

Was it Made in China or Designed in China?

The Chinese manufacturing industry is well known for its knockoffs. But what does that mean for the Chinese designer?

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The phrase "Made In China" is synonymous with cheap, knockoff copies of major brands in fashion, technology, furniture and numerous other industries. Recent headlines have even gone so far as to warn Kickstarter users to prepare to have their ideas stolen before they're funded. The open-source manufacturing culture in the country means that thousands of small and major production operations could spot an idea online and begin mass producing cheaper, near-identical copies of the idea. So what does this mean for the Chinese creative? Is there

room for original design in an economy driven by the cheap cost of reproduction? It's what Design Academy Eindhoven graduate Jing He calls the "Chinese identity crisis". We spoke to her about her MA project, [The Tulip Pyramid](#) in an attempt to unpack some of the complexities of the Chinese creative scene.

What piqued your interest in this topic?

I've been confronted by this topic for many years through my relationships with fake products. I grew up in the period of fast economic growth in China. I had many fakes, pirated CDs, DVDs and products leaked from manufacturing companies.

When I came to the Netherlands, I met Dutch and Chinese designer who asked me if there were any Chinese elements, style and identity in my works,

which confused me because I wanted to know what their intentions were. What did they expect to see as Chinese? I started to think about this question of identity, which had never been the topic in my works.

I realised there was a lot of anxiety among Chinese designers. China is so good at copying and copying is always related to a lack of creativity. I started to explore many questions like what is “Chinese”, what are the notions of original and copy, why do people look down on copying?

What's the role of a Chinese creative within the copycat culture?

It's a complicated question. Many independent designers or people who work in the creative industry in China are victims of this very fast culture. Laws do not protect original works well enough so they [creatives] need to find their own way to fight back. While it's hard for an independent designer or small company to produce a few products, larger richer companies can do it in a fraction of the cost and time. At the same time, people are sort of being encouraged to copy because the cost is much lower than originality.

There're so many layers to this. I realised that it is not only about money, laws or morality. It reflects the politics, economy, culture and people's desires in society. The companies produce the fakes the people want most.

Do you have any ideas on what should be done about the mass production of copied ideas?

What is the notion of the original and the copy in the market and how should we react to this phenomenon other than place blame and feel shame about it? This doesn't mean that I support it or feel proud of it, but sometimes I am fascinated by how people copy and alter the original into many local versions. So maybe it's already a form of creativity.

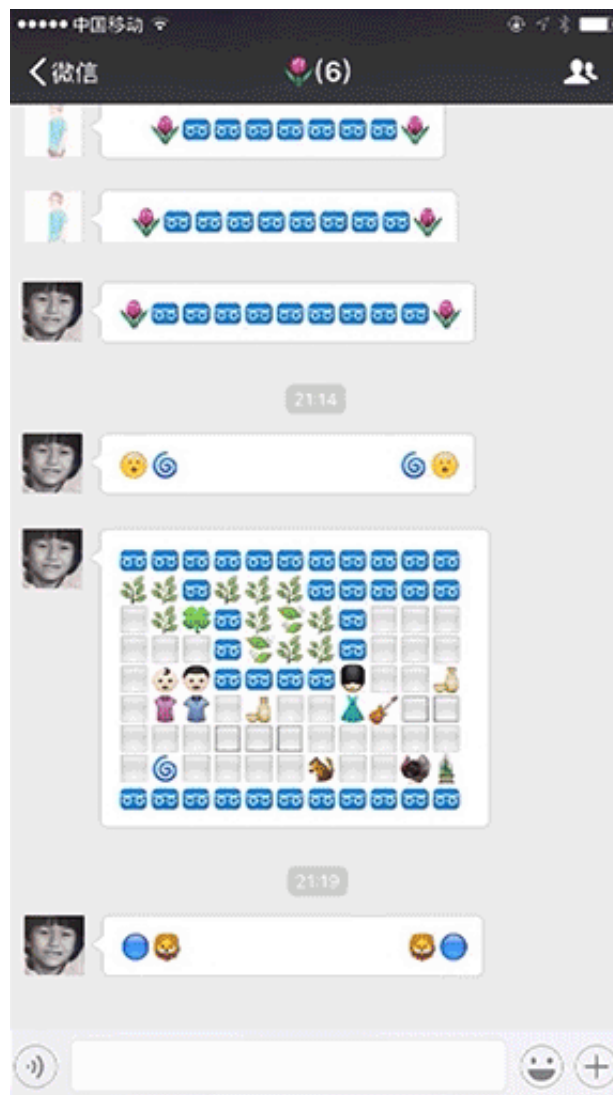
In my project, I don't put forth any solutions because the phenomenon is too big and complicated. As a designer, I tried to turn it into a tool of creativity, calling on people to rethink, relook and reuse what's happening in our contemporary life.

*How has the copycat culture benefitted the average consumer?
Was this good or bad for design in the country?*

There are two ways products are copied in China. The first is what we call

“fake” in that the producer tried to imitate the original product. The second refers to products from the OEM (the Original Equipment Manufacturer) of brands. These companies create products without branding to be delivered to big brands. People buy these products because they’re the same design and quality but half the price.

From a customer’s point of view, it’s cheap. It allows people from a lower income bracket to purchase quality items which they can not afford in shopping malls. Luxury brands advertise their products to create a desire within a public who cannot actually afford them. Fakes break this boundary. This could spark a discussion around the real value of these brands.



Tell me about the Tulip Pyramid...

It is based on a 150 centimetre high, traditional ceramic vase made in the Netherlands in the 17th century. It comes in blue and white and the motifs are the hybrid of European and Chinese style. The body of the vase is made up of many layers that form a cube with four “necks” and four “corners”. The necks hold the Tulip flowers and the cube-shaped body holds the water.



What inspired your Tulip Pyramid and how did it come to represent your exploration of Chinese identity?

There's a history of copying behind the Tulip Pyramid. When I started my research on the topics of identity and copying, I was overwhelmed with the history of copyright law even though it isn't a long one. I was curious about how people viewed copying before Intellectual Property laws given China's long history of mass production.

I learnt that the Delftware or Delftblue in the Netherlands was the imitation of Chinese porcelain in the 17th century. Nowadays, you can see blue-white motifs in the airport and in the souvenir shops. I see the Tulip Pyramid as an invention that came from copying Chinese porcelain and culture.

The shape of the Tulip Pyramid is based on the Porcelain Pagoda in Nanjing

The shape of the Tulip Pyramid is based on the Porcelain Pagoda in Nanjing. Its material imitated the texture of porcelain, and its motifs draw on Chinese imaginary. But Dutch creators gave the form of Chinese Pagoda a new function: as a vase. The vase was then copied a second time when European potters asked Chinese potters to copy the design in porcelain, a material they were not familiar with at the time.

The history of the Tulip Pyramid highlights issues like transformation, misunderstanding, localisation and more. These issues can be creative outlets if we use them. If Chinese are good at copying, why don't we learn from it instead of trying to deny it?



The Tulip Pyramid: Copy and Identity (2016) was originally written as a thesis report for a research project concerning copying and cultural identity, and accompanied the design project Tulip Pyramid. Both the design project and the thesis were part of Jing He's graduation from Contextual Design (MA) at Design Academy Eindhoven in 2016. [Download the full project here.](#)