Designing Desires: Cultures, Commerce and Creativity in Late-Socialist Chinese Interior Design

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Abstract

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in Late-Socialist Chinese Interior Design

The last four decades have seen China's interior design transform rapidly from a decoration-based subsidiary role within the construction sector into a pivotal service industry crucial to economy. This new salience of design and innovation in both economic and cultural life presents an important opportunity for studies on creativity, commercial practice and cultural production. By drawing on original research materials and secondary data, this thesis examines the intrinsic operations of the interior design world and the professional life of its practitioners, including design business owners and individual designers. It traces the trajectories of modern design from its historical roots to the present, highlighting the proliferation and entrepreneurialisation of interior design, particularly evident in Shenzhen's transformation into a contemporary design hub since the reform era. This shift has led to an unprecedented production of design professionals, driven by real estate markets and intellectual property rights protection, and ongoing human capital cultivation shaped by both the state and the design sector. Central to their professional life are not only industrialisation, culturalisation and aestheticisation of interiors, but also differentiation from existing products in a competitive market, which is achieved through varying degrees of innovation and originality to counter mindless imitation of foreign styles. While a significant change in practice has occurred involving the hybridisation of modernist design with Chinese and oriental elements, the industry demonstrates a persistent incorporation of Western design elements, knowledge, and standards. Simultaneously, there exists a continuity of Confucian learning practices through skilful copying. Focused on the design economy, this thesis underscores how

late-socialist neoliberal logics of efficiency, profitability and responsibilities to oneself and the nation are constitutive of the process of subject formation. This process entails not only the reproduction of regulatory norms but also the concurrent exploration of alternative practices to align with commercial goals and personal ideals.

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Numerous individuals have walked beside me on this journey, shaping the

Introduction

This thesis explores the professional lives of interior designers working in privately-owned design agencies in the city of Shenzhen. Over the past four decades of reform, interior design as a profession and commercial sector has undergone a significant transformation. This has been closely intertwined with the rise of Shenzhen as a Chinese model city and a pivotal hub for contemporary design. By viewing design simultaneously as a business service, an aesthetic-material formation, commercial culture and as a subjective process, I examine the changes and continuities in the practices that make up the field of interior design and the subjective identities of its practitioners. In particular, I address how design practitioners work to facilitate particular types of innovation and how they navigate regulatory norms and operate within a society deeply rooted in Confucian and socialist legacies, but also influenced by entrepreneurialism and increased valorisation of innovation.

I.   Prevailing or Parting in the Design World

During an early afternoon in summer 2019, as the echoes of Hong Kong's protests reverberated through the air, I found myself within the restricted zone of the Mainland Port Area at Hong Kong West Kowloon station, which serves as a border control point between mainland China and Hong Kong. This station was where I often caught a high-speed train for my research fieldwork and interviews in Shenzhen,

China — a 20-minute train ride away.[1] However, on this particular occasion, I missed my train due to the extended inspection of my two mobile phones by mainland Chinese immigration officers.

During the waiting period, a male mainland Chinese police officer, possibly in his thirties or early forties, dressed in a blue Nike zip-up sweater and Timberland boots, came up to me and struck up a conversation. His intention soon became clear as he asked me a series of questions and offered to resolve my situation. Recognising my research focus on the interior design sector in Shenzhen, the officer displayed interest and inquired about which design software I used. To my surprise, he told me, 'I studied interior design before'. Perplexed by the unexpected exchange, I asked him why he changed to his current job. His response, tinged with a mix of resignation and pragmatism, revealed a glimpse into the intricate motivations behind career decisions. 'You have to be outstanding among others,' he began, 'otherwise it is difficult to continue'. He continued, 'My current job offers me welfare, like housing and stuffs, so it is not bad.' And with that, his topic veered into the realm of 'education'.

The explanation given by the designer-turned-police-officer was brief, yet it encapsulated the entrepreneurial ethos of young Chinese designers as they navigate in the ruthless design world. In his case, the decision of whether to leave his design career appeared to stem from intense peer competition in the interior design sector, and the appeal of job protection and welfare associated with a civil servant role. His experience serves as an illustration of the turnover within the interior design industry, a phenomenon linked to the abundant supply of design graduates since the early 2000s, a direct consequence of the implementation of higher education expansion

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[1] I refer to 'China' as 'mainland China', which encompasses areas under direct administration of the government of People's Republic of China (PRC), but excludes the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau. When not specified, 'China' refers to 'mainland China'.

policies in 1999. Recent decades have seen the allure of the interior design profession in China, driven by its perceived potential for rapid growth and business opportunities within a commodified real estate market which followed the 'marketisation' of the real estate industry in the housing reforms of 1998. In the case of the designer-turned-police-officer, what was suggestive about his remarks was both the hype and competition surrounding interior design. The hype began to emerge strongly around 2003 when commercial real estate was recognised by the government as a pillar of the national economy, and the design industries started gaining more commercial prominence as China began moving up the value chain. 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. Within the realm of design, interior design stands out as one of the four major sectors in China, alongside product design, fashion design, and graphic design (Chen and Liang, 2015). These dynamics have made interior design a sought-after career among young people in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. While this trend has opened up new avenues for interiors businesses to operate and enabled design graduates to pursue their careers, the commercial culture of the interior design sector has fostered a dynamic and competitive landscape.

The account given by the designer-turned-police-officer suggests that maintaining a career in interior design relies on producing distinctive work to stand out in this crowded and competitive domain; that is, in his own words, being 'outstanding among others'. This underscores the view that design companies are not only required to excel in meeting market demands but also to differentiate themselves from their rivals in processes like tender bidding for projects such as model flats, and international award competitions. In this 'Darwinian' world of interior design market,

they are compelled to compete with their peers to demonstrate their suitability and capabilities in order to thrive in the socialist market economy, a reality that led individuals like the designer-turned-police-officer to opt for alternative professions.

Importantly, what the designer-turned-police-officer referred to was unlikely to represent the entire interior design sector. It is crucial to have a sense of the composition of China's interior design sector. The sector can be categorised into three parts. First, there emerged a small number of big corporations specialising in curtain wall design, construction, and interior design, focusing primarily on high-end large-scale projects. Secondly, privately-operated civil design institutes, which are previously state-owned, emerged due to the transformation of state-owned institutions during China's reforms in the late 1990s. Lastly, a significant number of small-to-medium sized private design enterprises emerged, alongside a few large enterprises, creating two distinct market segments. One segment focuses on design services and renovation work for domestic residential spaces. The other segment encompasses a broader range of design projects, like model flats, sales centres, residential spaces, retail shops, office spaces, and hospitality spaces. It is widely recognised that the latter market segment comprises skilled designers with more extensive design knowledge and capabilities than the former. They are expected to handle diverse projects involving various types of spaces, while also having the ability to set and charge design fees. Specifically, this thesis centres on design companies that cater to this particular market segment.

Within this realm of interior design, the investigation of this thesis aims to focus on design practitioners who have continued to stay in the interiors business. I focus on their work experiences and ask how these practitioners perform diverse and multifaceted cultural practices while positioning themselves within the realm of

creativity. In doing so, I explore why they deploy particular models of creativity and how these models shape the cultural practices they perform, enabling particular types of innovations. Additionally, I examine how they engage with various forms of undertaking using a variety of resources. Through this exploration, I address what this reveals about their occupational and subjective identities, their agency, and the dynamics of change and continuity that underline their practices.

There are important reasons for documenting the practices and the professional lives of designers. As an occupational group, designers are pivotal to cultural and socio-economic change. In recent decades, the recognition of design's importance in government policies, the economy, and culture has led to closer relationships between design, sociology, and anthropology, particularly in exploring design's roles in socio-cultural and economic changes (e.g. McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli, 2022; Entwistle and Slater, 2019; Irani, 2019; McRobbie, 1998, 2016a; Julier and Moor, 2009; Lash and Lury, 2007; Shove et al., 2007; Molotch, 2003). Accounts examining the relationship between design and its material forms, both the physical and the digital, confirm that design professionals have been playing a crucial role in the social and institutional organisation of production and consumption (Alexander, 2020; Molotch, 2003; Scolere and Humphreys, 2016; Shove et al., 2007). Shove et al. (2007: 9), for example, characterised designers (industrial designers in particular) and users as the key reproducers of material culture, shaped by a dominant commercial logic forcing designers to 'meet what are generally taken to be pre-existing needs' through which the status and identity of designers are sustained. Molotch aptly observed, 'nowadays, the work of design — the intentional use of cultural and material resources to create a worthwhile artefact — is where the cultural rubber hits the commercial road' (2003: 23).

Sociologists have also examined how material-aesthetic objects are mediated by professionals, such as design and advertising practitioners (e.g. Nixon, 1996; Alexander, 2020). This investigation illuminates, for example, the culturalisation and aestheticisation of commodities as means of production (Lash and Urry, 1994), and the sequencing of imaginative, aesthetic, and discursive elements in the commercial system governing symbolic object production and performance (Alexander, 2020). However, limited knowledge has been generated about the practices, identities, and intellectual and cultural formation of design practitioners, and their perceptions of newness and commercial production. This is particularly evident because individual aspects of the design sector are often grouped within the broader category of creative industries in current discussions. McRobbie (2016b) observed the need for 'a stronger post-industrial sociology of professional life' through 're-differentiation', suggesting that conducting studies of creative professionals can offer values and insights into the conduct of specific cultural sectors. Likewise, Campbell, O'Brien and Taylor (2019) called for a new mode of 'cultural' occupational analysis in sociology of cultural and creative industries. By showing the differences in cultural consumption engagement and patterns between IT and other cultural and creative sectors, they emphasised the need to pay more attention to shared cultures, knowledge, and tastes in specific occupations in cultural and creative industries studies. My study contributes to their calls for disaggregating the category of creative and cultural industries. By focusing on the interior design sector, I consider this sociological study as an opportunity to identify and understand the shared cultures, experiences, and professional lives of design practitioners within this sub-field of design, wherein 'design knowledge, practice and context are interrelated and mutually constitutive' (Sunley et al., 2010: 378).

As noted earlier, design has become a significant part of commercial and cultural life in China over the past few decades. The Chinese design industry has grown in size specifically, facilitating the shift of industries from a 'made in China' to a 'created in China' model (Li, 2011; Justice, 2012). 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). The elevated recognition, professional status, and cultural significance of the interior design sector are evident in home makeover reality TV shows, where established designers are entrusted with home improvement and design projects, showcasing interior design's role in enriching people's lives on a national broadcast scale. Despite the increasing recognition and discussions about the industry's newfound importance in the economic and cultural realms, there has been limited attention to understanding the working lives and subjective identities of these practitioners. I argue that this missing piece of the puzzle can enhance our comprehension of their commercial practices and the evolving status of design practitioners in the cultural economy. To delve into this, I pose these questions:

- What are the experiences of design practitioners, and how are these experiences understandable within the specific geographical milieu of Shenzhen and the context of Chinese state?

- How do the industry and workplace cultures in which design practitioners work set limits and offer resources for specific design productions, thereby impacting their design jobs? How do they engage with various form of undertaking and navigate the regulatory norms?

- What is the cultural and intellectual formation of these design professionals? For example, what training have they received? In what

ways do they involve in the transmission and acquisition of cultural norms, knowledge, languages, tastes, and practices within the design community?

- What values, judgements, and self-identities shape and guide their practices? Furthermore, what particular models of creativity do they deploy, and why? How do these models enable or constrain particular types of innovations?

In their pursuit of commercial cultural production, design agencies harness a wide range of knowledge, expertise, materials, economic resources and cultural resources to produce interiors that serve their clients. For instance, these firms highly value their employees' skills in design software and aesthetic judgement, as these are essential for creating compelling and reputable designs, and effectively communicating design ideas and strategies to potential and current clients. Hence, practitioners' practices, aesthetic preferences, subjective judgements and identities impact the production process and final products, shaping their ability to connect with clients and end-users, differentiate themselves from their competitors, and fulfil service expectations. Furthermore, the values and identities held by both design business owners and designers in managerial positions, which are scripted into the workplace cultures, exert an influence over the specifics of design jobs and their cultural practices. These cultural aspects and individual identities of design practitioners are central to an account of the business activities conducted by design companies and the unique roles performed by design practitioners. Therefore, studying their working lives becomes necessary to explore these interrelated dimensions.

The design practitioners this thesis focuses upon entered the industry between the latter part of the 1990s and the 2010s, when China's socialist market economy started to actively engage with the global market, leading to private wealth accumulation, and the emergence of urban professionals and entrepreneurs (Hoffman, 2010). Most of these design professionals are university-educated. They relocated to Shenzhen to establish their careers and later started their own design enterprises, holding job titles like chief designer and creative director. They share cultural similarities and place emphasis on self-identity formation through consumption and individual lifestyle choices, an aspect aligning with many of their clients and users of their designed spaces — the urban professionals and the newly rich, such as private business owners and managers of large-scale companies (L. Zhang, 2008; Hoffman, 2010). Hence, the close relationships that designers have with the cultivation of aesthetics, taste, and cultural sensibilities, described as the 'cultural milieu' by Li Zhang (2008: 25), through their subjective judgements and design preferences are areas this thesis seeks to explore.

This thesis challenges some popular accounts that have influenced the general understanding of Chinese design practitioners and their work. These focus on the creative capabilities of individuals and government's role, driving innovation, economic growth and shaping urban areas. Richard Florida's (2012 [2002]) *The Rise of the Creative Class* is one such narrative. The book categorises designers as part of the 'super-creative core' within the broader 'creative class,' including professionals like scientists, engineers, professors, software programmers, editors, artists, architects, musicians and writers. In his attempt to illustrate how these professionals can be attracted to cities through effective city-marketing strategies and urban cultural policies, Florida generalises the values held by the members of the 'creative class' and

suggests that they all 'share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference, and merit' (Florida, 2012: 8-9). Similarly, certain accounts of the Chinese design industry emphasise the instrumentality of creativity in the knowledge economy by showing how China's design can serve as a value-added practice, a business strategy and a tool for economic and social reforms. These studies examine how the transformation of consumer markets and their needs has intensified the 'explosion of creativity' (Sinha, 2008), and how creative industries foster an innovative society (Li, 2011). From this research strand, we know better about the larger picture of how new ideas, contents, and their creators serve economic functions, but we know very little about how newness is defined and understood in specific professions.

In the field of design studies, innovative design has often been perceived as a linear result of the efforts of designers, design companies, and government entities. One such example can be found in *China's Design Revolution*, a work by design scholar Lorraine Justice (2012). In her work, she traces the development and role of Chinese design and designers, focusing on projects by a handful award-winning designers in various design fields, such as product, fashion, graphic, interior and media design, which are taken to support her claims about the potential of the 'third generation designers' born after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The study represents the dominant perspective that has tended to frame innovative works and designed objects as products of creative genius, leading a 'design revolution' with government support. Media narratives have similarly centred on these themes, depicting the design industries as undergoing profound transformations within the larger socio-economic contexts. These narratives have emphasised a growing interest in home improvement through design, particularly during the pandemic, and the rise of designed goods and decor, propelled by design talents, a burgeoning middle class

and their increased consumption power (Krichels, 2013; Hu, 2023).

However, a critical problem with these narratives is their tendency to assume a break with older practices in the new wave of designs. These narratives overlook how the rubric of creativity and newness is influenced by the particularities of history and culture within social institutions (Negus, 1999; Nixon, 2003). In other words, they take creativity for granted as embedded capacity in the design process, rather than attending to the creativity models deployed by design practitioners and their roles in mediating between production and consumer and/ or user identification. As a result, they fail to conceptualise and politicise creativity in relation to China's historical and socio-cultural backdrop, thus oversimplifying the complex processes, meanings and implications associated with designed outcomes. In their narratives, these outcomes appear as generalised markers and 'clues' of macro social changes (Justice, 2012: 13). While their narratives do touch upon the motivations and challenges faced by design practitioners, they have little to say about how the power of design and its culture operates through designers' roles as cultural and market intermediaries. This process spans diverse objectives, encompassing individual and organisational goals, as well as commercial and non-commercial purposes. It is this double role of design practitioners that this thesis is concerned with interrogating.

My account has been driven by the consideration that more insights can arise by foregrounding the neglected field-specific practices and cultures. In considering these aspects in a sociological study of design practitioners, the notions of cultural intermediaries and market intermediaries are an appropriate place to start. As a profession, design is considered as one of 'new cultural intermediaries', a term coined by Bourdieu (1984) in his work *Distinction*. Originally, Bourdieu used this term to refer to cultural commentators, writers, journalists working in mass-media fields.

However, the term has expanded to encompass other practitioners, including those in 'media, design, fashion, advertising, and "para" intellectual information occupations, whose jobs entail performing services and the production, marketing and dissemination of symbolic goods' (Featherstone, 1990: 11). Within these sectors, small cultural businesses, where cultural intermediaries often work in a self-employed capacity, are emerging as focal points of the modern urban cultural economy. This phenomenon has been documented in a body of literature (Banks, 2010a; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hutton, 2009; McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli, 2022; McRobbie, 2016a; Scott, 2017; Taylor, 2015). Scott (2017) indicates that this group of small business owners, who are also new cultural producers, resembles the 'petite bourgeoisie,' embodying both its 'old' and 'new' elements. On the one hand, they identify well with the old petite bourgeoisie activities by virtue of their self-employment and entrepreneurial subjectivity (Bechhofer and Elliott, 1985). On the other hand, they can be considered as a sub-group within what Bourdieu (1984) termed as the 'new petite bourgeoisie'— a group of young, educated individuals who deploy taste and promote 'the art of living, in particular, domestic life and consumption' (366), playing the role of 'taste makers and need merchants' (141). In my research, the majority of design practitioners are designer-entrepreneurs, exemplifying the social group 'new petite bourgeoisie' conceptualised by Bourdieu. In a sense, both terms 'new cultural intermediaries' and 'new petite bourgeoisie' appear to aptly characterise Chinese interior designers because interior design as an occupation and market sector is relatively new under state socialism — it began to gain prominence since China's reform and opening-up policy in 1978. This is precisely in this regard my thesis attends to both the cultural intermediary role and the entrepreneur role of these design practitioners. Through this emphasis, I insist on the importance of historical

particularity of these two roles undertaken by design practitioners to advance a better understanding of their working lives and the commercial cultures of their field. Both dimensions of designers' practices are explored from five perspectives in this thesis.

First, it concerns the relationship between the designer's role as a cultural intermediary and the 'culturalness' of design — the aesthetic-expressive and taste-making dimensions. I posit that interior designers represent an interesting case for studying practices and innovation because 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). These dimensions can outweigh design's functional aspects, when compared to consumer electronics or hardware designers who pay more attention to functionality. Pratt and Jeffcutt (2009: 4) argued that 'individuals are primary sources of creativity (and invention),' thereby shaping the ideation aspect of innovation. To analyse design practitioners' practices in a dynamic socio-economic context, it is necessary to take into account cultural attributes of design, such as subjective understandings of taste and aesthetics (Bryson et al., 2005; Power, 2009).

Thus, I suggest that the role of cultural intermediaries played by design practitioners can be better understood within an analytic framework that illuminates the connections between individuals' subjectivity at the micro level and the contextual institutional factors at the macro level. Studying interior designers' experiences and practices requires unravelling the connections between people's models of creativity, their designed outcomes, genre, and organisational cultures (Negus, 1999; Nixon, 2003), the history of aesthetic formations (Born, 2010; Molotch, 2011), and practices (Shove et al., 2007; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002) within specific socio-cultural contexts. In interweaving together these insights, I seek to contribute to empirical

studies that examine the variations in the models of creativity deployed by designers and how these models shape the types of innovation they produce. This endeavour involves examining the changes and continuities associated with design aesthetics and practices within a cultural-historical framework, an aspect that has been lacking in current literature.

Through the analysis of individual accounts given by design practitioners, I demonstrate how these practitioners' models of creativity and the resulting innovation are also shaped by practices that prioritise value creation and problem-solving. I highlight two dominant models of creativity that design practitioners deployed. One model is characterised by authentic creativity, emanating from within individual and emphasising originality and personal expression in design. The other model, derivative creativity, focuses on service provision and its incremental improvements. In this context, practitioners emphasised slight design differentiation rather than pursuing absolute novelty as innovation. While there has been a shift towards valuing originality over mindless imitation of foreign styles, particularly evident in their distancing from the notion of 'style' (known as 'de-stylisation'), they tended to agree that creativity can arise through copying and appropriating predecessors' works, aligning with a Confucian perspective of cultural production (Tang, 2023).

Second, the commercial dimension of practice informs my account of how the market intermediary role of design practitioners developed and performed through their designed products. I suggest that such understanding can benefit from the scholarship on commercial cultures in cultural analyses, as well as those accounts on market in economic sociology. Cultural analyses have long transcended the dichotomy of commerce and culture to establish the commercial domain — wherein cultural production across various industries operates — as a distinct object of study

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(Nixon, 1996; 2003; McRobbie, 1998; 2016a; Negus, 1999; Jackson et al., 2000). This strand of research explores commercial cultures as the connections between production and consumption. It emphasises that the commercial domain of goods and services is influenced and shaped by the cultural domain of producers, such as the dynamics of competing technologies and knowledges over times (Mort, 2000), particularities of commercial behaviours and forms of entrepreneurship (McRobbie, 1998), sets of cultural meanings and values deployed as representations of the consumer, as well as the informal cultures and subjective identities inhabited by producers (Nixon, 2003). These aspects, in turn, impact consumer identities and experiences. Their accounts have directed me towards exploring the subjectivities of design practitioners, and their entrepreneurial practices and knowledge-acquisition practices situated in various places and occasions, ranging from design enterprises, client meetings to online sharing session and events like Milan Design Week. Prompted by these emphases, I shed light on how acquired knowledge, practices and preferences serve as resources and parameters in their design production. The insistence on the co-constitution of commerce and culture has guided me to examine the interactions between the subjectivity of design practitioners and the organisational cultures of design enterprises and the wider industry. Doing so illustrates how the missions or orientations of design enterprises can shape the ways in which design practitioners create and communicate meanings and values through their project-based designs, directed towards the target clients, consumers, or users.

Studies in economic sociology have offered important ideas that foreground the role of design practitioners in shaping the consumer market and subjectivity through such calculative processes. Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier (2013) suggest that studying the work and activities of designers, advertisers, and critics, collectively

termed 'market intermediaries' or 'market mediators', can deepen our understanding of economic exchange mechanisms. By analysing items such as product labels, advertisements, press, consumer reports, Michelin guides (Karpik, 2010), they argue that these market intermediaries play a central role in 'market work' through the production of 'market mediation devices' or 'market devices' — the 'material and discursive assemblages' such as 'objects, frames, practices and tools' that 'intervene in the construction of markets' (Muniesa, Millo, and Callon, 2007: 2). Muniesa, Millo, and Callon (2007: 2) propose the notion of 'market agencement' to not only capture market rationalities and the strategic, calculative practices of individuals aimed at making devices more economically effective, but also to provide a better understanding of how subject formation is intertwined with market devices. Drawing from Deleuze (1992), they contend that 'subject is not external to the device. In other words, subjectivity is enacted in a device' (Muniesa, Millo, and Callon, 2007: 2). In this sense, interior designers undoubtedly operate as 'market intermediaries' by designing artifacts and technical devices, such as showrooms, model flats, sales centres for manufacturers and real estate companies as 'intermediary objects'. Through their professional practices and calculative decision making, they engender 'market agencement' that connects two worlds: corporations selling commodities or providing services to consumers, and individuals articulating their demands for these goods and services both as consumers and users. Often, this connection is accomplished by creating attachments that forge bodily practices and affective links between people and things (Hennion, 2010; McFall, 2009). My thesis offers an additional example that has thus far been understudied in the ongoing discussion of market devices: interior designed spaces, encompassing their decor and objects, as well as the material and affective dimensions. Through the creation of market devices,

the practitioners in my study mediate the ways economic calculations are performed within markets, a process that becomes a part of their subject formation. Recent studies on consumption practices have shown that both Chinese traditional values and modern Western values have an influence on the consumption decisions of contemporary Chinese consumers (Zhang, 2017; Hulme, 2014; Zhang, 2010). Despite these findings, little attention has been given to how the subjectivities and creative practices of design practitioners mediate the process of connecting with Chinese consumers. Drawing on the combined insights from cultural analyses and economic sociology as outlined above, I attend to the market work performed by design practitioners in creating attachments between commodities and consumers or users. I address how market-based calculative efforts of design practitioners, coupled with the cultural, material, affective, and aesthetic qualities of designed spaces, developed and deployed by design practitioners, offer agency as market devices that is integral to the formation of subjective identities.

The third way in which the interrelated questions of market and culture emerge relates to the issue of 'quality uncertainty' in designed outcomes. Beckert (2009) uses the term 'quality uncertainty' to describe a central feature of aesthetic and creative objects. This uncertainty arises from the absence of a standardised metric for evaluating their quality due to their inherent incommensurability. This aspect becomes particularly clear upon a closer look at the design works produced by the practitioners in my study. Much of their work can be understood as what Karpik (2010) called 'singularities'— the largely personalised services involving varying degrees of originality. Hence, the Chinese interior design sector, like many creative industry sectors, exemplifies a 'status market' (Aspers, 2009), where the quality of design works is evaluated based on the status of the individuals and entities associated

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with the works. Within this framework of assessment-based practices, owners of spaces, interior designers, and end users often resort to 'status signals' or 'judgment devices' (Karpik, 2010) to aid in value-assessment. These signals include, for example, prices (e.g. design fees), prizes (e.g. expert opinions), as well as formal and informal rankings of design companies (i.e. the 'impersonal device' adopted by design media, real estate companies, and peers). As I show in Chapter 3, the issue of 'quality uncertainty' in interior design work partly elucidates why the industry exhibited limited interest in pursuing certification for professionalisation. The drive to enhance one's status within the local and global design arenas compelled designers to focus on making new and successful commercial design, while vying for accolades in international competitions. I argue that market competition has intensified the entrepreneurial subjectivities among designers, influencing organisational strategies to enforce identity control, celebrate passionate work and normalise extended working hours.

The fourth way in which the cultural dimension of design intertwines with the market landscape is through classification. My thesis addresses that classification operates not only in the form of constantly changing status rankings and signals, as previously mentioned, but also in the broader context of a global design hierarchy and genre status. I show how the hierarchy of design, which generally places Western advanced design in a higher position than Chinese design, orients Chinese designers to 'worship,' emulate, and acquire the formal knowledge and expertise of advanced foreign design, which they utilise to create their own works. In this context of industry culture, the dominant discourses of modernisation and notions of China's 'lagging behind' and 'catching up' persist among design practitioners who distance themselves from a culture of blind copycatting and attempt to narrow the gap between China and

the West in this hierarchy. This shaping of design practices affects both design practitioners and their companies, particularly concerning the adoption of foreign design standards and establishment of overseas business networks.

Within this hierarchy, design works can be 'classified together on the basis of perceived similarities' (DiMaggio, 1987: 441) and constitute a genre. However, the ways in which definitions and status of genres change need to be understood within what Neale (1980) called the 'genre world'. Neale defined it as 'systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject' (19). I examine how the genre world influences the practices of design firms and practitioners who encourage and discourage certain types of design innovation. By attending to designers' identification with genres, I draw out two types of creative formations that most of my design practitioners identify with. One involves working within the genre of Western modernist design. The second involves the hybridisation of modernist design with oriental aesthetics, known as the 'modern oriental'. I show that design practitioners who identified with this latter genre sought to transform genre boundaries by incorporating oriental elements into modern interiors that set their work apart from imitative foreign decorative styles. Bringing to the fore the classification dynamics not only underscores the importance of understanding the emergent innovative formations in the market through genres, but also articulates the arguments about the substantial impacts of Western design currents on Chinese designers, a point highlighted in this thesis.

The fifth way concerns the specific links between places and times that impact the practices of design practitioners and the design economy. I sketch out the key historical moments that have shaped the meanings and roles of design over time. In tracing the emergence of interior design as a service provision, profession, and a

domain of aesthetic-cultural practices in China's reform era, I situate the analysis in a Chinese megacity, Shenzhen. Although interior design companies have flourished in other megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai, and have spread to numerous second-tier and third-tier cities across mainland China, Shenzhen stands as emblematic of the profound changes experienced by interior design professionals over the past four decades. This transformation is determined by an apparatus of techniques of power, i.e. Foucault's (1980) notion of *dispositif*, that has shaped Shenzhen into a Special Economic Zone and a model city for experimenting with the tenets of 'late socialism', or 'late-socialist neoliberalism'. Following the perspectives of Li Zhang (2001) and Lisa Hoffman (2010), I use the term 'late-socialism' to refer to the era in Chinese society where the economy, the social and culture function under a one-party Communist political system, exhibiting a continuation of socialist elements in terms of techniques, norms, and modes of self-formation, institutions and practices. Simultaneously, this era accommodates the presence of neoliberal elements, such as privatisation, marketisation, and self-governance. These elements collectively constitute techniques of governing that differentiate the late socialism era from the era of high socialism, characterised by central planning and a command economy (Zhang, 2001). This mode of governmentality shapes the opportunity structure for design practitioners, agencies and organisations through a set of processes coinciding with the restructuring of the global economy after 1980. These processes include China's building of an export economy, the making of enterprising subjects, the legalisation of private companies, the introduction and subsequent amendments of Chinese Copyright Law, the marketisation of housing system, the expansion of real estate sector, and the cultivation and incentivisation of design talents. Collectively, these processes shape the emergence and growth of the interior design sector in China,

contributing to the development of the late-socialist market economy. Recent studies have examined Shenzhen as a prime example of urban growth and economic modernisation driven by a logic of capital accumulation and an intense emphasis on rapid development and swift construction since the reform era started in the late 1970s, often referred to as 'Shenzhen speed' (Huang, 2017). I contend that interior designers play an important role in the design-construction processes that articulate the speed of Shenzhen's development. To comprehensively study Shenzhen, an interdisciplinary approach should extend its focus to interconnected domains, such as the interior design industry, where the regulatory norms of Shenzhen's urban regime and subjectification regimes become palpable at both the organisational and individual levels, as I illustrate in Chapters 2, 3 and 7. I posit that an account of design practitioners, encompassing their roles and their output, can enhance the understanding of how techniques of governing shape the economic life and the expression of design's economic and cultural power. By exploring the working lives of interior design practitioners, this account also opens up the dynamics of their engagement with prevailing norms. Through this understanding, I argue that Shenzhen serves as an appropriate place to examine the relationships between industry and organisational cultures, practices, subjective identities and innovation.

Studying Chinese interior designers is particularly timely because the Chinese regime has sought to align the design language of the built environment 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. These discourses were also in line with Xi's notion of the 'China Dream', a slogan he began using in 2013 to refer loosely to his ambition for a 'revivalism' of the Chinese nation, including its culture. It is within this dynamic context that different narratives of creativity exist and evolve, shaping the ongoing landscape of Chinese interior design. My arguments about the increased interest in hybridising Chinese and oriental aesthetics with modernist design among some design practitioners, and their growing confidence in the professional status in the global design industry, cannot be fully grasped without sensitivity to the larger nationalist narratives mobilised by the state. In the following section, I introduce the research methods that I employed to examine the inner workings of the design world and the professional lives of interior designers that this thesis focuses on.

II.   Research Methods

This thesis is primarily based on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 Shenzhen-based Chinese design practitioners who had three to over fifteen years of working experience in the industry (see Appendix). Additionally, it draws upon secondary data sources, including livestreams, online videos and publications in which designers shared their work experiences and personal viewpoints. My discussion of the design world is also informed by media coverage of some of its protagonists through news and press interviews, and the project descriptions, relevant images, and documents produced by designers and design companies. The primary criterion guiding my selection process was to actively seek out materials that capture the cultures, values, practices, ongoing debates, and trends within the sector.

This study focuses on professional designers and thus only those who worked on multiple types of design projects were selected. In my sampling process, I also ensured that my sample predominantly comprised practitioners born between the early 1980s and the 1990s, commonly referred to as Generation Y, or Millennials. These age cohorts represent the major workforce in the industry, thereby enhancing the relevance and applicability of my research findings. Interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling, cold calls, and emails, with interviews conducted between September 2018 and February 2022. Besides snowball referrals, names were taken from different sources, including membership listings in interior design associations, awardee listings of design awards, and reports by local and international design media (such as *gooood, archiposition, DesiDaily, Dezeen, Archdaily, Dinzd, Archilover, Designboom*). Most interviewees hold the titles of creative directors or chief designers, who are founders or co-founders of their design companies, but I have also interviewed some designers at beginning levels and some senior designers. Among them are established professionals who have gained recognition for their distinctive works and contributions to the industry, evidenced by awards they have won or positions they hold in professional bodies. This underscores the elevated stature and significance of interior design professions within the broader society. A large majority of the interviewees have received formal design training at universities, holding degrees in various fields such as interior design, environment art design, and architecture. Additionally, some have backgrounds in exhibition design, visual communications, and industrial design.

In conducting my research, ensuring ethical procedures and gaining access to interviews were important considerations. I implemented several ethical procedures to safeguard the rights of participants. Before conducting interviews and participant

observation, my research underwent review by the University's Ethics Committee.

After receiving the ethical approval, I started sending out interview invitations and

scheduling interviews. I made sure that I obtained written or verbal informed consent

from all participants before interviews began, and requested that they read the

prepared information which clearly outlines the nature of the study, the access to and

storage of the gathered data, their rights to anonymity, and rights to withdrawal at any

time without consequences.

The interviews took place in various settings, including face-to-face in public

places, workplaces, or online. From 2020 onwards, interviews shifted online because

of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation was voluntary, adhering to non-coercion

principles (House, 1990: 158). Chinese languages used during the interviews included

Mandarin and Cantonese, either of which was the interviewees' native language,

providing a respectful environment that facilitated accurate and in-depth responses.

Unless the interviewees chose to disclose their real names, their identities have been

kept anonymous or concealed using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Conducting interviews has the limitations of not providing a 'thick

description' of practices that is possible through ethnographic accounts, but it is an

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. During these interviews, a wide range of topics were

covered to gain a holistic perspective. These topics included participants' educational

and professional background, basic information about their companies, their design

practices, clients, work norms, workplace culture, professional identities, leisure

activities, observations of the design scene, aspirations, and opinions about diverse

aspects such as institutional support, policies, copying practices and

professionalisation. The interviews conducted with design practitioners typically spanned a duration of one to three hours.

The discussion of the design world is further informed by a month of participant observation and informal conversations in Shenzhen from July to August 2019. To negotiate access for conducting participant observation, I initially contacted several interviewees, including designer employees and design business owners, discussing possibilities for conducting observation at their workplaces, and explaining the purpose and scope of my study. This process involved sending formal requests for obtaining necessary permission from the companies where applicable. After obtaining permission, I negotiated the timing and commenced my participant observation. For this phrase, I based myself at a small-sized design enterprise started by a Chinese interior designer of the post-80s generation in Shenzhen. Like many interior design enterprises, it relied on a diverse type of projects, including office spaces, showrooms, and real estate projects such as model flats, while also servicing individual clients on private residential flats and engaging in furniture design as side projects. Situated in a building in downtown Shenzhen, the open-plan studio, without partitions between desks — much typical workspace for young designers — serves as a reminder of the merit it holds in facilitating the generation of good ideas through 'casual contacts' and group work (Gladwell, 2001). The workspace exuded a design identity through its designer items and furniture, such as Ligne Roset sofa, Bang & Olufsen speaker, catalogs of designer furniture manufacturers, design books, and material samples.

During my fieldwork, I observed on a day-to-day basis not only the internal activities of the design agency, including the casual conversations among the colleagues, their project discussions, digital visualisation of design work, but also other external activities, such as business-to-business furniture and material sales

prospecting meetings, supervision of interior construction work, client meetings and design proposal presentations across different places in Shenzhen. This provided me with the opportunity to engage in their working lives and gain a greater understanding of their interests, aspirations, values and challenges. Fieldnotes were taken digitally as soon as possible on a daily basis, both during the participant observation and at the end of the day, to ensure accuracy and capture details. They were used to record a variety of information, including detailed descriptions of the physical environment and people, such as layout, ambiance, number of people, their appearance, and demographic features. They also covered individual behaviors, group dynamics, language of individuals, practices, and notations of emotional states, where necessary. I also recorded quotes and dialogue that captured participants' knowledge, perspectives, opinions, experiences, as well as details such as background information on the happenings, norms, practices, and situational circumstances, which also shed light on the contextual dimensions of design practitioners. To allow for further data collection, analysis and interpretation, I made reflexive notes on my own biases, assumptions, interpretations, personal reflections, and included preliminary insights or analytical thoughts prompted by the observations or interactions.

Reflecting on the process of gaining access to research participants, I found that identifying myself as a sociology PhD student from a UK university and as a person coming from Hong Kong somehow could open doors. This was due to both shared commonalities, such as languages and the fact that some design practitioners or their business partners had studied in the UK, and the differences between me and the interviewees. Some design practitioners were interested in talking with a sociologist because they wanted to meet people from non-design disciplines, while others simply wanted to share their thoughts and feelings about their work lives with

people outside the industry. From the perspective of the interviewees, my position as an outsider in the Chinese design sector seemed to allow them to open up. Simultaneously, my cultural and ethnic identity as a Chinese from Hong Kong made them feel that I was an insider with whom they spoke freely.

To address the inherent challenges posed by the constrains of the interviewing method and participant observation, I ensured diverse data sources by collecting data from over 20 public talks and presentations conducted by design media (e.g. *DesiDaily, ELLE Decor, Designwire*), industry associations (e.g. Shenzhen Institute of Interior Design), design companies, individual practitioners, and design-related organisations. In my selection process, I made sure to include talks by designers not only from Shenzhen but also from other cities. This deliberate choice broadened perspectives beyond the local context, enriching the research with diverse viewpoints and experiences. By incorporating talks from designers based in different cities, I aimed to capture nuances of design practices and identify similar trends across varied locations, highlighting the practices, norms, and values described and embodied by these professionals. The purpose of examining the data from public talks is to foster a comprehensive understanding of the broader design landscape and to supplement and cross-check with interview data, thereby ensuring a wider representation. These data were available or live-streamed through China's social media platforms such as TikTok and WeChat, particularly in the year 2020 as China was facing the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. All data collected through interviews and public talks was recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and coded for thematic analysis. The translation from Chinese was kept as close to the original as possible, with slight adjustments made to maintain the flow of conversation.

The data for this thesis also comes from government documents and secondary

materials. This involved sourcing a wide range of governmental documents, related textual materials, and statistical data spanning the interior design sector, design professions, cultural and creative industries, design higher education, intellectual property (IP) rights, and industry regulations. I gathered data from various sources such as industry annual reports, official newsletters, and reports specific to Shenzhen, while also delving into literature and sources documenting the histories of Shenzhen, its design sectors, and China's modern design. These materials were selected based on their direct relevance to the research questions and were accessed in both online and printed formats as available. The official discourses, historical accounts, textual and statistical data found within these sources, shedding light on design as both a practice and a profession, served to complement the descriptions provided by practitioners and media accounts. By integrating interviewing with participant observation and analysis of secondary materials, my aim was to achieve a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter while remaining focused on capturing the experiences of the participants.

My approach in reading the data is influenced by both thematic analysis and phenomenological analysis, focusing on questions of experiences, and understanding practitioners' interpretations of experiences and their meanings. I emphasised a dual interpretation process when examining the accounts provided by individuals in the design field. This process involves both the hermeneutics of 'empathy' and 'suspicion' (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2003). To make sense of how design professionals interpreted their world, I insisted on representing their experiences in a manner that reflects their understanding, while taking a step back from their accounts, examining the data critically, and asking questions about the underlying assumptions and reasons behind their interpretation of experiences. By employing this approach, I

identified recurring themes in the interview materials and other textual sources, and examined how key themes, such as entrepreneurial subjectivity, innovation, cultural-aesthetic production, market, and changes, varied across my sample and in relevant discussions presented in the other secondary materials that I outlined.

At the same time, the need to understand the 'discursive worlds' individuals inhabit and examine these in terms of how they shape possibilities for one's subjectivity and practices has drawn me to employ Foucauldian discourse analysis (Riley, Robson and Evans, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2013: 189). Its emphasis on discourse allowed me to interrogate the discourse and language found in the interview materials and other textual sources against the broader socio-cultural contexts of regulatory practices, expert knowledge, and institutions within China's subjectification regimes of socialism and neoliberalism. During the coding process, I followed Foucault's method of 'problematization' to identify issues that design practitioners considered problems (Riley, Robson and Evans, 2021; Koopman, 2014). This helped me see where discourses overlapped or intersected (ibid). Informed by this approach, I posit that discourses not only constitute social realities but also embody a productive force, generating, shaping, and reproducing meanings, practices and categories (Braun and Clarke, 2013). They underpin the operation of dominant social norms, contestation and negotiation of these norms, as well as the (re)making of subjectivity and practices. I recognise the guiding influence of discourses on the perception of the subjects toward objects (including abstract entities such as self-identities and material objects), while exploring the multiple subject positions that individuals took up (Davies and Harré, 1990); some of which aligned with dominant discourses, while some of which involved negotiation or resistance. In this context, I reflected on how these different subject positions could generate agency and

limitations for individuals in terms of how they can perceive the range of possibilities, desires, and actions they can envision, aspire to, and ultimately engage in, as well as how they understand their own identities and subjectivities (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

III.   Outline of the Thesis

With this study, I hope to bring the questions of creativity and innovation, as well as entrepreneurial subjectivity and performativity to bear on my account of the Chinese design practitioners. I concentrate on the emergence of design practitioners and designer-entrepreneurs, their professional lives, and their formation of subjectivities and identities to emphasise their ongoing impacts on the cultural and economic life in China's late-socialist neoliberalism.

Chapter 1 is a literature review. I elaborate on the conceptual arguments developed in relevant theoretical analyses that have shaped my own thinking about the themes of this thesis. By situating these issues within sociology and the larger field of social theories, I suggest how this thesis can offer a fuller understanding of the relationships between design practitioners, the dynamics of societal change and continuity, and their subjective identities and practices.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the evolving dynamics between modern design, education and the economy from the modern China era through the contemporary reform era. It outlines key historical developments and changing policies towards design and their legacies, which have significantly influenced the understanding and application of design as a concept and practice. I trace the emergence of Shenzhen as a centre of contemporary design in China to its strategic location and its role as a testing ground for policy innovation. I show that Shenzhen's

transformation into a model city has led to a network comprising design firms, markets, and practitioners, giving rise to interior design as a profession in Chinese working lives.

In Chapter 3, I present evidence of human capital cultivation strategies that aim to develop designers as human capital for national, economic and business growth in conjunction with Shenzhen's design economy. Government initiatives of incentivisation, talent attraction and retention elevated the importance of design in public policies, while design enterprises fostered a corporate culture of identity control, self-monitoring and self-cultivation. Within this process of design talent cultivation, I highlight the politics of professionalisation through certification, while also noting the limited interest among designers in pursuing such certification. In addition, I examine the impacts of expanded design higher education on reinforcing a technique-based hand-drawing art exam system and adopting a low-barrier approach to the design profession. Meanwhile, the introduction of art institute test reform in 2015 signals an increased emphasis on self-expression in design works and their differentiation.

Chapter 4 delves into bridging the gap between Chinese and Western design worlds by exploring the actions of design practitioners and the state. It suggests that design practitioners find themselves operating in an industrial milieu in which discourses of China's lagging behind constantly remind them of the need to catch up with the West, while also drawing on their cultural roots to redefine design language and vocabulary. I show how the dominance of Western advanced design has led to a 'worship of the West', as evident in practices such as the 'pilgrimage' to Milan Design Week. This has resulted in the adoption of foreign design standards, collaborations with Western counterparts, and an emphasis on affective objects and spaces

influenced by Western design trends. Meanwhile, external networking shaped the diffusion of Chinese design overseas and the imaginary of China being a global design hub. I explore the event of 2022 Shenzhen Global Design Award Conference at Milan Design Week that was intended to elevate Chinese design globally. Amid these networks, elite Chinese designers became sought by Italian high-ended furniture manufacturers to design luxury pieces blending Chinese, oriental and foreign elements primarily for the local Chinese market, a sign that cultural hybridisation has gained more currency.

Chapter 5 discusses the defining characteristics and philosophical underpinnings of China's intellectual property (IP) regime, encompassing patents, copyright, and trademarks. It examines how this regime both provides and withholds protection to design-related rights holders, delving into the links between China's efforts to conform to the Western IP norms, its integration into the global economy, and its responses to accusations of unfair IP practices during trade disputes with the United States. Amid these disputes, recognising that China's hybrid IP system is influenced by traditional Confucian and socialist practices sheds light on how people perceive originality and IP rights.

Chapter 6 examines the models of creativity deployed by design practitioners, namely authentic creativity, which concentrates on self-driven originality and subjective expressivity in design, and derivative creativity, which is service-oriented and focuses on slight improvement or modification of existing designs. Operating within an environment that saw copying as part of the 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 design differentiation by appropriating and rediscovering multicultural form, countering the imitative culture of

copying foreign decorative elements and styles, while establishing themselves in the commercial world.

Chapter 7 suggests that design practitioners find themselves reproducing dominant norms in the design economy, including the logics of self-enterprise, profitability, 'Chinese speed,' and marketing design, and simultaneously adopt alternative practices as strategies to co-exist with these norms within China's late-socialist neoliberalism. I argue that the reproduction of the regulatory norms is particularly manifested in their embrace of rapid design service delivery and the creation of experiential marketing design as market devices. The struggle to fully comply with the regulatory norms that inhibit their pursuit of design ideals has led designer-entrepreneurs to employ alternative strategies, such as relying on 'surrogate designers' for non-ideal yet profitable projects or adopting a 'fake identity' to secure high-status projects. Designers' engagement with alternative projects, such as unpaid volunteer design work and sustainable sales centres, also signals their negotiation with the dominant norms that tend to suppress design capacities for cultural imagination and social visions.

The conclusion revisits the questions of how we can analyse creativity and innovation, entrepreneurial subjectivity, performativity and lifestyle minimalism through this field-specific analysis of interior design practitioners. This is particularly pertinent in the context of an innovation-driven economy, slowing economic growth, rising interest in minimalism, persistent late-socialist dynamics of governmentality, and politics of nationalist narratives in China. I argue that the analysis presented in this study holds implications for thinking about the concepts of creativity and innovation, the change and continuity in cultural practices, the aesthetic, the dynamic relationship between design practitioners and markets, and their performative agency.

Chapter 1

Design, Creativity, Performativity, and Agency

In this chapter, I interrogate several major conceptualisations framing this sociological study of professional life and creative occupation. These include the questions of 'creativity' and 'newness,' the concept of 'entrepreneurial subjectivity', and the usefulness and relevancy of 'performativity' as a site for analysing the agency of entrepreneurial self. This examination involves three groups of literatures that underpin the arguments I present throughout this thesis. The first is the sociological analyses that concern the multitude of forces in bringing upon newness and shaping designs as socio-material objects and cultural practices, facilitating processes of change and stability. The second is the 'governmentality thesis' put forward by Foucault and other scholars adopting this perspective, explaining the emergence and governance of the entrepreneurial self. The third is Butler's theorising of 'performative agency,' which captures the calculative dimension of agency enacted through cultural practices that align with dominant norms, and the alternative vision of agency that involves the pursuit of individual ideals and the associated deployment of tactics. By locating the overarching themes of this thesis within the intersections of these strands of studies, I reflect on the connections between design practitioners, the ever-changing dynamics of society and the current regulatory norms and market discourses, and how these factors influence the identities and practices of the design practitioners.

I.   Designed Stuffs, Creativity and Change

In approaching the question of the relationship between design practitioners and dynamics of change and continuity, Harvey Molotch's (2003) work, *Where Stuff Comes From,* has been both enlightening and limiting. First, Molotch examines designs as cultural objects and suggests paying attention to an array of components that constitute the production processes and lead to the emergence and evolution of newly designed products and artefacts. These components include people, things, technologies, aesthetics, institutions, places, contexts of production and consumption practices, and morals and ethics. He uses the term 'lash-up,' as introduced by John Law (1986; cited in Latour, 1987: 124), to denote the summing up of the social and the material dimensions of innovations, aiming to understand how this 'lash-up' of a designed object makes change and stability occur in the material world. For Molotch, diverse actors such as designers, clients, and retailers are included in this 'lash-up' of everyday products, like toasters, and more expensive items, such as designer furniture. His approach to an interpretation of larger social patterns calls for 'searching out the social evolution and detailed practices that stand behind the tangible outcomes' (Molotch, 2003: 13-14). In approaching his sociology of design and material culture, Molotch (2003) is informed by actor-network theory (ANT) and anthropology, coalescing into an approach that aligns more with a post-ANT analysis (Gad and Jessen, 2010). Unlike a traditional ANT approach, his work holds a heightened sensitivity to an anthropology of consumption and human-made artefacts. This perspective builds upon the traditional ANT approach developed by Bruno Latour, while challenging the cultural analyses influenced by Frankfurt School and post-modern social theories. His approach not only accentuates the importance of

history and place, but also allows a focus on the different facets of social organisation and specific socio-cultural and organisational elements that go into the production of material goods and built environments. These encompass human experience, corporate organisations, aesthetics, hybridity, tacit rules, identity work, emotional aspects of objects (such as meanings and affect), and qualities and consequences associated with material goods, such as expressivity. It is these dimensions of historicity and specificities of design as material products, aesthetic-affective objects and cultural practice that also form the focal points of my study. Through this analysis, my study responds to the call for an attention to the historical constellation of creativity and aesthetic formations within sociology (e.g. Born, 2010; Molotch, 2011; Reckwitz, 2017). It also acknowledges the analyses that explore the centrality of the aesthetic in the organisation of capitalist production (de la Fuente, 2000) and the 'aestheticization' of everyday life (Featherstone, 1992; Welsch, 1996). Viewing designed outcomes as underlined by aesthetics, historical development, place-specific influences, and cultural practices is crucial not only for understanding today's design sectors, but also for deciphering why Chinese interior designers engage with particular types of design. As I show, their designs are driven by particular models of innovation and creativity, regardless of whether they are transforming, modifying, reworking or reproducing the existing design outcomes. My thesis traces the social evolution of modern design as a concept and practice, along with its relations with the field of interior design in China for much of the twentieth century up till the present day. Central to my argument is the exploration of how these developments, especially concerning the relationship between design and concepts such as 'crafts', 'art' and 'decoration' and 'service', have shaped the practices of contemporary design practitioners. Situating within these threads of analysis, I show how the shaping of

Shenzhen into a key hub for contemporary design industries in late-socialist market economy in recent decades has impacted the perception of interior design as a discipline and profession. This, in turn, has influenced the approaches of designers and design-entrepreneurs in their practices.

Second, Molotch's concept of newness and familiarity within human society serves as a good starting point in thinking about the creativity models deployed by design practitioners. For Molotch, the emergence of new designs and change in goods arises from both the 'human proclivity for something a bit different, new, or inventive' (2003: 16), and a desire for tradition and familiarity in things. As he puts, 'Goods provide a basis, in a number of different ways including their use, for there to be a sense of social reality' (2003: 11). In the context of classical sociology, Molotch's perspective on creativity, which posits it as intrinsic to human nature and emphasises human inclination over their capacity, finds resonance with the views of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber (Godart, Seong and Phillips, 2020). They all have tended to view creative acts and creative processes as the outcomes of 'a fundamentally human and collective penchant to create something new by combining various elements from both the cultural and material realms' (ibid: 492). Molotch's perspective also converges with that of many contemporary sociologists, who perceive creativity as a 'context-dependent construct' within modern capitalism and 'a configuration of cultural and material elements' that is present in both high culture and everyday activities (Godart, Seong, and Phillips, 2020: 492, 494; Joas, 1996).

While Molotch's account has been insightful in many ways, it has fallen short in detailing the creative practices of designers because he privileged the networks of forces and creativity that shape new designs into being and sustain the stability of existing things. Therefore, his analysis tends to identify with the inclusivist view of

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creativity that sees creativity as embedded in and shaped by networks of daily social practices comprised of cultural and material elements. This has led him to underplay the models of creativity that designers deploy within varied commercial settings and socio-economic contexts. This could also be why his attention to the actual working lives of design practitioners, as well as their cultural and intellectual formation has been somewhat scarce. With this thesis, I hope to address this gap by using evidence from late-socialist neoliberal China to show how the cultural and intellectual formation of creative labour, along with the commercial contexts, influences individuals' perspectives on innovation and creativity. This, in turn, lends distinct quality to specific cultural practices that contribute to the creation of new designs.

My position on the conceptualisation of creativity is informed by a body of literature that gets beyond a dualistic viewpoint of inclusivist or exclusive notions of creativity, focusing instead on the intricate models of creativity deployed by individuals. It is precisely in this regard that I find Raymond Williams's (1983) interrogations of the idea of creativity to be conceptually relevant. His work foregrounds attention to an 'inclusivist' perspective of creativity, in which new ideas and capacity for producing newness lie within all humans, as opposed to 'exclusivist' accounts that view creativity as the domain of gifted individuals who possess a predisposition towards creativity. For Williams, both views have rendered the word opaque in nature, especially the former perspective has extended its conceptual reach to different disciplines, from literature, design, business management to national policy and so on. He cautions against an excessive emphasis on the inclusivist approach, as it may empty the abstract values of creativity by blurring the line between imitative work and original creations. These arguments lay the basis for models of creativity deployed by creative workers, which often assert the distinction

between the notion of 'authentic' (or 'inspired') creativity and the notion of novelty in commercial settings, as argued by Nixon (2003) and Negus and Pickering (2004). The former refers to the sense of creation connected with romantic subjectivism and the power of individual imagination, metaphysical force and inner feelings that lead to self-expression and bursts of originality (Nixon, 2003). The latter encompasses routinised practice, or the self-driven, contrived and manipulative aspect of the idea (Negus and Pickering, 2000; 2004). I argue that drawing upon these findings of sociological and cultural studies can offer a better understanding of the ways cultures are sourced and re-worked by design practitioners, shedding light on their perception of newness in relation to their own and others' design work. This attention to individual and subjective perceptions of creativity and innovation recognises that creativity becomes a material-cultural configuration as mediated by design practitioners. It opens for consideration whether studying the models of creativity deployed by individuals can account for the types of innovative outcomes they produce.

These sociological discussions surrounding the notion of creativity, as I have indicated elsewhere, hold relevance to the interdisciplinary field of design thinking and innovation studies, which explores the adoption and institutionalisation of service design and design thinking practices in corporate settings (Tang, 2023). If my argument regarding creativity stems from sociology and cultural studies, it also draws from its broader dialogue with terminology like 'radical' and 'incremental' innovations (Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour, 1997; Perks, Cooper and Jones, 2005; Verganti, 2009) as well as the 'micro-creativity' model of production (Keane and Zhao, 2012), which are used by innovation scholars to classify the different levels of newness mobilised by companies. I argue that sociological accounts of creativity can

be enriched by invoking this typology of innovation grounded in institutional understandings. When applied in this thesis, these understandings acknowledge that innovation exists along a spectrum, encompassing both modest improvements and more radical transformations. They also illuminate the links between the two models of creativity deployed by design practitioners I outlined earlier and their roles as service providers, offering problem solutions and experiences for clients or end-users.

II. Entrepreneurial Subjectivity and Performativity under Late Socialist Neoliberalism

The emergence of the designer as an entrepreneurial figure in the neoliberal China poses questions that concern the multiplicity of subjectivities and practices within the space delimited by the state. These questions include: What is the relationship between the self-identification of design practitioners and the diverse types of design production they produce? To what extent do their visions align with the tenets of late-socialist neoliberalism? How do they navigate the space between the imperatives of rapid service delivery and marketability, while holding on to their ideals? How do they address and challenge norms specific to the market and industry that may not align seamlessly with their individual aspirations? How can we explain this agency? To explore design practitioners as entrepreneurial subjects within the context of China, I take an analytic approach grounded in Foucault's concepts of governmentality and entrepreneurial subject, and draw on related research conducted by scholars in this field. While pursuing this line of analysis through a Foucauldian perspective of governmental rationality, which I discuss subsequently, I also reflect on its limitations in capturing the multiplicity of practices deployed by entrepreneurial subjects in the Chinese context. Subsequent to this examination, I provide a reflection

on the applicability of the psychoanalytic approach and its constraints, which has led me to propose using the concept of performativity to examine how design practitioners enact agency.

a. Governmentality and Entrepreneurial Subjectivity

For Foucault, governmentality means 'conduct of conducts' (2001: 341) and concerns central political questions from the perspectives of sovereign power, including 'how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor' (Foucault, 1991: 87). The relationship between governmentality and self-entrepreneurialisation emerges through the framework of the freedom of choice that propels the economy (Burchell, 1996; Hoffman, 2010). It is by means of freedom — a technique and rationality of governing in liberal governmentality — entrepreneurial subjects capable of self-governance can be produced and regulated. As per Foucault's definition, an entrepreneurial subject is a '*homo œconomicus*', whom he refers to as an 'entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital', 'producer', and 'the source of [his] earnings' (2008: 226). In this sense, entrepreneurial subjectivity is generated through and inside power, norms, and practices within the economy, with a focus on the 'enterprise of the self' (du Gay, 1996: 181). Thus, this underscores the twin processes of 'being-made' and 'self-making' (Ong, 1996). Many studies of cultural labour or private micro-enterprises in the fields of design and music have employed the lens of governmentality to scrutinise the politics surrounding self-organised work and entrepreneurial subjectivity within Western liberal democracies (e.g. McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli, 2019; McRobbie, 2016a; Scharff, 2016). In this thesis, I explore this issue within China's late-socialism to foreground the intricate

differences between different models of governmentality in governing the activities of entrepreneurial subjects.

The dominant presence of the Chinese government and its rationality reminds one of the 'techniques of power', practices of 'power/knowledge' (Foucault, 1977) and 'biopower' (Foucault, 1990) designed to monitor and control the conduct of individuals in modern liberal societies that Foucault illustrated. By identifying urban professionals as coupled to the nation through the dreams of national prosperity and self-cultivation practices (Hoffman, 2007: 14), Chinese governmental rationalities resemble the '*police* (i.e. policy) state', or the 'state of prosperity' of the early modern Europe that Foucault discussed (Foucault, 1988: 148; Gordon, 1991). The case of China also aptly reflects how the rationalities that link the idea of prosperity and happiness to its subjects and their strength and productivity align with the mercantilist economic policy of maximising national wealth (Gordon, 1991: 10). Nevertheless, despite these similarities, the cultural differences between Chinese late-socialist society and the Western democratic societies, upon which Foucault's theory of governmentality is based, should also be addressed to provide a clearer picture of the case of China. First, in terms of the power of government, Chinese governmentality does not hold 'a conception of limited government characterised by the rule of law that would secure the rights of individual citizens', a hallmark of Western liberal societies (Dean, 1999: 147). Since the reform era started in the late 1970s, Chinese governmentality has adopted both socialist technologies of government and neoliberal strategies (i.e. socialist market economy) to govern individuals through choices and desires. In this late-socialist neoliberal governmentality, the state's sovereign power induces the citizens, who are seen as the 'counterpart to entrepreneurship, innovation

and national competitiveness' (Rose, 1999: 282) to become 'self-responsible, self-enterprising and self-governing subjects' (Ong and Zhang, 2008: 3). Institutional practices enact the vision of life as a well-organised enterprise, wherein the 'enterprising self' operates under a set of distinct principles that prioritise ambition, calculative thinking, responsibility, and personal accountability (Rose, 1992; du Gay, 1996). As Ong and Zhang (2008) note, the Chinese authorities hold the view that the neoliberal logic informs the privatisation practices and policies, promoting entrepreneurialism and self-enterprise essential for national growth, integration with the global economy and overcoming past policy failures. Yet, the Chinese state does not fully embrace the adoption of neoliberal techniques; it still retains the superiority of 'social engineering' and 'an accompanying belief in the strong necessity for the Party-state to remain the primary driving force behind national development' (Sigley, 2006: 494). In contrast, contemporary Western liberal societies tend to be skeptical about the ideology of obtaining complete knowledge of the subjects and regard it as incompatible with neoliberalism, and thus favor more indirect ways of shaping the conduct (ibid).

Second, they have different conceptions of an individual. While the Western notion of ethics is linked to individualism, the notion of ethical self within contemporary Chinese governmentality is influenced by both marketised and Confucian-socialist values. In Foucault's analysis, an individual in Western neoliberal societies is like an 'atom,' functioning as 'the abstract, elusive atom of market economics' (Gordon, 1991: 24), whereas the Chinese conception of an individual is often defined and contextualised by social connections, referred to as *guanxi* in Chinese (Yang, 1994; Gold, Guthrie and Walk, 2004). Mayfair Yang (1994) contends

that this *guanxi*-oriented context is shaped by and through Confucian philosophical roots, which concerns with placing social relations, rather than a legal system based on rationality and objectivity, at the centre of the state and society. In this Confucian culture of establishing a harmonious secular order, the self is subject to moral order and status differences (ibid). Scholars sharing Yang's perspective tend to insist on the position that social interaction and connections are defining features in the formation of an individual's self-identity in the Chinese context (see Gold, Guthrie and Walk, 2002). Gold, Guthrie and Walk (2002: 10) notes that this strand of studies stresses on the significance of how 'the self is realised in the social sphere' in order to 'achieve a sense of fulfilment as a "person"'. Although the rise of neoliberalism is considered as contributing to the rise of individualisation in China (Hoffman, 2010; Zhang and Ong, 2008), an individual is traditionally considered as a social entity, rather than an independent one. In contemporary China, as Ong and Zhang (2008: 2) elucidate, 'regimes of living are shaped by the powers of the self with socialism from afar' and the 'state controls continue to regulate from distance the fullest expression of self-interest' (2008: 3). They argue that self-interest is permitted only when it aligns with collective or state interest. In this sense, the meanings of self are embedded in state planning influenced by socialist and Confucian values, which often serve as the basis of ethical behaviors promoted and strengthened by the government authorities that emphasise the collectivistic moral obligation of each individual, a legacy dating back to the Maoist era (Liu, 2009: 144; Deng and Jeffreys, 2021).

Given the historical background, the ways 'conduct of conduct' played out in the Chinese authoritarian society are different from those in Western liberal societies. The relevance of Foucauldian governmentality theory in this study of practices lies in

its capacity to capture the co-existence of both technologies of the state (totalizing power of the state) and technologies of the self (individualising power of the state) in enforcing the 'subjectifying practices' within the urban professional regimes in China. The governmentality framework is useful but limiting to my investigation of how design practitioners engage with the dominant practices and norms at the immediate level of work within the organisational and commercial contexts. It has its limits in sensitising us to relations of contestation or struggle that constitute the government of one's self (O'Malley, Weir and Shearing, 1997), not least due to its tendency to view practices in micro-settings as total conformity to the normalising judgements in society and to ignore individual responses in varied forms. In this way, individuals living under the rule that relies on the nexus between knowledge and power to produce subjects are described by Rose (1996b: 241) as operating like 'a whole series of little machines for fabricating and holding in place the psychological self'.

Although Foucault has suggested that dissenting 'counter-conducts' do exist in modern biopolitics (Foucault, 1990: 95; Gordon, 1991: 5), his work could not capture how subjects can achieve autonomy by evading the constraints of government (Smart, 1999: 94), and does not discuss further about how individuals engage in those moments. Furthermore, with its rather binary vision of power and resistance, Foucauldian studies do not elaborate much on the notion of resistance that is associated with ethics of individualism, which Foucault defines in terms of the technologies of self (Rose, O'Malley and Valverde, 2006: 90). As such, Foucauldian studies is criticised for its tendency to overlook the role of agency, resistance and microscopic change (Adams, 2007: 770), failing to address a multitude of practices at

the micro level and understand struggles and resistances around governmentality (Frankel, 1997; Newton, 1998; Mills, 1995; O'Malley, Weir and Shearing, 1997).

b.   Limits of Psychoanalytically-informed Analyses

Some consideration of the aspects neglected by the governmentality approach can be found within the field of critical social theories and work studies of enterprising selves, informed by a psychoanalytic approach. However, there are limitations to these arguments, which I will discuss in the following.

Political theorists Jason Glynos and David Howarth's (2007) framework of 'logics approach', a Lacanian approach to practices that invokes the category of fantasy, offers a suggestive framework to explain individual work practices. They explore how social reproduction and transformation of practices are construed as a nexus of logics, which encompasses grammar-like norms that structure actions, contingency within the norms, and fantasy. Based on this framework, they argue that social practices are not governed by complete structures of social relations; they are subject to contingency of self-identification, which allows for the emergence of the 'contestable moment' (Glynos, 2008: 277). In such 'dislocation moment', the subject can feel unclear about how it is to follow the rules or engage in routinised practices (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 129). This concern about the vulnerability of practices is linked to their idea of discourse that makes visible such tension, along with associated affect such as ambivalence. Central to their belief of contigent social relations is the logic of fantasy (Glynos, 2008: 286; 2014). This logic produces and structures the subject's unconscious enjoyment, closely connected to Freudian notions of libido and primordial loss (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 107). In this formulation, the authors

focus on the role of fantasy, which disguises the inherent incomplete and changeable natures of social logics through explanatory narratives with idealised (achieving fullness or wholeness) and disastrous scenarios (impeding the realisation of the ideals). One primary emphasis of the authors lies in how one's strong attachment to fantasies aimed at obtaining a sense of security against anxiety prevents norm change and inhibits contestation. Conversely, one's weak attachment to fantasies about norms fosters openness to alternatives, thus enabling creative practices. It is this assertion of a person's affective attachment to fantasies that the authors used to explain the persistence and change of individual practices (Glynos, 2008: 289).

This approach has been adopted in some organisation and work studies to understand work practices (Thompson and Willmott, 2015; Hoedemaekers, 2017). For example, Hoedemaekers's study (2017) examines both affective attachment to and transgression of norms in the daily work of creative workers, which are captured within the notion of fantasy that underpins their identities. He argues that the creative workers' emphasis on autonomy and craft leads to counter-identifications with market norms and commodification motivations, but it simultaneously allows these norms to motivate and guide their work experiences.

Despite the analytic values of their arguments in enriching the intrinsic dimensions of enterprising individuals and in highlighting contingent social relations and alternative practices, this psychoanalytically informed approach is not without problems. First, it seems to grant the concepts of fantasy a privileged position in structuring actions. In particular, there is a tendency of Freudian accounts to read all actions as driven by irrationality and impulses underpinning human subjectivity. Due to this emphasis, selfhood is primarily a construct of libidinal investments. This is a

significant problem in accounting for identity formation and social actions of the enterprising self that figure importantly in my study because it obscures other broader cultural-historical processes and contextual factors that go into constructing and shaping a subject's identity and conduct, which are emphasised in Foucauldian perspective. Thus, while Glynos and Howarth's logics approach shifts the attention to contingency and avoids treating the categories of structure and agency as pre-given, it also tends to subsume the question of agency under the narratives of affects and fantasmatic dynamics. Furthermore, it neglects the questions of calculative decisions in the world of commerce and the genre cultures that are important in the understanding of work practices and hence the professional identities within the field of commercial creative production.

Working within the psychoanalytic problematic also includes Tara Fenwick's (2002) research on Canadian women entrepreneurs, in which she argues that enterprising individuals learn not only to become neoliberal subjects but also subjects of 'transgressive desires'. By scrutinising the psychic dimension of entrepreneurial subjects in neoliberalism, her study particularly illustrates how the development of entrepreneurial identity, discourse and employment is intertwined with learning and the capitalist world of productive 'desiring-machines' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983). At the individual level, she references psychoanalytic social theorists to suggest that enterprising selves are subjects implicated in learning processes, social experiences, and cultural environments. In these contexts, she argues that they learn to deploy suitable means for articulating and fulfiling their desires, projecting desires onto objects, and mobilising impulse to transgress dominant logics of productivity and profit. As she argues, 'desire is not a simple longing for pleasure or fantasy, but a

learned assertion of the legitimacy of desire to reject perpetual human capital project (du Gay's vision of the 'enterprising self') and seek immersion in fulfiling work for its own sake' (2002: 716).

Fenwick's analysis portrays how being a subject of conflicting desires is agentic, shaping one's experience and self-perception, enabling resistance and alternative pursuits. This learning-oriented approach, in addition to its focus on the internal aspects of individuals, directs us to consider the ways work contexts and social relations inter-connectedly shape enterprising selves, who learn to negotiate in the marketplace. However, it remains largely concerned with psychic dynamics and offers scant discussion on how the interplay between subjection and agency unfolds within the activities of individuals operating within their professions.

Getting beyond the limitations of these sets of arguments has led me to examine how the diversity of practices and agency can be more comprehensively understood from a sociological perspective. I propose a closer examination of how enterprising identities and their practices in specific professional fields are constituted in and through both non-discursive practices and 'discourse' within the Chinese economy. According to Foucault, 'discourse' serves to define and constitute these practices as interconnected and comprehensible, functioning as rules and regulation that govern what is considered true or false (2008: 18). Within the interior design sector, entrepreneurial subjectivities are formed within the discourse of cultural economy, which du Gay and Pryke (2002: 2) called 'cultural practices' that 'format and frame markets and economic and organizational relations' (Callon, 1998). When contextualising these practices and discourse within the Chinese governmentality, it is evident that they inhabit in an array of dominant norms, such as the enterprising ethos,

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marketability of design, pursuit of profitability and the notion of 'Chinese speed,' which emphasises rapid service delivery. These issues surface in the conversations of design practitioners as they speak about their plans, experiences, and professional lives. As Butler asserts, 'subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency' (1997: 2). My reflection on these arguments has prompted me to consider a framework that accounts for both the normative enactment of cultural practices and the alternative practices as forms of agency in the context of China's socialist market economy. It is this discussion on agency that I now turn to.

c.   Performativity and Agency

In thinking about the professional lives in which enterprisng subjects engage with a set of norms and conventions in the design economy, this thesis inevitably draws on Judith Butler's theory of performativity. My recourse to this theory was motivated by evidences of norm conformity as well as alterantive practices performed by the subjectivities of design practitioners. This concerns how design practitioners, as late-socialist neoliberal subjects, become a form of what Butler (2010) called 'performative agency' in their deployment of diverse practices. Drawing on J. L. Austin's work (1962), Butler's (2010) discussion on performativity makes it feasible to conceptualise not just speech acts, but also a set of practices and relations as performative agency. In her conceptulisation of performativity, she directs us towards various exercises of performative agency. Moving beyond the explicit 'speech acts' of subjects, she draws attention to how the organisation of human and non-human networks into specific economic activities can also act as a form of agency. Thus, a focus on performativity does not mean that a study of design practitioners and their

enactment of practices neglects the notions of space, material objects, and time, since it specifically concerns itself with the spatial-materiality and temporality intrinsic to the domain of market agency. As Thrift (2000: 677) dissects Butler's concepts (1990, 1993), performativity is 'temporalized regulation and constant re-citation of norms,' embedded and worked through spaces. Butler highlights these dimensions in the following:

> Indeed, while the autonomy of the market is presumed as a necessity and a banality, we can still surely ask how that necessity and banality are established (performatively) through time, and how we understand the spatially distributed and temporally reiterative processes that characterize the performative agency of various institutions. (Butler, 2010: 148-149)

Following Butler, I argue that market and economy are not best thought of as presumed 'autonomous' systems produced *ex nihilo*. Rather, they should be understood as ideas of reality reconstituted by 'a series of discursive and non-discursive practices and institutions' through 'reiteration' over time (Butler, 2010: 148). In considering agency as performatively developed and traversed through human and non-human domains, this thesis attends to social relations and non-human elements like material space, objects, as well as institutionalised practices such as those developed by government bodies, educational systems, and corporations. If designers play a crucial role in the 'reiteration' process, facilitating market transactions by utilising their diverse knowledge and skills (Muniesa, Millo and Callon, 2007), the examples of interior designer practices presented in my study highlight this particular market role. They participate through designing spaces and objects, and engaging with project management and delivery methods. Their performative agency, in this sense, organises human and materials into the design

economy, through activities like client meetings, designing, presenting proposals, tender-bidding, budgeting, time control, and resource management. Although the relationship between design practitioners and market has received attention in economic sociology of market work and professional markets, it remains under-researched in the context of Chinese studies. With this study of design practitioners' practices, I aim to provide empirical evidence from China's hybrid system of late-socialist neoliberalism, and add insights to this ongoing discussion of performativity.

Another aspect of Butler's theory of performativity concerning the 'effects' of agency is useful to my thinking about the economic life, politics, and the contingent empirical circumstances associated with performativity (Cochoy, Giraudeau and McFall, 2010). According to Butler, performative agency results in two effects — the illocutionary and the perlocutionary. The distinction between these two effects is most relevant to my purpose here. Illocutionary performatives involve the actions of the subject who rely on the pre-established discourse of sovereign power to bring about the desired outcomes. Butler captures this idea when she notes, '…the codification and ritualization of that discourse precedes and makes possible the subject who speaks' (2010: 148). In terms of the design economy, the illocutionary effects of performativity manifest in the constitution of market agency through the intricate interplay of practices, relations and discourses that sustain regulatory norms. For example, the deployment of tailor-made market devices, such as showrooms, model flats, and sales centres, in which interior designers play a crucial role in sustaining the codes of marketing design, fashions, and structures of the markets for commodities. In these scenarios, market devices act as calculative catalysts unlocking attachment between individuals and things, establishing ties with individuals' internal states,

fostering desires and affections for goods, and enabling consumer judgment (Cochoy, Deville and McFall, 2017; Callon and Muniesa, 2005).

Perlocutionary performatives, on the other hand, concern an alteration of an ongoing situation when favourable conditions are in place, carried out within the framework of non-sovereign power. This conceptualisation is built on Butler's view of performativity as inherently structured to have the risk of breakdown or disruption (du Gay, 2010). Perlocution, thus, 'implies risk, wager, and the possibility of having an effect, but without any strong notion of probability or any possible version of necessity' (Butler, 2010: 151). This perspective can be traced back to Butler's conceptualisation of gendered subject and agency. For Butler (1995, 1997), reproduction of social norms can fail during subjection. It is through the process of 're-signification' that subjects' unconsciousness can transmute the norms and techniques of conduct associated with social constructs (such as gender and identities) into 'representations', thereby failing the disciplinary production of subjects, including gendered subjects (Rose, 1996a). In this sense, agency can emerge through re-signification. As Butler (1992: 13) puts, the 'subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process.'

This division of effects of performative agency is useful for understanding the practices and identities of design practitioners as entrepreneurial subjects. I do not presume that performativity, in the context of the interior design sector, only works to reiterate and reproduce dominant norms that govern their professional lives. Instead, I demonstrate how performativity encompasses a range of diverse practices, such as designing market devices, deploying project-specific strategies, doing non-profit design work, which yield illocutionary or perlocutionary effects. The favourable

conditions for perlocutionary perfomrative agency, in the cases that I studied, appear to be linked with the subjects' social networks, professional status, economic resources, and company direction and goals. These conditions enable design practitioners to pursue alternative practices while adhering to the dominant norms that govern the organisation of economic life within the boundaries set by the state. The findings demonstrate that both subjectification and the practices of resistance signal the workings of performativity. Based on these dual focuses, Butler's conceptual framework of performativity has been instructive in my attempt to situate the account of agency and practices under the socialist market economy.

In Chapter 2, I present a history of changing state policies towards design from the early modern period through the present to illustrate the important roles of the developments in and associated with the education system and the emergent design market in the formation of Chinese design professionals.

Chapter 2

History and City of Shenzhen

In the past few decades, the rise of modern design, which has come a long way since China's implementation of open-door reforms in 1978, aligns closely with the development observed in the city of Shenzhen. The parallel growth of Shenzhen's emergence as a city of experimentation and exceptionalism, and later as a hub for design and technological innovations, has provided flourishing opportunities for design practitioners. This points to the need to examine the intricate relationships between history, socio-economic change, urban transformation and governance practices that have shaped China's design sectors.

This chapter provides an overview of the history of modern design in China, exploring its significance as a subject matter in China's education and economy from the early twentieth century through the contemporary reform period. The formation of modern design and its evolution in the West that took place during the period spanning the mid-nineteenth to the twentieth centuries has given rise to the 'modern interior' that characterises modern life (Sparke, 2008a; 2008b). I examine the introduction of modern design in China from outside its geographical borders, and its subsequent local development. I then move to an introduction of the city of Shenzhen, the research site of this study. The intensification of Shenzhen's model city-building has contributed to its rapid urban growth, real estate development, and wider socio-economic transformation. The city's development as a model city has made interior design become part of the Chinese working life as a profession.

I.   Past and Current Visions of Modern Design

During my research, what stood out to me was the imprint of history over the diverse conceptions of design as a form of practice and profession. The relationship between design education, economy and culture has been subject to significant transformations. Delving into the development of China's modern design reveals the historical background of current practices, and the legacy of the past, as well as the changes that have occurred. The ways design practitioners approach their work entail an understanding of the genealogies, which refer to the 'school' or tradition to which their production adheres. These backgrounds inform their practices by offering essential or formative principles or qualities to guide their work (Born, 2010: 16, 25, 27). Tracing the historical roots of design education and the people involved illuminates the wider arenas that enter into the practices and create what Born and Wilkie (2015) called an 'alchemy of practice'. It shows how design cultures and practices are shaped over time.

The history of modern design education as a distinct discipline in China's higher education system is relatively brief (Xu, 2017). Modern design education was introduced in the early 1930s but was short-lived due to political upheavals. It was not until the 1980s that the curriculum for modern design education was reinstated. The transitioning from the realms of 'crafts' (*gongyi*), 'patterning' (*tu an*), 'art' (*meishu*), 'art design' (*yishu sheji*) to a focus on 'design' (*sheji*) has been a complex evolution that has shaped people's understanding of design in today's China. A discussion on the conceptions of design as a practice and a discipline is best started by tracing back to the notions of 'crafts', 'art' and 'decoration', which have a long legacy in the history of China's design education.

a.   1912-48: Design as a Nexus of Patterns, Art and Crafts in the Initial Era of Modern Design

Design has been long perceived by the Chinese state as largely a form of crafts and artistic practice (Tsui, 2016). The 'crafts school' was founded by the late-Qing government and served as an initial model for design education within the Chinese school system. During the Republican era (1912-1949), it evolved into a 'pattern education' model (Liu and Nah, 2020). For Chinese scholars, the term 'pattern' was taken to mean design, including graphic or motif design, encompassing design solutions and an understanding of materials. The introduction of foreign design concepts into China in the early twentieth century was facilitated by the Republican government's efforts to develop aesthetic education as part of China's self-modernisation initiatives. Chinese reformists, intellectuals, and educators were enthusiastic about modernising China through Western influences, viewing Chinese cultural traditions as barriers to progress. The belief in the potential for Western modernity and its approach to technology and aesthetics to enhance China's development paved the way for the introduction of modern design concepts into China and led to the establishment of the National School of Fine Arts of Beiping (now the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing) in 1918. This school included the first design-related programme under the advocacy of Cai Yuanpei, the Minster of Education who had received a Western education (Shen, 1998) and promoted the idea of 'saving the nation with art' (*meiyu jiuguo*) (Chu, 1998: 69).

This model of craft-pattern-based design was introduced to China by individuals who had studied in France and Japan (Tsui, 2016). Notably, individuals who studied in Japan were the primary channels through which the teaching and pedagogical principles of Bauhaus's system was introduced to China. Chen Zhifo,

who studied at the Pattern and Craft Department of the Tokyo Art School in 1918, became exposed to Bauhaus design precepts and brought modern design concepts back to China in 1923. As the director of the Pattern Design Department at the National Hangzhou School of Art (now the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou), established in 1928, Chen invited Japanese designers influenced by Bauhaus to serve as guest instructors, teaching basic modern design courses in 1929 (Zhang, 2019). During this phrase, design was seen as a method to reconcile the traditional methods of craftsmanship with emerging machine-based techniques (Liu and Nah, 2020). The dominant concept of design emphasised an art-based education with a focus on drawing (Lu, 2006), which had remained a core element of the design curriculum in China to this day.

The 1930s marked a period of expansion for Bauhaus concepts in Shanghai through various channels (Zhu, 2019). These developments were fuelled by the flourishing of professional education and the practice of modern architecture in the 1920s, as the first generation of Chinese architects trained abroad returned home and established practices (Rowe and Wang, 2011). Pioneers in the field of modern design include Liang Sicheng and Huang Zuoshen, both of whom studied at the Graduate School of Design (GSD) of Harvard University. Huang, who had studied under Walter Gropius, actively introduced Bauhaus concept into the curriculum, which laid the foundation for the development of modern design in China (Zhang 2019; China Design Museum, n.d.). Merging modernist design concepts with Chinese art, Zhang Guangyu, a commercial designer and illustrator, published *Modern Crafts and Arts* in 1932, which became the first theoretical publication in different areas of design and introduced Western design principles in China (Zhang, 2019; Bevan, 2015).

Modern design was also disseminated in China through Bauhaus-associated

architects, including Richard Paulick, Rudolf Paulick, and Walter Gropius, who were commissioned to do design work during the period from the 1920s to the 1940s (Zhang, 2019). Numerous local and foreign architecture firms designed buildings in the 'orthodox' modernist style, as noted by Rowe and Kuan (2002: 81). Design educators and practitioners in Shanghai also published works that discuss applied art, commercial art, and design in the 1920s and 1930s (Bevan, 2015). Accompanying these developments was the growing influence of movements such as *moderne* and *Art Deco*, promoted by architects such as Liu Jipiao, who had received training in Europe. In brief, the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century saw the growth of modern design in China through the transmission of ideas from more advanced economies, facilitated by overseas-returned elites and their initiatives in a context aspiring to modernise the nation and its economy (Wang, 1989), with a social vision of modern design (Zhu, 2019).

b.   1949-78: Design as Decorative Art and Crafts in Mao's era

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, commercial design underwent a shift towards an 'art and crafts model' that served to satisfy the demand for crafts in the planned economy. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1949-1976), who resisted capitalist values and the principles of Chinese literati culture, design was predominantly seen as decoration (*zhuanghuang* or *zhuangshi*), or decorative art, and handicrafts. This perspective is evident in the establishment of the first interior design department, named 'interior decoration design,' within the Central Academy of Art and Crafts by the communist government in 1956 (Ren, 2014). During this period, painting remained a core element in design education in which the socialist realist genre was promoted as the new national art form. Traditional Chinese

ink painting in the refined literati style known as *wenrenhua*, a dominant form of art prior to 1949, was denounced as 'feudal'. After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, during which decorative art primarily served propaganda purposes, art academies were reopened. Western-style oil painting took over as the primary focus of fine arts (*meishu*), and the Soviet Chiastakov drawing training system and the techniques of the Soviet expert Maksimov were reinstated as the fundamental parts of the curriculum (Chumley, 2016: 113). Throughout the years from 1949 to 1978, the dominant approach to design was grounded in the decorative basis of art and crafts, contrasting with the principles of Western modern design (Xu, 2017).

c. 1979-late 2000s: Design as Decoration and Art Design in Early Reform Era

As China adopted the open-door policy in 1978 and entered the reform era, the term design (known as '*Sheji*' in Chinese) became more widely accepted by the government in the 1980s, indicating a renewed interest in aligning the education approach with the western world. For example, the Central Academy of Art and Crafts was renamed as the Central Academy of Art and Design in 1986 (now the Academy of Art and Design at Tsinghua University). During the 1980s, the Bauhaus approach to design education was introduced from Hong Kong and experienced a resurgence (Wang, 2020; Lin, 2005). While the education system still placed emphasis on painting in the early 1980s, it gradually incorporated a standardised curriculum that provided modern design foundation courses, such as three-dimensional formulation (Lin, 2005). Some design programmes began to offer new courses, such as ergonomics (ibid). In the 1990s, the design industry started gaining momentum, particularly in the field of graphic design. The first national non-profit professional organisation for graphic design was set up in Shenzhen in 1995. Other design sectors

also began to grow as more design companies emerged. For example, Newsdays Design Construction Company was founded by a group of teachers from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1993. During the early stages of development in the 1980s to 1990s, there was, however, no clear distinction between art and design professions. In the field of interior design, an emerging interior 'decoration' industry took shape, rather than an interior 'design' industry. Interior design was often viewed as fit-out work done by construction-led decoration companies for projects such as hotels and large-scale public buildings, indicating that designers were subordinate to construction (SGDA, 2020b). During this time, Shenzhen emerged as a hub for decoration-related activities as reflected in the popular industry saying, 'National decoration is in the coastal areas; coastal decoration is in Guangdong; and Guangdong's decoration is in Shenzhen' (SGDA, 2020a). In 1998, while design was recognised as decoration, the design discipline was officially referred to as 'art design' in the Chinese Ministry of Education's Professional Directory of General Colleges and Universities.

Entering the twentieth-first century, some practitioners started to see the design profession as distinct from decoration and construction companies, leading to the emergence of independent design companies in China. Alongside local firms, non-local designers such as Steve Leung, an architect-interior designer from Hong Kong, entered the mainland China's market in 2000, diversifying the genres within the market with his modern design orientation. With China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2003, design's integration into the global economy and society was intensified. Chinese designers gained more exposure to global design through the internet and modernisation initiatives connected with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. As designers gained influence, the industry gradually separated interior design

from construction during the 2000s (SGDA, 2020b).

However, while modern interior design began to be recognised as distinct from decoration, in many cases design continued to play a supplementary role in value creation and was often used as a tool for embellishment or imitation of existing products (He and Xiao, 2014). Many interior design enterprises established during the 1990s and 2000s included the word 'decoration' in their names. Leo Luo, founder and design director of Now Architecture, a micro design enterprise, started his career journey as an interior designer in the city of Guangzhou in around 2007. He gave a testimony to the prevailing perception of design as decoration:

> In Guangzhou, most companies' designs were more focused on decoration, which differed from my understanding of design. You know, in Europe, design is more strategic, or it is about design logic. However, here it was a bit different. The idea of design was completely different from the actual design. […] At that time, I didn't have many choices, and most companies viewed design as decoration.

Luo's remarks corroborate the claims of design critics who argue that Chinese modern design suffers from a shortcoming — the confinement of Chinese design to the 'form design' level, a contrast to the attainment of the 'strategic design' level by Western design (Liu and de Bont, 2017). Critics attribute this limitation to the Chinese design education, which has historically focused on nurturing artistic skills through the traditional 'master-apprentice model' in Chinese handicrafts and neglect scientific and technical skills that are required for innovation (Peng, 2013). They argue that this has resulted in a limited ability to keep pace with the evolving demands of the industry and the relegation of creativity in the design production process (Wang, 2009, cited in Zeng, 2017: 6-8). Debates like these have persisted throughout this period and

propelled initiatives for reforms that recognise the more comprehensive role of design in the years to come.

d. 2010s - Present: Design as Services, Art and Decoration in Contemporary Era

> ......on the Chinese market, the dividing line between design and art is not as clear-cut.
> > – Luca Nichetto, a Venice-born designer who worked at a Chinese start-up Zaozuo for three years (Colombo, 2022)

Entering the second decade of the twentieth-first century, educators and officials began paying more attention to the difference between art education and design education (Liu and Nah, 2020: 112). There was a rising recognition of designers as a more specialised workforce in the economy. In 2012, the Ministry of Education elevated the status of design to a first-level discipline, although it is still under the discipline of art. Design was no longer named 'art design' (*yishu sheji*) to align the Chinese translation (*sheji*) with the English word design, reflecting the importance of design's role in cultivating innovation for national and city's competitiveness. This re-naming coincided with the design education reform that had taken place in some major tertiary design education institutions in 2012. Liu and Nah (2020) examined the case of design education reform within two major comprehensive universities and two art academies, which sought to address the demands for creative subjectivities by means of a more strongly 'problem-oriented' interdisciplinary curriculum, a project-based teaching mode, and closer connections with industry. For example, the Central Academy of Fine Arts's (CAFA) School of Design promotes deeper communication between students and their tutors, including

external design practitioners in studio-based teaching. Prior to this, students usually worked on conceptual design as their final year project rather than a real commercial project, and had little contact with the industry, as the teaching tended to separate actual practices and theory instead of seeing practices as having theoretical basis (Liu and Nah, 2020).

The reform was seen as a response to the criticism surrounding China's design education and training, which was perceived to have failed in keeping up with the industry's actual requirements, resulting in a widening gap between design education and industry demands (Liu and Nah, 2020). This criticism has prompted continuous introspection among Chinese design scholars, government officials, and stakeholders, as they seek solutions to address the challenges faced by the design education at higher education institutions (Wang, 2005; Peng, 2013), by paying more attention to the ideal type of subjectivities that should be made through diverse strategies.

The changes in approaching design as an industry are also reflected in the government's re-categorisation of design as an economic activity, which recognises the roles of design in driving the service industry, innovation, and cultural power. An apparent move is that the term 'design services' has become more frequently used by government bureaux to categorise designers' activities, diluting the emphasis on 'decoration' as China moved into the late 2010s. For example, the National Bureau of Statistics' renaming of categories of economic activities within culture-related industries shows that design has been recognised as generating economic values, demonstrating the state's pursuit of a 'culturally strong nation' (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In 2018, the National Bureau of Statistics revised its 'categories of culture-related industries' and classified 'interior decoration' as part of the 'architectural design services', along with 'building architectural construction',

'landscape construction activities', under the sub-category of 'design services' within the broader category of 'creative design services'. The revision also recognises that some of the activities of architectural design services, including interior design, contribute to its status as a partially culture-related industry.

Before this revision, the economic outputs produced by the interior design sector were solely put under the category of 'Building/ architectural decoration and renovation sector', as shown in the governmental document titled 'Industrial classification for national economic activities' (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In a similar approach, interior designer as an occupation is classified by the Ministry of Human Resources, Social security, and Professional Qualification Management (MOHRSS) as 'interior decoration designers', a type of designer under the small category of 'personnel in professionalised design services'. This category is classified within the sub-category of 'technical support personnel' under the umbrella category of 'personnel in social production services and life services' (Working committee for Classification Catalogue of Occupations, 2022). In this classification, interior design is viewed as involving the technical capability of applying materials and art to enhance the form and functions of interior space. The official classifications thus frame how interior design is practiced and perceived as a profession. In current circumstances, it is defined as having a dual focus — not just 'services' but also 'decoration', reflecting the strong underpinnings of design as decoration, an inheritance from Mao's era that continues to influence the official discursive practices.

II.   The Shenzhen Model and Design Capital

Analysing the relationship between designer-subject formation and the

historical process of Shenzhen's city-building highlights the significance of Shenzhen as a field for policy experimentation, resulting in a nexus of design firms, markets, and professionals. The city of Shenzhen, commonly regarded as the birthplace of China's contemporary design industry (UNESCO, 2009), is among China's first 'Special Economic Zones' (SEZs) established in the late 1970s. Today, it has evolved into a megacity with a population of over 10 million (Ministry of Housing and Urban-rural Development, 2017) and has become one of the four major cities, along with Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, where many design practitioners are concentrated (Chen and Liang, 2015). Often nicknamed the 'Silicon Valley of China', it positions itself not only as a technological hub where the headquarters of major Chinese corporations, such as Tencent, BYD, and Vanke, are located, but also as a metropolis inhabited by high-end talents and driven by innovation-led economic growth (Ni and Kamiya, 2019: 5). Such development is in line with the state's visions.

In 2010, China introduced the 'Innovation-Driven Strategy' as a key component of its national development plan, leading to various policy measures enacted, such as 'Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation' in 2014 and 'Made in China 2025' in 2015. These policies aimed to bolster China's capacity for independent innovation and manufacturing power and drive its economy forward in the face of economic slowdown and global competition. In 2020, the government unveiled a new reform plan that aimed at transforming Shenzhen into a 'demonstration area of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the next five years', with the ultimate goal of establishing it as a 'national model of high-quality development' by 2035. This plan envisions Shenzhen as a thriving hub of innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity with international influence (Xinhua News Agency, 2020). Under this plan, design plays a pivotal role in Shenzhen's endeavour to maintain its status as a model city.

O'Donnell, Wong and Bach (2017: 1) noted, 'The production of policy through the production of 'model'— model people, model factories, model villages — is a classic feature of socialist governance'. From a historical perspective, the process of city-building of Shenzhen has become a 'model' for the Chinese regime since the late 1970s till today. China's governance is characterised by Maoist socialist, nationalist, and developmentalist approaches with the contemporary market-oriented principles of 'market socialism' during the era of economic liberalisation (Nonini, 2008). For the central government, Shenzhen's role as a SEZ is a tabula rasa (empty space) and a testing ground from where successful practices can spread to other parts of the country. It was selected as a SEZ because of its proximity of Hong Kong, a major participant in the global finance sector and a then British Colony (until 1 July 1997) that China could take advantage of to accomplish its national goals (O'Donnell, 2017; H. Zhang, 2008). In this model-in-the-making project, the logic of the zone governs SEZs, including Shenzhen, to serve as 'a site of economic planning that enhances the global circulation of goods and the accumulation of capital, and 'a version of imagination of the modern rational city with an inherent civilizing mission' (Bach, 2017: 23). Post-Mao Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's 'southern tour' to Shenzhen in 1992 consolidated the vital role of Shenzhen as the crucible of 'socialist market economy' and experiments in reform policies, which became stagnant due to Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 (Sigley, 2006).

Many senior designer-entrepreneurs similarly viewed Shenzhen as the origin of post-Mao interior design because of its role as a focal point of transmission and diffusion of design currents during the 1980s and 1990s. Dr. Ni Yang, founder of Jishang Construction Group and former president of Shenzhen Institute of Interior Design (SIID), traced the emergence of an interior design sector in Shenzhen to the

individuals 'who went to Hong Kong to take up interior design and came back to Shenzhen after they noticed the potential of development in the mainland' (SDPA, 2016). These individuals not only 'brought back the design methods and concept from Hong Kong but also 'encouraged their fellows in their hometowns to move to Shenzhen' (SDPA, 2016). He Xiaoning, President of SIID, also witnessed this transmission. She noted:

> I came back to Shenzhen in 1995 after studied in Japan, at a time when China's real estate market just started. Shenzhen must have been the first city in China to start interior design. One of the biggest advantages was that Shenzhen was close to Hong Kong. It borrowed a lot of ready-made experience from Hong Kong, and brought the 'neoclassical design style', which was popular in Hong Kong, to many cities in China. (SCCDA, 2021: 28)

It was the proximity to Hong Kong that permitted this transmission of commercial design through Shenzhen to other parts of China. Besides, Shenzhen's cheap production costs and status as an export processing zone attracted investors including those from Hong Kong, who not only contributed to the development of Shenzhen's manufacturing industries, but also the industrial design, graphic design, product design and advertising industries that served the manufacturers, including multinational corporations, in the Pearl River Delta since the 1980s (Liauw, 2012). In its early developmental stage, Shenzhen's export-oriented industrialisation, the ensuing rural-urban migration and improved telecommunications infrastructure drove its rapid urbanisation (Ni and Kamiya, 2019; Huang, 2017). Dou and Chen's (2017) study on the land use expansion of Shenzhen indicates that during the period 1988-2015, Shenzhen's built-up area has increased from 5.63 percent in 1988 to 41.77 percent in 2015. The period 1996-2005 was described as the 'rapid development'

phase, when urbanisation growth mainly took place outside the SEZ area, followed by the 'intensive' phrase (2005–2015), during which Shenzhen's limited urban lands contributed to a slower city growth (Dou and Chen, 2017). The growth mindset of the state has contributed to a series of policies that shaped the real estate industry into an urban growth engine within a new framework of the housing market. Examples include the initial land auctions that took place in Shenzhen in 1978, and the introduction of real estate trading and the implementation of pilot programs in specific metropolitan regions in 1982 (Ren and Folmer, 2022). Certain developments of large residential complexes were financed by the national government in the 1980s.

The 1980s also marked the beginning of Shenzhen's spatial design education, with Shenzhen University's department of architecture established in 1983 and its students participated in building the campus. With the arrival of spatial design professionals in Shenzhen, talent mobility provided the Shenzhen's market with the expertise brought by architects and construction companies from Hong Kong and overseas, as well as Beijing-based architects and engineers connected with Shenzhen branch of Beijing Institute of Architectural design, who moved to Shenzhen to work on projects. These developments laid the foundation for the development of the interior design sector.

The permission for the establishment of private corporations in 1988, a decade into the reform process, serves as another key defining moment that led to the growth of design companies in China. While initially only private sole proprietorships were allowed, limited liability companies were introduced as a new type of business entity in the 1993 Company Law. Additionally, it was only until 1994-95 that China reintroduced the architect registration system, which had been absent for a span of more than forty years. This change allows architects to obtain licensure and their

establishment of private design firms, leading to their rapid growth and a subsequent increase in their market share, alongside the state-owned design institutes (Zhu, 2013). The consequence of these developments is that the design landscape in China has become more diversified since the mid-to-late 1990s, encompassing a range of entities and actors, including state-owned design institutes, private companies, and foreign spatial designers. Notably, hybrid collaborations have arisen, allowing Chinese designers to frequently partner with their international counterparts for knowledge exchange and learning (ibid).

Two other drastic changes in national housing and land policy contributed to the growth of the interior design sector. The year 1998 marked the first turning point in housing market when China implemented housing reforms to privatise and marketise its housing system, including the privatisation of public housing, ending socialist housing allocation and subsidised rental housing, and promoting private housing development and homeownership (Huang, He and Gan, 2021). The second significant point was the year 2003, which marked the beginning of a real estate boom that was spurred by the central government's promotion of the sector. The State Council emphasised real estate as a key pillar industry of the economy, leading to the adoption of land auctions for all residential and commercial land leases. At the same time, local governments prioritised the construction of commercial housing over affordable housing due to the revenue generated from land sales. All these reasons set the favourable conditions for the growth of commercial housing market, and thus the interior design market, which developed rapidly from 1998 to 2015. Interior design economy is subject to the ebbs and flows of housing — a key consumption good and investment asset in China, where boasts one of the highest rates of homeownership in the world (Huang, He and Gan, 2021; Zhang, 2010), with homeownership rates

exceeding 90 per cent (Yi and Huang, 2014; Chen and Zhang, 2022). This contributes to a growing China's commercialised real estate market, which can be reflected in a significant increase of new housing across metropolitan areas from 6.10 million square metres per year (2001-2006) to 11.18 million square metres per year (2007-2015) (Ren and Folmer, 2022). Accompanying this was a drastic increase of average real house price since 1998, which has increased by approximately 2.5-fold from 1,854 RMB per square metre in 1998 to 6,473 RMB per square metre in 2015 (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2016, cited in Ren and Folmer, 2022: 2117).

As a result of these developments, there was an optimistic milieu that believed in the industry's potential for continued success and expansion. The profession of interior designers became highly sought after, attracting interest from individuals seeking career transitions during this period. Statistics highlight such a positive outlook for the interior design industry. In 2008, the average annual value created per person in interior design companies across the country amounted to 430,000 RMB. Notably, the top 5 companies stood out by generating an impressive average value of 2.44 million RMB per person annually (SGDA, 2020b). Furthermore, the same year witnessed a promising trend in terms of growth rates. The most promising interior design companies in China experienced an average annual growth rate of 5 per cent. Among them, the top 6 companies showcased exceptional performance, achieving an average annual growth rate of 36 per cent (ibid). Nevertheless, the interior design industry is affected by government intervention in the form of market regulation policy. The real estate growth was slowed down since 2017, when the central government set to prioritise state intervention under the principle of 'Housing should be for living, not for speculation,' proposed by the National Congress in October 2017. Following this were steps taken to address high demand, excessive

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construction, and soaring home prices. This included tighter mortgage terms, restrictions on multiple-home ownership. For example, Shenzhen became the first city in China to implement 'the guidance price for second-hand properties' in February 2021, which has led to a significant reduction in the transaction volume of second-hand homes. In explaining the negative impacts of this policy, one co-founder and creative director of a small design company in Shenzhen expressed: 'It is quite challenging. The proportion of middle-class client is decreasing […]. Overall, there is a decrease in the total quantity [of clients]' (R22). The interior design sector relies on a vibrant residential housing market because residential properties tend to have the largest share in the real estate market in China, compared to office and retail spaces. In first-tier cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the residential sector occupies around two-thirds of real estate market on average, with the office sector accounting for approximately 19 per cent, and the retail sector occupying the lowest percentage at 15 per cent in 2015. Of the four cities, Shenzhen has the largest residential sector, comprising nearly 75 percent of the real estate market (see Table 1).

Overall, design businesses in Shenzhen have seen continuous growth in the last forty years. 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).

Composition of real estate markets in ten cities in China (2015)
Unit: %

	Residence	Office	Retail
First-tier cities			
Beijing	58.10	27.64	14.26
Shanghai	61.77	22.30	15.93
Guangzhou	71.27	11.65	17.09
Shenzhen	74.84	13.25	11.91
Average	66.50	18.71	14.79
Second-tier cities			
Tianjin	77.82	6.70	15.48
Nanjing	82.35	6.61	11.04
Hangzhou	70.19	14.02	15.79
Wuhan	78.08	8.28	13.63
Chongqing	74.46	6.34	19.19
Chengdu	71.56	8.33	20.11
Average	75.74	8.38	15.87

Table 1. Distribution of local real estate markets based on three different uses: residences, offices, and retail spaces, in China's first-tier and second-tier cities in 2015 (Source: Tsai and Chiang, 2019).

Practitioners aged between 23 to 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).[2] Another survey of 21,706 interior design

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[2] 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

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).[3] 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.

In this chapter, I have sketched an overview of Chinese history in relation to the development of modern design to highlight the historicity of the design sector. It has analysed how these complex relations between reform policies, economy and culture have shaped the emergence of design practitioners and Shenzhen design consultancies, as well as their understanding of design as a professional practice. In the next chapter, I consider more specifically the question of human capital cultivation in Shenzhen and develop an argument that the design subject is not only being produced by both the state apparatus at the local level and privately-owned companies at the organisational level but is also self-made.

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cent and included designers from both districts to ensure representation of Shenzhen's dominant interior design areas.

[3] 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.

Chapter 3

The Designer as Human Capital

This chapter examines the turning of designers into human capital in Shenzhen through governing strategies as well as work and organisational norms. As discussed briefly in the Introduction, the opportunities and challenges that these design practitioners faced throughout their careers over the course of history were influenced by the broader development of *dispositif.* Foucault (1980 [1977]: 194) described *dispositif* as an apparatus that includes various elements such as 'discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulations, laws, and administrative measures', which are deployed as a technique of power directed over social and economic aspects of life. The state's interests in cultivating human capital and promoting the economy, following the legalisation of private-owned enterprises in 1988, has led to the promotion of a new worker subjectivity. This was particularly evident through the promotion of self-enterprising culture since 1990 and the expansion of higher education since the late 1990s. Market practices of competition and choice created spaces for the emergence of 'new petite bourgeoisie' as private entrepreneurs, who comprise the majority of the design practitioners in this study. Embodying an entrepreneurial subjectivity but also a sensitivity to the deployment and acquisition of cultural capital to succeed as taste makers, these individuals play a major role in governing and shaping design subjects.

Further along these developments, there were debates about the expansion and quality of design higher education, as well as changes in the design education curriculum. Most individuals who are at the heart of this study started to receive

design-related education at higher education institutions and joined the industry during the 2000s and early 2010s, with a minority brought into the profession in the mid-to-late-1990s. Their intellectual formation, nurturing of aesthetic practices and skills are linked closely with the changing pedagogy provided by the state's education institutions and those in the private sector through which design professionals are produced.

I show that the expansion of design higher education has not only sustained design as low-threshold jobs but also reinforced an exam-based system that assesses and emphasises technical drawing abilities through 'unified art tests' and 'art institute tests,' along with the development of an exam preparation industry that nurtures these skills. These developments strengthened the state-sanctioned pedagogy through state-run art and design programmes by emphasising realist drawing and painting skills as prerequisites for designers. On the other hand, a new emphasis on non-drawing or painting techniques emerged with the 'art institute tests' reform initiated by prestigious art institutes in 2015. This reform changed the evaluation regime by introducing a new, extra test subject — design — alongside the standard realist painting and drawing tests. This change aimed to assess students choosing the design track on not just technical competence but also on their improvisation and self-expression. In this process, private design training schools devoted to design software training have emerged. They become alternative sites for producing design subjects.

While the economic values of design services in the cultural economy have been recognised by the state and professionalisation initiatives have been developed to certify interior designers in response to the market demand for design services, design practitioners held differing opinions on the need for certification of their profession due to the concerns about practicality and usefulness. Nevertheless, there

was a higher level of importance assigned to design practitioners in Shenzhen's policy framework with the expansion of design economy, incentivisation for attracting and retaining talent, and the extension of design education in China through the higher education system and private institutions.

I. Incentivisation and Cultivation of Design Talents

The human capital, often referred to as *rencai* in Chinese, is cultivated at different levels through which Shenzhen can sustain its role as a model city as deployed by the state. Shenzhen's *dispositif* is rooted in the ideological programme called 'Shenzhen spirit' in 1990 that aims to create new ideal subject by directing urbanites and migrant workers towards embracing a culture of entrepreneurial self and 'material and spiritual civilization'. This *dispositif* highlights desirable individual qualities such as self-autonomy, risk-taking and competition, and also the building of socialist market economy and a model of new post-Mao era subject known as 'the four-haves person' — 'a new person with ideals, culture, ethics, and discipline' that is shaped by the party-state's efforts to normalise and discipline social groups (Florence, 2017).

Designers are increasingly viewed as human capital by the Shenzhen municipal government since the early 2010s, making design jobs more promising in their outlook. They are presented with opportunities and incentives, including rewards, as the government has sought to attract more talents to settle and stay in the city. One established designer told me that he was listed as a 'leading talent' by the government and had received a generous cash award of a total 2 million RMB over 5 years (R13). This award was granted as a subsidy under Shenzhen's 'High-Level

Talent Plan', a government initiative launched in 2017 to foster talent cultivation in the city through incentivisation.[4] Another example is the Shenzhen municipal government's implementation of 'Measures to Accelerate the Development of the Industrial Design Industry' in 2012, which stipulated that designers who received international design awards such as the German iF Award and the Red Dot Award would be awarded a cash prize of 50,000 RMB, and the gold prize winner would be awarded a cash prize 500,000 RMB (Xu, 2020: 29). Government's talent cultivation strategies in the form of monetary rewards were viewed as a bonus by aspiring design practitioners. One designer, whom I interviewed and won an iF Award and a Red Dot Award, told that he was awarded 50,000 RMB and 200,000 RMB by the government. He commented: '[Shenzhen] is comparatively more concerned about design, and [its] support for design is also a bit larger than other cities. In terms of attracting talents, say, if you are a top-tier talent, you will be given some subsidies if you move to Shenzhen for work and live. I think this is Shenzhen's biggest advantage' (R7).

Apart from the state, education institutions are sites of *dispositif* that turn design practitioners into a new subject and workforce, as they supply the market with appropriate labour. State-run art and design schools served as the foundation for nurturing and developing creative individuals as human capital, while also fostering the expansion of 'aesthetic communities' and networks comprising culture professionals (Chumley, 2016). To understand the significance of design higher education that shapes the educational background of the individuals in this study and the jobs they are performing, it is important to have a sense of its recent development.

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[4] This incentive programme is different from the 'Peacock Talent Plan', an initiative devised by the government in 2011, aiming to draw in highly skilled individuals and elites from abroad (foreign citizens and Chinese nationals) through offering various attractive subsidies and employment benefits, and privileged access to immigration services and subsidised housing as incentives.

The phenomenal proliferation of design education during the first decade of the twentieth-first century had expanded the size of a creative workforce, creating a more competitive environment for designers and exacerbating the role of pedagogy as a site for cultivation of talent in higher education. According to Xu (2017: 50) and Peng (2013), the government introduced education reform in the late 1990s to expand China's higher education, shifting to the model of mass higher education, with the aim to develop a post-industrial knowledge economy (Chumley, 2016). Against this background, design education has expanded amidst a market environment with increased demand for industrial upgrading and design talents in the rapidly developing manufacturing industry. Apart from the 'big nine' art academies, all types of universities in China, including comprehensive universities, engineering universities, agricultural and forestry universities, geological universities, and financial universities, have opened departments of art and design, offering undergraduate programmes in design specialties, contributing to an education bubble where there is an oversupply of graduates and resulting in an increased competition for limited job opportunities (Peng, 2013).

According to Min Wang (2020) from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), there were fewer than ten design education programs available in China in 1978, while in 2018, the number had surged to over 1500. Similarly, there were less than 1000 students studying design in 1978 (Wang, 2020). But in 2009, the number of students studying art and design in Chinese universities exceeded those studying science, math, education, economics, law, and agriculture, with a total of over 1 million out of nearly 19 million students (Ministry of Education, 2011, cited in Chumley, 2016). In the early 2010s, the number of design students in China increased significantly. According to the China Design Education Survey conducted by the

Central Academy of Fine Arts, in 2010 there were around 1.4 million design students (including those in Tertiary Vocational Education Schools) (Peng, 2013). This number had grown to approximately 2.3 million undergraduate design students in China by 2012, as reported in an unreleased research report based on the survey conducted by the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Liu and de Bont, 2017). In 2012, around 2000 institutes and universities offering art and design programmes (Vision Union, 2015; China Education Daily, 2016, cited in Xu, 2017: 50). In 2022, the number of art and design students (including those in Tertiary Vocational Education Schools) exceeded the number of students studying science, education, economics, law, and agriculture, with around 1.8 million out of nearly 19 million students enrolled in the former field (Ministry of Education, 2023).

The availability of design programmes at higher education has several important implications and impacts. First, it bolstered the inclusivity of design programmes and sustained its low-barrier to entry as a profession. The availability of a larger number of design programmes, whose entrance scores are much lower compared to other academic schools or majors like engineering or business, had made design one of the most popular majors at universities. One consequence is that it has supplied the labour market with a group of young people who might have treated design programmes as an instrumental route for earning a university degree that facilitates social mobility.

Second, it intensified state-sanctioned pedagogy as spaces for deploying the *dispositif* of creativity, particularly through emphasising realist painting and drawing skills. The expansion of design programmes has reinforced the dominance of an exam-based system that tests mainly technical drawing skills, which differs from the portfolios-centred admission process at U.S. art institutes. Besides the foundational

design education, a big part of the intellectual formation of designers who received design or art training at state-run institutions is also constituted by and through the private exam prep schools called *huaban* (also commonly called *huashi*) that groom the required technique-focused skills. Any interior designers who graduated from state-run design programmes, such as product design (textile), decoration art design, visual communications, and environment art design, had to complete the unified art admission test, which included tasks related to realist drawing, including 'chiaroscuro portraits, impressionist still life, and sketches' (Fang, 2020), in order to get in the design programmes at the undergraduate level. It is estimated that around half a million students in China take the unified art tests every year (ibid). Prep schools, dedicated to Soviet-style genres of socialist realist drawing, served as sites for preparing for this exam, focusing on manual-technical drawing skills. The classes involved learning the skills primarily through copying images, making sketches and color drawings, drawing live figures and objects, using copybooks, and making plaster busts, typically over the course of eight months to several years (ibid; Chumley, 2016). While they offer general art history knowledge (Fang, 2020), they tend to neglect the interpretations of realist genres, as with the copybooks that students buy that offer no analyses of the historical or aesthetic meaning behind the genres (Chumley, 2016). As Chumley (2016: 61) has argued, this system of art tests and its interdependent relationship with the businesses within the exam prep industry has 'increasingly disconnected from the new aesthetics and new technologies of the visual culture industries in China.'

Another criticism concerns accusations that the art test preparation industry stifled students' creativity and individuality, leading to the reform of art tests at art

institutes in 2015.[5] Esteemed art institutes such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) introduced a substantial overhaul of their art tests that incorporated design as a new test subject and placed a greater emphasis on evaluating individual expression, improvisation, and creativity in interpreting textual and/or visual materials (Fang, 2020).[6] This transformation compelled art test prep schools to incorporate design into their traditionally technique-oriented curriculum with an emphasis on instructing students in showcasing their uniqueness and distinctiveness (ibid). Fang's (2020) study on art test prep classes in China indicated that the 2015 reform gave rise to an 'aesthetic socialisation' that emphasises both competence (in meeting technical standards) and differentiation (by unlearning realist drawing skills to differentiate from conventions) that art students need to demonstrate in 'art institute tests'.

Third, the examination system continues to reinforce the notion that high proficiency in fine art, particularly drawing skills, is prerequisite for design. For instance, some universities have introduced topics such as 'design fundamentals' as part of the admission tests for design programmes that focus on requiring students to demonstrate their hand-drawing skills in response to questions about two-dimensional and three-dimensional drawing. What is perhaps noteworthy is that these drawing exams not only provide a foundation but also cultivate a disposition for art, which significantly influences designers' approach to design. For example, Wang Zhenjin, a designer born in the post-1990s whom I interviewed and studied drawing in a *huaban* and design in a vocational school, shared how her experience in attending a *huaban* in Beijing shaped her aesthetic taste and understanding. She realised that 'color selection

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[5] 'Art institute tests' (*xiaokao*) are taken by candidates who have passed the unified art tests and wish to be considered for admission to higher-level art schools (Fang, 2020).
[6] The designers interviewed in this study were not the cohorts admitted to the art institutes in or after 2015.

practice' adopted in Northern China's drawing style aligned more closely with her own aesthetic preferences. She noted,

> In Beijing's drawing rooms, you can meet people with various drawing styles, habits, and perspectives. Through exchanges with friends and classmates, you can undergo a subtle transformation in terms of aesthetic judgment and understanding.

At the same time, the limited emphasis on software training and digital drawing skills offered in state-run universities, particularly in art academies, has led to the emergence of non-state-operated design classes and design enterprises as alternative sites for producing design subjects. As discussed in the previous section, major design higher education providers have initiated efforts to improve their models of teaching and curriculum design to adapt to the social changes and to meet the changing expectations of design graduates and employers. Although some design programmes within institutions like CAFA have introduced new curricula that emphasise the integration of art, design, and technology (Chen and Guo, 2011), training in design software and digital drawing often receives limited attention. Many interviewees who received design education in art academies and comprehensive universities told that they had to self-learn design software, such as AutoCAD and Sketch Up, and develop their skills through real-world work experiences. Others, including Edda (pseudonym), a young designer born in the post-90s era whom I met during my fieldwork in Shenzhen, opted to enroll in an intensive design software training course run by a private company to acquire the skills.

The experience of Edda, who joined a small design enterprise in 2019 as a design assistant, illustrates how design cram schools contribute to the diversification of design workforce. Edda, originally a finance major who graduated in 2018, was not

interested in pursuing a career in the finance industry. After graduation, she enrolled herself in a one-year interior design software course offered by a private design education provider called 'Create Perfect Design'. The school, founded by teachers who graduated from Guangzhou Fine Art Academy and had practical design experience, aimed to address the issue of many art academy graduates 'struggling to find employment due to a lack of necessary digital skills' (Private conversation on 22 August 2019). Although Edda paid a tuition fee of around 18,000 RMB for the one-year course, the experience has equipped her not just digital skills but also a design portfolio, a crucial component of her CV that helped her secure her current job as a design assistant. Similar courses can be found in other big cities like Shanghai, where aspiring students who are interested in becoming interior designer can enrol in intensive design training courses on interior design that are taught by teachers from Tongji University, renowned for its schools of architecture and design in China.

Edda's case illustrates how private design course providers have transformed the perception of design education and created new pathways for individuals to join the interior design workforce, thus fostering inclusivity within the profession. Their emergence has played a role in advancing the country's design industries. Additionally, this example shows that possessing a bachelor's degree in design or a related field is not necessarily a prerequisite for securing interior design jobs in certain design companies, leading to increased competition within the industry.

II.   The Politics of Professionalisation

Ambivalently, the notion of professionalisation through certification did not resonant very much with design practitioners that I interviewed, despite that interior design is regarded as a low-threshold job that novices with different degrees of design

training can undertake, as commentaries have shown and individual designers have mentioned. During my research, in both formal interviews and informal conversations, it is clear that interior designers tended to have weak motivation for professionalising their practice through certification. The primary reason is that the two key businesses — interior design and small-scale architecture design (typically one to two storeys) — do not require interior designers to be certified. Unlike the architect profession, which has formalised processes of career development linked to certification, interior designers do not need a licence to practice interior design nor to advance their career in the field.[7] Second, the current system of certification is rather fragmented. Besides government bodies, there are several professional bodies/associations which issue certificates for interior designers, such as Institute of Interior Design of the Architectural Society of China (IID-ASC), China National Interior Decoration Association (CIDA), and China Institute of Interior Design (CIID) (Ren, 2014). Designers did not feel the need to push forward certification as a means for professionalisation because they considered the quality, credibility and authority of certification organisations to be not high enough. Liu Wanwan, co-founder and creative director of Lanmao Design who established her company in 2016, shared this view. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in visual communications at Xinyang Normal University in 2013. Without having a certificate or degree in interior design, she expressed that it was not beneficial to get certified for her profession as an interior designer under the current system:

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[7] As specified by the national laws in China, architects need to have academic qualifications in architecture, or its related discipline such as engineering, and specific length of work experience, in order to be considered for national certification for registered architects (which are composed of Grade 1 and Grade 2 registered architects). Only licenced architects can undertake large architectural projects, and hence the licencing system upholds the professional status of architects.

I don't think it's really necessary. Why? Well, because I don't feel the need for it. It could be because I don't sense the qualification would be helpful for our current work. Or maybe it's [lacking] a more professional criterion for evaluation. Currently, we don't have such a quality […]; there is no standard in place.

Similarly, another design practitioner believed that having a certified qualification or a professional title can be 'bonus points' in some projects that prioritise technical skills, but the overall values were limited. He believed that the architect licence contains much greater values than these certificates (R2).

A major reason for the low motivation for certification is that the idea of 'standardisation' through certification is not viewed as important as the market's emphasis on 'differentiation' (*cha yi hua*) — the idea of gaining a competitive advantage by setting apart oneself from competitors through unique and distinctive design elements. For many designers, it was the clients who endorse the distinctiveness of one's design and have the positional authority to judge their professionalism. Sharing this attitude was Tom, a Taiwanese designer and co-founder of Hejidesign, a small design company based in Shenzhen. As he observed:

Clients tend to be the major ones who maintain professionalism [of designers]. That's the current situation in the country. […] It's more challenging for them [designers] to obtain professional qualifications or certification. They can only pursue certifications related to basic professional skills […]. It becomes difficult to assess their creativity, and this creates a conflict. I think it's because creativity cannot be easily quantified, making it challenging to evaluate seriously.

Like Tom, other designers I spoke with also believed that personal taste, creativity and aesthetic judgement cannot be measured by standardised assessment. Li Yuan, designer at Peng and Partners Design, echoed this view, as he said: 'Many people with

art training background can produce designs that are much better than professional designers. I just feel that there is no standard for this. If you really want to talk about a standard, it would be your logical ability, your aesthetic level, but these are things that cannot be judged.' The lack of perceived instrumental values of certification is coupled with the problem of commodification of credentials in China's interior design industry. Some designers claimed that certain titles associated with interior design associations can be bought for self-branding. Therefore, scepticism has grown within the design community over individual's titles and certificates associated with interior design associations as a genuine validation of professionalism in the industry.

While designers in my study display rather limited interest in certification as a professionalisation project, the government has attempted to centralise the certification system. In 2023, the 'National Occupational Standards for Interior Decoration Designers (2023 Edition)' was jointly promulgated by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MHURD), which commissioned the China National Interior Decoration Association (CIDA) to compile the standards. The official document standardises the requirements for the fundamental skills and knowledge of interior designers of different levels of experience, and also practitioners' professional conduct, aiming to guide the direction of vocational education and training, and provide a basis for vocational skill assessment' (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2023). The newly introduced standards include a five-level occupational skills assessment system, which was previously a three-level system, providing certification of qualifications to individuals who passed the assessment consisting mainly of exams. This professionalising project for interior design appears to take cues from some of the elements of 'major' professions (Glazer, 1974) that

have 'normative curricula' and 'norms of conduct' to create a professional culture for interior design and its own discursive structures (Julier, 2008). While the level of recognition this qualification can receive remains to be seen, the attempt serves largely as a reference-standard for educators and companies since the assessment and certification for interior design practitioners is not mandatory.

Although the pay structures of interior designers are largely market-driven, this does not mean that design fees for projects undertaken by interior design firms are not competitive. Rather their design fees received for privately-owned projects, such as real estate sales centres and luxury villas, can be generous.[8] Compared to interior designers focusing on privately-owned projects influenced by market forces, licensed architects working on projects for government departments and state-owned enterprises that are bounded by a regulatory environment have raised more concerns about their design fees and advocated for more reasonable treatment (Creative China 2049 Intelligent Mapping Platform, 2023; Zhang, 2021). Their design fees are typically calculated as a small percentage of the total construction project cost, based on the guidelines and fees standards developed by the government. While their fees levels are negotiated with clients, architects argue that the design fees have remained low, especially in small-scale projects with high complexity level, and have not kept up with societal changes (Creative China 2049 Intelligent Mapping Platform, 2023; Zhang, 2021). It is especially so when compared to their foreign counterparts (Kvan, Liu and Jia, 2008).

Han Jin, licensed architect and co-founder of ARCity Office who specialises in

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[8] A typical interior design fee is determined based on the gross floor area. Design firms often establish their fee per square metre as a benchmark for clients' reference, negotiation and adjustment, taking into account the specific project requirements and scope. When tendering for a real estate interior design project, design firms are considered based on their tender documents, which include details about the firms, the qualifications of staff, number of years of experience, design portfolio, etc.

old and small building renovation and urban micro-renovation projects, has expressed dissatisfaction with the minimal fees with state-owned projects. She pointed out that the fees level failed to reflect the actual time and human costs involved. When discussing the design fees for micro-renovation projects, ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of RMB, she told, 'It's absurd that some designers find their design fees equivalent to the price of a 'flame tree' in the park. [laughter]. Our years' worth of design fees still can't catch up to the value of a single tree'. ARCity Office's co-founder Zhang Yuxing (2021) criticised that the low design fees almost 'made human value less than the value of objects.'

III.   Design Companies and Human Capital Cultivation

Corporation's organisational strategies serve as a *dispositif* that encourages entrepreneurial subjectivities within China's interior design industry. This *dispositif* took many forms; but the most significant and notorious form is its normalisation of long working hours. A survey conducted by CBNData in 2020 reported that '80% of designers have an average working time exceeding eight hours, over 50% often work overtime and stay up late.' Designer-entrepreneurs of small design enterprises in my study have generally set working hours for employees as 10 AM to 10 PM. Based on my participant observation at a micro interior design enterprise in Shenzhen, designers might get off work at around 7 PM if there were no urgent tasks to finish; but staying in late night at work is common. Some designers of the post-80s and 90s generations have reported working over ten hours per day and sacrificing their holidays, giving rise to a saying: 'There is no time to even dream, not to mention taking days off' (Sina Home and Aijia Home, 2019; DesiDaily, 2020b). Some bigger companies had a bit longer working hours, but set 11 PM as the limit, as one

interviewee told about this rule established in these companies, '[Now] you need to leave before 11 PM. In the past, there were no rules set, and it was possible to stay until the late hours of the night. You need to create values' (R9). As there is commonly no overtime work salary in the interior design sector in mainland China, long working hours are routinised as a practice to supply 'surplus labour' to drive company's productivity and perfect design. This *dispositif* directs employees to willingly make personal sacrifices for the sake of the company's success. One designer half-jokingly said: 'the overtime in this industry is quite intense, so if you don't enjoy it, it's difficult to persevere. It also helps to have a better physical condition [laughter]' (R13).

This overtime work culture is also embedded in the larger framework of identity regulation in some big corporations in China. J&A, a large-scale design enterprise in Shenzhen, drew on the rhetoric adopted by Chinese political leaders to emphasise the spirit of *fendou* (or 'struggle' as a striver), which literally means hard working and fighting to achieve something in English, as a quality of a subject that they look for in employees. It was deployed to align the company's values with the *fendou* culture promoted by other multinational Shenzhen-based corporations like Huawei and by the Shenzhen Municipal Government. As Davy Liu, General Manager of commercial ventures (Design Department) of J&A, told: '[Like Huawei]…our firm also advocates for 'strivers'. You come to our firm not to live out your retirement or have fun, but to embark on a venture and contribute to the development of this industry, as well as contribute to the firm's values' (R10).

Fendou has an ideological connotation as it was frequently utilized by Xi Jiping in his speeches and featured in Chinese Community Party's (CCP) discourses, such as its 'struggling goals' (*fendou mubiao*), emphasising competitiveness of

individuals that are needed to fulfil national and individual goals (Fumian, 2020). Lai et al. (2020) argue in their case study that the term *fendou,* which can be dated back to a work by the then CCP Chairman Mao Zedong in 1936, has been incorporated into the discourses of organisational practices underpinned by nationalist rationales in some Chinese corporations to legitimise the overtime work culture and hence employee's non-paid overtime work (Lai et al., 2020). This supports what Lisa Hoffman (2010:17) points out in her research on urban professional subjects and governmentality in post-Mao China that 'political norms cultivated in the Maoist era have not been fully supplanted by neoliberal ones'. Identity, in this sense, can be referred to as a 'dimension of organizational control' that entails 'identity work' in the form of discursive practice as a technique of the self (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 620-621).

The long hours culture of China's interior design sector corresponds with some creative sectors in the Western contexts, for instance, the British fashion industry described by McRobbie (1998; 2016a) and the television, magazine publishing and music industries explored by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011). These examples consistently illustrate how deriving pleasure from seeing a good job done plays a vital role in justifying extended work hours and modest incomes. In China, the starting monthly salary for novice designers is generally not very high. The salary range for a fresh graduate working as an assistant designer typically falls between 4000 and 6000 RMB per month. The lower end of this range is below the national average monthly wage for individuals employed in urban private units in 2020, which was 4811 RMB (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The monthly income of a young designer of the post-90s generation normally ranges from 2500 RMB (for interns) to 10000 RMB (CBNData, 2020). Senior designers with 5-7 years of experience can earn around

10000 RMB or above (Matrix Design, 2020). Equally important is the fact that the salary of interior designers is typically composed of a base salary plus commissions (*ti cheng*). In other words, the more projects an interior designer takes on and the larger the scope of those projects, the higher their earnings will be. Yet, it is often dependent on the design firm owners to decide on the number of projects the firm can undertake within their own limits.

Operating within this *dispositif*, some of my interviewees cited 'passionate work' as an ideal quality of employees. They did not only consider their 'passion and relentless pursuit of creativity' (R21), but also their 'passion and perseverance' in order to 'withstand' the work life (R8) and to 'face the design industry' (R19). One designer noted that 'if they only do design work for the sake of livelihood, they will not be able to treat it as a profession and are prone to giving up easily in this kind of lengthy process' (R25). Their concerns demonstrate how passionate work is not just about pleasure in work (Donzelot, 1991), but also it being a form of justification for long hours (McRobbie, 2016a), as self-fulfilment of a neoliberal subject is integrated with corporate goals (Rose, 1999: 56).

However, long hours culture of China's interior design sector may translate into higher income levels that become a resource control *dispositif* in some big design corporations. Matrix Design, a big interior design corporation in Shenzhen, offers financial rewards through its partnership system that links with its Partners Share Ownership Plan — a strategy to retain and attract talents who are willing to work long hours. As Matrix's co-CEO Wang Zhaobao told, 'Every week, I and all the partners work over 70 hours basically', and 'I am off every day at 11 PM' (Matrix Design, 2020). Matrix's distribution of bonuses and dividends is determined by a rigorous merit-based performance evaluation system, which the company named 'DKP system'

(borrowed from the name 'Dragon Kill Points' in the game 'World of Warcraft'), which grants a disproportionately higher share of annual dividends and bonuses to high-performing individuals. Describing the partnership and DKP systems as 'transparent and fair', Matrix's co-founder Wang Guan (2020a) stated during a public talk titled 'A Leap from 3 to 41 Partners: The Logic of Matrix's Innovation' that these techniques 'enabled the team to maintain a strong fighting capability' by offering competitive salaries. According to Wang (2020a), 'a designer at Matrix, from an intern to a partner, can see their annual salary increase from 30,000 to 550,000 RMB within a span of 7 years'. Furthermore, a partner's salary-to-bonus ratio is 1:1, rather than 7:3 in a non-partnership system, and competition is promoted through a policy of dismissing underperformers (Matrix Design, 2020; Wang, 2020b). The entire mechanism encourages employees to strive towards the goal of becoming a partner through internal referrals, while also aiming to attract external talents to join as partners. These strategies contribute to a collective approach that seeks to distribute responsibilities among all partners for the company's long-term growth, emphasising the cultivation of a corporate culture that serves as both a competitive, self-monitoring tool, and thus a means of enforcing work discipline, rather than focusing solely on short-term objectives.

While not all companies adopt the mentioned approaches, design enterprises adopt different practices to shape employees' subjectivity attitudes and foster desired behaviours, thereby producing individuals that fit their preferred type (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). This *dispositif* emphasises the discourse of 'culture/education' (*wenhua*) of designers (Hoffman, 2010), which encompasses specific forms of intellectual formation and self-initiative. Despite seeking designers possessing both affect-sensitivity and logics-rationality towards design, different companies might

have specific preferences to fit their own needs when it comes to intellectual training. Some preferred a mix of employees with diverse intellectual backgrounds, such as seeking those with an architectural design background to diversify a staff composition with the dominant presence of designers coming from solely interior design background. Some might prefer graduates from art academies to ensure the aesthetical level of products.

Designer-entrepreneurs generally told that they prefer hiring those with expanded horizons (*yanjie* or *shiye* in Chinese), which refers to a breath of knowledge, understanding, and perspective of global design by leading designers, encompassing interdisciplinary knowledge across architecture, product design and art. They also considered factors such as their 'taste' (R4, R19), knowledge of 'the blending of Eastern and Western cultures' (R13), proficiency in English (R17), and 'aesthetic judgement' (R24). Because some of the design enterprise owners whom I interviewed themselves were not completely satisfied with the design education in China, they highlighted that overseas study or work experience would be desirable (R17, R19). For instance, big design corporation Cheng Chung Design (CCD) specifically seeks out 'talented individuals who have received a Western education and have excelled in top foreign companies to join' (Shenzhen Panorama Network, 2016). A lot of established designers are highly mobile, actively engaging in foreign design through field trips,[9] and developing foreign business connections. This includes acquiring international clients, collaborating with foreign design companies, and serving as Chinese agents for foreign design companies. For example, design company owners told that they collaborated with other organisations based in foreign

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[9] The places and events that these design company owners visited included, for example, 'Japan', 'Singapore, New York, and Boston', 'Design Week in the UK' and 'Milan Design Week'.

locations or undertook design projects for Chinese and non-Chinese clients in places like Cambodia, Singapore, New York (R13), Italy (R23), and United Kingdom (R19, R24). Recognising the importance of international connections, some individuals emphasised self-enhancement by, for instance, taking English classes, including overseas classes, to improve their language skills (R12, R17). Through their engagement with this type of project-based transnational work and their mobility, designer-entrepreneurs in the upper echelon resemble the 'transient transnational elites,' who embody a set of professional knowledge, skills and cultural values, moving across a global design labour market (Kunz, 2016: 92). These characteristics also demonstrate the attributes of a knowledge-based economy, where the workforce not just possesses technical skills, but also holds the knowledge of experts and connoisseurs in the subject area within a global design industry (McRobbie, 2016a).

This emphasis on knowledge and international horizon as important qualities (known as *suzhi*) of a design subject extends to the sphere of self-cultivation, where there is an expectation of self-initiated 'leisure' that can advance the work interior designers perform. Because interior designers are primarily concerned about 'creating a good life' (*chuangzao meihao shenghuo*) with good living quality and environment, and offering their clients ideas and suggestions to improve their lifestyles, many interviewees consider an understanding of good living as the basis of good work in their field. Their corporate clients, such as real estate companies, are tastemakers who frequently conduct overseas field trips to newly developed high-end designed spaces and encourage particular types of design. Within this social milieu, designers are motivated to visit spaces that come to be directly linked to good design quality. Interviewees told that they went on trips to visit spaces, such as five-stars hotel rooms, designed by design masters to gain first-hand experience and ideas for future design

projects. One designer, who cited Tony Chi, renowned design master in the field of hospitality design, as his biggest influence, told, 'I will stay at every hotel designed by Tony Chi; not just once but most likely two or three times at each hotel' (R10). This practice of self-learning is promoted by design media. For instance, Chief editor of digital design media *DesiDaily* told on a livestream session on TikTok: 'If you haven't been to five-star hotels, how can you design them? I think this is reasonable' (DesiDaily, 2020a). In this sense, consumption practices are construed as techniques of self-cultivation, encouraging designers themselves to become experts in design consumption and affected by its trends.

According to Sunley, Pinch and Reimer (2011), the actual practice of design expertise does not only rely only on strong ties within the companies or 'flexible weak-tie networks' in project-based work, but also on the 'medium-strength ties' between designers and their clients, which combine market contracts with a profound sense of personal connection and friendship. This emphasis on the role of client-agency relationship in design innovation and production also applies in the case of interior design companies in China. The designer-founder of Supernormal Design notes, 'Actually, clients can come in many different types. Some clients may even have a better understanding of good living than designers themselves. In such cases, we can also learn a lot from them' (Shenzhen Institute of Interior Design, 2020). Many interviewees shared this view, including Li Baolung, co-founder and creative director of Bloomdesign. He told, 'We learned a lot from them [clients]. They taught me how to approach problems and view them systematically. We are only specialized in design; and many things, including management and long-term brand building, are not necessarily within our expertise' (R15). These comments point to the fact that the clients of the middle class and upper class are also designers' resources for

interdisciplinary knowledge in terms of lifestyles, design, business strategies and management particularly, which they gained through social exchanges of knowledge.

IV.   Summary

This chapter has explored the relations between history, reform policies, official directives to cultivate talents, and occupational cultures within market competition and state regulation. Both education and the design work regime have become key sites for cultivating and regulating their practices and entrepreneurial activities through diverse discourses and mechanisms. The introduction of the reform of art institute tests in 2015 has changed how design subjects are cultivated by including design as a test subject for the first time, allowing some room for self-expression and differentiation from conventions, rather than conforming solely to drawing technique standards. While this change is limited to higher-level art institute tests, it represents a new emphasis on the assessment of individual creativity in the design track tests, leading to changes in the curriculum of art test prep schools. What remains unchanged is an exam-based art education system for admission to design programmes to test primarily technical drawing skills, which has persisted to figure importantly in the making of designer as human capital.

By studying how cities, organisations and creative workforce have been shaped by *dispositif*, this chapter reveals that 'city-building and subject making are related processes' (Hoffman, 2010: 33). These mutually constitutive processes make for a designer-subjectivity, whose potentials and capacities are now conceived within transnational networks and enterprises. In Chapter 4, I explore the processes by which designers utilise transcultural resources, act as cultural intermediaries, and engage in

cross-cultural exchanges, cultural hybridisation, and inter-firm collaborations to bridge the gap with the West and seek broader recognition.

Chapter 4

Worshipping the West and Rediscovering the Oriental

Interior designers and members of the design world have played the role of cultural intermediaries shaping tastes and culture. They not only transmit information to clients, users and consumers but also shape the design outcomes and promote varied cultural forms and ideas. A wide range of transcultural resources have become available to these practitioners in a global context, allowing them to draw on both global and local cultural currents that are characterised by their complexity, hybridity and external networking (Welsch, 1999).

This chapter reveals how colonial discourses of modernisation and notions of China's 'lagging behind' and 'catching up' that emerged in the early reform context of the late 1970s have continued to prevail among design practitioners at a time when design practitioners aspired to narrow the gap between China and the West in relation to the cultural hierarchy of design.[10] In analysing how the status of Chinese design practitioners and the interior design industry are changing in a global context, this chapter first looks at the case of Milan Design Week 2022 (also known as 'Salone del Mobile Milano'), a nexus of design culture and commerce influencing Chinese market trends and design practices while facilitating a two-way cultural and commercial exchange between China and Italy. Through observation, the chapter illustrates how luxury furniture design created by leading Chinese designers and showcased during

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[10] The usage of the term 'West' in these discourses reflects the ongoing discussion circulating within the Chinese interior design community, where the term is employed loosely to refer to advanced designs. In this context, the term 'West' generally refers to developed economies in Europe, North America, and also Japan, viewed by the Chinese design practitioners as a collective cultural and economic entity associated with advanced designs.

Milan Design Week signifies the pursuit of positive status signals by Italian design manufacturers and Chinese designers. These Italian-Chinese collaborations indicate the convergence of interests of Chinese designers and Italian design manufacturers in the hybridisation of Western modernist design and Chinese aesthetic concepts.[11] To explore how global design hierarchy impacts the dynamics of cultural flows between Chinese design practitioners and the West, I examine the state-sponsored Shenzhen Global Design Award Conference held in Milan Design Week 2022. The event exemplifies how Italian-Chinese cultural exchange served to promote Chinese design concepts and buttress the status of Chinese design world.

Additionally, I employ examples of Chinese design practitioners and entrepreneurs immersing themselves in foreign design currents to illustrate how foreign trendsetters and prominent works influenced their design approaches. Their focus on creating affective objects and space, echoing the design-driven innovation advocated by Italian design manufacturers since the 1990s, indicates an increased interest in engaging with affects and incorporating foreign design standards. Centring on the relationship between 'experience economy' and interior design, I examine examples of commercial design projects where practitioners hybridised both local and foreign design elements and practice to construct affective atmospheres for local markets.

This chapter shows that two major formations have emerged within the community of Chinese designers: one focusing on appropriating Western modernism, while the other hybridising modernist design with oriental aesthetics.[12] While both

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[11] By hybridisation, I refer broadly to the blending of cultures, and more specifically to 'the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices' (Rowe and Schelling, 1991: 231).

[12] In this chapter, I use the term 'Oriental' to refer to the East Asian culture and aesthetic that is predominantly Chinese and Japanese. The term is actually used as a genre in the Chinese interior

attempted to be on par with their Western counterparts, the latter group transformed centuries-old oriental culture by fusing it with modernist design, transcending the perception of anachronism associated with Chinese elements by the late 2010s. Both corporations and designers have embraced Chinese and oriental elements, demonstrating cultural sensitivity to traditional Chinese values in design and business practices (Thompson, 2010). By interpreting broader oriental culture through modern design, designers showed the potential of the oriental genre to redefine modernity expressed in their designs.

I.   Milan Design Week, Status Market and Design Pilgrims

Milan Design Week carries a significance for Chinese entities that extends beyond mere business proceedings and touristic spectacles. It serves as a strategic, globally recognised platform for showcasing Chinese design and cultural influence. In June 2022, I attended the Milan Furniture Fair, a key event during Milan Design Week and noticed multiple billboards that read 'Furniture China 2022 – the 27th China International Furniture Expo,' hanging over a bustling passageway to greet the attendees traversing the metro station atrium that connects the fair (Figure 1). Located centrally, this campaign certainly drew people's attention to China's upcoming exposition, featuring the latest in furniture, decoration, and manufacturing technology. This observation underscored the presence that Chinese design sector aimed to

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design sector. I must emphasise that the definitions of 'Western' and 'Oriental' cultures contain contested and complex meanings, as indicated by postcolonial studies. For example, Edward Said (1995) uses the term 'Orientalism' to refer to a set of Eurocentric and distributed cultural representations that are embedded within the practices, discourses, subjectivities, and histories of Western societies, which employ them to facilitate imperialism and reproduce their superiority. The concepts of the 'West' and the 'Orient' are thus organised along categorical binary oppositions such as West vs. East, familiar vs. exotic, insiders vs. outsiders/ others, etc. Under this ideology, the 'Oriental' encompasses Eastern societies (including, for example, Asian and Middle Eastern countries), which are often portrayed in stereotypical terms. See Said (1995) for an elaboration of these concepts.

establish, signaling its active engagement within the international design network and positioning itself prominently on the global design map.

Figure 1. Billboards advertising China International Furniture Expo 2022, near the entrance of Milan Furniture Fair 2022. Photograph taken by author, 16 June 2022.

Another notable display of the robust presence of the Chinese design sector was witnessed at the event 'The Shenzhen Design Week and Shenzhen Global Design Award Conference in Milan 2022' which I attended during Milan Design Week 2022 (Figure 2). Hosted by the organising committee of Shenzhen Design Week (SDW) and Shenzhen Global Design Award (SDA), the event was organised by Italian design organisation Art Lab. Its founder and CEO, Dalia Gallico, had extensive experience with Chinese institutions. She served as Overseas Consultant for SDW and SDA

2022, and as a Visiting Professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) and Peking University. I observed how this Chinese government-sponsored event aimed to showcase Shenzhen as a design city, building relationships with international designers and enhancing the global reach of Chinese designers.

Figure 2. Poster of the event 'Shenzhen Design Week and Shenzhen Global Design Award Conference in Milan 2022'. 2022.
Image courtesy of Brera Design Week, Brera Design District, Italy.

The whole event, simultaneously livestreamed to some twenty attendees in China, started with a welcoming speech by Dalia Gallico and a Shenzhen propaganda video. Narrated by Wu Jun, Deputy Minister of the Propaganda Department of the Shenzhen Municipal Party Committee and Director of the Information Office of the

Municipal Government, the video highlighted Shenzhen's achievements as a modern 'Chinese socialist city'. It introduced Shenzhen's significance as a design city to the global design community and emphasised its partnership with Milan, which was designated as Shenzhen's 'friendship city' in 2018.

Continuing in this amicable tone, Dalia Gallico made a comment that drew parallels between the guiding concepts of the works of guest speaker Italian Architect Michele de Lucchi's work and Chinese design. She stated, 'The theme of de Lucchi work emphasises the collective fate of human race; and this is congruent with the inclusivity in Chinese design culture'. Her narrative provided a common denominator that facilitates mutual understanding and co-operative relationships between Italian designers, academics, and other actors in the design world. This basis potentially lends legitimacy to Shenzhen's aspiration to become an Asian counterpart to Milan.

Further illustrating this effort was the spotlight on Shenzhen Design Week (SDW) and Shenzhen Global Design Award (SDA) that operated in parallel with Shenzhen Design Week — both were state-sponsored events.[13] An open call was made for entries across five design categories, including industrial and product, communication, architecture, interior, and fashion. The most eye-catching part was the generous cash prizes: the prize for 'Global Design Pioneer Award' and the 'Chinese Design Pioneer Award,' open to worldwide and domestic candidates respectively, is both set at one million RMB, while each recipient of '10 Designers of the Year Award' is awarded one hundred thousand RMB.

Milan Design Week, as can be seen, served as a channel for Chinese authorities to incentivise, recognise and reward the professional achievement of not

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[13] First launched in 2017, Shenzhen Design Week is an annual cultural event administered by the Shenzhen Innovation & Creative Design Development Office, and organised by Shenzhen Culture, Creativity & Design Association (SCCDA).

just the Chinese design practitioners but also their foreign counterparts. By engaging foreign practitioners with the Shenzhen Global Design Award (SDA) held in Shenzhen, Shenzhen Design Week was positioned competitively as a sequel to Milan Design Week. Seen from this perspective, such cultural exchange and cooperation between Italian organisations and Chinese authorities was a strategy for the city of Shenzhen to gain global stature in the design world and to move China up on the ladder of creative industries. Milan Design Week therefore demonstrates how design culture serves as a site for Chinese authorities and urban elites to seize the opportunity for city-branding, foster Chinese-Italian cultural exchange, and lay the groundwork for future collaborations. These ultimately aim to shape Shenzhen into a distinguished global design centre that constitutes a part of what Sharon Zukin called the 'symbolic economy', where cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital intertwine to facilitate the growth of commercial industries in a city (Zukin, 1995: 3). Furthermore, the status and reputation of China's design and practitioners depends on entwining its culture with the narratives of the global design community, represented by the Milanese design culture and leading Italian designers.

These official efforts and narratives prompt the question of the ways in which Milan Design Week is bound up with the interior design community in China. What is the connectedness between them, and how is it developed? This question can be approached through a deeper understanding of the high status of Milan Design Week in the design world. Its existence epitomises the 'status markets' of furniture and interior design, where designers and their works showcased in Milan Design Week are conferred values because of the associations (Aspers, 2009). In this context, high-status designers also produce values for Milan Design Week as each piece of work 'has to be valued in relation to the status of the designer' (ibid: 118). This in turn

sustains the elevated 'rank order' of Italian-led design currents and the products associated with them (ibid).

Following from this classification, Chinese design practitioners not only seek to connect themselves with Milan Design Week but also more broadly engage themselves in the 'worshipping' of Italian-led design trends. Over the last two decades, Milan Design Week has become an important mode of circulation for global design industries, offering vital cultural and commercial resources for Chinese design practitioners, entrepreneurs and also other professionals, such as editors of design media, real estate professionals and agents of foreign design brands within the interior design and architectural industries in China. Functioning like a transnational circuit of culture and knowledge, the event serves as a platform for design professionals to stay abreast of the latest design trends and explore different types of enterprises (e.g. manufacturers, distributors, agents, buyers, retailers), spanning design, furniture, home textile, decorations and materials. The lasting influence of Milan Design Week since it started in the 1960s is well captured in *ELLE Decor* U.S. Magazine in 2020:

> Milian is to furniture design as Paris is to couture. The industry's modern history in Milan begins in the 1930s with the Rationalism movement […]. The next chapter starts in the '60s, with the rise of Ettore Sottsass and Paolo Buffa and the launch of the annual Salone Internazionale del Mobile fair [Milan Furniture Fair]. The trade show truly turned Milan into Europe's furniture capital and now boasts thousands of exhibitors each year. Many of today's iconic pieces are iterations of ones first introduced decades ago, proving the timelessness and longevity of Italian design. Forza! (*ELLE Decor*, November 2020: 44)

While the international design media used to express that Italian design is the pacesetter for the global design industry, a similar view circulates in Chinese media.

The Chinese design circle's obsession with Milan is evident in the accounts of design practitioners who cited their personal linkages and experience with design associated with Italy and its design capital Milan.

Huang Gaohua, the editor-in-chief and founder of *DesiDaily* — one of the most active WeChat Official Accounts in Chinese design sector, with more than 1.3 million followers — was an adherent of Italian design currents. He recurrently encouraged his audience and readers to visit Milan Design Week. For him, Milan Design Week had 'a great impact' on shaping his company's 'mission of having an independent perspective' (DesiDaily, 2020a). Participation in this event and writing about it continuously shapes design tastemakers' sense of belonging to a global design community, as evident in a collection of articles written by *DesiDaily*'s editors and titled, 'I insist on going to Milan Design Week every year, only to be not abandoned by design!' (Huang, 2020). By identifying Milan as an important place to stay updated on global design currents and to engage meaningfully with design, these editors' assertions are akin to claiming a membership to an 'aesthetic community', where their semiotic behaviours demonstrate the ways taste matters to a person's identification with a social category (Chumley, 2016: 160-161).

Visiting Milan Design Week has not only been a 'yearly pilgrimage' for many Western design professionals and design lovers, but also for their Chinese counterparts, who aspire to discover new products, design trends and expressions. Many whom I heard or interviewed, who were particularly mobile and financially sufficient, indicated that traveling overseas to see foreign design in person was the activity that they would love to do annually. One designer told me that the experience he had in Milan Design Week could be used as reference for the projects that he was doing, indicating that ideas, knowledge and techniques acquired during the event was

beneficial to practitioners. Since 2016, an annual nationwide competition titled, 'I need to travel to Milan: Chinese New Generation Designer Award' has been organized by NetEase's design section (home.163.com), a Chinese Internet technology company, to support emerging designers to pursue their careers and learn from foreign design. Top ten young designers were selected by a jury panel as winners to undertake a free group-based field trip to Milan, on a 300,000 RMB education fund offered by the organiser. During COVID pandemic in 2022, Home Yimi, an importer and retailer of Italian design in China, organised a livestream session, '2022 Milan livestream,' in which a Chinese architect host brought the virtual audience to Milan Furniture Fair and interviewed persons in charge of Italian brands. Activities like these have made Milan Design Week one central mode of transmission through which Italian-led design practices are diffused to Chinese practitioners.

These acts of 'worshipping' designs associated with the Italian design sectors, as exhibited by Chinese practitioners and design media, were evident of a wider industry culture of learning from advanced foreign designs. Looming large here were the perceptions held by the practitioners concerning the current status of Chinese design in a global context when compared to its Western counterparts. How do they relate themselves to the status hierarchy of the global design world? This is the focus of the following section.

II.   Worshipping Foreign Design

> Whether in contemporary design studios or ancient craft settings, the creators have their own pecking orders of emulation, based on personal and professional admiration and disdain. (Molotch, 2003: 89)

Like their global counterparts, Chinese designers have their own pecking orders of emulation when it comes to design production. Hierarchical emulation, an idea set forth by Georg Simmel (1957 [1904]), occurs in the realm of interior design in which design is also partly a project of emulation of elite-initiated fashion. Parallel to consumers competing for status and prestige by observing and mimicking the esteemed and superiors (Veblen, 1934), creators who pursue innovation and conformity also imitate the elites and draw on prevalent social divisions, despite that they depend no less upon subjective preferences for differentiation (Molotch, 2003). While many designers whom I interviewed have pointed out that Chinese designers have greatly improved over the past decade, their remarks reveal a design hierarchy that tends to place foreign design at a higher rank than Chinese design. Some of them looked up to certain contemporary designers or design companies from China (e.g. Wang Shu), Australia (e.g. Kerry Hill) and South Asia (e.g. Amata Luphaiboon, Geoffrey Bawa), but many cited both classic and contemporary designers from Japan (e.g. Tadao Ando), Europe (e.g. Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Peter Zumthor, John Pawson), America (e.g. Tony Chi, George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg) as their major influences.

Central to this hierarchy is the notion of Chinese deficiency, through contrasting China and the West. For Chinese interior design practitioners, China started developing modern design much later than the advanced economies. Sharing this notion of deficiency in Chinese design is established designer Ju Bin, founder and creative director of Horizontal Design, who suggests that Western design has shaped very largely his approach and thinking to design. Ju authored a book in which he explores the ideas about and his experience in East-West cultural fusion and

hybridisation of Oriental and Western aesthetics, but he thought it was the Western ideas that have become the essence of his design. As he said, 'Ninety percent of my thinking wavers between the Orient and the West. And ninety per cent of my thinking comes from the West.' He also indicated:

> China has not made any contribution in the past 100 years to the world, so we are now absorbing and learning from the contributions that the West has made to the world in the past 100 years — all the noble good things we have known of — from modernism to postmodernism, and then to the emergence of various genres now.

By comparing China to the West on a continuum, his narrative revealed a notion of China's backwardness in design development, which was the main reason that drove him to learn about Western design.

Li Yuan, a designer at Peng and Partners, echoed Ju's notion of deficient China. While he thought that learning from the West was central, he felt that certain Chinese cultural norms hindered the modernisation of design. As he suggested:

> I think the current Chinese design 'movement' is a form of learning from the West […]. China is a soil full of treasures, but it must learn from the West in order to excavate its treasures. Otherwise, the treasures will always remain just a pile of valueless mud. […] The West underwent a long period of development; its research methods and logical ability are very strong. These are things that China lacks. Chinese people do not talk about logics.

For Li, modernity was defined with reference to Western scientific culture grounded in logics. He thought that Chinese are deficient in logical thinking and therefore must learn from the West. Another established designer Quin Liang (pseudonym) explained why he thought that the Western design system was more advanced than China's. As he suggests,

> Design had developed in the West at a time much earlier than in China. Their education system has determined their [development]. I think that their education system may be better than that of mainland China, because it has been around for a long time; and it has more experience in cultivating students.

In Liang's view, the established design education in the West has consolidated its advantage that China can hardly compete with. As we have seen, all the accounts above given by the designers revealed a similar notion of time-lag between the advanced West and relatively backward China. While these practitioners viewed Western design as a monolith, there was a strong sense of urgency to catch up with the latest Western design.

Yu Pengjie, design director and partner at Matrix Design, referred to China's lagging behind the West to justify his adoption of foreign design as key references. He contended that Chinese designers should take cues from ('*jie jing*') designers who were more superior to them. As he shared the views on a livestream video on TikTok:

> The third-tier [design companies] take cues from the second-tier [design companies]; the second-tier [design companies] take cues from the first-tier [design companies]; and the first-tier [design companies] take cues from the foreign ones. Speaking of the current development of China, when compared to the Euro-American countries, Japan and Singapore, China is still lagging behind in time. I think taking cues from someone is not something bad.

Yu's comments articulated an occupational life that comes with hierarchy and stratification of design firms, of which design firms can be roughly and mentally classified into three tiers, based on design quality and the level of reputation of the firm's founder(s). In this hierarchy, what Yu referred to as 'first-tier firms' are the companies of big names ('*da ka*'), the leading and established designers based in four major cities in China, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen ('*Bei-Shang*

Guang-Shen'). In ranking the peers from more superior to less superior, the industry culture created differences in status. Here, the upper echelons of the industry, in ways similar with Veblen's idea of the leisure class, established the standard of design production that the rest attempts to emulate. Circulating in the industry is thus the idea that first-rated firms are the bellwether. For these first-rated firms, it is a compulsion to meet the global standard and maintain their industrial status and quality of work. From a sociological viewpoint, this mental classification of models of learning adopted by design practitioners is indicative of the hierarchy of values within the Chinese design community.

In this context of commercial ecology, the existence of pecking orders of emulation means that being in contact with global design currents is integral to a company's development and self-enterprising pursuits of the practitioners. By accessing resources, networks and culture-independent forms of knowledge, members of the design world have demonstrated the bridge-building function of its community to connect contemporary Chinese design to the professional values and experience that are prevalent in the West but less developed in China. Throughout these processes, Chinese practitioners were thrown into the status markets where they have to work their way to acquire positive status signals in their professional life (Wohl, 2021).

a.   Worshipping Italian Design

As I have noted earlier, the significant influence of Western design in China becomes evident through the effects of design trends led by Milan. Many Chinese practitioners who regularly update themselves with foreign design news and latest

currents have referred to Italy as a source of influence. How have Italian design concepts and practices affected them? What does Italian design signify to them? I explore these questions in the following discussion.

<u>Italian Design Approach</u>

One of my interviewees Tom, co-founder of Hejidesign, a Shenzhen-based small-scale design company, reported that he spent one-third of his time in Milan each year normally. Tom's holistic design approach was shaped by his previous work experience at a Milan-based Design firm company, ACPV, where the motto 'from the spoon to the city' ('*dal cucchiaio alla città*') guided their work. As he indicated, 'In Italy, architecture is integrated with many other things. This, perhaps, has a bigger impact on us. That is, it may have changed your perception about a design, a field, and the values, in other words, your cognition, concepts and direction about design.'

This idea of 'from the spoon to the city', coined by Italian architect and designer Ernesto Rogers, captures the ideal practice of designing things across scales: from small objects and furniture to larger, more complex buildings and urban projects. This modernist concept emphasises the importance for designers to consider the interconnections and similarities (such as the forms) between smaller objects and larger spaces, suggesting that 'every aspect of the physical environment needs to be considered in tandem and be rendered in a coherent way' (Molotch, 2014). Drawing on this Italian maxim, Tom emphasised his alignment with the holistic approach of Italian designers.

Tom was not the only designer advocating a design approach that manages different scales of intervention. Interviews that I conducted and data collected from designers' online sharing sessions revealed that many design practitioners embraced

the concept of 'integration of architecture and interiors', or 'integration of architecture, interiors, soft furnishings and products'. This view, characterized by the term 'integration' ('*yi ti hua*'), has gained widespread traction in the industry in recent years. These designers perceived interior design as part of a comprehensive design scheme that spans from architecture, including landscape architecture, to soft furnishings and products, rather than a separate domain. Considering that many of those who held this view were speaking from their practical experience related to their company's direction, design management, and implementation, I understand this viewpoint as both a commercial strategy of tapping into design business opportunities, and a designer's ideal influenced by modernist design concepts. The viewpoint also signifies the market demand for integrated design services in both home and commercial interior design. For example, according to *2017 China Home Furnishing and Home Decoration Consumption Survey Report*, around one-third of respondents sought integrated services from design firms, encompassing conceptual design, hard furnishings, and construction (Sina Home, 2017). Additionally, technological and industrial advancements have further fueled this approach to design integration in the global interior design industry. This development has certainly garnered the attention of Chinese designers, especially as technological industrial design has become a pivotal aspect of kitchen and toilet design, necessitating a deeper understanding of industrial design among interior designers (Wang, 2006).

Italian Furniture and Craftmanship

Italian furniture has a big place in the interior design industry in China, primarily because of its craftmanship that has long appealed to Chinese designers and the popular use of imported Italian brand name furniture in the interiors of luxury

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model housing commodity in recent years. This sentiment is evident in the words of Amy Du, executive director and creative director at Simon Chong Design (SCD). She described that she did not only adopt imported Italian materials such as fabrics in her design, but she aspired to propel Chinese craftsmanship by learning from the spirit of Italian craftmanship. As she indicated in a TikTok livestream session in 2020:

> We have been talking about the Italian craftsmanship at all times: What exactly are they talking about? […] They employ the best craftmanship and materials, regardless of cost and time, and then devote themselves to perfecting the products. This is what we like about Italy. We rave about these international top-rated Italian furniture brands. I hope that starting from our generation, we will put a little effort into developing our craftsmanship spirit in China.

Similarly, one of my interviewees, Wang Peng, who has engaged in both interior and furniture design and has strongly identified with Italian-manufactured furniture and materials, expressed that he personally preferred using imported furniture, especially those made in Italy, in his projects upon clients' permission. He described how Italy has been positioned in the cultural hierarchy of design: 'The Italian furniture is the best in the world. Perhaps 70 or 80 per cent of the good furniture is from Italy'. For Wang, Italian furniture is a signifier of quality. Both designers' and their clients' attention given to Italian furniture is reflected in the official figures offered by the Italian Trade and Investment Agency (ICE), which published that in 2021 Italian furniture exports to China rose 32.98 per cent compared with 2020 to a total of USD 670 million. Italy was also the leading furniture supplier nation to China in 2021 (Colombo, 2022).

The case of Italian furniture, again, exemplified the larger phenomenon of 'worshipping' of foreign design among Chinese design practitioners. The

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phenomenon of these practitioners keenly engaging themselves with Italian design currents was compounded by the fact that many consumers like Italy-made furniture and aspiring design practitioners felt the need to take cues from advanced foreign design in their design activities as upward learning. And this is congruent with what Molotch (2003: 162) has described the importance of 'place labels'. As he argued, 'place labels' attract consumers who look to taking in some of the social and cultural power of the 'place'. Such 'valorisation of milieu' has reinforced consumers' preference and hence an export market for products that can be attributed to the milieu of the place and from a particular geographical origin (Molotch, 2003: 162).

Chinese-Italian Business and Professional Connections

The strengthening of Italy-China commercial and cultural links over the last decade has offered Chinese designers unique educational and professional prospects. On top of their appeal to Italian labels, many Chinese design practitioners had ties with Italian universities, e.g. Politecnico di Milano, and other commercial-cultural relationships with Italian companies and institutions. For example, some established practitioners taught as adjunct teacher at Italian universities. One of my interviewees Ju Bin has taught an online module to a class of year four undergraduate students of Politecnico di Milano in 2020. Some conscientious founders-CEO of interior design companies enrolled themselves in the Executive Master's programme in Design Management, co-organised by Tongji University and Politecnico di Milano's Graduate School of Business, to acquire knowledge of Milan design system and the Western concepts of design-driven innovation, project management and strategic design.

Italian-Chinese business relationship is another aspect that potentially facilitates the Italian holistic design approach to take off much more smoothly in

China. Many interior designer-entrepreneurs are themselves importers of Italian designed products, e.g. furniture and home decorative items. Large design firm YuQiang and Partners Interior Design has a subsidiary company that focuses on procuring foreign decoration and furniture pieces. Another big company Matrix Design relies on its fixed supplier, PIM, for Italian construction materials. Some Italian brand agents (e.g. designer furniture brands and material manufacturers) in China collaborated with established Chinese designers on showroom design projects. Smaller-scale design studios have also played the role of intermediaries between Italian and Chinese businesses. For example, design studio Hejidesign served Italian clients who looked to open up new stores in China, and assisted Chinese clients in finding suitable Italian designers, acting as a bridge between the Milanese and Chinese design worlds, ultimately gaining economic capital and symbolic capital.

As seen in the dynamics across the cultural, educational, and business realms, Chinese designers have actively engaged with Italian counterparts and products, creating space for transcultural collaboration and knowledge acquisition that holds the potential to enhance their own status in the market.

b.   Importing of Foreign Design Standards

The classification in the design hierarchy and social connections drawn out above have supported the introduction and indigenisation of foreign modern design for local Chinese markets, shaping the cultural formation of Chinese designers. Additionally, the dissemination of foreign design standards in China has also depended on Chinese entrepreneurs, who have played an important role as importers of values associated with foreign design awards and foreign organisations to China.

<u>Italian International Design Awards</u>

In the status market of interior design, Chinese private businesses have propelled the spread of foreign design standards, serving as a form of judgement devices within China. For example, China International Interior Design Network (CIID88), an e-business company offering one-stop design service platform in China, initiated and jointly organised the 'Italian International Design Awards (IIDA)' with Italian schools and cultural organisations since 2020[14]. These awards were endorsed by established members of the Italian design industry, illustrating how Chinese organisations have depended on their foreign counterparts to evaluate design quality. In this pursuit, the official narrative emphasises the macro-level benefits of cultural cooperation. The IIDA Awards website portrays this initiative as a part of the 'China-Italy cultural cooperation mechanism' aimed at strengthening 'diplomatic relations' between the two countries. In this way, an international vision of Chinese design was brought into being through a partnership between foreign non-governmental organisations and Chinese commercial interests, aligned with national interests. Within this design award culture, stakeholders in the interior design industry have aspired to enhance their own role as tastemakers and the status of Chinese design by involving foreign parties into their creation of awards, in the course of promoting the internationality of Chinese design and co-engendering cultural exchanges.

<u>Andrew Martin Awards</u>

Shaping the influence of foreign design awards in China also includes

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[14] These organisations included the Milan China Cultural Center, Italy-China International Design Association (founded by Italian professionals in promoting the culture of Italian Design in Pearl River Delta region in China) and Italian educational institutions (e.g. The Italian Academy of Fine Arts in Palermo, the Polytechnic University of Milan in Italy, the Institute of Fashion Design in Milan) and also other Chinese design and art colleges.

entrepreneur Lu Congzhou. As the proponent of the Andrew Martin International Interior Designer of the Year Awards (known as the 'Andrew Martin Awards', or AMA) and founder of Euroart, a Beijing-based wholesale western fabric supplier, Lu has played a pivotal role. AMA, dubbed the 'Oscars of the interior industry', has been launched by British Interior Design company Andrew Martin since 1996. Under the support of AMA in 2012, Lu established ADMD Design Culture, a company that represents AMA in China, facilitating Chinese-foreign exchange activities and design culture communication.

Lu's role involved bridging the gap between the global and the local design scenes through engaging with transnational flows of brands and commodities, as well as exercising his commercial-cultural practices. The productive and pragmatic potential of Lu's taste can be found in his role as a 'cultural broker' of foreign design culture, mediating knowledge and cultural representations specific to foreign design communities but less known to the Chinese communities (Peterson, 2010; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005; Richter, 1988). One important step in linking Chinese designers with global design currents was creating occasions of cultural transmission through which design practitioners and design addicts can discuss and learn about foreign practices. In a TikTok livestream in 2020, for instance, Lu discussed with Ben Wu, the first mainland Chinese designer to receive an AMA in 2020, about the distinctiveness of Belgian designer-antiquarian Axel Vervoordt's wabi-sabi aesthetics, communicating foreign design currents to the audience.

Like the cosmopolitans described by Hannerz (1990), Lu's engagement with the culture of 'the Other' reflects the importance of competence and an 'intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences' (239). These cosmopolitans are akin to 'aficionados'— individuals who view cultures of the Other

as art works (ibid). For Lu, his role as cultural broker was to 'promote the development of China's design circle, help young designers' growth and introduce more international, advanced, or experimental concepts, to promote interaction between China and the international society' (TikTok livestream on 2 March 2020). In fulfiling these objectives, Lu highlighted the standards adopted by AMA, whose judge panel included what Lu described as 'the nobles and descendants of celebrities,' 'Hollywood movie female stars', 'committee member of Olympic Games from the UK,' 'bankers' and 'members of music bands like Queen'. As he noted:

> With their eyes and tastes, different elites from different industries surely represent the ways of life of their circles. […] If you are shortlisted, it means that your works echo their contemporary living. Your works are appropriate to that living.

He further delivered an indirect criticism of China's award-giving culture by pointing to the excessive number of annual awards. As he said:

> The [total] numbers of [interior design-related] awards given away amount to some 100 awards in 365 days. […] However, speaking of whether winning design awards are important or not, […] this depends on your own judgement […] — whether it has objectivity and reaches a professional level. At the same time, whether it has internationality.

In serving as a representative to the global Chinese design community and publicising the set of criteria for winners enacted by the selection committee of AMA, Lu subtly highlighted the strengths of AMA ('objectivity' and 'internationality'). The implication of Lu's point is that AMA represents credibility and professionalism, addressing the shortcomings of China's prize-awarding culture. Lu's account thus reflects the mounting concerns about the lack of authority in Chinese awards in recent

years. Increased exposure to foreign design competitions and the success of Chinese designers and companies in prestigious foreign awards have prompted more designers to engage in foreign competitions adhering to international standards.

Contrasting the internationally acclaimed awards with those organised by Chinese organisations, which often rely on local judging panels, highlights the skepticism regarding the impartiality of awarding organisations among the practitioners in China. Practitioners whom I interviewed expressed that foreign design awards were fairer compared to those organised by Chinese companies and organisations. One designer expressed her views about the culture of design awards in China: 'Many of the prizes can be bought, except those foreign ones, e.g. IDA [International Design Awards], and Hong Kong's Asia Pacific [Asia Pacific Interior Design Awards]. They should be fair and just' (R1). Another designer also made a similar comment: 'Anyway, I don't join any competitions in mainland China. You pay and you get the awards. Most of them are like this' (R8). Though this interviewee acknowledged the existence of purchasable awards even from certain dubious foreign organisations flooding his email inbox, such awards in China lacked utility and were mocked within his professional circle. He went on to criticise:

> The stuffs [purchasable awards] aren't worth the price you paid. […] When industry practitioners see them, they will be like, "Aw…". Usually these [awards] are for some small firms or weird firms that haven't got any awards in a while. They buy awards to display them and improve their online visibility. This situation is deteriorating. 7 to 8 years, or 10 years ago, it was less noticeable, and people didn't distinguish them much. Now everyone is aware of this, and it's awful.

The implication behind this comment is that award buyers purchased awards not to showcase them to peers, but as a proof of achievements intended for the potential

clients' viewing. As one of my interviewees Li Binfeng observed, with clients like real estate developers becoming more discerning in the past decade, a design company's portfolio, rather than claimed awards, held greater significance for these developers when selecting service providers.

The factors illustrated above explain why many designers remained skeptical of and distanced themselves from awards given by Chinese organisations, which have been accused of prioritising quantity over quality and treating awards as commodity for sale. Running through the narratives about Chinese local awards among the design practitioners was again the notion of Chinese deficiency, which has led them to embrace foreign design standards endorsed by foreign awarding bodies.

As seen in the examples of Chinese designers and entrepreneurs looking Westward, the dissemination of Western design and standards in China has been a multifaceted process. It involved cultural intermediaries who drew upon western design concepts and practices to shape contemporary Chinese interior design as symbolic assemblages. At a time when advanced Western design still served as a guide for many Chinese designers and their clients, exposure to and knowledge about foreign design has continued to be an important advantage in the industry. Significantly, this underscores that Western design trends, craftsmanship, and standards continue to serve as benchmarks for practice.

III.   Exporting of Chinese Design to the West

> If you want to do Sheraton [hotel interior design], you need to refer to our design standards. You can imagine that our creativity really struck them, so much so that they picked us finally.
> – Joe Cheng, Interview with Shenzhen Panorama Network, 2016

Joe Cheng, founder and CEO of Cheng Chung Design (CCD), a large-scale interior design company based in Shenzhen and specialised in design for high-end international hotel brands, talked about his successful commercial story, design practices and philosophy during a 2016 interview with Shenzhen Panorama Network, a financial news platform. In the interview, he pointed out that transnational hotel brands such as Marriott, Sheraton, and Westin started to adopt the design standards that CCD worked out around 2014, and transmitted them globally to their branches. Rather than using the design standards developed by local American design firms as they usually did in the past, these high-end hotel brands selected CCD's design standards as their global guidelines.

Cheng's statement seemed to support the industrial influence of CCD, which emerged to rise to power in 2013 when it ranked third in Hospitality Giants 100 by the U.S. *Interior Design* magazine. As a prominent player in hospitality design, CCD has advocated its design idiom, 'Eastern concepts and Western scenes' (*dong yi xi jin*), which means presenting the concrete being of the Western modernist interiors with an internal, abstract mind of the Orient. Citing his company's success, Cheng indicated that Chinese design practitioners 'no longer imitated or borrowed from the West', and that creativity was now exporting from China to the West.

The narratives of Cheng revealed a view that rejects China's deficiency in innovation when compared to the West. Indeed, these narratives Cheng employed to validate his accomplishments in a competitive environment were different from the discourse imbued with a self-critique of China's inferiority among his peers. However, Cheng's narratives simultaneously re-affirmed the Western dominance in the design industry by contrasting Chinese designers' past behaviours of imitation and cultural borrowing with the current's rising status of Chinese design. What was

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particularly notable was how Cheng implied the strength of Chinese design —

creativity — and described its significance in making his company stand out. The

valorisation of Chinese design has spurred the confidence of Chinese design

practitioners and elevated their public exposure. The case of Cheng demonstrated that,

within the design system, now Chinese design has possessed symbolic values and

meanings that presented novelty to Western corporations.

<u>Designed in China, Made in Italy</u>

      In addition to hotel interior design, another way Chinese design practitioners

have pushed forth the exporting of Chinese design has been to collaborate with Italian

furniture manufacturers. In recent years, leading Chinese designers have employed

oriental aesthetic concepts to design furniture items for a few furniture manufacturers

in Italy's Northern Lombardy region, known for its clusters of upscale home-

furnishing companies.

      The impetus for these linkages was initially fuelled by Italian businesses'

seeking to tap into new markets in China, which to some extent influences the

luxurious Italian furniture produced. These Italian manufacturers display a high level

of 'specialized production' that depends on creativity, craftsmanship and embedded

skills (Storper and Salais, 1997). Embedded within the export market that coalesces

around various regions within a globalising world (Storper, 1997), they recognised the

potential of the Chinese market and now they have distributors in major cities in

China to sell their Italian-made brand name products. As such, established Chinese

designers proficient in hybridising Chinese aesthetics with the Italian culture of

craftmanship fit the manufacturers' requirements, as these manufacturers attempt to

localise their products. Particularly, they aimed to cater to discerning Chinese buyers

seeking upmarket furniture pieces.

In 2016, Chinese designers began capturing the attention of luxury Italian furniture manufacturers. Frank Jiang, the founder of J&A, a large-scale spatial design company based in Shenzhen, was invited by Turri, a luxury Italian furniture brand, to design furniture under their label and to exhibit his 'melting light' collection at the 2017 Milan Furniture Fair. According to Turri's promotional video (2017), the collection stemmed from Jiang's 'research' and attempts to 'integrate Chinese and Western art', as he cited his earlier design of the 'moonlight' dressing desk, exhibited at the 2016 Milan Furniture Fair in 2016, which is 'based on the style of Chinese traditional furniture, the element, the spirit, combining with Italian or the latest international trend' (Turri, 2017). This innovative approach attracted the notice of *Wallpaper** magazine and subsequently Turri's owner, leading to Jiang's collaboration with the Italian brand. In designing his furniture, Jiang emphasised that his design was 'less a simplified form of traditional Chinese furniture' but more of showing a vision of an 'international standard of craftmanship' that 'integrates with Oriental concepts' (ibid).

Italian design-intensive manufacturers, like Turri, exemplify a 'managerial rationale' (Verganti, 2008) that enlists new collaborators from outside of Italy for new products as external 'interpreters' (i.e. the designers), managing the symbolic contents of products through their design teams, who embedded 'design discourse' in the products for different socio-cultural contexts. As Verganti noted (2008): 'Indeed, one could notice that most Italian designs have not been created by Italian designers but from foreign designers who work for Italian firms. There is a special capability of Italian manufacturers of attracting talented designers from all over the world…' (Verganti, 2006).

Additionally, Jiang's case signals a transformation in the practices of Italian manufacturers that had business in China over the last decade. In a study focusing on the small-to-medium sized Italian manufacturing companies and design studios operating in the Lombardy region and having business relationships with China, Bianchini and Sangiorgi (2007) found that there was a lack of interest in enlisting Chinese designers among these companies. As Bianchini and Sangiorgi (2007) indicated: 'Companies perceive design as a strategic competence for the development of their distribution strategies, but there seems to be a limited use of design to adapt products to the Chinese local market exigencies. [...]. Companies prefer to continue consolidated collaborations with design actors already involved in the design of their products, while it seems no Chinese designers have been involved by now' (10). However, we can see that this trend shifted roughly ten years later, as evident in the case of Jiang's collaboration with Turri.

Jiang is not the only designer sought out by luxury Italian brands. Huang Quan, founder of WJID Design and leading designer, whose specialised design idiom 'Shanghai Oriental' (*Haipai dongfang*)[15]— a strand of modern oriental genre that earned him career success, was also entrusted by Turri to create a collection. Being almost an industry's legend who has reportedly earned 1 billion RMB and owned a villa in Shanghai (Desidaily, 2020a), Huang's opulent living is well illustrated in his recent work called the 'Pinnacle' collection designed for Turri. T*his collection, which was* showcased in 2021 Milan Furniture Fair, emphasises a 'synthesis of Oriental

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[15] The term 'Haipai' here refers to 'Shanghai style' of the genre of 'modern oriental'. It was coined in the 1920s to describe the localisation of Beijing opera in Shanghai that was appropriated with more modernised elements. It was later used to refer to the different fields of creative production including literature, opera, fashion and design. With reference to the works of historians Lynn Pan and Marie-Claire Bergère, Greenspan (2014) indicates that the word 'Haipai' can mean the expression of the cosmopolitan and commercial culture of modern China.

philosophy, Western culture and contemporary taste', meaning 'a synthesis between two cultures: the Eastern one, philosophical and conceptual, and that of the Italian design of Turri' (Turri, 2021). Serving as an exemplar of Chinese-Western hybridisation, the collection, at its core, signifies the convergence of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics through Italy's tradition of craftsmanship, demonstrating the Chinese-Italian design production model.

According to Turri's description, the concept of 'pinnacle' comes from a Chinese expression *zheng rong,* meaning lofty and steep mountains, and symbolising sense of extraordinariness that is best captured in the imagery of mountains in Chinese painting in the tradition of Shan Shui (mountains and water) art movement (a painting style that depicts natural landscapes). This concept then became part of the publicity campaign material (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Turri's publicity material for the collection, *Pinnacle* (2021), featuring the image of mountains in a Chinese ink painting and sketches of Huang Quan. Image courtesy of Turri.

Huang drew on these elements in designing the shapes of the furniture pieces, as 'evident in the sculptural forms and slender lines' (Turri, 2021). Other examples of Chinese influence are shown in the 'sculptural base of the Pinnacle Table,' and in the 'vigorous strokes, clearly evident in the wooden structure' of the Pinnacle Chair (Turri, 2021). This stress on the forms akin to Chinese art elements reminds of Molotch's (2003) discussion on the notion of 'art experience' unleashed through forms, and his argument of form and function being always interweaved in products. As Molotch notes, 'For some people, some groups, some products and at some times, apparent functionality may be in demand, while at other cultural moments, a different signal — romantic charm, perhaps — may help something win out' (2003: 119). Such 'romantic charm', as embodied in Huang's design, perform special function of appealing to Chinese consumers through its affective dimension.

Another leading designer, Ben Wu, a key proponent of the 'modern oriental' genre and founder of W Design, was also hired by an Italian luxury manufacturer brand Longhi to design furniture. In a public lecture held on 12 December 2019, Wu told that the owner of the brand was interested in oriental concepts like *yin-yang*, and invited him to design a collection called 'Rhythm Law' series**,** which was showcased in Milan Furniture Fair 2019. According to Wu's remarks in a promotional video of Longhi (2021), he drew inspiration from Chinese 'traditional rhythms' (the five pentatonic scales used in ancient Chinese music), and combined 'the elegance of Italy with the gentleness of the East' to design the furniture collection (Figure 4).

The collaboration did not stop from there. Designers have continued to produce new collections in the subsequent years. For example, Frank Jiang collaborated with Turri to produce the 'vine' collection in 2018. Ben Wu designed new furniture for Longhi in 2020 and 2021. The orientation to home furniture

embodies the larger meanings of identity that draw on traditional Chinese culture and its aesthetics rules, hinted by all the implicit details and signs embedded in the design features.

Through manipulation of these elements, design practitioners turned these material products into a source of identity of consumers. As Anthropologists Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1996 [1979]) point out, all material goods and human-made space are 'markers within the spatial and temporal frame' (44), which often indicate the shared past and present. Similarly, production of designed products operates in a way that attempts to arouse this sense of collectivity. As in the case of the furniture designed by Chinese designers, the formation of the final products is driven by the sensibilities of Chinese designers in interpreting their own cultural-aesthetic traditions that can date back to 2000 BC from which they draw the abstract concepts to shape their design.

Figure 4. Swivel armchair with armrests designed by Ben Wu, 2019. Longhi Pavilion, Milan Furniture Fair 2022. Photograph taken by author, 16 June 2022.

The collaboration between the Chinese design practitioners and Italian manufacturers together shapes how "people work their physicality and 'furnishings' as a cultural ensemble of their time and setting" (Molotch, 2003: 8). It also shows how the 'place character' and 'place tradition' of Milan co-produce 'ineffable feelings' that enter a design. Thus, this type of hybridity shown in these furniture items involves a strong sense of 'mixed times' (Caldéron, 1988; Vargas, 1992 cited in Pierterse, 1995: 60), highlighting multiple temporal periods that concern with 'the coexistence and interspersion of premodernity, modernity and postmodernity' (Pierterse, 1995: 60).

With the emerging market of China, it is also part of the commercial culture of the high-end Italian furniture manufacturers to explore new ways to attract wealthy Chinese clientele to subscribe to and identify with their products. This is often accomplished through collaborations with designers with high rank order in the market. For example, Turri's (2022) official website proclaims that China has become its future market starting from 2009: 'The next market is China and the whole Asian territory, where the success is extraordinary and Turri becomes one of the most famous and appreciated brands.'

In a conversation with a Chinese saleswoman at Turri's pavilion in Milan Furniture Fair 2022, where Huang Quan's 'Pinnacle collection' was displayed, the saleswoman told me that Turri only selected 'top-notch designers' to work with. She added that before pandemic Turri's Pavilion had been 'crowded with Chinese visitors', which served as evidence supporting her point about the brand's significant popularity in China. Upon my inquiry of the price of Turri's furniture, she enthusiastically indicated a price range from some forty thousand (such as 'Blues collection' designed by Italian designer Giuseppe Viganò) to some eight thousand

Euro dollars (for instance, Huang Quan's 'Pinnacle collection' was priced at 82,000 Euro dollars) — which certainly targets a wealthy clientele. The pricing seemed to support the positioning of the brand as luxury furniture. Just as the saleswoman highlighted the company's emphasis on the Chinese market, her presence as Chinese saleswoman amongst a predominantly Western sales team perhaps was also very much self-evident.

From the vantage point of Italian manufacturers, introducing Chinese designer pieces is an important part of its campaign because they capture the sense of cultural familiarity and western luxurious feelings evoked by the brand that consumers look for. By employing Chinese designers, the manufacturers increase the receptiveness and currency that they could obtain from releasing such products that involve in a continual production of familiarity and certain newness (Negus, 1999). On the other hand, these Chinese designer pieces represent how certain Italian-led design traditions and innovations are hybridised with the inputs of Chinese design practitioners whose ideas were inspired by traditional Chinese arts and philosophies in its importing to the Chinese market. This is what the collaboration hoped to achieve to make the products appealing to those cosmopolitan elites who see design items as displays of connoisseurship in both foreign and Chinese aesthetics and of lifestyle that reminds of Chinese cultural identity.

In this sense, the Chinese market has, to some extent, an influence on the marketing approach of these luxury Italian brands and has gradually led some of the top echelon Chinese practitioners to obtain a unique position in the international design world. For these practitioners, maintaining even the slightest hints of Chinese culture in their works is, nevertheless, central to their opportunity to expand their global design market, as these are the elements that appeal to the Western luxury

furniture brands.

This process of hybridisation and reworking, as we can see, is not only shaped by the subjective expression and experience of designers; it also takes into account the global markets, networks and local managerial systems that shape them into being, as has been observed by scholars in cultural studies (e.g. Kraidy, 2005), design studies (e.g. Verganti, 2008) and design history (e.g. Potvin, 2015: 15). The motive that has driven the practices of Italian manufacturers and the Chinese designers is close to what Kraidy (2005) described as a form of 'corporate transculturalism', underpinning the motives of this mode of production that emphasises 'cultural fluidity as a tool to make corporations more profitable' and 'consumers more satisfied' (Kraidy, 2005: 95). In the case of Chinese luxurious furniture design, top Chinese design practitioners tended to understand the transcultural underpinnings in hybridity as progress in Chinese design, as it is gradually integrating into, rather than counteracts, the global design discourse. Design practitioners' collaboration with Italian firms affirms their readiness to be recognised on equal footing with Western designers. As we have seen, the interactive forces of hybrid cultural meanings and practices shown in the examples reflect the co-production involving both Chinese and Italian stakeholders. The flows of cultural discourse in the design domain are constituted as two-way traffic, rather than a one-way flow that directs from Italy to China. Taking all these into consideration, the oriental genre advocated by leading design practitioners appears to articulate a narrative of modernity rooted in their own cultural origins, setting it apart from foreign design. The examples presented confirm the perspective that sees cultural globalisation not just in terms of homogenisation and heterogenisation (Featherstone and Lash, 1995: 4; Pieterse, 1995: 62) but also in terms of cultural hybridisation (García Canclini, 1995; Pieterse, 1995).

IV.   Western Design and its Affective Dimension in Experience Economy

> In the country, what we tell [the potential apartment buyers] is, 'This is an Italian brand-name product […],' 'this is good-looking and is cultured'. […] That's why when I visited the model mansions at Hudson Yards, my biggest feeling was that it could bring me back to the state of life. […] In China, putting a sofa [imported from abroad] would do basically. But in foreign countries, designers may say, 'We put a rocking chair by the window so that we can lie here and enjoy the wonderful sunshine'. It is this state of life […] that arouses your imaginations of life. So this kind of affects has been planted in my brain so that now I know how to make affective stuffs.
>> – Aaron Wang, founder and creative director of Z One Design (Interview conducted by author, 2020)

Aaron Wang, founder and creative director of Z One Design, is one of the many Chinese design practitioners who are influenced by foreign design practice. Recalling his memorable visit to an upscale real estate model mansion at Hudson Yards in New York recently, Wang drew a difference between the practices adopted by Chinese designers and American designers in model flat projects. As his quote above suggests, he thought that the preoccupation of Chinese designers in the appearance ('good-looking') and symbolic sign values ('imported', 'Italian', 'brand-name') of furniture resulted in a lack of attention to other important issues in design. As he made comparisons between the American practices and Chinese practices, he pointed out that the American field trip brought him new perspectives and shaped his approach to design, particularly leading him to think about the need of presenting a design that can connect with its affective qualities ('affects') and construct a sense of lived space ('state of life'). Wang's account is noteworthy for its reflexive description of the dominant design elements in the industry. Notably, it is through their contacts with foreign design that the consideration of the intrinsic and affective qualities in design,

have grown in importance among contemporary Chinese design practitioners.

Wang was not alone in paying attention to the affective dimension in design output. The affective dimension that Aaron Wang highlighted has concurrently prompted discussion among design commentators and enthusiasts in China's design media over the last decade. Given the advent of the 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), now Chinese designers who design commercial space need to be capable of manipulating atmospherics in order to produce affect and pleasure to influence consumption behaviours and intentions (e.g. purchase and patronage intent) (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982), as well as indirect advertising (Campbell and et al., 2022). In their book *Experience Economy* (1999), Joseph Pine and James Gilmore note that '…those companies which figure out how to design experiences that are compelling, engaging, memorable — and rich — will be the ones leading the way into the emerging Experience Economy' (61). In the case of interior design that design practitioners engage with, desires and capacities to make affective design are driven by the profit-seeking commercial culture, which involves the sensitivities of practitioners to constitute part of the affective flow within the interiors as assemblages of materials and objects (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983; Fox, 2015).

As we will see in the following, not only that the aesthetic appearance of design and sign values of brand were important, but also the symbolic character of design outputs that engage the senses and make people feel touched was in vogue among Chinese interior designers. Participant observation, interviews and relevant sharing given by designers that were available on the internet revealed that design practitioners and tastemakers like design media editors were concerned about the affective qualities of interiors. Editor-in-chief of design media *DesiDaily*, Huang Gaohua, whom I introduced in the earlier section, identified the affective ability of

design as the definition of good design. During a livestream session on TikTok on 18 April 2020, he noted:

> [The creation of] experience is not just about the visual. Real good design can move us. And our demands for [good design] will increase, while [the design] will undergo the trials of market demand. In recent years, the level of aesthetic judgment [in China] has been on the rise.

For example, in another livestream session on 16 May 2020, he expressed that the dominant line of furniture design being pursued by many contemporary European designers served as an important reference, demonstrating how design can embody human affects. He commented,

> It seems that their line of product [design] concerns relatively rounded and plump shapes, favouring white fabrics and relatively cute forms that can make people feel touched at a glance. They are no longer those square-shaped chairs or sofa; these forms have become more approachable to human. I think that they embody some affects.

Huang believed that producing affective design, similar to what European designers were doing, was an essential task for contemporary designers. Another design enthusiast whom I introduced earlier, Lu Congzhou, the organiser of Andrew Martin Awards in the Greater China region, was cognisant of the affects in design and cited the works of acclaimed Belgian designer-antiquarian Axel Vervoordt as design models. In a TikTok livestream session on 12 July 2020, he noted:

> I think there are a few things [in Axel Vervoordt's works] that are the most touching. First, he is calm. His works are calming; Second, he is natural. He is good at referencing the nature; Third, it is rounded and plump. Fourth, it focuses on proportion. Fifth, it focuses on time. Time, space-time and light are all perfectly mastered.

Lu's discussion showed his admiration for foreign design masters like Axel Vervoordt, who is famous for constructing the affective dimension of design through his appropriation of wabi-sabi, a traditional Japanese philosophy and aesthetics linked with Buddhism that celebrates imperfection and transience. Similarly, one of my designer-informants, an admirer for foreign design giants like Louis Kahn and Carlo Scarpa, stated on his personal social media webpage that his ideal is 'to create an architectural atmosphere that can stir people's hearts' (R7).

In a presentation at a public event called 'Discovery of Good Design' that celebrated exemplary local and foreign design works and practices, Alyssa Xie, a female designer-founder of ACE Design, stressed that spatial design played a role in touching people's heart. Citing the well-known Therme Vals, a spa resort designed by acclaimed Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, she described:

> When you are at Therme Vals, you will feel touched: the light and shadow, temperature, overall environment, and the tactile feeling of the building stones. They all activate the sensory system of a person fully as he/she enters into the space [...]. Only when our bodies come to such a space and interweave with it can such a building be able to touch people's hearts (Andrew Martin China, 2021)

Like Lu, Xie pointed to advanced foreign design as a good model for learning. For Xie, Chinese design needed to step up on design that engages human bodies and thus senses to create affective moments ('to touch people's hearts') within the constructed atmosphere. In her description, the process through which human bodies become part of the physical material space comes close to what cultural geographer Ben Anderson (2009) called the function of 'affective atmospheres'. Anderson employed this term to explain how atmospheres, like affects, are always in an indeterminate state that

necessitates people's own 'apprehension' (ibid: 79). Xie's description highlighted the dimension of how human bodily feelings express the qualities and meanings of 'affective atmospheres' through sensing the atmospheres associated with a particular space (Dufrenne, 1973 [1953]). In Xie's understanding of human-atmosphere relations, there is an implied reflexive quality of atmospherics that is akin to Lash and Urry's (1994) notion of 'aesthetic reflexivity,' which they used to describe a process of entailing self-interpretation and creation of new meanings in social practices like consumer-user practices.

Taken altogether, what is salient about the points made by the design practitioners and enthusiasts is how they had elicited foreign design — particularly designs produced by European and American designers — as an influence and standard of good design, and how they had emphasised what it took to achieve the affective character of design. They considered stuffs like space-time intensity, light, shadows, shapes, and their relations to human's emotions, senses and bodies, to enhance the overall symbolic qualities of design — the 'cognitive, moral, affective, aesthetic, narrative and meaning dimensions' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 164).

As shown in the accounts given by the design practitioners and enthusiasts, design was described in terms that were in line with the approach of 'design-driven innovation,' a phenomenon observed by innovation and design studies scholar Roberto Verganti (2008). As a distinctive design approach, 'design-driven innovation' has been popularised by Italian design-intensive manufacturers since the 1990s, during which leading manufacturers pioneered new modes of design that capture the symbolic values of design. For instance, Italian Design House Artimede made design products like lamps an embodiment of affects, meanings and values created by designers, rather than merely products that focus on the utilitarian and aesthetic

aspects (Verganti, 2009). Another manufacturer Alessi re-defined household item design by proposing 'radically' new meaning for its new product line in 1993, upholding the viewpoint of 'household items as objects of affection, as substitutes of teddy bears for adults' (ibid: 7). From this perspective of 'design-driven innovation,' the relevance here is that, like these Italian manufacturers, now members of the Chinese design industry also pushed forth the affective aspect of design. As Verganti (2008: 440) notes, 'Apart from styling, what matters to the user, in addition to the functionality of a product, is its emotional and symbolic values (i.e. its meanings). If functionality aims at satisfying the utilitarian needs of customers, the product meaning tickles their affective and sociocultural needs.'

a. 'Luxo-minimalism' and High-ended Commercial Space

Within this affect-based 'experience economy,' the adoption of foreign design concepts and practice by contemporary Chinese designers becomes evident in the case of minimalism. This genre of design can date back to the 1980s that saw the emergence of 'minimal interior', a form that is built on the continued influence of 'Modernism's machine aesthetic' in the West (Sparke, 2008a: 201).[16] Since then, minimalism has become widely visible in commercial spaces, especially in international luxury hotels and brand name fashion boutiques (ibid). Urban Studies Scholar Paul Knox (2011: 62) describes this type of design as 'luxo-minimalist'

[16] The term Modernism here refers to the aesthetic styles and forms associated with modernity that implies social and cultural changes brought by Western industrial capitalism through processes such as rationalisation and urbanisation. The term is often used to refer to the 20th century's dominant practice, production, and theory in literature, art, design, and architecture. In design and architecture, modernism is characterised by the embodiment of unity (e.g. manipulation of machine production and the combined use of space, light, modern materials, technology and abstract forms), order (e.g. practical use of geometry), and purity (e.g. restrained use of ornament and palette; arts and crafts principles of 'honesty of construction', 'truth to materials', clean lines). See Woodham (2005) for a more detailed definition.

interior design, which has become a 'preferred high aesthetic' of the 'affluent and fashion-conscious metropolitans' in the Western 'experience economy' (ibid: 162). With its popularity derived from media buzz partly created by *Wallpaper* magazine, luxo-minimalism can be seen across the world over the last two decades (ibid). Examples include Park Hyatt Seoul Hotel designed by Japanese designer Takashi Sugimoto-led design group in 2005, and fashion brand Jil Sander's Tokyo flagship store designed by British designer John Pawson in 2018.

The influence of this design genre has also extended to China. While downright simplicity or austere minimalism is not so much a collective orientation in Chinese design practitioners' pursuits, recent years have seen growing interest in this luxurious form of minimalism among some of the aspiring practitioners in the industry, who have applied it to brand space like high-ended retailing space, sales centres and hospitality space. As with their foreign counterparts, minimalist design produced by Chinese designers often involves hybridisation. Some young designers demonstrated their interests in re-hybridisation of what is often already a form of hybridity. For example, one design business owner believed that her company's recent wabi-sabi design for a B&B guesthouse in China was "in essence different from those 'authentic' wabi-sabi projects done overseas" because the members of her company made their 'own inputs' into it (R25). A major characteristic of design hybrids involves hybridisation of foreign minimalist aesthetics and Chinese aesthetics to produce new meanings and identities. This hybridisation process makes much sense to Chinese designers, given the similarities between Western minimalism and Chinese classical aesthetics in China. In her book *China Style* (2002), Sharon Leece, a former Editor-in-Chief of *ELLE Decoration* Hong Kong magazine, notes that there are similarities between modern minimalist concepts and classicism inherent in Chinese

design. For instance, most classic hardwood furniture from the Ming dynasty (from the fourteenth to seventeenth century) is 'ultra-minimal' with 'Bauhaus-like lines' (Leece, 2002: 11). Besides, the idea of minimalism is not entirely foreign to China because similar ideas of restraint and nature have been central to Chinese philosophy, such as Taoism (a set of beliefs advocated by a Chinese scholar and philosopher Lao-Tse, 604-531 BC) (ibid: 60). Highlighting the forces of hybridity serves as a reminder of hybridity's role in destablising and transforming genre boundaries. In the following examples, designers hybridised minimalism with oriental aesthetics in order to appeal to clients who look for cultural fusion in design, and consumers who identify with both foreign and oriental culture.

Li Binfeng, chief designer and founder at LIA Design, a medium enterprise focusing mainly on real estate spaces like sales centres and model flats, saw minimalist concepts pioneered by Western designers as the core philosophy of his company. Evidence of this pursuit can be found on his company LIA Design website, where we can see the modernist and minimalist dictum 'less is more', advocated by German-American Architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, looms large:

> We insist on the principle of 'less is more', advocating frugality, simplicity, humanistic interest, and giving people a comfortable sense of space experience, to achieve a richer realm. (LIA Design, 2022)

For Li, his formula of upscaling minimalist design was to model from 'cool' foreign modernist museum interiors in Japan or Europe. This approach of making commercial interiors look like minimalist art museums has become popular in sales centre projects in recent years, as developers approved this genre as a marketing strategy. As Li stated: 'No matter what kind of positioning a real estate project takes, we would try to

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start from thinking of the design language of art museums and museums because it can carry a lot'.

Despite being influenced by Western design practices, he emphasised that his design had a 'strong sense of local culture' that 'differentiated it from the style of design championed in the West', and 'was done in a way similar with that of Japanese design integrating the indigenous and contemporary design'. Indeed, Li had incorporated Chinese and Japanese aesthetic elements throughout many of his sales centre projects and represented these elements in what he called 'an ingenious and subtle way' to create imagery and lingering charm (*yiyun*) of space. For example, in one of his sale centre projects completed in 2019, he employed the idea and appeal of crooked paths featuring classical Chinese gardens to design the spatial flow, and place rocks commonly used in Japanese gardens to construct an oriental vibe in the vast, museum-esque sales centre (Figure 5). Li's approach suggests that minimalism has become hybridised with oriental culture in commercial interior projects.

During the interview, Li also displayed a heightened awareness of interior design being a tool of experiential marketing. In Li's views, the goal was to create a simplistic space 'where people feel comfortable when they go in and do not forget it'. Like many brands that have taken an experiential turn in the recent decades, minimalist interiors designed by practitioners like Li have become 'a rich source of sensory, affective, and cognitive associations that result in memorable…..brand experiences' (Schmitt, 1999: 21). In developing cues to enhance the desired experience through minimalist vibes, Li believed that his works had identified most likely with the post-80s and 90s generations, whom he thought were prone to modern and cool stuffs, such as iPhones. Li's design thinking and strategies reflect that modern minimalism plays a role in forging affective bonds between consumers,

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potential buyers and brands, as he commented: 'If you just pick one young person randomly on the streets, he may probably like some of the design concepts that we are advocating now — minimalist and modernist, which align with the aesthetics that modern people lean towards.'

Figure 5. Sales centre designed by LIA Design for a private residential development in the city of Jiangxi, China. 2019. Image Courtesy of LIA Design.

Using hybridisation of modernist minimalism and oriental aesthetics as experiential marketing has been prevalent in high-ended hospitality interior design. Post-90s generation designer Chris Shao, who received his M.F.A. at the New York School of Interior Design and founded his own studio in 2016, is one of the designers who have interpreted luxo-minimalism through dynamic appropriation of oriental culture and Western design concepts to create eclectic ambiance. In his interior design project for *Ensue*, a high-end Michelin starred restaurant situated on

the top floor of Shangri-La Hotel in Shenzhen, Shao turned the space into what he called 'a fusion of Eastern ideas and philosophy, with Western execution' through hybridisation. He adopted a Western-influenced eclectic approach to hybridise Buddhist-inspired wabi-sabi aesthetics with local crafts, which is represented by a hand-painted landscape mural made by a local artisan at Shenzhen's Dafen Village.

From this perspective, Shao framed different cultural currents into what he described 'a new emotional representation of luxury'. As he notes in the design statement posted on his company's website: "this project 'evokes a new thinking of my culture that until now, is yet to be explored in relation to design. Being so personal, this entire process was an emotional one. This project is my new definition of 'luxury'". In this quote, we can see that the affective dimension ('emotional') figured centrally in Shao's design. His wabi-sabi-luxury can be attributed to not only an emphasis on craftmanship and maintaining the original and detailed texture of construction materials, in adherence to the Arts and Crafts design principle 'truth to materials', but also the entailed high production cost to conjure the branded space as an affective and performative object (Lury, 2004).

b. 'Affordable Luxury' and Middle-class Living Space

Moving away from the realm of 'luxo-minimalism,' some other designers I spoke with highlighted the affective dimension of their production through engaging with a design genre known as 'affordable luxury' ('*qing she*'). This genre specifically refers to the design of real estate model homes and private residences, emphasising modernist simplicity and the use of soft furnishings to create home atmospheres. Like 'luxo-minimalism,' it also involves hybridisation of foreign modernist and oriental aesthetics. One of my interviewees, Finley Yang (pseudonym), a young female

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designer of the post-90s generation, described how modernist interiors with a twist of 'affordable luxury' were central to model home design targeting young potential buyers of new apartments. She indicated that a popular genre for model homes and private residences was the Oriental genre, coupled with zen-like elements as expressed in 'New Oriental' style, or using Chinese elements in 'New Chinese' style. Speaking from her personal working experience, Yang explained that 'affordable luxury' design meant the fashioning of exquisiteness through modernist simple design. As she indicated:

> In the past, they [home buyers] pursued something more extravagant, more complicated decoration. Now everyone may feel that space should be modern and simple, and with a touch of affordable luxury […] There is a bit of 'petty bourgeoisie'; and there is some individuality. […] And design tends towards young people […], with a touch of living quality. It is not complicated […], not lame nor flamboyant. We can feel touched.

Yang's account demonstrates how simplicity and affective dimension ('feel touched'), as has been mentioned earlier, has figured importantly in contemporary interior design in China, particularly since the early 2010s when modernist design has gone mainstream in commercial market. The term 'petty bourgeoisie' ('*xiaozi*') that Yang used has a more localised meaning, dating back to the 1990s. It loosely refers to urban employed young people, and sometimes specifically to educated young professionals. The group of Chinese consumers that Yang mentioned was primarily the young middle-class. As with the individualistic ethos of petite bourgeoisie highlighted in Bourdieu's discussion in *Distinction*, '*xiaozi*' as a group in China is understood as having a sense of individualism (Henningsen, 2011), but also tending

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towards materialistic and spiritual satisfaction, inner experience and aesthetic living.[17] Yang's account shows that hybridity of modernist design and oriental Chinese elements has developed into an option of consumption commodity that the middle-class prefers. Such an orientation towards the modernist genre is presented by Elfick's (2011) discussion of the consumption practices of Chinese middle-class professionals. Elfick found that middle-class professionals attempted to distinguish themselves from the new rich ('*bao fa hu*') and other classes through consumption practices. In her study, these middle-class professionals considered the pursuit of modern Chinese design as representative of their 'unique' and 'specialized' taste, 'a type of connoisseurship that stemmed from being highly individual' (Elfick, 2011: 204). Her study provides examples of how the prevalence of hybridised modernist and Chinese elements among middle-class professionals reflects their intentional distancing from the new rich, who display preferences for specific styles, such as ornate furniture in traditional Chinese style and imitative foreign styles of decor (e.g. faux Baroque). Yang's account supports Elfick's findings regarding the middle-class's interests in simple modernist designs, including those designs with certain Chinese flavour and a minimalist twist.

c.   Commercial Pragmatism and 'Fresh Young' Rentals

The indigenisation of minimalist design in the Chinese market is as much a pragmatic commercial solution as an aesthetic choice for both design practitioners and their clients in particular design projects. For example, in the account given by Xu Shijie, a young interior designer under 30 years old at SD Design, a strong linkage

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[17] Additionally, this term *xiaozi* can broadly refer to the office workers and professionals who share similar lifestyle and cultural dispositions such as inclinations towards certain cultural activities.

surfaced between minimalist design and urban building's retrofitting design projects targeting rundown building clusters (known as 'urban villages') in the city of Shenzhen. He pointed out that simple design, when compared to highly ornamental styles (e.g. 'American style'), is deemed a more ideal way to save material and time costs for the building owners investing in these urban retrofitting projects. As he explained:

> There are a lot of requirements for Chinese and American styles in terms of the form. It has a lot of cornices and so on. To put it bluntly, it is very complicated, and the budget does not allow for that. More, the time period for design is very short generally; it is the same for construction work. They need to be quick, otherwise they will lose money. […] So, they demand high speed; it's impossible to make complicated stuffs. We would say the quickest way is to just re-paint the walls. The quickest the better.

Xu's comment highlighted how the norm of high-speed service delivery figured centrally in the form of design for these units ('impossible to make complicated stuffs'), which were transformed into rentals mainly for singletons.[18] It was these considerations that he had in mind whilst explaining the kind of design his company encouraged — a simplistic vibe, coupled with an 'instagrammable' twist:

> In terms of apartment retrofitting project, an important factor to consider is the cost, which is money. That is, you can't do it like a hotel, that's not feasible. This is more like the style…of Instagram. The style is instagrammable. Doing in this way is money-saving. It's just that [people] like the style of instagram very much.

What Xu referred to as a space of 'instagrammable' style was conjured through placing decorative items against a simple, plain background, such as interior walls

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[18] For an extended discussion of this notion of speed in the Chinese design economy, see Chapter 7.

with 'a big patch of colour' or walls that are often 'painted in white' (Figure 6). By blending modernist design with decors that offer opportunities for digital engagement behaviours (such as photo-shooting and sharing experiences on social media), designers like Xu forged experiential, affective living space where the demands of investors can meet — shortening of project completion time and alignment of the project with the interests of the social media generations (Generations Y and Z).

Figure 6.   Interior of a rental unit designed by SD Design for an apartment rental brand targeting young people in the city of Shenzhen, China. 2019. Photograph by Nie Xiaocong. Courtesy of SD Design.

For Xu, this type of design was not austere minimalist design, but one that fused minimalist design with certain non-essential decorations and different foreign design influences, such as Nordic and Japanese design, which emphasises simplicity and the use of raw timber to create natural vibes — a category of design that Xu

described as the 'Fresh Young' ('*xiao qingxin*').[19] As he indicated, this category

served to save design costs and entice the target users of the retrofitted apartments —

the urban young people who need to rent a living space but cannot afford to buy new

apartments in the city. Like many of the target users of the space he designed, Xu told

that he himself leaned towards minimalism, a genre he described as "something

modernist, akin to the 'less is more' stuffs, and as simple and simplistic as possible".

Significantly, his comments offer a perspective on how minimalist design is utilised as

both a commercial strategy and an aesthetic practice in the industry, framed within the

modernist genre and influenced by various indigenised foreign innovative currents.

V.   Summary

This chapter has explored the transmission of Western design ideas and

practices into China's interior design industry, in which Western design is revered as

a guiding influence. Rather than being unified during these processes, the take-up and

reworking of foreign design practices and ideas are specific to varied types of design

projects and products, client preferences, and their market niche. These processes are

shaped by a series of contextual factors that sustain the influence of western design on

Chinese design practitioners. It has also analysed the exporting of Chinese design

concepts and practices to the West, suggesting that this can be understood as an

interplay of city-branding strategies and Chinese designers' creativity in evoking

oriental aesthetics through design, as well as an outcome of corporate transculturalism

and specific managerial system in design-intensive companies.

As Chinese designers sought to disseminate their design works and concepts

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[19] The term 'Fresh Young' can also refer to a style of art-related work or creative work preferred by
certain groups of art enthusiasts and hipsters.

across a wider and more varied consumer and client base, oriental aesthetics have become useful for such an endeavour because they can be hybridised with modern minimalist design, simultaneously appealing to potential Chinese and Western market segments. Despite the fact that these designers have been recognised within their own country, the dissemination of their design concepts to overseas markets might not have been possible without the attention of Western manufacturers to the Chinese market and the Western design community's interests in Chinese design. These developments demonstrate the interrelations between genre status and designer's identification with genre in shaping the status market of interior design.

In the following chapter, I look at the intellectual property (IP) regime in China — a system in which the Western-led intellectual property regime, along with Chinese Confucian values and socialist legacies, is hybridised to shape the broader context in which design practitioners understand and exercise originality and IP rights.

Chapter 5

Intellectual Property Rights and Interior Design

In this chapter, I seek to explore the intellectual property right system of China and its relations with the interior design sector. It provides an account of the defining characteristics of the intellectual property (IP) regime in China and its interconnections with the field of design. The analysis encompasses an examination of the IP regime across three key domains: patents, copyright and trademarks. This exploration sheds light on the pivotal role played by IP laws in protecting intellectual property, which is broadly defined as the 'creations of the mind: inventions; literary and artistic works; designs; and symbols, names and images used in commerce' (WIPO, 2004: 2). Building on the arguments about the incompatibility of Western IP System with China's Confucian values and socialist legacies, a crucial part of a discussion on the IP system in China is the linkages between the attempts of the Chinese state to conform to the global IP system, as exemplified in China's IP system reform, and the valorisation of creativity in global economy and trade relations. I seek to address that China's IP reform in the last two decades is taken forward through the fostering of China's integration with global economy, the promotion of its knowledge-based, digital and creative economy, and its response to the United States' (U.S.) accusation regarding unfair IP practices in trade disputes. Against this background, I ask, what are the philosophical underpinnings of China's hybrid IP system? What are the implications these have for the operation of its IP system in relation to design practices? By showing how the logic of IPR emerges and operates to regulate and to offer, and not offer, protection to the design-related rights holders, this chapter

demonstrates that the current socio-legal reality in China's late-socialist neoliberalism is born out of the interweaving relations between the landscapes of political economy and culture. In addition, it shows the wider context in which people understand originality and IP rights.

I.   Intellectual Property Regimes and Production of Culture

Over the past two to three decades, Chinese design practitioners and entrepreneurs, on the one hand, found that they were given greater assurance of the intellectual property rights under specific categories of legal status that are relevant to their professional practices. On the other hand, they were at the same time subjected to China's unique IP regime, characterised by both the elements of Western-style IP system and also the Confucian values and socialist practices that may be considered as arbitrary practices and do not follow the modern Western liberal doctrine of rule of law.

To understand the significance of the relationships between China's IP regime and design works, it is important to have a sense of the philosophies and logics that have underpinned the Western IP system. In the discussion of the Western tradition of IP regime, Celia Lury (1993) has highlighted that the emphasis on the copyrightable material expression emerges through recognising the author-function. This attribution aligns with the Romanticist conception of originality as subjectivity and individuality, alongside the cultural value inherent in works. As Lury notes (1993: 23), 'The author-function thus acted as the locus of asymmetry between cultural and social reproduction, and, simultaneously, provided a means by which the creative labour process could — albeit in the hazy and indeterminate terms of individual originality

and genius — be linked to the creative work.' Her study shows that whether it is the French tradition emphasising the notion of an author's personal rights (i.e. one's rights of being identified and having one's works being treated appropriately), or the Anglo-American tradition that emphasises the rights of copyright owners, it is through putting in laws that the author-function transforms cultural values into exchange values. Despite that China's copyright laws have recognised this author-function logic, Western philosophical underpinnings of the IP system do not align neatly with China's IP system. While the Western IP tradition tends to view originality as an expression of individual's personality and their rights that constitute the attributes of a 'person', China's IP system is influenced by traditional Chinese perception of 'person,' which tends to define one's rights in terms of one's duties and rights within the wider communities, as I noted in Chapter 1. This characteristic of the IP system, as I will elaborate on in the following sections, has shaped the government's approach to organising and regulating cultural production.

This chapter considers that China's Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) framework and the ambiguity associated with the protection of private rights reflects the means and its limits of conducting oneself and one's relations with others that are offered to Chinese design practitioners (Mauss, 2000 [1985]). As noted in Chapter 3, laws, discourses, institutions, administrative measures are part of the *dispositif* deployed by the government as a means to govern the socio-economic life of the subjects (Foucault, 1980: 194). IP regimes, encompassing not just laws but also the associated forms of discourse, instituted norms and techniques of conduct*,* cultivate particular forms of personhood, and constitute the 'capacity for self-consciousness and self-reflection' (du Gay, 2007: 11, 22). This understanding of the impacts of IP regimes complements the political economy approach in studies of creative workers

that inform numerous studies of IP system. These studies tend to downplay the significance of the cultural underpinnings of IP regimes in shaping how the rights of individuals (and corporations) are defined in specific ways and hence the milieu in which these subjects operate.

Some accounts of China's IP system have tended to draw on the evolutionary perspective from economics and argued that a weak IP regime can act as an 'open-system' that does good to the overall growth of creative industries, despite the ambiguity associated with the weak IP system that may hinder its future's development. For example, Montgomery and Potts (2008) have argued that the weak IP system in China was able to contribute to the evolutionary development of its industries. Their studies found that individual business's ability to adapt to the Chinese legal system and the advantage of weaker IP laws in enhancing the 'operational value' of reusing ideas in creative industries mitigated the downsides of China's IP system. Similarly, Richard Florida's (2012: 24) discussion on IPR as a form of human creative faculty tends to overgeneralise the dynamics of the IP regime. He alerted the readers to consider the negative impacts of overprotecting and overlitigating IPR in limiting creative impulse, an argument put forward by legal studies scholar and activist Lawrence Lessig. While it emphasises that IP system is a form of regulatory mechanism for creative energy, it gives little attention to how creative workers act in relation to sets of concepts of IPR protection in the first place in different socio-cultural contexts.

While both the studies of Florida as well as Montgomery and Pott have contributed to the understanding of the economic role of creativity and the IP system in China in a broader industrial scale and pointed out the socio-economic benefits of a weak IP system, they left very little room for an understanding of the larger cultural

processes that inform the existing Chinese IP system. As Jane Gaines has pointed out, 'copyright protection is always and at the same time circulation and restriction' (Gaines, 1991: 122). Hence, seeing IP system functioning as both a driver and a hindrance to creativity in a general sense is inherently limiting; it provides little insight into the effects of the IP legal-cultural milieu on the actual practices of design practitioners.

There are several warrants for a discussion that focuses on the IP regime in relations to design. First, designs, as a core category of IP encompassing innovation, culture, and commerce in a globalised cultural industry (Lash and Lury, 2007), involve an act of brokering the relationships between production and consumption (Julier, 2008: 1). Meanwhile, the issues surrounding IP, such as exclusive rights of copying and replication, are pertinent to all designs. Since design culture is intertwined with the domains of IP production, dissemination and consumption, studying the relationships between these IP concerns and design can offer implications on the specific value system that recognises and rewards creations of human minds in certain ways. As Kretschmer and Pratt (2009) suggested, IP laws, particularly copyright laws, can be understood as a sub-system within the broader system of production of culture (Peterson, 1976). Following this vantage point, examining IP regimes allows researchers to avoid taking IPR for granted and highlights how the IP laws constitute the objects they govern. Thus, studying the legal form, particularly copyrights, and its relations with cultural forms 'opens up a critical space within which we may examine the construction of copyright norms,' as well as the links between production and consumption (Kretschmer and Pratt, 2009: 172).

Second, design outcomes are often the important elements in the manifestations of the IPR regime's 'extensive-intensive working' (Yang, 2014: 74),

meaning the dual operation of a global extensive network of capitalist production and design-intensive branding. In light of this extensive reach of design-intensive forms as they compete in the global and local markets, studying specific examples of dynamics in the IP regime in relation to designs helps us understand the power dynamics in the operation of global capitalism that put emphasis on IP goods and IP-related services. This also shed lights on the local variations regarding the instituted IP laws and people's perception of IP, including the design practitioners, their clients and end users in the target markets.

Third, an analysis of the relations between IP and design is helpful in light of the attention given to the moral issues surrounding copyrights in the field of design. Copyrights particularly matter in this context due to the potential reproduction of most visual and material design outcomes through advanced technology. The remit of design is extensive, encompassing not only technological innovations filtered into our life through products like smartphones but also extending to objects and images like logos, household objects, and spatial designs like retail stores. In the field of spatial design, designs acquired by private organisations during the bidding process and by clients during commissions have the risk of subsequent reproduction in two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms without the creator's authorisation. Such issues point to the natural demands for regulation to ensure that good intentions are upheld in the playing field and provide a solid foundation for creative economic activities.

Lacking the examination on the broader legal-cultural milieu that are specific to the concepts of rights, duties and creativity, research that emphasise the effects of IP system, political economy and legal regulations on the dynamics of circulation and restriction within creative industries may seem incomplete. By going beyond the

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limited conception of creative work like design as an economic product and private property, a view strengthened by IP regime, this chapter offers a more culture-sensitive explanation of China's instituted IP statuses and attributes and the ways in which IP system is reformed. Following the insights provided by Negus (2002), I emphasise that cultural processes shape and inform the context in which creativity is understood, assessed, and valued by creative practitioners. And this is why, before I move on to explore the concepts of creativity and newness that are adopted and understood at the level of individual practitioners and the enterprises in the next chapter, in this chapter, I took a broader perspective to study the transformation of IP regime that took place in China in recent decades, and points to the unique features of China's IP regime underpinned by both Chinese traditional cultural 'pillars' of creativity and Western neoliberalism that have impacts on the conduct of design practitioners. As I will illustrate in the following sections, these legal-cultural pillars of categories and practices shape the development of IPR protection through which we can comprehend concepts of IP in relation to the case of China.

II.   China's Traditional Cultural Pillars of Creativity

Laikwan Pang (2012) provided a detailed discussion on the conflicts between the logics underpinning the global IPR regime and those underpinning Chinese people's perception of culture and creativity. In exploring the historical construction of a dominant value system in China that influenced perceptions of culture, Pang (2012) indicated that the dominant IP system is a product of developed capitalism in the Western world, shaped by two major aspects. One aspect is the political and commercial interests that have driven IPR protection from its origins in the middle

ages in Europe to its relevance in today's global economic structure in the twenty-first century. The other involves the Western philosophical understanding that began to develop during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, celebrating the idea of individualist human ideas as conducive to social diversity and progress (ibid). It is not easily assimilated in China because the Chinese value system embraces two major ideologies: the traditional view developed in the Confucian past of defining culture by its public-ness, and legacy of the socialist understanding of property as part of collective ownership, despite its economic reform. Both developments conflict with the IPR concept defined by western approaches of the IP system — the acknowledgment of IPR that dates from the Enlightenment has understood ownership of ideas and innovations as private property of individuals.

As I have noted in Chapter 1, the individual's sense of self is often shaped by social connections known as *guanxi*, influenced by the Confucian philosophy that prioritises social relations over a rational legal system. Max Weber (1951[1915]), in his seminal study of religion and capitalism, discussed how Western capitalist societies, structured around a system of rationalisation process encompassing all aspects of life, are underpinned by a Protestant-Christianity ethic. In contrast, China's path of capitalist development diverges from the Western trajectory, lacking the reliance on a rationalisation process and the subsequent establishment of a rationalised legal system and bureaucracy. Weber argued that Confucianism was a major factor preventing China from developing an economic attitude conducive to the type of capitalist development that was happening in North America and Europe during the time of his research. This argument has prompted a body of literature that has provided evidence of how Confucian values, such as its 'work ethic', family-based loyalty, sense of duty, and virtue of thrift, have similar effects on contributing to

capitalist development in China (see Sigurðsson, 2014).

Nevertheless, these Confucian values have simultaneously shaped people's perceptions of individual rights in China. Yusheng Peng (2004) has indicated the importance of distinguishing between Chinese and Western conceptions of rights because the Western concept of universal rights, which are rooted in the idea of human equality before God and legal rights (Hamilton, 1994), is alien to China. As Peng has pointed out, "the definition of 'individual rights' in the Chinese context is specific and particularistic to social ties. It is not universal rights, but ego's obligation to the alter: no tie, no obligation, and no rights" (2004: 1050). This means that personal rights centre around the responsibility of the self to 'others' that give meanings to a fulfiled person (Gold, Guthrie and Wank, 2002). The 'others' here refer to two units that are central to the value system of Confucianism. First, it is the nuclear family and the familist value, placed at the centre of a person's social network 'differentiated according to the closeness of kinship ties and the degree of mutual affection and maintained through internalization and various forms of expressive reciprocities' (ibid: 63). Second, the public and communal value and interests are placed above those of the family (ibid). Thus, what is considered as individual rights in the Western culture is much closer to the concept of self-interest, which is overshadowed by one's obligation to one's social ties in the Chinese Confucian culture. While social practices rooted in the Western culture of universalism and individualism tend to condone special favour to strong ties (Fei, 1992[1947]), Chinese social practices of *guanxi* tend to regard special favours and obligations to one's social ties as normal and even more noble than serving one's self-interest, which can be sacrificed to honour such obligations (Peng, 2004). The Confucian concept of duties to one's social ties, extending from one's family to others, plays a role in

organising the practical deportment of individuals and groups in China. As such, a distinct sense of limitation and techniques governing forms of personhood becomes evident, a view echoed in the works of Mauss (2000 [1985]), Weber (1930) and Foucault (1986).

By revisiting some of these discussions about Chinese cultural values and norms, my aim here is to show how the two cultural pillars in contemporary China, namely the ideologies of Confucianism and socialism, through their effects on institutional practice (such as legal-governmental system and regulations) and also individual and organisational practice, have shaped the conceptions of rights and persons in China, which require the individuals to become able to live up to the ethical demands allocated to them (du Gay, 2008). In other words, both Confucianism and socialism are sets of beliefs that guide people's conduct through practical means (ethics) that form a part of the domain of spiritual discipline, by which people conduct themselves as persons (Foucault, 1986) [cited in du Gay, 2007: 58]. Such specific cultural configuration does play a role in shaping the people in society through different technologies. For example, the fact that China's IP system places state interests at a position more important than private rights and views social connections as methods of solving IP disputes is not only characteristic of its socialist regime and a Confucianised legal approach that prefers mediation rather than litigation (Li, 2011), but is also representative of its legality operating without judicial independence. This also demonstrates how a Confucianised society continues to follow on a trajectory of development, as Inglehart and Welzel (2005: 22) suggested.

Scholars across cultural studies, creative industries studies, East Asian studies and copyright studies have supported the view that there was an interdependent relationship between creativity and copying within the Chinese culture influenced by

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Confucian values (Pang, 2012: 7; Keane, 2007; Alford, 1995: 9-29). William Alford's (1995) work has provided a good account of how Confucian values frame how people understand the past and the work of those people who had gone before in creative practices. A quote of Confucius published in a passage in the *Analects* perhaps best captures the Confucian conception of creativity: "The Master [i.e., Confucius himself] said: 'I transmit rather than create; I believe in and love the Ancients'" (Waley, 1989, cited in Alford, 1995: 25). The act of copying — originated from a sense of valuing the learning from and imitating the fruits of intellectual endeavour — has been a characteristic of Chinese civilisation from the imperial days to the present, and this practice has shaped Chinese people's perception of copying.[20] As was the heavy borrowing of the classics in literary work and the manner of taking masters as the basis and appropriating their styles in calligraphy and painting in imperial China, replication of the manifestation of creative endeavours in arts tends not to be construed as implying the absence of originality in contemporary times (Alford, 1995: 27-28).

In their book *Creativity, Communication and Cultural value*, Keith Negus and Michael Pickering (2004: 64) based their analysis on Anglo-American cases and commented, 'copyright is a clue to the way people seek recognition and the will to communicate and reciprocate, no matter how this may have been incorporated into various systems of capitalism'. In the case of Confucianised China, however, copyright is not necessarily the way through which people gain recognition for their works. Instead, skilful copying is generally considered as an intellectual practice to

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[20] This idea of creativity in China is different from the Western conception of creativity that can be traced back to the pre-modern era. In Western thought, creativity has often been associated with a divine source, the God, particularly in the Christian tradition where God is viewed as the origin of divine creativity who passes the mythic creative power to artists. See Pang's (2012) *Creativity and Its Discontents*.

recognise and interpret the values of creative works. As Alford has noted:

> Given the extent to which 'interaction with the past is one of the distinctive modes of intellectual and imaginative endeavor in traditional Chinese culture,' the replication of particular concrete manifestations of such an endeavor by persons other than those who first gave them form never carried, in the words of the distinguished art historian and curator Wen Fong, the 'dark connotations... it does in the West.' (Alford, 1995: 28; cited Murck, 1976; Wen, 1962).

Because of the inherent values of copying, the act of copying is often not seen as incompatible with, or even an 'enemy' of, creativity. Such a concept parallels the Confucian idea of utopia (*da-tong*) (Liao, 2006), which embraces the view that resources should be best shared with others rather than left idle and possessed by oneself. In this sense, as Pang reminded, 'creativity is exercised by copying and sharing' in the traditional approach to knowledge and culture in China (2008: 123). This Confucian concept of exploitation of resources and generation of creativity is further conditioned by Socialist-collectivist values of properties under the rule of the Chinese Communist regime. The longstanding records of *shanzhai* (copycat) production, ranging from counterfeit products to copycat interiors, 'duplitecture' and towns (Bosker, 2013), are an indication that the culture of copying persists in the production process. An example of copycat interior can be seen in Yang's (2014) case study of China's 'copycat Apple Store'. In this study, she argued that the copycat store that sold genuine Apple product but copied official Apple Store's design without endorsement exemplifies a consumer-turned-producer mode of production that extended the design-intensive value regime of Apple within the global culture industry. Her case study not only reflects the tension between China's copycat production and ideological framework of IPR, but also shows that what is considered

'fake' by IPR regime's standard can be regarded by China's copiers and 'produsers' (Bruns, 2008), i.e. producer-users, as a constructive way of production, contributing to the circulation of the 'dream products' in a 'dream world' conjured by Apple Store.

In this section, I provided an understanding of the cultural-historical background against which China's IP system emerged and people's conception of individual rights and creativity is shaped. In the section which follows, I aim to offer a brief recent history of how China's IPR framework has transformed and highlight its characteristics.

III. Transformation of China's IPR Framework

The current institutional approach adopted by the Chinese Communist regime to IPR is built upon the IP system that began to take shape after 1978, when China adopted its open-door policy and economic reform. While the Communist Party obtained ruling power in 1949, it chose to abolish the IP laws enacted by the Nationalist government rather than modernise them. Consequently, it did not build its IP system until the 1980s: Trademark Law was passed in 1982 and the Patent Law was enacted in 1984. Like in Medieval Europe where trademark protection became the first type of intellectual property that put into law (May and Sell, 2006), trademark law was the first IP law in China as China sought to incentivise national production and introduce foreign products and technologies. In the early 1990s, the Chinese Communist regime entered a new era of intellectual properties by putting the Chinese Copyright Law (CCL) into effect in 1990, and by signing the 'Memorandum of Understanding on the Protection of Intellectual Property'('MOU') in which the U.S. required China to enhance the standards of its IP protection. What is significant is that

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the 1990 Copyright Law became able to protect private personal and property right by adding a purpose to 'protect the copyright of authors in their literary, artistic and scientific works and the copyright-related rights and interests.' As legal scholar Yahong Li (2011) pointed out, the pressure imposed by the West through trade agreements, international IP treaties, and the threat of trade sanctions have prompted almost all IP law reforms after 1978. Another push factor for China to revamp its IP system was its preparation for the entry into the WTO in December 2001, which was paved by the Chinese government's amendments of Patent Law in 2000, and the amendments of Trademark Law and Copyright Law in October 2001. Being a member of WTO requires the Chinese government to ensure compliance with copyright treaties, including the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) that requires that China's IP system meets TRIPS' standards. The WTO membership reflects that Chinese IP system have become influenced by Western IP regime as its IP laws are 'modelled after Western IP laws in form and in substance' and can be seen largely as 'a transplant from the West' but with Chinese characteristics (Li, 2011: 138-139), as China sought to enhance its economic gains and global influence of its WTO accession.

Numerous studies have noted that there are signs of a gradual shift from a copycat model to a model of greater protection of copyright over the last two decades, particularly evident in the amendments of the CCL in 2001, 2010 and 2020 to enhance protection of copyright (Lee and Li, 2021; Gilardi et al., 2023). Yet, this does not mean that the copycat model, which is dependent on a rather ambivalent governmental approach to copyright enforcement (Hulme, 2014: 94), has completely disappeared in today's Chinese society. As several studies have indicated, throughout

most of the first decade of the 21ˢᵗ century, IP rights were not actively promoted by the Chinese government at the local level as state officials viewed strong protection of IP rights as barriers for local industrial growth (Keane and Zhao, 2012); they emphasised the flexibility to permit copycat culture and to promote production at the lower-end of the production chain, which was considered to be able to stimulate innovation and business. Another important point is that China's IPR enforcement system is very different from other countries' since its administrative organs, on top of the courts, hold considerable power in IPR enforcement in China (Li, 2011). As Mertha's (2018) research has shown, despite the external pressure on its IP system, it is China's bureaucracies that have the authority in terms of policy and enforcement, and its administrative apparatus can trace varying impacts of external pressure for different types of IP. Citing Dimitrov's (2009) study, Athreye (2020) similarly emphasises the role of law enforcement, highlighting that the Chinese IP law enforcement capacity can be simultaneously weak and strong, as evident in the 'poor quality decisions but high volume of prosecution in the case of copyright and trademark violations and high-quality decisions but low volume of prosecution in the case of patent laws' (59).

At the same time, despite that IP laws enforcement is conditioned by government-protected monopolies and persisted state intervention (Montgomery and Priest, 2016: 340), two economic developments have driven reforms in its IP system. First, the 'creative economy' discourse became widespread among the governments in Asia during the late 1990s and early 2000s, a time when these governments plan to develop an economy that is built on intellectual property (Kong et al., 2006). In 2005, the term 'creative industries' became officially adopted by the Chinese state (Hui, 2006), which meant that it was ready to embrace the discourse of 'creative industries'

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in the hope of increasing the international presence of its local creative industries. This pushed the Chinese policy makers to further the system of intellectual property in supporting the development of its industries. Not only that the policy makers paid more attention to IP, local stakeholders who emerged after the privatisation of Chinese state industries during the 1990s and enjoyed private property rights also supported stronger IP protection (Yu, 2007). Second, the country has seen a shift towards an export-driven economy and stepped up its development in knowledge-intensive industries over the course of the 2000s (ibid). China became the global largest exporter in 2010, and in 2020 it had the highest exports globally, with the value of exports totalled at almost 2.7 trillion US dollars (US Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). In connection with developing the creative industries, China's export structure of cultural products and services needs to comply with the international standards to facilitate the local producers and enterprises in entering the global market (Li, 2016).

Besides the goal of expanding the transnational influence of Chinese enterprises, there has been pressure on China from foreign business interests, especially those of multinational corporations, to protect their IPR after China's entry into the WTO. China's becoming a member of the WTO has proved to give rise to IP infringement cases that foreign businesses brought in Chinese cities like Shanghai, Beijing and Guangdong, where the win rates of these businesses are not low, as Cohen's research (2016) has shown. A more recent example of the influence of the external pressure is that the Copyright Law was revised in 2010 because of the findings of the WTO dispute settlement body in a case initiated by the U.S. (Montgomery and Priest, 2016: 340).

A body of literature has indicated that the Chinese state saw law reform as necessary for the Chinese legislatures to integrate with the globalisation process and

treated it as a tool for directing and managing societal change as China integrates with the world economy (e.g. Zou, 2006; Gallagher, 2007). Revisions of the CCL signify the increasing usefulness of legal means to achieve its political and economic goals in local and global contexts. This is one of the major aspects of the marked change in China's IP regime in recent years, as the Chinese government has stepped up its efforts to strengthen its IPR framework. In fact, the extensive IP regime reform since 2019 (CNIPA, 2020a; Lee and Li, 2021), including the amendments to Trademark Law and the Anti-Unfair Competition Law, the Third Amendment of its copyright law, and the Fourth Amendment of Patent Law, primarily stems from the U.S.-China trade war where China sought to address the U.S.'s accusation of its unfair IP practices (Lee and Li, 2021). One example that shows the role of trade interests in shaping the outcome IP-related dispute in China is the victory of Michael Jordan's brand over the long trademark battle against Chinese company 'Qiaodan Sports', a knockoff of Michael Jordan's brand in China. The victory was announced in 2020, when the U.S. and China were reaching a new trade deal that saw China pledge to increase greater protection of IP rights. Such a legal battle illustrates China's concerns about its obligations as a full member of the WTO.

Underlying this IP regime reform is the law enforcement enhancement, including crackdown operations as well as the setting up of IPR protection centers and fast-track IPR enforcement centres (State Council, 2020; CNIPA, 2020a). There are two major reasons why the Chinese government strengthens this aspect of IPR enforcement. First, there is sustained internal pressure from foreign trademark-owners who hire private investigation companies, leading to a higher level of enforcement on trademark infringement to fight counterfeiting (Mertha, 2018). Second, IP has become a tool for global competition and entails heightened law enforcement. The

competition has been especially apparent between China and the Western world powers over industrial development in innovation, science and technology in recent years. The Chinese state has put more emphasis on sustaining its discourse about innovation and creative industries, and developing professional subjects to compete in intellectual property. China also saw a greater motivation to secure IP protection among the stakeholders. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO, 2021a), the figures of filing IP applications in China and from offices outside China showed a gradual increase throughout 2011 to 2020, with the numbers of trademark filings increased most drastically (see Table 2). This indicated a rising demand for IP protection through the Chinese IP system by the stakeholders.

Year	Patent	Trademark (class count)	Industrial Design (design count)	GDP (Constant 2017 US$)
2011	436,186	1,445,916	563,863	13,020.07
2012	561,472	1,693,976	718,125	14,043.93
2013	734,115	1,940,739	765,221	15,134.61
2014	837,857	2,422,084	677,313	16,258.47
2015	1,010,557	3,100,200	730,511	17,403.28
2016	1,257,466	4,192,897	794,083	18,595.19
2017	1,306,077	6,388,803	862,643	19,887.03
2018	1,460,243	8,118,820	957,372	21,229.36
2019	1,328,067	8,604,721	1,118,565	22,492.45
2020	1,441,085	10,886,104	1,336,233	23,009.78

Table 2. Statistics of IP Filings in China (resident and abroad, including regional) and China's GDP from 2011 to 2020 (source: WIPO statistics database, November 2021, 'Statistical Country Profiles').

China's scheme in boosting its IP-related economy can be seen in the Global

Innovation Index 2021 (WIPO, 2021b), which ranks innovation capacity and output

of economies around the world. China ranked the 12th, behind France and ahead of

Japan, and was the top innovation economy in the upper-middle income group. Its

next five-year plan (2021-2025), in which more emphasis was put on fulfiling R&D

targets and protecting 'high-value patent' (CNIPA, 2021a), orients towards a stronger

IPR framework, even outside China. This is evident in the updated duty of China

National Intellectual Property Administration (CNIPA), which vowed to step up its

'response mechanisms for overseas IP rights disputes, opening up more overseas

branches and providing better counsel' for enterprises 'going global' (CNIPA, 2021a).

The amendments to the IP-related laws and improvements in law enforcement

therefore not only reflect that the levels of copyright and authorship protection are

dependent on the state's attitudes towards its economic policies and the wider

situation of political economy, but also show that the IP system serves as an

instrument to the Chinese state in the context of knowledge and creative economy.

While we can assert that China's IP law legislations and its reform were driven

by its economic and political interests, this trajectory parallels the development of IP

laws in the nineteenth century Europe and the U.S., which were involved in IP-related

international treaties and agreements. The development of IPR protection in China

also reminds us of the U.S. being the IPR violator in the nineteenth century, during

which Great Britain tried to convince the U.S. to protect British publications from

being pirated by American book publishers, newspapers and magazines (Tomalin,

2011). It was not until 1891 that the U.S. become willing to protect foreign IPR by

enacting the Chace Act (The International Copyright Act of 1891). Situating the

Chinese development of copyright protection in a historical perspective reveals a

parallel between today's China and the nineteenth century America: both tried to build their indigenous industries by ignoring IPR protection for foreign investors and creators in the first instance, and later both began strengthening their IPR protection when they recognised their growing competitiveness of IP production in foreign markets and the benefits of enhanced IPR protection for fostering competitiveness. This shift from a copycat model to heightened interest in IPR protection points to the impacts of the trade balance in both countries (Fisher, 1999).

IV.   Chinese Approach to IPR Protection

Although China's three major IP laws (the Trademark Law, Patent Law, and Copyright Law) and their complementary regulations offer personal and property protection to design practitioners, it is important to note that there is a strong ideological dimension to these laws. As Li (2011) has noted, China stands out to be the only nation that inserts the terms like 'socialist' in both its Copyright Law and Trademark Law to underscore its dominant political ideology and system. She concludes that the best description for the Chinese IP system is 'a hybrid that consists of Western legal style and substance, old socialist ideologies and Chinese culture and tradition, particularly in the context of enforcement' (2011: 139).

When examining the actual application of IP laws in China, it becomes apparent that the socialist-collectivist understanding of property has an impact on its approach to IPR protection. One example to illustrate this is the trademarking in China. Given that the illicit utilisation of trademarks for selling unauthorised goods has become one of the major forms of IPR infringement that global policies focus on (Fink, Maskus and Qian, 2016), China has also enhanced its enforcement

infrastructure to address trademark infringement in recent years, as mentioned earlier. However, it is essential to note that China employs a more hard-line approach to its 'first-to-register' system within its Trademark Law, when compared to the varying application of this system in different countries (Corsearch, 2019), although a growing emphasis on bona fide use intent has emerged since 2019 (UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2021). In China's application, the first registrant of a trademark secures the right, regardless of use by a different business owner. This practice is different from most other regions that adopt 'first-to-register' system in which the first person to register does not obtain absolute sole rights because the goodwill established by a prior creator and user of the brand are given considerations and recognition (Corsearch, 2019). Thus, local Chinese companies that infringe upon an existing trademark that is not registered in China can still acquire the trademark rights, resulting in what are known as bad-faith trademarks.[21] For these local companies, operating under strong IP law does not yield benefits, as their businesses predominantly cater to the local market within the framework of Chinese IP regulations.

One case that highlights such inherent cost-benefit consideration in laws is the MUJI trademark case. In 2019, the Chinese Court ruled that the Japanese retailer MUJI infringed on Beijing Cottonfield Textile Corp's intellectual property rights over the use of '无印良品' (MUJI, in simplified Chinese characters) trademark. This trademark had been registered in 2001 by the Chinese firm Cottonfield Textile Corp for specific woven fabric products, including bed covers and towels Corp, which were sold in their retail shops called 'Natural Mill' (Zhang, 2019). The Japanese MUJI

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[21] According to UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2016), bad-faith trade mark applications are defined as 'pre-emptive, unauthorised applications for trademarks that the applicant knows to have been used and developed by others (within mainland China and/or internationally).'

entered the mainland China market a few years later and registered its international brand name 'MUJI' in block letters in 2005. Since the Chinese name of their stores 'Natural Mill' matched that of the Japanese MUJI stores, and the decoration style of 'Natural Mill' stores closely resembled that of the Japanese MUJI stores, many considered the Beijing Company as a local copycat. Despite this, the Japanese MUJI lost in the legal battle and was ordered to pay 626,000 RMB (US$89,000) and issue a public apology to Beijing's Cottonfield Textile Corp. While the judgment was limited to the trademark 'MUJI' in Chinese and applied solely to certain products (e.g. fabric products, towels, sheets, pillow cases, bed covers), the ruling has raised concerns about copyright protection for foreign enterprises in China. This case illustrates the ambivalence inherent in the Chinese IP system, which may, at the cost of foreign companies' interests, skew towards the benefits of local businesses. It underscores that China's Trademark Law does not necessarily perpetuate and protect existing monopolies.

This approach of IP laws perpetuates the notion of creativity deficiency embodied by both local Chinese and foreigners who see China's mimicry culture not only as a demonstration of cultural inferiority and incapability of creative production but also as a form of 'disruptive' creativity that gears towards cheaper products and threaten the creativity defined by the Western commercial world (Christensen, 1997). In this legal-cultural milieu, it is therefore not surprising to see Chinese netizens, who aligned themselves with Western IP standards, sharing negative commentary about China's IP system on the internet as they found that Chinese IP laws occasionally failed to protect 'genuine' copyright holders (Luo, 2021). Nevertheless, this is also the contentious nature of China's IP system that concerns the government, which is working to shed China's reputation as a 'pirating nation' and divert the economy away

from the piracy *shanzhai* sub-culture (Lin, 2011; Keane, 2013).

At the core of safeguarding the private personal and property rights of copyright owners, including the design practitioners in this study, lies the Copyright Law. While Chinese courts generally consider that only original expressions are copyrightable, it was not until 2020 that the Copyright Law stipulated the concept of originality and the idea/expression dichotomy[22], thus providing protection for the manifestation of an idea (Lee and Li, 2021) and presupposing an authorial individualism (Barron, 2002). Building on the 2013 *Regulation for the Implementation of the Copyright Law*, which requires 'works' to be 'original' intellectual creations, the *Third Amendment* in 2020 stipulates that 'works' refer to 'original intellectual creations in the fields of literature, art, and science that can be presented in a certain form.' By doing so, the 2020 version of CCL codified both the concepts of originality and the idea/expression dichotomy, and further confirmed that copyright protection pertains only to original expressions rather than the originality of ideas (Lee and Li, 2021). In this sense, the law does not equate originality with the creation of something which had not hitherto existed; and the term 'original' does not imply that the work must be the expression of strikingly inventive or original ideas. As Jane Gaines has argued by referring to legal documents, 'originality does not imply novelty; it only implies that the copyright claimant did not copy from someone else' (1991: 58).

The idea/expression dichotomy not only serve to incentivise the production of cultural works and the protection of commercial interests of both authors and copyright beneficiaries (such as the rights of authorship and reproduction in terms of

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[22] This idea/expression dichotomy is a legal doctrine that restricts the scope of copyright protection by differentiating an idea from the expression or manifestation of that idea. This notion helps ensure that expression or manifestation of an idea is protected rather than the idea itself.

limited monopoly rights), but it also reinforces the public character of cultural works by supporting the dissemination and circulation of ideas and cultural goods (Lury, 1993: 37; Barron, 2002). In other words, this framework of authorship, legitimised by the notion of individual originality, is now explicitly recognised within China's Copyright Law. However, not all forms of original work receive the same level of attention under the Copyright Law. The Chinese approach to copyright protection can be discernible when examining its treatment of copyright protection for interior design projects. According to the CCL 2020 Article 3 (1)-(9), nine categories of works were stipulated, with several categories being most relevant to spatial design works, e.g. 'works of architecture', 'fine art works', 'photographic works', and 'graphic works'. In the definitions offered by the Copyright Law's *Regulations for the Implementation*, 'works of architecture' refer to works with aesthetic effect which are expressed in form of buildings or structures; 'fine art works' refer to 'paintings, calligraphy, sculptures, and other two-or-three-dimensional aesthetic works of formative arts that are formed by lines, colors, and/or other patterns; 'graphic works' refer to works such as 'engineering design drawings and product design drawings created for construction or production purpose, as well as maps and schematic drawings'; and 'photographic works' refer to 'artworks that are created by recording images of objects on light-sensitive materials or other media with the aid of instruments' (State Council, 2002).

The CCL includes stipulations for the works of architecture, fine art and engineering design drawings, but it does not explicitly cover interior design works nor explicitly put them within their appropriate categories of creative works. This absence of a stipulation for interior design in the CCL should come up as no surprise because the practice of interior design, according to the governmental definition, is often

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categorised under multiple fields. These fields include 'art,' 'architectural design services' and 'architectural decoration and renovation sector', as noted in Chapter 2. This is different from the practices of some Western jurisdictions, such as Italy. For example, the Italian Copyright Law explicitly stipulates an interior design project 'as part of architectural works as long as it manifests the personal imprint of the author and can be recognized as his unitary creation due to precise choices in the composition of its elements, not dictated by the necessity to solve a technical or functional problem' (Editorial Office of GRUR International, 2021: 205).

Despite the apparent lack of clear copyright protection for interior design projects in China, the Chinese government has referred to the classification system adopted by World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), which designates interior design, architecture, along with other categories like jewellery, furniture, apparels, toys and games, and household goods, as 'partial copyright industries' (WIPO, 2015). This designation has been utilised to estimate the economic contribution of copyright industries since 2007 in China (NCAC, 2018). According to WIPO's official documents, partial copyright industries are defined as those industries 'in which only part of the production is linked to copyright protected material' (WIPO, 2005). In other words, these industries involve 'a portion of the activities is related to works and other protected subject matter and may involve creation, production and manufacture, performance, broadcasting, communication and exhibition, and distribution and sales' (ibid). In spite of its status as a partial copyright industry, interior design may be accorded IPR protection by the Third Amendment of the CCL, as the CCL employs an open-list approach to ensure flexibility in accommodating copyright subject matters. By amending CCL Article 3 (9), the law offers copyright protection for 'other intellectual creations that meet the

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characteristics of works'. This indicates that copyright protection does not restrict to the first to eighth categories of work listed in Article 3(1)-(8), but extends to other types of creations (Lee and Li, 2021). In addition, the 2020 version of CCL grants the judiciary, rather than an administrative body, the authority to determine new categories of copyright subject matter. This indicates a better protection for new types of copyright subject matter not foreseen by lawmakers (Lee and Li, 2021).

A legal case that appears to prove that interior design is copyrightable through China's IP regime of right is a court ruling involving copyright infringement of retail shop designs in Guangzhou in 2009 (Chen, 2010). In this case, the interior design firm Gongda Huanyi Designs was commissioned by a Pharmacy retailer (Second Heaven) to design store front and interior designs for its thirty-five chain stores and franchise stores between 2002 to 2006. It was remunerated by 2,000 RMB to 53,254 RMB per store design. The store design, demonstrating a consistent theme and style with little variations, was used subsequently by Second Heaven for another forty-nine stores without obtaining Gongda Huanyi Designs' approval or paying design fees. Gonda Huanyi Designs brought a suit against Second Heaven for copyright infringement of its store designs. In the end, the Chinese Court ruled that Second Heaven was liable for copyright infringement of Gongda Huanyi Designs' store designs, considering them as engineering designs. As a result, Second Heaven was ordered to pay 50,000 RMB to Gonda Huanyi Designs.

According to Chen's (2010) case analysis published by American-British law firm Hogan Lovells, this case holds two significant implications. One is that it confirms the copyright protection of designs in the context of the right to make copies of the work, by means of reproduction 'from two-dimensions to three-dimensions.' This stance aligns with many other jurisdictions, but contrary to the widely held view

among local Chinese legal experts and practitioners that copyright protection did not apply to three-dimensional applications of two-dimensional design and drawings. Moreover, this ruling establishes the works of engineering design drawings as the basis for copyright protection in interior design projects.

The second significance is that it shows that China, being a member country of Berne Convention, has extended copyright protection to interior designs, despite that the Berne Convention's requirements regarding copyright protection for spatial designs are ambiguous. Despite the significance, the report reminded us that the impact of this ruling could be influenced by the uncertainty of how the Chinese judiciary interprets the accuracy of the application of the Copyright Law in similar cases in the future. Thus, this case should not necessarily lead us to conclude that the Chinese Copyright Law is substantially protective of copyrights in the domain of spatial design works. While the dubiousness of Copyright Law might not guarantee copyright protection, designer-entrepreneurs whose businesses span furniture design, domestic article design, and architectural design appeared to be increasingly inclined to obtain patent protection through patent design application.[23] For example, official public documents from China National Intellectual Property Administration (CNIPA) indicate that design firms based in Shenzhen have been granted design patent in the past few years. For example, Matrix Design was granted a design patent for its 'refrigerator's food data recorder' utility model design in 2018, and Yishang Oriental Interior Design patented a 'television-set-sideboard door' utility model design in 2019. As can be seen from Table 3, there were considerable numbers of patent design applications from within China for utility model related to building design, furniture

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[23] According to the Patent Law's Article 2 revised in 2020, the word 'design', means, 'any new design of the shape, the pattern, or their combination, or the combination of the colour with shape or pattern, which is rich in an aesthetic appeal and is fit for industrial application.'

design, domestic articles or appliances design in 2019 and 2020, showing the

substantial interests among design practitioners in securing patent design for their

products.

(Unit: piece)

			Patent Grants		Patent Applications	
Classification			2020	2019	2020	2019
Furniture; Domestic articles or appliances; Coffee mills; Spice mills; Suction cleaners in general	*Invention*					
		Sub-total	4764	3744	20373	21061
		Domestic	3893	2962	18957	19519
		Foreign	871	782	1416	1542
	Utility Model					
		Sub-total	87812	74977	100427	86541
		Domestic	87369	74528	100086	86091
		Foreign	443	449	341	450
Decorative arts	*Invention*					
		Sub-total	447	347	1127	1434
		Domestic	416	330	1078	1393
		Foreign	31	17	49	41
	Utility Model					
		Sub-total	4155	2804	4220	4420
		Domestic	4152	2800	4217	4417
		Foreign	3	4	3	3
Building	*Invention*					
		Sub-total	5504	4430	23322	19729
		Domestic	5315	4281	22995	19341
		Foreign	189	149	327	388
	Utility Model					
		Sub-total	76472	43930	97211	73135
		Domestic	76407	43899	97146	73071
		Foreign	65	31	65	64

Table 3. Statistics of Patent Grants and Patent Applications in three selected categories for Invention and Utility Model by International Patent Classification (IPC) in China, from 2019 to 2020 (Source: Intellectual Property Statistical Yearbook 2019, CNIPA, 2020b).

Furthermore, domestic companies had significantly fewer invention patents than utility patents, aligning with the trend observed by Keane (2013), where Chinese companies have been seeking incremental innovations and more affordable, easier-to-process patents. Such development echoes the sentiments among corporations and institutions based in China in seeking patent protection internationally. As of 2021, China has been the largest source of in the international patent applications filed with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), via its Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT) system for four consecutive years (WIPO, 2021c). In the realm of design, we can see that patent protection is embraced enthusiastically in China's IP industries partly because patent brings profits originated from new design and models, which could contribute profoundly not just to the patent stakeholders and creators, but also to China's economic development and indirectly to political stability.

In this chapter, I have examined the role of cultural and historical contexts that have shaped the legal arrangements of China's IP system, with an emphasis on the philosophical and cultural basis of individual rights, creativity and copying that constituted the normative value system and concepts of knowledge and cultures. The reform of IP laws, driven by both foreign pressure and China's own economic and political interests, serves as an economic means as much as a biopolitical instrument to elevate China's global competitiveness in cultural and innovative production. While China's hybrid IP system regulates IPR through encouraging circulation and imposing restriction, it nevertheless provides a space for different sectors to embrace the idea of original works, shaping the specificity of design labour and its relations with material expressions in the works they produced. The notion of IPR ownership in China is not only linked with the concept of the author as the creator that reifies creative labour in terms of Western IP traditions — as demonstrated by the role of

Copyright Law in institutionalising the logic of authorship — but is also closely informed by ideologies of Chinese culture and politics.

As we have seen, the Chinese IPR framework in which authors are accorded specific sets of personal rights retains a strong socialist-Confucian style. The characteristics of China's IP system reflect that private property rights and individual authorism are bound up with the public nature of culture and the individual's ties with social groups and the state. Yet, infused with Western IP traditions, the notion of originality supported through the operation of IP laws promotes the dissemination of cultural goods, as well as the commercial endeavours and individuation of professional creative workers. This does not contradict China's current late-socialist neoliberalism, since global export of cultural contents and innovation has become important to China's economy. Given that legal logic shapes production activities, it is important to understand that design practitioners themselves are embedded, and their models of creativity are formed within these empirical settings and legal-cultural configurations.

In the next chapter, I seek to examine further the concepts of creativity and copying employed by design practitioners. Although these design practitioners pursue a certain degree of newness and originality in their works, some traces of the Confucian-socialist legacies, such as an emphasis on the values of copying and contributions to one's social community, can be seen in the deliberations of the models of creativity employed by these practitioners that I now turn to.

Chapter 6

Towards a New Interior? 'Take-ism,' Innovation and Models of Creativity

Against the background of a reformed IP apparatus noted in the preceding chapter, in this chapter I provide a closer analysis of the ways in which design practitioners conceptualise and practice creativity and newness.[24] This is particularly pertinent at a time when individual's rights to intellectual property seem to be treated as more important than before in China, and when the works produced by some Chinese design practitioners have been recognised on a global level in recent years, standing in stark contrast to the copycat culture.

This chapter foregrounds the models of creativity described and inhabited by the professionals and explains why they deployed these. Their endeavours to live out their professional lives that emphasise innovation beg a series of questions: How do they perceive the notions of newness and creativity? What do these notions mean for design practitioners in China? What does their engagement with these notions reveal about their occupational identities?

I seek to address these questions through an analysis of individual narratives offered by the design practitioners. This analysis goes beyond the discussions in which Chinese creative workers are viewed in terms of their exploitation and empowerment within the intellectual property systems, or the discussions on

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[24] In this thesis, 'innovation' and 'newness' are used interchangeably, both referring broadly to a new idea, product, outcome, method, or process that generates novelty (see Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour, 1997).

employing design practices as innovation resource in the field of design thinking. By situating the practices and experiences of design practitioners within the intersection of these fields, this chapter explores how their deployment of different creativity models enables, and constrains, particular forms of design.

This chapter starts with a discussion of the relevant literature, emphasising the linkages between practice, genre, history, innovation and cultural production. I argue that the valorisation of creativity needs to be understood in relation to the practices in which practitioners engage within particular contexts of history, organisation, and genre cultures that provide opportunities for the transformation of genre boundaries. I show that there were two dominant models of creativity that design practitioners deployed. One model was authentic creativity that emanates from within individual. The other model was derivative creativity that is oriented towards the role of service provider and incremental improvements. Operating within a milieu that regarded copying as an integral part of the creative process, the practitioners had no agreement on how their work should be understood within the rubric of creativity. Despite that, they tended to distance themselves from the notion of 'style,' which denotes the conscious grabbing and copying of foreign decorative styles and elements from the 1980s until the early 2000s. On the other hand, they acknowledged the Confucian view of culture, which posits that creativity can emerge through one's learning by copying and appropriation of their predecessors' works. Also running through their narratives was a common emphasis on producing slight-differentiation in design. As will become clearer in this chapter, 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.

I.   'Chinese creativity', Innovation and Practice Theories

Much of the current understanding of China's creative practice and production is typically guided by the problem of 'Chinese creativity,' which stems from its copycat culture within a context shaped by the Confucius tradition and late-socialist neoliberalism. However, little empirical research has been done to study practitioners' accounts of creativity. A body of literature that focuses on Chinese creative practices points to their socio-cultural and historical specificity, examining how the Confucian views of defining copying as literati practice of learning, and the socialist understanding of property as a component of collective ownership, have influenced the perceptions of copying and creativity within 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 Western-led regime of intellectual property rights (IPR). In her book *Creativity and its Discontents*, Pang (2012) critiques creative labour within this IPR framework, arguing that it reflects workers' exploitation in global capitalism, and highlighting the tensions linked with creative industries. She documents the challenges faced by China's creative industries as a perceived pirate nation where creative labour encounters hardships in claiming creative authority. 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'— 'un-Chinese' things that are 'neither certifiably foreign nor recognizably native' (Chumley, 2016: 118). 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 (Yang, 2016; Wang, 2016; Lindtner et al., 2015; Keane, 2013: 117-124; Keane and Zhao, 2012; Wong, 2014). This revisionist explanation of copying raises questions about its relevance to their neighbouring industries, like design industries, which brings us to the next focus: the study of creativity models among design practitioners. This examination of the models of creativity deployed by design practitioners entails dissecting their current practices within specific socio-cultural settings, as highlighted in Chapter 1. In doing so, 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 (Shove et al., 2007; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002). 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 chapter sheds light on how their models of creativity shape and contribute to social phenomena, such as changes in practices.

Additionally, practice theories allow focusing on an indeterminate level comprising the 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 (Reckwitz, 2002; Kimbell, 2012). Designers, as active participants, 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 interior design sector, it is also necessary to grasp the concept of innovation. Innovation has been explored extensively in studies integrating services marketing, organisation studies, and design studies, examining the 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). As defined by Verganti (2009), 'incremental' innovation involves small changes and gradual improvements made to services, technologies, and products along an existing trajectory, whereas 'radical' innovation involves significant changes and breakthroughs, often proving to be more challenging to attain (Verganti, 2009). This typology intersects with the scholarly works on cultural industries that I referenced in Chapter 1. For example, 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 (Nixon, 2003; Negus and Pickering, 2004). 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 (Pratt and Jeffcutt, 2009: 4; Nixon, 2003). Using a typology of innovation as a reference point, this chapter 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).

II.   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 involves aesthetic components that communicate symbolic meanings. 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. As Pratt (2017) has also critiqued, the dominant model of practice that has shaped our understanding of innovation is limited and reductionist, primarily because it relies on manufacture-based and technology-centric analysis, leaving little room to address the relations among innovation, knowledge, and the market.

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 (Olcese and Savage, 2015; Molotch, 2011; McRobbie, 2016a). Olcese and Savage (2015) suggest viewing aesthetics as a routinised, everyday social practice rather than 'a social ruse which hides social powers' (Olcese and Savage, 2015: 4). 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. Similarly, 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 (184). She highlights the connection between aesthetic qualities and historical processes across various realms, including the discursive, social, and material spheres, drawing attention to the questions of genre and style rooted in the studies of art and cultural history but neglected in the field of social sciences (ibid: 197). Drawing on their concepts, this chapter sheds light on the role and values of aesthetics in constituting creative production and cultural life.

Central to an analysis of the models of creativity is the concept of 'genre world' (Neale, 1980: 19). As I have discussed in the Introduction, 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 (1999) 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'. The subjective judgements regarding the recognition or dismissal of novelty and difference coming from both the practitioners and the recipients of their work can be both personal and social, involving aesthetic pleasure and displeasure that constitute the 'emotional, sensual and social' dimensions of creativity (Frith, 1996; Negus, 1999: 184). Nixon (2003) 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 in their teamwork or individual tasks, whether or not practitioners have high ideals. In short,

they both provide parameters for conceptualising models of creativity operating within established and limited sets of genres, echoing the emphasis in practice theories which argue for more attention to the institutional and cultural contexts.

Drawing on different theorists that I referenced, 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 practices, institutions, genre, and aesthetic culture, thus, provides an analytic space for my analysis.

a. Pursuit of Newness and Originality

The extent to which design practitioners should pursue originality has become one of the many preoccupations for China's design industry in recent years. Many interior designers are concerned with establishing their own 'IP,' a buzzword in the industry that encompasses the features of one's unique identity, including originality, brand and image. In this study, it is well observed that this pursuit is also closely linked to 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 (Figure 7), 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. For example, during this period, designer Wang Shouzhi (2004) created commercially successful modern Chinese residential space designs for Vanke, a real estate developer, challenging the dominant practice of imitating western design (Figure 8). Designers were able to produce works with Chinese characteristics, 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).

Figure 7. *Screen-painting*. 2015. Model house project in Beijing by Horizontal Design. Photograph by Jing Xufeng. Courtesy of Horizontal Design.

Figure 8. A view of Vanke Fifth Garden. 2006. In Dai Chun, Zhi Wenjun, and Zhou Hongmei (eds) (2016) *Shenzhen Contemporary Architecture, 2000-2015*. Copyright, Tongji University. Published on the website of *Shenzhen Design for 40 years*.

Identifying with this shift, Ju saw his 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 which Negus (1999) used 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 livestream 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 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 9), 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. This emphasis on building emotional and cultural connections between users and spaces echoed one of the seven design philosophies of Li's firm: 'The merit of originality is not novelty; it is sincerity', a quote Li cited from Aesop's official product philosophy. As he explained, his design objective was to 'inspire people' by bridging 'the soul' of the actual users with his designed spaces and aesthetics. In essence, his model of creativity was oriented to innovation based on cultural-sourcing.

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Figure 9. HEYTEA retail design at Paragon Center by Bloomdesign. 2019. Photograph by Hu Jingsen. Courtesy of gooood.cn.

Similarly, Li Binfeng, Chief designer at LIA Design, whom I introduced in Chapter 4, 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.

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In Li's views, newness comes from designers' cultural, imaginative, or artistic depth and understanding; and design should not be superficial (not 'cosmetic'; 'not as flashy and buzzy as a nightclub'), 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 a 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, demonstrating the positive impacts of social exchange on 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 a 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 Jiang & Associates Creative Design (J&A), a big

corporation 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 centers 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

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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 can see a persistent dilemma facing design practitioners, that is, how to produce 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 was 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 are the focus of the following section.

b. 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 often 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).

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 in a way analogous to the 1930s[25] (Figure 10). 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. (R8)

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 (R12), pursuing 'genre formatting' (Hesmondhalgh, 2019: 98).

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[25] The term take-ism (*Nalai zhuyi*) has been translated as 'borrowing-ism' or 'grabbism' as well. The term was the title of Lu Xun's essay published in Tendency (*Dongxiang*), a supplement to China Daily (*Zhonghua ribao*) on June 6, 1934.
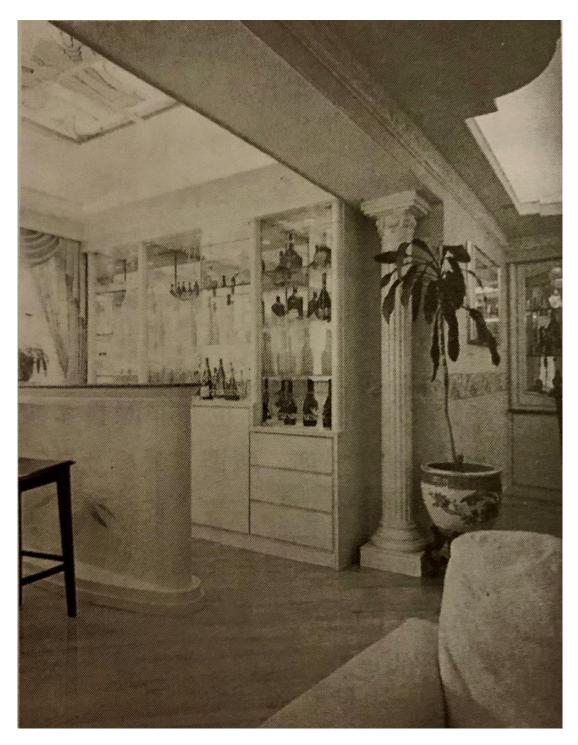
Figure 10. A photograph published in Zhu Zhejie (ed) *Real cases of Chinese modern architectural decoration* (in Chinese) in 1994 showing a home interior of 'European style' featuring classical columns and western cornices.

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, Han Jing and Zhang Yuxing, founders of ARCity Office, a small design 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 behaviors 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 (ibid: 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 of 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 the 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).

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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 of 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.

III.   From 'Take-ism' to the Pursuit of Newness and Originality

In this chapter, I have explored how Chinese interior designers approached newness and how they facilitated particular forms of innovation in their 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.

In accounting for the practices of design practitioners and elucidating the change and continuity in these practices, it becomes evident that 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 endeavors to grapple with the legacy of China's imitator image in design by 'de-stylising' their 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 the users of their designed spaces.

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.

In the following chapter, I broaden the discussion on the relationships between the self-identification of design practitioners and the wider socio-economic context by examining the dominant industry norms that practitioners embody and engage with, as well as the alternative practices they adopt to co-exist with these norms.

Chapter 7

The Work, Self and Agency in Chinese Design Economy

This chapter explores how design practitioners operate within the confines of a social system that emphasises an array of neoliberal-late socialist logics, including the spirit of self-enterprise, logics of profitability (capital accumulation), logics of 'Chinese Speed' (high speed of service delivery and rapid economic growth), and consumer logics (marketability of design). The proliferation of design practitioners in China raises an important question about how this group of professionals, in the process of applying their expertise to shape the material spaces and cultures, engage with these existing social norms, values, and economic practices, impacting the economy and people's wellbeing while making up their subjective identities.

Examining the ties between the performance of practices and the shaping and formatting of the design economy over time, this chapter seeks to address the questions: to what extent do the visions and practices of design practitioners fit in the neoliberal-late socialist logics? How do their visions and practices fit between those of high-speed development that are rooted in the reform-era norms of economic development on the one hand, and those of their ideal work practices on the other? How do they deal with and counteract those market and industrial-specific norms that do not fit perfectly into their personal pursuits? To address these questions, I build on Butler's concept of performativity, and the sociological studies of entrepreneurial subjectivity which I discussed in Chapter 1, while attending to the discussions on autonomy in cultural and creative industries work.

In discussing the design practitioners' positions towards the dominant market norms and practices, this chapter focuses on the practices adopted by design practitioners as forms of performative agency within the design economy. I examine the instances in which the design practitioners adopted normative market practices that align with the existing norms in the late-socialist neoliberalism, and the processes through which they turned to alternative practices to articulate their personal ideals and exercise freedom of choice, even though autonomy and choice is part of the government's technique of governing (Hoffman, 2006). Following from Butler's theorising of performativity, normative market practices can be understood as illocutionary performatives, while alternative practices can be viewed as struggles within illocutionary performatives, and, thus, as having the potentials for perlocutionary performatives. With reference to the notion of illocutionary performatives, I argue that examples like the alignment of business strategies with local and national policies, as well as patriotic acts, are evident of the illocutionary acts of practitioners in conforming to the codes and rituals of dominant norms, shaping the subjectivity of practitioners as they operate in the design economy. This type of performatives best exemplifies how market agency was performatively initiated, formed, enacted and sustained over time through the deployment of market devices (the material-discursive formations, such as objects and practices) by design companies.

Focusing on the alternative practices of design practitioners and their claims over them, this chapter also reveals the tension between their conformity to the dominant market norms and practices, and their autonomy of constructing idealised forms of agency. These alternative practices are evident in the examples of their

negotiation of the rationalities within the late-socialist neoliberalism at the individual's level. I show that practitioners deployed various forms of alternative strategies to deal with their tensions, ambivalence and contradiction linked with the reiteration of regulatory norms within the normative framing of the socio-economic life. Two cases where established practitioners volunteered design work to articulate personal ideals of design imagination and social visions, alongside their profitable design practices, signaled a simultaneous resistance and conformity to the dominant norms. In highlighting how alternative strategies are used to negotiate the market norms while pursuing the ideal design practices, I examine an example of a design company's deployment of 'surrogate designers' for marketing design projects. Another example of a practitioner's deployment of 'faux' identity for participating in high-end hotel design projects shows how practitioners attempted to fulfil personal ideals and the requirements of the project contract through alternative tactics, reproducing the logic of high efficiency in service delivery. In exploring the perlocutionary effects of market agency, I examine a case of sustainable, permanent sales centre as an instance in which design practitioners and real estate developers collaborated to transform the dominant market approach to creating one-off, temporary sales centers.

I argue that the construction of different forms of agency by design professionals is best understood within the approach of performativity, which sheds light on the role of agency in terms of *the social,* rather than viewing agency as solely the innate. The variation of work practices undertaken by the design practitioners is worth investigating because it reflects the workings of China's double subjectification regimes — the neoliberal and socialist rationalities — and the performative agency of

market actors through the recitations of social norms and the construction of ideals. Furthermore, it highlights the often-neglected values and practices that potentially conflict with the growth imperatives underpinning the dominant creative economy thinking and discourses, which reflect a 'limited cultural ontology,' as Banks has observed (2018: 370). As I will show, these work practices, on the one hand, centered on a strong enterprising self, with a double sense of responsibility to self-advancement and to the modernisation of the nation. On the other hand, some of the work practices deployed by designer-entrepreneurs deviated from the dominant norms in the industry and reflected moments of resistance and struggles for autonomy and ideals. Despite that these alternative practices seemingly competed with the existing dominant norms, they coexisted with them and did not disrupt the sustaining appeal of these norms in society. In this context, design emerged as a site not just for market activities and value-added creative production but also for the micro-technologies of the self and the manifestation of the potentialities residing in the economic life.

I.   Reiteration of National Ideologies and Dominant Norms as Illocutionary Performatives

In this section, I concentrate on examining the way in which the deployment of market devices sustains particular dominant work forms and relations. This is achieved through considering the practices of design companies underpinned by their discourses and ideological identification, where we see the alignment of both state discourses as well as corporate strategies and visions. Following this section, I show how design practitioners turned to alternative practices as they engaged with

dominant work norms, encountering ambivalence or discordance with reference to their personal and corporate ideals.

A lot of the creative labour in China, including those designers whom I spoke with during interviews, have some forms of links with the state as they are often the service providers for state-related organisations or entities (Chumley, 2016: 17). A portion of the established ones hold teaching jobs at the government-funded design departments at universities and educational institutions, while some senior design professors hold the titles such as secretary of the party committee in universities. Likewise, privately-owned design firms are often hired to complete projects by local city governments. Additionally, some nominally privately-owned real estate firms whose ownership is linked to the state. For instance, China Overseas Land and Investment Limited, which has their projects commissioned to design firms, is actually a subsidiary company owned by a state-owned company. Another example is Vanke (China Vanke Co. Limited),[26] a real estate group whose largest shareholder currently is Shenzhen Metro Group Co., Ltd. (SZMC), a state-owned enterprise. While design practitioners can have the latitude to make autonomous decisions and choices, they are concerned about the need to harmonise their creativity and visions with national interests (Keane, 2013: 38).

As Hoffman (2010: 89) has argued, choices 'must be understood within the context of late-socialism, for market choice was experienced in relation to national progress'. Big design firms (referring to those consisting of several hundreds of employees) tend to prioritise playing it safe by following state directives to ensure

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[26] Vanke, a real-estate company and urban development service provider in China, entered into the housing market in 1988. Since 2017, Shenzhen Metro Group Co., Ltd. (SZMC), a state-owned enterprise, has become the largest shareholder of the group (with a stake of 28.69%). Thus, it has been argued that the group is a state-owned enterprise, despite its adoption of a mixed ownership structure.

that their entrepreneurial pursuits benefit not just the state but their own companies. In seeking to free themselves from the negative consequences of not keeping up with the state's goals, large design corporations integrate the norms defined by government policy as their own and align their development plans with state directives. For instance, Wang Zhaobao, one of the co-founders of Matrix Design, a fast-developing large interior design firm with around 650 staff members in 2021, asserted that the firm's vision was to follow the state's national strategy:

> The mission of Matrix is to 'return to the orient'. It carries two meanings. Firstly, as you may already know, Matrix excels relatively better in the oriental genre. At the same time, we think that Chinese design has developed quite well till now actually. We hope that we are able to align with the national strategy [of] 'Going Out'. On one hand, we have a strong affinity for the oriental things; we will further enlarge…further this oriental dimension. On the other hand, we follow the national strategy to go global. (Matrix Design, TikTok Livestream on 26 February, 2020).

The 'Going Out' national strategy that Wang mentioned was laid down by the state in 2011, aiming to increase the global presence of local Chinese cultural services, products and enterprises (Li, 2016). While this mission was not without calculation, as this alignment coincided with his own company's strategy to boost its global standing after local commercial success, his professed vision shows the illocutionary impact of market agency through the citation of the national strategy.

Another example of a design company that has registered this citation of norms is Jiang & Associates Creative Design (J&A), a listed design company. Its mission stated on its official website is 'to create a paradise on earth with design'. For J&A, fulfiling such an ideal of the creation of a 'paradise' involves not just their own efforts but an identification with the state's policy. The following is an example of a

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design practitioner, Davy Liu, General Manager at J&A, accounting for how the current mode of the firm's business focus was shaped by government's policy:

> ……because the population began to age in the country, and people have paid more attention to the problem of elderly retirement. It is like policy-led, like government is the lead and different places started working towards these medical services and retirement [industry]. The towns started to set up for this. We think that this is a potential area for development, and a trend. Last month we started earlier to make deployment for this [business area of] medical care and retirement [village complex]. (Interview conducted by author, 2019)

The designer-manager described how the firm's business plan in designing a complex of medical care and retirement village buildings responded to the central government's emphasis on the retirement industry. Similarly, as in the previous example of Matrix design, this narrative reflects a citational practice, echoing the state policies. This support for the central policy was further underpinned by collaboration between design enterprises like J&A and the local government. Located within Shenzhen's Nanshan District, J&A has developed a close relationship with the district's governmental units through formal networking. For example, on a visit to J&A in February 2021, Shenzhen's Nanshan District Mayor, Huang Xiangyue, remarked that the national goal of 'high-quality development' (*gao zhiliang fazhan*) in the district inevitably demanded the assistance of the design industry, and expressed a commitment to collaborating with design enterprises to 'construct a more well-developed design ecology' in the district, including areas such as digitalisation and green design (J&A, 2021). This gesture and remark appeared to echo the rhetoric of the central government that can be observed in 2020 and 2021, and later in its official document, *14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) for National Economic and Social Development,* which was approved in March 2021 to highlight China's strategies for

fostering 'high quality development' (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). In response to the call for collaboration in 'high quality development,' J&A publicly welcomed the opportunity and stated its willingness in such collaboration on its public social media page:

> Today, the delegation from the Nanshan district of Shenzhen made us feel the full support and attention offered by the government to enterprises. As the leader in the design of China's urban complex [buildings], J&A hopes that we will have endless breakthroughs and innovations, contributing to the strengthening of the development and the building of the city!
> (J&A, 8 February 2021)

The company's public post above shows how its discursive practices, which included citing the supportive role of the state and affirming its pledge to contribute to city prosperity, were tied to the state discourses of 'high-quality' city growth. Not only does the quote demonstrate the performative power of speech acts, but it also shows how economic activities are constituted by the anticipation of mutual support and collaborative relationship that reinforce the modernisation discourse of the city's government. In illocutionary terms, design companies' deployment of market practices and digital technologies was also dependent on the state's authorisation, as they engaged themselves in the networks of social relations, spaces and technological instruments that produced the market agency and brought this idea of design economy into being.

Examining various mediums of communications whereby design corporations and professional design organisations proclaim allegiance to the Party-state on special occasions reveals further the illocutionary performative act. One instance showing the reiteration of political norm is when celebration posters were posted on the public social media accounts of some design companies on the national day and the day of

Party-establishment anniversary of 70 years. Another example can be found in the case of Shenzhen Institute of Interior Design (SIID), which has a party unit to hold Party-related celebration or memorial activities, where young participants held a red Chinese Communist Party flag and posed for photos. From the perspective of governmentality, these signs reflect the strategies of 'co-optation' and corporatism that the Party-state adopted to seek to extend control over social forces, including the professional organisations (Dickson, 2003). Hoffman (2010: 97) argued that 'expressing patriotism did not require one to proclaim an allegiance to the Party' in contemporary China. However, more updated media reports have shown that both private companies and state-owned firms listed on stock markets in mainland China are increasingly proclaiming their respect or loyalty to the Party and Party leaders in recent years. According to *The Economist* (2020), there had been a 20-fold increase in the number of firms that cited the remarks of President Xi Jinping in their annual reports since 2017. In anticipating that the allegiance would be recognised by the state officials as a responsible and trustable entity, professional practitioners and organisations reproduced the illocutionary effects through the performative acts by citing the ontological formation of the Party-state leadership.

   In a broader sense, the conducts exemplified by the practitioners' narratives about their company's development plans and the organisational practice of allegiance proclamation demonstrate the level of captivation of the design companies with the national goals and policies. The double neoliberal and socialist rationalities in China, however, are only a partial picture of the 'sites of microphysics of power' where design practitioners conduct their working lives. There are some other more nuanced reactions, including ambivalence and resistance towards dominant practices that represent the incompleteness of the individualising power of the state.

II.   Adopting Alternatives: Tensions between Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Performatives

In this section, I illustrate four types of scenarios where practitioners did not simply perform the expected behaviors through the internalised means of enforcing regulatory norms. Instead, they turned to alternative ways to attain a degree of 'negotiated autonomy' from the constraints that govern their work practices in the social and economic spheres (Banks, 2010b: 262). Some of these practices indicated the emphasis on autonomous choices and self-expression, even when they might contradict the prevalent norms that they kept reproducing. Some revolved around the necessities of survival and optimising their circumstances in which they pursued their ideals within the limits of the design economy. As we will see shortly, these practitioners' negotiations with the regulatory norms often ran alongside their perpetuation of these norms.

a.   Informal Unpaid Work Practice and Logic of 'Chinese Speed'

> In China I now must work at Chinese speed.
> – Tadao Ando, Japanese architect and winner of the Pritzker Prize
>   (*Shanghai Daily,* 6 April 2012)

On 27 February 2018, Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk retweeted a post of the British online newspaper *Independent* titled, 'Chinese workers build railway station in just nine hours', featuring a short clip showing how some 1,500 Chinese workers managed to finish the job in those hours. 'China's progress in advanced infrastructure is more than 100 times faster than the US,' he wrote on his twitter page (which is now known as 'X'). It was later found out by fact-checking experts that

what was depicted in the video was not a new railway station; the workers were installing a new railway junction at an existing railway station. Nevertheless, Musk's tweet has been widely shared around the world and the news subsequently hit the Chinese state-controlled media outlets such as CGTN, Xinhua News Agency and People's Daily Online. For these outlets, Musk's remarks served as a good promotion to the world about the upside of a system built on the 'Chinese speed'.

In China, the term 'Chinese speed' originally refers to the high-speed railway projects introduced in China, but is often used to define national economy in terms of the speed of its economic growth. The term has been frequently adopted by the state-controlled media to describe how this mode of speed led to 'miracles' associated with the achievements in growth rate of GDP, speedy completion of huge infrastructure projects, as well as advancement in space technology and technological innovation (Song, 2020). The notion of speed, in such propaganda discourse, is entangled with the notions of national transformation, diligent work population, as well as the strengthening of power and confidence in the 'Chinese system'. This narrative, in which the ideal of Chinese speed is materialised in relation to the past few decades of economic growth since the reform era that started in the late 1970s, continues to circulate till today.

Key notions that run through the narratives of my interviewees and those of professionals presented in media accounts also include those of the 'Chinese speed' or 'high speed'. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the quantity of China's construction projects increased speedily, starchitect Rem Koolhaas speculated that Chinese architects were likely the 'busiest in the world' and believed that their efficiency was at least '2500 times' higher than their American counterparts' (Chung et al., 2001: 704). Many of the design practitioners specialising in interior design have

been the beneficiaries of the national imperative to sustain such Chinese speed. As

mentioned in Chapter 2, the real estate industry is a crucial growth engine that post-

Mao developmentalism has turned to. Such a mode of development and boost of rapid

economic growth over the past few decades, particularly in the last twenty years, has

led to the birth of lots of construction and redevelopment projects, as well as a group

of wealthy clientele demanding interior design expertise and service. For example, in

Shenzhen, the investment in real estate development has increased by nearly 6 folds

and the investment in residential buildings has increased by nearly 4 folds throughout

2010 to 2018 (see Table 4). This pace of development thus brought along business

opportunities in which a lot of design professionals can make a living and actualise

their personal potentials.

Time	Investment in Residential Buildings (100 million RMB)	Investment in Real Estate Development (100 million RMB)
2010	360.12	458.47
2011	393.35	590.21
2012	474.60	736.84
2013	594.10	887.71
2014	730.28	1,069.49
2015	897.13	1,331.03
2016	1,044.54	1,756.52
2017	1,014.05	2,135.86
2018	1,303.33	2,640.71

Table 4. Statistics of the investment in residential buildings and investment in Real Estate Development in Shenzhen City from 2010 and 2018 (source: China data online, 2021).

In the real estate sector, the notions surrounding 'speed' generally refer to the norms and practices about cutting down on time cost and other production costs involved in a development project in order to achieve a high-paced project completion cycle. And this logic of growth is sustained by market ideologies of profit maximisation. Such intensity of speed can be seen in Shenzhen, where the story about how its landmark building, Shenzhen's International Foreign Trade Centre, was built at the speed of 'one floor every three days' in the 1980s. This mode of production gave rise to the buzzword 'Shenzhen speed'. Hence, real estate development in Shenzhen represented a symbol of the 'Chinese speed'. For design practitioners, upholding this concept of Chinese speed means delivering design service in a way that aligns with the goal of cutting down on time cost for the clients, who are concerned with speeding up capital turnover (known as *gao zhouzhuan* in Chinese) — the strategy to gain capital back in a very short period. This practice is commonly adopted by property developers in the developments of residential properties.

Apart from this, the notion of speed is intertwined with the ebbs and flows in the property investment market. One designer-entrepreneur, who previously worked as a design project manager at a real estate company's interior design department from around 2015 to 2019, compared his then role to 'Apple's product manager.' He described the notion of speed in the real estate industry: 'The [real estate] development was *too fast* in the early stages' around 2015 and 2016, and 'the market demand was so huge that people actually bought a property as investment and sold it immediately' (R16). This meant that during those days design quality of a property did not figure in the decision making of buyers who treated housing as an object of speculation. This interviewee later noted that such a high-speed and investment-

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oriented mode of housing production had now shifted to a mode that became more concerned about making 'good property' of 'enhanced design quality' with 'better bargaining power on pricing'. However, this did not mean the Chinese speed has slowed down, as he expressed that still 'the pace of property development's design was perhaps too fast', 'not allowing you to have too much thinking' in design.

As the major clientele of most interviewees, developers emerge as the key impetus in making this high-speed mode of work necessary among the design practitioners. Owners of smaller commercial spaces, such as boutique hotels or shops, as reported by some interviewees, also wanted to ensure a short project completion time that is comparable to the average length of project completion time in the market. According to the interviewees in this study, as a rule of thumb, the duration of design proposal completion (often including presentation slides) on average ranges from at least one month, to two to three months, depending on the size of the space and the negotiations between the design team and the client. However, in some extreme cases, it can be less than a week. One interviewee, whose design firm specialises in interior design for real estate projects, including sales centres and model flats, told that 'the fastest' turnaround his firm had achieved for a design proposal in his experience was 'fifteen days' (R14). His firm was given 'normally forty-five days to two months'. He contrasted this Chinese average time to what he referred to as the foreign average time, which ranges 'from six months to a year'. In the design sector, the difference between 'Chinese speed' and 'foreign speed' is hard to ignore. Bianchini and Sangiorgi's study (2007: 11) indicated that both smaller and larger Italian design studios conducting business in China claimed that they encountered 'short design timelines and fast rhythms'. This dominant norm was evident in the

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interior design projects for large governmental buildings in the early 2000s. One interviewee, who was a former designer at a state-owned design institute responsible for designing and building larger public buildings such as metro stations, spoke of the difference between the Chinese and foreign work speed:

> I wanted to say that it took half a year to complete…. it was still very quick for such a large-scale project. I remember that some foreign companies came to our company on a field visit. Every one of them was astonished that the design work for such a large-scale project was done in just half a year. It would take them two to three years in their home countries. That is, [our] six months equaled [their] thirty months. To be honest, at that time, the company's primary requirement for design was speed. (R8)

For this interviewee, however, such speed was achieved at the expense of the staff members' rest time. As he expressed that despite the chance for working on large-scale high-end project, his work life back then was 'very bitter' and required long working hours from morning till 10 PM, from Monday to Sunday, except the Chinese New Year holidays. A similar point about working hours has been made by one interviewee Suki Li, who had worked in New York as interior designer for a year. She explained a reason why there is an emphasis on design production efficiency in China by comparing Chinese practice with the American practice: 'Like the United States, [design fees] are based on working hours, with a few hundred working hours being counted towards the design fees; However, in mainland China, it is calculated by the size of the area. In view of this, given the working efficiency in China, it is definitely not cost-effective to calculate design fees in terms of work hours.' Apart from this, she highlighted the cultural difference in work-life balance: '[Americans] do not put much emphasis on working overtime or changing one thing. […] You are off if it is a holiday; even if you are the owner and wanted to rush the work, the

construction side would not get back to work'. Like many designers, Suki Li thought that such efficiency was good as this could ensure that 'the projects can be completed as soon as possible so that there can be opportunities to develop in different domains of design and grasp the opportunities quickly.' This efficiency gained at the expense of long working hour, identified by her as contributing to entrepreneurial growth, resonates with earlier accounts of how the culture of overtime work among both white-collar and 'gray-collar' workers in China is sustained by corporate governmentality and the workers' own internalisation of the demands and responsibilities (Wallis, 2013; Peng, 2020).

Instances in which designers compared the working speed of Chinese design firms and their European counterparts also illustrate the dominant logic of high-speed mode of work in the field of interior design. Interviewee Ju Bin, who normally spent one-third of his time each year overseas, alluded to such difference in working speed between Chinese firms and Italian firms:

> I have a friend in Italy and he studied in good schools, like Politecnico di Milano. And he continued to study, study and study because there were no house construction projects. What's next after finishing the studies? He told me the day before yesterday that he had been designing a hair salon […] of a size of 150 square metres, and had been doing it for 3 months. I was speechless but sighed deeply. […] The proposal of a hair salon is still not done yet. […] A design for hair salon sized at some 100 square metres can be done in a week. I was speechless and said, 'if you have a chance, you should come to China and see. You need to understand that China's current speed…will bring bad things as its 'gold content' (*han jin liang*, meaning the actual values in design) is reduced, but at the same time it will bring a lot of energy.

As with other interviewees, Ju Bin's remarks implied that the notion of speed functions as an industry norm that structures design practices. By presenting 'Chinese

speed' as the ideal and a better option with more job opportunities than 'Italian speed,' which was seen as a hindrance to a designer's career growth, the interviewee's narrative appears to have structured his desire for and identification with 'Chinese speed' despite the potential drawbacks, such as limitations in product quality that may come with the practice.

Designers' identification with this logic of speed, however, embodies dilemma and ambivalence. Interviewee Li Binfeng gave an account of how his design team was reliant on real estate developers for their livelihood, and thus aligning with the high speed-mode of project completion demanded by these developers. Yet, this orientation towards the dominant logic of business efficiency and productivity created a predicament for Li: his firm could hardly afford to do other projects with lower budgets or projects that takes a longer period to finish, as this could bring economic pressure or even a deficit to his firm. As he explained:

> Our team, formed in response to real estate companies […] is our operating cost. So we may be forced to focus on [projects for] real estate companies. Regarding other projects like restaurants, cafes, hotels, offices, I can only take them occasionally, when we are less busy. We may also consider some villa projects, but we seldom pursue them because their completion durations are too long […]. Last year, anyway, I undertook a villa project… […] You know, the construction team they hired was not very professional. After we finished the design, it might still take two or maybe three years [to complete]. The cost is there, including time costs. So, we still seldom undertake this type of project.

The excerpt shows that running through the narratives of the interviewee was an implicit sacrifice about his own preoccupation with real estate projects. Li's words were equivocal; he did not give up on practicing the logics of speed and efficiency bolstered by real estate developers, but neither was he fully committed to the

economic considerations of earnings and market. In the following excerpt, Li explained his willingness to pursue non-real estate projects which he would enjoy, such as a club space, even without charging any design fees:

> The site is meant for sharing wine culture, not big. We talked, and I realised that I can produce very good work based on the ideas and pursuits [of my friend]. Well, then I agreed to take on the design job. And in fact, I did not charge any design fees. A Chinese proverb says, 'It is too hard to meet someone who really knows you.' I always work on projects for real state developers and I hope to try other types of projects and have some fun. With these feelings of pursing something interesting and something alternative, I accepted to help, which also means helping myself.

Here, the interviewee emphasised the importance of personal satisfaction through the alternative project. It allowed him to experiment with new ways of being and actualise his own potentials as a 'designer', rather than playing the role of 'businessman' that he described as only his 'interlude'. In another except, his ambivalence of being at the service of real estate developers also surfaced. He explained the reason why his pursuit of non-real estate projects was a way to deal with his internal dilemma regarding designing commercialised spaces for the real estate sector:

> Why do I specifically love such interesting designs for people who share concepts compatible with mine? It is because it is very difficult to achieve this within the field of real estate. Despite that [real estate projects] contain fundamental things that make people feel comfortable[...], still they are spaces that are very commercial [...]. Although you try to make them comfortable and 'de-commercialise' them, making them appear less commercial, they remain very commercial. Because what is talked over there is selling flats or houses.

His sense of dissatisfaction led him to take an unpaid design project for small businesses, which he believed had the potential to become a larger market. Li's account showed how the negotiations of illocutionary performatives were at work: he

reiterated the dominant market logic of profitability but this did not stop him from exploring other alternative practices to pursue personal ideals or less commercially-driven designs.

Alternative practices often came up in this study when designers pointed out that a design enterprise being too concerned about its 'scaling-up' would hinder personal ideals and social visions of design. This concern was most evident in the accounts of the more established design practitioners. Apart from engaging in entrepreneurial activities like gaining and maintaining capital streams through working with real estate developers and wealthy clientele in various ways, these established designers tended to be sensitive to potentialities that allowed them to make autonomous decisions and identify differently outside of the boundaries of existing capitalist-oriented practices. Like Li Binfeng, Ju Bin's case highlights the tension and ambivalence between pursuing personal design ideals and following the logic of profitability. Evidence of his commitment to these ideals can be found in his accounts of rejecting an approximately 200-million RMB acquisition offer and resisting the temptation to transform his medium-sized company into a large-scale enterprise (comprising a few hundred employees) — a stark departure from the conventional paths followed by many successful design firms in China. As he put it, he felt 'ambivalent' about his decision, but he emphasised that he 'did not start this company just to provide services' but to 'find out what design is; we have idealism'.

Holding a social vision of design, Ju Bin aspired to realise his ideals by designing non-commercial spaces such as religious spaces. He decided to offer volunteer design work in a village's chapel construction project named 'Jianshan Chapel', funded by the villagers themselves. As he explained his motivation,

I must have a high degree of freedom in designing churches and monasteries because I charge no design fees. I do it for free, and I do it with my heart. How sad it is if a person is determined to design for a monastery but he still has no freedom! Well, the reason for not charging design fees is that you like it very much. I don't think I will charge design fees for three types of space. The first is monasteries, the second is churches, and the third is libraries. I think these three are the purest spaces to carry people's hearts and souls. They….can't be measured by money. Therefore, I need to tell this to make me appear to be very *gaodashang* (lofty)…and I really am. […] Not only did we design it for free, [we] also helped the priest of the church to get sponsorships. [We] contacted tile manufacturer NABEL to sponsor the tiles on the outer walls, and another sponsor for the toilets inside […].

Ju Bin's account reflects his emphasis on what he described as the 'architecture of eternity'. This can be understood as the art dimensions of the 'art-commerce relation' (Ryan, 1992), which involve the pursuit of autonomy, timeless art, and self-expression (Banks, 2007; 2010b). In this project, Ju perceived these art dimensions, intertwined with social values, as more significant than his commercial practice. His account also resonates with Best and Connolly's (1982: 129) discussion that work is not only practiced for its instrumental use (such as make a living) but also for the 'intrinsic interest of the work' and 'a desire to create socially useful products'. In addition, for Ju, this voluntary design project was evident of his social vision of design that he was clearly proud of — in a way resonating with the ethos of modernity that entails an individual's incessant search for validation (Lasch, 1980) and 'desire to gain the respect of others through the social contribution one makes' (Best and Connolly, 1982: 129). As someone who himself values self-autonomy, Ju Bin demonstrates his micro resistance to the norm of capitalist-form of spatial production through his Chapel project: an architectural and interior design project that offered him no monetary rewards and took nearly a year to finish (from Jun 2017 to August

2018). His practice not only shows the potentials of pro bono work as a form of non-market production at the enterprise's level, but also contributes to the consolidation of religious culture in the local community under a Chinese regime that is wary of religion because of its anxiety about religious power in undermining people's loyalty to the Party-led regime. The Chapel design project, thus, met with somewhat disapproval of the state media China Central Television (CCTV), a chief propaganda arm of the Chinese regime. This is evident in the fact that Ju Bin was ordered by the programme production crew not to talk about the Chapel project during the shooting for its programme, even though the Church committee Ju Bin worked with was state-sanctioned (private conversation, 11 Aug 2019).

The case of Ju Bin, as with that of Li Binfeng, shows the tension between the illocutionary and perlocutionary performatives, where they both appeared to identify with the norms of capitalist production and affirm the political-economic ideology of 'Chinese speed' but simultaneously contravened such norms through informal unpaid work (in the form of volunteer practices) outside of the market mechanism (Alacovska, 2018). Here, the conducts of self-autonomy and self-actualisation, which are the essential elements of a neoliberal subject in China (Zhang and Ong, 2008), were not solely manifested in calculative logic but also in their engagement in an ethical mode of being through committing to exploring alternative possibilities. This identification with the practice of volunteer design did not impede others from identifying with the dominant norms that cater to the real estate sector. In the accounts given by both aforementioned interviewees, their work practices were presented as an alternative version of performativity within the framework of market mechanisms. The interviewees' status as an established designer with a network of economic

resources and social connections allowed them to explore the potentialities for alternative capitalist forms and engage in non-market transactions, such as volunteer work and unpaid labour that is outside of the 'capitalocentric' mould (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In this context, the performatives demonstrated by the interviewees — deploying autonomous but unpaid design works as side projects alongside primary projects of market-oriented designs — represented a form of agency aimed at reshaping their own circumstances within the framings of the market. Thus, their practices should not be considered in the same way as they were considered in a body of creative labour literature as self-exploitative, sacrificial (Ross 2003), insecure or precarious (McRobbie, 2016a; Neff, 2012). Instead, the practices of these design practitioners demonstrated a visible emphasis on the alternative cultural production. It was through such practices that they were able to prioritise self-autonomy, the aesthetic dimension, as well as the 'social' and 'ethical' dimensions of cultural production over profitability. In a way, they were similar to the progressive tendencies observed in the cultural sectors in the Western capitalist societies (Banks, 2007).

b. 'Surrogate Designers' and Logics of Profitability and Marketability

> Marketing design is bigger than design….they are more like a marketer […].
> As long as they can sell the things out, they are successful.
> – Li Yuan, Chinese interior designer (Interview conducted by author, 2019)

Closely associated with the logic of 'Chinese speed' is the notion of marketing design (*sheji xiaoshou*), which is often seen in conflict with the self-identification of design practitioners. This notion of marketing design revolves around the discourse of

treating design as a marketing tool, with the goal of boosting successful sales by using designed space as a strategy, luring the targeted buyers into buying the intended products. The dominance of this discourse promoted by developers' projects creates apparent contradictions in design practitioners' aspirations. It is common that design firms mainly focusing on non-real estate projects also undertake developers' projects like model homes and sales centres even though they consider that such projects do not suit their orientation best. These firms undertake developers' projects because they hope to increase their market visibility and to grow their business, as this type of projects can generate a source of revenue to support the operation costs.

A major reason that their work plans do not put a major focus on developers' projects is that such projects often proceed in high speed, and the importance of design in such projects lies in its role to help a development sell quickly and successfully to buyers. Tension arises when the design ideals of these firms do not align with the demands of developers, who require that the design appeals to a specific segment of buyers. Positing themselves as creative firms, these firms, however, increasingly caught the attention of developers who started looking for better-known but small-scale design firms. Developers would be willing to try them in anticipation of future products with sign values defined by their own sensibilities.

One interviewee told that when design firms wanted to undertake a developer's project but were unwilling to invest extensive time and effort in it, they would turn to 'surrogate designers'— designers whom they trusted and believed capable of producing designs that matched the developers' demands and mediated potential buyers' needs. The interviewee further explained the situation regarding this form of 'surrogate designers': '[Especially] for those who have not yet established a design firm, they may undertake such projects. That is, if others don't want to do

those projects, they are willing to sit behind and play the role of a '*qiangshou*' (surrogate) […]. After working [as surrogate designer] for a couple of times, one finds that [such jobs] can be more profitable than working [at a design firm]' (R16). In this type of 'work relationship', as the interviewee described, a design practitioner who moonlights in these second jobs is called '*qiangshou,*' serving as surrogates for design firms, assisting in completing various design-related tasks, such as producing proposed effect drawings, computer-generated 3D drawings, and preparing and delivering design proposal presentations.

An instance of a small design firm subcontracting a model flat project to a surrogate designer highlights the challenge faced by design studios as they venture into unfamiliar real estate projects. Private conversations among designers at this firm often displayed a sense of ambivalence when they followed up on the model home project. For example, one designer half-joked, 'real estate companies just are not afraid of hounding people,' a grievance he articulated after knowing that the developer client set a very tight deadline for their submission of a revised version of design. He expressed that he felt 'much more relaxed' after handing over the project to the surrogate designer, who then emphasised the need of a model flat design to 'satisfy the mainstream market' and 'catch people's eyeballs' during a design solution meeting.

The designer-founder of the firm also registered similar ambivalence. While he was concerned about how to make the design 'look like what we [the firm] do' in some ways' at the beginning of the project, he was critical of the practices of developers and later criticised the project as 'rubbish', as he complained: 'At first there was something creative, but after the first, second and third rounds (of meeting with the developer), the creative things just became more blurred'. When I asked

whether he thought he would undertake this type of real-estate projects in the future, he answered: 'This type of project can [help us] sustain in the future because there are a thousand of such projects; so this is good for the growth of the firm.' The comments of the designer-founder reflect his calculative thinking to prioritise meeting the demands of developers that he deemed economically instrumental to the prospects of his firm. His illocutionary performative was governed by entrepreneurial subjectivity in ensuring profitability and employability — the logics that he internalised to guide his decision-making within the professional domain. At the same time, he distanced himself from the expected subjectivity of being a marketer for developers by turning to a surrogate designer. Here, we can see the designer's dilemma — the tension between pursuing creative work and engaging in the illocutionary practice of producing marketing design. In this case, the identification with the logics of employability and profitability reproduced the discourse of marketing design, which was facilitated by the arm's-length approach of the design company in adopting a surrogate designer.

c. Performance of 'Fake Identity' as Strategy and Logic of 'Design-Build' Model of Project Delivery

The logic of 'Chinese Speed' within the designers' discourse also revolves around the institutionalisation of a dominant model of project delivery, known as the 'Design-Build' model, which is commonly called 'EPC' (Engineering, Procurement and Construction) in China. This model of design-build integration (*Sheji shigong yitihua*) is a system of project delivery in which one contractor, that is the design-build team, works with the project owner to provide design and construction services under a single contract. The advantage of this system is that it streamlines the tedious

process of tendering and bidding and administrative procedures of approval, while allowing the project owner to do tendering once and hold only one contractor accountable for the project. In other words, EPC is a means of promoting maximisation of efficiency, enforcing the logic of market competition.

This model of project delivery is commonly applied in governmental building projects and high-end privately-owned building projects, such as hotels, office buildings, high-quality residential buildings, and commercial complexes. In 2017, the Chinese government's state council released a document that specifies its intention to spearhead the EPC model of project delivery in projects with government investments. However, such institutional preference and arrangement created processes of ambivalence and exclusion. Smaller design companies and construction companies may lose competitiveness in the qualifications-based selection process because larger corporations with a large workforce comprising both construction and design expertise can easily outcompete the smaller companies, which are not eligible to bid on these projects with a small workforce. In this way, smaller-sized design firms may not be able to work on high-ended projects due to the high threshold requirements.

As pointed out by an interviewee who worked on EPC projects, market demands for a less tedious and streamlined process entailed a less standardised form of EPC procedures. In this context, construction companies without a design team can still win the bids on projects that require EPC's design-build requirements (R10). The processes point to some complex ways in which a construction company can meet the EPC's Design-Build requirements by subcontracting the design job to a design team, which, however, cannot claim to be a separate unit from the construction company.

Thus, through these strategies and procedures, the EPC model can still offer job opportunities for smaller design firms.

In the following excerpt, the interviewee explained how his firm was able to work on two high-end, five-star hotel projects with government investments through this less formal mode of EPC:

> The contractor that undertook the projects is a construction company that lacks a design department. So, it asked us to do the design and paid us the design fees. […] It only subcontracted the design part to us. Subsequently, the project owner needed to approve the design proposal. But this design contract did not require a tendering process […]. Because externally speaking, during this phrase, we were considered [part of the] the contractor company; we could not say we represent another company. This was not allowed. Yes, so this is a non-standardised EPC procedure that caters to the informal market demands. That's it. It [the construction company] presented itself to the public as 'having an in-house design department'. […] Nevertheless, through this [non-standardised procedure], we had a chance to participate in five-star hotel projects because they have strict requirements regarding staff size. (R10)

As told by the interviewee, it is this informal non-standardised procedure enacted through the market culture that has given rise to this mode of work relations between small design firms and small construction companies. This also reflects the mutual benefits deemed by both parties. Small design start-ups can have their hands on the high-end projects, while the construction companies playing the role of EPC contractor can capture market opportunities. In this case, we can see that the logic of market competition promised by standardised procedures in the EPC model caused anxiety among smaller design companies. However, small design companies could still find a way forward by subcontracting with construction companies and concealing their identity as a separate company during the project. To the extent that

the need for standardised credentials excluded these small design firms and construction firms from EPC contracts, their adoption of non-standardised procedures as the entry point to EPC contracts can be seen as a form of market agency. Such operations outside of procedural constraints did not disturb but rather maintained the status quo of the EPC model.

Apart from the market factor, designers were driven by the hope of actualising their ideal designs in EPC projects through the non-standardised practice. As the interviewee further explained, 'Why do designers also like this kind of EPC projects? [Because] what we designed will be executed. If, say, two companies were commissioned to do design and construction respectively and separately, [….] the [ideal] design might not be so easily realised, whether it is because of costs or technical problems. It [construction company] will constantly modify your design. As a result, we cannot guarantee the design quality of the final product. However, design quality is guaranteed in EPC projects — there is a guarantee of the product quality and that it comes from my design'. Within the narratives, EPC contracts became a means for designers to achieve self-actualisation through autonomous decision making and calculative thinking of a neoliberal subject, while non-EPC contracts might present an obstacle to it.

However, this EPC practice displays some contradictions. While such practice demonstrates the ambitions of these design practitioners in producing quality design and showcasing their design skills and aspirations through high-end projects, it also at the same time requires them to compromise by performing a temporarily 'fake' identity — being a design team as part of the construction company. This necessitated their willingness to conceal their design company's attachment to its design outputs and its ownership of these outputs. For these smaller start-up firms, however,

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participating in a less regulated part of the market is a way to survive in the competitive job market, where they adapt to specific market demands. This aspect of the industry culture, therefore, demonstrates how design practitioners made compromises to construct their ideal designs by engaging in alternative, non-standardised practices. It also shows a specific way in which market agency did not only satisfy market demands but also made the market more inclusive, reinforcing the logic of market competition and efficiency maximisation.

d. Sustainability Attempts and Logic of Exchange Values

Within the design economy, performative agency is also related to the role of real estate developers in seeking to explore innovative practices. One dominant type of commercial designed space — real estate sales centres, simultaneously a marketing strategy for developers to showcase new residential development and a space to conduct a deal with buyers, serves as a good example. Sales centre is a type of usually standalone architecture owned by developers, who commission design firms to undertake the design of its interiors, and sometimes also the exteriors. It is widely used within the Chinese real estate sector as a place for selling developed flats or houses to potential buyers in China. As a traditional designed product, this form of space reflects best the developers' preference for *exchange values* over use *values*, and has been criticised for being wasteful, non-sustainable, and overly-commercial because it is often a temporary architecture, unless it serves as a commercial housing for future sale or is intended as a permanent space designated by the developers. Typically, once the housing commodities are sold, this type of space is demolished.

At the same time, this logic of non-sustainability is subject to change as a dynamic has emerged in recent years within the real estate sector. Newer

developments, characterised by slogans like 'eliminating sales centres,' seek to explore other potentially innovative and alternative approaches to replace the traditional conception of sales centres as exchange spaces and showcases for high-end design. In a TikTok livestream session, Peng Xudan, a product manager and partner at real estate developer Vanke (Product Department at Chongqing Branch), explained the change by explicating his mission of 'eliminating sales centres' in the real estate development named 'Chongqing Vanke Future Starlight':

> After so many years of doing this [form of sales centres], we have been constantly thinking about why spaces like sales centres exist? […] In fact, […] they [buyers] don't actually need such containers. [...] Before embarking on this venture, we came up with a new slogan: 'eliminating sales centres'.[…] We hope that the scenarios [we create] will represent the continuation of our future community. [...] We advocate the idea of permanency, and we don't want to do something that will be demolished. We hope this is permanent […] and can support people's living after they moved in […]. Third, we want the content to be real. It is no longer an excessively branded and fabricated space. It should be a space that contains the authentic life in the future. (DesiDaily, 2020e)

In Peng's account, there was a strong desire to transform the sales centre into an exemplar of the 'new generation' of sales centres, positioning as a communal and commercial space that the future residents could enjoy. His narratives are tied to the notions of community living and authenticity, orienting towards both social and environmental sustainability, and at the same time attest to the reflexive awareness of the developer Vanke in delivering social visions through its products, echoing some of its current goals stated on its official website: 'to explore creative experimental fields and to construct a harmonious ecosystem'.

Echoing Peng's mission of 'eliminating sales centres', Guo Jie (Founder and

Creative Director of EnjoyDesign), the chief designer of this project, highlighted how

an idealised space for 'community business' (*shequ shangye*), modeled from foreign

successful cases, suits the needs of the future's residents. As he said:

> Our client, [Vanke], has given us a very clear and accurate vision. We need to
> create community business for the future — one that is experiential, insightful,
> cozy, and showcases the facilities for daily life […]. Everyone knows that the
> idea is to move away from [traditional] sales centres, as it has been discussed in
> the design circle for some time. However, it requires effort to experience,
> understand, and create the process necessary to achieve this. […] We have seen
> some ongoing projects, such as the Uniqlo in Japan, which I think is a good
> example. People can stay at home while their family members can bring their
> kids to the café and also buy daily necessities. (DesiDaily, 2020e)

Guo's remarks revealed that the new way of approaching the forms and functions of

sales centres was promoted and driven chiefly by the developer. This dynamic of

transformative and innovative potential revolves around the notion of 'community

business', which can be considered as the main theme used to redefine the role of the

sales centre. Both Guo and Peng were motivated by the projection of ideal scenarios

conjured by this new concept of sales centres, functioning as a community for small

businesses and a 'third-place' for social exchange in the low-density, private, urban

residential development.

In their accounts, the market norm of producing commodified, unauthentic

non-sustainable sales centres that were built on exchange values was interrupted by

the logic of sustainability, in which they promoted use values of commercial space

through place-making. For example, Guo explained how the design team turned the

space of sales centre into partly a daytime café and local snack bar, and partly a

shaken-tea shop and a beer bar at night. These were all designed to cater to potential

buyers of the Generations X and Y, who, as he described, were oriented towards the 'spiritual dimension' of life than the 'material dimension'. He stated, 'We make this product to help you relax […] and find a sense of family, [that is] the emotions of the commercial community here'.

From the perspective of performative agency, both accounts, which emphasise the reimagining of the forms and functions of sales centers, illustrate the ongoing role of sales centers as a category of 'arts and devices of attachment' (McFall, Cochoy and Deville, 2017). These serve as tools that market intermediaries develop through aesthetics, emotions, and technology to create attachment between consumers and brands (ibid). While both accounts emphasised the notion of getting rid of sales centres from their practice, the term 'sales centre' still loomed large as they contested the conventional version of sales centres. The fact that the designer described their design of sales centre as a 'product' reflects that discourse still draws on the dominant logic of commodification associated with sales centres. At the same time, however, it is inhabited by experimentation with more sustainable market devices — an ongoing project of the real estate sector as a whole.

For other designers who worked frequently on real estate projects, the dominant logics of exchange values and 'Chinese speed' were noticeably the impediment to more rigorous site analysis and design research, and hence the realisation of their design ideals. For example, Liu Jianhui, founding-partner and principal designer of Matrix Design, spoke of how thorough site analysis and design research was sacrificed due to the norms in a livestream session on TikTok in 2020:

> Speaking of research, actually this was missing in many of our previous projects. But I think it's actually a must-have for designers. If conditions allow, in fact all the projects, because our team is relatively big… some smaller teams

may work on some explorative studies and projects. […]. [But] in a lot of projects that we have done, we missed this. For example, if we do such a routinised, fast-paced project, there is simply no on-site study in the early stage, nor does it tell any other places in the surroundings over there. There is just probably an evaluation of the drawing, and you start the construction work. (DesiDaily, 2020f)

In Liu's account, the tension between the pursuit of design ideals, which were not fulfiled, and the identification with the logic of exchange values and speed became apparent. However, Liu saw signs of potential changes taking place in the real estate sector as he further spoke of his experience working with a developer, whom he 'admired very much,' and considered having a greater sensitivity to corporate social responsibility:

Since the construction on the land of collective landuse will also affect the local residents, or the local villagers, [the developer's management] ordered its employees to conduct a study on, for example, how the development will affect these local villagers' lives as they may lose part of the land, or whether they will need to solve the labour problem. I think this is what an entrepreneur is all about. In addition to doing business, a true entrepreneur takes into account their social responsibility. I think that these considerations are what our real estate developers should have in the future. It's not just about 'I'm working fast'. (DesiDaily, 2020f)

The account of Liu shows that practices of project management with a vision of social responsibility in supporting the local community came up as a potentially perlocutionary performative during the pre-construction stage. In this case, the developer's practice has become concerned with practices of care for the wellbeing of the local community, not being solely preoccupied with market practices of pursuing high-speed development and exchange values of space at the expense of others' wellbeing.

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III. Summary

In this chapter, I have elucidated on the dynamics and variation of work practices by contextualising the role of performative agency in relation to the regulatory norms in the design economy. I have also highlighted several forms of performatives located in the practices of design practitioners as they managed their relations with the dominant social and industry norms. These work practices demonstrate how design practitioners and corporations have reproduced dominant discourses and norms, and how practitioners' contingent distancing from them has led to the emergence of alternative practices. Foregrounding these practices revealed the "contingency and plurality of 'personhood'" that emerged under specific regime or milieu and marked the production process of design (du Gay, 2007: 11).

The findings indicate that the work practices of aligning with the national policies, ideologies and logics of profitability, marketability and 'Chinese speed' were manifested in both discursive and non-discursive practices that involved the deployment of market devices and marketing designs. We saw how the pursuit of 'negotiated autonomy' and its ambivalence with illocutionary performatives has led to volunteer design work, breaking away from the dominant logics of Chinese speed and profitability. The attempts of the design practitioners represented a form of struggles to shape their own self-identification. Given the negotiated character of the design work, illocutionary performatives did not achieve its ontological effects completely. We also saw how turning to 'surrogate designers' and participating in the EPC projects through an alternative strategy has sustained the logic of design marketability and service efficiency. These practices point to the compromised character of designers' working lives, pursuing design ideals while subsisting and making do within the boundaries of illocutionary performatives.

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Based on the case of sustainable sales centre design, it is evident that alternative practices could emerge under favourable conditions, particularly when there is a strong emphasis on corporate sustainability strategies. These conditions can bring upon changes, pointing to the perlocutionary effects of performativity. An examination of the alternative practices, therefore, draws attention to the moments where the design practitioners performed a more autonomous, reflexive self when dealing with their relations with the dominant norms. This process could imply the tendency of the subjects to pursue the potentialities residing in dominant norms, developing an ethical form of subjectivity — an ethical self that can 'explore, discover, reveal and live in the light of the desires that comprised one's truth' as Foucault suggested (Rose, 1996a: 135). At times, these practices illuminate the creative potentials and contingency in the professional domain.

While the findings illustrated in this chapter support earlier accounts of how self-enterprising practices, such as self-actualisation, have been made possible within the creative art and design sectors by China's reform and opening-up policies since the late 1970s (Chumley, 2016: 18), they supplement evidence about how these practices can be understood through the analytic framework of performativity. As the cases show, the context-specific and contingent nature of work practices necessitates an analysis of performative agency at the individual's and organisational levels that attends to the social relations between human (e.g. design practitioners) and non-human (e.g. state, corporations, market devices). This approach highlights the inherent ambiguities in social relations that open up possibilities for alternative practices. It also suggests that professional identities and agency can come into view within an analysis of the variegated performatives, which are manifested in the different modes of engagement with the social norms. Thus, a performativity-

informed analysis in this chapter not only sheds light on a broader sense of a design industry that is driven by cultural imaginaries, self-expression and entrepreneurial practices, but it also offers a way to analyse the source and organisation of identity. As we have seen, the complex conducts of design practitioners, whether by pursuing personal ideals at the expense of monetary rewards or by the means of distancing themselves from the expected illocutionary effects, are some examples of the undercurrents for potential transformation of practices and discourses in the design industry that construct and shape the identities of design practitioners.

Conclusion

> Design, marketing, and image construction play a vital role in the transfiguring of goods into desires and vice versa, through the webs of meaning within which each commodity is located, the phantasies of efficacy and the dreams of pleasure that guide both product innovation and consumer demand. Through this loose assemblage of agents, calculations, techniques, images, and commodities, consumer choice can be aligned with macroeconomic objectives and business advantage: economic life can be governed and entrepreneurial aspirations realized, through the choices consumers make in their quest to fulfill themselves.
>
> – Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves* (1998: 162)

Rose's argument above, regarding the centrality of design in the world of material goods and enterprise culture, remains pertinent for understanding Chinese society, even though it was written in the late 1990s and based on the analyses of Western liberal democracies. His assessment serves as a fitting foundation for this study's conclusion as it indicates the way questions of design, economic life, innovation, and subjectivity are intertwined. For Rose, design becomes intertwined in the worlds of consumption and commerce, producing innovation of desire and pleasure while responding to consumer demand for a better quality of life. It also, significantly, performs a vital role in shaping our economic life and entrepreneurial subjectivity that emerges through aspiration, autonomous choices, and self-fulfilment. Thus, the production of design commodities reiterates and partakes in enterprise and consumer cultures, as they transverse diverse domains of human life.

Rose's claims provide some pointers into understanding the design world that I examined in this study. They were also indicative of the increasing significance of the design profession and its multifaceted role — from being a lifestyle enhancer and

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innovator to a business manager or owner. This has captured the attention of not only sociologists but also scholars in fields such as organisation studies, market studies, studies of service design and design thinking, and cultural and creative industries research over recent decades.

However, as I pointed out earlier in Chapter 1, similar assertions like Rose's, which tend to emphasise the world of designed goods as 'networks' and 'assemblages' often leave insufficient room to explore the practices of design practitioners. This gap has significantly influenced the construction of my account, which delves into the cultural and intellectual formation of design practitioners, their entrepreneurial subjectivities, actual working lives, practices and models of creativity that they deploy. This exploration is made possible by situating the analysis within the commercial cultures that shape the links between production and consumption. This involves attending to how the cultural domain of producers and production can mediate the making of consumer subjectivity, for example. I have argued that it is this 'cultural-ness' of the design sector that requires further exploration. All these aspects, as I have contended, are central to understanding the dual roles of designers as both cultural and market intermediaries that I have elaborated upon in this study.

Rather than confining a study on interior design practitioners to the framework of consumption and its relationship with economic life, I have viewed these people as a new entrepreneurial class whose interior businesses involves a great deal of production of symbolic goods, service provisions and discourses that reify the commodity value of creativity, generate consumption needs, and promote what Bourdieu called 'art of living'— distinctive features encapsulated in his conceptualisation of a social group known as the 'new petite bourgeoisie'. In my study, these designers are composed of both employees and the self-employed, with

the latter constituting the majority. Jumping onto the interior design bandwagon at different times after the commencement of the reform and opening-up era in the late 1970s, many have become owners of their startups. Design enterprises, typically of small-to-medium scale, have risen to become one of the symbolic centres in the cultural economy, not only in Western developed countries but also in China. I have traced the emergence of interior design enterprises, intricately intertwined with markets such as private housing, retailing, hospitality, and furniture manufacturing, during this pivotal period of transformation in China. Specifically, this study examines some four decades into the rapid development of the socialist market economy and the implementation of related reform policies, such as the legalisation of private enterprises in 1988.

When this entrepreneurial cultural production is contextualised with the framework of governmentality, it can be analysed as a technique of self-governing that illustrates the behaviour and conduct of the professional subjects. Becoming their own bosses, as shown in Chapter 3, entailed the implementation of organisational strategies and management skills to attract, cultivate and retain talents through identity control and normalisation of long working hours, for example. In the field of interior design, however, this is not simply about generation and securing of financial incomes, which constitute the 'old' elements of the petite bourgeoisie. It is also about the 'new' elements of the petite bourgeoisie that are manifested through their pursuit of cultural capital, focusing on self-improvement in terms of expertise and knowledge, as well as their positioning as innovators drawing on their own cultural-aesthetic resources, knowledge, acquired taste, and imaginative capacities. As mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, many design practitioners actively sought to augment their cultural resources by acquiring proficiency in English and studying Western

advanced design. They also immersed themselves in these design currents. Going on 'pilgrimage' trips to events like Milan Design Week, and engaging in business collaboration with Western counterparts, for instance, often stemmed from self-enterprising motives and desires to engage with Western codes of good design. Despite the elevated status of Chinese design on the global stage in recent years, the discourse of 'deficiency' about Chinese design did not disappear and it revealed the aspirations of design practitioners in diminishing the disparity between China and the Western world concerning the cultural hierarchy within the realm of design.

Interior design has been classified as one of the creative design services within culture-related industries in 2018 by the government, which has favoured using the term 'interior decoration' in official documents since the Maoist era. In this context, interior design, like fashion design and advertising, is a form of creative-cultural production that involves not just economic calculations, but also cultural concerns in the aesthetic economy (Entwisle, 2002). The claims about the cultural characteristics of 'new petite bourgeoisie' has offered directions for developing arguments in my study. In presenting the intricate arguments concerning the practices of design practitioners, certain intersections have surfaced. I have identified how the values, beliefs, and cultural-intellectual formations of these designers, along with the field-specific genre cultures, and the broader enterprise culture and industry culture, have collectively influenced the cultural practices demonstrated by the designers in this study. The first intersection is most explicitly manifested in the theme of creativity and innovation.

Creativity and Innovation

As I have already mentioned in this conclusion and in Chapter 6, all design

practitioners facilitate certain forms of innovations and pursue newness by ensuring at least a slight degree of differentiation from existing works. Innovation is an important part of their working lives, setting them apart from their peers. This distinction is particularly pertinent due to the relatively open access nature of interior design jobs and the expansion of higher design education, which have intensified competition within the industry. By asserting that striving to be an innovator is a commonality among them, I do not mean to pigeonhole them into conforming to a single model of creativity. Instead, this analysis emphasises that they hold different perceptions of creativity and newness in their work, leading them to deploy diverse strategies that resulted in varying levels of innovation. In this analysis, the models of creativity can be understood as aligning with either 'incremental innovation' or 'radical innovation', which are two key concepts identified within studies of design thinking and innovation. I have indicated that one group of designers has tended to work more often with, or identify themselves with, 'derivative creativity.' This model invokes commercial novelty and 'incremental innovation' to achieve commercial success and satisfy clients. Thus, this service-oriented dimension is closer to the entrepreneurial subjectivity known as the '*homo œconomicus*'. In contrast to this model of creativity, 'authentic creativity' emphasises romantic notions of creativity as an innate agency and genius, marked by moments of sparking original ideas, and thus has the potential to bring about 'radical innovation' if it leads to breakthroughs that can change the direction of current markets. This model is deployed by a group of designers who see cultural and aesthetic knowledge, and their own tastes and judgement as indispensable preconditions and resources for fostering originality and newness in their design projects. Introducing this interdisciplinary differentiation sheds light on the conditions under which creative practices are deployed by individuals, while also becoming

adopted and institutionalised within companies.

It is important to highlight the significance of copying to Chinese design practitioners when analysing their models of creativity. In this thesis, I present a discussion on how their models of creativity were influenced by the art education they received that shaped their perceptions of copying practice. As noted in Chapter 3, their training involved substantial hand-drawing training that involved copying images and the use of copybooks to master the skills necessary for passing the technique-focused art exams. The practices of precise copying of renowned paintings and artworks, underpinned by a Confucian understanding of culture that regards copying as a learning process from predecessors and generative of knowledge and creativity, shaped how they made sense of the copying-based approach in cultural production. These educational experiences made an impact on the intellectual and cultural formation of the design practitioners in terms of how they viewed skilful copying and appropriation as beneficial, particularly for novice practitioners, and how they saw their works copied by others as recognition of their professional status. The models of creativity we see are, therefore, part of the result of the combined impacts of art training and the public art-exam system that shaped the definitions of creativity and copying held by design practitioners. Recognising education institutions as sites of biopower and practice reproduction sheds light on how models of creativity, and more broadly professional practices, are contoured and produced.

By arguing that authentic creativity is one major model of creativity, this study does not intend to 'essentialise' creativity as a simplistic and individualistic process. Rather, it aims to capture the complex yet specific ways in which practitioners subjectively comprehend the concepts of creativity and newness, which in turn shapes the resultant products. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, designers who deployed the

authentic creativity model drew on knowledge and inspiration from different cultures (cultural-sourcing). This approach enriches their ideation and inspiration process that may lead to original outcomes. Therefore, a discussion on authentic creativity underscores that creativity is not exclusively an individual trait or a subjective attribute; it is also context-dependent.

It is useful, in examining the models of creativity, to allow conceptual flexibility to make sense of the complex and context-specific form of practices. Informed by practice theories, I have insisted that work practices are ingrained in habitual routines and involve a complex interplay of diverse elements, encompassing human thinking, bodies, objects, discourses, knowledge, and institutions. By delving into genre theories and post-Bourdieuian theories of cultural production, I also recognise that practices are formed and transformed within the genre world of established conventions and rules. Concurrently, they are shaped by broader cultural values and beliefs, and the evolving aesthetics in a historical context. In this analysis, I consider the questions of genre and style rooted in the studies of art and cultural history but neglected in the field of social sciences (Born, 2010: 197). Specifically, I argue that this combined approach is productive to make sense of the models of creativity, which exist as distinct 'features' of practices and define design practitioners as a social group through their involvement in practices (Schatzki, 2012). In this manner, practice theories provide a framework for comprehending the practitioners' models of creativity, highlighting how these models are shaped by the norms, values, and established routines specific to their practices. By leveraging post-Bourdieuian analyses of cultural production and genre theories, my aim is to enhance our understanding of how history and the socio-cultural context shape discourses, objects, genres and material forms related to aesthetics and culture. In this regard, practice

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theories provide an analytic space that effectively connects history, aesthetic formations, and models of creativity.

In this study of the interior design sector, I argue that the creative practices observed in China often revolve around the notion of 'style'. The notion of 'style' is associated with negative connotations that trace back to the 'take-ism' era spanning roughly from the 1980s until the first decade of the 2000s. This era was characterised by an imitative culture of blind-copying of foreign decorative elements and styles to achieve rapid design production. Many contemporary designers have sought to get beyond this 'stylisation culture,' which is a legacy of the 'take-ism' period, and is perceived as a 'stigma' of the industry associated with groups of subpar practitioners. This has contributed to a shift away from the prevalent 'take-ism' practices, steering the industry towards a rising concern with newness. Designers now place an emphasis on originality, drawing from a blend of cultural sources, which involves reworking and appropriating Western advanced designs, while another group focuses more on incorporating local Chinese and oriental elements.

One important issue revealed in this analysis of models of creativity pertains to the transformation of practices. A significant change of designers' practices within this study is evident though the 'de-stylisation' trend and its role in facilitating and discouraging specific forms of innovation. Examining the models of creativity that practitioners identify with and understanding the reasons behind, therefore, provides a more nuanced comprehension of creative practices that emerge from distinct institutional and historical contexts. In addition, the rediscovery of Chinese and oriental aesthetics for hybridisation with modernist design has now gained traction in the industry. This change could have implications for research on innovation within China's hybrid intellectual property system, its export-led industrialised economy, and

nationalist agendas. Thus, the valorisation of creativity we see in China needs to be contextualised within the practices that producers engage in, within specific contexts of politics, history, commercial organisations, and genre cultures that provide opportunities for the transformation of genre boundaries.

However, that is not to say that only changes have taken place, since much evidence in my study points to the continuity of practices as well. The legacy of stylisation practice persists in today's interiors business landscape, as demonstrated by certain real estate companies and design agencies using the word 'style' as a means of communication. Furthermore, copying-based creative practice has continued to be seen as beneficial for design practitioners, particularly novices, as a valuable learning tool. This viewpoint aligns with the legacy of Confucian culture, where appropriate copying represents a traditional form of literary and artistic practice that pays tribute to past masters (Alford, 1995: 9-29; Pang, 2012). Additionally, the findings indicate that copying continues to be perceived by individuals as a practice that empowers them to exploit and learn from the past. These discussions specifically underscore the effectiveness of using an analytic framework that combines various theoretical insights that I have suggested, as it captures adeptly the dynamics of both change and continuity within industry-specific analyses of cultural production.

Performative Agency as Normativity and Alternativity

Exploring the performativity of design individuals has been another central objective of this study. Of course, performativity does not involve individuals only; it also encompasses culturally-constructed categories such as the design economy and its commercial cultures, which are performative in the sense that they are an effect itself of the process of shaping and creating the very identity or subject they appear to

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represent. The analysis here has been informed by what Butler (2010) terms 'performative agency,' emphasising not only the predicted outcomes of normative practices, but also the contingent outcomes arising from how these practices are carried out and repeated. This perspective is relevant as it asks questions about how the economy is performed through practices and how the politics of performativity manifest, particularly when these actions can contribute to alternative practices and the reproduction of norms. The emphasis on the notion of contingency is integral to understanding the dynamics of design economy because it is at the heart of the working practice of design professionals. As Dunne and Raby (2013: 2, 3) point out, 'all design to some extent is future oriented,' and designers generally concern 'the idea of possible futures', usually in 'the form of scenarios, often starting with a what-if question, and are intended to open up spaces of debate and discussion; therefore, they are by necessity provocative, intentionally simplified, and fictional'. In applying performative perspectives in this study, I examine the dominant norms that govern the design industry and its work domain, and consider the discourses, non-discursive practices, and identification of design practitioners. In Chapter 7, we saw how these practitioners sustained and reproduced dominant norms, including the logic of self-enterprise, design's profitability, marketability and the logic of 'Chinese speed'. This was accomplished not only through the creation of design with fast turnaround but also through experiential marketing designs. These aimed to help clients in boosting sales figures by routine creation of triggering interiors that evoke and shape human perceptions and feelings. We also noted how practitioners turned to alternative practices to co-exist with these norms. In the examples of established design entrepreneurs, alternative practices, such as doing unpaid volunteer design work and declining an attractive company acquisition offer, signal a refusal to be fully

committed to the logic of profitability and speed. Indeed, they indicate a pursuit of autonomy, personal ideals and design execution aligned in social visions. In another example, collaborative efforts between real estate developer and design practitioners reshaped practices in the design industry, paving the way for more sustainable approaches to designing developers' products. This is demonstrated through innovations in the design of a community-oriented sales centre that is not set for demolition right after the housing commodities are sold, prioritising use-values over exchange values.

There are inextricable links between alternative practices and the explicit reproduction of industry-specific norms. We saw how design entrepreneurs of small-scale businesses came up with various strategies to address conflicts with certain regulatory practices and norms. These included enlisting surrogate designers to handle less appealing marketing design projects that generate economic capital, and projecting an image of adequacy for bidding on large-scale design-and-build contracts, such as five-star hotel interiors projects. In this regard, these designers exhibit characteristics of both the new petite bourgeois and entrepreneurial subjects, actively pursuing capital accumulation and self-advancement. Thus, while an analysis of the commercial culture of a creative sector opens up ways to study cultural practices, it prompts reflections on the aforementioned questions of normativity (normative dimension of performativity) and alternativity (alternative horizon of performativity). These questions involve considering the performative agency of professional subjects as they articulate diverse and contingent practices. Butler's conceptualisation of performative agency offers tools for reflecting on these questions by recognising the power of performativity to achieve its intended impacts through subjectification, as well as ways to influence ongoing regulatory practices and

processes.

Within the context of China, this performativity approach allows us to understand the 'illocutionary' effect of performative agency as perpetuating the current state, while its 'perlocutionary' effect demonstrates contingent instances through which new possibilities are opened up. Thus, the cultural practices enacted by these design professionals were not either a pure reiteration or an outright rejection of regulatory norms. Instead, they reflect simultaneous alignment with regulatory norms and adoption of alternative practices that often emerged as strategic responses to their challenges and opportunities, born out of reflexive consideration. Normativity and alternativity tended to run in parallel.

In this sense, this study shows what an account informed by commercial cultures could deliver in thinking about the performative agency and work-based identities in late-socialist neoliberalism. It may contribute to discussions about how entrepreneurial subjects are governed through various techniques and how they manage themselves as neoliberal subjects, engaging with norms in multiple ways and incorporating calculative yet autonomous choices into the subject forms. Thus, it offers a deeper understanding of the politics surrounding self-organised work and entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Minimalism, Production, Consumption and Selfhood

The discussion about designers' pivotal role in driving cultural shifts provides a good basis for pondering the relations between interior designers and a lifestyle culture, minimalism. As previously noted in Chapter 4, minimalist interiors served multiple commercial purposes. These spaces not only functioned as market devices in the form of sales centres for developers and as branding strategies for businesses,

particularly in the hospitality and retailing sectors, but also served as practical commercial solutions for time-constrained clients. They focused on the markets related to aesthetic consumption and emphasised the crafting of affective spatial experiences, through the deployment of minimalism as a tool for experiential marketing. The codes of minimalism often involved the construction of affective atmospheres, using a modernist design approach that emphasises the unity, order, and purity of designed spaces. This approach also manifested in innovations related to the appropriation and indigenisation of foreign aesthetics, and the hybridisation between minimalism and concepts from Chinese art or oriental aesthetics. It is these developments in the case of Chinese interior design that offer us implications for rethinking about the meanings and significance surrounding lifestyle minimalism. While recent accounts have predominantly attributed the growing popularity of minimalism to media influences, the impact of minimalist influencers, or shifts in spending habits within specific social circles, the insistence on studying design practitioners as key cultural and market intermediaries serves as a reminder that they hold a fundamental place in shaping design processes and the execution of cultural practices that promote minimalism.

The ongoing austerity policies, ecological crises, discussions on sustainability, and, most recently, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the global context further underscore the importance of exploring the production process and producers, rather than solely focusing on consumption habits. Transitioning from the global to the national level, in this study, I speak to a period of heightened interest in minimalist genres among designers and their clients in China. This period, more or less, aligns with the country's experience of economic slowdown, evidenced by its growth rate dropping from once remarkable double-digit figures (14.2% in 2007) to 6%-7.4%

during the 2014 to 2019 period (World Bank, 2023). This economic change signifies a policy shift towards a 'new normal' economy. The term 'new normal' was coined by the government to describe its policy adjustments aimed at fostering more sustainable development strategies in response to the slower economic growth rate observed in 2014. While the larger concept of lifestyle minimalism that has surfaced in China may appear to align with the narratives presented by studies focusing on minimalism in Euro-American societies — such as 'de-growth' politics, or 'alternative' approach to pleasurable living and consumption rooted in environmental concerns and ethical consumption — the minimalist interiors produced by Chinese designers do not inherently link to such notions.

Through my focus on the designers engaged in minimalism as both a genre and commercial practice, I have developed one argument that concerns the commercial pragmatism of minimalism in the 'experience economy'. This minimalist design approach serves as a practical solution to both clients and design practitioners in specific project types that aimed at minimising material and time costs, or providing bespoke designs for high-end spaces, exemplified by one category of minimalism, namely 'luxo-minimalism'. Moreover, the genre-sensitive analysis that I have emphasised in this study reminds us that the philosophy of minimalism, when viewed from a perspective of art and design, is intimately connected with the tenets of 'modern' art. It rejects ornamentation and emphasises subtraction over abundance; thus, it diverts attention from the surface, and opens gateways into the depths of the inner self (Alexander, 2020). The pragmatic aspects of minimalism, coupled with its sensitivity to the dimensions of affects, interiority and self-cultivation, were reflected in narratives of design practitioners as they talked about their intentions and aspirations for their projects that I discussed in Chapter 4. These narratives are often

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deployed to connect with the target end-users, particularly the urban middle class who are willing to make significant investment in interior design (Tsang, 2014). Interestingly, in this sense, interior designers, through their preoccupation with creating a good living via design, bear a somewhat resemblance to what Rose referred to as 'experts of subjectivity' in his discussion on contemporary therapists (1998: 151, 160). While differing in many aspects, both professions offer ways of improving one's quality of life. As affective products and market devices, some of the examples of minimalism shown in my study are designed in ways to create a tranquil and unworldly spatial experience for urbanites, addressing the concerns of the entrepreneurial self who seeks self-cultivation in the emotional and intellectual realms that can potentially help overcome negative emotions. The examples that I examine may contribute to ongoing discussions about the limitations of the 'de-growth' literature in comprehending the role of cultural production in capitalism (Banks, 2022). These limitations arise from its narrow focus on ecological sustainability, while neglecting crucial aspects of diverse organised cultural production that are central to the sustainment of future cultural economies, encompassing the production and communication of authentic meanings, as well as its capacity for self-expression, 'popular pleasures,' and aesthetic experiences (ibid: 21, 24).

Additionally, the examples illustrated in this thesis can broaden a discussion of lifestyle minimalism that is confined largely to consumption and media impacts. They not only shed light on the calculative agencies frequently discussed, but also highlight the affective elements integral to comprehending market attachment between products and their target users, as well as the intricate interplay between agency and objects. By situating the production of minimalist interiors within the context of genre and within the cultural practices that emphasise the affective dimension in 'experience

economy,' we may better understand the notions related to minimalism, well-being, and the 'psychic life' of the entrepreneurial self (Butler, 1997; Scharf, 2016), and explore their relations with consumption and material objects.

Examining the interior design sector in China's megacity Shenzhen specifically offers an opportunity to dissect how the generative relations between the commercial processes within a creative sector and the wider economic, political, and cultural formations manifest in non-Western settings of neoliberalism. It also highlights the importance of place and history in conditioning the interrelated relations among the market, design practitioners and enterprises that are central to our understanding of economic life and cultural changes. The cross-disciplinary nature of design and diverse array of specialised design sectors have posed challenges for researchers, educators, and authorities in fully grasping the multifaceted practices of design people and their relations with society. However, considering the evident significance of design practitioners and designed products in today's economic, cultural and ecological landscapes, there is a need for initiatives that delve more profoundly into the realm of design within distinct sectors. This entails not only focusing on the professional contributions of practitioners but also delving into their personal realms and the products they create, understanding their performative aspects and the roles they play in people's lives. This approach may hold the potential for a wealth of insights.

Appendix

List of Respondents

Respondent number	Gender	Profession	Age cohorts	Date of interview	Location of interview
R1	Female	Researcher and former design assistant	1990s	14 Sep 2018	Hong Kong
R2	Male	Design director	1990s	20 Jan 2019	Shenzhen
R3	Female	Design assistant	1990s	20 Jan 2019	Shenzhen
R4	Female	Chief designer and design company owner	1960s	17 May 2019	Shenzhen
R5	Female	Designer	1990s	16 Jun 2019	Shenzhen
R6	Male	Designer	1990s	22 Jun 2019	Shenzhen
R7	Male	Chief designer and design company owner	1980s	30 Jun 2019	Shenzhen
R8	Male	Chief designer and design company owner	1980s	2 Jul 2019	Shenzhen
R9	Male	General manager of design company	1980s	11 Jul 2019	Shenzhen
R10	Male	Designer and partner of design company	1980s	21 Jul 2019	Shenzhen
R11	Male	Designer	1980s	29 Jul 2019	Shenzhen
R12	Male	Designer	1990s	10 Aug 2019	Shenzhen
R13	Male	Creative director and design company owner	1970s	11 Aug 2019	Shenzhen
R14	Male	Chief designer and design company co-owner	1980s	18 Aug 2019	Shenzhen
R15	Male	Chief designer and design company co-owner	1980s	19 Aug 2019	Shenzhen

Respondent number	Gender	Profession	Age cohorts	Date of interview	Location of interview
R16	Male	Design director and design company owner	1980s	24 Oct 2020	Online
R17	Male	Chief designer and design company owner	1970s	12 Nov 2020	Online
R18	Male	Chief designer and design company owner	1980s	19 May 2021	Online
R19	Male	Design director and design company owner	1970s	22 Jul 2021	Online
R20	Male	Chief designer and design company co-owner	1970s	31 Jul 2021	Online
R21	Female	Chief designer and design company co-owner	1970s	31 Jul 2021	Online
R22	Female	Creative director and design company co-owner	1990s	7 Aug 2021	Online
R23	Male	Design director and design company co-owner	1980s	13 Aug 2021	Online
R24	Male	Creative director and design company co-owner	1980s	20 Aug 2021	Online
R25	Female	Designer and design company co-owner	1990s	24 Feb 2022	Online

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