

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN



UNRAVELING IDENTITY'S INFLUENCE ON DESIGN: A HOLISTIC EXAMINATION OF CHINESE INDEPENDENT PRODUCT DESIGNERS' NARRATIVE IN DESIGN PRACTICE, MANUFACTURING, AND EXHIBITION.

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DOI: 10.63442/SXOS2993

**KEYWORDS | GLOBALISATION, CULTURAL REPRESENTATION, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, DESIGN
CULTURE, CHINESENESS**

ABSTRACT | This study explores the intricate interplay between Chinese identity and the design industry, focusing on independent product designers. As China undergoes significant transformations in its economic, political, and cultural spheres due to globalization, this research explores the impact of these changes on the design practices of Chinese independent designers. By examining the narratives of designers such as Mario Tsai, Frank Chou, and others, the study aims to unravel how Chinese identity intertwines with design across practice, manufacturing, and exhibition. Methodologically, the research employs ethnography, involving qualitative analysis through interviews, observations, and thematic analysis. Interviews with prominent Chinese independent product designers, coupled with fieldwork at Mario Tsai design studios and international design exhibitions such as Milan Design Week, provide firsthand insights into their experiences and perspectives. The findings of this research reveal the multifaceted negotiation of Chinese identity within the realm of design practice, manufacturing processes, and exhibition strategies. Notably, Chinese designers are observed to gravitate towards a design language characterized by simplicity and universality, challenging conventional expectations that often associate Chinese design with stereotypical symbols. Moreover, the study discusses the impact of the Shanzhai phenomenon, which refers to the production of fake goods, on the development of design in China. This exploration reveals ideological conflicts and societal tensions inherent within the design field as designers navigate the complex landscape shaped by cultural, economic, and political factors. In conclusion, this study contributes significantly to a nuanced understanding of Chinese identity within the context of design. By illuminating the ideological conflicts, cultural tensions, and strategic maneuvers prevalent within the global design landscape, this research advocates for a liberation of contemporary Chinese design from traditional cultural constraints. Furthermore, it calls for a more nuanced representation of Chinese identity in design practice, detached from conventional stereotypes and government propaganda. Ultimately, this study anticipates a more sophisticated outlook in the realm of international design promotion, fostering a broader appreciation for the diverse and evolving landscape of Chinese design identity.

1. Introduction

During Milan Design Week 2023, when the author was assisting Chinese independent product designer Mario Tsai in promoting his works, multiple visitors inquired, "Are you Japanese?" This question's underpinning logic rests on the stereotype that Chinese identity remains marginalized within the design community. Why is there such a huge discrepancy between the volume of China's economy and its sense of existence in the independent design community? To answer this question and explore the intricate interplay between Chinese identity and the design industry, this study endeavours to dissect how Chinese identity intertwines with the design industry, as seen through the eyes of Chinese independent product designers.

The process of globalisation significantly impacts Chinese identity. After 1978, in a quarter of a century, China has 'moved from communism to capitalism' (Guthrie, 2012, p6). The world's largest communist society is also the world's most dynamic capitalist economy, which is one of the greatest ironies of our time (Wang and He, 2014). The juxtaposition of China's economic progress with its political identity engenders a significant contradiction. Meanwhile, globalisation has also inevitably brought about the Americanisation of global culture, weakening the integrity of local and national cultures, and Chinese culture has been deeply affected by it (Knight, 2006). Few countries in history have gone through such a process of transformation involving the economic, political, and cultural spheres, and such a profound transformation is bound to bring about extremely sharp pains in the face of identity (Liu & Turner, 2018). The fluidity and pluralism of identity and culture, the homogenisation of lifestyles, and the ambiguities within traditional Chinese culture have all contributed to difficulties in the perception of Chinese identity, which is the Other in the West's context (Said, 2003). However, the impact of globalisation on various fields varies significantly, for example, traditional fine arts, such as Chinese calligraphy, is a cultural phenomenon that remains intricately connected to traditional culture and exhibits minimal association with economic practices of capitalism. So Chinese calligraphy stands as a rare example of a cultural heritage that has endured relatively unchanged for over a millennium and has experienced limited influence from Western factors. In stark contrast, design, particularly product design, maintains a close and intricate relationship with the industrialisation process and cultural and aesthetic contexts, thereby prominently exemplifying the paradoxical implications of globalisation on cultural practices and identity construction. This demonstrates the special attributes of design, especially product design: it can serve as a social medium for loading, extending, and exchanging information, and this research exploits this quality by using product design as a lens to gain insight into the entanglements generated by China's cultural- political-economic identities.

2. Aims of the study

This research focuses on Chinese independent product designers who design lamps and furniture for both national and international consumption. Chen (2006) previously highlighted the lack of globally influential design studios and designers in China, which impacted Chinese designers' identity to some extent. However, after 17 years, China has witnessed the emergence of a group of Chinese independent product designers, such as Frank Chou and Mario Tsai, who now attain stability in profits from their studios, collaborate with European brands like Louis Vuitton, and frequently feature in international exhibitions and media platforms such as Wallpaper. This research takes this small group of independent designers as a starting point to explore how they differently perceive their Chinese identity and how they understand the impact of modern Chinese identity in design practice, manufacturing, and marketing. The objective of this research is to enhance academic comprehension of the professional experiences of Chinese independent product designers and their perspectives on Chinese identity by gathering and analysing their narratives. Pavitt and Crowley's (2008) exhibition and book "Cold War Modern" unraveled the multifarious ways in which Cold War politics and attendant anxieties imprinted themselves upon the canvas of modernist art, design, and architecture post- 1945. In congruence with this lineage, this study aims to offer inspiration to other scholars interested in exploring 'Chineseness' or investigating the influence of diverse national cultural contexts on design. From a practical perspective, through the in-depth analysis of the independent design field's development in China and the consolidation of experiences from established practitioners,

this research seeks to make valuable contributions and serve as a reference for aspiring young designers pursuing careers in this domain. For national design agencies and cultural departments, this study hopes to help them broaden their systematic understanding of Chinese culture by sorting out the Chinese independent design industry and Chinese independent product designers' narratives.

To achieve these objectives, this research is structured around five primary research questions, serving as the foundation for the study's investigation:

1. How have important periods in China's product design trajectory influenced the contemporary Chinese independent product design industry?
2. How did cultural Chinese characteristics impact the construction of modern Chinese design?
3. How do Chinese independent product designers perceive their Chinese identity?
4. How do Chinese independent product designers organize their design and production, whether situated within China or abroad?
5. How do Chinese independent product designers promote their identity at domestic and international exhibitions?

3. Methodology

This research methodology centered on ethnography, involving qualitative analysis through specific methods, including interviews, observations, and thematic analysis. This study primarily focused on interviewing a cadre of famous Chinese independent product designers, including Mario Tsai, Xu Gang (Bento Studio), Frank Chou, Sing Chan, Gao Guqi (Fnji), Weng Yuxin (YUUE), Mona He (Studio Monana) and Jiang Qian (Studio DEJAWU).

These interviews gathered first-hand information about their experiences in the field. Subsequent to two months of fieldwork, the author was involved in extensive engagement at Mario Tsai's studio and Milan Design Week 2023. The immersion in Mario Tsai's studio environment facilitated comprehensive insights into all facets of design, manufacturing, and promotional activities. At Milan Design Week 2023, the author conducted observations focusing on Chinese designers' presentations and the articulation of their identities. This comparative study extended to designers from other countries, notably Norway and Denmark. The aim was to investigate how their national governments and cultural organizations incentivized and facilitated their participation while fostering cultural exchange. After the transcription of all collected material, the thematic analysis served as the analytical framework to decipher patterns, recurrent themes, and underlying meanings embedded within the extensive data acquired through interviews, observations, and fieldwork.

4. Findings



Figure 1. Mario Tsai' Mazha system. The conductive transmission of low voltage across the structure of the lighting allows the lamp to be free from wires and to build diverse and endlessly changing systems with free units. Based on these theoretical and technical foundations, the first generation of modular lighting systems in the Mario Tsai studio was inspired by the traditional Chinese sitter Mazha Lighting System.

I look at the works of these designers (see Figure 1&2), it is almost impossible to find typical Chinese symbols. Instead, they have gravitated towards a design language characterised by its simplicity and universality. Xu and Xie (2019) suggest that Chinese designers predominantly follow Western design systems and aesthetics while overlooking elements of Oriental culture, which affects the construction of their Chinese identity. This research questions this argument, particularly in today's transcultural and globalised world: is the incorporation of classic Chinese cultural symbols indeed the quintessential conduit for the manifestation of Chinese identity in design? However, from another perspective, does the adoption of a so-called universal design language by Chinese independent product designers contribute to expediting the disappearance of China as the 'Other' in the field of design? This research prompts contemplation regarding the extent to which the modern Chinese design might merely function as a rhetorical device, homogenising and consolidating diverse individuals within a specific context. The ostensible emphasis on distinct markers of identity often obfuscates the underlying Western cultural lineage and identities, thereby rendering the 'Other' designation vacuous, making the term 'modern' transmuted into a tool for assimilation. This research explores the reasons behind this conflict, drawing from the historical development of Chinese design from ancient times to the present, the high degree of homogenisation of designed products in the context of East-West fluid relationships, and Western design colonialism.



Figure 2. Sing Chan's Fragment. Sing Chan's work uses stainless steel folded into long, tense vertebrae with textured glass, exposed lamp bases, screws, and wires to create a structured product.

Jean Baudrillard (1976) claimed that the manufacture of industrial products is not only a process of material production but also a construction of consciousness and discourse. And China is in this secondary discourse. Due to historical negative evaluations of faulty quality toys and toxic pet food, the “Made in China” label is still evaluated negatively (Ling, 2022). Apart from being the world's factory for low-end manufacturing, the Shanzhai factory is also a highly negative label. In Chinese, Shanzhai means “mountain stronghold,” but it is more often used to refer to fake goods (Han, 2017, p56)(See Figure 3), representing a subversive play on the original. Paradoxically, the Shanzhai phenomenon serves as an essential innovation model for China's technological advancement and embodies the spirit of open source (Lindtner and Greenspan, 2015; Wu et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the open-source socialist ideology underlying Shanzhai has inflicted a severe blow upon the independent design sector and the safeguarding of Chinese independent designers' intellectual property rights, and even worse, they have also suffered from the negative perceptions of their image brought about by Shanzhai, which means they became double victims of Shanzhai. Using manufacturing as an entry point, the study provides insights into the ideological conflict between the careers of Chinese independent designers and the Shanzhai phenomenon, tacitly condoned (or even covertly encouraged) by the government (Hennessey, 2011). Shanzhai embodies a deconstruction of conventional notions of ownership, serving as a pivotal catalyst for expansive production on a broader scale, facilitating enhanced livelihoods for a more significant number of individuals, thereby engendering the realisation, to a certain degree, of what can be referred to as a "commonwealth society." In other words, fundamentally, this contradiction is an inherent conflict between capitalist Chinese characteristics and political Chinese characteristics, this dual victimisation illustrates the inherent contradiction between capitalist and political characteristics in China and unveils a deeper exploration into the role of national political formations in design development.



Figure 3. Shanzhai Gucci shoes, with the label "made in P.R.C.." Photo taken on 16/12/2023 by author.

The fact that China is a manufacturing but design-undeveloped economy, rather than a design-developed one like Japan, profoundly but subtly shapes the overseas promotion of Chinese independent product designers. A decade ago, some Chinese manufacturers attended Milan Design Week to take photographs to copy since many Italian manufacturers were reluctant to receive Chinese guests (Liu, 2016). As a result, some Chinese “designers” printed Japanese business cards, and they had a clear division of work, with someone in charge of the tabletop and someone copying the legs (Ibid). This negative impression of plagiarism and past absence at international exhibitions is an inherent disadvantage for Chinese independent product designers nowadays. This research uses Milan Design Week as another focal point to explore how these designers strategically market their identities and challenge implicit stereotypes caused by “Made in China” and Shanzhai.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis of Design Shanghai and Milan Design Week illuminates the varied formats and participation dynamics, revealing how exhibitions can serve as vehicles for identity promotion and industry representation.

5. Conclusion

In essence, the complex nuances within Chinese identity in design underscore the intricate interplay between global influences, cultural legacies, and economic realities. This study serves as a stepping stone in unraveling the multifaceted narratives of Chinese independent product designers, shedding light on the ideological conflicts, cultural tensions, and strategic manoeuvres within the global design landscape. The exploration of identity construction within the design realm unveils an ongoing discourse where

'Chineseness' negotiates its place amidst globalised paradigms, redefining notions of modernity, identity, and cultural representation in design practice. From a cultural perspective, this study calls for a detachment and liberation of contemporary Chinese design from past traditional culture and the Chinese government's propaganda. It anticipates cultural representation in design to manifest in a more nuanced and profound manner rather than merely through symbols. From the standpoint of manufacturing, independent design undertaken by designers represents a sophisticated top-down influence within society. However, during the research process, it was found that the Shanzhai phenomenon is evolving into a more diverse and democratic force, encompassing societal powers at the grassroots level. The intertwining of these two forces has created a complex landscape within China's social design sphere. In the realm of promoting within the international design community, while the identity label of Chinese designers serves as a rapid and efficient means of promoting and establishing inherent impressions, designers are hesitant to play the identity card any longer. This is because such Orientalist expectations often act as constraints when endeavouring to create designs that reflect a more modern outlook.

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Dan Mu is a current PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh, She is also a product and service designer. Her research specialises in design culture and the designer's identity, endeavouring to chronicle the emergence and growth of independent design in China, whilst bridging a critical gap in the contemporary design history narrative. Dan's PhD research uses product design as a lens through which to gain insight into the entanglements generated by China's cultural-political-economic identities.

P/REFERENCES OF DESIGN

This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.

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ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

Conference Organisers

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME)

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