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Chinese design – designing Chineseness*

They are so fresh in mind, they have the most radical things in their tradition, the most amazing faience and perforated jades and scholar's rocks. Everyone is encouraged to do their most stupid and extravagant designs there. They don't have as much of a barrier between good taste and bad taste, between the minimal and expressive. The Beijing stadium tells me that nothing will shock them.

– Jacques Herzog, architect Beijing stadium

Herzog's cryptic statement (quoted in Arthur Lubow, 'The China Syndrome', *New York Times*, 21 May 2006) is telling on many counts. First, it contains a strong us (the implicit West) versus them (the Chinese) logic – as if the two were clearly separate entities. Second, the invocation of tradition rings a banal yet pervasive bell: when it comes to China, references to tradition simply creep in. Third, precisely by positioning China as the cultural other, Herzog allows possibilities for Chinese designers to subvert design practices established and hierarchized in the West. All three – cultural essentialism, the celebration of tradition and possibilities for alternative design practice – need to be critically examined when discussing design prefaced by national/cultural labels such as 'Chinese' and 'Dutch'.

If we are to define 'Chinese design', let me venture a typology:

1. Antique China: objects such as Ming vases, *suanzhi* furniture and *qipao* dress;
2. Communist China: paraphernalia from the Cultural Revolution, including the *Red Book*, Mao icons and the Mao suit;
3. Industrial China: late-modern urban landscapes of Shanghai's Pudong area, shiny shopping malls and Lenovo laptops; and
4. No-design China: the arguable assertion that contemporary China is a design wasteland.

The typology however fails to address the fundamental question: how can we talk or write about 'Chinese design' at all? Talking or writing about China treads on paths ridden with clichés and pitfalls – clichés about China's 'long history' and 'rich culture'. Causality is often assumed, as if more years of history – imagined or not – add layers of culture. The underlying assumption, that culture is something one can measure, weigh and accumulate, remains just that – an assumption. The epithets 'Chinese', 'Dutch', etc, should be confined by quotation marks, to liberate them into the contradictory array of practices, experiences and pasts – which is, after all, what we normally call creativity.

It may therefore be better to start from scratch, and to interrogate the epithet 'Chinese design' and its counterpart, 'Dutch design'. This questioning is necessary to sensitise ourselves to the inherent contradictions, unwarranted assumptions and nationalism inscribed in notions of 'Chinese' or 'Dutch' culture, and to actualize their true potential. The starting position should be one of sincere doubt: what is 'Chinese' or 'Dutch' design, what justifies the use of 'Chinese' and 'Dutch'? Some preliminary observations:

1. One possible answer is the marketing logic of distinction. As much as 'Italian', 'German' or 'Japanese' design provide marketing advantages for certain products, perceived or constructed Chineseness and Dutchness may work wonders. The question then becomes not what is Chineseness or Dutchness, but: what kind of Chineseness or Dutchness sells where?
2. A global economy may demand Chineseness from China, since that is what sells today. Yet, in the long run, the logic of exoticization will only demand newer kinds of exoticness. If Dutch design has succeeded in escaping a global insistence on exotic Dutchness, how will China do so? When and how can we move beyond the cultural epithets and imagine a Chinese-Dutch fusion into cosmopolitan design practice?
3. China today refers to dazzling speed and scale of economic and cultural change, both seemingly absent in the Netherlands. How does this affect design practice?
4. Given the speed and scale of change in China, the question of sustainability is urgent. How to foster design practices sensitive to the environmental implications of consumption and production?
5. Different political, bureaucratic and juridical systems produce their own hindrances and opportunities. Insecurity reigns in China, where approval often depends on *guanxi* with the right people. How to navigate such territory, and aren't differences with the 'West' overrated here?
6. The speed and scale of change in China blur distinctions between good and bad, real and fake, as well as other distinctions of taste. Take its vibrant counterfeiting culture, which cheerfully reproduces and builds on existing designs. The tyranny of the new, the perpetual desire – if not obligation – to produce something original, something radically different, to dominate a global design world, may be replaced by an alternative logic of revamping, a celebration of the fake, practices of refreshing rather than renewing. What can be gained from this alternative logic of cultural production?

These questions foreground the classic inquiry of inter-cultural dialogue: what, then, can we learn and unlearn from each other? <

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✲ **Position paper on meeting of Dutch and Chinese designers in Amsterdam, 12 June 2006, organised by the Premsela Foundation. www.premsela.org**

Exhibition in Rotterdam: China Contemporary, Architecture, Art and Visual Culture. See arts agenda p.36 and www.chinacontemporary.nl

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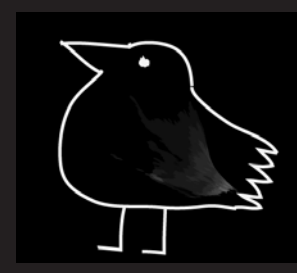

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Veil

It could be so thin as to be invisible, or it could be completely opaque. It highlights the fine chiseled features of beauties, or obscures the face from the forehead to the neck. It has several forms, but only one name: the veil. Perhaps no other article of clothing has been so over burdened with symbolism through the ages. Today it is commonly associated with Islam.

The veil was not common in the Muslim empire until late in the 10th century, and was introduced to Muslims through their Persian conquest. In antiquity, only upper class Assyrian women were required by law to wear veils, while slaves and servants were explicitly forbidden from veiling. Muslims initially adopted the veil to represent social status; only later did the veil symbolise modesty. While the Islamic injunction to dress modestly has a wide range of interpretations, by the 16th century, *yashmak* (veil) had become obligatory in the Ottoman empire.

As the feminist movement gained ground in Europe and America in the 20th century, many western feminists wanted to empower women in developing countries. Sometimes their perception of the problems of women in the developing world were at odds with their real lives and concerns. Here the veil was one of the most visual symbols used to represent backward and patriarchal societies.

As nation states gained independence, unveiling was used to symbolise modernity. Turkey's Kemal Ataturk probably attacked veiling most vociferously. Shortly after, Iran's Shah Reza Pahlevi ordered school teachers to unveil. By the 1950s unveiling had taken hold in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. In Saudi Arabia, the veil is legally mandatory (but is sometimes of very fine material and nonfunctional as far as concealment goes).

As fundamental political parties gained power in the late 1970s, veiling was again instituted either through social pressure or mandated by law. With Khomeini's revolution in Iran came the state mandate that women should be veiled. In Pakistan veiling increased as Zia-ul-Haq's efforts to Islamize Pakistan progressed. One outcome of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan was mandatory veiling.

Today, some non-Muslims use the veil to symbolise women's oppression in developing countries. Muslim women living in western Europe and North America are beginning to wear the veil – by choice. It demonstrates their modesty and asserts their Muslim identity. Some developing countries have adopted the veil in keeping with their interpretation of dressing modestly. Others have adopted the veil to highlight their differences with their perception of the West.

It is difficult to say if the veil is being lifted or becoming more entrenched. What is certain is that in many cases references to the veil are actually references to what it symbolises. One needs to realize that while what the veil symbolises may evoke strong responses, the veil itself is amoral and apolitical. <

For further reading

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