
中华土酷
China Too Cool
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China Too Cool:
Vernacular Innovations and Aesthetic Discontinuity of China

Yi Jing Zhou

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Gregg Horowitz
_____
Faculty Advisor

_____
Faculty Advisor

Josh Karant
_____
Coordinator of Critical and Visual Studies

Macarena Gómez
_____
Chair of Social Science and Cultural Studies

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Introduction

When considering the aesthetics of China, we often fall into two quick stereotypes "The Orient", and the "Communist State." "The Orient" refers to the rich, sophisticated, refined forms and objects of traditional high art and culture while the "Communist State" refers to the crudeness of modern China, the People's Republic of China (PRC), serving as a go-to visual cliché of the authoritarian government that foreigners and daring natives are equally eager to critique. Furthermore, the self-mocking, satirical, "deconstructive" portrayal of the aesthetics of the "Communist State" in Chinese contemporary art, most commonly evoked through references to communist propaganda art, reinforces the narrative of the Western liberal societies' accounts of modern China as a backward, totalitarian state with unthinking, unimaginative citizens. The crude, tacitly demeaning stereotypes dominate impressions and are further promoted by curators and auction houses alike in the global art market to feed the appetite for such a narrative of the "Other".[1]

If, however, there were one more indispensable stereotype of the aesthetics of contemporary China, it would have to be the label of "MADE IN CHINA", which reads as: low quality, knock-off, tacky, unoriginal. With the rapid urbanization catalyzed by the market-oriented economic reform of Deng Xiaoping, the quickest way to develop was to borrow, to copy, to reenact stylistic forms using Chinese production in order to encourage mass and rapid consumption. As China has risen to become the leading export country in the world[2], accounting for 13.15% (2016)[3] of the world's total exports, it has become no exaggeration to say that in almost every region of the world, everyone must own or at least have encountered something manufactured in China. This heightened visibility of

[1] Pauline J. Yao, "Making it work: Artists and Contemporary Art in China," in Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present, ed. Alexander Dumbadze, Suzanne Hudson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 60-70.

[2] The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, 2016, accessed Jan 3, 2018, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2078rank.html.

[3] World Trade Organization, 2017, accessed Jan 3, 2018, http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBCountryPFView.aspx?Country=CN.

poorly produced goods, alongside a curious mystery about and unease towards China's political agenda, gave rise to the formation of the infamous image of contemporary China: where Chinese production is synonymous with counterfeiting, and their feckless pursuit of profit tramples that of creativity and originality. But is there really no creativity and originality in these copies, appropriations, and reinterpretations? Or is there something to be learnt, something useful that could point to a new direction of Chinese aesthetics and cultural production relevant to the present? My thesis is an attempt to challenge the prejudices against the "made in china" tag—a rhetoric arising from the antagonism between the mass-produced copy and the original. My contention is that the "tackiness" and "unoriginality" of these creations actually encourage a different kind of creativity, producing intriguing aesthetic outcomes in the process, the makings and styles of which I am calling "China Too Cool."

COOL, COOLER, COOLEST, TOO COOL!

The term "Too Cool" is the phonetic English translation of a subcultural style[4] "土酷" (*Tuku*), which in Chinese means "tacky cool." According to the online persona Yangya and his friends, who lay claim to originating this style, the emphasis should be on the English term "Too" and not "Tu" (tacky), considered in its double meaning of both outdated and cool, cooler, coolest—too cool. This style is marked by an attitude of poking ironic fun at but also embracing the stylistic elements of dated popular taste.

An example of the subcultural style "Too Cool", from Yangya's *Weibo*

In order to get a better understanding of the formation and dissemination of the "Too Cool" aesthetic, it might be useful to look at a predecessor subculture called "Smart," which sometimes gets credited for influencing the aesthetics of "Too Cool". This is not our English understanding of the word smart. "Smart" (*Shamate*) is a subcultural style that began gaining popularity in third-tier cities[5] in China in 2008. According to the Baidu encyclopedia, it originated from a kind of "Internet family," which is a complex network of blogosphere/ social media/ chat room group under QQ Group, China's Instant Messaging giant.[6] "Smart" is most notably identified by crazy, exploding, layered hair that is usually brightly colored. The sartorial codes of 'Smart' are influenced by Scene and Goth styles, as well as Emo-punk and Japanese Visual-Kei music fashion styles. It is

[4] The term "subculture," as Hebdige used it, tended to mean a culture that is in formation—one that is not yet quite a complete culture. It has evolved to mean in today's sense a culture that is not the mainstream culture. As the term "subculture" gets thrown around to describe every rising fashion trend, it has lost its usefulness as an analytic tool. I am using the term to mean a culture that is not the mainstream culture.

important to note that the visuals and styles of this "Smart" subculture are considered poor *rip-offs* of their original counterparts from other countries, but the knock-off looks have since developed a life and unmistakable style of their own. The style has been transformed into a trope that often appears in media as the defining features of a lower-tired city youth living in their own small circles and towns, sporting outrageous and outdated looks. It is interesting to note that the name of the subculture actually does come from the English term "smart", but the visual styles are clearly nothing close to the definition of "smart", i.e. neat, trim, elegant, sophisticated. This misunderstanding and lost-in-translation quality adds a layer of fascination—you are drawn to it but also cringe at it (more on that later)— to this brazen style.

"Smart" Subculture

[5] China has a system of classifying cities by tiers according to their GDP production, political administration and population. First tier cities include Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing, and Guangzhou, all cities that have GDP production of over $US300 billion and are controlled directly by the central government. Third tier cities have GDP between $US18 billion to $US67 billion and are prefecture-level cities. What began in the 80s as a bureaucratic classification to facilitate the prioritization of urbanization and development has turned into a substitute for demographic and social segmentation, promoting various stereotypes and prejudices. For more information: "Urban Legend: China's tiered city explained", South China Morning Post, accessed Feb 17, 2018, http://multimedia.scmp.com/2016/cities/. China Morning Post, accessed Feb 17, 2018, http://multimedia.scmp.com/2016/cities/.

[6] "Shamate," Baidu Encyclopedia, accessed November 04, 2017, https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%9D%80%E9%A9%AC%E7%89%B9/4557227?fr=aladdin.

It is this same quality of being ripped-off and not-quite-there that characterizes the discontinuity in aesthetics of Chinese cultural production that I am calling "Too Cool." Playing on contemporary imaginations of past circumstances, "Too Cool" manifests itself as appropriations and reinterpretations situated in a naïve, post-internet aesthetic. Such "imaginations of past circumstances" are akin to nostalgia, except in the case of "Too Cool" it is not about trying to return to the past. Instead, it allows us to look at something fondly because we have experienced it and gotten over it, with those experiences characterizing a specific time period in memory. This "past" also speaks to the fact that we have gotten beyond the circumstances we are recalling, usually in the form of climbing the social or economic ladder, and progressing in terms of urbanization. Hence, what "Too Cool" offers is a lens through which we can consider with nuance the complex issues of culture and cultural productions "Made in China", by using a form of affirmative irony to give depth to an issue beyond oversimplified moral judgments. What I mean by affirmative irony is very much like Yangya's explanation of "Too Cool", where you examine something and acknowledge the brilliance—psychological and aesthetic grip— that comes with its cringe-worthiness. The mixed reaction of simultaneously disowning but also remaining entirely enchanted by the cringe begs a dialectical conclusion: you are inclined to affirm the thing, but you do not want to actually adopt it. This is where "Too Cool", when executed consciously, provides a layer of gentle spoof that exaggerates and brings critical attention to "tacky", "Made in China" cultural productions and objects, without falling into the oversimplified, dismissive stereotypes of the "Made in China" tag.

I am borrowing the term "Too Cool" from Yangya, but I wish to expand on the definition of it. For Yangya and his friends, who own an online shop[7] selling clothes marketed under the subcultural style of "Too Cool," the main purpose of the movement appears to be commercial. The term that Yangya coined helped to spark discussions around the sensibilities of "Too Cool," and the aesthetic he presents exemplifies such sensibilities, but I wish to draw on the full potential of this phenomenon, looking at the ways it manifests itself in areas of design, art, and cultural production beyond just

[7] Yangya and his friends own a shop on Taobao, China's e-commerce platform akin to Amazon. However, Taobao provides services such as self-publishing, photo developing, essay writing, etc. and even features live-broadcast retailing, with their latest move being merging online and offline shopping experiences.

fashion. As such, I will be zooming out on the lens of "Too Cool," dissecting this phenomenon in terms of its twofold existence. The first layer of "Too Cool", in other words the real, genuine, "original," is a naïve process wherein the aesthetics of "Too Cool" emerges as a byproduct of vernacular cultural production. The second layer of "Too Cool" is a conscious, thoughtful remaking of the first layer, wherein the aesthetics of "Too Cool" is exaggerated and emphasized in the form of gentle spoof and affirmative appropriation, to bring attention to and serve as a form of understanding and questioning the "original". The two layers emerge and interact—maintaining an unresolved tension—as a result of generational and economic differences in China, which have acquired heightened visibility through the Internet and now beg for our analysis.

CONSUMING IS CREATING, TAKING IS REMAKING.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall wrote about a "profound discontinuity" within the history and experience of the Caribbean diaspora—a forced separation brought about by slavery, colonization and migration from Africa.[8] In a similar sense, Chinese people experienced a profound discontinuity forced upon them as a result of the Cultural Revolution. The movement sought to fundamentally change Chinese daily life, redirecting its cultural progression radically by "[criticizing] and [dismantling] all the old ideas, old cultures, old customs, and old habits".[9] During the time of High Maoism, high art and culture was denounced, giving way to officialdom manners of speech and communist propaganda art, the effects of which can still be felt today.

The research of Nicolai Volland[10] has shown, however, that even during the most xenophobic period of High Maoism, the dissemination of and exposure to foreign literature did not cease. On the contrary, the "restricted public sphere" of neibu (internally disseminated)[11] publications reveal a surprisingly up-to-date translation and review of the latest Western literary trends, many of which were controversial (even in their own countries). This suggests that foreign literature was always regarded as a benchmark and provided a framework for Chinese cultural production. The irony of neibu publications is that the dissident foreign literature embodying the degenerate morals of the West were quoted in bulk and readily consumed, oftentimes by the unrestricted public since strict restriction to the access of such material could hardly be implemented. Volumes of sensational, dangerous foreign writings were tempered, if at all, with only a few passing lines of condemnation from the editor—and we might here recall what Caliban says

[8] Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora," in Identity: community, culture, difference, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 227.

[9] "Declaration of War against the Old World", People's Daily 26 Aug. 1966: A2 (Chinese Version) as quoted in Wang Min'an and Shaobo Xie, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution, Deleuze, and Desiring-Machines," Theory & Event 16, no. 3 (2013) Project MUSE.

[10] Nicolai Volland, "Clandestine Cosmopolitanism: Foreign Literature in the People's Republic of China, 1957-1977," The Journal of Asian Studies 76, no. 1 (February 2017) 185-210.

[11] Volland examined the circulation of foreign literature within socialist China from three channels, namely the private sphere, the restricted public sphere of Internal publications, and the open public sphere. By "foreign literature", he means both literature in the traditional sense and also a broader sense of arts, cultural, and occasionally scientific materials. Ibid.

in The Tempest: "You taught me language, and my profit on 't/ Is I know how to curse."[12] Volland's research shows us that China has always considered itself in relation and competition to the rest of the world. Even during Cultural Revolution, China never ceased to look to the global, take from it, and re-contextualize it to fit the local.

Following Mao's death, an era of "reform and opening-up", a program of economic reform aimed at leading the country towards modernization and a market economy, once again caused great shifts in the lives of people. This time around, social and private lives could be explored and expressed, and with that, leisure and style flourished.[13] It is as American journalist Richard Bernstein described: this is "a country that is returning to itself."[14]

To fill the void of desire[15] left by the Cultural Revolution, and to reconnect the unrestricted public sphere of China back to the community of the modern world[16], China went through phases of mass media import from varying cultures around the world. These materials—imported films, literature, and television programs—evoked their own ideas of beauty and aesthetic, which in turn inspired mass copying of appearances, producing ripped-off versions of the original look.

Let us consider an example. Towards the end of the 80s and especially during the 90s, there was a huge boom in children's studio salon photography. The original trend was of dressing children up to look like famous characters from Chinese mythology and classical literature (Journey to the West, Dream of the Red Chamber), or to resemble celebrities and their archetypes (the demure maiden, the rich lady, etc.).[18] At that time, there was little variation to the props and costumes, as most shoots tended to follow a fixed template.

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[12] A line by the character Caliban from Shakespeare's play The Tempest, Act 1, Scene 2. A modern translation by Sparknotes reads, "You taught me language, and all I can do with it is curse!" accessed March 17, 2018, http://nfs.sparknotes.com/tempest/page_44.html.

[13] Antonia Finnane, "Breaking with the past," in Changing clothes in China: fashion, history, nation (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 257-290.

[14] Heung Shing Liu, China After Mao: "Seek Truth From Facts," (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983). 6-7.

[15] Ming-an Wang succinctly points out that Mao's revolution was "a revolution against individual desires" (here using the Deleuzian concept of production of desire leading to social production) to rid people of their selves in order to become part of the collective. In turn, the reform brought about by Deng essentially became "an emancipation of desire" (Wang, 2013). Wang Min'an and Shaobo Xie, Op. cit.

[16] Shuyu Kong, International Institute for Asian Studies, accessed Dec 20, 2017, https://iias.asia/profile/shuyu-kong.

[17] Fanheini, Jan 2, 2015, response to "What foreign films were available in 80s China?," on Zhihu, https://www.zhihu.com/question/27357764.

[18] "Children Salon Photography that Everyone has Experienced," Toutiao, last modified June 1, 2017, http://wap.china.com/act/toutiao/13000656/20170601/30623774_2.html.

Children's Salon Photography from 1980s

Above: A double exposed photo is proof of the photographer's skills.

Children's Salon Photography form 1990s

By the mid 90s, trends began to change. Photographers gave more attention to backdrops and staging props, and began to use slightly more natural makeup. The exaggerated and almost horrifying makeup commonly seen in the photographs of the 80s were rooted in aesthetic influences from traditional Chinese New Year prints and Chinese Opera.[19] But even as the makeup became more natural, the red dot between eyebrows remained a staple, iconic touch.[20] After interviewing people from my mother's generation (Post 60s: ages 48~58)—the ones who decided to put that dot on their children's foreheads—I discovered a surprising piece of information. Apparently at that time, the popularity of the red dot was a result of the influence of Bollywood movies in China.[21] Our parents were fascinated with the beautiful Indian women "with their big eyes" in Bollywood movies, recalls my aunt, so the red dot was adopted as a beauty mark, serving purely decorative purposes. By the time I had that dot on my head, I definitely did not know where it came from or what it originally meant. This is a great example of how something gets appropriated and reinterpreted with the final result culminating in an image associated with "Made in China". What is "Too Cool" about these salon photographs is their distinctly dated artifice and peculiar trends that are at once cringe-worthy but also kind of "cool" (considering that they could be fashionable again). The ambivalence towards such images captures our fascination, a renewed and recontextualized feeling of charm towards the original fascination with the trend of salon photography. In this sense, these images of "Too Cool" and their reignited interest function as a form of "review", to use the words of Eddie Blake[22] in describing Parisian fashion house

[19] "After all these years, children's stage makeup is still as awful as our parents' days," KK news, last modified October 25, 2016, https://kknews.cc/news/xz9elyq.html.

[20] Traditionally, the red dot between eyebrows were painted with cinnabar, and were meant as a sort of peace amulet. There is also a mythical story of Yang Guifei, a concubine known for her beauty, starting a beauty trend within the imperial courts with this red dot. Over time, the practice was diluted and simplified to a red dot painted with red lipstick. In most cases where they appear on children's foreheads in photographs, the red dot serve purely as decoration and is not associated with peace and protection anymore.

[21] During the period of economic reform, China was extremely active in importing classic foreign films from various sources, most often European, but also unlikely places such as India, Mexico, and later Hong Kong. Many blogs and forum pages featuring personal reminiscent accounts of watching those foreign films strengthens the reliability of the claim of the connection of the red dot to Bollywood movies.

(E.g. Fanheini, Op. cit.) On Shuyu Kong's site, Op. cit., there are pointers to further readings under the heading "Discreet Screening of the Foreign Film in 1970s and 1980s China".

[22] Eddie Blake argues that Vetements is "critically engaged with its own repeating gyres… resist[ing] easy interpretation while inviting it". Fashion operates in cycles, but Vetements serves to bring our critical attention to the space between these cycles. Eddie Blake, "Jungle is Massive," Real Review 3 (Spring 2017): 47 – 58.

Vetements.[23] Layered images such as these resurfaced salon photographs, much like the designs of Vetements, serve as the post-modern outlook "reviewing our particular point in history" and addresses the "gap" that is the time between the creation of a work and its analysis.[24]

In a roundtable discussion on cultural appropriation held at Artforum International New York last summer, theorist Homi K. Bhabha gave insight into distinguishing between cultural *translation* and *appropriation*, by explaining that "[a]ppropriation and translation have different matrices of time, and different ways of addressing value and historical value".[25] He asserted that the word "translation" implies "interpretational changes over time relative to the anterior text, or work, or thing, that came before"; and this further invites the possibility of transformation brought about by displacement and time. He also states that translation suggests that the relationship of the translated to the anterior can be "tangential… [having] its own figurations, and configurations, and even deformations and misreadings… It's an interpretational intervention".[26] While China underwent phases of mass media import from varying cultures and regions around the world[27], the dissemination did not end with simple acknowledgement and admiration for these forms—they went one step further into becoming translated and reinterpreted versions, sometimes bearing merely tangential reference to the original.

Besides foreign film and literature, Japanese Anime imports were also widely popular, especially influencing children, like myself, who grew up in that era. China Central Television aired the first imported Japanese Anime "Astro Boy" in December of 1980, and subsequently throughout the 80s and 90s imported many Anime classics such as Doraemon, Sailor Moon, Slam Dunk, Dragon Ball, etc., until a law[28] was passed in 2006

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[23] Vetements is a brand that has shaken the fashion world with its devotion to Ugly fashion – grumpy, slouchy models, awkward silhouettes, appropriation of work wear and everyday brand logos/ products, embrace of crassness – and that has undoubtedly legitimized the cheap, Normcore aesthetic as part of a High-street insider knowledge.

[24] Blake, Op. cit.

[25] Michelle Kuo and Gregg Bordowitz, "Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable," Artforum International 55, no. 10 (Summer 2017): 266,268-277. Jstor.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Fanheini, Op. cit.

[28] "Notice by State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of The People's Republic of China regarding strengthening management of television cartoon dissemination," State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of The People's Republic of China, last modified February 19, 2008, http://www.sarft.gov.cn/art/2008/2/19/art_106_4480.html.

prohibiting the airing of foreign cartoons during the prime time period of 5PM —8PM.[29] As a member of the Post-90s generation who spent my pre-elementary school years in China, I remember vividly being hooked to the various Japanese Anime that was showing on TV. While the Anime that was aired on state television was obtained through legal measures, the glut of Anime character merchandize and pirate CDs and DVDs was not. But given the huge market and general disregard for intellectual property protection, and above all, given the fact that most of us only had access to these MADE IN CHINA fakes, we happily paid for this merchandise anyway, with little care about how authentic they looked or were.

So how could you tell if something is made in China[30] or the real thing? Without even turning to the underside of the object to check the label, if you notice that a sheet of sticker that reads "Sailor Moon" has a random character from another show, or that a Dragon Ball pencil case opens up to reveal a multiplication table, well, then, chances are you are looking at something made in China. What is "Too Cool" about this, in retrospect, is that the images themselves are *the real thing*, taken directly from the original Anime; but the accident (or should I call disregard?) of mixing two unrelated shows, and the translation of a popular character or product (typical elementary school student pencil case) into a localized, practical, commodity, undoubtedly exposed the fact that these commodities were beyond a doubt made in China, and most likely for China.

The third sticker from bottom right belongs to a different cartoon.

[29] "When did Japanese Anime enter China?," Baidu Zhidao, last modified November 28, 2017, https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/355521959.html.

[30] "Made in China" here refers to the counterfeits, not the climate of production where everything, even the licensed real brand products are manufactured in China.

I remember going back to China[31] one year around 2009 and seeing the Anime "Balala Fairies" on television and feeling very perplexed by it. At first glance, the character design and story appears just like a typical Japanese magical girl Anime.[32] However, as I watched on, instances of jarring scene transitions, a hodgepodge of animation styles, and forced dialogues preaching morals and virtues that were irrelevant to the plot betrayed the merely superficial likeness to Japanese Anime. Once again, these "not-quite-there" qualities remind us that we are looking at Chinese appropriations, not the real thing. What this reveals, however, is that even the copying of styles stems from practical (as opposed to artistic) aims: to capitalize on the popularity of a given style, rather than emulating or understanding its beauty. In such cases, the content is incipiently "Too Cool", with the qualities of "Too Cool" produced as a byproduct and not an intention of the creators.

The foreign cartoons, films, and literature that entered China all invariably experienced some kind of cultural translation. They were highly regarded and received with widespread popularity, but were subsequently translated into Chinese versions of their original self, produced by and for the Chinese consumers. The cases that I examined in this section are marked by their pre-Internet conception and dissemination, and therefore can be considered "historical" examples of "Too Cool." While "Too Cool" is a newly coined term that is deeply linked to post-Internet aesthetics and forms of consumption, I wanted to show that the sensibilities of "Too Cool" have already been in play before the Internet. However, it is their resurgence through the medium of the Internet that gave them refocused limelight, inspiring young creative minds to reconsider the fascination and appeal of such images. In the next section, I will be looking at current manifestations of "Too Cool," which display explicit connection to digital imagery and the Internet. I will be using examples from interior and architectural design choices to shed light on the subject of copying and of Chinese mentality, and show how all that culminate in instances of "Too Cool."

[31] I was born in Shanghai but later moved to Singapore when I was 7, where I was educated until high school. However, I went back to China frequently during my time in Singapore, and have spent time from weeks to months living in China in first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier cities.

[32] "Magical girl", or "Mahou Shoujo" is a genre of anime and manga where typically a school-aged girl is empowered with magic, and the story unfolds through the adventure of the heroine as she manages her double life.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

It's a small world after all
It's a small world that we own
It's a small world to be shown
It's a small, small world

—Adapted lyrics written by me to be sung to the tune of "It's a small world"

There is a long-standing tradition of imitation art within China that boasts of its own classification system. The highest form of simulacrum bears the essence of the original—the *qi*, or "life force"—to the extent that the image evokes and becomes a "real" substitute of the original.[33] While that level of simulacrum was used to describe Chinese paintings (art, imitating and reproducing life, capturing not a perfect copy of the appearance but the essence), the act of perfecting copying is also highly regarded by the Chinese as "testament to cultural and technological achievements."[34] Furthermore, journalist and Columbia University professor Alexander Stille points to two Chinese terms, "fangzhipin" and "fuzhipin", to explain the Chinese attitude toward the copy: "*Fangzhipin* is closer to what we would call a reproduction—a knockoff you would buy in a museum store—while *fuzhipin* is a very high quality copy, something worthy of study or putting in a museum."[35] These instances of copying *are* for the sake of understanding the beauty of form and structure, of technology and craftsmanship, of artistic achievements.

Let us look at another instance of taking as remaking. The theory and history that I have been drawing from in the previous paragraph were informed by Bianca Bosker[36], who examined the intriguing phenomena of "simulacrascapes"—themed residential

[33] Bianca Bosker, Original copies: architectural mimicry in contemporary China (Honolulu, T.H: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 26-27.
[34] Ibid., 14.
[35] Alexander Stille, 2002, quoted in Bosker, 2013. Ibid., 25.
[36] Ibid.

communities in China that replicate anachronistic European or American towns. While both the Western and Chinese intellectual elite sigh at the "backward" mass scale replication projects, quick to dismiss them as "kitsch", "fake", "unimaginative and cliché", Bosker provides a more nuanced reading of the phenomenon, explaining the conditions for their existence and viewing them as "monuments to the 'New China'."[37] These mass scale residential simulacrascape developments, aimed at the expanding middle class, owe their success to their visibility as "coveted status symbols."[38] Much like the conspicuous logos of branded goods, these themed residencies featuring the trademark forms of Western cultural achievement are meant to signal wealth and luxury.

So beneath the surface of "West worship" actually rests a mindset of Chinese superiority, the conviction that all the good things of the world can be found in China, and tailored to Chinese taste to resemble Chinese peoples' conception of the foreign—the historical tourist spots showcasing the celebrated moments of Western culture. It is noteworthy also to examine the interior choices made by home buyers: by looking at the domestic space, we get a glimpse into the vernacular taste and preferences of individuals, often demonstrated to the full extreme with the opportunity of total control over their own private space. A little search on Zhihu.com, China's information sharing site, akin to Quora or Reddit, brought me to revealing explanations of popular contemporary Chinese interior design choices. What the term "European-style" translates to in China is literally: chandeliers, Greek columns (indoors in low apartments, no less), pompous gilded Rococo motifs and gaudy Baroque furnishing. Such "eclectic frenzy" and "compulsive imitation", to use the words of Umberto Eco, "prevail where wealth has no history."[39] This aesthetic had seen an earlier manifestation in America, in the seemingly "artificial regions" of post-urban California and Florida and it is happening now for the Chinese *nouveaux riches*, especially after the discontinuity in historical, cultural, and aesthetic richness caused by the Cultural Revolution. These elements of high culture and luxury are today rendered archaic and kitschy[40] for their irrelevance and impracticality to contemporary urban living, and

[37] Ibid., 132.

[38] Ibid., 130.

[39] Umberto Eco, 1986, quoted in Bosker, 2013. Ibid., 67.

[40] Stephen Bayley defines kitsch as "that [which] offers a facsimile experience", and points to the "certain presence of fakery" in reproduced Rococo and Baroque styles of decoration as definingly kitschy (Bayley, pg145,146). Stephen Bayley, Ugly: the aesthetics of everything (New York, NY: Overlook Press, 2013).

especially so after the new standard of design elevating functionality over appearance set by the Bauhaus school and Modernist architecture. A penchant for Minimalism and simplicity is still highly regarded today in industrial and interior design, rendering the sensory overload of the garish Chinese homes extremely cringe-worthy.

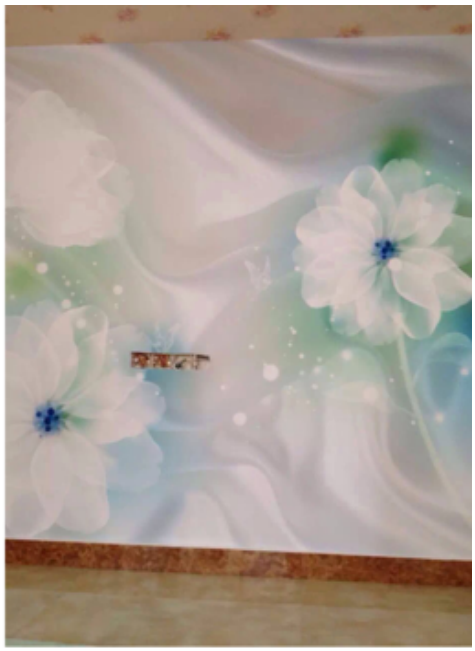
A more interesting development of this interior appropriation is how these "European style" copies evolve into mutations with Chinese characteristics. What is kept of the "European style", i.e. the elaborately ornamental Rococo and Baroque, is the essence of sensory overload, but the manifestations are more in keeping with "current" trends. Consider the design on the sliding closet doors in Figure 1: the bright, saturated colors, high-definition landscape of detailed grass, flat pictorial space, uplifting mood, distinctly digitally rendered style… it is all too much—too artificial, too uplifting, too bright, too much, "Too Cool." This was a photo in a series uploaded by a netizen expressing her disbelief at her parents' interior design choices for their new house on the outskirts of the main city.[41] She is not alone in her lamentation; threads voicing outcry over outlandish new wedding home designs gifted by their loving parents are ubiquitous on the Chinese Internet, gaining popularity and resonance with every "Like".

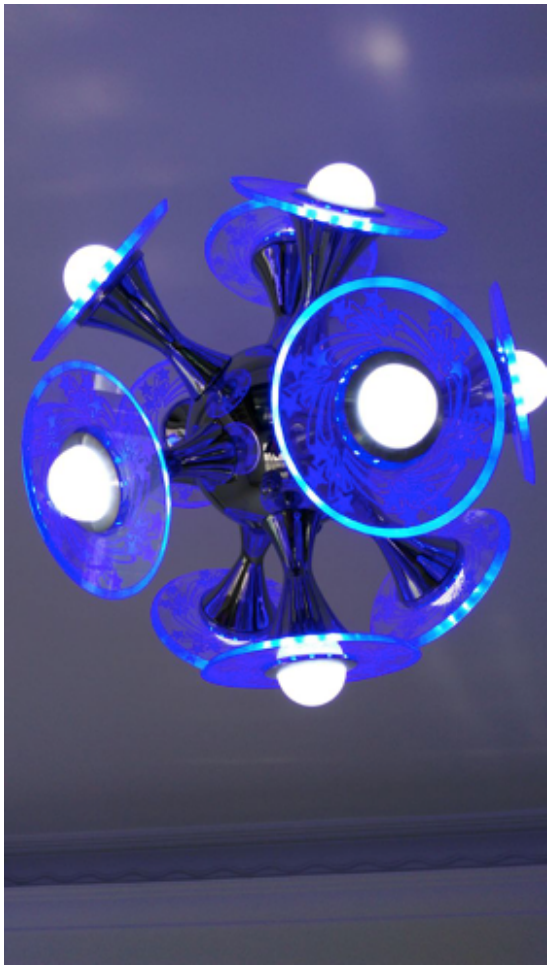
One netizen succinctly points out the uneasiness of being engulfed by digital wallpaper flowers, as in Fig. 4: "it feels like I just entered QZone".[43] QZone, the biggest social networking space of the QQ Tencent Group, features personal blog space decoration with many free templates akin to the one shown in Fig. 4. The site remains a popular space of social networking for teenagers, and its template history serves as a good reflection of popular aesthetic trends. This distinct reaction of cringing when faced with the flowers is due to their familiarity pointing to a specific time period and trend, which by today's standards are long outdated. In fact, many of these kitschy, over-the-top designs in Chinese homes resemble cyberspace aesthetics of the early and mid 2000s, as well as representing strange fixation with turning private spaces into poor simulations of leisure places like Karaoke parlors and vacation villas, or a simulation—a pretense—of nature.

[41] "Dad and Mom made such ugly renovations, and they're proud of it!," Sohu, last modified December 23, 2015, 16:52, http://www.sohu.com/a/50158873_113753.

[42] "What is the ugliest interior you have seen?," Zhihu, accessed Jan 10, 2018, https://www.zhihu.com/question/29598382.

[43] Ibid. This specific reply has garnered over 10,000 likes.





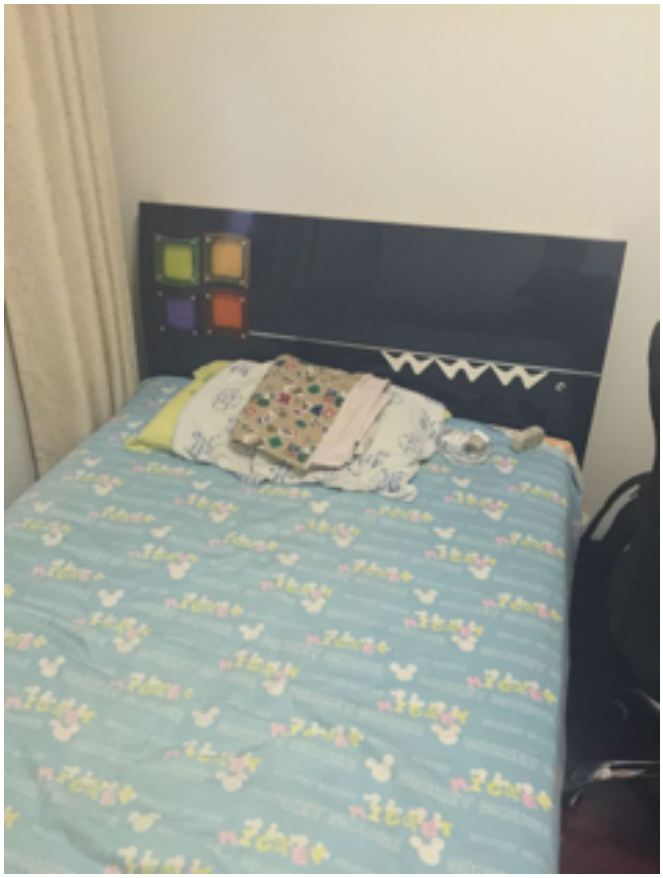
In order to understand "mom and dad's" unwavering belief in the aesthetic choices of these interiors, we have to put things into context and perspective. Whatever is "fashionable", "trendy", or "cool", "has always to be differentiated from the mainstream."[44] So the question therefore begs: in comparison to what are these design choices cool and trendy? If we think about a simple, standard home with concrete or wooden flooring, orange incandescent or white fluorescent lighting, undecorated furniture, framed landscape paintings or photographs for display… then all the examples I have presented exhibit an extraordinary sense and creativity in being different. They are most likely not going to be defined as refined and beautiful—something that can stand the test of time—but in terms of "coolness", in terms of novelty and capital (that you have your own house and the excess to decorate it), these interior designs might stand a chance, even if only within the circle of "mom and dad" or small-town folk.

So who are the two groups that are against each other, the ones who created and chose these designs and the ones who are looking at them in disbelief? I would like to propose two sets of antagonisms that will help us to frame the understanding of these naïve, incipient "Too Cool" designs. The first is *generational difference*; in this case, the opposition between young netizens and their parents who chose the interior designs. The second is *economic difference*, loosely delineated by the different tiered cities in China. I will be looking in depth at the generational difference through a separate example in the next chapter, thus, for now, I will examine more closely the second factor of economic difference. The two sets of antagonisms are by no means independent; in fact, they overlap and correlate to collectively produce "Too Cool." But treating them seriatim will enable us to develop a better understanding of how they interact.

I remember a specific episode from the documentary "Plastic China"[45], where Kun, the owner of the household-recycling workshop in a small town in Shandong province

[44] "Joanne Entwistle, The fashioned body: fashion, dress, and modern social theory (Malden, MA: Polity Press in association with Blackwell, 2000), 117.

[45] "Plastic China" is a documentary by director Jiu-Liang Wang, which was screened at the Sundance Film Festival 2017. It follows the lives of two families in the plastic waste industry in China, as we get a glimpse the poverty, hopes, and aspirations of the largely unknown group of people and their families caught in such work. I watched the film at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as part of the "Turn It On: China on Film, 2000—2017" series accompanying the larger "Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World" exhibition (on view October 6, 2017—January 7, 2018).



Completely immersed in a digital pretense of nature.

Microsoft Logo design incorporated into a bed.

Karaoke parlor-esque lighting design.

splurged on a new car, ignoring more pressing problems in his household, just so that he could save face with this status symbol and avoid "being looked down upon."[46] A scene shows him deliberating over the most expensive car by the local manufacturer, while the children commented honestly that "it's ugly," to which he retorted, "you kids don't understand." When he finally bought the new car, all the neighbors in town came to admire it. This event was etched into my mind as the quintessential example of the nature of competition that is linked to the important concept of *mianzi* (face)[47] in Chinese culture.

The conspicuous display of design sensory overload in the interiors I have examined is a form of this competition. Just as "architectural 'tags'" of French Baroque style and Palladian windows function as luxury-brand logos, sought after for their recognizability, these interior design choices, for all their bizarreness, function as direct, in-your-face professing of status—visible symbols that people have the means to do something unique, with the latest technology and designs. However, just like the kids of "Smart" subculture, the trends and products of these "Too Cool" aesthetics conjure poor copies, outdated styles, and specific links to lower-tired cities. This leads to my proposal of the second antagonism that accounts for the aesthetic discontinuity leading to an awareness of "Too Cool": an economic difference loosely delineated by the different tiered cities in China.

The making of modern China is essentially a story of rapid urbanization, with massive development plans executed with such speed and force that in every city (or suburban city-in-the-making) the transformations to a continually changing "urban" landscape can be ceaselessly felt by all its inhabitants. When explaining the philosophy behind the subcultural style of "Too Cool", Yangya pointed to the experience of him and his friends growing up in second and third-tier cities before moving to Beijing, a first-tier city and the capital of China. He recalls trying to mimic the fashions of stylish Beijingers in an attempt to cover up his lower-tiered origins.[49] His actions are comprehensible, as the so-called "chain of despise" (*bishilian*) —a concept that

[48] Bosker, Op. cit., 42.

[49] Wanjia, "What is Too Cool?," Douban, last modified July 14, 2016, https://www.douban.com/note/570277958/.

[50] The bishilian, or "chain of despise" in English, is a term used to describe the social hierarchy present in China where people subcategorize and compete with one other through social and cultural capital, getting looked down at by someone of a higher notch, and in turn looking down on someone of a lower notch, and so on; much like a food chain of social hierarchy.

gained popularity feeding off the wide economic difference in China—among different cities and regions in the country is rather intense. For someone like Yangya, who hailed from a third-tier city, and subsequently found himself immersed in trends and aesthetics of the first-tier city, and by extension the trends and aesthetics of the international (the Western) world, the vernacular tastes and products that we have examined so far will certainly remind him of his humble origins.

Most people who have climbed the social ladder and moved away—both in thinking and in physical distance—from the environment that produces such manifestations of "Too Cool" will naturally want to cringe when faced with reminders of it. Yangya acknowledges that instinct, but he and his friends chose to embrace it, and by doing so transcended into the second layer of authentic, self-aware manifestations of "Too Cool." Using affirmative irony, they create images poking fun at themselves and the idea of "tacky"—something that they were familiar with—bringing critical attention to the roots of such styles and questioning the pride or despise that accompanies them.

For the parents who chose the interior design choices discussed in this chapter, their aesthetic sensibility falls into the first layer of "Too Cool." But beyond that, the attitude of sincerely believing in the design choices, and the confidence to actually execute them—especially for semi-permanent interior and architectural choices—marks these cases as "Too Cool." It is cool in the eyes of those choosing the designs, "tu" (tacky) in the eyes of those detached and bewildered by the designs, and "Too Cool" in the eyes of those consciously engaging with these images through affirmative irony.

Ah! This is so beautiful!

开会没有不隆重的；
讲话没有不重要的；
领导没有不微笑的；
问题没有不解决的；
成就没有不巨大的；
群众没有不满意的；
决策没有不英明的；
路线没有不正确的；
牺牲没有不悲壮的；
中日没有不友好的；
中美没有不合作的；

Meetings are always grand;
Speeches are always important;
Authorities are always smiling;
Problems are always solved;
Accomplishments are always big;
People are always satisfied;
Decisions are always wise;
Directions are always correct;
Sacrifices are always heroic;
Sino-Japanese relationship is always friendly;
Sino-American relationship is always cooperative;

—Xinwen Lianbo Manner of Speech[51]

In this section, I will be examining the generational difference that gave rise to the discontinuity in aesthetics, which resulted in an awareness of "Too Cool." The case I will be analyzing is that of the emergence and popularity of "elderly sticker sets" on Chinese chatting APPs. The "elderly sticker sets" (中老年表情包 *Zhonglaonian Biaoqingbao*), translated literally to "middle-aged & old people emoticons/ stickers", is a subgenre of emoticon/ sticker that is beloved and widely used by our moms, dads, uncles, grandmas, and the like when chatting on applications such as WeChat or QQ (Chinese equivalent of Whatsapp or Messenger, but with more functions). They are characterized by a saturated and highly chromatic color palette, phrases of greetings, inspirational messages or blessings written in expressive, decorative typefaces, frequent background image of nature or flowers, portraits of celebrities or children, and finally, a touch of bling and dumb repeating motions you might recall from PowerPoint WordArt.

"Beautiful wishes to you"

"Hello Friend"

"Toast to friendship"

[51] Xinwen Lianbo is a news program that is broadcasted by China Central Television, and is shown simultaneously on all local TV stations. The excerpt shown here is a satire of "Xinwen Lianbo Ti"—the Xinwen Lianbo official manner of Speech. "Xinwen Lianbo Ti," Renren, accessed December 10, 2017, http://blog.renren.com/share/441542108/15853968272.

A quick look at the redesigns of a few well-known applications and their logos and interfaces will clearly reveal the preferred direction of design and aesthetic appearance the design world have been heading in recent years. Consider the case of Instagram: its initial version featured an overall theme of blue and black banners, rendered complete with bevels and shines to give volume to the two-dimensional planes. With each cosmeticupdate to its interface design, we see a gradual phasing out of the three-dimensionality of the objects and space (as if to remind us that we are dabbling in a flat, curated version of reality), till finally even the application icon gets a makeover from an adorable toy camera to the current pared down and abstracted geometry of a lens, and the interface is completely ridden of extraneous color and decoration to invoke the auratic experience of a white-cube gallery.

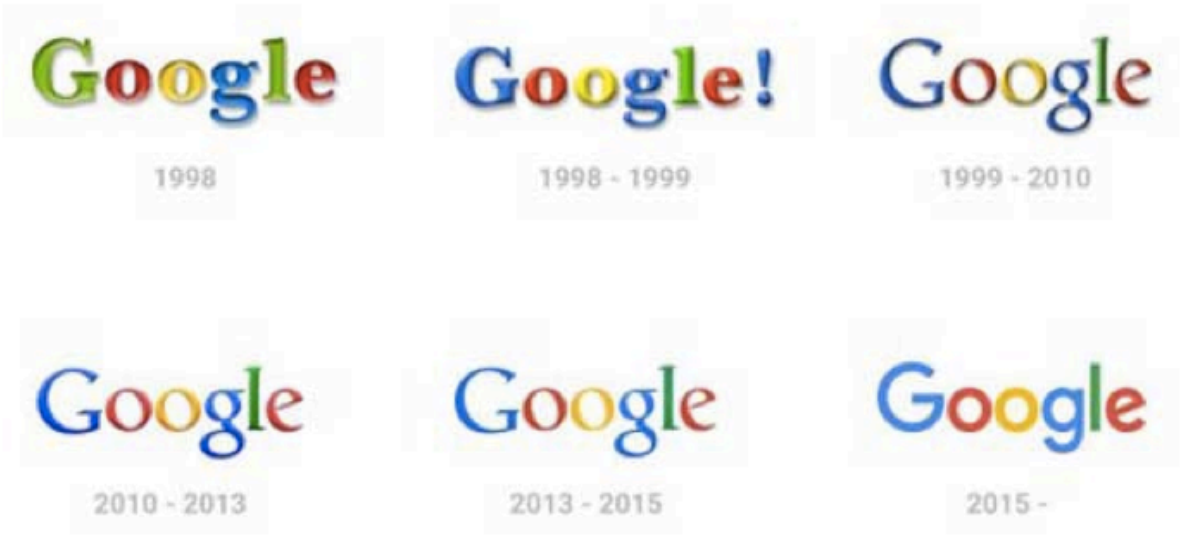
Instagram Interface changes

Instagram Logo, left old, right new

Another major change in graphic design in recent years is that of Google replacing its logo's original serif typeface for a sans serif one, its "biggest [redesign] since 1999."[52] Design and innovation consultant Rafiq Elmansy explains:

> "Logos are no longer limited to print media anymore… Logos should maintain a clear look and feel on different devices… The old Google logo used a serif typeface with semi-thin glyphs and serifs that did not look good on small screens like cell phones, especially with having a different color for each glyph. The amount of serifs, colors, and thin letters contributed to make the logo unclear and appear noisy at a small size."[53]

According to Elmansy, Google's logo design change reflects an emphasis upon real functional value towards a better user experience; the aesthetic choice of a sans serif typeface reflects the culmination of the designers' problem solving. Most likely unaware of the practical motives underlying these design changes, their aesthetic evolution towards a more minimalist, sleek look is what consumers ultimately notice, accept, and adopt.



Google logo changes over the years

[52] Rafiq Elmansy, "How New Google Logo Will Change Old Design Rues," Designorate, accessed January 17, 2018, http://www.designorate.com/google-new-logo/.

[53] Ibid.

In contradistinction to this, the appearance and popularity of "elderly sticker sets" on the Chinese Internet is bewildering and sensational. If we have been conditioned to the likes of sleek Apple aesthetic with every smartphone upgrade, the appearance (in both sense of the word) of "elderly stickers" is oddly subversive, akin to a scandal and attack on the established design sensibilities of these unquestioned standard setters. Put another way, "elderly sticker sets" upset all the markers of preferred design (i.e. "good taste") that I examined in the previous paragraphs, stirring confusion for the viewer. The confusion arises because we are surprised by the dated appearance of these stickers, but their popularity and wide circulation amongst the older generation forces us to reconsider their existence and value. I will come back to this point in the next chapter, but for now, I will say that confusion is not a feeling that we dismiss; instead, it comes back in the form of appetite—an insatiable desire for more in search of an answer.

The prevalence of smartphone ownership within China across economic classes (facilitated by the widespread availability of affordable local brands) reflects both a cause and effect of the hyper-connected cashless smart city[54] that many big Chinese cities have become, and has also created a platform where people of different generations can be simultaneously exposed to the contents and tastes of one another. In the giant all-in-one App WeChat, you can chat, post on your timeline, call a taxi, transfer money, order food and services—all without leaving the App.[55] An interesting feature of WeChat that is not available for other chatting apps is the user-engineered sticker creation feature. Unlike most chatting apps (e.g. Facebook Messenger) that only have built-in emoticons, stickers, or external downloads, WeChat has a sticker creation option, where the user can upload and store his own customized stickers in the form of low quality .jpegs or .gifs to his chat keyboard, or easily save stickers that someone else has generated or shared in a chat. This process of "emoticon engineering"[56] gives rise to a whole plethora of vernacular creativity, ultimately gaining popularity with amateur elderly Internet users as well.

[54] Jason Bellini, "China's Great Leap to Wallet-Free Living | Moving Upstream," The Wall Street Journal, last modified January 18, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/video/series/moving-upstream/chinas-great-leap-to-wallet-free-living-moving-upstream/09D91AAD-5839-49C0-BFBD-E369F25C55FB?mod=trending_now_video_5.

[55] There have been multiple videos and even scholarly writings on the topic of WeChat and social behavior, as well as Westerners musing if China is for once leading in technological innovation, but those aspects are beyond the scope of this paper. Below are a few examples of videos and scholarly writings for further information on the subject.

Jonah M. Kessel and Paul Mozur, "How China Is Changing Your Internet," Technology, New York Times Company, last modified August 9, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/video/technology/100000004574648/china-internet-wechat.html.

Yi-ru Regina, Chen, "Perceived values of branded mobile media, consumer engagement, business-consumer relationship quality and purchase intention: A study of Wechat in China," Public Relations Review 43, no. 5 (December 2017):945-954.

Ronggang, Chen, "Alipay and WeChat Prove That China's Future Is Cashless: Accessible, intuitive mobile platforms have made China an unlikely frontrunner in the race toward becoming a cash-free society," Chinese American Forum 33, no.2 (October 2017): 25-27.

[56] Xiaojuan Ma, "From Internet Memes to Emoticon Engineering: Insights from the Baozou Comic Phenomenon in China," in Human-Computer Interaction. Novel User Experiences. HCI 2016. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, ed. Kurosu M., 9733, (June 2016): 15-27.

A search for “emoticons/ sticker sets” on Chinese search engine Baidu yields:

A Search for “elderly sticker sets” yields:

As the two images from the previous page reveal, sticker tastes differ tremendously between young and old people. Sifting through the many speculations and analyses of the creation and popularity of these "elderly sticker sets", I can summarize the narrative as such: the middle-aged and elderlies in China (above 50), having experienced the special era of Cultural Revolution and Red Education, have been conditioned to officialdom slogan-esque phrases of positivity and motivation, not only in words but also in spirit. By extension, the beauty of nature, flowers, beautiful men and women, and glittery effects, all ignite positive energies. Therefore, when they learnt how to use WordArt and *JinShan Hua Wang*[57] at local community computer classes, the sensibilities of their unique experience take shape in the simplest, most direct, amateur manner of outdated Web 1.0 aesthetics.[58]

These stickers, with their low resolutions, conjure "poor" images. They are not exactly the degraded images that Hito Steyerl writes about in "In Defense of the Poor Image", where there was an "originary original" that became corrupted with every "digital dispersion", "countless transfers and reformattings"; but they are nonetheless "poor", simple renditions of the message that they wish to embody.[59] Recalling the penchant for Chinese art to evoke the essence of the original, perhaps the blunt collage of all the "goodness" is a form of capturing the essence of the message—one of genuine blessing—although all the elements of goodness crammed into one sticker often appears too much.

Following the previous chapter on "Too Cool" interiors, one might notice that a lot of the elements are also present in "elderly sticker sets", and that is by no means a coincidence. Middle-aged and old people in China, with all their love of nature and sincerity in reproducing its beauty in their homes, are equally concerned with being up-to-date, choosing the "newest", digital versions of nature or something-like-that. Both these interiors and "elderly sticker sets" display a similar love for nature, an aesthetic excess applied in a blunt "cut-and-paste" style, generating a distinctive trace of artificiality. From

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[57] A software in between Paint and Photoshop, leaning way more towards Paint.

[58] Yuli Zeng, "Why young Chinese are so crazy about online sticker sets," Sixth Tone, last modified September 05, 2017, http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000812/why-young-chinese-are-so-crazy-about-online-sticker-sets.

Xiaojun Ma, Op. cit.

Wanliu, "The ugliness of 'Elderly Stickers' started half a century ago," Wangyi, last modified January 17, 2018, http://news.163.com/18/0117/00/D8AIJI8R00018M4D.html.

[59] Hito Steyerl, "In defense of the poor image," E-flux Journal 10 (November 2009), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

the time of user-generated video spoofing and the fansubbing boom in the mid-2000s Chinese Internet[60], the tendency for humor has been a subversion of power (officialdom manner of speech), poor quality, and deliberate uglification.[61] And the not-quite-there-ness of these "elderly sticker sets", coupled with their dated appearances, lend them a natural quality of humor to young people that requires no additional layer of spoof; and with that, the very act of a non-elderly person using these sticker sets is ironic in itself—the more sincere the greetings in the sticker reads, the deeper the irony. And it is this sincerity and excessive positivity that many young people cannot quite put their finger on, because it subverts their usual usage of memes and emoticons/ stickers as a form of satire, which is a marked quality of the unseriousness of their online manners of speech.

The often dramatic and rhyming slogan-like words appearing on the "elderly sticker sets" are in direct contrast to the kind of sarcastic and snarky remarks usually used in younger peoples' sticker sets. The tone and manner of speech presented in "elderly sticker sets", combined with the appearance of it, recalls a very specific formal but emotive manner of speech that is adopted during performances and recitals in China. This means that the information in "elderly sticker sets" are not at all unfamiliar to younger people, even as they are surprised at the context of their appearance: what should have been dated or only appearing in official television channels and grand occasions is being used as a means of communication on a platform as mundane as the chatroom of a mobile APP.

[60] Luzhou Nina Li, "Rethinking the Chinese Internet: Social History, Cultural Forms, and Industrial Formation," Television & New Media 18, no. 5 (2017): 393-409.

[61] Wanliu, Op. cit.

While the use of "elderly sticker sets" by younger people started off as something ironic, with increased popularity, the relation between irony and embracing becomes more ambivalent. In fact, an Internet celebrity (Wang Hong) by the name of Papi-chan, who is popular amongst younger audience, launched a set of stickers on WeChat featuring herself in these "elderly sticker set" settings. What "elderly sticker sets" bring to the table is a disruption of the established modes of communication and "aesthetic standards" on the Internet amongst younger users, creating a kind of dated novelty that invites layered interpretations with its usage by younger users, who were not the original targets. Thus, when younger users adopt and appropriate the aesthetics of "elderly sticker sets," as in the digitally engineered images of "Too Cool," they invariably generate the second layer of conscious remaking, bringing critical attention and value to the original visuals.

Extreme Usefulness | Supreme Presentation

Taobao adverts showcasing the sturdiness of a wooden bedframe.

In the previous chapters, I examined generational and economic differences respectively through the examples of interior design choices and "elderly sticker sets." It is now only fitting to examine an example where the two sets of differences overlap and interact, both serving as key factors to understanding the case in question. This is so for the case of Taobao store advertisements[62]: both generational and economic differences are exemplified in these images. Eddie Blake talks about the real radical potential of the Internet being its "ability to create new juxtapositions", especially "extreme and inherently meaningless juxtaposition(s)."[63] This, according to Blake, might be the key to where novel and original ideas can come from. The bizarre and unconventional images of many Taobao store advertisements contribute to a dizzying overcrowding of images competing for consumer's attention on a shopping website. Altogether, they form aesthetically discontinuous content pods, but these images could also be said to embody such juxtapositions complete in themselves.

[62] Taobao is the Chinese equivalent of Amazon. As there are many private sellers and stores, these advertisements could better be described as homemade advertisements.

[63] Eddie Blake, Op. cit.

[64] Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991), 39.

[65] Dictionary definition of "tawdry" on Google Dictionary.

Unlike a lot of advertising and branding that capitalizes on the anxieties of people by providing an ideal solution with the promise of success and social status through the acquisition of a product, the point of desire presented in Taobao advertisements is completely different. Instead of creating an aestheticized ideal, they situate the product in a way that showcases its crude functionality—a direct, blatant portrayal that makes use of the available materials at hand, with little regard for pursuit of excellence, refinement, or beauty. This is a new language of "tawdry and commercial sign system,"[64] where the "showy but cheap and of poor quality"[65] manifest not as kitsch baroque decorations but as abruptly orchestrated scenarios, and the coveted status symbols are exchanged for coveted actual functionalism. And that is only in keeping with "showy but cheap and of poor quality" manifest not as kitsch baroque decorations but as abruptly orchestrated scenarios, and the coveted status symbols are exchanged for coveted actual functionalism. And that is only in keeping with the nature of the site, where billions of commodities are sought after and sold for what they are—things, and not status, and the target audience, who wish to purchase a cheap, reliable product that serves its functional purpose, and not an image of a lifestyle. The unintentional byproduct of Taobao, then, is an amateurish image put together in simple digital enhancements, but displaying unconventional originality almost in the form of entertainment. Again, the ambiguity of their content (are they serious?

An advert showcasing the strength of a hook.

are they trying to be funny?) mixed with the genuine concern of selling the product, presented in this incongruent aesthetic, altogether make these images decidedly "Too Cool". In the previous chapter, I mentioned a feeling of confusion as someone like myself (who did not make and was not the target of "elderly sticker sets") considers the popularity of them (Pg. 35). When viewing these homemade Taobao advertisements, a similar feeling of perplexion arises. The ambiguous intention behind the content of these advertisements confuses us; and that confusion in turn leads to appetite, urging us to consume and desire for more of such images, as if increased exposure will lead to some form of an answer.

Conclusion

My chains, new gold watch, made in China
We play Ping-Pong ball, made in China
Buy designer shit for my bitch, made in China
Yeah Higher Brothers' black cab, made in China
She said she didn't love me
She said she didn't love me
She said she didn't love me
She lied, she lied
She all made in China
She all made in China
She all made in China
She lied, she lied

—Lyrics to "Made In China" by Chengdu Rap group Higher Brothers

In this thesis, I have examined a number of different cases across different time periods and mediums that I have identified as possessing qualities of "Too Cool." Underlying all these, especially for people involved in creative output, is a search for Chineseness and Chinese identity. However, it should be evident that "Chinese Identity" is not an intrinsic quality. Rather, it is something that evolves and reformulates itself along the way, like a biological byproduct, almost, taking shape only as a result of sufficient repetition, and not the cause of them. One might wonder why Chinese people working in the creative industry always feel compelled to incorporate something "Chinese" into our works, or flaunt that part of our identity and cultural background. This is because in a

world where Western standards and Western history is *The Standard* and *The History* in the global context, an ordeal arises from the tension between appealing to these standards in order to appear on par with the global, while simultaneously not losing the local and historical complexity of Chinese forms and standards (high and low); in other words, not losing our authenticity and identity to globalization. And yet this is never something innate, much as cultural identity is not a static, intrinsic quality, but "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."[66] To be fair, this ordeal is also internal to China, with the wide economic, geographical and cultural differences across different cities, and can be drawn upon by people like myself as a means of creative inspiration. This desire to draw upon the richness of contradiction of one's culture is also roused by the increase in Chinese students studying abroad, especially in the arts, as we are compelled to reexamine our identity and culture—something that sets us apart and can be used in our creative works, but also falls on our shoulder as a burden to represent.

The cases of genuine, unintentionally "Too Cool" aesthetic productions that I have examined in this essay do not have the burden of fulfilling a certain standard, or representing China to the world. Neither do they wish to hop on the bandwagon of global style and fashion market. Many up-and-coming creative persons and fashion designers, like Feng Chen Wang[67] and CLOT[68], are seeking to rebrand the "Made in China" tag for the world to acknowledge. Even local Chinese sportswear brand Li-Ning[69], which was never associated with trendy or cool, sought to rebrand itself at this year's Spring Summer New York Fashion Week by successfully placing Chinese characteristics, such as images of Chinese athletes and bold Chinese words, onto already popular street wear templates and

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[66] Stuart Hall, Op. cit., 222.

[67] "Feng Chen Wang Wants to Change Social Stigma," Hypebeast, accessed March 03, 2018, https://hypebeast.com/2018/1/feng-chen-wang-jordan-1-made-in-china.

[68] CLOT is a streetwear label and lifestyle brand founded by actor-singer Edison Chen and entrepreneur Kevin Poon. It seeks to bridge Eastern and Western Cultures.

Jingnan, Zheng, "Edison Chen: The world should realize that made in China is not bad," Medium, November 25, 2017, https://medium.com/msing051/edison-chen-the-world-should-realized-that-made-in-china-is-not-bad-95c1eee6fd40.

[69] Li-Ning Company Limited is a Chinese sportswear brand founded in 1989. It endorses both Chinese and international athletes and teams, and is a known household name in China.

silhouettes, giving "petit nationalistic"[70] Chinese youths a chance to contribute to the growth of a national sportswear brand with renewed relevance.

In comparison to those established brands, these vernacular cases that I examined in my paper are made in China, *for China*. And precisely because of that, they unintentionally become one of the most interesting and genuine aspects of Chinese aesthetic and cultural output. The first layer of naïve, vernacular makings of "Too Cool" exist as a lens reflecting the state of China's urbanization and generational change, while the second layer exist as a form of conscious engagement with the "original" first layer in order to make sense of and draw from this creative form of cultural production. As young creative makers, we are downstream from the economic and generational transformations happening around us. We experience it, and that propels us to delve into the second layer. So a young creative person like Yangya can take inspiration from the originals to form his own subcultural style of "Too Cool," while an artist like Cao Fei[71] can critically engage with social commentary and popular aesthetics which reflect sensibilities of "Too Cool." All in all, the people who are fascinated with and participate in a reappropriation of "Too Cool" seek to engage with their past, their environment, their experience of a rapidly changing landscape and lifestyle—and, ultimately, the distorting process of contemporary urbanization in China.

While I have looked at examples from a variety of fields and across disparate time periods, I hope I have extracted their essential linkages and revealed that beneath apparently "poor" or trivial imagery lies some clues to the complex issues of economic, cultural, and generational shifts in contemporary China. Images can be rendered meaningless, passing noise in the ether of the Internet. But it is oftentimes with a little attention to the minute passings of life that the next wave of culture—of meaning—is

[70] "Petit Nationalism" is a term coined by Kamaya Rika in 2002 to describe the youth nationalism in Japan at the time, characterized by a disenchanted young generation powerless to change the traditions in society, who chooses to be detached from the war and sentiments of nationalism, but channels their underlying nationalist energy into sporting events, which is harmless on the surface but could always be evoked to form real nationalism.

[71] Chinese contemporary artist based in Guangzhou who mostly works in the mediums of video and installation. Her works examines the rapid and chaotic changes within contemporary Chinese society, and oftentimes appear down-to-earth/ reflecting popular taste, as those are exactly the kinds of people and lifestyle that she is interested in and wishes to explore.

generated. Sensibilities of "Too Cool" might not be unique to China, but the cases of "Too Cool" I have examined reveal Chinese characteristics that stem from specific cultural experiences in, and unique references to, China. On top of that, the ambitious attitude of translating the globalized into Chinese vocabulary and idioms make these cases of "Too Cool" decidedly "China Too Cool."

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