FRAMING DESIGN IN CHINA AS A "MODERN" PRACTICE: FROM CHRONOLOGY TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction: from history of objects to design history

Design history has an uncommon interpretation in China. Even the most updated writings (such as Zhongguo she ji shi [Chinese Design History] by Xia Yanjing, 2009; The Design History of China by Gao Feng, 2006) of design history still consider the tools made by Homo erectus yuanamouensis during the lower Paleolithic period as the beginning of design practice in China. Most authors consider design simply as an act of ‘making things’ while many do not find any distinctions among the concepts of “craft” (工藝), “art” (美術) and “design” (設計).

The presentation of the typical Chinese design history is an iconographic description of the objects and their material conditions in loose accordance with the conventional archeological codes. In addition, the historians offer an aesthetic appreciation to the objects from a subjective perspective.

The Western design historians have a very different view on the nature of design history. Victor Margolin indicates that ‘history has always a role in shaping contemporary thought’. In general, many Western design historians have confirmed that ‘design is of great importance and significance in the modern world’ (Dilnot [1984], Attfield [2000], Magolin [2009], Lees-Maffei & Houze [2010]). Attfield considers that the practice of design and its objectification were in fact the non-verbal dynamics of the way people constructed and interacted with the modern material world. Moreover, Dilnot confirms that the task of design history is to ‘contribute to what design is and

what designer does’.\(^4\) If we agree with these prominent scholars, we
would see that the abstract narrative of the things made in the past is
inadequate to identify the significant role of design in the Chinese
context, especially its force in shaping the world of modern China.
Furthermore, such narrative does limit our capacity to construct a
clear and distinctive nature of “design”.

In the article “Design in History”, Margolin considers that
design history should relate to the wider history of society. He agrees
with Dilnot and declares that through the study of design history, we
can obtain an understanding of the complex socio-economic factors that
configure ‘the conditions surrounding the emergence of a designed
object or a particular kind of designing’. Having observed such
reflective and critical definition of design (Dilnot [1984], Lees-
Maffei & Houze [2010]), we see that a precise modern definition and a
clear periodisation of Chinese design is needed, in order to gain a
comprehensive picture which relates design to the process of
modernisation in China.

**Weaving design into the political and social tissues of the historical
period – a chronological overview of the complexity of the process of
modernisation in China**

In agreement with the reflective definitions of design history,
we aim to relate the subject of inquiries to wider political and social
field. The aim of our book, *The Birth of Modern Design in China* is to
gain deeper understanding of the meaning of design practice during the
great period of political turmoil and turbulent social and cultural
transformation in Chinese history from 1842 to 1949.\(^5\)

When constructing ‘a conceptual framework’ of the history of ‘modern
China’, Hsu confirmed the convergence of Chinese and Western history
which ended China’s seclusion was the most accepted point of departure.
Even though a school of historians have regarded the arrival of
European explorers and missionaries from the 14th century onwards as
the beginning of modern China, Hsu accredits the Opium War (1841-1842)

\(^4\) Dilnot, C., *The state of Design History Part I: Mapping the Field*, *Design Issues* 1(1)

fang chu ban zhong xin.
as a neat point of departure. In the introduction to his classic work, *The Rise of Modern China*, Hsu describes the initial process of breaking away from the traditional period into the modern period in three aspects:

1. It was a process when China changed from a sneering rejection of the West in the early 19th century to the worshipping of the West by 1920.

2. Hsu makes reference to Hsiao Kung-chuan’s periodisation of the sequence of change in framing the process of modernisation of China which states, ‘First the technologies affecting material existence; then principles concerning state and society and finally ideas touching the inner core of intellectual life’. Hsu further indicates the climatic points which marked the following three stages:

   a. The Self-Strengthening Movement of the T’ung-chih period (1861–95)
   b. The Reform Movement of 1898
   c. The May Fourth Movement of 1919

3. Hsu continues to elaborate these important stages in the development of modern China: from the rejection of the West in the Pre-Opium War period to the Self-Strengthening Movement of 1861–95; from the period of political reform and revolution in 1898–1912; from the period of intellectual revolution in 1917–23 and finally to the rise of Chinese Communism in 1949.

   Margolin affirms that ‘there is no human activity that is not embedded in material culture’. In our research, we try to understand the practice of design (including design thinking and operation) with close reference to the political and economic development towards the modernisation of China. In this context, with reference to Hsu’s definition of Chinese modern history, we regard design history as an account of the mode of production of material objects and images which

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co-present and co-develop together with the process of political, economic and social changes within the same historical period.

In the first section of our book, we present a chronology of the period of 1842 –1949. This chronology is constructed in such a way that all the events happening at the same time in different fields (political, social and economic), are mapped in parallel to those events taking place in the realm of design over the 100 years. We consider this chronology as a "bird's-eye view" of the modernisation in China. By tracing the chronology, the readers can understand the interweaving relationship between the development of design practice and the other events that were happening within the same historical period. A deeper understanding of the specific role played by the practice of design in the process of modernisation in China can also be gained.

While the Chinese scholars merely include all objects made in the past three million years under the name of “design”, we hereby offer a sharp definition to demarcate “design” as a practice that the Chinese have to engage in order to become ‘modern’. As an example, let’s consider the first extract of the chronology: the drastic changes that China experienced from 1842 to 1900. The flow of events that happened during this period indicated how China gradually realised the absolute difference between “design” and “the process of making things”.

When examining how Japan started to trade with the western world during the 1850s, Murata indicates that the Japanese were impressed by the American warships which were powered by steam engines, thus leading them to start the Meiji Reformation. Similarly, in the 1840s, China was invaded by the British Army during the Opium War. China was ‘shocked’ by the western military hardware and technology which had completely defeated them. But the Chinese were reluctant (or ignorant) to admit that the western military technology was undetachable from the western culture. The Chinese then began to organise the ‘Self-Strengthening Movement’. While they tried to learn to design and build military weapons, they believed by doing so they could defend not only their

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8 Please refer to the content page of our book Zhongguo xian dai she ji de dan (中国现代设计的诞生). (Appendix I)

nation but also their traditional society and culture. Nevertheless, the ‘Self-Strengthening Movement’ failed as China was defeated by the Japanese in 1894. According to the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), China was obliged to allow foreign countries to set up all kinds of manufacturing industries in all the open cities, towns, and ports. Foreign industries making products in China came flooding into the Chinese market, putting the Chinese economy into near bankruptcy.

In 1898, the Qing Emperor, Guangxu (1875-1908), ordered a series of reforms aimed at making sweeping social and institutional changes. The principal leader of this reform, Kang Youwei (1858-1927) advised the Emperor to launch thorough institutional changes in material culture: ‘change the traditional hair style (cut the braids), change into western clothing system, and to measure time with the western calendar.’

Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909), one of the ‘four famous government officials of the late Qing” (四大名臣), though still insisting on a method of relatively conservative reform (as summarised in his phrase, "Chinese learning for fundamental principles and Western learning for practical application" (中學為體，西學為用，Zhōngxué Wéi Tǐ, Xīxué Wéi Yòng)), had established the Hupei School of Arts and Industry. In one of his writings: Exhortation to Study (勸學篇, Quàn Xué Piān), he pointed out the absolute importance of ‘design’ (工藝) in re-vitalising the economy of the nation:

First and foremost we have to promote “Design” (工藝). People often think that the Western countries are rich because of their success in doing business, but they do not know that the wealth of the Western countries comes from design. The Western manufacturers produce mainly designed products because design can transform coarse products to refined commodities, cheap products to expensive ones, useless things to useful ones. With design we will have products, with the designed products there will be market.

From this extract we see that the deliberately constructed chronology gives a bird’s-eye view on the historical events happening at the same time. The emergence and development of design practice, political
development, and social changes were in fact the ‘connective tissues and the circulating system’ of the modernising process of China, with which the Chinese had no choice but to painfully wrestle with.

The birth of modern design in China: a critical analysis

The discussions of policy on design conducted by the Chinese politicians revealed that how they came to understand the necessity of giving up the traditional concept of the material world. With great difficulty they finally realised that “design” was not about “making things”; it was about configuring products that constructed the modern environment. Zhang Zhidong realised the necessity of a complete transformation of the material production and consumption in order to rescue the country.

While art historians may have claimed that the works of art should be linked to the social processes from which they were derived; the design critics see that the design artifacts which shape the everyday life environment are heavily implicated in the articulation and perpetuation of the ideologies of progress, class and gender. In order to dig deeper into the layers of meaning of modernity that were incarnated into the concrete living environment as experienced by the Chinese people at the time, we have established a critical reflection on a number of cases. Our intention is to prove that the practice of design is a manifestation of social values under the circumstances in which it is produced. In our study, we tried to grasp both perspectives – the political and social conditions which gave rise to the design practice as well as the ways design shaped the society.

In one of our cases, we have examined the complex social relations revealed in the set design of the films produced during the 1920s and 1930s. With regards to the economic background at the time, Marie-Claire Bergère indicates that World War I and its aftermath were


the golden era of economic development in China. While the foreign powers were entirely engaged in warfare in Europe, they were unable to import goods sufficiently to the Chinese Market. Benefitting from this situation, the local Chinese manufacturing industry flourished, especially those who manufactured products used in daily life. The local manufacturers seized this chance to take back the domestic market. This was also the period when the Chinese launched the ‘National Goods Movement’.

As Misa indicates, the complex industrial systems and the dynamic forces of technology together will trigger social changes, we remarked that urban life also flourished during the great leap of the manufacturing industry. A large number of villagers migrated to the cities, such as Shanghai, to look for jobs (usually in the factories but many women eventually became sex workers). Going to cinema was a popular leisure activity during that period. A lot of films were produced, especially in Shanghai, to portray the city life itself. These films form an excellent cultural object of analysis. It is easy to discern class and gender implication in the plots, which also reveal the social trajectories of the characters. From the design perspective, we see that most cultural critics have overlooked the very significant socio-cultural implications embedded in the set design of these films.

By applying the parameters of ‘habitus’ set up by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) to analyse the set design of these films, we can understand the social space and the field of power that were concretised by these material setting. In our study, we found that social life was clearly represented in these films: the stories explicitly explained the different places where different classes of people lived. People of different classes used, and communicated with, different kinds of objects and frequented different types of social milieu. We see that the set designers understood perfectly that class difference resided on people's 'capacity to differentiate and appreciate the practices and products'— thus the tastes of people defined their class. In the films, the lifestyles and thus the social distinctions were concretised in the setting of home and work environments; the social trajectories

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were also materialised into different spatial settings forming thresholds admitting qualified ‘arrivals’ at different stages (e.g. in Tai Tai Wan Siu [Viva My Wife 太太萬歲] after successfully seducing a rich person, a poor young girl was able to move to a small apartment decorated in western style offered by the rich person who himself lived with his family in a big mansion).

In our analysis, we have conducted an inventory of the components that composed the set and prop design of the ten films being studied. We discover that the set designers were extremely careful when designing, selecting and categorising the spaces and gadgets, which formed the signs that defined the ‘habitus’ of different characters in the films. Hence, the material dimensions of a hierarchically organised modern and urban society were formulated in great precision through set design. As examples, we present here three tables showing the social spaces and the habitus of the characters (Refer to Appendix II)

Furthermore, the set and prop design of the selected films revealed the political views of the characters in a very subtle manner. In the milieu frequented by the bourgeoisie characters, “national” products seldom appeared. On the contrary, typical “Made in China” products such as thermal flasks were usually staged as symbols of the living environment of the poor characters. Yet the national products also appeared as components in the living environment of the ‘enlightened’ patriots’. In the real world the patriots at the time advocated the saving of the nation’s economy by purchasing national goods. The props thus became the visual signs of class distinction and political standpoints of the historical period.

Conclusion

The book cover of the best selling Chinese Design History written by Gao Feng (2006) states:

Design history does not only start during the modern period in the West, ancient China has also a bright history of handicraft. From the perspective of the artistic design knowledge, in the long history of arts and craft activities in China, many
outstanding works have been made and achieved excellent performance in design.

From this passage, we realise how Chinese design historians see history of design purely as a history of "objects". Gao's (and many others') intention of writing design history is to show that not only western people can make objects; the Chinese have been making objects for three million years.

In the Design History Reader, Lees-Maffei clearly defines “design” in the context of the modernisation process:

Design historians have tended to regard processes of industrialisation as significant for providing the condition necessary for the emergence of a distinct practice of design. The shift from a society in which goods were made by the people who devised their form and function to a society in which design was a discrete practice performed by a specialist prior to manufacture has preoccupied design historians."

To be critical, we need to grasp a framework which gives design a proper scope and meaning. Our book defines the emergence of “design” in accordance to the modern definition of the term. We emphasise that it is impossible to construct a history of design without considering the interweaving connections between design and the technological, social and political development of the modern period.

In our view, it is important to understand that in China, the emergence of the design practice was a consequence of the violent intrusion of modern technological mode of production into the traditional society and culture. Giving up the traditional material culture and its production were in fact a subversive act overturning the whole country. During the mid-19th century, in the face of the assault of modern weapons, the Chinese politicians thought that the physical territory of the country could be defended by solely adopting the western military system. In the 20th century, the Chinese politicians and the “enlightened” intellectuals, in order to rescue the country, tried hard to launch a thorough transformation not only of the military system, but also of the political, economic and social institutions. Moreover, they also urged profound changes in the

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everyday aspects of life including hairstyles, clothing system and products of daily life as well as the architectural and interior setting. Hence, the definition of “design” in the Chinese historical context does not only involve changes in ‘the internal world of design’ but also in the wider social and cultural dimension. In fact, developing design industry at the beginning of the 20th century was an unavoidable political act for the Chinese politicians to save the country from bankruptcy and national subjugation.

(Refer to Appendix I)