

Predicament Faced by Regionalism Product Design Based on Chinese Cultural Context

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Abstract

This article introduces how regionalism has emerged in the context of economic globalization, and how this trend has spread to the field of product design. And based on the Chinese market, a case study was conducted on regionalized design, discussing how they behave in terms of regionalism and why they receive different evaluations from society. In the end, the article discusses the main challenges faced by the localization of regionalist design in China, what are they, and how they are formed.

Keywords: regionalism, product design, Chinese culture

1. Introduction

In the context of economic globalisation, the design of products and services has begun to show strong regional characteristics, resulting in a new trend of “regionalist” product design. This trend is not entirely a revolt or a rejection of globalisation, as Vincent Canizaro, an associate professor from the Department of Architecture at UTSA, puts it: “In the same way that ‘all politics is local,’ so it is with architecture, whether by accident or by design.” His viewpoint also applies to other design fields.

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, in his work *The System of Objects*, puts forward a unique theory of consumption: the consumer behaviour of modern society has gone beyond the satisfaction of basic needs to a state of “symbolic consumption.” In this state, people buy commodities. In this state, people no longer buy commodities just to satisfy their actual needs, but to satisfy their psychological and social needs such as social status, identity, and personal expression. This kind of symbolic consumption psychology provides market space for Chinese regionalism product design. As business competition intensifies, many brands and companies in China have responded to a range of consumer demands regarding identity and have made regionalist design a strategy for product development.

How can Chinese regionalist product design tell the Chinese story in a modern context? Designers must, as Prof. Dr. Ralf Roloff argues in his article, find an artistic balance between globalisation and regionalisation. In this paper, we will analyse some design cases in the current market and conduct an in-depth research and discussion on regionalism product design in China.

2. What Is Regionalism in Product Design

To discuss regionalism design in China, first of all I would like to talk about what is regionalism and its performance in design.

Since modern times, the strict logical and philosophical thinking that has gradually developed in the West has led to a high degree of development in natural sciences, which has been reflected economically in the global dumping of industrial products and culturally in the high degree of information sharing. The spread and penetration of modern lifestyles across the globe has led to the emergence of similar global cultural contents in

the lifestyles of various regions, and the emergence of homogeneous cultural products without a sense of history or place. Today, under direct material stimulation, the philosophical thinking and way of life of regional culture have become increasingly difficult to form regional culture and philosophy that had a significant impact on people's lifestyles and behaviors similar to those before the 18th century. For example, the ubiquitous modern urban architecture has replaced the original traditional residential house in Singapore, the Malay Archipelago Long House. Modernist theory has rapidly spread globally due to its monism and objective rationality. However, if one believes that this theory can be applied to every region without modification, it undoubtedly goes against its own proclaimed objective rationality.

As a result, opposing voices have emerged in the field of design. Since the spatiality and locality of architecture determines the regionality of any building, the trend of regionalism was first produced and practiced in architectural design, and architects began to absorb the national and folk styles of the region, and to embody certain local characteristics in their buildings. Lewis Mumford, an urban planning theorist from the United States, proposed replacing "international style" with "regionalism" in the *Sky Line* column of The New Yorker magazine, reflecting on the value of universalism over regional individuality advocated in modernist thought. Regionalism in architectural design is a design approach that emphasises the consideration of the environment, culture and history of a particular region, and tries to reflect and preserve local characteristics to create buildings with a sense of regional identity. For example, Chinese garden design is a typical expression of regionalism, emphasising harmony with nature and implying far-reaching philosophical ideas. Another example is the traditional Norwegian Stave Church, whose unique wooden structure and exquisite decorations are expressions of Norwegian Lifestyle.



Figure 1. Almost every city in China has its own garden landscapes, which may not be as ancient as they appear

After attempting to maintain and enhance the identity of architecture by emphasizing local culture and characteristics, regionalism has also been utilized by other design fields. In fact, from the beginning, the core concept of regionalism was to respect and protect local culture, which is a design philosophy widely applicable to various design fields. Whether it is architectural design, product design or Fashion design, local environment, history, culture and other factors need to be considered. In this way, the development of regionalism in various design fields is a natural result.

3. Case Analysis of Chinese Regionalist Product Design

This trend is also rapidly spreading in the product design industry in China. For commercial or noncommercial purposes, many companies and designers have provided different solutions to this problem. Below, their case studies will be analyzed and considered.



Figure 2. Y chair designed by Hans J. Wegner, in 1950

This chair is the Y chair, also known as the forked bone chair. Hans J. Wegner's work in 1950 was inspired by the circular chair of the Ming Dynasty in China. Compared to the original circular chair, the Y chair has a more concise design, but it still retains the original ancient style and charm of the circular chair. The material is made of wood and natural paper fiber cushion, providing users with a more intimate and comfortable feeling. This furniture designed by westerners is undoubtedly a successful Chinoiserie style product, but what transcends regionalism itself is that the Y chair has universality, ergonomic shape and ubiquitous production materials, making it popular in the global market. And this is the kind of design balance that critical regionalism seeks.



Figures 3. The Beijing 2008 Olympic Torch, designed by Lenovo China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, in 2006

The second work I want to analyze is the torch of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. In fact, even without the obvious Chinese cultural symbols such as auspicious clouds, seals and Chinese red, the design is still full of Chinese humanistic feelings. The Chinese people are full of Cultural identity to the paper scroll, whether it is the Papermaking of the Four Great Inventions or the ritual feeling when the scroll like torch is passed to the next person. It can make people feel that a designer must be someone who knows Chinese culture very well. The non paper material is made into a paper shape. The cultural core of combining hardness and softness is not simply the stacking of elements. In addition, the shape of the scroll is not designed to imitate the softness of the paper. The combination of the appearance and the “double flame” nozzle of the internal combustion system ensures that the Olympic flame will never go out. It is obvious that the auspicious cloud torch in 2008 is a successful Chinoiserie design in terms of both the use of symbols and the unity of its appearance and function.



Figure 4. Armani's Highlighter for Chinese Lunar Year of the Monkey, in 2016

On the contrary, Armani's cosmetics box design with the theme of the Chinese Lunar Year of the Monkey can be said to be a complete failure. From various perspectives, its most failed aspect lies in the stereotypical impression of Chinese culture. Whether it is the simple strokes of monkeys or the undesigned printed font, it can make users feel that the designer did not fully understand and respect Chinese culture, but only used cultural elements as simple decorative symbols, trying to win the favor of the Chinese market with this.



Figure 5. A speaker designed by a certain brand inspired by China Dragon

Even designers who have grown up in the Chinese cultural environment will make similar mistakes when absorbing Chinese cultural symbols. Before a good regionalist design, a product must be a good design, and then it must comply with the most basic principle of product design — form follows functional rules. The speaker design above imitates the appearance of a Chinese dragon, but its appearance, content, function, and form are completely incompatible. The designer cannot explain why this speaker needs to have a curved shape in the middle or add two dragon horns. Apart from increasing design costs and making the appearance appear cumbersome, it does not solve any problems, which goes against the original intention of the design. In addition to this dragon speaker, there are many similar designs that directly use ancient Chinese symbols — divine beasts, cultural relics, or historical figures — as the outer shell of the product, creating many regionalist products with poor market response.

So, what is design with Chinese cultural characteristics? Is it a symbolic symbol from traditional Chinese culture? Is it embroidery and porcelain technology that originated from Chinese handicraft technology? American design theorist Victor Papanek explained design in his book *Design for the Real World*: “Almost like all education, the foundation of designer education is also the learning of skills, the cultivation of talents, the understanding of concepts and theories that can make people familiar with this field, and ultimately obtain a philosophy.” When we are discussing the cultural characteristics contained in a design, the cultural characteristics we see are

actually the designer's own understanding of the culture, and philosophical ideas guide the producer to complete a work. Therefore, the characteristics of Chinese culture are derived from the most profound influence of Confucianism on the Chinese people, which has a strong Pragmatism tendency, and even pursues the same thing as Luce's "decoration is evil" in terms of the form of utensils. In conclusion, only by deeply understanding the philosophy of the Chinese people in the depths of thought, can it arouse the resonance of local users in the design.

4. The Challenges Faced by Product Design in the Context of Chinese Regionalism

From a macro perspective, today all over China and even cities are striving to explore and even create their unique cultural attributes to enhance their competitiveness in the market. This is not a collective dissatisfaction with modernism, but can be roughly attributed to three reasons: Firstly, the increasingly fierce market competition results in manufacturers eager to break away from homogenization and create new consumption incentives; Second, the government departments hope to strengthen the sense of Cultural identity in the region through deliberate guidance. For example, China's Outline of National Innovation Driven Development Strategy clearly proposes to accelerate the integrated development of industrial design, cultural creativity and related industries. Finally, as designer Wang Wei said, incorporating local materials, art, and craftsmanship into product design in a highly circulating market can enhance the diversity and attractiveness of the product, while also helping to promote and disseminate local culture. In fact, the influence of the first two reasons is far greater than that of the third one. Regionalization in design has become a political correctness, which is reflected in product design and is the abuse of regional cultural symbols.

In fact, the market is deliberately creating regional demands, adding Chinese cultural symbols in completely unnecessary scenes, or using Chinese cultural symbols to stack without understanding, and can only extract some obvious symbols from "cultural relics" and decorate them on the core of modernism. Many times, even designers cannot figure out whether they are pursuing national traditions or catering to the foreign imagination of others. In addition, these regionalist designs that overly emphasize local characteristics may overlook user experience and functionality. The primary goal of design is to serve users. If the design overly pursues regional characteristics, it may overlook the practicality of the product.

How to design a product that perfectly integrates the core of Chinese culture while also possessing features such as ease of use and practicality is currently the biggest challenge faced by product design with Chinese cultural symbols. Although we have seen some excellent cases, designers still need to continue to think about how to summarize this success into the inherent logic and methodology of the product.

5. Conclusion

In the exploration and analysis of the paper, we have gained a deep understanding that regionalism does have great appeal and potential advantages in design, which can endow products with unique cultural charm and profound storytelling. However, as we have discussed, relying solely on the direct appropriation of cultural symbols is an overly simplified or even destructive technique that cannot truly express the spirit and connotation of regional culture, and may even lead to stereotypes and misunderstandings.

In order to overcome this predicament, designers need to deeply study and understand the design philosophy behind local traditional design, and explore more subtle and rich design languages. This requires us not only to focus on the formal expression of culture, but also to explore its underlying values, lifestyle, and thinking habits. Only in this way can designers find a balance between respecting regional culture and meeting the global market, and for Chinese culture, the same applies. As Tadao Ando, a Japanese architect, said, "It is not to introduce regionalism into form uncritically, but to reinterpret regionalism in the practice of modernism."

Future exploration and research will focus more on how to better showcase the uniqueness and richness of Chinese regional culture while maintaining the universality and market acceptance of design. We hope that with the deepening understanding of culture and in-depth research on design by designers, China's regionalist design can embark on a unique and dynamic development path.

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