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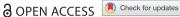Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Chinese innovative workers are often discussed in terms of their exploitation and empowerment within the current intellectual property systems, but little attention is given to their creative processes. Meanwhile, design practitioners are viewed solely as an innovation resource in the field of design thinking. Based on interviews with Chinese interior designers and secondary data, this article provides an analysis that situates their practices and experiences within the intersection of these fields, emphasising practitioners' accounts of creativity and production of innovative, cultural, and aesthetic forms. Drawing on theories of practice, genre, and post-Bourdieuian analysis of cultural production, this article argues that the valorisation of creativity needs to be understood in relation to the practices in which they engage, within particular contexts of history, organisation, and genre cultures that provide opportunities for the transformation of genre boundaries. Operating within a milieu that saw copying as part of creative process, the practitioners had no agreement on how the work should be understood within the rubric of creativity. Despite this, they aimed for slight differentiation in design, appropriating and rediscovering multi-cultural forms to resist 'take-ism' – the imitative culture of copying of foreign decorative elements and styles, while establishing themselves in the commercial world.

Introduction

Design has become a significant part of commercial and cultural life in China over the past few decades. Chinese design industries have grown, and designers have facilitated the shift of industries from a 'made in China' to a 'created in China' model (Justice 2012; Li 2011), putting more emphasis on innovation. Against this backdrop, Chinese designers were presented as a 'cheerfully flourishing, globally driven' community, 'buoyed up by a new wave of Chinese consumerism' (Buckley 2008, 342), where design is adopted as a value-added practice and a business strategy.

Recent developments notwithstanding, little empirical research has been done to study practitioners' accounts of creativity. Literature on Chinese creative practices points to their socio-cultural and historical specificity, examining how the Chinese Confucian views of defining copying as literati practice of learning and the socialist understanding of property as part of collective ownership have influenced the perception of copying and creativity in Chinese society (e.g. Alford 1995,

9–29; Pang 2012). This line of research emphasises the longstanding practice of sharing and skilful imitation as a means of exercising creativity, which has influenced how people perceive existing works as exploitable and seek productive opportunities from them. Thus, cultural critiques often focus on the limited definition of creativity defined by capitalism and the regime of intellectual property rights (IPR). In the book *Creativity and its Discontents*, Pang (2012) critiques creative labour, arguing that it reflects workers' exploitation in global capitalism. She documents the challenges faced by China's creative industries as a perceived pirate nation. Chumley (2016) provides another critique through her anthropological study on Chinese design, highlighting the incommensurability between Chinese and Western aesthetics that is intensified by copycat culture. She argues that accusations of copying Western designs have heightened the binary distinction between Chinese and Western aesthetics and made it challenging for aesthetic workers. In China's pursuit of global power, Chinese modern aesthetics have become what Chumley (2016) called a puzzling 'cryptocategory' that is neither fully foreign nor native. These critiques tend to view Chinese design practitioners as victims in the global creative economy and overlook how they work with newness and creativity.

Another wave of interrogations of Chinese innovation views the oft-criticised *shanzhai* (copycat) culture as 'grassroots creativity.' Exploring DIY makers, consumer electronics manufacturers and export painters, researchers suggest that such copycat culture promotes an open manufacturing system and represents agency and empowerment for individuals and entrepreneurs (Keane 2013, 117–124; Keane and Zhao 2012; Lindtner, Greenspan, and Li 2015; Wang 2016; Wong 2014; Yang 2016). This revisionist explanation of copying raises questions about its applicability in their neighbouring industries, like design industries. I extend this inquiry into the interior design sector, a design context that is closely associated with the practices of industrial production with its own institutional logic under certain circumstances and the creation of symbolic cultural meanings through narrative and communication involving strong aesthetic components (Hesmondhalgh 2019). I draw on the practice theories to approach practices carried by interior design practitioners as a nexus of organised activities, norms, rules, and material artifacts produced through the interconnectedness between them (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2002; Shove et al. 2007).[1] In this article, I explore how interior designers' practices, which involves the deployment of different creativity models, enable and constrain particular forms of innovation.[2] Rather than studying creativity in isolation, I view different forms of innovation as a result of the ways the design practitioners engage in complex practices within particular contexts. Schatzki (2012, 14) notes, 'If what a person does, thinks, believes, etc. presupposes the practices that s/he carries on, social phenomena cannot consist simply of people's actions but must comprise these actions together with, or in the context of, these practices.' Building upon his idea, I recognise that the models of creativity held by design practitioners are 'features' of practices – they characterise these practitioners as a group by virtue of their participation in social practices (Schatzki 2012). By examining the practices of interior design practitioners, this study sheds light on how their models of creativity shape and contribute to social phenomena, such as changes in practices.

China's interior designers represent an interesting case for studying practices and innovation as cultural intermediaries, emphasising not just design's commercial role but also its 'culturalness'– the aesthetic-expressive and taste-making dimensions. In their projects, these dimensions can outweigh design's functional aspects, when compared to consumer electronics or hardware designers who pay more attention to functionality. Thus, studying interior designers' practices reveals connections between people's models of creativity, genre culture, aesthetic formations, discursive practices, and corporate commercial practices. However, empirical studies that examine these relationships and changes within a historical framework are lacking. This article illuminates these connections using genre theory (Negus 1999; Nixon 2003) and post-Bourdieuian theory of cultural production (Born 2010; Molotch 2011). Through analysing individual accounts given by design practitioners, I demonstrate how practitioners' models of creativity and resulting innovation are shaped by practices that prioritise value creation and problem-solving. Pratt and Jeffcutt (2009,

4) argued that 'individuals are primary sources of creativity (and invention),' shaping the ideation aspect of innovation. To analyse design practitioners' practices in a dynamic socio-economic context, design's cultural attributes, such as subjective understandings of taste and aesthetics need to be considered. This perspective, as noted by Bryson, Daniels, and Rusten (2005) and Power (2009), is echoed in this article.

This study's analyses not only contribute to scholarship on creativity and practices of cultural production, but also shed light on China's industrial sectors, which involves the mobilisation of different forms of innovation. Specifically, the study demonstrates the unique models of creativity deployed by practitioners within a broader context of an export-led industrialised economy, nationalist agendas, and an intellectual property system influenced by Western legal style and socialist ideologies (Keane 2013). In this context, claims about specific forms of creativity in cultural production are made and challenged by corporations and state organisations. The valorisation of design is interconnected with this context, as it fosters innovation, promotes companies' competitiveness, and aligns with China's 'going global' and industrial upgrading strategy.

Studying Chinese interior designers is timely because the Chinese regime has sought to align the built environment's design language with a nationalist narrative in recent years. President Xi Jinping called for an end to 'weird architecture' in 2014, advocating for contemporary Chinese values and traditional culture to be reflected in fine arts (Ramzy 2014). In 2020, the Ministry of Housing and the National Development and Reform Commission called for a halt to 'copycat' public buildings to strengthen cities' cultural confidence and highlight Chinese characteristics. It is within this dynamic context that different narratives of creativity exist and change, shaping the ongoing life of Chinese interior design.

In this article, I highlight two dominant models of creativity that design practitioners deployed. One model was authentic creativity that emanates from within individual and emphasises originality and personal expression in design. The other was derivative creativity, which focuses on service provision and its incremental improvements. While these models differ, practitioners generally agreed on the need to distance themselves from the notion of 'style' and acknowledged the Confucian view that creativity can arise from copying and appropriation of predecessors' works. Also running through their narratives was a common emphasis on producing slight differentiation in design. As will become clearer in this article, the trend towards producing newness rather than blindly copying foreign stylistic elements in ways that can establish themselves as creative or professional in a commercial world has become more visible.

China's design industries and interior design sector

As China moves up the value chain, its design industries are gaining commercial prominence. In 2014, the State Council released a document that highlighted the role of design services in promoting cultural industries as a pillar industry for sustainable economic development. Interior design is among the biggest four design sectors in China, along with product design, fashion design, and graphic design (Chen and Liang 2015). The interior design sector can be divided into three parts: first, a small number of big corporations with expertise in curtain wall design, construction and interior design, focusing on high-end design projects; second, privately-operated civil design institutes that were transformed from state-owned institutions during China's reform in the late 1990s; and third, a large number of small-to-medium enterprises that are split into two market segments. One segment focuses on design services and renovation work for domestic residential space. The other segment focuses on a mix of design projects involving various spaces such as model flats, property sales centres, residential space, and hospitality space. The latter market segment was the target of most of the design practitioners in this study.

Much of the momentum of China's design development can be seen in Shenzhen's emergence as the first UNESCO City of Design in China in 2008. Shenzhen, along with Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, is one of the four cities where many design practitioners are

concentrated (Chen and Liang 2015). According to a 2018 survey by Shenzhen City of Design Promotion Association (SDPA), the number of enterprises in Shenzhen's design industries has consistently increased since the early 1980s. In 2018, there were 108,910 enterprises (around a 22 per cent increase from 2017), with over 90 per cent being limited liability companies (SDPA 2018). These enterprises come from sectors of, but not limited to, brand design, graphic design, advertising design, architectural design, interior decoration design, fashion design, industrial design, stage aesthetic design, animation design, and software design. There was no official census of the population of designers or interior designers in Shenzhen. However, for 2016, SDPA estimated the number of professional designers in the city to be over 60,000, and an estimated figure of around 30,000 interior design practitioners was provided by the then Chairperson of Shenzhen Association of Interior Designers (SZAID) in 2016 (Miao 2018). Practitioners aged between 23 and 40, particularly the post-80s generation, occupied a pivotal place in the interior design sector. A survey of 189 Shenzhen-based interior design practitioners revealed that a majority (36 per cent) of the surveyed were the post-80s generation (Miao 2018).[3] Another survey of 21,706 interior design practitioners in China indicated that the post-80s and post-90s generations accounted for 45.6 per cent and 40 per cent of the surveyed respectively (Sina Home and Aijia Home 2019).[4] Both surveys showed that degree holders made up most of the interior designer population, with nearly half having received undergraduate education and around one-tenth having a postgraduate degree (Miao 2018; Sina Home and Aijia Home 2019). Among the degree holders in the survey of Shenzhen's practitioners, half had studied an 'environment art design' degree covering fine art, interior and exterior design, while the remaining had studied either 'art design,' 'architectural design' or other art-related degrees (Miao 2018). While these figures are only indicative, they suggest that the opportunities for employment were skewed towards the university graduates and millennials.

This study is based on qualitative data from 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Shenzhen-based interior designers who had three to over fifteen years of working experience. It focuses on professional designers and thus only those who worked on multiple types of design projects were selected. The author recruited interviewees through snowball sampling and by cold calls and emails to build the sample. Interviews took place between September 2018 and February 2022, either face-to-face in public places and interviewees' workplaces or online. Valid consent was obtained from participants, who were informed about the nature and objectives of the research before interviews. Their participation was voluntary without monetary reward. The principle of non-coercion was upheld (House 1990, 158). Chinese languages used during the interviews included Mandarin and Cantonese, either of which was the participants' native language, providing a respectful environment that facilitated accurate and in-depth responses. To ensure diverse representation, data was obtained from over 20 public talks and presentations conducted by design media firms, design companies, industry associations, and individual practitioners. These were available or live-streamed through China's social media platforms such as TikTok and WeChat. The objective was to highlight the models of creativity described and embodied by these professionals and to explain the reasons for their deployment.

All data collected through interviews and public talks was recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted using coding. The translation from Chinese was kept as close to the original as possible, with slight adjustments made to maintain the flow of conversation. Although relying mainly on interviews for data has the limitations of not providing a 'thick description' of practices that is possible through ethnographic accounts, it is the most appropriate method for addressing the research questions that aim to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and understanding of their practices in which they have a personal stake. Combining interviewing with analysis of public talks enabled me to gather a diverse range of perspectives and to maintain a focus on the participants' experience, yielding rich accounts.

Practice theories and innovation

My analysis of design practitioners' models of creativity builds on practice theories that acknowledge practices as systems of patterned, routinised, and embodied activities produced through the interplay of human agency and non-human things (e.g. Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2002; Shove et al. 2007). Practice theories allow focusing on an indeterminate level comprising of dynamics and impacts of multiple factors (e.g. human thinking, bodies, objects, discourses, knowledge, agency, norms, organisations) rather than individual factors in shaping and constituting practices carried by individuals (Kimbell 2012; Reckwitz 2002). Designers are involved in perpetuating intricate networks of social practices, along with other social actors and forces (Shove et al. 2007). In this way, practice theories provide a broader context for understanding the practitioners' creativity models and viewing them as shaped by norms, values, and routines of specific practices.

To understand the models of creativity in the design sector, it is necessary to grasp the concept of innovation. Innovation has been explored extensively in studies integrating services marketing, organisation studies, and design studies, revealing circumstances and factors that encourage manufacturing firms to adopt service design or design thinking practices, which facilitate innovation (Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour 1997; Perks, Cooper, and Jones 2005; Verganti 2009). Lawrence et al. (2019), for example, emphasise designers' problem-solving and thinking methods to improve service quality and develop innovative products or services that create value for organisations. Studies on service design understand design practices as part of 'institutional work' in an organisational context (e.g. Kurtmollaiev et al. 2018), while those on design thinking distinguish between 'incremental' and 'radical' innovation (e.g. Perks, Cooper, and Jones 2005; Verganti 2009). The former involves small changes and gradual improvements made to services, technologies, and products along an existing trajectory; the latter involves significant changes and breakthroughs, and is likely harder to achieve (Verganti 2009). This typology intersects with the scholarly works on cultural industries. Negus and Pickering's (2000; 2004) concept of commercial novelty highlights the routine, self-driven, and contrived aspects of creativity, which aligns with incremental innovation that aims for service improvement and client-consumer acceptance. 'Radical' innovation may partly emerge from 'authentic' creativity, involving bursts of originality driven by romantic subjectivism, individual imagination, metaphysical force, and inner feelings (Negus and Pickering 2004; Nixon 2003). Some scholars argue that Chinese companies in the technological hardware sector prioritise incremental, organisational, and process innovation rather than radical innovation (Breznitz and Murphree 2013) and tend to adopt a 'micro-creativity' model that emphasises R&D investment and brand building after achieving a certain scale (Keane 2013; Keane and Zhao 2012). In short, efforts in this vein provide insights into the types of innovation enabled by practices of service design and design thinking in corporate settings. Instead of viewing creativity and innovation as identical or distinct concepts, I follow the view that innovation embodies varying levels of creativity, and some innovations may be relatively modest and less creative in certain contexts and organisations where creativity is mobilised differently (Nixon 2003; Pratt and Jeffcutt 2009, 4). Using a typology of innovation as a reference point, my study analyses how designers' models of creativity are linked to their roles as service providers and their ability to offer practical solutions and create unique experiences for clients or users.

However, design thinking and service design literature often treats designers' doing, thinking and knowing as an organisational resource for innovation, ignoring the culture of design in specific socio-economic and historical contexts (Kimbell 2011; 2012). Additionally, creative industries studies tend to focus on innovation and creativity as a function of utility, monetary benefits and economic growth (Keane 2006, 286), sidelining the process of culture-making, i.e. creating and communicating socio-cultural meanings. Some design thinking studies create a dualism between designers' actions and their thinking, attributing creative outcomes solely to individuals' cognitive

abilities (e.g. Dorst and Cross 2001). It is essential to move beyond limited perspectives, given the growing calls for increased attention to the socio-political, cultural, historical, and aesthetic dimensions of design, including the plurality inherent in designing and models of creativity (Kimbell 2011; 2012).

Linking creativity, genre culture and history of aesthetics

A key aspect of my study concerns the intersection of models of creativity with genre and aesthetics within a historical framework. Interior design goes beyond functional goals and has strong aesthetic and affective components with symbolic meanings, making it part of the cultural industries sector (Hesmondhalgh 2019). Thus, models of creativity can be better understood by considering the changes associated with aesthetics within the institutional and historical contexts. A practice-oriented concept of aesthetics acknowledges that 'aesthetic perceptions or objects for such perceptions are produced repeatedly, routinely or habitually,' creating symbolic meanings and shaping our affective experience (Reckwitz 2017, 21). Knorr Cetina (2001, 187) indicates that objects, including their forms and 'meaning-generating connective force,' are what really differentiates the 'more dynamic, creative and constructive' dimensions of practice from the routinised, embodied aspects of practice. However, practice-oriented accounts focusing on consumer electronics, manufacturing, technological hardware industries and e-business sectors tend to overlook the genres and aesthetic aspects, which are outweighed by aspects like service, management and technology. These accounts have little to say about designers' subjective judgements and understanding of design trend and aesthetics, and often overlook the role of aesthetic sensibilities, culture, or qualities in constituting practices, unlike approaches influenced by anthropology and sociology.

To understand designers' practices, I engage with the arguments about cultural production, genre, aesthetic formations and their temporalities. Sociologists argue that understanding creativity in cultural production requires attention to aesthetics and the processes leading to new designs (McRobbie 2016; Molotch 2011; Olcese and Savage 2015). Molotch (2011, 105) indicates that lack of attention to design activities and the interaction between history of aesthetics and designed products hinders our understanding of change and continuity in practices and beliefs. Born (2010) advocates for an approach that elucidates the relationships between practices of cultural production and broader aesthetic culture, including the semantics of a particular culture, the aesthetic movements that define different periods, and the politics of aesthetic objects (Born 2010, 184). She highlights the connection between aesthetic qualities and historical processes across various realms, including the discursive, social, and material spheres.

Central to this nexus of practices is the concept of genre world, defined as the 'systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject' (Neale 1980, 19). This concept helps to understand innovation within commercial practices. Drawing on Neale's notion of 'genre,' Negus (1999) and Nixon (2003) suggest that creativity lies in both contextual factors and subjective judgments of novelty and difference, with creativity involving both newness and the continual production of familiarity. Negus emphasises the role of organisational and industrial contexts in shaping practices, suggesting that new styles can emerge by confronting routinisation and constraints, and by transforming boundaries in the 'genre world.' Nixon suggests that creativity is best described as working with established genre codes rather than sudden bursts of originality. He argues that creativity is often driven by an orientation towards slight different-ness rather than absolute novelty. They provide parameters for conceptualising models of creativity, echoing the emphasis in practice theories which argue for more attention to the institutional and cultural contexts.

Drawing on different theorists, I consider the importance of contextual and human factors when studying the models of creativity deployed by design practitioners. A theoretical framework that is historically informed and incorporates various perspectives such as human agency, institutions, genre, and aesthetic culture, provides an analytic space for my analysis.

Pursuit of newness and originality

Cultural-sourcing, newness and creativity. In this study, it is well observed that design practitioners emphasise innovation. Ju Bin, a renowned Chinese designer, is among those who strongly identify as innovators. His firm, Horizontal Design, a medium enterprise that specialises in hospitality, residential, and real estate design, follows the slogan 'no innovation, no design.' According to Ju, every project undertaken by his company incorporates an element of novelty. A significant aspect of Ju's understanding of innovation comes from creating new business functions and aesthetics. For Ju, newness includes what he refers to as 'step-by-step innovation,' which entails introducing new spatial functions and arrangements to conventional practices to make his clients' products stand out. For instance, in one hotel project, Ju's team designed a children's room with upper and lower levels which he claimed could not be found in any other hotels in China.

Apart from this, he emphasised that innovation in aesthetics was his priority. As he expressed,

> I've been assiduously pursuing aura aesthetics in design, excavating and absorbing Chinese culture, extracting its core elements through refinement. Haziness is uniquely Chinese, and we have screens to express it. We turn these into innovative ideas and incorporate them into a project. This thing will become a classic later.

In reworking Chinese aesthetics, such as traditional room screens, in a modernist way (see Figure 1), Ju's approach adopts the concept of 'aura' to project a persona, cultural allure, and metaphysical qualities that give the works originality. His creativity model emphasises aesthetics and links it to creativity, similar to the transcendental discourse of the artist.

In defining creativity, Ju's comments also indicate the influence of the 'Chinese turn' in design. This wave of interpreting traditional Chinese aesthetic elements and reworking them into modern design began in the late 1990s, when designers like Wang Shouzhi created commercially successful modern Chinese residential space design that challenged the dominant practice of imitating western design elements. Designers were able to produce works with Chinese characteristics, vernacularly categorised as 'new Chinese style,' 'modern Chinese style,' or 'oriental style.' Entrepreneurs and real estate companies adopted these styles as a method of consolidating a conception of design with the idea of the market (Negus 1999, 27–28). Ju saw his

Figure 1. *Screen-painting*. 2015. Model house project in Beijing by Horizontal Design. Courtesy of Horizontal Design.

originality as immanent in Chinese culture, setting him apart from the strong imitative design language. As he explained,

> My understanding of culture is based upon a very inclusive culture built from the soil of Chinese culture. […] It's flexible and inclusive. The more it's flexible, the more valuable of its soil.

What Ju valued was the 'inclusive' nature and reproductive quality of Chinese aesthetics, which enabled new creative possibilities in modernist design. Like the musical genre Salsa used by Negus (1999) as an example of a transformative musical genre, Ju conceptualised Chinese aesthetics not only according to the genre's conventions, rules, and codes (the 'classic') but also as a cultural form drawn from other genres and open to change, allowing for the 'transformation of genre boundaries' (Negus 1999, 27).

Ju's model of authentic creativity and emphasis on excavating Chinese culture were shared by Amy Du, executive director and creative director at Simon Chong Design (SCD), a medium enterprise concentrating on hospitality, real estate and residential space design. The live stream sharing that she gave on TikTok in 2020 was, at its core, a profound pursuit of originality despite the difficulties and financial sacrifices involved in changing her past design practice. Du's tenet was to recognise design practice as the manifestation of one's originality, self-expression, and growth in the spiritual dimension. She saw creativity as arising from an individual's absorption of different cultural sources, particularly Chinese arts that underpinned the modern aesthetics she aligned with.

Citing an example of sales centre interior design she produced for a residential development, she claimed:

> Reading Chinese poems is very helpful for soft-furnishing designers because poems capture the things that are different in everyone's hearts. Scenes from poems serve as the core source of creativity and inspiration […]. This allows us to blend the city's profound cultural heritage, ancient poetry, and past cultures into modern design.

Du's comments revealed how she understood creativity as both culturally sourced and emanating from within herself. Her views were shared by Li Baolong, founder and creative director of

Figure 2. HEYTEA retail design at Paragon Center by Bloomdesign. 2019. Courtesy of goood.cn.

Bloomdesign, a small company founded in 2012 and specialised in commercial interior design for retail shops. Reflecting on his recent project for HEYTEA, a local shaken-tea brand (Figure 2), Li emphasised the connections of Chinese culture with consumers and oriental culture as 'the underlying logic' of his design. He remarked:

> We are striving to find new inspiration within our culture. Western design is excellent, but we question whether it is still the best option. We have adopted it and the Japanese design's procedures and systems. The challenge is having the confidence to create our unique designs. Consumers no longer simply follow foreign design; they want products that reflect their culture, and the state has also mentioned this. As the era evolves, it is important to showcase our own cultural heritage.

Like Du, Li pursued original design that combined authentic creativity with self-conscious efforts to express the cultural identity of his times – a desire immanent in his design that was shared by the state and the consumers, as he contended.

Similarly, Li Binfeng, chief designer and founder at LIA Design, a medium enterprise focusing mainly on real estate spaces like sales centres and model flats, emphasised the importance of generating newness by immersing oneself in cultural currents including fine arts. During the interview, Li recurrently expressed his passion for Chinese literature and the history of Chinese classical architecture. Like Ju Bin, he believed that the advantage of Chinese spatial design culture was its 'pluralism' emerged from its regional differences. For Li, the concept of creativity was based on cultural-sourcing, and he made a commitment to create 'original work' without plagiarising. He contended:

> 'Cosmetic' design is discouraged as it is superficial. Our goal is to create cultured design, incorporating culture and art as the foundation. […] It is not about doing whatever is told to do without analysis – direct copying has no culture – but rather analysing the positioning and determining what kind of 'flesh and blood' it needs. […] It creates something with soul, rather than a flashy and buzzy design like a nightclub that lacks substance.

In Li's views, newness comes from designers' cultural, imaginative, or artistic depth and understanding; and design should not be superficial but practical and meet market requirements. Thus, his idea of creativity is grounded in both authentic creativity and commercial novelty.

As we have seen, Ju Bin, Amy Du and Li Baolong and Li Binfeng linked design with cultural forms such as Chinese fine arts. However, some practitioners were not as committed to incorporating Chinese-ness into their designs, such as Wang Peng, founder and design director of Peng and Partners, a small enterprise specialising in commercial and residential space design. Wang aligned with European design but shared similar emphasis on cultural-sourcing as a way to produce newness. Like Ju, Wang absorbed ideas from books and the media before refining and deploying them in new projects, while also satisfying clients. As he claimed,

> Our question is, how to satisfy our clients' needs while expressing our design attitude. […] We don't want to repeat previous projects or throw similar things entirely onto another project. Some similarities are expected due to continuity of project, so we try to discover something new in every project.

In Wang's account, newness means slight different-ness between the works he produced or planned to produce on a continuum – the degree of newness was relative to his previous designs. Inspired by Steve Jobs' saying, 'We do great design, not earning,' he aimed to 'create great works like what the masters did.' For him, discussing masterpieces with peers sparked new ideas for achieving newness, highlighting the role of social exchange in the process of creative production (Tang 2020). Unlike Wang, Vinci Chan, founder and chief designer at VMDPE Design, a small consultancy specialising in kindergarten interiors, did not view creativity as sparking of inspired ideas or something emanating from within an individual. For Chan, the importance of newness was evident in design upgrading. He explained:

> Our positioning is to make new things. We aim to upgrade and replace outdated products with new ones. […] As a result, our designs cannot be visually differentiated. Instead, we create statements with underlying meanings that influence the look of our products, including colors.

In giving his views, Chan indicated that Japanese kindergarten design was his major reference for design. He saw himself less of a cultural translator and more as a market translator – 'translating' his design proposals into market perspectives to convince clients. Expanding on this idea, he explained his concept of newness with recourse to slight differences from existing designs: 'What we do is to make perfect and slightly adjust existing things that accord with the characteristics of clients, sites and education services.' This view shows that his model of creativity was closer to the pursuit of incremental innovation, which involves making small degree of changes and improvement to existing products.

Another practitioner who shared Chan's little sense as cultural translators was Davy Liu, General Manager of commercial ventures (Design Department) of Jiang & Associates Creative Design (J&A), a listed large enterprise focusing on a variety of design projects, e.g. office spaces, hotels, shopping centres, cultural and educational spaces. For Liu, newness was considered in light of clients' opinions. He said,

> Some clients focus on quick progress and do not prioritise customisation. What does 'customisation' imply? It refers to budget, time, and complexity involved. […] We design solutions that meet our clients' needs. If they require a creative approach, we will be creative. If they prefer a quick, simple, and clean design, that is what we will deliver.

What is noteworthy about Liu's case is how he had prioritised market demands in his creative role, and considered creativity as a choice external to designers. This is a stark contrast to the creativity models deployed by Ju, Du, and both Li, who emphasised cultivating their habitus and expressing individualistic ideas. Liu's model of creativity thus reflects his identification as a service provider.

Seeing newness as a manipulated commercial solution also includes Aaron Wang, founder and design director at Z ONE⁺ a small enterprise specialised in the design of residential space, sales centres and model apartments. To brand his company's outputs as different from his peers,' his concept of creativity emphasised what he called 'micro-innovation.' He claimed:

> We pursue newness to some extent but not extensively as real estate projects often move quickly. We balance innovation with high standards for some projects, while building on our previous experience in others. […] We have new concepts in the works, including what we call 'micro-innovations,' as it's challenging to completely reinvent what we already have.

Aaron Wang's approach to creativity was to pursue slight degrees of newness ('micro-innovation') and ensure commercial viability by aligning with fast service delivery and reworking previous design, rather than attempting to bring disruptive possibilities to the conventions he adhered to ('to completely reinvent'). This tendency puts his conceptualisation of creativity closer to Chan's and Liu's concern for commercial novelty that gears towards incremental innovation.

For Finley Yang (pseudonym), a female designer at ULiving Design, achieving authentic creativity was difficult. At her small design consultancy focusing on the design for commercial interiors, sales centres and model flats, designers created decorative items by modifying existing prototypes based on artworks or industry's outputs – a process she called 'derivative creativity' (*erci chuangzuo*). This also involved reworking previous design proposals to meet commercial demands for 'safer' design within time constraints. Although she did not oppose derivative creativity, she believed that her company's emphasis on 'commercial considerations' had resulted in 'little values' in their outputs. She expressed frustration, stating:

> A lot of times you feel powerless as you engage in this kind [of copying]. Over time, you may become numb or accept it as an unspoken rule in the industry. This is the status quo, and it can feel like there's no escape as the products you create lack innovation and the industry as a whole is not particularly innovative. That's it. You may grumble at times, but aren't you still end up doing a lot of similar things?

In Yang's account, we see a persistent dilemma facing design practitioners, that is, how to generate authentic creativity in the world of commerce? For Yang, there was a large discrepancy between her

ideal of authentic creativity and the 'derivative creativity' that involves incremental improvements, which was the norm in her company.

As can be seen, there were competing creativity models in the practitioners' testimonies. In the accounts of Ju Bin, Amy Du, Wang Peng, Li Binfeng and Li Baolun, creativity imbued a duality of 'banal habitual working practices with an aura of artistic inspiration' (Negus and Pickering 2000, 267), whereas Vinci Chan, Davy Liu and Aaron Wang based their creativity models on service-oriented design. Ju Bin, Amy Du, Li Binfeng and Li Baolun saw themselves as translators of Chinese culture and continued to drive the 'Chinese turn' in design, although they also found inspiration in Western design. For instance, Ju claimed to have seen the architectural work of every Pulitzer awardee overseas, and Du mentioned how she was inspired by an art show in Spain. It is evident that they held differing views on newness and the creative process. Intersecting their conceptions of newness were not only the concerns of the symbolic values of design, but also arguments about the notions of genre and style, as well as the meanings of copying that were a binding influence on their models of creativity. These arguments and preferences are the focus of the following section.

De-stylisation and the meanings of copying.

> People talk about orientalism, new orientalism, and new Chinese style, but China's design circles lack art critics comparable to those in the West or Japan, such as Kenya Hara. […] Design theorists who simply label designs as 'new oriental' or 'new Chinese style' are considered relatively low-level. (Shaw Aibin; quoted in He 2017)

In criticising the common narratives and the lack of scholarly research in China's interior design industry, senior designer Shaw Aibin's views raise persisting questions that confront the current design rhetoric circulating within it. A sentiment that pervades Shaw's opinions is a call for 'de-stylisation,' freeing design rhetoric from notions of style and 'ism' and promoting a more critical understanding of design categories. He views the culture of stylisation as a stigma associated with second-rate practitioners. The term 'stylisation' was employed by Celia Lury (1996, 50–51) to describe the increasing demands on the symbolic and aesthetic-cultural aspects of goods and their societal effects. While Lury's use of the term hinted at the signifying practices, Shaw noted that the term 'style' was used superficially for categorising similar types of products in the industry.

Shaw was not the only one critical of stylisation; some interviewees shared the same position. For example, Wang Peng echoed Shaw's criticism, noting that design was often categorised into narrowly defined, discrete styles. He stated,

> I believe design cannot be defined. Using the word 'style' to define design is relatively bullshit. […] Many design firms claim to be experts in Chinese or European style […]. However, the word 'style' has been used in a problematic manner. We intentionally avoid using it.

Wang's response was significant because it highlighted what he thought of as a malaise in the industry, where design was reduced to a marketing tool by being delineated into specific styles. According to Wang, terms like 'new Chinese style' were used by design practitioners to brand their work as '*gaodashang*' (high-end, elegant, and classy), which were the predominant feelings that many clients looked for in a design. Shaw and Wang's remarks shed light on the treatment of 'style' and 'ism' in the discursive tradition shaped by Chinese history. In the western context, 'ism' and 'style' in design are associated with movements that shape the expressions of design practice, production and theory, and are not merely characterised by specific visual elements. However, in the case of China's interior design, the term 'style' refers to sets of design works that are 'classified together on the basis of perceived similarities' (DiMaggio 1987, 441), including features of pastiche and copying. Against this background, the meanings of stylisation practices need to be understood with a historical lens examining the legacy of copying practice that allowed for quick design production since the late 1970s. In *A History of the Contemporary Interior Design in China I*, Chinese design educators

Chen and Zhu (2013) discussed the phenomenon of 'take-ism' that prevailed in the industry from the 1980s until the first decade of the 2000s:

> Although the design works were of questionable quality, such model of 'take-ism' was a pragmatic means to advance. There should be rational tolerance towards the corrosion brought by the so-called 'European style' and '[Hong] Kong style'. As time passes, these genres will integrate into more pluralistic trends ([in Chinese] Chen and Zhu 2013, 22).
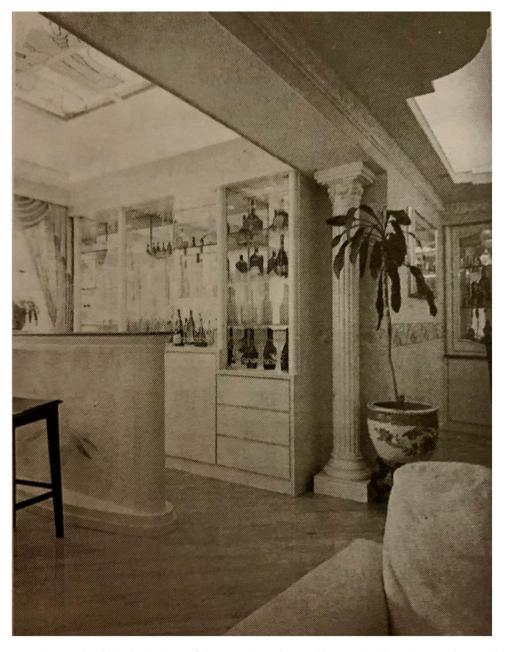

Figure 3. A photograph published in *Real cases of Chinese modern architectural decoration* (in Chinese) in 1994 showing a home interior of 'European style' featuring classical columns and western cornices. Source: Chen and Zhu (2013).

Borrowing from Chinese writer Lu Xun's term 'take-ism' coined in the 1930s, the authors described the grabbing of foreign cultural-aesthetic elements in the early 1990s (Figure 3) in a way analogous to the 1930s.[5] This cult of 'take-ism' emerged in the wake of the open-door policy in the late 1970s when market demand for design services for hotel developments increased, and the government and investors trusted non-local design professionals over mainland Chinese locals. Property owners often perceived design with foreign elements, whether or not they were imitations, as more prestigious and encouraged similar production.

One interviewee who worked as an interior designer from 2006 to 2008 at a large state-owned design enterprise, Shenzhen Decoration Corporation, which focused on interior design for public spaces, recalled the indispensability of copying foreign design. He stated:

> If you used examples from mainland China, it would appear very 'low' [laughter]. At that time, the simple procedures were like 'Look at these. Here I have some first-hand examples that are still not copied by others.' Many designers were also business owners. They all regularly traveled overseas to do field visits, taking photos of many places people haven't been to, and saw this as the biggest show-off.

It is within these historical and commercial settings that the practitioners formed their perceptions of 'style.' A more recent usage of the term 'style' was mentioned by one interviewee, a designer at RWD (Ricky Wong Design), a medium-sized enterprise whose major businesses involve sales centre and model flat design. He noted that real estate developers used the term 'style' colloquially to describe 'the feelings the space needs to give' on design task documents and to pursue 'genre formatting' (Hesmondhalgh 2019, 98).

In this discursive practice, 'style' was considered by practitioners like Shaw Aibin and Wang Peng as imitative and low-level. Similarly, Amy Du blurred the notion of style in her design discourse, equating it with routine design 'templates.' She emphasised: 'Our designs are no longer direct copies of Italian, American, European, or classical French styles. We have cultural confidence and aesthetic beliefs that may be still developing, but we are working hard.' For Aaron Wang, the term 'style' was not frequently used when communicating with clients. He stated that he preferred a 'weak stylisation' approach. Likewise, Suki Li, designer and co-founder of Fusion Design, a small enterprise focusing on hospitality space design, prioritised her clients' satisfaction over focusing on 'style.' She emphasised:

> Styles … are not the core of a good design since different design companies can present the same project differently. I think the most fundamental, critical point is to satisfy the initial requirements and expand the client's needs.

Similarly, Dr. Han Jing and Dr. Zhang Yuxing, founders of ARCity Office, a small enterprise, kept a distance from the notion of style. In positioning themselves as innovators in the fields of interior design, architecture and urban renovation, they believed that creativity emerged from contingency in each design project. As they said,

> We have always avoided the style and language of urbanisation. Many of our designs incorporate natural elements and integrate with daily life. These designs reject the use of a fixed paradigm […]. We generally do not start with a predetermined design language or style.

Their comments stressed the need for an open approach in their design practice to avoid being limited by a particular style or language, which could interfere with their ideal practice.

As we have seen, these practitioners sought to distance themselves from the notion of style to achieve originality or satisfy their clients. However, they also faced prevalent copying behaviours within the industry, which industry leaders regarded as problematic. Wang Shu, the first Chinese recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize and a critical voice in the industry, was one such leader who spoke out against imitations and plagiarism. He stated,

> Today, many are not creative or original at all when it comes to design, even extending to what's known as 'advanced plagiarism'. … Some copy designs directly, while the 'advanced' ones make only slight changes. I

find 'advanced plagiarism' particularly unacceptable, especially when those who practice it confidently claim, 'I did not copy, I created'. (quoted in Yin 2019)

Wang questioned the equivalence of plagiarism, creativity, and originality drawn by 'advanced' plagiarists. However, many interviewed practitioners did not align with Wang Shu's creativity model. Despite encountering image theft and plagiarism online resembling their firm's work, they were not overly concerned about copyright infringement. Though they pursued legal action in some cases, they viewed copying as a beneficial process. While they disapproved of blind plagiarism, the usefulness and positive aspects of plagiarism often came up in interviews when they contrasted a more transformative, learning-oriented approach to copying with a 'silly' and 'blind' approach.

The approach of learning through copying is drawn from traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy's methods of study copies (Alford 1995), while complete replication without creative adaptation of a master's works is often considered low-skilled. Although practitioners no longer blindly copied foreign decorative elements, some still considered foreign designs as their models for imitation. Within this culture of learning from role models, practitioners often saw having their works copied or used without authorisation as a form of recognition and validation of their design skills. According to Emily Pan, former interior designer at SD Design, a small company specialising in various design projects from sales centre design to old-building renovation, practitioners' acceptance of plagiarism was led by their implicit pride in having their designs copied by others, which is a sign of one's influence on the industry. In her words, 'People feel quite happy about it [being copied], feeling like "finally people copied ours!" This proves we did a great job.' Sun Ping, design director at ONE-CU Design, a small enterprise focusing on projects for real estate spaces, noted that practitioners with higher educational levels were less concerned about their designs being copied by others. He admired Wang Shu for his contribution to the industry but disagreed with his model of authentic creativity. As he remarked, 'Certain levels of similarity are inevitable, given the shared development and direction in the same era.' Despite differing opinions, the practitioners agreed that having one's designs copied was an indicator of a designer's standing in the industry.

The collective consciousness within the design industry has promoted the imitation of existing works, resulting in an aesthetic lineage that aligns with the traditional Confucian idea of culture, where new works in the arts succeed from predecessors. This phenomenon resembles Latour and Lowe's (2010) concept of 'assemblage,' in which original artwork serves as the main stream while copies act as estuaries and tributaries, ultimately elevating the original work's status and originality. For the interviewed practitioners, the value and the quantity of design copies, by the same token, enhance the original design's status (Latour and Lowe 2010, 4).

An example of seeing copying as a learning process was Quin Liang (pseudonym), a founder-design director at a medium design enterprise that mainly provides design service for developers. He believed that copying could be considered as a learning tool, provided it was not exclusively for commercial gain. He saw it as akin to precise copying (*linmo*) in traditional Chinese calligraphy. He indicated:

If he doesn't plagiarise, […] surely he doesn't know how to design? […] If one wants to practice calligraphy, one needs to do precise copying (*linmo*). For young people, this should not be a big problem; just do not plagiarise for commercial purposes. I think it is understandable. I disapprove of copying just for convenience.

Another practitioner who shared Liang's view was Hihope Zhu, founder and design director of SIAD Design and Archihope. Both small enterprises focus mainly on commercial interiors, as well as landscape and architectural design. While he saw copying as a norm in every industry, he disapproved plagiarism in the form of a complete replication. For him, copying was a basis for, and a transformative process towards, the generation of innovative ideas. He noted:

> When we study art, we do precise copying of famous paintings, right? […] The so-called copying is a process of transformation, turning others' knowledge into our own innovative elements. […] We can't copy others' works exactly. We must bring own ideas and thinking to the table, refining, upgrading, transforming, changing, and executing [in our own way].

As with Liang, Zhu's concept of copying was analogous to Chinese practice of precise copying in art. He believed that copying is a process of 'recombination of old elements' which can enhance creative expression. This perspective aligns with the idea that creativity operates within genre conventions and rules, producing both newness and familiarity (Negus 1999; Nixon 2003).

Similarly, Yohan Wan (pseudonym), partner-designer at a small start-up firm that focuses on hospitality, commercial and real estate space design, shared a positive view of plagiarism. He saw copying as a path to career success in China, especially three decades ago. Citing a large-scale design company as an example, he argued:

> These companies we see today, well-known, big, or small, have been copying all along. These so-called design masters have also been copying. They were able to develop their own language during the process of copying.

Adding to the point that saw the process of copying as evolutionary, Wan emphasised that plagiarism was 'an inevitable process' for designers. During the interview, he recalled a previous boss who taught him to see copying as 'just a way to prove one's line of thought is correct.' In this sense, copying was likened to a touchstone for testing design ideas, particularly for juniors and novices.

Despite their varying work experience, Liang, Wan and Zhu described copying in terms closer to a Confucian understanding of culture. This saw copying and appropriation as a means of learning and generating creativity, rather than relying on individual invention. In this model of creativity, copying is taken to mean learning, and newness is based on their processual experience with comprehending, copying and appropriating the reputable works of predecessors. Their view of mimesis as a power to acquire and generate knowledge and creativity highlights the influence of education in China's art and design schools on their understanding of creativity (Zeng 2017, 6). As their accounts have shown, they all emphasised the interdependence of copying and creativity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how Chinese interior designers approach newness and how they facilitate particular forms of innovation in their daily work. The analysis highlights that design is both a cultural and institutional practice. As Bennett (2007) notes, 'The making of culture and its differentiation from the social is, above all else, the work of institutions.' The findings indicate that both the 'culturalness' and 'industrialness' of design require a synthesis that grasps the value of analysing distinct genres, aesthetic and discursive practices while acknowledging that specific assemblages of practices which the practitioners carry and engage with are institutionalised through companies. Through this synthesis, a better understanding of individuals' models of creativity and the potential for different forms of innovation that emerge within particular cultural, institutional and historical contexts becomes possible.

This article has accounted for the practices of design practitioners and elucidated the change and continuity in these practices. Practitioners expressed a sense of urgency in rediscovering Chinese cultural identity while also learning from foreign cultural forms to achieve authentic creativity. The models of creativity deployed by design practitioners represent their endeavours to grapple with the legacy of China's imitator image in design by 'de-stylising' their discursive practices, using cultural-sourcing, cultural-borrowing, and reworking to create innovative designs that are not mere pastiches of existing ideas. This change in design practice is most evident in practitioners' reworking of Chinese and oriental culture, indicating heightened interest among the practitioners in making designs with cultural meanings that resonate with clients and users.

A clear continuity of copying-based creative practice influenced by Confucian culture is evident in the accounts given by some practitioners. They viewed copying and appropriation as a means of

learning from reputable works and generating creativity, while rejecting absolute replication. Copying as a productive practice continues to represent a form of empowerment for certain social groups, not only within the product manufacturing sectors but also within the interior design sector. For this group of practitioners, the pursuit of newness was crucial in positioning their identities as professional designers and gaining recognition in the design world.

While the practitioners had no agreement on how the work should be understood within the rubric of creativity, the common ground was the way they saw slight different-ness among their design works that was at stake in terms of innovation. Practitioners who held different views on the pursuit of newness were often in consensus about satisfying clients' preferences. Many emphasised their role as service provider through offering derivative creativity that leads to incremental innovation. In a sense, their models of creativity are representative of the commercial culture of the industry while reflecting their aesthetic preferences and commercial orientations.

Notes

1. I refer to 'interior design practitioners' (also known as spatial or interior designers) as those working in private practices and engaging in interior spatial planning, design and formation, including architectural and soft furnishing designers.
2. In this article, 'innovation' and 'newness' are used interchangeably, both referring broadly to a new idea, product, outcome, method, or process that generates novelty (Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour 1997).
3. Using systematic sampling, Miao (2018) surveyed 189 Shenzhen designers from 8 enterprises in Futian district and 7 enterprises in Nanshan district. The survey achieved a response rate of 75.6 per cent and included designers from both districts to ensure representation of Shenzhen's dominant interior design areas.
4. Surveyed by two Chinese enterprises, Sina Home (a digital news platform of Sina, a Chinese technology company) and Aijia Home (an online home furnishing service platform), the sample consisted of designers from different city tiers in China, with around 40 per cent based in second-tier cities, 33.6 per cent in first-tier cities, and 26.88 per cent in third-tier cities, although the provenance of the reported numbers is unclear.
5. The term take-ism (*Nalai zhuyi*) has been translated as 'borrowing-ism' or 'grabbism.' It was the title of Lu Xun's essay published in on 6 June 1934 in *Tendency* (*Dongxiang*), a supplement to *China Daily* (*Zhonghua ribao*).

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Disclosure statement

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