

Working Title:
Culture and the Genesis of Asian Product Design

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Abstract

As an art/design educator, stimulating creativity and awaking in students an appreciation for the conceptualization and creation process is crucial. In order to achieve this, examples for illustration and critique are crucial. However, I have found that in my area of specialization, product design, although Asian products are plentiful, little is known about the Asian design philosophy that underlies them – specifically, why Asian products take on their various shapes and forms or the functions they serve. The lack of knowledge in this specific area has made it difficult for my students in Singapore, and elsewhere in the world, to tap into the rich Asian design heritage and use it as a stepping-stone towards greater creativity.

The genesis of Asian design is understudied because of the myriad of language/cultures that exist in Asia and the lack of researchers who are fluent in multiple Asian languages. This is a gap I have tried to address in my fieldwork¹ in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, China and Japan and in this paper I would like to focus on one of my findings. Namely, how design development and adaptation is related and intertwined with the larger social environment. One example I uncovered in my fieldwork is how the Chinese have adapted the humble

¹ The fieldwork was conducted in 2000 -2001 as part of my Master of Arts (Hons) in Musashino Art University in Tokyo, Japan. Since my initial training was in Art Centre College of Design, Pasadena, USA, I am well aware of the western approach to design and was keen to understand how the Asian perspective differed. This was particularly useful for me in my present capacity as an design educator at the School of Design, Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore.

washing machine to fit their agricultural contextual needs. Another is how the Koreans have developed their own unique “Kimchee Refrigerator” to meet their cultural needs.

The Chinese Washing Machine

We often think that washing machines are used solely for washing clothes. However, in rural China, this is not true. Some farmers in the agricultural southwest use their washing machines to wash produce and hence clog up their pipes with soil and spoil their machines. The frequent breakdown complaints in that region baffled Haier Corporation, the Chinese maker of the washing machines. It was only when they visited did they realize what the problem was. The result of their inquiry was a washing machine designed to wash potatoes, fruits, vegetables and clothes! By using an interchangeable washing barrel and widening the diameter of the pipe, Haier could maintain the same technology and provide farmers with a low-cost solution.

Haier Corporation's innovation is an excellent example of the importance of understanding the consumer needs in the design and marketing of products. The ability to appreciate cultural needs and adapt accordingly is a quality foreign manufacturers often lack and could account for why sometimes even good foreign products have failed to make successful inroads into Asian markets.

The Kimchee Refrigerator

This link between cultural needs of the consumer and design is especially evident in the development of the unique Kimchee refrigerator in Korea. Kimchee, preserved vegetables served cold with a spicy and sour taste, is a staple of the Korean diet. In the past, in order to keep the Kimchee at the optimum temperature during the fermentation process, large pots were buried underground during winter and retrieved as needed. However, as people began moving into apartments without plots of land, this method of storing Kimchee became impractical. Refrigerator manufacturers caught onto this and LG introduced the concept of storing Kimchee in refrigerators in the 1970s and followed it up with the sale of Kimchee refrigerators in 1985. Today, this type of refrigerator is found only in Korea and is a fine example of a culture-adapted product.

These are two simple examples of how even though technology that led to the initial manufacture of the household products may not have originated in Asia, these products have been adapted and revolutionized by Asian designers to meet the needs of Asian living. In my paper, I would introduce other examples and will illustrate through historical records and pictures how the form of these products (i.e. household products - iron, rice cooker, and communication tools like the typewriter and phone) has changed over time.

The standpoint I have adopted is that the study of art and design cannot, and should not, be divorced from the time and space context it is located in. But this does not mean that art education should then be time/space specific. On contrary, I would think that there is much to learn from the evolution of art/design across cultures because only through such exploration can we see certain human behavioral patterns in the creative process. This paper would also suggest how such a perspective could be used to enrich the art/design curriculum.