

# Approaching a Chinese Cultural Transferring Design Model Through Analysis of Culturally Oriented Design and Its Context

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**Abstract.** This paper deals with the case studies and criteria applied to them in terms of Chinese culturally orientated design, in order to test the author's hypotheses about cultural reflections. It develops a three-layer design model reflects Chinese cultural elements into design in terms of symbolic, behavioural and political/philosophical, through methods and analysis of values in practice. Additionally, for the readers sympathetic with a systematic design approach or cultural identitarianism, this work addresses a view of critical understanding for facing Chinese culture in design.

**Keywords:** Chineseness · Cultural transfer design · Symbolic transfer · Behavioural transfer · Philosophical transfer

## 1 Introduction

This paper comprises four sections. Section one deals with the relevant concepts around culture, through short criteria of relevant concepts such as technology, globalisation, and some of the general definitions of culture. This section aims to generate a characterization of culture, subsequently searching what Chineseness is. The second section introduces the core hypothesis in this paper - 'Chineseness' - by comparing it to the form "Chinoiserie". The third section depicts three aspects in terms of Chinese cultural transferring design: symbolic, behavioural, and philosophical/political. Then, in Sect. 4, it forms a three-layer cultural transfer design model, which explores a systematic approach to reflecting Chineseness from various cultural angles. These four sections in paper include sources that evidence particular points of view about Chinese culture and design. Additionally they throw up some specific challenges:

How can we characterise local culture that feeds into its social context and design needs?

How can we manifest the cultural elements in design through design methods?

## 2 A Criteria of the Relevant Concepts Around 'Culture'

What is culture? There are thousands of definitions of culture. Matthew Arnold defined culture as 'a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters

which most concern us', 'the best which has been thought and said in the world', and through this knowledge, 'turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically' [1]. Whereas the view of aspiration towards cultural perfection may not resonate completely today, the sense of culture being very broadly interpreted is one the author can identify with as a designer's 'fresh and free thought', applicable to individual contexts. In another words, culture is an empty vase, a vehicle, which takes the input and output of individuals and groups of people within their surrounding environment and context. Thus, through the criteria of the concepts above, considering the flexibility and trick of it that feeds into different design contexts, rather than define Chinese culture in any one overriding sense, the author attempt to explore a thinking process that is constructed on the understanding of Chineseness within specific design contexts.

## 2.1 Technology

What is technology? Where should one draw the line when defining hi-tech products? There are no standard answers to these questions. Design researcher Klaus Krippendorff asserts that every action system beyond the basic apparatus of the body is a technology [2]. Through various points in history and the development of human society, technological artefacts/products become moving targets [3]. In the way that ceramics, sculptural tools, and printmaking apparatus were state-of-the-art products thousands of years ago, more recently, films, and electrical goods were considered high-tech. Now, however, when people talk about high-tech products, we are not talking about these technologies. Most of the time, we are talking about our imagination of technology rather than a technology. The forms of high-tech devices are not derived from how they are produced and what they do, but from their users' ability to conceptualize and handle them, which we called the interface. Therefore, we noticed that sometimes, as most of the users hardly know the core technique or manufacture of a product, what they directly connect with the product is through its interface, rather than through the inner workings.

Tracing back to the first Mac, which brought together a number of technical threads in the computer that developed in the 1960s and 1970s, sparking new movements in computing, which is as we know today 'user leads' design thinking. As one of its designers, Jef Raskin remembered:

There were to be no peripheral slots so that customers never had to see the inside of the machine (although external ports would be provided); there was a fixed memory size so that all applications would run on all Macintoshes; the screen, keyboard, and mass storage device (and, we hoped, a printer) were to be built in so that the customer got a truly complete system, and so that we could control the appearance of characters and graphics [4].

On this point, hi-tech is just an inner design element, which needs to be 'well-packed', to be considered comprehensively by designers, and then expressed through an interface or interaction design in the purpose of commercial attraction. For a designer, there should be no good or bad technology, but only better or worse design choices. Moreover, for dealing with local cultural related design, it is about how to represent

interfaces or interactions to users, with both ‘well-packaged’ technology and local cultural consideration within.

## 2.2 Globalisation, Localisation and Glocalisation

We cannot ignore the fact that there are billions of the world’s people living in different social and cultural contexts who are quick to passively accept the exports that are full of western axiology. Today, no matter whether in terms of the image of hi-tech or the way of producing it, innovative design is taking centre-stage in the Western-World standards. Maybe from the Western side, globalisation indicates jumping out of the western culture and understanding others. However, from a non-western, for instance, the Chinese side, it means more to consider the western way, as the western world is the one outside Chinese and which leads the mainstream global market today. China has a population of 1.4-billion and a huge number of individual local cultures on top of the usual diversities of gender, age, area, education and so on. However, there exist common influences from globalisation/westernisation in today’s Chinese generations as well: the people inherit specific Chinese characteristics such as strong consciousness of family, high respect for the older intelligence, etc., yet have experienced huge changes during the last thirty years; their lifestyles have shifted and they have had to accept western designs as well as western ways of life in a very short time. Thus, they advocate western technology as well as maintaining pride in Chinese traditions. These global influences comprise the Chinese culture today and are also the causes of estrangement.

We could argue that globalisation causes cultural homogeneity and destroys cultural diversity/heterogeneity in the process, by denying or ignoring cultural identity, or abstracting the cultural identity into a universal. A typical example is the similarity of products and shops in different countries of international brands to suit the purposes of global branding strategy. However, simultaneously, we cannot ignore the fact that globalisation has also fragmented the world landscapes into smaller cultural unites [5], and made culture the most important asset to work with in design’s sphere [6]. For instance, glocalism in design is a result and part of globalisation. It promotes local identity and highlights cultural values. This occurs maybe because of local designers attempts to save the national identity of products from the homogeneity of the global market; or alternatively, for the local users’ better adaption. This trend also leads back via the abstractions of localisation into the global market, in order to increase and attract the global users’ interests and curiosities in local culture.

## 2.3 Chinoiserie and Chineseness

Chinoiserie was a visual and aesthetic reflection of Chinese culture into design from a western perspective, as well as a westerners’ Chinese cultural transfer in terms of symbolic aspects: both the decoration of 18th century and contemporary luxury design are characterised by the use of fanciful imagery of an imaginary China. It is a French term, referring to a recurring theme in European artistic styles from the 17th century, since when European design, especially the luxury end, was influenced by Chinese aesthetics and designed through Chinese cultural transfer by European methods of the

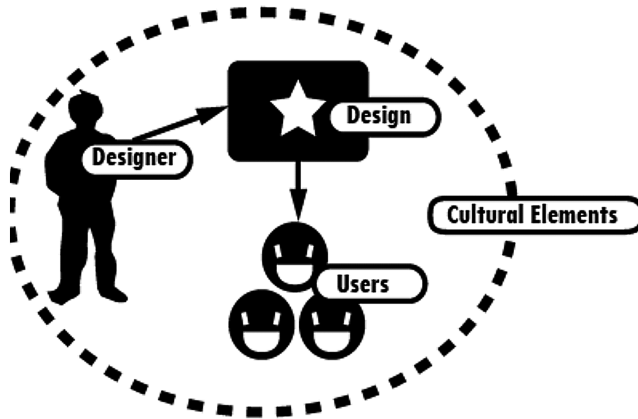
crafts people. “Chinoiserie is a technical sophistication of Chinese traditional pattern” [7]. Chinoiserie satisfied the western curiosity about Chinese traditional cultural stereotypes. It is a quite visually symbolic format with whimsical contrasts of scale, and by the imitation of Chinese porcelain and the use of lacquer-like materials and decoration, e.g. a fairyland in fanciful mountainous, landscapes with cobweb bridges, carrying flower parasols, lolling in flimsy bamboo pavilions, dragons and phoenixes, etc. [7].

Today, Chinoiserie is still evident in western luxury products for its Chinese and oriental allure. Local designers in China explore Chinoiserie as well, being even much more fascinated with it than in the west. This kind of designing Chinoiserie can be regarded as a cultural symbolic transfer. The new Chinoiserie in China today is also a part of Chineseness in design as well, in terms of catering to people’s impression about Chinese culture. However, Chineseness relates to or reflects Chinese cultural characters rather more than visual symbols, in terms of both an outlook of design and reflection of its cultural intelligence and wealth. If we look into our immersed culture now, firstly, today’s China sees today’s politics, social status, philosophy, and behaviours influenced deeply by both multiple historical and other factors of globalisation. Chineseness today both inherits the traditions, as well as maintaining a great difference from what it was centuries before. For instance, we all know that the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s left a disjuncture among the scholarship and scholar class. That means the emphasis of the Chinese traditional philosophies is much weaker than how it was at the much older time. Yet after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, starting from the end of the 1970s, globalisation brought western ways and values to Chinese people’s lives. Some of the traditional Chinese elements have turned out to be little more than stereotypes, rather than the genuine Chineseness manifest today. On the other hand, it is not surprising to find some of the original and strongest elements of Chinese cultural elements, such as Taoist harmony with nature, the wisdom of Buddhism, Zen, and Confucianism, etc. that exported from China and into the world, represented as much better designs in Japan rather than in China. The periphery of a cultural character and icon tends much more ambiguous with the cultural transmission.

### **3 Chinese Cultural Transferring Design**

#### **3.1 Chinese Symbolic Transfer into Design**

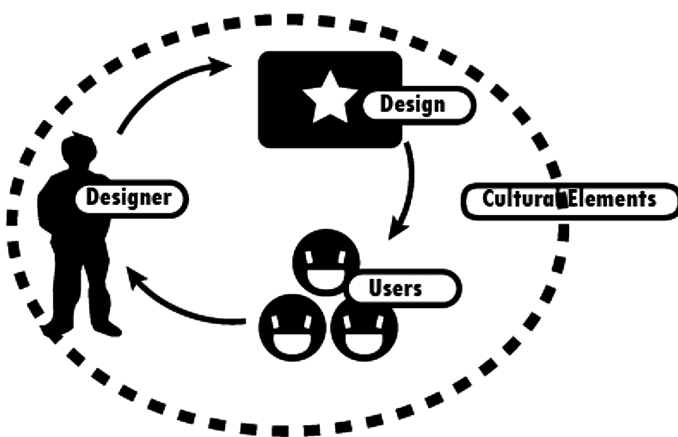
Cultural symbolic transfer can be a good way to define products in the homogeneous global market. Its importance is not to pursue how much the design reflects the cultural elements, but to find valuable cultural elements that make the design different or reflect back the users’ images about Chineseness. On this point, designers transfer cultural elements into product design to distinguish it, adding commercial allure (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** The relationship of designer, design, users and cultural elements in terms of symbolic transfer.

### 3.2 Chinese Behavioural Transfer into Design

If we look from the perspective of users' experiences, and see products in terms of technological mediation, design evolves through users' experiences and users' interaction with design. In this way, Chinese cultural transfer into design should be considered on the level of users' behaviour. On this aspect, design focuses on reflecting and extending the thinking around Chinese behavioural transfer into and how it can be better adapted by Chinese users. To integrate the user's behaviour with design, the designers should research through user experience, search and abstract the relevant cultural elements surrounding users and then accommodate those into a design, with the ultimate goal of users' better acceptance of products (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** The relationship of designer, design, users and cultural elements in terms of behavioural transfer.

### 3.3 Chinese Philosophical Transfer into Design

Moreover, the designers, designs and users were all immersed in a big philosophical/political mix of different factors that subtly influenced the designer’s way of creativity, or the people’s understanding and acceptance of design. However, this complexity also contributes to the wealth of the philosophical and political cultural transfer as design communication and a community platform to exploring Chineseness (Fig. 3).

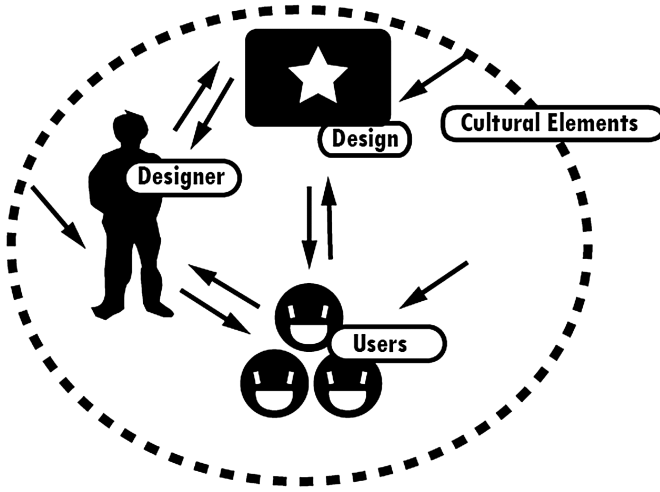


Fig. 3. The relationship of designer, design, users and cultural elements in terms of political/philosophical transfer.

## 4 An Emerging Model of Chineseness

Simultaneously, in order to structure them, the author attempted to search the models of the classification/definition of culture in the sociological research sphere. Raymond Williams’ social cultural theory is a very inspiring one. His Marxist critique of culture studies (cultural materialism) viewed culture as a ‘productive process’, as well as defined three terms of culture: “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity, the particular way of life of a people, period or group, and the process of a society’s intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” [8]. Later researcher Spencer-Oatey’s extended the concept of culture as a three-layer cultural model (2000). She combined both basic assumptions and values in one ‘segment’ of culture. In her model, ‘beliefs, attitudes and conventions’ influence another layer, consisting of “systems and institutions”, which in turn are encircled by a split outer layer of culture. In the split outer layer of culture, “artefacts & products” is located on the one side and “rituals & behaviour” on the other side. The model also contains another ‘mental’ level of culture: ‘attitudes, beliefs and behavioural conventions’, which makes a useful distinction between values on the one hand, and their expression in a more precise, but at a non-implemented level on the other [9]. This can be regarded as the extension of Williams’ theory. Dahl reviewed Spencer-Oatey’s model

that it ‘describes culture as a shared set of basic assumptions and values, making the level of culture more practical’. As well as, it is the combination of a number of ‘additional factors that apart from values and resultant behaviour and artefacts, including a description of the functions that culture performs’ [10].

In addition, in design research area, Lin and Leong defined three cultural levels for their culture-oriented design model:

- Physical or material culture
- Social or behavioural culture, including human relationships and social organization
- Spiritual culture—including art and religion [11].

Hence, inspired by Williams, Spencer-Oatey and Lin’s work, the author located ‘how to manifest Chineseness into design’ as the following three-layer structure: symbolic layer, behavioural layer, and philosophical/political layer. This structure is a view to characterise Chineseness in terms of design practice. This also offers a platform to combine the fuzzy set of culturally oriented design concepts with a number of additional relevant research/design methods and knowledge.

This framework is a hybrid and culmination of research through design. Through analysing, combining, simplifying and structuring the ideas that arise from the previous chapters, this interpretive framework clarifies the different statuses of designing Chineseness into three layers: symbolic, behavioural and philosophical/political. It performs as a platform bringing a category of different discursive considerations of design, theories and methods to the research, in order to raise more possibilities within design practices. It also identifies a theoretical thread that divides culture into different layers, representing open-ended and ongoing inquiries, posing relevant questions about culturally orientated design (Fig. 4).

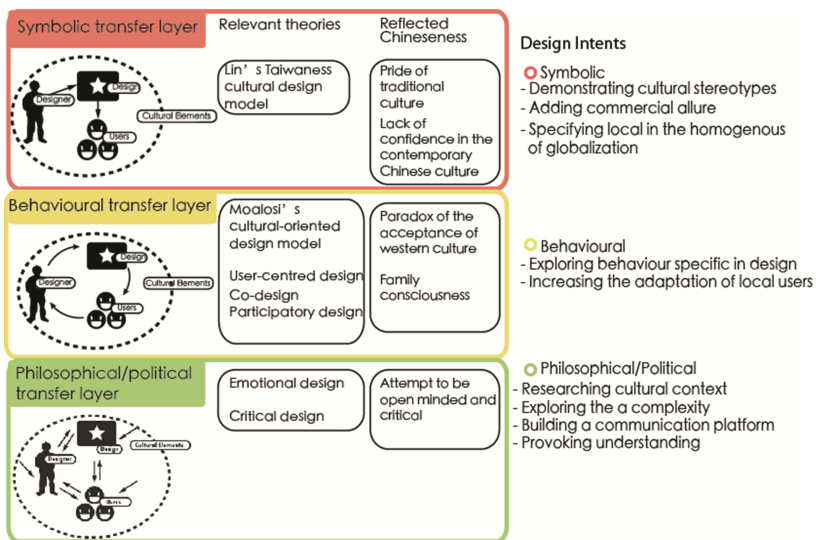


Fig. 4. Three-layer structure for culture-transfer design

This analytic framework can be dynamic, less of a hierarchical method. For design practical work always brings out more questions about the Chinese cultural and behavioural complexity, as well as broadens the research file. This method explores the manifestation of Chineseness into a structural manner (a system) that enables more apposite design methods.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper describes three ways of exploring the transfer of Chinese culture into design: symbolic, behavioural and political/philosophical. They culminate in an enabling developmental structure through which designers can deal with Chinese cultural complexity in design. This is for designers investigating relations between culture and design through an experiential perspective of Chinese culture in terms of developing a new understanding of 'Chineseness'. Designers in practices can manifest their own understanding of Chineseness through design, for adding special values for design from the perspectives of regarding the different kinds of relationship between the four factors: designer, design, users and cultural elements. 'Chineseness' in this work, can be re-mapped as a form of communication that deals with Chinese culture in design. It is not just along with historical stereotypes, nor a remote copy of other countries' successful cultural transfers, but rather should be inseparable from the radical social phenomena and design culture already emerging within contemporary China. The author's work is ultimately allowing Chineseness to be less implied and instead, to be made manifest, in terms of what behaviours over symbolism and decoration. This paper also remarks some stereotypes, generalisations and categorisations when designers deal with cross-cultural design from both non-Chinese and Chinese angles.

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