

Self, Materiality, and National Identity:
The Dilemma of Authenticity Among Millennial Industrial Designers in China

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

By analyzing the discourse relating to the dilemma of authenticity among millennial industrial designers in China, the major objective of this thesis is to gain insights into the values, beliefs, practices, and ethics of the design community under investigation. This study has shown that, first, the locus of authenticity and self could be contested between individuals depending on the cultural backgrounds. Second, the boundary between copy and authenticity in design is ambiguous; further, a contested authenticity between materiality and objects could be examined with combining the constructivist and materialist approach. Third, designers hold an essentialist view on the Chinese tradition and in the pursuit of an authentic national design identity, even though the authenticity is constructive in nature. This research contributes to the emerging field of design anthropology from a non-western perspective.

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Chapter 1

Self, Materiality, and National Identity: The Dilemma of Authenticity Among Millennial Industrial Designers in China

1.1 Introduction

The meaning of design can vary significantly between people in different contexts. Moreover, it is an ambiguous word regardless of the languages being used, resulting in multi-layered incommensurability and occasionally, in loss of translation. There are circumstances when people debate on topics related to design, yet end up conflating disparate subjects. In design anthropology, design is generally referred to as a social and cultural production process through which a network of agents create or alter an object; however, the definitions can be divided into two groups: the broader and the narrower.

Design is known as a broad and general term, regardless of art or engineering, craft or mass production. On one hand, design refers to an object and its specificities, such as its materiality, functions, aesthetics, symbolic meanings, and values. Research interest could be further related to how these specificities are reflected in the object with its social trajectories and regional histories. This is adopted mostly by anthropologists from material culture study, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology. On the other hand, design is referred to as a commercial activity or process which consists of various specialized domains and is primarily accountable to an institutional agenda. This process is frequently filled with friction between the groups of design stakeholders such as businesses, educators, designers, promoters, and the public (Micklethwaite 2002). In this respect, design is often seen as problematic, instrumental, and political. This definition is employed more by sociocultural anthropologists applying critical theories.

Design is also understood as a narrow term which is related to the modern design profession among designers. Designers consider design as their vocation, through which the design practices shape and reflect their identity, intersecting with other identities such as nationality, gender, race, and class. The strong ownership of design amongst designers does not monopolize design but standardizes it with certain design discourse that performatively legitimizes their practice yet sometimes excludes communication, for their specific interests which might sound odd to people outside the field. Moreover, despite the number of designers growing continually over the past century, design might still be on its way to a formally recognized discipline and occupation

(Micklethwaite 2002), especially in non-western countries. This definition of design is adopted mainly by sociocultural anthropologists and some design historians, who are concerned about the personhood, identity, and ethics of the designers, and the localized orientation of design expertise with a postcolonial framework.

Like any other term, the meaning of the word design is not static and is constantly changing according to the context. Regardless of the diversified registers, these definitions are not mutually exclusive; they could overlap yet emphasize different aspects of design. Anthropologists could choose a certain perspective that is appropriate for their study. Throughout this thesis, the term design will refer to the narrower definition of professional design practice, with designers referring to institutional design practitioners.

This study was exploratory in nature and the research journey has changed its direction. In the research proposal phase, an initial plan of the thesis project was to investigate the under-researched design trend industry which constantly monitors the changing relationship between socio-political climate, consumer behavior, technology, and material culture for nearly a century. My questions were, how do the trend forecasters make sense of the social, political, and economic futures; and how are these senses being objectified into material, color, and form, infused with emerging technology and a new understanding of ecology. I was particularly interested in the new aesthetics (Forlano et al. 2019) that arise when trend forecasters respond to changing social conditions as well as public issues, and how the ethical implications translated and evolved in their perennial work, functioning as crucial values disseminated throughout the designer community, and spreading more broadly to the material culture through the medium of technology. It aimed to interrogate the relationships between ethics and aesthetics, material culture and the agency of objects.

I utilized the sink-or-swim strategy and dived straight into the semi-structured open-ended interviews without anticipation of what I would get from my interviewees. Then, in the data analyzing stage, it turned out that the online interviews did not provide the multimodal and sensual information needed to answer the initial questions. Consequently, my question in the thesis becomes: what is distinct about millennial design in China?

The shifting nature of design identity under interrogation is rooted deeply in the social instability of my research site, the Peoples' Republic of China. With the mass privatizing of the poorly planned economy, the citizens were driven from collective egalitarian communities to entrepreneurs

and consumers with increasing inequality. The changing geopolitics also affects the Chinese perception of their position in the world, oscillating between the internationalist and nationalist extremes, while the linguistic non-differentiation between country, nation, state, and government in Chinese, using *guojia* to denote these four meanings remains largely unchanged in the public (Xiang 2010). The fast-paced social transformation has caused burgeoning psychological issues among the public, manifesting as pervading anxiousness and a collective soul-searching. All of the above contributes to my study of the dilemma of authenticity relating to self, materiality, and nationalism among millennial designers in China.

My experiences of industrial design in China between 2012 and 2019 lead me directly to this research question. During that period, I worked for various types of companies including state-owned, start-up, and foreign-direct-invested companies. My working footsteps spread across the north and south China metropolitan cities including Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, as well as semi-urban industrial areas dotted with uncountable “workshops of the world” in the Pearl River Delta.

My class flow from a rural ethnicity to the expanding middle class in China also leads me to the question. The question of how can I represent myself authentically has arisen multiple times in my design experiences, when I conducted export design for Chinese companies wishing to enter other culturally diverse markets in the world such as South America and the Middle East; when I was forced to interrogate in commercial design constantly with the question of “mainstream” domestically targeting the mass middle class in China and neglecting the minorities; and when I was questioned in the foreign company in China as not fully understanding the meaning of luxury in western perspective due to my lack of experience and my class origin. These may also reflect an ambiguous perception of my own authenticity and self.

Alfred Gell argues an anthropology of art that dissociates from aesthetic appreciation, in order to observe at a calm distance (1992). Gell’s detached attitude provides an important position to recollect the orchestral discord between individuals’ experiences and put it back in the design context, to unveil and reconstruct it on paper. This thesis will be an experimental discourse between art/design and social science. It not only challenges the analytic tradition in anthropology that studies design from the exchange and consumption side (Appadurai 1986, Murphy 2016), but it also attempts to bring the critical reflectivity from anthropology into the field of design. It extends the meaning of design as a style of knowing (Gatt and Ingold 2013, Escobar 2018, Miller 2018), to a realm where

designers intensely make inquiries to the future, respond to social issues imaginatively, yet uncritically serving the neoliberal system they adhere to. By engaging in the discourse relating to the identity of millennial designers in China, anthropologists might gain insight into the values, beliefs, practices, and ethics of the design community under investigation. This research contributes to the emerging field of design anthropology from non-western perspectives.

Due to practical constraints, this study cannot provide an anthropological representation of design and designers in China, as the interview samples are limited. Another potential problem is that the scope of my thesis may be too broad. The thesis is finally restricted by my bias and limited experiences of design in China.

I find millennial designers interesting because first I was one of them, and they are convenient for me to approach. This adds to this article an auto-ethnographical element. More importantly, millennial designers born between the 1980s to 1990s are the first generation in China to grow up during the economic reform, some called the post-socialist or neo-socialist period. They witnessed and participated in the formation, or more accurately, the revival of design as a field and social discourse in China, which was disrupted by wars and revolutions during the twentieth century (Wong 2011). In addition, these millennials were mostly brought up as the only child in their families due to the one-child policy, to some extent the self-interpreted “adventurer” or “explorer”, growing up under the cultural influence of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in East Asia via popular media and the global village with the coming age of the internet, distinct from the more conservative parental generation, who were simultaneously their teachers, bosses and clients. And this ideological rupture and disorientation between generations and value contestation in society might leave traces in the materiality of Chinese design.

At the end of this section, I would briefly introduce the framework of the thesis: First, the locus of authenticity and self could be contested between individuals depending on their cultural backgrounds; Second, the boundary between copy and authenticity in design is ambiguous; further, a contested authenticity between materiality and objects could be examined with combining the constructivist and materialist approach. Third, designers hold an essentialist view of the Chinese tradition and in the pursuit of an authentic national design identity, even though the authenticity is constructive in nature.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 The history of design anthropology

To understand design anthropology first we should review the history of how these two encounters, and under what kind of sociocultural and theoretical contexts. I call this context “interdisciplinary synchronicity”, which means fundamental changes are happening at the same period inside the disciplines. Both disciplines were established around the 1930s. Dating way back to the nineteenth century, even earlier, untrained amateurs, such as missionaries had been doing some form of proto-anthropology and artists have been doing design for a long time.

The mutual correspondence between design and anthropology starts from the 1970s to the 1980s. For anthropology, the booming of anthropology education drives anthropologists working in the industry - a rise in business anthropology. Many of the design anthropology encounters are located in science and technology studies (STS). It also relates to the ontological turn, with critical self-examination of universality, binary thinking, and the rise of postcolonial theory. On the other hand, design went through an ethnographic turn in the 1970s, many designers (Papanek 1971) no longer considered their practice as giving form, but as giving social concepts that embodied cultural, emotional, and even political implications. The notion of “design science” promoted by Hubert Simon (1969) influences the design role in emerging technology. The design territory gradually expanded from the material into the immaterial realm, such as human-computer interaction (HCI), service and system design.

1.2.2 Design history and anthropology of design in the non-western world

Pauline Garvey and Adam Drazin (2016) state a conflating trend between the shifting paradigm of design history and the anthropology of design, especially when the meaning and activity of design become more dispersed and all-encompassing (Clarke 2011). The paradigm of design history changed from a focus on the evolution of forms, aesthetics, and eminent designers, to the trajectories between the situated object-human relations and their socio-economic, political canvas.

For design histories in the developing world, the theoretical landscape seems to be less smooth and more culturally and linguistically specific. Taking design history in East Asia as an example, the term *design* was translated into different words over different periods in a country; and a translation in one country might further be translated into a neighboring country that each time the

meaning changes slightly (Kikuchi and Lee 2014). Although the design is generally considered a western invention starting from the Bauhaus in Germany during the interwar period, characterized by its intervention and appropriation of new technologies in industrialization. A small fraction of design history researchers still resists this chronological dating. Instead, they prefer to bridge indigenous or traditional craft practice with industrialized manufacturing, blurring the logic of high and low design under the western-centric diffusionism model. This also results in a reinterpretation of authorship and authenticity underlying the pursuit of status and redefining the counterfeit phenomena as a proto-design learning process reflecting grassroots innovation (Wong 2014).

Regarding design history focusing on national differences, the anthropology of design in the developing world shares more theoretical similarities. Two major themes are identified in the anthropology of design. The first theme is about the personhood, self, identity, or citizenship (Chumley 2016, Irani 2019) that is carved in the everyday practices of design or more widely, the creativity and innovation processes. Lily Chumley (2016) focuses on the role of art schools in shaping individual articulations among the new creative class in China. Lilly Irani (2019) investigates designers' engagement with nation building in India which she calls "entrepreneurial citizenship". The second theme is about the design practices and the agents (either human or non-human) enmeshed with the transnational discourse of industrialization, urbanization or more broadly speaking, global neoliberalism (Moon 2018, Rofel et al. 2019). Christina H. Moon (2018) illustrates the highly shifting fashion industry between US and Asia connected by the Korean familial diasporic network, and how this network intertwines with the city "upgrading" in New York. Rofel et al. (2019) analyze the collaboration conducted between the asymmetrical power of Italy and China, and how identity, inequality and value are fabricated as by-products in the transnational manufacturing process.

In conclusion, compared with Euro-American scholars, scholars of both anthropology of design and the history of design in the developing world seem to be more attentive to the postcolonial frameworks and the complexity of local histories, positioning their research subjects in a transnational scope, and relying significantly on multi-sited methods.

1.2.3 Anthropology of China

The major issues confronting China anthropology today could be the tensions between east and west encounter (Rofel et al. 2019), rural and urban split (Liu 2022), socialist governance and neoliberal

market (Greenhalgh 2020), political reform and individualization (Yan 2009), monoculture and social diversity (Pieke 2014). They might lead to the consequential effects of displacement, oppression, inequality, and other anomie. For example, Sun Liping (2004) uses “fractured society (*duanlie shehui*)” to describe the proliferating economic imbalance in China since the 1990s. Lisa Rofel and Sylvia J. Yanagisako (2019) argues an “outsourcing of inequality” as the by-product of transnational capitalism in the east-west encounter. However, when we check closely, it seems we do not see things that can be put cleanly one-sided. Every individual entity is inevitably a composite somewhere in the middle, mixing with some of the paired elements in proportions, meanwhile evolving quickly with discordant rhythms.

Frank N. Pieke (2014) summarizes a wide array of topics in his review of China anthropology; moreover, these anthropological investigations are radically reshaped by the new realities of life in China and its relation to the world. He asserts a new challenge now is to “understand China as a changing composite of elements”. This changing composite is theorized by different scholars, such as Stephen J. Collier and Aihwa Ong’s (2005) global assemblages theory, and Biao Xiang’s (2020) gyroscope theory. According to Collier and Ong, local expertise systems and practices can be used in a transnational framework analysis and linking to the global. The back-and-forth interrelationships, flows, migrations, calculations, and strategies with contradictory logics could be signs to trace these linkages between the conceptual adjacency of the here and the faraway. While Xiang (2021) problematizes this imagined spacial intimacy across long distances and inclines towards the “actual global” (Collier and Ong 2005, 12). He urges a return to “the nearby (*fujin*)” to get to know one’s actual position, recollect its history, and understand the common worries among the public. Furthermore, Xiang argues that China has arrived at a hypermobility stage when the composite can only spin fast to maintain its balance, as observed between SARS and COVID-19 (2020).

When current scholars talk about the anthropology of China, they normally talk about PRC, excluding the invaluable and potentially related anthropological studies in Hong Kong and Taiwan with different schools and historical trajectories. They lend weight to modern Chinese history and how it influences the research subjects under interrogation, with a theme of change over time. Scholars generally start the historical contextualization from three different points, circa 1912 (Xinhai Revolution ending the Qing Dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China), 1978 (the end of the cultural revolution and the start of the economic reform), or 1992 (the official start of privatization

and abolishment of the planned economy). With joint attention to the specific temporalities, the individuals or collectives are not only of here and now, but a lengthy network entangled in these chronotopes, where past, present and future are condensed into historicism. A rich historically informed narrative (Pieke 2014) seems to be the way out for those China anthropologists whose audiences are Western readers. The advantage of the historicism tendency is that it provides a scope of vision to analyze big questions under the backdrop of the grand social transformation; the disadvantage might be that it poses a challenge for individual researchers to collect reliable historical data, and sometimes loses the blood and bone of the real people.

1.3 Methodology

I conducted five semi-structured interviews across industries with millennial designers in China based on convenience sampling. The semi-structured interviews were conducted distantly online. The interview questions revolve around the life history of the interviewee, mainly focusing on their design career experiences in China after the mid-2000s. The five interviews are between 1:02 to 2:08 hours, the average record is about 1 hour and a half. Categorizing the samples is tricky. If discerning by industry, two are from electronics & design services, one from household appliances, one from industrial paint supply & electronics, and one from architecture & city planning. If discerning by nationality, four of the interviewees are Chinese nationality, and one is Taiwanese American. I think this is important as the transnational perspective is a critical part of this paper, and it reflects the diverse population inside the design community in China. The latter categorization is adopted. On the other hand, all interviewees have a similar length of career in design for over a decade; and they were born in the 1980s, falling into the millennial generation.

As most interview data presented in the thesis are drawn from three of the five interviewees, I would briefly introduce my three main interviewees and industrial designers with pseudonyms Yin, Ling, and Xuan. Yin is a scenario innovation designer based in a southern industrial town as her chosen home where traditional values persist among the older and the younger generation with a twist. Working in the house appliance industry, her work is to identify possibilities of future scenarios concerning lifestyle changes of home. Ling is proudly raised and educated in the political metropolitan capital of Beijing, and previously worked as a color designer and forecaster. Working in the paint industry, her work was about identifying technological shifts and lifestyle changes and translating them into painting materials. Xuan is a considerate transnational citizen, who has spent

one-third of her life consecutively in Taiwan, the US and mainland China. Working in the smartphone industry, she considered her work as micro innovation by translating her imagination of future possibilities into a handful combination of colors and material technology.

Although the three interviewees have utterly different backgrounds, they have several similarities: They are all women; they are millennials; they are university-trained industrial designers; they consider themselves designers and trend researchers and interrogating the future is their major concern. Despite all of them being bilingual or multilingual on varied levels of fluency in English, the interviews were conducted in Chinese for convenience and ease of communication.

It might be unconventional to consider one's career as a part of their identity, yet this conjunction provides a base for our discussion and a possibility to delineate the underlying logic of this specific practice in industrial design. Furthermore, with the intersection of individual differences and similarities, each person has their distinct dispositions (Bourdieu 1996) which means temperament and interest as well as common concerns or worries in the field. People's beliefs and values are greatly shaped by their positions, or more specifically, their cultural embeddedness in the political and economic context.

The main questions asked in the interviews include "what drew you into the realm of design", "tell me about your design education and career experiences", "what was the most challenging part you remembered in this process", and "could you tell me a story which influenced or impressed you the most".

The research is largely based on a review of the literature, which shapes my approach and perspectives. My body of literature consists of design anthropology, anthropology of China and design history in the non-western world especially in East Asia.

I try to incorporate my experiences in industrial design in China between 2012 and 2019 as autoethnographic data into this research. I refer to my workbooks, and daily schedules books to recollect the memories, which might not directly contribute to the study. However, my shared experiences working in the industry in China are critical in understanding, interpreting and reconstructing the context of the designers' utterance. I also attempt to be informed as widely as possible by design news, virtual design community groups, media-conducted designer interviews, and design magazines.

My role in the research is considerably blurred, as I am both the informant and the researcher. I hope to use the dual sensibility as an instrument, to find correlated or complemented theories and methodologies that might contribute to both ways of perception. Finally, Lassiter's (2005) brand of collaborative ethnography as co-interpretation is truly accessible. I will try to integrate it in the interview with designers, to discuss my interpretation with them and to add their interpretations of my interpretation in the thesis to form a layer of polyphony or dialogue, finally to attain a certain level of collaboration and mutual learning. This reciprocal ethnography is inherently feminist and humanistic (Lassiter 2005).

1.3.1 Three Approaches of Anthropology Engaging Design

1.3.1.1 Politics of Design

This subsection focuses on the review of the critiques of design in anthropology. The critiques mainly focus on the politics of design, and its inseparable relationship between design and neoliberalism (Tunstall 2013), emphasizing that design theory, practice, and methodology are greatly shaped by neoliberal ideologies, such as innovation, performance and multiculturalism. And the postcolonial and decolonial theories bring examination inside design, from its ethnocentric, universal implications, to the design relationship with race, gender and identity. Furthermore, the ethics of design is still rarely discussed in design theory and practice.

One of the first critical design ethnographies in anthropology is about the famous Japanese fashion design brand *Commes des Garçons* (Kondo 1997). Kondo uses "performing race" to describe how design purposefully adapts, racializes and engenders to satisfy or twist the Western imagination of Orientalism. A similar case is mentioned by Kuo (2012) when he shares Takezawa's reflection on how Asian artists negotiate in the social discourse of race and racial representations, by strategically strengthening their minority identities as an advantage in the global art market. Hence the design performance can also be viewed as a tactic of intervention articulating new kinds of identities, either of designerly products or artist work - an active political site.

The pervasive universality in design innovation reified by tech-infused novelty is also under critique (Kondo 1997, Suchman 2011, Tunstall 2013). "Design thinking" usually objectifies human (Drazin 2020) apart from their political and historical background, and essentializes problems as individual "needs" or "lack", so as to come up with a transcendent solution that is detached from its

historical and political roots, suited to the modernization imagination, yet profitable to the investor (Tunstall 2013). Moreover, the future making that design innovation claims is in fact simultaneously making obsolescence. The time-space compression in globalization determines that once a design concept is pinned down, it is destined to be obsolete from the moment it is put into the production cycle and released to the global market - the alternative design concept is already on its way.

Another disturbing concern is the multiculturalism manifesting in design aesthetics, such as the misrepresentation of indigenous culture. In retrospect of my own career and peer designers native or abroad, indigenous and vernacular designs are considered to be in the public domain out of protection from Intellectual Property law, so designers have been taken for granted for generations to extract paramount aesthetic inspirations and knowledge from the indigenous wisdom pool, and create so-called original design under their copyrights. Yet strangely, contemporary design history has long separated itself from the history of art and craft and the non-western world (Chin 2021).

The efficacy of design does not depend on the design practice, its methods, processes, or talents of individuals, but relies on the framework it adheres to (Suchman 2011). In other words, the market success of a product cannot be attributed solely to its design, but to the fundamental infrastructure of the corporate organizational system and the broader networks in which it circulates. It seems the celebrated narrative of design in business strategy as well as mass media increases its exposure yet sometimes wrongly represents how design works.

1.3.1.2 Mechanism of Design Intervention

This subsection reviews the major ideas in anthropology about design and its role in contemporary society.

It seems previous studies in anthropology of design pay little attention to designers, which Murphy (2016) attributes to the influence of Christian teleology, a tradition believing that nature and objects are God's creation. On the other hand, there might be a 'lingering reluctance' in anthropology to study professionals, hence there are limited examples to be referred to in how they contribute to popular ideal. However, this is rapidly changing as anthropological knowledge itself becomes considered a cultural phenomenon to be studied on its own (Robbins 2006).

As people already begin to consider their everyday environment and objects as "design", the demarcation between design and culture becomes even more blurry. This sort of ethnography of

design can be understood as a connection between the design studio - its professional methods and practices - and the material culture mediated by the material forms between the studio and the wider society, such as factories, retailers, digital territory, etc.

Design is part of the deterritorialized phenomena (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) in the age of globalization, as a result, multi-sited ethnography is strategically utilized in studying design and its mechanism in the complex global capitalist system, so as to explicate logic and connections among sites and define reliable arguments of causes and consequences of the global process (Ribeiro 2019). Whether the design is a force of stable or changing, local or global, discrete or relational, might be subject to the perspectives anthropologists observe (Drazin 2020), and to their own theoretical orientations.

As the essence of design is planning, the design team must constantly make inquiries into the future, imagining people already using their product, and asking what people will be like as the anthropological question of cultural change. However they do not provide a real answer to the question, but only an imagined “alterity” under a certain upcoming time and space, like the exotic others in anthropology (Drazin 2020). Hence design actively engages with and grounds its research in social science.

Nevertheless, the limitation of design production is no different from anthropological knowledge production, that designers’ capacity and creativity decide what they see and how they make connections and reconstructions. On one hand, designers can unconsciously bring present bias into future narratives of design research, manifesting as the presumption or interpretation; on the other hand, with cross-boundary collaboration such as the design studio model, designers have more chances to break through their epistemic limitations, and create products and services that are more durable and valuable (Lewton 2012, Root-Bernstein 2019). Hence good design might not necessarily come from a diverse design team, but must be informed diversely and inclusively.

Designers might not understand material culture as systematically as anthropologists or archaeologists, but designers are necessarily materialist thinkers. The conceptual materiality from the design studio is sourced from and situated in the social context of race, gender, class, age, and ability, yet seeking its transcendence, to create a push-and-pull (Drazin 2020) effect through resonance or agency of objects between production and consumption. It often embodies an ongoing popular understanding of truth - not belonging to one individual, but a collective ideal in a certain temporality.

The materiality in design is a wave-like (Drazin 2020) phenomenon or fluid co-produced assemblage (Edensor 2011) circulating and entangling in social time and space. Suchman (2011) has a similar opinion that in the perspective of industrial design, form is always fluid in mass dissemination.

Although anthropology studies design for its concern in material change, Drazin (2013) also points out a lack of vocabulary in anthropology when studying the dynamics of design, its non-linear iterated and rhythmic forms. Edensor (2011) expresses a similar concern, that the contingency and multiplicity constituting the complexity of materiality are inexplicable and beyond the capacity of words.

1.3.1.3 Design As a Way of Knowing and Transforming

This subsection is about how anthropology radically engages design, viewing design as a way of knowing and transforming, to some extent breaching the conventional definition of design. Robbins (2006) appeals to anthropologists to resign from the witness of the world of horror highlighting violence and conflict, instead embracing a resistance with hope - the hope and dream that Gatt and Ingold (2013) and Escobar (2018) discuss.

Gatt and Ingold (2013) promote "an anthropology by means of design" to restore design at the heart of anthropological practice instead of a subject. Their definitions of design might be based on a wider and more general understanding that design could be any human actions that create desired changes in tangible or intangible forms. They define design as a resilient ability and a foresighted improvisation to cope with everyday changes with hope. It means that design no longer transforms the world, but design becomes an open-ended approach to let the world triggers our self-transformation - a stable life condition. "An anthropology by means of design" calls for proactive and experimental participation in anthropology, and deliberately focuses on the process of relation-building and things-making in the field.

On the other hand, Escobar (2018) redefines design as a "diverse form of life" in order to unfold the political capacities of design as "an ethical praxis of world-making". He develops the theory "designing for the pluriverse" of radical interrelation and explores its possibility through a dense review of design studies and cultural-political transition literature over the past decades. He highlights the ontological aspect of design, that designing tools is about creating ways of being, and the "autonomous design" that puts autonomy and community at the center of design, seeking an alternative to modernist development.

By acknowledging design as a promising transformational force in society, design is hence dislocated from the context of commerce and transplanted into the context of anthropology and activism.

1.3.2 Limitations

In China, like most other academic professions, both design and anthropology are young disciplines that recovered and restarted in the 1980s, after the higher education was interrupted by the cultural revolution. Hence, design anthropology is a field yet to be established. Moreover, the five interviewees are sampled by convenience sampling which means the research results to be presented in the finding section do not represent the whole picture of design in China. The thesis is finally restricted by my bias and experiences of design in a limited domain.

1.4 Framework: the dilemma of authenticity

At the early stage of the interview data analysis, I treated the different attitudes between designers as a mere variance in personal temperaments, as claimed by the interviewees. However, as reminded by my professors, I started to pay attention to the cultural background and positional differences between the designers, in order to better capture the image of their identities arising during the interview.

The more I dug into the research question, the more I found that the interrogation of characteristics or patterns of millennial Chinese design intertwines with the interrogation of the authenticity of materiality, individuals and collective identity. As a result, my frame of reference would focus on the dilemma of authenticity articulated by my research participants as well as from my autoethnographic experiences.

A key theme that keeps emerging from the interview is authenticity. On one hand, the concern for authenticity might not be openly spoken about by designers, but it could be the major underlying factor that drives designers' interrogation of temporality, aesthetics, material, form, or other design practices on the surface. On the other hand, in anthropology, there have been heated debates about the diverse meaning of authenticity in the cultural production process. I argue that it would be beneficial both practically and theoretically to examine the contextualization of authenticity in design practices with the help of anthropological theories.

An underlying framework of the thesis is the dilemmas of authenticity resulting from its multiple semantic meanings and indexical simultaneity. Theodossopoulos' (2013) framework

proposes five dilemmas of authenticity in anthropological conception. They are 1) problematic anticipation of a deep authenticity beneath the cultural or individual surface based on the internal-external division, 2) the dichotomous trap of authenticity and copy or false, 3) the authentic tradition as constructed imagination, 4) the authentication process regarding material clues, social expectation, and the articulation of authenticity, 5) analyzing the contested authenticity into the processes about originality, expressive value, and sociopolitical/material benefits. I would apply this categorization in my evaluative analysis of the value and intentions imbued in the design authentication practices among the millennial design in China.

Theodossopoulos' framework applies to the Chinese millennials in this study in the following ways. Compared with Theodossopoulos' findings, I will focus on three major subthemes as analyzed from research data. They are 1) the locus of authenticity seems to be relational or on the surface instead of hidden inside, with less obvious internal-external division among my research participants, 2) the boundary between copy and authenticity in design is ambiguous and the duality is mutually constructed; 3) designers hold an essentialist view in the authentic Chinese tradition and the composition of Chinese design identity, while the authenticity is constructed in nature.

1.4.1 Multiple interpretations of the authentic self

First I would share a story of how authenticity is understood differently between cultures. It was in 2019 when I worked for a German car design studio in Beijing, my colleagues were mostly Chinese. We were asked to “present ourselves authentically” to the new German design manager. The Chinese designers were confused, as “authentically” in the sentence functioned like a redundant word and seems to have no meaning. The Chinese designers were accustomed to viewing the design work and daily life as authentic and truthful. The German manager further explained that the presentation about the authentic self was a revelation of “where you came from, who you are, and what you do in your leisure time”. This includes something unfamiliar for the millennial Chinese designers in the studio, as we seldom relate “who we are” to our birthplace and ethnicity. In my view, the originality of oneself is assigned at birth without choice, while the self for millennials is more rendered as a pursuit or achievement attained after one leaves the kin, such as education, career, and habits that are less related to the family tradition. Moreover, the authentic self is perceived as an evolving and unstable one with a forward focus rather than a backward focus. This view is similar to Liu's

interpretation of authenticity in China as “the otherness of self” (Liu 2002). As a result, the regional origin was thought of as less relevant or important to the authenticity of the Chinese millennials.

The understanding of authenticity between the Chinese designers and the German manager was contested. I felt that the revisit of our originality in the self-introduction to the new German design manager worked more like an authentic performance satisfying his anticipation, but less relevant to my perception of the other designer’s self at that moment. Just as Theodossopoulos (2013) rendering the anticipation of a deep authenticity beneath the cultural or individual surface based on the Western internal-external division is problematic, I find that the locus of authenticity seems to be relational or on the surface with no need for a special effort to reveal among my research participants.

The European philosophical interpretation of authenticity could be dated back to the late 17th century, in which the common social concern focuses on how to authentically represent oneself after the breakdown of the medieval hierarchical structure (Theodossopoulos 2013). This link between authenticity and self is surprisingly relevant to my research, especially for the millennial generation who grew up at the turning point of the social reformation in China shifting from a socialist ideology into a capitalist one. The shift did not occur overnight, but is a gradual process in which many conflicted ideologies, values, institutional structures, and practices co-exist. Similar to the individuals in the 17th century, the designers in China who seemingly embrace the capitalist ideology from my research, share a discursive concern of representation between authenticity and self, resulting from the structural change of the Chinese society.

The generational changing understanding of the authentic self is not unique in China but could be widely seen across cultures. However, in my research, the distinction lies in the co-occurrent effect of the extensive political-economic reformation in China, the age of accelerated globalization, and the coming of the digital era. Yan (2009) attributes the concern of “what is the authentic self” to an essentialist explanation, claiming an individualization trend in China in order to explain the common identity worry. Nevertheless, this collective-individualized dichotomy is to this research unfavorable, as it risks of essentialism and seems to accord with the East-West dichotomy. Using “individualization” as a rhetorical replacement for the “Westernization” of China risk of falling into stereotyped reductionism and does not articulate the complexity and the dilemmas of authenticity among my research participants.

Another example of the contested authentic self is expressed by one of my research participants Xuan. As introduced earlier, Xuan has a multicultural background, grown up in Taiwan, educated in the US, and worked in mainland China. Her view on the differences in authentic self between the East and West is rather distinct.

In Asia, I find people have a main job, but after work people have leisure like movies, shopping, going gym or hiking. Without work, it is comparatively difficult to see who you are. In the US many of my colleagues have side hustles. I feel it like this, but not dare to say it is an east and west difference.

Xuan comments on the distinct authentic self she has observed between Asian and American designers after work, that the Asian self is more actualized through the major work and consumption with close friends and families, while the American self is more found in the side jobs and hobbies after work connecting to a wider community. While two other Chinese designers Yin and Ling consider the authentic self as “going with the flow (*shunqiziran*)”. It might be more understandable by thinking of the continuous social reform in the past decades, the flow might indicate the rapid changes in politics, economy, and culture manifesting as tangible and intangible forms of incongruity that are oftentimes beyond the control of the individuals. People must learn and adapt themselves amidst the turbulence, a register and mentality turning the passive condition into a proactive one. Yin also emphasizes the importance of “self-consistence(*zhiqia*)” in order to accommodate seemingly conflicted phenomena in China. Hence, the meaning and scale of life control are rather distinct in the expression of the authentic self between the research participants with different cultural backgrounds.

According to Theodossopoulos (2013), another way to differentiate the contested or parallel authenticity in the authentication process is by referring to Dutton’s (2003) three types of authenticity, which are nominal authenticity (the origin), expressive authenticity (the objects’ emerging value), and instrumental authenticity (the pursuit of material, social, political benefit). For millennial designers regardless of class and regional originality, they perceive themselves as the origin of post-socialist China different from the older generation (nominal authenticity); and they naturally identify Western design aesthetics as more appealing and authentic, distinct from socialist tradition (expressive authenticity); this perception contributes to a pursuit of oversea design education, and the foreign returnees significantly influence the criteria of authenticity, pedagogy, success and social distinction among millennial Chinese designers(instrumental authenticity). This contributes to increasingly contested criteria in the authentication process. Moreover, there seems to be a shared self-legitimation

among millennial Chinese designers considering themselves as a new, authentic, and better generation compared to previous generations of designers. This evolutionary perception and distinction (Bourdieu 1996), influences the articulation of their identity, personal goal and imagination of the future.

1.4.2 The ambiguous authentic-inauthentic demarcation

Theodossopoulos points out that the authentic-inauthentic opposition is problematic, if applied to anthropological inquiry. The subsection will discuss possible solutions to this problem: when explaining the local meaning of authenticity, researchers need to engage in the binary thinking of authenticity first and allow it to expose itself to its contradiction and complexity.

My generation entered the field of design when the copycat phenomenon was at its peak in China. It was in the mid-2000s when the “export design” gradually shifted its focus to the local market, as the domestic market and the middle class in China were expanding. To those Chinese designers who participated in the copycat design period, it seemed to be both an interesting thing and a disgrace to talk about. Ling had a collection of various copycat products she bought herself in Shenzhen Huaqiangbei, known as the largest electronic market in the world. Another designer I interviewed, Junhong, shared his experiences of changing his job six times a year in local design firms in 2007, attributing this to his own “stubbornness” to avoid working for the “outdated entrepreneurs (tulaoban)” clients who wished only to copy bestselling cell phones in the market from named brands. It reflected a ruptured attitude to the “new” between two generations in the 2000s: for the older generation who had experienced the socialist period, the “new” and different was dangerous and even terrifying, imitating the already successful is secure and reasonable; while the millennial generation perceived the “new” as inventive and desirable, the imitation as unreasonable. It relates to Bourdieu and Wacquant’ (1992, 130) examination of people sharing a similar habitus yet having different orientations, due to their growing up in different social structures. Rofel (1999) also describes the different values between women from three generations in China: in high socialism in the 1970s, women believe in gender equality; in the early reform era in the 1980s, women engage themselves with the national building; after the 1990s, women are concerned of the humanity aspect of gender that includes body, love and sex. The value and ideological distinction between generations, strengthened by the social reformation, is one of the most important sources of conflicts; it is a major source of concern in the design practice. The complexity that the generational shifts underpin,

increases significantly when we take into consideration the public that stretches widely along the temporal, cultural, and ideological demography.

While millennial designers might believe an object without brand-named authenticity denotes copy or counterfeit, some design historians (Wong 2014) view the counterfeit practice as a proto-design process, meaning the authentic design at the locality is on the rise or under transformation. Similarly, Appadurai (1986) suggests authenticity as a technology and a skill that could be transmitted from one region to the other. This phenomenon has been observed in many newly industrialized countries in history, like the prevailing porcelain design counterfeits in Europe in the 17th century. This timeline coincides with the philosophical discussion of authenticity and self as mentioned in the previous subsection. This shared question of authenticity between humans and things in 17th-century Europe is similar to the common identity worry among Chinese millennials about the authentic self and the prevalence of counterfeit products in Chinese society. As explained by Theodossopoulos, the attributes of material objects might reflect certain social expectations.

Moreover, in the design context, the boundary between copy and authenticity is ambiguous and the duality is mutually constructed. Unlike citations in academic writing, the inspirational origins of design are difficult to be traced in the forms and styles of the objects, unless the inspirational originality is openly articulated by designers. Just as Theodossopoulos suggests, many designers agree it is unattainable to be truly authentic, and the pursuit of authenticity in creative practices is illusory. However, the money-driven market requires incessant novel products to attract attention and boost consumption, forcing designers to claim authenticity in their work, because the claim of authenticity could legitimize their work and contribute to career promotion. On the other hand, the practice of copying is sometimes considered a flattering sign and less an immoral behavior if conducted within the design community without institutional involvement, as is observed on online design forums.

Holtorf and Schadla-Hall (1999) suggests using constructivist thinking to analyze materials, paying attention to material clues, the material correspondence with social expectations, and the articulation of authenticity. I argue this approach could also be applied beyond archaeology, to the analysis of the material design and production process, which may reflect the contested criteria of authentication between material parts and the mass-production objects assembled from the material parts.

The comparative examples are between the phenomena of diversifying supply chains as a global standard, in which the brands use designedly inauthentic materials to produce the authentic product, versus the phenomena of A-level replicas in China, in which unauthorized factories use authentic materials to make high-quality inauthentic counterfeit products. In the first example, diversifying supply chains is a global standard driven by cutting costs and reducing the risk of production failure. Brands take the initiative to copy materials from the first-tier vendor to the second- or third-tier vendors legitimized by diversified supply chains. Next, designers are responsible to approve those replicas and decide if they are close to the authentic design quality. Designers often feel reluctant to approve these copied materials, not only due to their compromised design quality compared to the original design, but also because this replication process harms the trust and relationship with the first-tier vendors with which the designers collaborate directly in the design work. Moreover, a conflicted meaning of authenticity is at work here. The end products are finally assembled with a mix of the copied material parts from second- and third-tier vendors, but are claimed as authentic products even if the process includes inauthenticity. In the second example, as counterfeits are marked with different levels by manufacturers, A-level replicas are top-level counterfeit named-brand products made with authentic original materials due to convenient sourcing networks in China and manufactured by unauthorized manufacturers. They are characterized by high quality and much lower prices compared to the named brands. A-level replicas are very popular in China, as the price of luxury goods is at least fifty percent higher in China compared with other countries due to the high import tax. Some consumers even believe that the quality of some A-level replicas is better than authentic products. Finally, most sellers in the black market openly articulate the A-level replicas' inauthenticity even if the fabricated materials are authentic.

As seen in the two examples, the paradox is about copied originals and authentic replicas (Holtorf and Schadla-Hall 1999). By adopting the material dimension of authenticity, the authentication of objects becomes more complex, ambiguous and unstable. As a result, to properly inquire and engage in the topic of authenticity, the constructivist and materialist approaches may be inseparable.

1.4.3 The invention of an authentic national design identity

While Theodossopoulos (2013) suggests a conflicted understanding of authenticity and tradition between popular essentialism and academic constructiveness, my research participants of

millennial designers seem to stand closer to the essentialist side, viewing the authentic Chinese tradition as a streamlined objective with five-thousand years of history, meanwhile accepting its multicultural and multi-ethnic meaning. Moreover, similar to Theodossopoulos' claim, the emphasis on Chinese tradition and authentic Chinese design identity among my research participants might have a political implication, with the backdrop of a burgeoning nationalism lately.

In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), he argues that after secularization, empty time becomes dominant with calendars, clocks, and markets, filled by contingencies instead of destiny. It is these contingencies that sit between the present and the future. Anderson refers to this temporal distinction as a character of modern authenticity. He argues that the nation represents a highly abstract imagined authenticity and agency among individuals in the community. In my study of millennial designers in China, the increasing emphasis on tradition and national character in their designed work might work as a stake to legitimize their work and agency in the design negotiation and authentication process. However, this change only happened very recently.

The essentialist approach to learning various national design identities is frequently used in design pedagogy as a skill for designers quickly familiar with the design legacy of a specific nation or region. This enables millennial designers to work effectively in the past decade in China focusing on export design, collaborating with clients and designers with different preferences globally. However, the essentialist tendency of design pedagogy contributes to the increasing anticipation of an essentialist Chinese design identity among Chinese design historians. For example, Chinese design historian Hang Jian (2008) focuses on the distinction of Chinese design identity regarding the relationship between Chinese ancient craft and modern design. This anticipation of a national design identity is also found in East Asian countries such as Korea and Japan where design is viewed as a modern transplantation. Some Korean design historians (Lee 2012) use Said's orientalism theory to explain the pursuit of a distinct national identity among designers, relating it to their increasing self-consciousness in the process of cultural change in the deepened globalization.

Even though the institutionalization of design is generally considered of Western origin, the nation-state actively engages in the invention of new design traditions in China through mass mobilization of foreign direct investment and design talents, urban planning of technological zones, tax incentives for the creative industry, intellectual property protection, design competitions, and other related activities. The governmentality of design previously focus on its ability to add value to

traditional industries such as manufacturing; until very recently, the focus of governmentality in design has shifted into a deeper integration between the design, service and information industries.

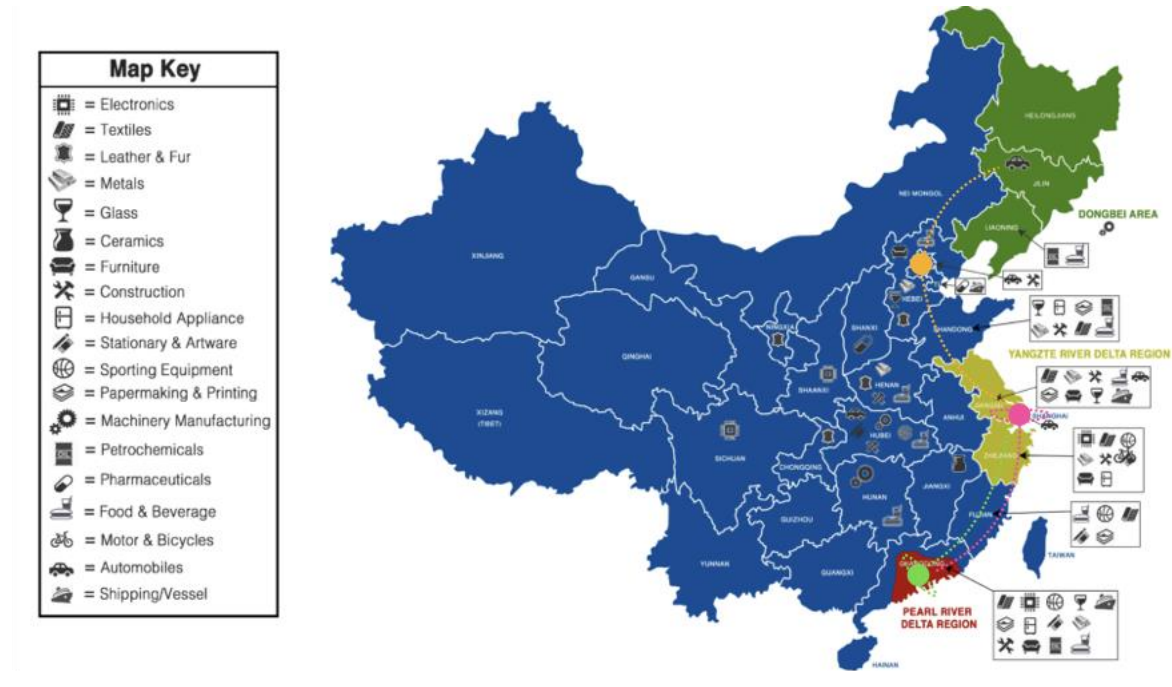


Figure 1. Map of China Manufacturing Distribution 2016

The UNESCO “Cities of Design” network in China shows relations with the industrial regions and different production infrastructures. The major industrial region in China was located in the Northeast area, the mid-south Yangtze River Delta, and the southern Pearl River Delta, as color blocks shown in the map. Shenzhen (2008), Shanghai (2010), Beijing (2012) and Wuhan (2017) joined UNESCO Creative Cities Network as “City of Design”. The color spots and dotted lines illustrate generally my daily connection with the factory network in China. In Beijing it connected the factories in the Northeast and Yangtze River Delta; in Shanghai, it mainly connected the factories around the Yangtze River Delta, and some in the Pearl River Delta. And Shenzhen is primarily connected to the Pearl River Delta and a small amount to the Yangtze River Delta. The later joined “City of Design” Wuhan is not covered in the research data, but it was also circumscribed by major industry clusters in inland China.

Wuwei Li, a Chinese senior policy advisor introduces China’s public policy in the book *How Creativity is Changing in China* (2011). The editor Michael Keane mentions how China is generating a creative economy development plan following other post-industrial societies such as the UK, US,

Japan, Korea and Singapore from the 1990s, by embracing an evolutionary model from creative industries to the creative economy, and ultimately creative society (p. 16). The “creative industry” symbolizes a positive shift towards open innovation and knowledge sharing, in which consumer-citizens could rewrite the rules of creative engagement (p. 15). However, it is difficult not to associate the creative industry in public policy with the negative stance on the “cultural industry” defined by Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), that mass production and cultural reproduction are a form of domination and manipulates the public through standardized goods, as the standards are specifically tailored for the consumer demands. They claim that, thus, the citizens are left only to consume with the least resistance.

Since the 2010s with the increase in labor wages in China, the factories started to migrate to South Asia and Southeast Asia mobilized by transnational capital, and the US-China trade war accelerated this process. And the export design profile catching up with Western standards gradually changes its focus to the domestic market where the middle class is expanding. It starts to correspond to questions from the local audiences about the desired lifestyle - the form of living. Based on the central state regulations, many municipal governments provide tax deductions for independent design firms and companies across industries with in-house design teams. In 2022, the number of design firms in China almost doubled compared to 2021. Amongst the new firms, over half of them comprising more than 3,000 design firms are founded in Jiangsu province in a single year (National Development and Reform Commission 2022), where a sustainable industry is incubating, and China (Jiangsu) Free Trade Zone is being planned by the central state and provincial government. In this context, design could be an important site of governmentality and an intermediary to the public. Moreover, the identity of millennial designers might shift between postcolonial nationalism and colonial nationalism depending on their design subject and affiliated institution.

1.5 Conclusion

This study has shown that the dilemma of authenticity is a distinct characteristic among millennial designers in China. First, the locus of authenticity and self could be contested between individuals depending on their cultural backgrounds; Second, the boundary between copy and authenticity in design is ambiguous; further, a contested authenticity between materiality and objects could be examined by combining the constructivist and materialist approach. Third, designers hold an

essentialist view of Chinese tradition and authentic national design identity, even though the authenticity is constructive in nature.

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