear. Nancy had shown me samples of an innovative new textile she had developed from Mongolian yak fibre: ‘yakshmere’, and given me a potted history of her route to social entrepreneur founding Tengri, one of the first social businesses to take the Business for Biodiversity Pledge at the UN Convention of Biological Diversity. In our subsequent interview Johnston described having grown up aspiring for a life where she could ‘learn to live off the land and animals but living in LA in a concrete jungle’ and becoming a social worker who spent her spare time mountaineering and back-country camping. Following a redundancy, Johnston had travelled to Mongolia where she was inspired by the people, particularly the yak herders, and the harmony of their nomadic lifestyle with their animals and the land. Like many social enterprise founders, Johnston’s business emerged as a creative response to the social and environmental issues she had witnessed first-hand travelling in Mongolia. Many of the herders were raising goats to meet the increasing global demand for cashmere, trading with most of the world’s luxury brands under what they claim to be ‘fair trade’ conditions. Yet despite the importance of their role in the luxury supply chain, they were living in abject poverty, earning ‘a pound a day largely subsidised by the government which is actually subsidised by mining’.

Inspired by Patagonia whose responsible business model, openness and innovation in creating positive environmental impacts she admires, equally motivated to protect the natural
environment, but working in another sector - luxury menswear, for social enterprise Tengri, the notions of equality and responsibility are central to brand DNA and as such inform every business, design and marketing decision. Despite having no background in fashion, as a trained social worker, Johnston saw an opportunity to redress the systemic inequalities of a luxury system that failed to reward those on whom the entire textile supply chain rested (Radclyffe-Thomas 2018). Johnston calls herself ‘a product of the global economy, global politics, and war’ that displaced her family from China to Vietnam, then to America via a refugee camp in Malaysia. She describes starting a social business as ‘an existential journey about who you are and what you value and what you believe.’ What started as a knitwear brand subsequently evolved into a B2B / B2C company that includes a fashion line and also produces fabric for Savile Row and other luxury brands as well as supplying other luxury brands ranging from interiors to furniture and furnishings.

Visitors enter the exhibition on the ground floor where they are immersed in an environment comprising images, textiles and machinery designed to communicate the provenance of the brand Tengri and emphasise its values and mission as a social enterprise. A curatorial label tells us: ‘Using her knowledge as a trained systemic social worker, Nancy wrote her first business plan on the back of a chocolate wrapper in a dimly lit ger (yurt). Having worked as a child in a sweatshop, she was determined that Tengri should be fair and equitable – a socially minded company – working with nomadic herder families to take Noble Yarns to new markets’. The exhibition’s narrative follows the journey of its core material- yak fibre - and in tracing its passage from the Khangai mountains in Western Mongolia to the textile mills in the Yorkshire Pennines, UK, it serves to make explicit, or transparent, the geographic and cultural linkages in its supply chain.

[Image 2 about here: Yak fibre]

One of the notable features of the exhibition is a brand manifesto from founder Nancy Johnston in which she outlines her ‘sustainable design philosophy’, i.e. the motivations and intentions in starting the luxury label. The founder story is an integral part of brand identity; Nancy’s background was not in fashion design, the manifesto describes her as ‘a humanitarian, environmentalist, wildlife activist and adventurer who was inspired to start a social enterprise while travelling in Mongolia.’ The manifesto comprises a large poster with a central panel of text against an image of the Mongolian landscape. The animals, land and people shown in the Manifesto imagery are central to the brand, since Tengri’s introduction of yak fibre into the luxury supply chain has lifted thousands of nomadic yak herders out of poverty. Other Manifesto images show the people and machinery of the heritage factories and workshops in the UK with whom Tengri has partnered to develop its Khangai Noble Yarn, which is shown in the hands of knitters as well as in fashion images of Tengri’s luxury menswear made from the yak fibre.

Kapferer and Bastien’s description of a luxury product as ‘com(ing) along with a small fragment of its native soil’ (2012: 13) perfectly encapsulates the London-based luxury menswear brand Tengri whose founding, development and brand purpose are firmly rooted in the vast open landscapes of Mongolia. Due to the extremities of the Mongolian climate, the indigenous yaks produce a double coat, with an outer layer of robust, durable fibres and an inner layer of fine thermo-insulating fibres. One of the defining features of a luxury material is its rarity and Tengri’s core textile innovation is the concept of yakshmere, a fine fibre - Tengri Khangai Noble Yarns - that can be woven into fine textiles or knitted into luxury
The yak fibre is only collected once a year, when the yaks shed their winter coats, and prior to Johnston’s intervention, was considered of low value. On Johnston’s first trip to Mongolia, she had intuited its potential and purchased her first batch of yak fibre, reimagining waste into a valuable luxury ingredient. In 2016, Tengri was recognised for its innovation in sustainability by its inclusion in Sustainia100.

In Tengri Johnston has created a luxury brand that seamlessly embodies the material, individual and social aspects of luxury and provides a model for other modern luxury brands. In her own words ‘what’s the highest value we can give to honour people’s skills, but to also honour this natural fibre and create something desirable from it?’ The Tengri Manifesto outlines the company’s founding principles that ‘every Tengri product is created without compromise to people, animals or the environment.’ Samples of untreated yak fibre in three colourways - light fawn, mid-brown and chocolate - are shown in the exhibition atop a pedestal. A glass bowl is placed on a digital scale; the bowl contains 100 grammes of untreated yak fibre, representing the total annual yield of luxury-grade fibre from one yak and highlighting its scarcity. Yak fibre has not been widely recognised as a fashion textile, yet its qualities include strength, and as the exhibition highlights it outperforms merino wool for warmth, is as soft as cashmere, and is odour and water resistant. A skein of yarn sits atop another pedestal accompanied by text explaining how the combed fibres are hand-sorted into their natural colours: cocoa, tan, silver and platinum. As seen above, dyeing is usually the most impactful process during textile production and Tengri’s decision to work with the fibre in its natural colourways has removed this potentially negative impact as well as introducing a further opportunity for differentiation and exclusivity, since the silver and platinum colourways are much rarer than cocoa and tan.

The photographic imagery on view throughout the exhibition is captivating and entrancing, introducing a landscape and way of life distant both geographically and culturally to most. A pair of photos feature a brother and sister, herders who have returned home from Mongolia’s capital of Ulaanbaatar to assist with preparations for winter. In one image the brother, Bat-Erdene Chuluun-Erdene, is seen on horseback riding out towards the distant Khangai Mountains where the yaks roam. In the other image his sister, Byambajav Batsaikhan, is seen preparing to milk the yaks for the family’s evening tea. The beauty of the landscape and whatever romantic fantasies the casual viewer may conjure around the nomadic lifestyle stand in harsh contrast to the realities of the social and economic conditions for many living in Mongolia. Of a population of 3 million, it is estimated that 40 per cent depend on herding; an ancient nomadic lifestyle ‘woven with [the] ecologically, economically and culturally significant stories, knowledges and memories’ of indigenous people (Whyte 2017: 2), a ‘legacy of thousands of years of traditional culture and dependent upon a harmonious coexistence with nature’ (Yembuu 2016: 93). The herders rely on their animals for food, transport and income (Yembuu 2016) and although Mongolia is one of the least densely populated countries in the world, increasing industrialization through mining, and overgrazing have resulted in desertification and displacement of the nomadic herders to levels that threaten its ‘innocent landscape and immutable culture’ (Solomon 2016: 246).

By recognising the value of the herders’ traditional nomadic lifestyle and educating their customers on the delicate ecological balance upon which the traditional nomadic lifestyle...
depends, Tengri aims to address these environmental and social issues in partnership with the herders themselves. Privately-owned luxury businesses are not obliged to share details of their finances, yet it is a key strand of contemporary social purpose brands to extend transparency into their business models.

The central concept of Tengri’s fair-share business model aims to eliminate complex and inequitable global supply chains. To illustrate Tengri’s alternative vision, the exhibition includes a Material Journey Map showing the fibres’ journey from East to West. Starting in the Khangai Mountains, the fibre travels via Ulaanbaatar to Yorkshire and Scotland for processing and weaving, and from there to London for tailoring. Tengri promotes local heritage and sustainable development by working directly with herders and building a sustainable supply chain from fibre to yarns and fabrics that not only reduces environmental impact, but enables Tengri to pay above-market prices for their yak fibre and support local production in the UK. Through its work Tengri aims to address SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 15 (life on land) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals) ‘by promoting sustainable economic growth, ensuring sustainable production patterns, protecting and promoting sustainable natural ecosystems use and combating desertification through our global partnerships for sustainable development’.

The family-owned Yorkshire mill that spins and weaves Tengri’s yarns has been manufacturing textiles since 1777, and the exhibition includes a wooden eight-shaft Harris table loom used for developing textile designs with a caption noting that the design of such looms remains relatively unchanged over the years and as such weavers like its current owner Henrietta Johns (2018 Tengri Innovation Awards Winner) are an important part of sustainable development that recognizes the importance of maintaining cultural heritage. Tengri’s business model not only helps preserve and promote intangible cultural heritage in Mongolia; by working with small-scale local production in England and Scotland it also recognises the value of cultural heritage as living heritage in the UK, supporting skills and traditions that span the centuries.

[Image 4 about here - sweater]

Proceeding downstairs, the visitor is encouraged to interact with a range of Tengri products. The lower floor gallery’s unfinished brick walls provide an analogous backdrop for luxurious yakshmere throws and the hand knitwear that was one of their first ranges, made using undyed yarn and cable stitch or natural colourways to create textures and patterns. One of the knit pieces, the Emblem Sweater, hand-loomed in Scotland, translates the Tengri letter ‘T’ logo, designed by Tengri’s co-founder Winnie Lee, into a jacquard-knit Fair Isle. The Tengri logo references the shape of the yak’s head and a curator’s panel tells how ‘The continuous line reflects a single strand of yarn, while its composition is inspired by the Mongolian ulzi pattern, a symbol of longevity and happiness.’

[Images 5 and 6 about here - shoes]
The lower floor also showcases a new ‘sustainability and footwear initiative’, a limited edition collaboration between Tengri and the esteemed Northamptonshire shoemaker Joseph Cheaney & Sons. The collaboration has resulted in the world’s first luxury shoes to feature Khangai Yak fabric, and exemplifies Tengri’s desire to celebrate traditional skills and promote a design-led approach to textile innovation. The exhibition references Joseph Cheaney & Sons’ heritage in shoemaking, a family trade for five generations, as well as their relevance to Tengri’s functional design ethos: Joseph Cheaney & Sons made paratrooper boots during WW2. Johnston’s travels in Mongolia informed Tengri’s work with Joseph Cheaney & Sons and resulted in three styles of shoes for men and women, the Apex Brogue, the Vertex Boot and the Pinnacle Chelsea boot, each of which incorporate a yak fibre insole. As well as providing another use for the yak fibre, £50 from the sale price of each purchase is donated to support local wildlife conservation efforts in Mongolia.

The lower floor of the gallery space houses several installations including pieces from the 2019-20 Sky Collection hand-tailored in London. Moodboard images of tailored coats and pilots in vintage flight suits are presented along with design sketches and fabric swatches in a colour palette of greys and browns, and also a navy swatch created with eco-friendly dye. A text panel explains the collection is named Sky since Tengri is synonymous with the sky: Tengri translates as Sky God, ‘the primary deity of gods believed by early Mongolic and Turkic peoples to govern all human existence and natural phenomena on earth’. The tailored pieces are inspired by ‘the meaning of Tengri’ and ‘man’s endeavours to conquer the sky’, they represent a cultural hybrid ‘blending eastern and western influences’ by introducing traditional Mongolian functional design elements to classic menswear silhouettes ‘created for the modern day nomad’. Mongolia’s pastoral nomadic lifestyle requires clothing to be adaptable and protective, thus simplicity and loose-fitting styles predominate; although traditional Mongolian dress is necessarily functional, different ethnic groups differentiate themselves through their use of ‘cut, colour and trimming’ (Yembuu 2016: 95).

- The Raven Trench Coat is made from 100 per cent undyed and natural Khangai yak lined in cupro (a regenerated cellulose fabric made from cotton waste woven in Italy). Resembling a classic trench, the Raven incorporates the design features of the traditional Mongolian deel; a long traditional tunic made from a single piece of fabric with a high collar and long sleeves that fastens on the right shoulder (Discover Mongolia, nd). The Raven references the deel in its overlong sleeves, side fastening and sash belt.

- The Merlin Overcoat is a classic overcoat with vented pockets, made from Khangai yak fibre, lined with cupro, featuring a notched Mongolian sheep wool collar and lapel. The Merlin references the off-duty style of early twentieth century pilots with a storm patch and a deep inverted pleat at the centre back giving volume at the hem. Its centre front fastening is secured with corozo ‘ivory’ nut buttons.
The Kite 2-piece Jumpsuit references both original WWI aviators and contemporary SWAT uniforms. Made in lightweight undyed chocolate-coloured yak fabric, lined with cupro and featuring a drop-crotch construction and articulated knees for ease of movement, there is a concealed fastening for attaching the jacket and trousers.

The Kinglet 2/4 Length Trench Coat incorporates the storm collar and map pocket styling of the original WWI trench. Made in 100 per cent virgin baby camel with a yak fabric collar, lined in cupro with metal concealed poppers.

The Crested Aviator Jacket is Tengri’s interpretation of the classic aviator jacket, inspired by a crested bird’s plume of feathers. Featuring diagonal zip-fastening pockets and lined in cupro, the Crested Aviator Jacket is made from Mongolian sheep wool, with an integral wadding made from 100 per cent yak fibre and a knitted collar designed by Zoe Atkinson, a 2018 Tengri Innovation Awards Runner-up.

The Falcon Pilot’s Liner Jacket designed by Christopher Ehrlich, a 2018 Tengri Innovation Awards Runner-up, takes the insulating layer that WWI pilots wore under their flight jackets as its inspiration. Made from undyed hemp muslin, with a large chest zip pocket and front zip fastening, the hip length zigzag quilted jacket is lined in cupro and features a knitted yak ribbed collar and an inner layer of Mongolian yak wadding providing insulation.

Conclusion

Writing in the foreword of ‘Future Luxe’ Francois-Henri Pinault, Chairman and CEO Kering, says ‘modern luxury is a luxury that accepts its responsibilities to the environment and its community’ (Rambourg 2020: x). Luxury is an industry that defines its value through the quality of its raw materials, that fosters creativity, elevates artisanship and relies on brand heritage and local production to underpin the provenance of its products, and justify its pricing strategy, and as such can be considered as embodying many of the practices of sustainability (Amatulli et al. 2017; Kapferer, 2020). Yet despite luxury’s raison d’être being imbued with the desire to protect and promote savoir faire, heritage and product longevity, and notwithstanding public commitments and pledges for better business, financial and cultural factors have hampered progress in implementing the necessary system changes implied by slow fashion, sustainable development and circular economy.

Johnston defines luxury by saying ‘something is rare, it’s very limited, it’s made with quality and it lasts […] it will increase in value with time’. Tengri’s sustainable luxury uses creative marketing to educate consumers into what can be considered the new codes of modern sustainable luxury. These are codes that go beyond the workshop or atelier to create a narrative arc linking the herder families, local exporters and NGOs in Mongolia, to the manufacturers in the UK ‘focus(ing) on the highest level of craftsmanship’. Tengri’s mission statement ‘to introduce sustainable and natural fibres into the global luxury goods market as a sustainable alternative with the aim of supporting the land, the animals and the livelihoods of people in remote parts of the world that don’t have access’ aligns with The Circular Laboratory’s criteria for truly sustainable materials having ‘a valid concept in which the
effects on the environment at every stage in its life-cycle have been considered, from cradle to grave…’ (Holding and Lorenz 2020npag). Thus Tengri provides a blueprint for luxury brands catering to the new aspirational consumer who rejects excess and instead enhances self-esteem through knowledge-seeking and purchasing from responsible sustainable luxury brands.

ILLUSTRATIONS
Image 1. Nancy Johnston Tengri Founder and CEO, wearing Tengri, stands in front of her Manifesto.
Image 2. Yak fibre has many performance qualities contributing to its luxury status.
Image 3. An eight-shaft Harris table loom used for developing textile designs.
Image 4. Tengri logo knitted Emblem Sweater.
Image 5. Tengri x Joseph Cheaney & Sons collaboration.
Image 6. Yak hair insoles.
Image 7. Sky collection Moodboard and textile swatches.
All images [© N. Radclyffe-Thomas, courtesy of Tengri].

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