
School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

Design and Nationalism in China

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Human Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number HRE2020-0319.

Signature:

Date:

Keywords

Design

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Huawei

Design awards

Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of design in nationalism in China today. In recent years, ‘rising’ has become a common trope to describe the trend and tension of Chinese nationalism in academic publications, pundits’ analyses and media reports. This narrative is not only evident in the central government’s promotion of its nationalist agenda, that is, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but also in the current new wave of consumer nationalism in Chinese society since 2018. The growing emphasis on nationalist narratives for both the government and consumers has coincided with an increasing appreciation for the value of design by the government and among consumers. This thesis addresses an important gap in existing literature on the relationship between design and nationalism in the Chinese context.

I have selected three deep dive case studies, namely, China’s first-ever national design policy, Huawei smartphones, and design awards in China, to investigate the role of design in the Chinese government’s nationalist agenda and in Chinese consumers’ nationalist sentiments, as well as the synergies and differences that exist between them. With a background in anthropology and design, as well as ten years of experience in China’s design sector, I draw on in-depth participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Chinese consumers, together with extensive document analysis of policy papers and media reports, to critically explore the multifaceted role design is playing in nationalism in China.

This research concludes that both the Chinese government and Chinese consumers have begun to identify a key role for design as a mechanism for realising China’s National Rejuvenation (民族复兴 *minzu fuxing*). Even so, important differences exist in relation to the ways in which the government and consumers are engaging with design, as well as

with the practical realities of what and how they expect design to function in their nationalist pursuits. For the Chinese government, design is a strategic instrument for realising China's goal of becoming a strong manufacturing nation, and enhancing its national competitiveness in technological innovation. Chinese consumers, on the other hand, are more interested in and affected by the symbolic meanings of Chinese products' design quality. In contrast to media narratives which suggest that Chinese consumers are purchasing Chinese products as an expression of their nationalist sentiments, I found evidence that the experiences of using Chinese products in everyday life are challenging Chinese consumers' existing perceptions of 'Made in China' as denoting 'cheap', 'copy' and 'poor quality', and, in turn, generating a genuine sense of triumphalist nationalist pride in China's progress.

This PhD research enriches existing knowledge on design and nationalism by adding perspectives from China. The outcomes of the project are relevant to practitioners and stakeholders interested in understanding China's design industry and Chinese nationalism today. Moreover, the methodology proposed by this research—to investigate design's role in nationalism from both the government's and consumers' perspectives, as well as their interactions—can be adopted to explore similar topics in other national contexts.

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“This is your own project!” A supervisor once reminded me in this way of the significance of independence when doing research. However, it would not have been possible to complete this task without all the warm and intelligent creatures who have supported my PhD journey.

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Again, doing a PhD during the Covid pandemic has been challenging, especially when it comes to contacting interviewees and participants for data collection. This work would not have been possible without the interviewees whom I have engaged with. I thank all of you for spending your precious time on hour-long interviews, both digitally and physically, and for allowing me to visit your homes and offices as I engaged in participant observation, asking weird questions.

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge that Curtin University works across hundreds of traditional lands and custodial groups in Australia, and with First Nations people around the globe. We wish to pay our deepest respects to their ancestors and members of their communities, past, present, and to their emerging leaders. Our passion and commitment to work with all Australians and peoples from across the world, including our First Nations peoples are at the core of the work we do, reflective of our institutions' values and commitment to our role as leaders in the Reconciliation space in Australia.

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Key Terms

Nationalism

In this thesis, the definition of nationalism is adopted from A.D. Smith (2010), nationalism is a shared ideology subscribed to by both the ‘top’ (the government) and the ‘bottom’ (the people) that places the nation at the centre of their concerns and seeks to promote its well-being. Detailed discussion of nationalism can be found in [Section 2.1](#).

Chinese nationalism

I focus on the modern form of nationalism in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), while also acknowledging that the modern form of nationalism was introduced from the West to China by the reformist scholar Liang Qichao in 1903 (Shen 2007:15), which predates the founding of the PRC. Detailed discussion of Chinese nationalism can be found in [Section 3.1](#).

Design

I acknowledge that design is often generically defined as a universal human capability. When investigating design’s role in nationalism, I place emphasis on the professionalised activity of design (Aynsley 2009:9), which emerged after the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Walker 1989:28) to produce tangible (material

products) and intangible (services, experiences and systems) outcomes (Huppatz 2020:11), and functions as a strategic instrument for organisations and governments (Heskett et al. 2017:82). Lengthier discussion can be found in [Section 2.2.1](#).

Chinese design

When discussing Chinese design, this research is concerned with the professionalised form of design in China, but not China's art and craft tradition in the pre-modern context and lineage of Chinese aesthetics, which is often categorised as design in a traditional form. For the discussion on Chinese design, see [Section 3.3](#).

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In March 2014, at an international news conference held by China’s State Council after its annual National People’s Congress meeting, a Dutch journalist asked about China’s manufacturing industry, to which the former Premier Li Keqiang responded: “China’s economy will go up a level, and our exported products will also go up a level. We cannot always sell shoes and socks, clothes and hats, and toys.” (Reuters 2014). As the premier in the fifth generation of leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)¹, Li’s answer echoed one of primary agendas in Xi Jinping’s tenure post-2013: “Building a strong manufacturing nation” (X.C. Liang 2020). One year after this conference, the Chinese government launched the grand ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative—a national industrial plan aimed at upgrading China’s manufacturing sector from low-end manufacturer to high-end producer of goods (Cyrill 2018). Inside this ambitious national initiative, there is a sub-policy exclusively focused on design. This is the first time since the PRC was founded in 1949 that design has been highlighted as a high-level policy focus (S.X. Liu et al. 2018). Prior to this, design had almost zero presence in China’s central political settings (He 2008).

It has been widely observed in recent media reports, market analyses and academic publications that a new wave of consumer nationalism is on the rise in China (Nielson 2019; Yi 2019; M.Y. Jiang 2021; Farry et al. 2021). In practice, consumer nationalism is a two-fold phenomenon which not only refers to the invocation of national identity by

¹ The People’s Republic of China’s fifth-generation leadership took office in March 2013, led by Xi Jinping as the president and Li Keqiang as the premier (the constitutional head of government). In March 2023, Li Keqiang resigned, his successor Li Qiang took office as the eighth premier of China.

rejecting imported products from particular nation-states, but also promoting consumption of local products as a way of supporting the consumers' own nation-state (J. Wang 2006). On the one hand, Chinese consumers have become more sensitive to international political events and racial issues, and several Western brands have experienced boycotts in the Chinese market. For instance, in 2018, after posting advertising videos that were perceived as racist by Chinese consumers, the famous Italian luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) was boycotted in China; the company subsequently lost 98% of its Chinese market share (Bain 2019). In 2021, sportswear brands Nike and Adidas faced strong public backlash in China for trying to avoid using cotton from Xinjiang province, resulting in their sales dropping by 59–78% on China's biggest e-commerce platform within a month (King 2021); The CEO of Adidas, Kasper Rorsted admitted: "We don't understand [Chinese] consumers well enough, so we left room for Chinese competitors who are better off." (Law 2022).

On the other hand, Chinese consumers have begun to celebrate "an era of national brands" (Yi 2019). Not so long ago, the 'Made in China' label was largely associated with cheap, counterfeit and poor quality products for Chinese consumers, but recently it has become a driver of consumption (Farry et al. 2021). As shown in one Nielson (2019) report, in 2019, 68% of Chinese consumers preferred home-grown Chinese brands over foreign ones. For example, Huawei was celebrated by Chinese consumers as a 'national brand' during the US-China trade and technology conflict in 2019 (Kharpal 2019a); Nike's and Adidas's local counterparts Li-Ning and Anta have promoted "proudly made in China" products (C. Zhou 2021) and their sales have increased at a dramatic rate from 2020 to 2022 (Jaramillo 2022).

Consumer nationalism is not a new phenomenon in China. In his seminal book *China Made*, Gerth (2003) demonstrated that nationalised consumer culture played a crucial role in the early formation of Chinese nationalism during the early twentieth century. As noted

by S. Zhu (2021), what is different about this new wave of national celebration of Chinese products in the twenty-first century is Chinese consumers' growing demand for high quality design. In Justice (2012)'s book *China's Design Revolution*, she mentioned that as Chinese consumers become more financially capable, good design has gradually become the crucial factor of consumption choices. Indeed, by 2017, Chinese consumer demand for 'designed' goods had tripled compared with 2013 (CBNData 2018). With Chinese manufacturing companies making more efforts in research and development (R&D) and design, their attempts to replace the old image of 'Made in China' as cheap and counterfeit (Fairs 2019) has coincided with Chinese consumers' increasing demand for good design.

As I have laid out in the above paragraphs, there is a growing attention paid by both the Chinese government and Chinese consumers to design, nationalist agendas and nationalist sentiments; however, it is not yet understood how they are intertwined in the Chinese context. This PhD research investigates design's role in nationalism in China.

1.1.1 Nationalism and design

Sparke once noted that "nationalist sentiment and design innovation often went hand in hand" (1992:80). To what extent are nationalism and design inherently related? In this section, I will briefly introduce the theories around nationalism, design and design's role in nationalism, to readers who are unfamiliar with these fields. lengthier discussions can be found in [Chapter 2](#).

Nationalism

Modernist scholars generally agree that nationalism is a product of modernity and modernisation (Gellner 1983; A.D. Smith 2010) which emerged during the end of the eighteenth century as a by-product of the Enlightenment and the emergence of the Westphalian modern nation-states (Anderson 1993). More recently, nationalism has been identified as a common feature for all modern nation-states, like water and air (Tamminal 2017:755). In other words, as long as nation-states exist, then nationalism(s) exists. As Eley and Suny (1996:32) stated, “being national is the condition of our time”; nationalism is one of the core features of human association in the contemporary world. There are many different definitions of nationalism, but most of them reveal common and overlapping themes. Here, I adopt the definition offered by A.D. Smith that “nationalism is an ideology that places the nation at the centre of its concerns and seeks to promote its well-being” (2010:9).

The formation of nationalism is simultaneously a top-down and bottom-up process. In nationalism, the ‘top’ group refers to governments, top leaders and key political elites (Shen 2007:25), while the ‘bottom’ group often refers to ‘the people’—the non-elites, or middle and lower strata of the population (A.D. Smith 2010:61). The omnipresence of the governments is uniquely responsible for the formation and dissemination of nationalism; however, ‘the people’, as a grouping, is not a passive receptor, but a conveyor of nationalist ideas and an active contributor to the creation, modulation and dissemination of nationalism (Gimeno-Martínez 2016:149).

Moreover, nationalism should not be regarded exclusively as a political phenomenon. Various authors have argued that nationalism is equally as follows: a cultural phenomenon (A.D. Smith 1991:vii); a “cultural artefact of a particular kind” (Anderson 1993:4); and that which “permeates the structure of social relationships and is underpinned through

cultural production” (Gimeno-Martínez 2016:11). The cultural dimension of nationalism, as Gimeno-Martínez (2016) noted, is closely connected to design.

Design

When design is discussed in this thesis, it refers to the professionalised activity called design practised by professional designers (Aynsley 2009:9) to produce tangible (material products) and intangible (services, experiences and systems) outcomes (Huppatz 2020:11), and functions as a strategic instrument for organisations and governments (Heskett et al. 2017:82). In design studies, design is generally defined in philosophical terms as one of the basic human characteristics to envisage, plan and shape the world both materially and immaterially—to give form, structure and function to an idea (Heskett 2005:2; Huppatz 2020:1; H.G. Nelson and Stolterman 2003:1). However, as Huppatz (2020:9) pointed out, design practices have been highly professionalised and modernised in the age of Industrial Modernisation involving steam-powered machines, imperial expansion, urbanisation, mass communication and new forms of transportation. After the Second World War, the professional respectability of design has been further enhanced by various efforts, such as the establishment of dedicated schools, professional societies, design publications, along with the emergence of design theories and scientific approaches to the discipline (Huppatz 2020:10; Aynsley 2009:10). Today, design has evolved into “a pervasive aspect of modern society with a large number of practitioners and a great range of subfields” (Gunn et al. 2016:14), such as communication design, industrial design, architecture, user experience design and service design.

Design's role in nationalism

In his book *Economies of Design*, Julier (2017) explained the relationship between the economic value of design and the global economic turn to neoliberalism since the 1980s. Under neoliberal pressures of marketisation and differentiation (Julier 2017:3), design becomes a key agent in the differentiation of goods and services that are active in the economy (Doyle and Broadbridge 1999). At the same time, design contains a certain type of cultural value—a semiotic role in cultural production (Julier 2017:3). For instance, it can refer to “fashionable, prestigious, or luxurious” (Huppatz 2020:2) or “a higher status for a particular activity” (Heskett et al. 2017:69), as in ‘designer jeans’ and ‘designer restaurants’; it also indicates newness, innovation, and change (Suchman 2011).

The economic and cultural value of design have contributed directly to nationalist agendas and nationalist sentiments, mostly around the notion of ‘national design’ or ‘national branding by design’, such as Japanese Design, Danish Design or Italian Design. Kaygan (2012:110) pointed out that, design has historically been perceived as a key instrument of national economies in international economic competitions based on industrial commodities. Governments, such as Germany, Denmark and Japan, have used modern design as a key strategy when entering new international marketplaces, by capitalising on the consumption of new modern goods (Sparke 2020:170).

The cultural symbolic value of design also contributes to the forging of national identities. Through the global dissemination of goods, design activities often travel in the form of commodities; national labels attached to commodities are also able to travel spatially (Reimer and Leslie 2008). In this vein, as Aynsley (1993) noted, designed objects are crucial markers of national identity and global-national image. Aldersey-Williams (1992) even claimed that, among creative pursuits in the context of commoditisation, design has the closest link with the nation-state. Accordingly, following the success of Japan, the UK,

Denmark and Sweden, more countries have adopted design as a tool of national branding after the 1980s, including Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Korea and Singapore (Sparke 2020:182).

Since then, professionalised design activity has evolved into a wide range of sub-disciplines (Gunn et al. 2016:14), such as industrial design, communication design, architecture and fashion; ideas about the nation can be manifested via all these disciplines of design. Examples abound in Design History and Cultural Studies. Reimer and Leslie (2008) explained how furniture design contributes to national imaginaries in Canada and the UK. Quek et al. (2012) talked about national architecture, national canons and architectural nationalism. Jackson (2002; 2006) focused on Australian industrial design and investigated Stump-jumpers, Sunshine harvesters, Ford and Holden trucks as Australian design icons and as a search for Australian national identity. Finnane (2008) indicated how the volatility of fashion design matches the vicissitudes in Chinese national politics and identity. Hadlaw (2019) investigated Canadian nationalism and the first telephone designed in Canada. Waldeck (2014) explored how typography design can become the symbol of national identity which helps to engender a broad idea of nationalism.

In this thesis, when looking at design's role in nationalism in the Chinese context, I focus on industrial design as the main field of inquiry. I do so for two reasons. Firstly, among other design disciplines, industrial design can be seen as the backdrop of the contemporary culture of design; during the twentieth century, international competition among nation-states were ignited around national industrial products in the world market (Munch 2019:200). Secondly, industrialisation has been one of the persistent themes in China's nationalist pursuit. Since Xi Jinping's tenure post-2013, Chinese officials have repeatedly highlighted the manufacturing industry as the core of China's economic and industrial development (Han 2022); they have set "building a strong manufacturing nation"

(X.F. Liang 2020) as one of the primary agendas and also primary political achievements of the Chinese government since 2012; consequently, industrial design has thus become the government's central concern.

1.1.2 Gaps in the literature

When studying the role of design in nationalism, there are two significant gaps in the literature that I will outline below.

Gap 1: Existing studies are extensively focused on the role of design in the top-down formation of nationalism.

In nationalism studies, the formation of nationalism is described as a simultaneously top-down and bottom-up process. Different schools of thought in nationalism studies hold various views on the formation of nationalism. Modernist theories of nationalism generally highlight the instrumentalist function of nationalism in modern society—that nationalism is carefully designed by nationalist elites and politicians as a tool of ideological manipulation of the general public (Gellner 1983:50). However, later scholars have argued that ‘the people’—the non-elites, or middle and lower strata of the population—are equally important in the formation and creation of nationalism; they not only “constrain elite nationalist projects from time to time within the social and cultural parameters of their traditions, they also provide their own motifs and personnel for nationalist goals and movements” (A.D. Smith 2010:61). In this vein, the top-down and bottom-up formations of nationalism are two sides of the same coin, as concluded by X.C. Liang:

Both top-down mobilisation and bottom-up movement are real, which inevitably interlink with one another and share nationalist concerns in common...overemphasising the difference between official and popular nationalisms, the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy severely undermines the strength of analyses provided by both camps. (2011:8)

However, when investigating design's role in nationalism, the mainstream approach largely focuses on design's top-down, instrumental function in industrial, economic and cultural policy-making, and often neglects design's constructive role in constituting nationalism and national identity through everyday experiences in people's lives. Even though some scholars have addressed such short-sightedness, such as Kaygan's (2012) illuminating study on the design of the electronic Turkish coffee maker and everyday nationalism in Turkey, this is still a "regrettable lacuna", as commented by design historians Fallan and Lees-Maffei (2016:16), who have called for greater attention on designed objects' relationship with nationalism and national identity from a bottom-up approach.

Furthermore, as Gries (2004:121) argued, nationalism studies today should also focus on the interactions between the government and the people, instead of merely on a single side. These crucial understandings inform my research approach in investigating design's role in Chinese nationalism. In this PhD research, in order to construct a holistic understanding of design's role in Chinese nationalism, I investigate not only design's role for the Chinese government, but also design's role for ordinary Chinese consumers. I also compare the synergies and differences between the government and consumers in regards to design and Chinese nationalism.

Gap 2: Existing studies are mainly concerned with developed Western nation-states; experiences from China are neglected.

The second gap is that existing studies on similar issues are concerned excessively with developed Western countries, such as the UK (Reimer and Leslie 2008), Canada (Hodges 2015; Hadlaw 2019), Australia (Jackson 2002; 2006), Germany (Aynsley 2009) and Sweden (Murphy 2015) as well as the non-Western design superpower Japan² (Chatenet 2016). Even though there is recent attention paid by academics to non-Western nation-states, such as Turkey (Kaygan 2012), the Arab world (Gebrael 2017), Iraq (Saad 2021), Palestine (D.O. Smith 2006) and Korea (Kim 2006), by and large, more work needs to be done to understand the relationship between design and nationalism in non-Western contexts.

This research gap echoes the ongoing academic debate in design studies around the universality of design (Escobar 2018) and the coloniality of design (Kiem 2017). As many scholars have extensively argued, modern design has become a discourse embedded in the ideological formations of the First World, since the formation of knowledge in design has largely been dominated by Western, Modern and ‘universal’ experiences of imagination, rationalisation and representation (Fry 1989; Turner 1989; Chin 2017). However, an inclusive global perspective that encompasses experiences from the Global South is becoming increasingly important in order to understand the modern design culture as a whole and to recognise voices from diverse cultures (Fry 2017; Huppatz 2018; Ely 2020; Drazin 2021). Scholars, such as Tunstall (2013) and Ansari (2018), argued for a departure from the Western, modernist and capitalist understanding of design, calling for the decolonisation of design. Such an understanding is crucial in the discussion around

² Even though Japan is an Asian country, it is often categorised along with Western industrial countries when discussing the global hierarchy of design and innovation (Tunstall 2013).

design and nationalism, since nationalism has played a crucial role in the Global South, especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Chatterjee 1986).

Experiences from China regarding the relationship between design and nationalism have been mostly neglected to date in academic research. Developed Western countries tend to have well-developed design ecosystems, including well-established design education systems, design industries, and a stable and well-established consumer base for designed goods. These conditions differ from those in China. Nevertheless, China's drastic social, economic, political and technological transformations have had a powerful impact on its creative and cultural activities, such as design, fashion, film and the music industry (Montgomery 2010:1). China's emergent design industry has made it an ideal candidate for understanding design's dynamic role in nationalism.

It is also worth noting that most of the existing studies on Chinese nationalism have focused primarily on the political, cultural or economic realm, such as Chinese nationalism's influences on international relations and foreign policy (Callahan 2004; 2015; Gries 2004; Hughes 2006), cultural nationalism in China (Guo 2004), consumer nationalism in China (Gerth 2003; M.Y. Jiang 2021; in press; J. Wang 2006; L.A. Yu 2014), cyber nationalism (M.Y. Jiang 2012) and digital nationalism (Schneider 2018), to name just a few. However, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the topic of design and Chinese nationalism, especially in Western academia.

1.2 Research Questions

This PhD research concerns the intertwined relationship between design and nationalism in China. The core research question is:

What role is design playing in nationalism in China?

In order to construct a holistic understanding of design's role in nationalism in China, the core research question is underpinned by three sub-questions:

Sub-question 1: What role is design playing in the realisation of nationalist agendas from the perspective of the Chinese government?

Sub-question 2: What is the role of design in Chinese consumers' grassroots nationalist sentiments?

Sub-question 3: What are the synergies and differences between the ways in which the Chinese government and Chinese consumers are engaging with design as a mechanism for nationalist agendas?

Research Question: What role is design playing in nationalism in China?			
Sub-questions	1. What role is design playing in the realisation of nationalist agendas from the perspective of <u>the Chinese government</u> ?	2. What is the role of design in <u>Chinese consumers'</u> grassroots nationalist sentiments?	3. What are <u>the synergies and differences</u> between the ways in which the Chinese government and Chinese consumers are engaging with design as a mechanism for nationalist agendas?
Case Studies	Case Study 1: China's National Design Policy	Case Study 2: Huawei Smartphone	Case Study 3: Design Awards in China
Chapters	Chapter 4	Chapter 5	Chapter 6

Table 1-1: Case studies and related research sub-questions.

Each of these sub-questions respectively serves as the focus in a series of deep dive case studies, as shown in Table 1-1. I will further discuss the reason for using case study research as the principal approach, along with the rationale of case study selections, in the following section.

1.3 Research Design

This research takes a qualitative approach including systematic literature reviews and three case studies. Each case study uses different research methods, such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. In this section, I explain the theoretical framework, the rationale of the case study choices, and the methods used in each case study.

1.3.1 Theoretical framework

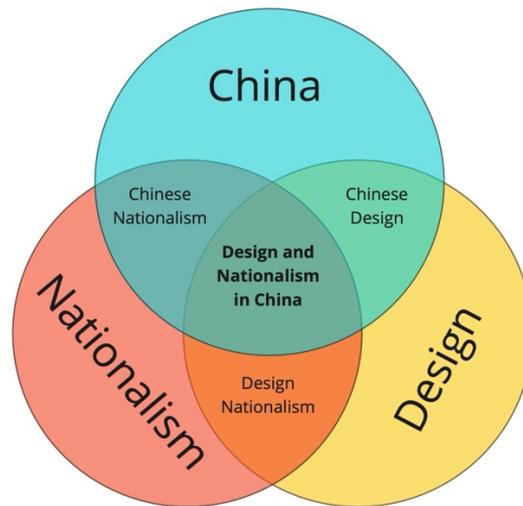


Figure 1-1: The theoretical scope of this research.

This PhD research takes a cross-disciplinary approach that combines perspectives from design studies, nationalism studies, and studies of Chinese nationalism. Figure 1-1 above illustrates the general theoretical scope of this research; it touches on three domains in general: China, design and nationalism. These domains overlap to produce three concepts: Chinese nationalism, Chinese design, and design's role in nationalism. The central object of this research is the role of design in nationalism in China.

In this thesis, the ways of understanding and investigating nationalism are informed by a great amount of literature in nationalism studies. Firstly, this research sees nationalism as a combination of historical and ethnic attachments and modern inventions from the ethno-symbolism approach (A.D. Smith 1991; 1996; 2009; 2010). Secondly, the formation of nationalism is seen as a simultaneously top-down and bottom-up process, in which 'the people' are equally crucial to governments and political elites (Van Ginderachter and Beyen 2011; X.C. Liang 2011; Shen 2007; A.D. Smith 2010). Scholars who highlight the

‘everydayness’ in the formation of nationalism through popular culture and material objects have inspired this research in understanding the role of design in the formation of nationalism from the bottom-up approach (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Palmer 1998; Skey 2009).

To position in a clearer disciplinary position in design studies, both design history studies and design culture studies have informed this thesis. The research on the relationship between design and ‘the national’ abounds in design history studies; for example, designed objects’ function as national identity marker (Aynsley 1993; Reimer and Leslie 2008; Aldersey-Williams 1992), design and national identity (Gimeno-Martínez 2016), design nationalism (Hadlaw 2019), national design, industrialisation and globalisation (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2016; Sparke 1983; 1992; 2002; Walker 1989). These scholars’ works are crucial for this PhD research in reviewing the relationship between design and nationalism from a historical lens.

This PhD research is also inspired by design culture studies, an emergent discipline to discuss design’s positioning between market, society and culture (Julier et al. 2019:265). Such an understanding has its advantages in thinking about the complex relationships between design, culture, national identity and globalisation. There are several works in design culture studies discussing similar research questions, such as design and everyday nationalism (Kaygan 2012), the international and local networks of design culture (Abdulla 2019; Munch 2019). In addition, as the next section will explain, the selection of case studies aligns with the mediation focus in design, which is also a shared approach in design culture studies (Julier 2014).

Moreover, this PhD research attempts to build a balanced theoretical framework, which combines a critical understanding of the formation of design in the Chinese context. In understanding Chinese design and design cultures from the Global South, this research is

fully aware of the universality of design (Escobar 2018) and the coloniality of design (Ansari 2018; Kiem 2017; Tunstall 2013), and how the modern concept of design was influenced, sometimes dominated by Western, Modern and ‘universal’ experiences of imagination, rationalisation and representation (Fry 1989; Turner 1989; Chin 2017). In this regard, this research aligns with Huppertz (2018:174), who calls for a global perspective to understand design and a departure from the Eurocentric way of thinking about non-Western design cultures in design history, which neglects the complex flow of ideas, objects and people in the formation of the contemporary notion of design. Such an understanding is important to this research’s position in understanding the development of design in China, how design is perceived in the Chinese context and its relation to nationalism.

1.3.2 The selection of case studies: the mediation focus in design studies

Case study is a research method that involves the close, detailed examination of a single example or phenomenon, which aims to generalise a larger set of cases (Calhoun 2002; Gerring 2017). It is particularly strong at shedding light on a grander phenomenon by focusing on a detailed, representative example. As noted in [Section 1.2](#), I use three deep dive case studies to answer the three research sub-questions. The selection of case studies aligns with the mediation focus in design studies, which was developed by several key scholars in design studies and cultural studies, notably Hebdige (1988), Lees-Maffei (2009) and Julier (2014). In this section, I will briefly unpack the mediation focus in design studies, and explain why it is the most appropriate way of investigating design’s role in nationalism.

What is the mediation focus in design studies? It was firstly introduced by the British media theorist and sociologist Hebdige (1988) in his seminal work ‘Object as Image: The

Italian Scooter Cycle'. For him, the meaning and value of design practices and designed objects are not only determined by the process of design/production and consumption/use, but also shaped by mediation, such as “marketing, promotion, the construction of images and markets, the conditioning of public response” (Hebdige 1988:80), as a distinct moment in understanding design’s socio-cultural value.

Building upon Hebdige, British design historian Lees-Maffei (2009) proposed the ‘Production–Consumption–Mediation Paradigm’ for design studies. For her, mediation “is not the examination of designers’ intentions or actual consumption practices, but rather the analysis of the cultural and social significance of designed objects, spaces and processes of shared ideas” (Lees-Maffei 2009:366). In other words, design studies are not only concerned with ‘who is designing’ and ‘who is consuming’, but also with ‘who is mediating those cultural meanings, ideologies and values’. Further, Julier (2014) described mediation as a distinct moment embedded in design culture’s constituent parts as an ongoing process (Julier 2014:312), which transforms ideas and values in design culture(s) back and forth. In this light, the mediation approach is particularly useful for investigating the transformation of symbolic meanings and ideologies in design practice and designed objects, such as environmentalism, globalism and nationalism (Lees-Maffei 2009).

Scholars have identified some of the mediating channels in design: Hebdige included “advertising, marketing, promotion and the construction of images and markets” (1988:80) as mediations in constructing design’s cultural significance and symbolised meanings; Lash and Lury’s (2007) book dealt with the mediation of things, where material objects are mediated into cultural symbols, such as watches and sportswear; Fallan (2014:255) identified “publications, fairs and awards” as mediations in design; Julier (2014:312) noted that national design policy documents are mediating channels to analyse the characteristics of a nation’s design culture; “magazines and other communication media, exhibitions and showrooms” were mentioned as mediations in Lees-Maffei’s (2009) seminal article. To

sum up, the scale of mediation is broad, and all things mediate in design (Julier 2014:312)—advertisements, brands, designed objects, policy papers, museums, design events and festivals can all be used to analyse the transformation of ideologies and cultural meanings in design related studies.

Based on the aforementioned understanding of mediation, I selected three case studies to answer the three research sub-questions respectively: (1) To investigate the role of design in the realisation of nationalist agendas by the Chinese government, China's first national design policy is the most evident point of entry which mediates how design is instrumentalised by the government to achieve its nationalist agenda. (2) The second case study on Huawei smartphones is a timely case which captures how a homegrown smartphone mediates Chinese consumers' need for expressing their grassroots nationalist sentiments, and the role played by design in this. (3) Design awards in China are the mediating channel that reflects the synergies and differences existing between the Chinese government and Chinese consumers regarding design's role in nationalism. As I will elaborate in [Chapter 6](#), there are strong nationalist implications in the attitudes of both the Chinese government and Chinese consumers, yet there are also many fundamental differences. These three case studies aim to generate a coherent landscape of design's role in nationalism in the Chinese context.

1.3.3 Methods used in each case study

Case study research is a richly descriptive approach, which is “grounded in deep and varied sources of information, such as interviews, observations, and existing documents” (Hancock and Algozzine 2006:16). With a focus on qualitative research, methods such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation are used in this

PhD research. This section explains the methods used in the case studies, and why they are best suited to answering the research questions.

Research Question: What role is design playing in nationalism in China?			
Sub-questions	1. What role is design playing in the realisation of nationalist agendas from the perspective of the Chinese government?	2. What is the role of design in Chinese consumers' grass-roots nationalist sentiments?	3. What are the synergies and differences between the ways in which the Chinese government and Chinese consumers are engaging with design as a mechanism for nationalist agendas?
Case Studies	Case Study 1: China's National Design Policy	Case Study 2: Huawei Smartphone	Case Study 3: Design Awards in China
Methods	Document Analysis of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Documents • Media Reports 	Participant Observation Document Analysis of Media Reports	Document Analysis of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Documents • Media Reports • Official Announcements of Design Awards Semi-Structured Interviews

Table 1-2: Methods used in each case study.

Case study 1: China's national design policy

In case study 1, document analysis is the major method used. I mainly concentrate on policy documents, key publications and media reports as the main sources. This case study focuses on China's first national design policy, which was introduced in 2015, and responds to sub-question 1 (What role is design playing in the realisation of nationalist agendas from the perspective of the Chinese government?). The analysis of China's national design policy is based on the two official publications of the national design policy, that is, the main policy document, *Strategy Research on Innovation Design* (创新设计战略研究综合报告 *chuangxin sheji zhanlue yanjiu zonghe baogao*) (PTSRID 2016a), and a

detailed ‘blue map’ of the policy, *Roadmap of Chinese Innovation Design* (中国创新设计路线图 *zhongguo chuangxin sheji luxian tu*) (PTSRID 2016b). Additionally, books and journal articles written by key members of the policy team³ are also included in the analysis; these are valuable sources for understanding the policy itself as well as its future developments.

Media reports are equally valid sources in academic research. They offer timely information which may not be the focus of scholarly sources or may take a longer time to be examined by scholars (OSU 2018:26). Throughout this thesis, media reports serve as crucial sources for all of my case studies. In this case study, the analysis of media reports aims to establish the background of the enactment of China’s first national design policy. For instance, during the early twenty-first century, design-related academic research was less advanced in China. Many journalists, therefore, assumed responsibility for investigating ongoing issues in China’s design industry. Two media reports by journalist He⁴ (2007; 2008) are extremely valuable sources for capturing the anxiety and uncertainty in China’s design industry, as well as the industry’s longing for national design policies.

Case study 2: Huawei smartphones

Sub-question 2 (What is the role of design in Chinese consumers’ grassroots nationalist sentiments?) is explored through the case study on Huawei smartphones. Participant

³ A detailed list of documents and publications that are directly related to China’s national design policy can be found in [Section 4.1](#).

⁴ Yuan He is a Chinese journalist from *China Computerworld* magazine. From 2007 to 2009, Yuan He wrote several opinion pieces on China’s consumer electronics industry, design industry and China’s lack of national design policy.

observation is the primary method in this case study. In this section, I will explain why it has been chosen as an appropriate method for this case study.

As I have mentioned in [Section 1.1.2](#), one of the gaps in the literature is that existing studies are excessively focused on design's instrumentalist function in top-down nationalism, since most of these studies were based on historical analyses of designed objects, events and policies. Meanwhile, design's role in general public's grassroots nationalist sentiments has been seldomly investigated. In order to fill this gap, grounded ethnographic evidence is required. For Merriam (2001), the ethnographic case study is one of the common case study orientations, participant observation is one of the most frequently used methods in ethnographic case studies (Hancock and Algozzine 2006). For a formal definition of participant observation, it is "a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture" (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:1).

But what is distinctive about participant observation? As anthropologist Margaret Mead famously noted, "what people say, what people do, and what they say they do are entirely different things" (Ewing 2011:80). There are many factors that may prevent people from expressing what they really think in daily lives, such as self-expectations, social norms and cultural taboos, in a sense, participant observation gives researchers the opportunity to collect and analyse firsthand data about what people actually do, in contrast to other methods such as questionnaires or interviews (X.Y. Wang 2017:21). My second case study aims to explore why have Huawei smartphones been celebrated by Chinese consumers as symbols of national pride, and what is the role of design in this grassroots nationalist sentiment. Discussing such a controversial topic like nationalism with people in China is complicated, participant observation becomes an appropriate method which creates opportunities for me to observe participants' everyday activities with their Huawei

smartphones, to have deep conversations, and to compare and analyse their actions and words.

For the second case study, I conducted three participant observations with three consumers of Huawei smartphones. My participant observations were mostly conducted on a short term basis, ranging from three to six days for each participant. I also met two participants again six months after the first contact. These observations were done at the participants' apartments and offices, as well as in Huawei flagship stores and cafes. Procedures include observing their experiences of consumption, use and maintenance of consumer electronics especially Huawei smartphones and other Huawei products, as well as broad, frequent conversations around their takes on Chinese design, their national identity and national sentiments, along with their perception of Huawei and other Western and Chinese products. The outcomes of three participant observations have been analysed and presented as three ethnographies, which offers grounded evidence for my arguments.

Additionally, media reports are also important sources for analysis. In this case study, media reports were analysed to establish relevant background information about Huawei and its products, such as the trade and technological tension between China and the US since 2016, Huawei's market performance, Huawei's reaction to sanctions imposed by the US and Chinese consumers' reaction to those events, and so on.

It should be noted that the media reports used in this case study are from a mix of international and Chinese media outlets, and I am fully aware of their underlying political interests and ideological implications. Here, the media reports mainly function to report on an event, to present a perspective, rather than offer a taken-for-granted argument. For instance, when I cite the *People's Daily* (人民日报 *renmin ribao*), a Chinese media outlet owned by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, I use it mainly as a

source to present official announcements or Chinese views on certain events. In order to present a balanced view, international media outlets are treated in an equal manner.

Case study 3: Design awards in China

The third case study touches on the different attitudes of the government and consumers towards design awards in China, which answers sub-question 3 (What are the synergies and differences between the ways in which the Chinese government and Chinese consumers are engaging with design as a mechanism for nationalist agendas?). The methods used in this case study are document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

The documents analysed in this case study include policy documents, official announcements of awarding organisations, and media reports. In order to explore the Chinese government's and academic elites' attitudes towards design awards, official policies on design awards found on websites of the Chinese governments and related organisations are discussed. I gathered data on the number of award-winning Chinese designs in two international design awards from 2005 to 2021 to analyse the changing participation of Chinese companies. Media reports serve as the source of information regarding the performance of international design awards in the Chinese market, and the interaction between the awarding bodies and China's local governments, consumers, designers and academic elites.

Ten semi-structured interviews⁵ were conducted in China. The interviewees included design educators, students, design practitioners, online influencers, and consumers. The

⁵ The names and occupations of each interviewee are listed in [Appendix C](#).

aim of the interviews was to record the significance of design awards in their professional lives and consumption choices, for instance, the significance of participating in design awards for students and teachers in China's design education, and also for industry participants, as well as the influence of these awards on consumers' consumption choices.

Since I have worked in Chinese universities from 2014 to 2017, I have connections with lecturers in Chinese universities and design schools. After interviewing one lecturer, he immediately introduced me to two of his students in the Faculty of Design who were interested in the topic. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media played a vital role in finding relevant interviewees; this was valid for both Chinese and international social media platforms. For instance, I follow a Shanghai-based French designer on Twitter, who constantly posts about her opinion on the Chinese design industry, and after being approached, she was happy to be involved. I also had the opportunity to interview a Germany-based Chinese architect and internet influencer on Chinese social media, who was once invited to be the Chinese media representative for the iF Design Award in Germany.

Ethical considerations

In 2020, I travelled to China to conduct the fieldwork research, including semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Following Curtin University's guidelines for ethical research, before conducting my field research, I prepared an outline of my project, and also consent forms for all the interviewees and participants. These documents were bilingual and written in Chinese and English.

Even though I was on-site in China physically during the one-year fieldwork period, the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person interviews difficult to conduct, especially when cities were implementing strict lockdowns. Thus, most of the interviews were conducted through online phone calls. Some interviews were done in person with consumers in China when travel restrictions were relaxed. Before recruiting interviewees, I briefly introduced the project outline via phone calls and then sent them the consent form for verification. At the start of each recording, I often asked for their permission again on tape. Consumers and design students generally agreed for their interviews to be recorded. However, some design practitioners and teachers were uncomfortable about being recorded because of their job requirements. Regarding the language of communication, since my participants were mainly Chinese citizens or Chinese designers who work in Western countries, I mainly used Chinese during the interviews. Interviewees usually signed the forms directly after the interview.

For the participant observations, an outline of the study was sent to participants before recruitment. This outline included a general introduction to the research and what the participants were required to do. Three participants were introduced by friends and colleagues via ‘a friend of a friend’; this is a common approach for gaining mutual trust in Chinese society. After three sets of data had been organised as ethnographies, I sent the written documents to the respective participants for verification in case their intentions were misinterpreted. Throughout this process, any unrelated sensitive political topics were not discussed to ensure that participants felt comfortable about the research.

1.3.4 The order of Chinese names in the thesis

It is common to notice inconsistencies in the ordering of Chinese names in Western publications, especially by Western authors. Given this, I will clarify the name-use in this thesis. In most Western languages, names usually follow a ‘given name + family name’ order, also known as the Western name order. By contrast, the Chinese language follows an Eastern name order which puts the family name first in both written forms and customary uses (Evason 2021). For instance, for the founding chairman of the PRC, Mao Zedong, Mao is his family name. It is also the case in many Eastern languages, such as Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Mongolian and even some Western languages, such as Hungarian.

When ordinary Eastern names are used in a Western context, they often preserve a Western order, as in the case of a Chinese person living or studying in the West or someone who is being reported in the Western news. But conventionally, when it comes to important figures that are well-known in a Western context, such as Chinese celebrities, politicians or poets, names are usually kept in the Eastern order. Using Mao Zedong again as an example, one rarely sees writers or journalists referring him as Zedong Mao, similar to the current Chinese president, Xi Jinping; the award-winning Chinese science fiction writer, Liu Cixin; or the founder of Huawei, Ren Zhengfei. In this thesis, I will therefore adopt the following convention: when the Chinese name of a scholar, author or journalist, or an ordinary person, is mentioned, such as the Chinese design scholar Prof. Guanzhong Liu, their names will follow the Western order; for well-known figures, such as Xi Jinping and Ren Zhengfei, I will use the family name first order.

1.4 Thesis Structure



Figure 1-2: An overview of the thesis structure.

[Chapter 1](#) briefly introduces the background, gaps in literature, research questions, research design and chapter outlines of this thesis.

[Chapter 2](#) comprises key theoretical approaches in nationalism, design and design's role in nationalism. Firstly, I draw on different academic schools of nationalism studies to construct a balanced view on how to understand nationalism and how to investigate nationalism. This informs my approach for investigating design's role in nationalism in China throughout the thesis. Next, based on literature in design studies, I unpack the notion of 'design' and its role in nationalism from both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

[Chapter 3](#) looks in detail at Chinese nationalism and Chinese design. In the first half of this chapter, I explore the historical origins, the fundamental narrative, and the primary nationalist agenda of the modern form of Chinese nationalism. I also unpack two core

themes of Chinese nationalism: industrialisation and cultural soft power. The second half of this chapter provides necessary background information about the historical transition of design in China, and explains how design is relevant to China's cultural soft power in relation to the symbolic cultural meaning of the 'Made in China' label.

[Chapter 4](#) is the first case study in this thesis. It focuses on China's first national design policy and the Chinese government's nationalist agenda. This chapter encompasses three main sections, namely, a detailed investigation on the absence of design in China's policy settings from 1949 to 1978 and from 1978 to 2013, an analysis of China's first national design policy based on the policy triangle framework (Walter and Gilson 1994), and an in-depth examination of this national design policy's association with the Chinese government's nationalist agenda. This chapter also critically examines China's approach to national design policy making, which is different from the conventional approach. Overall, the findings indicate the Chinese government's self-positioning, and identify where the problems are, how design can become the instrument to solve them, and what the role of design is in the Chinese government's grand nationalist vision.

[Chapter 5](#) is the second case study which focuses on Huawei smartphones and Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiments. This case study presents the bottom-up perspective of design's role in nationalism in China. Based on three in-depth ethnographies on Chinese consumers of Huawei smartphones, this chapter examines the grassroots celebration of Huawei smartphones as symbols of national pride, showing how the design quality of Huawei smartphones is perceived by Chinese consumers as the evidence of technological and cultural progress of China. It also highlights design's role in Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiments around Huawei smartphones in the context of use.

[Chapter 6](#) is the third case study. It examines design awards in China as an example of the synergies and differences between the 'top' (the government) and the 'bottom'

(consumers) groups in Chinese nationalism around design. This chapter reports on the contradictory attitudes towards international design awards between the Chinese government and Chinese consumers. This case study shows that even though the government and consumers have both identified design's crucial role in achieving China's nationalist dream, they are concerned with design in different contexts and have different requirements.

[Chapter 7](#) is the discussion and conclusion chapter. I firstly summarise and discuss key findings in each of the case studies. Secondly, I list key contributions of this study, and offer several suggestions for future research regarding design and Chinese nationalism. Finally, the conclusion section directly answers the research question raised in the introduction chapter.

Chapter 2. Nationalism and Design: A Literature Review

This chapter consists of the literature review on nationalism, design, and design's role in nationalism. Nationalism and design are both broad concepts which encompass various aspects. In this chapter, I identify a number of key theoretical approaches, perspectives and arguments in the broad array of literature which are crucial for informing my study. The first half of this chapter draws on different academic schools of thought on nationalism to construct a balanced view on what is nationalism and the way of investigating nationalism. The second half focuses on selected literature in design studies to review the definition of design, and its role in nationalism from both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

This chapter establishes the theoretical basis for understanding nationalism, design and design's role in nationalism in this PhD research. It sets up a holistic framework for investigating design's role in nationalism in China throughout the thesis, which simultaneously looks at design's role in the government's nationalist agendas, and in people's grassroots nationalist sentiments, and also compares the government's and the people's perspectives on design's role in nationalism.

2.1 Nationalism

The first half of this chapter is a brief review of existing literature on nationalism. The aim is two-fold: firstly, to set the theoretical tone for understanding nationalism from the

ethno-symbolism paradigm, which sees nationalism as a combination of modern inventions, and historical and ethnic attachments; and secondly, to construct a holistic approach for investigating nationalism, showing that nationalism is not only an elite-oriented ‘top-down’ phenomenon, but that it can also be formed from people’s everyday experience, as a ‘bottom-up’ process.

In recent years, the world is experiencing “the global resurgence of nationalist governments” (Mylonas and Tudor 2021:109), shaped especially by two major political events, namely, Brexit and the election of Trump (Latour 2017:67). More recently, Bieber (2020) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has further accentuated the global rise of nationalism due to border control, misinformation and distributions of medical resources based on nationality; Özkırımlı (2020) described this as ‘coronationalism’.

For Özkırımlı (2003:4), nationalism is an ‘umbrella term’ which comprises of various aspects that “fall on a spectrum from minimal to extreme” (Audi 2009:366). Moreover, there are significant differences between the public and the academic discourse of nationalism. In public discourses, nationalism is often separated into ‘good’ nationalism and ‘bad’ nationalism, as Billig (1995:55) remarked. People often label ‘our’ nationalism as patriotism, which is beneficial and necessary; by contrast, ‘their’ nationalism is dangerously irrational, surplus and alien.

On the other hand, in academic discourses, nationalism is not reduced to extremist movements and sentiments. It is taken for granted that nationalism exists in all nation-states, like water and air (Tamminal 2017:755), regardless of their political status (Gimeno-Martínez 2016:13). In this regard, A.D. Smith (2010:9) offered a general but accurate definition of the term: “Nationalism is an ideology that places the nation at the centre of its concerns and seeks to promote its well-being”. The academic realm of nationalism is a complex and contested field, with various schools of thought and paradigms that hold

different views on issues, such as the origin of nationalism, the formation of nationalism, and the process of nationalism in societies. In this section, I will briefly review these schools of thought in nationalism studies, and highlight the position and approach of my research.

2.1.1 Understanding nationalism: three paradigms

In this thesis, my understanding of nationalism follows the ethno-symbolism paradigm, which sees nationalism as a combination of modern inventions and historical attachments. In this section, I explain such a position by briefly reviewing three different schools of thought in nationalism studies.

It was not until the 1980s that nationalism became a popular topic of study in academic fields, such as history, sociology, political science, international relations, cultural studies and anthropology (Özkırımlı 2003). However, theories of nationalism have experienced significant dissensions over its development, splitting up into at least three different schools of thought or paradigms—primordialism, modernism and ethno-symbolism. The fundamental disagreement between the different paradigms centres on one core question: Is nationalism purely an ‘imagined’ modern invention; or is it taken for granted as a natural and organic notion closely related to pre-modern history, kinship, race, language and homeland? Before discussing this further, however, it is necessary to first understand each of the three paradigms.

Primordialism is the earliest paradigm of understanding nation and nationalism. For primordialists, nations exist in the first order of time, and lie at the root of subsequent processes and developments (A.D. Smith 2010:55). As one of the key figures in the

primordialism school, Geertz (1973) highlighted that nation and nationalism are legitimised by primordial attachments, such as kinship, race, language, religion, shared history, customs and territory. In this vein, nationalism is regarded as a ‘natural’ attribute of human beings, like taste and smell (Özkırımlı 2000:64); it is deeply rooted in human nature and will not simply go away (O’Brien 1993). However, this primordialism paradigm has received little academic attention and is relatively unpopular when compared to the modernist paradigm.

The modernist paradigm, unlike primordialism, denies the naturalness of the nation. For modernists, nations emerged from the idea of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the birth of the centralised French state (Kedourie 1966), as an outcome of specific modern transformations, such as capitalism, industrialisation, urbanisation and, most importantly, the emergence of bureaucratic nation-states (Özkırımlı 2000:85). Calhoun (1997:66) described this emergence of nation-states as ‘the modernity of the states’, from old forms of political entities, such as medieval lords, into new modern states, with clear boundaries, policed borders, requiring passports to cross, and educational systems to mobilise the population.

In the 1980s, the modernist paradigm gained important contributions from several key scholars, notably Ernst Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger; it became “the dominant orthodoxy of scholarship in nationalism” (A.D. Smith 2010:53). Gellner (1983), one of the major contributors in the modernist paradigm, argued that nationalism is a function of modernism and the process of modernisation, and nationalism will only appear when society faces a demand to transform from agrarian to industrial. Hobsbawm and Anderson argued from a more constructionist point of view—that nations and nationalism are invented (Hobsbawm 1992) and imagined (Anderson 1993).

The central debate between primordialism and modernism is chiefly concerned with the origins of nation and nationalism. For primordialists, nationalism is a natural given, but modernists argue that nationalism is purely a modern creation. Here, Özkırımlı's (2003) famous "artichoke and onion" metaphor offers a clear summary of their differences. For primordialists, a nation is like an artichoke, with a core to be discovered beneath the layers, which are 'primordial attachments', such as shared history, kinship, race, language, religion and homeland. For the modernists, nation and nationalism are like an onion, which can be "peeled away to nothing" (Özkırımlı 2003:339) and have no core inside; in other words, they are invented or imagined myths and symbols.

Ethno-symbolism is a paradigm coined by A.D. Smith as a 'midway' between the primordialist and the modernist debate (Özkırımlı 2000:168). Ethno-symbolism generally agrees with modernism that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, which is closely related to the emergence of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; however, it also emphasises the continuation of historical and ethnic roots (Kundra 2019:133; A.D. Smith 2009:21). For ethno-symbolists, nationalism is shaped by, founded on, and emerges from pre-existing ethnic communities and groups (Edensor 2002:8).

Ethno-symbolism was developed based on dissatisfaction with both the modernist and the primordialist theories of nationalism (A.D. Smith 2010:63). As Gellner's student, Smith challenged the modernist idea: "There is considerable evidence that modern nations are connected with earlier ethnic categories and communities and created out of pre-existing origin myths, ethnic cultures and shared memories" (A.D. Smith 1996:385). He also opposed Hobsbawm's (1992) notion of 'invented traditions', and argued that modernists have underestimated the significance of local cultural and social contexts, that nationalism should be understood as being rediscovered and reconstructed from historical and ethnic ties (Özkırımlı 2000:124).

Kaygan described the ethno-symbolism approach of nationalism as a ‘uses of the past’ model, that “nationalists did not invent traditions from a [sic] scratch, but researched and discovered, interpreted and authenticated, and in this manner mobilised certain myths and symbols at the expense of others as historical circumstance (e.g. modernity) dictated” (2012:83). That is to say, for ethno-symbolists, nationalism is a combination of pre-modern attachments and modern political and social needs.

Having reviewed these three paradigms of nationalism, I state that my position and way of looking at nationalism is aligned with the ethno-symbolism paradigm, which does not deny the modern invention of nationalism, but also admits historical and cultural influences. As A.D. Smith (1998:44) argued, nationalism exists as a “bridge between the distinctive heritage of the ethnic past, and the necessity for each community to live as one nation among many in the increasingly bureaucratized world of industrial capitalism”. Ethno-symbolism’s ‘use of the past’ model, as described by Kaygan (2012), is the strength of this way of looking, which will be adopted as the approach to understanding Chinese nationalism in [Chapter 3](#).

2.1.2 Investigating nationalism: top-down or bottom-up?

Another major disagreement within theories of nationalism concerns the following questions: How is nationalism formed? Is nationalism completely created by governments and political elites, then passively adopted by the general public? Do ‘the people’ also play a crucial role in nationalism? In other words, is nationalism purely generated from the top-down, or also from the bottom-up?

The modernist paradigm often adopts an instrumentalist view of nationalism, that nationalism is created externally by political elites, and then used as an instrument to “serve the interests of ruling elites by channelling the energies of the newly enfranchised masses” (A.D. Smith 2010:52). Gellner, one of the major adherents in the modernism paradigm, offered a famous argument on the notion of ‘high culture’. For him, ‘high culture’ is defined as “a school-mediated, academy supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication”, and nationalism is thus “essentially the general imposition of a high culture on society” (Gellner 1983:57). By contrast, pre-modern societies were dominated by ‘low cultures’, such as local, regional, folk and vernacular cultures. In this vein, the dissemination of nationalism is a process of ‘ideological manipulation’ that the general public can only absorb uncritically from nationalist elites. Gellner also described them metaphorically as ‘garden culture’ and ‘wild culture’: nationalism is the ‘garden culture’ carefully designed by nationalist elites, politicians and leaders, wherein the ‘wild’ identities of the people are cultivated by nationalism (Gellner 1983:50).

However, this excessive emphasis on the ‘top-down’ process has been broadly criticised by later scholars of nationalism. For instance, Edensor (2002) offered a systematic critique of how the excessive emphasis on the ‘top’ has generally taken a reductive view; for him, nationalism is a dynamic phenomenon. The top-down view “cannot account for the extremely dynamic and ambiguous contemporary constructions of national identity and nationalism” (Edensor 2002:9) in terms of how nationalism is represented, experienced and reinterpreted through everyday life in a vernacular way by the people.

Similarly, A.D. Smith (2010:61) noted that one of the priorities of the ethno-symbolism paradigm of nationalism is to “move away from modernists’ heavily elite-oriented analysis”; ‘the people’—the non-elites, or middle and lower strata of the population—are equally important. In the formation of nationalism, ‘the people’ not only “constrain elite

nationalist projects from time to time within the social and cultural parameters of their traditions, they also provide their own motifs and personnel for nationalist goals and movements” (2010:61). In this vein, Van Ginderachter and Beyen (2011) also coined the term ‘nationalism from below’ to describe the spread of nationalism that is not initiated by the government and nationalist elites.

This critique of the top-down focus of nationalism brought about a range of new scholarly investigations of the bottom-up formation of nationalism. Billig (1995) is the most important scholar in this latter group and his seminal work *Banal Nationalism* highlighted the notion of ‘everydayness’ in the formation of nationalism. Once nation-states are created, they constantly need to be maintained. Nationalism can be constructed and expressed in a banal way through people’s everyday activities. Furthermore, the way in which nationalism is expressed in everyday life can be very subtle, which links people to their material surroundings (Gimeno-Martínez 2016).

After Billig, theories of nationalism and national identity turned their foci to the study of everyday and popular culture (Palmer 1998; Skey 2009), especially with reference to banknotes, stamps and national cuisines. Edensor (2002), likewise, attempted to link nationalism with everyday life, advocating an analysis of nationalism ‘from below’, in which vernacular life becomes the focus of analysis. In his book *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, Edensor (2002) analysed how national identity is performed in popular rituals such as sports events and carnivals, and represented through films, and how nationalism is consumed and exchanged via national material cultures and commodities.

Moreover, as A.D. Smith (2011) argued, instead of emphasising only one side, the relationship between the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom’ is worth investigating equally. For instance, in Hutchinson (1987)’s study on the Gaelic revival in late nineteenth-century Ireland, the

lower classes—the Irish peasantry and Catholics—offered cultural myths, nationalist symbols, values and traditions to the elites, which in turn greatly contributed to Irish independence.

After reviewing both the top-down and the bottom-up approaches, I conclude that the formation of nationalism is not merely a top-down process, but also takes place in a banal way in people's everyday lives. In other words, nationalism should be equally seen as a top-down and bottom-up process; the 'top' and the 'bottom' groups in nationalism—the government and the people—are both crucial in the formation of nationalism. If we only focus on one side, our understanding will be “dangerously distorted” (Gries 2004:119).

As X.C. Liang put it:

Both top-down mobilisation and bottom-up movement are real, which inevitably interlink with one another and share nationalist concerns in common....overemphasising the difference between official and popular nationalisms, the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy severely undermines the strength of analyses provided by both camps. (2011:8)

Such a crucial understanding informs my research project's way of investigating design's role in nationalism in China. This is why in order to construct a holistic view, I use three case studies in this PhD research to examine both the perspective of the Chinese government and Chinese consumers, as well as the interaction between them, with regard to design's role in nationalism in China.

2.2 Design and its Role in Nationalism

2.2.1 Design

In this section, I set up a theoretical fence for the definition of design in this thesis. The scale of the term ‘design’ is broad, as noted by Heskett, even though there is a substantial body of work discussing design, but “little agreement exist about exactly what is understood by the term” (2005:2). I have pointed out in [Section 1.3.1](#), that this PhD research takes a cross-disciplinary approach that combines perspectives from design studies, nationalism studies, and studies of Chinese nationalism, it will reach various audiences who may not be experts in design, but interested in China’s design industry, Chinese nationalism, the relationship between design and nationalism. A vague definitional position has the danger of causing confusion. Thus, it is crucial to discuss how the term is used in this thesis when discussing design’s association with nationalism in China.

Acquiring a general definition of design is simple; for example, “design is to plan and make (something) for a specific use or purpose” (Merriam-Webster 2022). But real-world scenarios are more complicated than this general definition. To illustrate how the term ‘design’ itself is a source of confusion because of its many definitions, Heskett constructed a seemingly nonsensical sentence “design is to design a design to produce a design” (2005:3). In this sentence, design is both a noun and a verb, to describe both an outcome and a process. Moreover, it has also become an adjective in contemporary public perception, which refers to something “fashionable, prestigious, or luxurious” (Huppatz 2020:2); a good example here is the expensiveness of ‘designer jeans’ and ‘designer restaurants’. Design is everywhere now. Fallan (2019:24) coined the term ‘designification’ to describe design’s pervasiveness in every corner of our contemporary society, in which things, services and ideas have been gradually ‘designified’.

Given how broad the scale of design is, I need to make a theoretical defence of my emphasis on design, before looking at design's role in nationalism. It is worth pointing out that the term 'design' is as problematic as the term 'nationalism'. Thus, just as A.D. Smith (1998) once reminded us to differentiate between 'the contemporary conception of nationalism' and 'nationalism in general', in my thesis I also note that it is necessary to separate 'the professionalised form of design' from 'design as a basic human activity'.

In design studies, scholars generally regard design as a basic human activity. Most notably, H. Simon (1988:67) defined design as "devis[ing] courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones." Similarly, Heskett described design as "one of the basic characteristics of what it is to be human, and an essential determinant of the quality of human life" (2005:1). Following this general understanding of design, Manzini and Coad (2015) advocated the notion that 'everybody is a designer', while Miller (2011:95) described householders as designers who design the family's daily life. Recently, in the UK Design Council's project Design, Differently (DC 2021), the term 'invisible designers' was used to describe people who use design in everyday situations.

At the same time, however, for contemporary design practice, design is a modern creation. Since entering the age of Industrial Modernisation—steam-powered machines, imperial expansion, urbanisation, mass communication and new forms of transportation—design practices have become specialised, professionalised and modernised (Huppatz 2020:9). After the Second World War, with the advent of specialist design education, professional societies, and publications, the professionalisation of design has increased drastically (Huppatz 2020:9). Now, design has evolved into "a pervasive aspect of modern society with a large number of practitioners and a great range of subfields, such as industrial design, architecture, systems design, human-computer interaction design, service design, and strategic design and innovation" (Gunn et al. 2016:14).

This highly professionalised form of design contains a certain kind of economic value (Heskett et al. 2017) and cultural value in contemporary economic contexts. For Julier (2017), the rise of professionalised design activity is closely linked to the global economic turn to neoliberalism since the 1980s. Design is a key agent in the differentiation of goods and services in the market (Doyle and Broadbridge 1999). It is thus crucial for creating economic value under neoliberal pressures of marketisation and differentiation (Julier 2017:3). On the other hand, design's semiotic role in cultural production contains a certain type of cultural value (Julier 2017:3). The term 'design' is always associated with "fashionable, prestigious, or luxurious" (Huppertz 2020:2), "a higher status for a particular activity" (Heskett et al. 2017:69), or newness, innovation and change (Suchman 2011).

To sum up, when discussing design's role in nationalism in China, this project focuses on the professionalised activity of design. In Aynsley's book *Designing modern Germany* (2009), he offers an in-depth study on the relationship between German design, national identity and national building since 1870. Similarly, in the introduction of his book, he also mentioned that the emphasis of his study, is on "a specialist activity called design, practised by specialists known as 'designers'.....[it was] in fact formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.....which is still dominant today" (2009:9-10). Furthermore, this professionalised activity of design, as a by-product of modernisation, has a strong link to the modern form of states: nation-states, as the next section will explore.

2.2.2 Design and 'the national'

The most significant feature of contemporary scholarship, according to Mansfield (2005), is the declining importance of 'the national'. For instance, Appadurai (1996:169) once

indicated that “the nation-state has become obsolete as a marker of identity construction”. In this vein, internationalism and transnationalism have become the focus of mainstream media and academic discourses in the twenty-first century. However, nationalism and globalisation are not binary terms; on the contrary, nationalism itself is an international ideology. For Robertson (2000), the idea of nationalism is developed only in tandem with internationalism. Similarly, as Gimeno-Martínez (2016:23) pointed out, globalisation has proven to be an ally, rather than an enemy, in the propagation of nationalism. To a certain degree, the process of globalisation has in turn reinforced nationalism.

In this respect, recent design scholars have reaffirmed ‘the national’ as a valid aspect of study. Design historians Fallan and Lees-Maffei’s (2016) journal article ‘Real imagined communities: national narratives and the globalisation of design history’ can be seen as a strong and coherent provocation to reinsert the national category and nationalism into the academic understanding of design. With an ethno-symbolistic approach to nationalism, and using the influence of postcolonial theories, they issued a call to move away from a homogenised frame of design history with a ‘Euro-American’ focus, and highlighted the importance of the national approach when thinking of the processes by which design is produced, mediated and consumed (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2016:18).

The notion of national image and national branding, is one of the most crucial features of design’s association with national categories. For Aldersey-Williams (1992), design has the closest link with the nation-state compared to other creative pursuits. Based on country of origin (COO) stereotyping, products are frequently pigeonholed by national labels. Through the global dissemination of goods, design activities in the form of commodities travel through spatial scales, geographically speaking, while the national identities attached to them are constantly spread back and forth (Reimer and Leslie 2008). As a result, designed products often function as national identity markers (Aynsley 1993) which are crucial for building national images. In a sense, then, the relationship between

design and locality becomes apparent and inevitable. Design activities with national labels can be transformed into unique brands in the global market; examples abound such as Designed in Italy, Danish Design, or Made in China; each brand is in-built with negative or positive symbolic meanings.

This idea of the national character of design has long existed and been well-reasoned throughout the history of design. For Hall (1992:292), national culture is a discourse, or a way of constructing meaning that influences people's actions and self-conceptions. A national culture of design, similarly, works in post-industrial society as a great force of national identity building, and a modern source of national imagination. In order to build a national distinctiveness, "one of the most common tactics is to attribute an identity" (Du Gay et al. 1997:48) to its national or regional design. For example, in the public perception, Italian design implies playfulness, German design symbolises rationality (Sparke 1992), Scandinavian design is warm and democratic, Silicon Valley design means hi-tech, and Japanese design represents eastern and exotic, to name just a few.

However, the emphasis on national character is often a primordialist, sometimes essentialist view that only concentrates on the dominant role of diverse national origins. For instance, in his renowned paper 'The influence of national character on design', Reilly (1956) regarded design as a hybrid result of international trends and national characters (Gimeno-Martínez 2016:76). For him, even though design is heavily affected by "the international circle of the modern movement and the functional approach to design, there is in these fields plenty of room for reasonable expression of temperament" (Reilly 1956:923). By temperament, he argued that climate, geography, religion or social systems are reflected in the creations of one country; for instance, due to the shorter history, American design has the character of "the three 'G's: Glamour, Glitter and Gloss—the brazen juke-box, the glamorous automobile, the glittering cooker and the glossy magazine"

(Reilly 1956:920). By contrast, the Swiss and the Austrians are regarded as ‘mountain peoples’ who persist with old forms and handicrafts (Reilly 1956:922).

Moreover, as Reilly (1956:923) also pointed out: “Climate, customs and social systems tend to confirm national variations. On the other, function, technology and speed of communication tend to obliterate them”. In their study on the Sony Walkman, Du Gay et al. (1997:74) argued that when design becomes an increasingly global language, “pure, unified, watertight national design traditions are increasingly difficult to envisage”. This is more obvious in the category of consumer electronics—smartphones designed by Apple, Samsung or Huawei share a universal “hybrid aesthetic” (Dwyer and Jackson 2003:272), for example. This does not imply that the hybridity has weakened design’s role in national identity-making. In this age of the brand economy, national designs function more from a branding perspective, notwithstanding their less unique cultural distinctiveness. Nevertheless, I would suggest that Reilly’s idea is still valid in the contemporary example of consumer electronics. Ideologies and tastes might have been homogenised by the global exchange of information, whereby even demands and needs have become universal, but national character still varies in social structures, which ultimately results in every cultural production of a given society. Early cheap iPhone imitations from factories in Southern China were designed with dual-SIMs, louder speakers and multi-coloured flashlights; the aim of these ‘local adjustments’ was to fulfill the needs and tastes of factory workers with lower income and education.

Design is simultaneously a global, regional, national and local phenomenon. At the same time, however, national labels perceived by the public can sometimes be problematic and hybridised. Walker (1989) pointed out that even though the nationality of designers is a common criterion for classifying objects within national categories, British designers working in Italy, for example, would be contributing to the definition of Italian design, not British design (Walker 1989:122). Fallan and Lees-Maffei (2016:5) used the example

of New York City yellow cabs to demonstrate the hybridity of the national label of design to the extent that even though the car itself is a Japanese Toyota Camry, it is still perceived as an icon of American design culture.

At any rate, the relationship between design and nation-states has proven to be inevitable. However, another question remains: since the formation of nationalism is both a top-down and bottom-up process, how is design functioning at each of these levels? In the following two sections, I will discuss the question from both the perspectives of the ‘top’ group (the government), and the ‘bottom’ group (the people) in nationalism.

2.2.3 Design’s role in nationalism for the government

The government is a key element in the comprehension of societies since the government is a discursive construct that reveals the mechanisms behind the creation and implementation of authority. Correspondingly, as Gimeno-Martínez (2016:136) noted: “design participates and gets embedded in this authority”. This section aims to discuss the role of design in nationalism for the government. As previously mentioned, nationalism is an “umbrella term” (Özkırmı 2003:4) that has expanded into every aspect of contemporary society in the era of globalisation. Associated terms—such as consumer nationalism (Gerth 2003), techno-nationalism (Ostry and Nelson 1995), digital nationalism (Schneider 2018) and sports and nationalism (Bairner 2001)—have been used to describe specific phenomenon with which nationalism intersects. During the COVID-19 pandemic, terms such as ‘coronationalism’ (Özkırmı 2020) and ‘vaccine nationalism’ (Bollyky and Bown 2020) were used broadly in media outlets to describe the recent surge of nationalism.

One of the most well-developed terms, techno-nationalism, is helpful for building up a basic understanding of the association between design and nationalism. In an innovation-centric economy, it has become a global phenomenon that higher R&D budgets and technological achievements result in the creation of new national identities (Edgerton 2007:4). Technology thus connects to nation-building and a sense of national pride. Nations are evaluated by others and themselves based on technology and innovation; for instance, in the early twentieth century, Germany and America received the most credit because of their rapid national innovation, whereas Britain was seen as in decline (Edgerton 2007:6).

Likewise, design has also been perceived as an indicator of national progress, especially the design of manufactured goods. As noted previously, among other design disciplines, industrial design can be seen as the backdrop of the contemporary culture of design (Munch 2019:200) in the context of globalisation, industrialisation and commoditisation. Based on sets of literature of design history, the following paragraphs offer a historical account of industrial design's association with governments' nationalist agendas. As Sparke noted: "Industrial design forms an intrinsic part of the economy and political system of the country within which it functions, and is therefore necessarily affected both by its dominate ideology and by its more specific rules and regulations." (1992:79). She further elaborated that in Europe, the period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the Second World War was marked by "the twin spirits of nationalism and international competition" (1992:79), which deeply influenced the era's design practice. International exhibitions became the arena for international competitions around national industrial achievements. In Yagou (2003)'s study, he noted that in the Great Exhibition in 1851, the Greek exhibits were mainly raw materials and crafts products, such as "honey, tobacco, figs, processed leather skins and woodcarvings" (2003:86), which failed to show its national industrial achievements, it then received sympathetic and reproachful responses from commentators. From 1900 to 1913, the world trade of manufactured

goods has doubled, European countries were the main producers of goods, and they had “the strongest need to assert themselves on the world market” (Sparke 1992:80); for instance, Germany carefully curated a distinctly German style of its manufactured goods in order to stand out in the international competition. Even though international trade was seriously damaged during the First World War, soon after the war, design and styling were taken seriously by governments again.

After the Second World War, the crucial role of design in international competition continued. Moreover, international competitions in this period made more efforts to promote ‘national branding’ around designed products (Kaygan 2012:107). The act of branding shapes the representations and contexts around the designed object, and controls its embedded cultural meanings (Skou 2019:206). Brands such as Italian Design, Danish design or German Design have become a key element of national images for many nation-states, as Sparke noted: “Germany sells design in the name of science, Italy in the name of art, Scandinavia in the name of craft, and the USA in the name of business, all these national images of design were necessary strategies in the highly competitive markets of the immediate post-war years.” (1983:48).

For Teilmann-lock (2016), the ‘Designed in ...’ brand has constituted a new way of linking designs with nations; and such design-nation categorisation has been reflected in governments’ trade policies and cultural policies during the twentieth century. In her study on the myth of Danish Design, Teilmann-lock (2016) illustrated that the ‘Danish Design’ brand contributed greatly to its national economy, it was also a great force in constructing its national identity; as she noted, from the 1950s onward, the global-national image of Denmark has shifted from “its fairy tales and its bacon...to design” (2016:156). The come into being of ‘Danish Design’ was not an organic result, it was done by various promoters, such as government officials, marketing professionals, designers as well as a number of

foreign press; especially, Denmark's national design policies were key circulators of the 'Danish Design' brand.

Gimeno-Martínez (2016) noted that, in general, governments have intervened in design through various forms, one of the common approaches after the 1960s was implementing national design policies. National design policies are "government strategies that aim to develop national design resources and to encourage their effective use in the country" (Raulik-Murphy et al. 2010:54). As Woodham argued, after the Second World War, the world experienced "the proliferation of national design policy" (2010:28) – national design policies were implemented globally by various national design and industry promoting bodies, such as design councils, design centres and design departments⁶. Early promoters of national design policies were mainly in developed and industrialised countries, such as the US, UK and Japan. More countries started implementing national design policies in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Relevant examples include the establishment of the Korean Design Centre in 2001; New Zealand's 'Success by Design: A Report and Strategic Plan 4', Singapore's official design promoting body, Design Singapore Council; and India's 'National Design Policy' in 2007 (GI 2011).

Here, I will use Japan as an example of changing global-national images by implementing national design policies. Japan's 'Good Design Selection System' in 1957 was one of the most successful design promotion policies deployed in the twentieth century (Aoki et al. 2013:1), which not only contributed to Japan's economic miracle but also shifted Japan from "producing imitation goods to generating technically superior, well-designed products" (Heskett 2016:172). However, Japan, a country now regarded as a titan of design, has a long history of manufacturing cheap copies and imitations of the designs of

⁶ A detailed list of national and international design initiatives, reports and policies from 1944 to 2008 can be found in Woodham (2010:45–46).

others. According to Lucken (2016:9), there are abundant works that describe Japanese culture as one based on copying the English, French and German. French archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan observed: “Japan’s strength is its proclivity for compilation, or as others would have it, its spirit of imitation” (Leroi-Gourhan 2004:191, in Lucken 2016:9). After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan rapidly established modern systems such as transportation, communication networks, and also light industries to produce consumer goods (Atsushi 2019). Japan’s specialised modern design education also emerged in this period: in 1887, reputedly the first design school in Japan – Kanazawa Industrial School (金沢区工業学校 *Kanazawa Kogyo Gakko*) was established by Japan’s first design educator Kaijiro Notomi (Huppertz 2018:41). However, as Heskett (2016:164) argued, Japan’s early industrialisation and its design of consumer goods were generally based on Western models and products.

After being defeated in the Second World War, Japan’s industrial design was heavily influenced by the US and its lifestyle during reconstruction; according to Atsuko Kamoshida, the president of the Japan Industrial Designers’ Association: “Industrial design was to be seen in all the appliances and facilities at the service of US military personnel and their dependents...US life style [sic] was held in high esteem and was considered as being clean, efficient, and one that afforded comfort and was within the reach of anyone living within a democratic society” (Kamoshida 1993, in Heskett 2016:164). A Japanese video series called *An Encyclopedia of Japanese Plagiarism: Copycat*⁷, traces the role of design plagiarism in the development of Japan’s technology and precision manufacturing sectors during the mid-twentieth century. As the video series

⁷ The Japanese name of the video series is ‘日本パクリ大百科 Copycat’. This series was originally uploaded on YouTube but is no longer available to watch. A valid link to the series can be found here: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ws41m7J7/?vd_source=e4b8dce99f131716ab8688878de2bc39.

highlights, Japanese companies plagiarised a series of Western designs, including industrial home appliances, aircraft, automobiles, cameras, package design, logos and pop culture.

The Japanese government then assigned the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) to devise various plans to reconstruct industrial facilities and achieve economic expansion based on exports (Heskett 2016:165). Implementing new national design policies was one of its major moves to enhance the marketability of Made in Japan products. In 1957, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) initiated the ‘Good Design Selection System’ as an export-promotion policy, to promote originality in Japanese design and change the image of Japanese copy culture in international trade. This system was eventually reformed as the ‘Good Design Award’, later known as ‘G-Mark’, and is now a renowned design award internationally. It has been argued that the ‘Good Design Award’ is the most successful design promotion policy in Japan, even one of the most successful design promotion policies deployed in the twentieth century (Aoki et al. 2013:1). Japanese government’s successful strategies in national design policies, has resulted in “the global acceptance of Japanese design as sophisticated, innovative, and exciting” (Woodham 2010:29).

2.2.4 Design’s role in nationalism from below

All round the world national and communal identities are increasingly being defined through new readings of their history, and that history is frequently anchored in things.

— MacGregor (2012: xxv)

As noted in [Section 1.1.2](#), the mainstream approach to investigating design's role in nationalism focuses on design's top-down, instrumental function in industrial, economic and cultural policy-making in the hands of governmental bodies, and neglects design's constructive role in constituting nationalism and national identity through everyday experiences in people's lives. For Fallan and Lees-Maffei, this is "a regrettable lacuna" (2016:16), and they call for more academic attention to filling this research gap. In this section, I will unpack design's role in nationalism from below. In order to do so, two 'roles' need to be considered: (1) the role of design in people's everyday lives; and (2) the role of consumers in design and the construction of nationalism.

Firstly, design plays a crucial role in people's everyday lives. In *The Culture of Design*, Julier (2014) makes a distinction between two categories of design: high design and anonymous design. The essence of high design is 'exclusivity', conveyed by means of unnecessary decorations, precious materials, a clear sense of designer intervention and authorship. Since the 1980s the boundary between museum curatorship and retail has been blurred. High design often exists between high art and the high street, with its distinct cultural capital and aesthetic capital, except with a higher price tag. By contrast, anonymous design refers to objects in which "the etiquette of designers is not formally recognised" (Julier 2014:123), such as mugs and pencils, which are often conceived of as mundane objects. Moving away from design's blurred boundary with art, its visuality, aesthetics and cultural meanings, and instead focusing on the materiality of designed objects, it is easy to regard design as a part of material culture, which investigates "how people make sense of the world through physical objects" (Attfield 2000:1).

Going back to theories of nationalism, the binary between 'high culture' and 'low culture' proposed by Gellner (1983), which I discussed in [Section 2.1.2](#), is also applicable in the discussion on design. Even though designed products are often promoted and perceived as 'high culture', but once they have been consumed, used and exchanged, products "are

associated with particular nations, also often carrying mythic associations that connote particular qualities and forms of expertise” (Edensor 2002:105). Thus, the intimate relationships between people and the designed objects become crucial signifiers of identity for national labels, in a more bottom-up, subtle way.

After the publication of Billig’s seminal book *Banal Nationalism* (1995), which highlighted ‘everydayness’ in the formation of nationalism, scholarly attention has increased its focus to include banal symbols of nationalism, such as national anthems and postage stamps. However, as noted by Edensor (2002:17), such scholarly attention still focuses extensively on the “spectacular, the traditional and the official”, but not symbols “grounded in the everyday”. Accordingly, Edensor’s work looked at the interaction between popular culture and nationalism, and centred on the ‘ordinariness’ of national symbols.

However, as pointed out by Kaygan (2012), even though there are studies on banknotes, stamps, national flags and national cuisines in existing literature, mass-produced objects are still largely absent from the discussion. Fallan and Lees-Maffei’s also call for more academic attention on “the relationship between mass-produced designed artifacts and nationalism for the people” (2016:15–6). Recent scholars have attempted to fill in this gap. For instance, in Kaygan’s (2012) PhD study, he investigated the electric Turkish coffee maker as a single designed object and its relation to Turkish people’s everyday nationalism; Hadlaw’s (2019) study focused on the Canadian Contempra telephone and its association with Canadian nationalism.⁸

⁸ It is worth mentioning that, given that Hadlaw’s (2019) research focuses on Canadian design history, it mainly takes a top-down approach, resources are mainly from the viewpoint of the Canadian National Industrial Design Committee (NIDC), the company Northern Electric and the designer John Tyson, as well as media representations. How did the design of the Canadian Contempra phone function in Canadian people’s daily lives, is absent from the discussion.

Secondly, we also need to consider the role of consumers in design and the construction of nationalism. Fallan (2019) used the term ‘designification’ to describe design’s pervasiveness in every corner of contemporary society, in which things, services and ideas have been gradually ‘designified’. In this ‘designified’ society, the term ‘design’ contains a certain type of cultural value, it can refer to “fashionable, prestigious, or luxurious” (Huppertz 2020:2), “a higher status for a particular activity” (Heskett et al. 2017:69), or an indicator for newness, innovation, and change (Suchman 2011). The permeation of design has received harsh criticisms from design scholars, for instance, H. Foster (2002:17) noted that: “When the aesthetic and utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything – not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes seems to be regarded as so much design.” More importantly, the fundamental problem of the ‘designification’ of society, is the commodification of society (Fallan 2019:25).

Nations have also experienced the process of commodification. For R.J. Foster, nations since the nineteenth century have become “imagined communities of consumption” (1999:268), whereby national material culture has been transformed from political rituals to commercial rituals; in other words, the central battleground for nationalism is no longer the ‘nation’ but the ‘market’. The new generation has grown up with national commercials instead of national anthems, or as R.J. Foster (1991:243) put it, “citizens are shifted into consumers”. Commodities with a national label are not only merchandise, but mediums for objectifying the nation. A sense of identity can be generated and contextualised around commodities, not only by designers and makers, but also by consumers in the material culture of the everyday (Attfield 2000:xiii). For example, in her study of post-socialist Hungary, Fehérvári (2002) showed how American kitchens and bathrooms implied an imagined Western standard of living and a ‘normal’ life in Hungary during 1990s. For consumers, their perceptions of the nation can be shifted, positively or negatively, through

the act of consuming and using. Buying or using certain products can even be regarded as a patriotic act (Edensor 2002:111).

To sum up, in the context of “the commodification of nations” (R.J. Foster 1999) and the ‘designification’ of the contemporary society (Fallan 2019), design – in the form of designed consumer products – plays a crucial role in people’s everyday lives in a mundane and subtle way. Design objects embed various values, ideas and ideologies, including nationalism.

Chapter 3. Chinese Nationalism and Chinese Design

This chapter moves the discussion around design and nationalism into the Chinese context. It provides a comprehensive introduction for readers who are not familiar with Chinese nationalism and Chinese design. Regarding Chinese nationalism, this chapter explains its essential narratives and why it has become the driving force for China's political, economic, industrial and cultural developments. I also give a historical account and survey the current development of Chinese design.

3.1 Chinese Nationalism

China has been increasingly understood in a comparative context rather than as a unique phenomenon.

— Oksenberg (1993:332)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, nationalism has been identified as a common feature for all modern nation-states, like water and air (Tamminal 2017:755). However, Carlson (2009:24) pointed out that Chinese nationalism has often been examined as a unique phenomenon which emphasises China as a special case with distinctive culture and tradition. As a result, studies of Chinese nationalism were largely absent from general nationalism studies which isolated China from other cases. For Carlson (2009), this is one of the shortcomings of existing studies on Chinese nationalism.

Such a shortcoming has its historical roots. The author of *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, Prof. Suisheng Zhao added further weight to Carlson's claim by tracing the origin of Chinese nationalism studies. According to Zhao, during the Cold War period, China-related studies were strongly influenced by the tradition of Sinology which developed in nineteenth-century Europe (Carlson et al. 2016). When understanding and interpreting the socio-cultural and political phenomenon in the Chinese context, "the prominent old hands of Sinology" (Carlson et al. 2016:437) has focused extensively on China's uniqueness or 'Chinese-ness', which positioned China as an isolated case apart from other national and regional studies.

In this light, my understanding of Chinese nationalism builds on the broader set of theories of nationalism that I reviewed in [Section 2.1](#). This section focuses on the literature review on Chinese nationalism, and aims to understand the origin, essence and persistent themes of Chinese nationalism. It includes four parts. First, I review different schools of thoughts in studies on Chinese nationalism, following the ethno-symbolism paradigm of nationalism (A.D. Smith 2009:21). I conclude that Chinese nationalism is a modern creation based on China's historical period of humiliation. Similar to nationalisms in other nation-states, the 'top' group and the 'bottom' group are equally crucial in Chinese nationalism. The second part turns to academic debates around whether China is a modern nation-state. The third part focuses on the modern formation of Chinese nationalism. Lastly, I unpack Chinese nationalism's fundamental narrative and primary nationalist agenda.

3.1.1 Chinese nationalism: the debate

As noted by Carlson (2009:21), studies on Chinese nationalism during the mid-1990s were sparse, but today, it has become a popular academic topic both in Chinese and international academia. Furthermore, Chinese nationalism is a subject with constant controversies. As I have reviewed in [Section 2.1](#), there is a longstanding debate in nationalism studies between at least three paradigms: primordialism, modernism and ethno-symbolism. Similarly, the literature on Chinese nationalism has also corresponded with this debate, and is generally divided into two groups, namely, ‘primordialism vs instrumentalism’ (X.C. Liang 2011:5). The central controversy is whether Chinese nationalism has a historical origin before the modern nation of China was built, or it is merely a modern construction manipulated by political forces.

The primordialist take on Chinese nationalism looks into China’s history. For instance, sinologist Prasenjit Duara (1995) argued that nationalism existed in ancient China and then transformed into modern forms. However, the primordialist view has largely been marginalised in the broader scholarly discussion on Chinese nationalism. The more mainstream view on the other side is the instrumentalist one, which “easily fits in classical liberalism’s fear of the state” (Gries 2004:118). It aligns with the modernism paradigm of nationalism and identifies Chinese nationalism as an exclusively elite, top-down phenomenon, that often functions as an instrument for the Communist Party of China to claim its legitimacy. As argued by Christensen (1996), in order to maintain its position, especially after the dissolution of Soviet Union in the 1980s, the Communist Party of China instrumentalised Chinese nationalism to replace Communism as a dominant ideology. Similarly, Hayton’s recent book *The Invention of China* (2020) also argued that Chinese nationalism is a modern invention. For Zhao (2004), who compared the primordialist and instrumentalist groups extensively in his book, Chinese nationalism is a modern phenomenon that has been manipulated by different political forces, even though

it has deep historical roots. He also argued elsewhere that the reason why Chinese scholars oppose his conclusion is “due to their politically motivated intention to defend and justify Chinese foreign policy”, thus their opposition is in itself nationalistic (Carlson et al. 2016:438).

To some extent, the instrumentalist approach has successfully revealed the top-down nature of Chinese nationalism. This approach has also reached a broad consensus in the West, since it seems capable of explaining political and cultural events that has happened in China in a simplistic fashion. However, many scholars of Chinese nationalism have pointed out the shortcomings of the instrumentalist approach. For instance, Gries (2004:18) argued that “this mainstream view of Chinese nationalism is not wrong, but it is incomplete”; Callahan (2004:202) noted that the instrumentalist approach is “popular but narrowed”. The overemphasised role of the government and political elites has failed to include the bottom-up dynamics in nationalism.

After reviewing this binary debate posed in Chinese nationalism studies, I conclude that my own position is in the middle. The binarised views have captured the relative truth of Chinese nationalism, and mostly do not contradict each other, but they are inadequate in capturing the complete picture. X.C. Liang characterised this binary as ‘two sides of one coin’:

Both top-down mobilisation and bottom-up movement are real, which inevitably interlink with one another and share nationalist concerns in common. There does not exist sheer ‘popular’ Chinese nationalism completely impervious to the culture reproduction and identity construction activities of the state. Overemphasizing the difference between official and popular nationalisms, the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy severely undermines the strength of analyses provided by both camps. Instrumentalists restrict the

discussion of structural factors to the one-party system and overstate the strength of state manipulation; primordialists take a rather crude retrospective view of the popular base of Chinese nationalism while paying scant attention to contemporary social forces, such as the ever-increased global mobility, and their effects on the public psychology. (2011:8)

This evaluation of both sides brings forth a midway position—the ethno-symbolist view, as a more reasonable and balanced approach of seeing. Ethno-symbolism does not deny the instrumentalist function of Chinese nationalism; instead, it also opens the possibility of looking at the bottom-up aspect of Chinese nationalism, which is generally absent from mainstream studies. Ethno-symbolism highlights the ‘use of the past’ model to argue that national theories are not invented from scratch. The weight of history serves for political elites as instruments to mobilise the general public and, conversely, the public also constantly looks back to history for identity-making.

Gries’ (2004) influential book *China’s new nationalism: pride, politics, and diplomacy* can be categorised as an ethno-symbolist study on Chinese nationalism, which “overcome[s] both a view of the past as a mere elitist tool of the present, and also a deterministic view of the past as inescapably moulding the present” (Costa 2014:97). As he argued, the Chinese people who belong to the ‘bottom’ group of nationalism are not simply “plaything[s] in the hands of Communist puppeteers” (Gries 2004:116); rather, they often challenge the central government’s legitimacy and policy in nationalist agenda-settings. For example, he noted that during the ‘1996 Diaoyu Islands Protests’—a conflict arising from a territorial dispute between China and Japan—the famous popular nationalist book *China Can Say No* [中国可以说不 *zhongguo keyi shuo bu*] accused the Communist Party of China for being ‘too polite’ to Japan (Gries 2004:123). For Gries, Chinese nationalism, or indeed every form of nationalism, should be equally seen as an interaction between ‘the top’ and ‘the bottom’ because if we only focus on one side, our understanding would be

“dangerously distorted” (Gries 2004:119). As I will demonstrate later in my case studies, that even though the Chinese consumers and the Chinese government have similar aspirations to use design as a tool to fulfill China’s nationalist agenda, but they have different considerations and focuses.

3.1.2 China as a modern nation-state

When discussions around nationalism turn to China, a question emerges: Is China a nation-state? In this section, I will unpack academic debates around this question, which is crucial for understanding and contextualising the discussion on Chinese nationalism in later sections.

First of all, it is necessary to point out the definitional differences between three concepts: nation, state and nation-state. According to A.D. Smith (2010:13), the nation is “a named human community residing in a perceived homeland, and having common myths and a shared history, a distinct public culture, and common laws and customs for all members”. On the other hand, the state “is a set of autonomous institutions, differentiated from other institutions, possessing a legitimate monopoly of coercion and extraction in a given territory” (A.D. Smith 2010:12). The modern nation-state, as Zhao (2004:40) noted, is “a previously unprecedented form of political organisation based on particularistic features of ethnic composition, language, or territorial boundaries within which sovereignty is exercised by a government”. Calhoun described the emergence of nation-states as “the modernity of the states” (1997:66), from old forms of political entities (such as medieval lords) into new modern states, with clear boundaries, policed borders, required passports, and educational systems to mobilise the population.

The answer to the question ‘Is China a nation-state?’ is both debatable and obvious. On one hand, historians have argued that many non-Western countries predated the modern nation-state narrative and historiography, notably India, Egypt, China and Iran (Woolf 2006:75). If we start from a China studies perspective, it is true that China has kept its cultural consistency for thousands of years. German historian Wittfogel (1957) once notably concluded that the essence of China’s political system is ‘oriental despotism’, which has made China as a civilisation survive intact throughout history.

Similarly, as one of the leading American Asianists in the twentieth century, Pye asserted that “China is a civilisation pretending to be a nation-state” (1993:130). Later, building on Pye’s claim, political scholar Jacques, author of *When China rules the world*, argued that China is distinctive from the Westphalian nation-state model; it is not a nation-state but should be defined as a ‘civilisation state’⁹:

The roots of China’s sense of difference, superiority and greatness lie not in its recent past as a nation-state—indeed, its period as a nation-state largely overlaps, at least until very recently, with its historical ignominy and humiliation—but in its much longer history and existence as a civilisation-state. (Jacques 2009:282)

Since Jacques’ argument highlighted the uniqueness and superiority of the Chinese civilisation, it has been welcomed by the Chinese government and academia. Zhang Weiwei, who has been labelled a ‘Party intellectual’ by Western observers, propagated the idea of ‘civilisation state’ for both domestic and international audiences, and became “the self-anointed spokesperson for the civilisational state” (Keane and Su 2019:7). However,

⁹ A civilisation state refers to “a country that claims to represent not just a historic territory or a particular language or ethnic-group, but a distinctive civilisation” (Rachman 2019).

this self-claimed novel narrative has never gained mainstream support in international academia. Every modern nation-state has its historical roots, regardless of the richness of this history, as Kuo (2018) argued: “If this is sufficient reason to suggest that a given nation is a ‘civilisation state’ and not a nation-state, then we’re really not left with too many authentic nation-states.”

Yet, on the other hand, the answer to ‘Is China a nation-state?’ is also obvious. Because the current political entity, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and also the first modern Chinese nation-state, the Republic of China (ROC)¹⁰, were established based on the modern standard of nation-states, with clear boundaries, policed borders, required passports, and educational systems to mobilise the population (Calhoun 1997). More importantly, as I will unpack in the next section, the nation-state named ‘China’, the national identity of ‘being Chinese’, and also Chinese nationalism itself, all did not exist before the twentieth century.

3.1.3 Chinese nationalism as a modern creation

This section briefly introduces the modern creation of Chinese nationalism. As Zhao (2004:37) noted, modern Chinese history started with China’s transformation from a

¹⁰ A brief modern history of China needs to be noted. Australian historian John Fitzgerald (1996) concluded that the history of modern China can be divided into four periods: imperial (pre-1912), early Republican (1912–1927), Nationalist (1928–1949), and Communist (1949-). Before the Communist Party of China (CPC) founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the name of China’s one-party state was the Republic of China (ROC), and its ruling party was the Chinese Nationalist Party, commonly known as the Kuomintang (KMT).

universal but loosely connected empire into a particularistic but centrally governed nation-state. Before the founding of the ROC, China as a unified and defined country had only existed in foreign imaginations (Hayton 2020:9). The identity of ‘being Chinese’ and the term ‘Chinese nation’ were modern inventions, which emerged simultaneously with the establishment of the first Chinese nation-state, and also the emergence of Chinese nationalism. As Hayton (2020) noted in his book *The Invention of China*, the regime in Beijing from 1644 to 1911 did not recognise itself as ‘China’, but as the name of the dynasty, for example, ‘the Great Qing’; ‘Chinese people’ was not a recognised national identity as well. Under the Confucian worldview of ‘all-under-heaven’ (天下 *tianxia*), there was no formal name for the nation throughout its history, until the term ‘Chinese nation’ was coined by Hundred Days’ Reform (百日维新 *bairi weixin*) scholar Liang Qichao (1873-1929) in 1901. The modern concept of nationalism, was also imported from the West by Liang Qichao.

Across the world, nationalism has played a crucial role in the decolonial transformation from colonies into independent nation-states, from Latin America and Asia, to Africa (Chatterjee 1986). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even though China was not fully colonialised, there were several semi-colonies within its territory, such as Shanghai, Shandong Province, North-Eastern Provinces and Hong Kong, which were occupied mainly by the UK, Germany and Japan. China has indeed been influenced by colonialism, and experienced the process of gradual decolonialisation, in which nationalism has been a great force.

As Townsend asserted, the modern era is the age of nationalism, which “linked to the institutions and doctrines of the modern nation-state that came into being with the European age of revolution and Napoleonic Wars” (1996:37). Likewise, the modern notion of nationalism has played a significant role in the establishment of the modern Chinese nation-state. When Liang Qichao introduced nationalism to China, he claimed

that establishing a nationalist nation-state was the only way of saving China from the hands of the imperial Qing dynasty and Western imperialism (Shen 2007:15). In founding the first modern nation-state named as China—that is, the ROC—nationalism was promulgated in the official political slogan. In 1905, the ROC’s founding figure, Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), set out China’s main political doctrine as ‘Three Principles of the People’ (三民主义 *sanmin zhuyi*), namely, nationalism (民族 *minzu*), democracy (民主 *minzhu*) and people’s welfare (民生 *minsheng*) (Hayton 2020:154). As part of the principles of nationalism, Sun claimed that “expelling the foreign invaders and recovering China” (驱除鞑虏, 恢复中华 *quchu dalu, huihu zhonghua*) was the primary mission for the nation. It should be noted that even after the CPC founded the PRC, Sun Yat-sen was still highly commemorated and celebrated by the Communist Party. Most recently in 2016, Xi Jinping described Sun as “the great national hero, the great patriot, and the great pioneer of China’s democratic revolution” (Yang and Xie 2016).

One of the crucial functions of Chinese nationalism, as noted by Zhao (2004:37), is “to provide people with the means to identify their own position in the world in relation to others”, via the national identity of ‘being Chinese’. When the ROC was founded in 1912, there were five major ethnic groups in China, namely the Han, the Manchus, the Mongols, the Huis and the Tibetans. Founding figure Sun promoted the idea of ‘five ethnics under one union’ (五族共和 *wuzu gonghe*) in order to establish a unified national identity of ‘being Chinese’. Similarly, the present-day PRC claims there are 56 ethnicities in China (even though it should be acknowledged that 92% of the population are Han), nonetheless it still identifies Chinese as the unified national identity.

One thing worth noting is that there is no distinct emphasis on a Han nationalism based on the Han ethnics in China’s official discourse. By contrast, the CPC officially declared that “China must make a clear stand against Han nationalism” (F. Zhu 2014). To sum up, Chinese nationalism is the current form of nationalism in the PRC, and also previously in

the ROC, which in turn promotes the cultural and national unity of the Chinese nation, regardless of race or ethnicity.

3.1.4 The essence of Chinese nationalism

This section discusses the historical weight of Chinese nationalism and focuses on two concepts: the fundamental nationalist narrative with reference to the ‘Century of Humiliation’ (百年国耻 *bainian guochi*), and its primary nationalist agenda with reference to ‘National Rejuvenation’ (民族复兴 *minzu fuxing*). These two concepts are crucial to understanding today’s Chinese nationalism.

The ‘Century of Humiliation’

The Chinese have one very broad generalisation about their own history: they think in terms of up to the Opium war and after the Opium war; in other words, a century of humiliation and weakness to be expunged.

— R. Harris (1959:162)

As Carlson noted, even though studies on Chinese nationalism have various foci and themes, they generally agree that the roots of Chinese nationalism are located in its historical past: “a pervasive collective memory of past national experiences plays a central role in framing the content of modern Chinese nationalist sentiment” (Carlson 2009:22). This collective memory of the past was constituted and powered by two contradictory

but intertwined feelings: pride and shame (Nathan and Ross 1977:34). ‘Pride’ pointed to China’s past greatness of its 5,000 years of uninterrupted cultural development, which was widely celebrated in China’s nationalist narratives; on the other hand, the sense of ‘shame’ was predominately constructed around the historical period of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ (百年国耻 *bainian guochi*).

To offer a straightforward definition, the ‘Century of Humiliation’ refers to the historical period in China from the beginning of the First Opium War in 1840 to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, when the Qing empire and later the ROC were invaded by Western powers, Russia and Japan (Kaufman 2010:2). It is the fundamental national narrative of Chinese nationalism. For Gries (2004:46), national narratives are the stories we tell about our pasts and often “infuse our identities with unity, meaning, and purpose”. The ‘Century of Humiliation’ narrative constitutes China’s complex self-identification, and also the way in which contemporary China sees the world.

‘Shame’ is an integral source of national identity-building in many nationalist narratives. For instance, as Thorsten (2004) noted, the post-war economic success of Japan was portrayed by the US as a ‘shame’ to the US’s economic status, thus resulting in the nationalist sentiment among the US general public in the post-war period. Shame is similarly relevant to the Chinese context. The ‘Century of Humiliation’ portrayed China as a woman raped by Western imperialism (Gries 2004:48), which in turn constructed a feeling of national shame.

However, scholars have argued that the ‘Century of Humiliation’ narrative is far from being an innocent historical fact; instead, it has been carefully curated by nationalist elites in China (Callahan 2004; Kaufman 2010). From the instrumentalist view of nationalism, nationalism narratives are commonly developed by intellectuals in written texts and then transformed into common sense for the public; for instance, Callahan (2004:203) argued

that this narrative has provided the context and legitimacy for the PRC. In the founding ceremony of the PRC in 1949, Mao Zedong remarked in his well-known opening address that “the Chinese people have stood up”, implying that “only the Communist Party can save China” (Mao 1949). Later, the narrative was not only heavily implanted in the PRC’s patriotic education and history textbooks, but also well-received in contemporary Chinese public discourse, and even consumed in everyday life in the form of commemorating the official ‘National Humiliation Day’ (国耻日 *guochi ri*)—18th of September (Callahan 2006).

In short, the ‘Century of Humiliation’ is neither real nor fake, rather it is an interaction between the past and the present. In this vein, Gries concluded:

The ‘Century of Humiliation’ is neither an objective past that works insidiously in the present nor a mere ‘invention’ of present-day nationalist entrepreneurs. Instead, the ‘Century’ is a continuously reworked narrative about the national past central to the contested and evolving meaning of being ‘Chinese’ today. (2004:47)

Further, the ‘Century of Humiliation’ narrative does not stop at self-identifying as a victim, but also existed as an act of self-criticism and self-motivation, to build a strong China and to end the humiliation (Callahan 2010). Chinese nationalists have repeated a popular phrase ‘the backwards will be beaten’ (落后就要挨打 *luobou jiu yao aida*) as a political reminder; the phrase implied that China’s historical humiliation was not only caused by Western invasions, rather the underlying reason is China’s own economic and technological backwardness (Gries 2004:50). The humiliation narrative pushes Chinese nationalism into reacting and responding to the regrettable past, and contains an impetus of redemption and rejuvenation, changing from the old, damaged and backward China into a new, advanced and confident one, which brings forth China’s primary nationalist

goal: ‘National Rejuvenation’, to rejuvenate the Chinese nation’s glorious historical past (Stevens 2020).

‘National Rejuvenation’

In 2021, on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC, the party chairman Xi Jinping noted: “Over the past 100 years, the ultimate mission of our party can be concluded in one principal subject, that is, to realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Xi 2021). However, Stevens (2020:47) argued that Xi’s propagandistic slogan was nothing new, but “a profound, shared desire that has been consistent throughout time: National Rejuvenation”.

‘National Rejuvenation’ (民族复兴 *minzu fuxing*) refers to China’s profound, shared nationalist desire that aims to revive the Chinese nation’s glorious historical past (Stevens 2020). The concept was first presented by the reformist scholar Liang Qichao in 1900 (M.W. Song 2015:15), who had also introduced the idea of Chinese nationalism into China. Since then, ‘National Rejuvenation’ has remained central throughout different phases of China’s modern transformation (M.W. Song 2015:8). In 1906, the founding figure of the ROC, Sun Yat-sen, set out ‘nationalism’ as one of China’s main political doctrines and claimed that the agenda “to restore to our nation its former position” is the primary mission for China (Linebarger 1937:69). It should be noticed that even after the CPC won the Chinese civil war, Sun was still commemorated and celebrated as the ‘Forerunner of the Revolution’ (革命先驱 *geming xianqu*) by the Communist Party of China (Zarrow 2021). Sun’s nationalist legacy and the mission of revitalising China has been inherited in the PRC.

Furthermore, as observed by Johnston (2017), ‘rising’ is a common trope to describe the trend and tension of Chinese nationalism, which can be found pervasively in international media outlets, pundits’ analyses, official announcements from governments in the West, and also academic publications. It is the case that under Xi Jinping’s presidency since 2012, Chinese nationalism has been elevated to a more significant position compared to the previous approaches of his predecessors. Indeed, the Communist Party has been promoting the ‘Chinese dream’ (中国梦 *zhongguo meng*) as Xi’s signature slogan (Callahan 2014). The term ‘Chinese dream’ is a vaguely defined concept (Economist 2013), which aims to make the Chinese nation ‘great again’, and provide the Chinese people with the social and economic benefits of a “moderately prosperous society” (Callahan 2015:6). The essence of the ‘Chinese dream’ is, in effect, ‘National Rejuvenation’ (X. Li 2015).

China’s pursuit of ‘National Rejuvenation’ contains many layers. Karr’s (2015) edited book *China’s many dreams: comparative perspectives on China’s search for national rejuvenation* unpacks China’s essential nationalist agenda from various perspectives, such as politics, economics, industry, science, culture and military as well as international relations. In the next section, I will investigate two layers of Chinese nationalism, namely, industrial and cultural, which are crucial perspectives in understanding design’s association with nationalism in China.

3.2 Unpacking Chinese Nationalism

3.2.1 Industrialisation and Chinese nationalism

This section aims to unpack how industrialisation has been a crucial and persistent theme in China’s nationalist narratives and nationalist agendas. As Chong (2022:23) noted, “globalisation and the enveloping reach of the global economic order has incited new ways of envisioning the nation — materially, rather than ethnically or identitarian [sic]”, which he described as ‘material nationalism’. Similarly in China, material achievements are frequently described as exemplifiers of civilisation. The notion of ‘Four Great Inventions’ (四大发明 *si da faming*)—gunpowder, printing, paper and the compass—has often been celebrated and propagandised as scientific and technological achievements of ancient China. Nevertheless, such a notion was originated in the West by Francis Bacon, and later adopted by Chinese nationalist intellectuals and politicians in the early twentieth century, and subsequently promoted in mass culture as a ubiquitous subject after 1949, as a major source of contemporary Chinese nationalist ideology and pride (Poor 2020).

Furthermore, in China’s nationalist narratives, China’s lack of industrialisation before 1949 is one of the fundamental reasons for the ‘Century of Humiliation’ (百年国耻 *bainian guochi*). As argued by Prof. Canrong Jin¹¹, a special advisor for China’s National People’s Congress, the reason why China experienced a century of national tragedy was because “during the Ming and Qing dynasty, China was stupidly rejecting industrialisation”; and he further concluded that the ‘Century of Humiliation’ was “the time when an agricultural China was defeated and tortured by the industrial West and Japan” (Jin 2017). Such an understanding was deeply rooted in the CPC’s doctrine; as Mao proclaimed, the party’s primary mission was to achieve China’s industrialisation (X.

¹¹ Canrong Jin is a Chinese professor of international relations in Renmin University of China. He is also the vice president of China National Association of International Studies.

Sun et al. 2020). After the founding of the PRC in 1949, Mao set out ‘socialist industrialisation’ as China’s fundamental goal, which aimed at transforming China from an agricultural nation to an industrial one (J.J. Liu and Sun 2021)¹².

As I have noted in [Section 3.1.4](#), since Xi Jinping’s presidency after 2012, ‘National Rejuvenation’ has been highlighted as China’s fundamental nationalist ‘dream’ (Stevens 2020). Inside this ambitious goal of reviving the Chinese nation, industrialisation and the manufacturing industry were emphasised as ‘the foundation of a strong Chinese nation’ (NDRC 2023). After 2012, Chinese officials have repeatedly promoted “placing the substantial economy, especially the manufacturing industry as the core of China’s economic and industrial development” (Han 2022), and “building a strong manufacturing nation” (X.F. Liang 2020) as the primary agenda under Xi’s leadership.

The significance of industrialisation in Chinese nationalism is not only highlighted by the ‘top’ group of Chinese nationalism, but also emphasised in the bottom-up process. In recent years, a unique nationalist, grassroots internet community known as the ‘industrial party’ (工业党 *gongye dang*) has emerged in Chinese society. It is not a well-organised party *per se*, but a scattered, decentralised online community with a shared belief. N.F. Lu and Wu (2018:52) defined the ‘industrial party’ as a subculture group that “espouses the idea of China’s socialist construction along the lines of industrialisation and technological upgrading, with a clear sense of nationalism”. Furthermore, the emergence of the ‘industrial party’ is a mixture of Chinese nationalism and Marxist historical materialism (Leishe 2019). Members of the ‘industrial party’ insisted that material productivity is the defining feature of national progress. Shaped both by a collective disappointment with the Western economic system and a will to empower the Chinese nation, the ‘industrial

¹² For a detailed analysis of China’s industrial policy since 1949, see [Section 4.3](#).

party’ can be seen as a popular nationalist ideology with a focus on industrialisation, representing the consensus of the well-educated, nationalist general public in the ‘bottom’ group of Chinese nationalism.

3.2.2 Cultural soft power and Chinese nationalism

Industrialisation is a persistent theme in Chinese nationalism, in which material, technological and industrial achievements are used as evidence of national progress. Aside from industrialisation, Chinese nationalism is also concerned with cultural soft power and in becoming a ‘culturally strong nation’ (文化强国 *wenhua qiangguo*) (X.D. Wang et al. 2021). Chinese officials have raised concerns that as China becomes the world’s second-largest economy and a manufacturing powerhouse, its soft power “is not commensurate with its hard power” (Lo 2020). Such concerns reflect a sense of ‘values crisis’ among China’s political elites and intellectuals in the face of China’s rapid economic growth (Callahan 2015).

Unsurprisingly, the richness of Chinese culture and history has always been the taken-for-granted source of national identity and national pride. Since Xi’s leadership, the significance of ‘culture’ has been bound closely with the political agenda and slogans for the first time. For instance, the previous leader Hu Jintao discussed the ‘three matters of confidence’ (三个自信 *sange zixin*) doctrine in 2012, meaning that China and the CPC must be confident in the Socialist path, theory and system. Later, in 2017, Xi added a new layer—“a full affirmation of the value of China’s culture and a faith in its vitality”—and underlined ‘culture’ as “the most fundamental, profound, broad, basic, deep-rooted, and longest-lasting” form of confidence for China (China Keywords 2018). The resulting ‘four matters of confidence’ was subsequently endorsed by the officials as the complete

conceptual system of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Similarly, the ‘Chinese dream’ slogan also highlights Chinese culture with a nostalgia for its rich history and culture, and emphasises that “the rise of China is not only economic improvements but also advancements in culture” (X. Li 2015:514).

The articulation in the PRC around culture has been extensively discussed under the notion of soft power, a political concept coined in 1990 by Joseph Nye, the former dean of Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. For Nye, a nation-state’s hard power (or command power) refers to its military and economic powers, which rest on “carrots and sticks”, or by inducements and threats (Nye 2004:5). By contrast, soft power (or co-optive power) refers to “the attraction of one’s ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express” (Nye 1990:181). Nye placed emphasis on culture as one of three major sources of soft power, along with political values and foreign policies (Nye 2004:11). The heart of soft power is “the ability to create an attractive value system, ideology and culture” (Ren and Montgomery 2015:10).

The concept has been widely discussed and accepted in China, and even entered its official vocabulary. For Nye (2013), the popularity of the concept in China has exceeded his own expectations. As noted by Edney et al. (2020:2), among leaders from all major nation-states, Chinese leaders take the idea of soft power the most seriously. In 2007, in his keynote speech at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, former President Hu Jintao stated that the party must “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests” (Nye et al. 2009:19). Moreover, Hu linked China’s ‘National Rejuvenation’ with China’s ability to deploy soft power (Zinser 2021).

Since 2007, China has made efforts to enhance its soft power, including: its \$10 billion

annual expenditure on state-sponsored, national image-building programs (Economist 2017); the use of its state-led media network to promote China's economic achievements in the developing world (Zinser 2021); the provision of financial support for China's cultural products in international markets (Ren and Montgomery 2015:2); and the promotion of Chinese popular culture overseas (W. Peng and Keane 2019). However, based on Nye's (2015) evaluation, China's soft power has remained limited due to tightened party control and the impact of nationalism.

Nevertheless, in Xi Jinping's presidency, 'enhancing China's cultural soft power' is still being promoted as one of the crucial steps for China's 'National Rejuvenation' (X.D. Wang et al. 2021). As I will further investigate in [Chapter 4](#) on the Chinese government's national design policies, soft power has continued to be a recurring theme.

3.3 Design in China

In this section, I will focus on the transition of design in China, the intrinsic connections between design and Chinese nationalism pertaining to cultural soft power, as well as the current economic restructure in China and its relations to China's design industry.

3.3.1 The transition of design in China

It may be necessary to go back in history to get a sense of the transition of design in China. First of all, the image of Chinese design was not bound with notions around the 'copy' and 'low-wage products' in premodern history; by contrast, it was presented in the West

as ‘original creativity’. Sir William Chambers (1723–1796) was a Swedish-Scottish architect during the reigns of George II and George III, who designed the Somerset House and the Great Pagoda at Kew Garden in London. From 1740 to 1749, he travelled to China three times to investigate Chinese design and decoration under the employment of the Swedish East India Company (Harris and Snodin 1996:11). In 1757, he finished the book *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils*. In the preface, Chambers claimed: “Whatever is really Chinese has at least the merit of being original: These people seldom or never copy or imitate the inventions of other nations.” (Chambers 1757:1n). People today might be surprised to read such a comment highlighting China’s original creativity due to the fact that the global national-image of China has been largely associated with ‘fake’ and ‘imitation’. China has a rich history of arts and crafts (W.S. Wong 2011:376); however, as Tunstall (2013:202) noted, traditional crafts are often classified as distinct from modern design and innovation.

As pointed out by Ghose, the term ‘design’ does not have a natural equivalent or a directly translatable term in most Asian languages (1990:23), including Chinese. For China, the idea of modern design is considered a Western import (W.S. Wong 2007:2), which was introduced to China at the beginning of the twentieth century; likewise, Chinese terms for ‘design’ were also borrowed from the outside world, mostly from Japan. As discussed by many scholars on Chinese design (W.S. Wong 2007; 2011; S.Z. Lu 2011; Tsui 2016), the equivalent term for ‘design’ in Chinese has evolved several times, which reflects the evolving significance of design in China’s drastic social, political and economic shifts. In this section, I will use the evolution of Chinese terms for ‘design’ to discuss the transition of design in China.

From the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1950s, the term ‘tu an’ (图案 tuān) was imported from Japanese translation as the Chinese word for ‘design’, which refers to “not only meant drawing, but also including [understanding] of the material, the

production technology and solutions to solve the problems, it also includes research of the design theory.” (Tsui 2016:409), however, the current meaning of the term ‘tu an’ has been restricted to ‘graphic’ and ‘motif’. For S.Z. Lu (2011), such a shrinkage in meaning was because of the backwardness of industrial development in China before the 1950s.

In a seminal article on Chinese design published in the 1989 *Design Issues* special issue on ‘Design in Asia and Australia’, S.Z. Wang¹³ pointed out that: “China did not have a really [sic] modern design movement until 1979, although there were some fragmented attempts from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century to use design to modernise the Chinese economy.” (1989:52). From the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 to 1978, China’s economy was dominated by state ownership and central planning, and its industrial policy followed the Soviet model of industrialisation that aimed at “transforming China into a powerful, industrialised Socialist state” (Kirby 2011:269), with a distinct emphasis on heavy industries, such as large-scale infrastructure, heavy equipment and mineral machinery. By contrast, a modern design industry is usually built on light industries (consumer products) and in the context of a market economy. Therefore, owing to its industrial and economic structure at that time, China had little demand for the value-adding feature of modern industrial design. By contrast, during this period, China’s traditional handicrafts were a significant engine of profit and also could create more job opportunities compared to heavy and light industries (Tsui 2016:410). In this light, from the 1950s to the 1980s, the term ‘gongyi meishu’ (工艺美术 *gongyi meishu*) – which means arts and crafts – replaced ‘tu an’ as the officially used term, in order to preserve China’s traditional handicrafts and decorative arts (Buchanan

¹³ Shouzhi Wang is a Chinese-American scholar on design history, Professor at ArtCenter College of Design, Los Angeles, USA. As Buchanan mentioned, Wang is “one of the founders of China’s modern design education movement, and one of the most respected design scholars in China” (2004:30). Wang’s books on design history are widely taken as the guiding reference for China’s design education.

2004:30; W.S. Wong 2011:376). The wide use of this term reflects the neglect of modern design in China from a top-down approach.

Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy (改革开放 *gaige kaifang*) in 1978 was the most significant milestone for modern design movement in China. This policy shifted China's economic model into a market economy, which allowed private and foreign investments into the Chinese market, and boosted the development of China's manufacturing industry. Deng's Reform and Opening policy marked China's becoming of 'the world's factory' and the beginning of China's modern design movement, as many scholars have noted (S.Z. Wang 1989; Buchanan 2004; W.S. Wong 2007; M. Wang 2018)¹⁴. Shortly after the PRC opened up to the world, the officially used term 'gongyi meishu' faced heated discussions within China (W.S. Wong 2011:376), 'sheji' (设计 *sheji*) – also a loanword from Japan – then became the widely accepted Chinese translation for design, which is still using today (Tsui 2016:414). As also noted by Tsui (2016:414), in 1986, China's Central Academy of Arts and Crafts was changed to the Central Academy of Arts and Design, which symbols the official endorsement of the term 'design' and also its Chinese translation 'sheji'.

China's design education has also experienced significant developments after Deng's Reform and Opening policy. As noted by Buchanan (2004:3), from 1949 to the early 1980s, only a few Chinese schools offered design courses mainly based on China's arts and crafts tradition. From 1978 to 2018, the number of design education programmes surged from fewer than 10 to more than 1,500, while design students increased from fewer than 1,000 to 1.5 million (M. Wang 2018). For Keane (2013:153), the significant growth in China's design education symbolises China's modernisation. Today, top design schools in China are recognised regionally and globally. According to the QS World

¹⁴ A detailed discussion on the impact of Deng's Reform and Opening policy to China's manufacturing industry and design industry found in [Section 4.2.2](#).

University Rankings 2022, Tongji University in Shanghai was ranked first in Asia and 12th place worldwide (QS 2022).

To sum up, the concept and terminologies of ‘design’ have experienced two major shifts in China since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The shifts indicate the changing significance of the professionalised design activity for Chinese society, both for the government and the general public. However, it is worth mentioning that, even though the modern concept of ‘design’ has finally been accepted in China after its opening up, design was still not a primary concern from 1979 to 2013, not only for the Chinese government, but also for the majority of Chinese manufacturing companies, as I will elaborate in [Section 4.2.2](#).

3.3.2 ‘Made in China’: design and cultural soft power in China

After having briefly discussed the transition of design in China, it is necessary to dig further into the in-built connections between design and Chinese nationalism. As I have unpacked in [Section 3.2](#), industrialisation and cultural soft power are the two crucial and persistent themes in the modern form of Chinese nationalism. I argue that these two themes are where design and Chinese nationalism intertwine. The crucial role of design in China’s industrialisation and industrial transformation will be investigated in [Chapter 4](#)’s case study on China’s first national design policy, in which I analyse the evolution of the role of design in the PRC’s central industrial policy-making since 1949. In this section, I explain why design is crucial to China’s cultural soft power in terms of the global-national image of ‘Made in China’.

In 2007, the former department chief of China's Ministry of Culture, Yongzhang Wang (2007), published an article opposing the UK's approach of including 'industrial design' into cultural and creative industries. As he noted, China's cultural industries contain economic function, commercial function and ideological function, in other words, China's cultural products should promote a sense of 'Chinese-ness' in domestic and international markets. By contrast, he believed that "industrial design does not have ideological functions, it is out of the control of ideological departments" (Y. Z. Wang 2007). As Keane analysed, for Chinese officials, "design is a segment that responds rapidly to market needs" (2013:156), which lacks of the function of promoting ideologies and national image.

However, many elements in design are clearly culturally symbolic, it cannot be denied that designed products often function as markers of national image, as discussed in [Section 2.2.2](#). Design activities can travel through the global commodity chain in the form of consumer products, and are frequently pigeonholed by national labels (Aynsley 1993; Reimer and Leslie 2008) containing a certain type of symbolic value. For example, Italian design connotes playfulness and German design symbolises rationality (Sparke 1992), whereas Scandinavian design is warm and democratic, Silicon Valley design means hi-tech, and Japanese design represents eastern and exotic. The examples I have listed above often carry positive images; however, the current global-national image of 'Made in China' was and even still is largely associated with negative impressions, especially 'cheap', 'copy' and 'poor quality'.

From 1980 to 2015, China's real manufacturing wage increased 14-fold, which contributed greatly to China's economic miracle (Wei et al. 2017). However, as Heskett (2016:347) noted, as 'the world's factory', China's production of goods dominated on a quantitative basis; Chinese manufacturers generally lacked the ability to design products for the world market. The most representative case is China's largest personal computer

maker Lenovo, which started its manufacturing and sales in 1984, but only formed its design department in 2004. This issue was even more pronounced in the case of small corporations, where design was not the major concern for business growth (He and Jia 2007).

Gerth (2011) noted, 'Made in China' is China's 'branding challenge' for its global reputation. For Chinese officials, altering the global-national image of 'Made in China' is crucial to China's soft power. In 2009, China's Ministry of Commerce sponsored a 30-second advertisement on CNN titled "Made in China, Made with the World", which showcased the ubiquity of China-made products in people's daily lives in the West, such as sneakers, MP3 music players, refrigerators and airplanes. For F. Yang (2006:50), this move can be seen as the Chinese government's attempt to change China's national image through cultural means. Many Chinese domestic media outlets have also reported on this advertisement, and called it 'the ice-breaking move' to promote China's soft power in the international market. However, the results were not ideal. Some Chinese media outlets criticised that, this commercial video showed Chinese products with French designs and Silicon Valley technology, thus indicating that China is still at the lowest end of the global commodity chain (Z. Yuan 2009). Later, Libin Liu, the vice director of China's Advertising Association of Commerce admitted: "We cannot say it was a success, but at least it was a nice try" (Z. Yuan 2009). This representative example which happened in 2009 indicated that when there was a clear lack in the ability to produce products with original designs, any efforts to promote 'Made in China' seemed to be in vain. In 2011, China has overtaken the US to become the world's largest manufacturing power (Elloot et al. 2013), but as M. Peng and Keane (2019) noted, design, technology, innovation, creativity and other value-adding elements are still China's soft power conundrum.

At the same time, however, China was not alone in its 'national branding crisis' around poorly-made products. In fact, historically, 'Made in Germany', 'Made in Japan' and 'Made

in USA' are well-known precedents that have altered their global-national image from 'theft of foreign-owned technology' and 'poorly made', to labels for high-quality products (F. Yang 2016:18). As I have examined in [Section 2.2.3](#), Japan's success experience in implementing national design policy to change Japan's global reputation from "producing imitation goods to generating technically superior, well-designed products" (Heskett 2016:137) is one of the best examples of design's significant role in altering global-national images in the international sphere.

Likewise, the recent progress in China's design industry is gradually improving the image of 'Made in China'. In 2019, British journalist Marcus Fairs, the then editor-in-chief of online design magazine *Dezeen*, mapped out evidence of the rise of Chinese design, from the production, design and consumption sides. Firstly, Chinese-made products and services were slowly becoming well-known in the West for their good quality, and gradually replacing the old image of 'Made in China' as cheap, counterfeit production. Secondly, Chinese-designed products were successfully implementing advanced technologies; examples included Huawei smartphones, Lenovo laptops, DJI drones, internet-based shared bikes, even digital applications such as WeChat and TikTok. Thirdly, a new generation of home-grown Chinese designers were gradually achieving international success, while more and more Western designers were participating in Chinese design fairs and events. Finally, with its population of 1.4 billion, China is still one of the most valuable consumer markets globally, and Chinese consumers' demand for design is increasing at a rapid speed. Fairs (2019) concluded that "China is fast becoming the world's creative superpower" and is no longer merely a "cheap manufacturing base for foreign brands". Similarly, in China's fashion industry, as Lindgren (2016)'s study noted, Chinese fashion designers are making efforts to create their own brands and to alter global image of the 'made in China' label, which will ultimately, contribute to China's soft power and its cultural presence in the world market.

To sum up, this section has established that the ‘cultural soft power’ theme in Chinese nationalism is closely connected to the global-national image of Chinese design and ‘Made in China’. But questions about what exactly is the role of design in achieving such a nationalist goal, and whether there are any differences between the government and Chinese consumers in regards to this issue, have remained unanswered. These questions will be examined in my three case studies in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 respectively.

3.3.3 China’s economic reorientation and Chinese design

In May 2020, the Chinese government unveiled its latest economic strategy ‘Dual Circulation’ (双循环 *shuang xunhuan*): Keeping China open to the world (international circulation) while reinforcing the domestic market (domestic circulation) (Yang 2020). It aimed at reorienting China from an export-oriented economy to a domestic consumption driven one. This section reviews China’s current economic state, and its effects on China’s manufacturing industry and design industry.

Why this new economic strategy came into being has certain international political and economic contexts since 2020. The first context was the shrinking global demand for Chinese products. In 2009, China became the world’s largest exporter of goods, and the largest trading nation in goods in 2013 (McKinsey 2019:2). As ‘the world’s factory’, exports contribute a significant proportion of the Chinese economy. In 1970, exports were only 2.68% of its total GDP; after Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening in 1978, the percentage met a significant increase; the number peaked in 2006 at 36.04% (WB 2023). After the 2008 global financial crisis, the number decreased significantly. Moreover, since 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has further aggravated the decline of global demand

for Chinese goods, which “can be attributed to the threat of recession in the United States and Europe, combined with persistent high inflation” (DW 2023).

The second context was the growing economic and technological tension between China and the United States since 2018, and the idea of ‘decoupling’ with the Chinese economy in the general West (Tran 2021). The Trump administration added several Chinese companies to an Entity List, such as Huawei, ZTE, Hikvision and DJI. Such a move has limited US companies to continue supplying Chinese companies with crucial technological components, such as advanced computing chips and supercomputers (Horowitz 2019). These actions have caused serious damage to these Chinese companies’ businesses which are heavily dependent on the global supply chain.¹⁵

China’s central government’s ‘Dual Circulation’ strategy aimed at relying less on foreign markets, investments and technology, and pursuing economic and technological self-reliance (Yang 2020). Moreover, Chinese President Xi Jinping elaborated that China will rely mainly on ‘internal circulation’ – “the domestic cycle of production, distribution, and consumption” (Yao 2020), “to respond to the complex and changing international environment” (Tong 2022).

How can this economic reorientation affect China’s consumer market and design industry? China is a ‘hyper-sized’ consumer market with 1.4 billion people (Yao 2020); Its middle-class consumer base is growing rapidly, as McKinsey estimated that by 2030, China may be home to “about 400 million households with upper-middle and higher incomes”, and steadily to become “a crucial market for categories geared toward consumers with higher incomes” (Zipser et al. 2021). As mentioned in [Section 1.1](#), when Chinese middle-class consumers become more financially capable, ‘design’ has gradually become the crucial

¹⁵ A detailed discussion of the US-China economic and technological conflict and its effects on Huawei can be found in [Section 5.2.2](#).

factor in consumption choices (Justice 2012); their demand for ‘designed products’ has tripled from 2013 to 2017 (CBNData 2018). However, in many product categories, Chinese companies’ relatively low design quality cannot meet these middle-class consumers’ demands. This phenomenon was identified by the central government as the “principle contradiction facing Chinese society”, as noted by Xi Jinping, “what we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life” (Xinhua 2017).

Under such a context of economic reorientation which focused on the ‘internal circulation’ within China’s domestic production and consumption, the central government and its consumers’ demands for China’s design industry have increased. In the next three Chapters, I will elaborate further on how their demands for Chinese design are changing, and how these changes have embedded nationalist pursuits.

Chapter 4. China's First National Design Policy: Innovation Design

4.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter examines China's first national design policy as a case study. The aim is to analyse its content and discourses, and the rationale behind the policy, which reflect design's role in nationalism from the Chinese central government's perspective. As mentioned in [Section 1.3.2](#), the selection of case studies is based on the mediation focus in design studies. National design policies, in this vein, are mediating channels for identifying the governments' essential aims and objectives of using design to fulfill their nationalist agendas.

For a definition, national design policy is “the process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions in order to develop national design resources and encourage their effective use in the country” (Raulik-Murphy and Cawood 2009). The two general objectives of national design policy, as concluded by Heskett, are “creating imagery symbolising the government and its power; [and]...gain[ing] economic advantages in international trade” (Heskett 2016:229). For governments, their policy-making around design often overlooks the present situation of the nation's industrial and economic challenges and opportunities, and instead aims to instrumentalise design to fulfill the governments' concern over their economy, industry, technology, innovation and national competitiveness.

For example, as Julier (2014) argued, Danish design policy documents are mediating channels for Danish design: “Not only do they form an integral part of Danish design,

but also mediate information such as what is Danish design, its primary concerns, and a direction to which Danish design is heading” (Julier 2014:312). In Denmark’s *Design Denmark* issued in 2017, the Danish government evaluated that “Danish design’s distinct cultural value is in crisis” (DG 2007:3); in a sense, for the Danish government, Denmark was no longer a leading country that sets out design agendas like the US, UK and Japan, it was also facing challenges from new competitors such as Belgium, Italy, Sweden and South Korea. Denmark’s position as a ‘design nation’ needed to be restored by implementing a new national design policy (DG 2007:6).

In investigating design’s role for the Chinese government, its officially issued national design policy in 2015, becomes the most evident mediating channel which reflects how design is instrumentalised by China’s central government to achieve its nationalist agendas. Woodham has noted that, in the decades following the Second World War, the world has experienced “the proliferation of national design policies” (2010:28) from the Western nation-states, such as the UK, Canada, Germany and Denmark, to Asian nation-states such as Japan, Singapore, South Korea and India. However, design received little attention in China’s central policy settings prior to 2013 (Heskett 2016:239).

In August 2013, the Chinese Academy of Engineering¹⁶ (中国工程院 *zhongguo gongcheng yuanyuan*) launched a grand consultancy project, ‘Strategy Research on Innovation Design’ (创新设计战略研究综合报告 *chuangxin sheji zhanlue yanjiu zonghe baogao*). Led by two principal investigators, Dr. Yongxiang Lu and Dr. Yunhe Pan¹⁷, the project team consisted of more than 120 academic fellows, scholars, designers, specialists, and policy-makers in various positions of the Chinese government (S.X. Liu 2016). In 2015, the

¹⁶ The Chinese Academy of Engineering is a national advisory academic institution, which is directly subordinate to the State Council of China.

¹⁷ Dr. Lu Yongxiang was the Vice Chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (2003–2013) and President of Chinese Academy of Science (2004–2016). Dr. Yunhe Pan was the Vice President of Chinese Academy of Engineering (2006–2014).

project team submitted a report to the central government, which was later endorsed by president Xi Jinping. Titled ‘Innovation Design’ (创新设计 *chuangxin sheji*), this report became China’s first top-level national design policy since the PRC was founded in 1949 (S.X. Liu et al. 2018). Additionally, this national design policy has also been included as part of the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative¹⁸, a national industrial plan aimed at upgrading China’s manufacturing sector from low-end manufacturer to high-end producer of goods (Cyrill 2018).

This chapter’s analysis of China’s national design policy is mainly focused on two official publications by the project team: the main policy document *Strategy Research on Innovation Design* (PTSRIID 2016a) and a detailed blue map of the policy *A Roadmap of Innovation Design* (PTSRIID 2016b). Additionally, the analysis includes books and journal articles written by key members of the project team (Table 4-1). For instance, the principal investigator Dr. Yongxiang Lu (2017) published a book *On Innovation Design*, a compilation of fifty-six of his essays and speech drafts on China’s national design policy. One of his essays was also published in English in *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*¹⁹, which aimed at explaining his interpretation of ‘Innovation Design’. Another crucial member in the project team, Dr. Sylvia Xihui Liu, has published two journal articles in international peer-reviewed academic journals unpacking the rationale of this national design policy. These publications are valuable sources for understanding the background of the policy and the policy itself.

¹⁸ A detailed introduction of the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative and its association with the national design policy can be found in [Section 4.4.1](#) in this chapter.

¹⁹ *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* is a peer-reviewed, open access, trans-disciplinary design journal published in English. It is hosted by Tong Ji University, China, and published by Elsevier. The current editor-in-chief is Ken Friedman, a US design researcher working at Tong Ji University, China.

<i>Title of the publication</i>	Type	Year	Author	Publisher/ Journal
Yongxiang Lu on China's design and innovation policy	Journal Article	2015	Yongxiang Lu	<i>She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation</i>
Strategy research on innovation design	Policy Document	2016	The Project Team of Strategy Research on Innovation Design	China Science and Technology Press
A roadmap of innovation design	Policy Document	2016	The Project Team of Strategy Research on Innovation Design	China Science and Technology Press
Innovation design: Made in China 2025	Journal Article	2016	Sylvia Xihui Liu	<i>Design Management Review</i>
On innovation design	Book	2017	Yongxiang Lu	China Science and Technology Press
The new role of design in innovation: a policy perspective from China	Journal Article	2018	Sylvia Xihui Liu et al.	<i>The Design Journal</i>

Table 4-1: A list of policy documents and related publications selected for analysing China's first national design policy.

This chapter consists of three sections. [Section 4.2](#) provides a socio-historical context for China's industrial and economic model from 1949 to 2013, and explains why design was absent from China's central policy-making before 2013. In [Section 4.3](#), I adopt the 'policy triangle framework' (Walter and Gilson 1994) to unpack the context, content and process of China's first national design policy. [Section 4.4](#) is a detailed analysis of the association between China's national design policy and the Chinese government's nationalist agendas from three perspectives: 'National Rejuvenation', innovation, and national branding.

4.2 The Absence of National Design Policies in China: 1949–2013

From 1949 to 2013, industrial design has never become a focal point in China's central policy settings. The intriguing question is why. As Heskett pointedly asked: "Why has China lagged so far behind in discussing the role of design in industry?" (2016:239). The reasons lie in China's Socialist model of industrial development from 1949 to 1978, and the drastic and complicated shifts in its industrial, economic, and social structures after China's economic reform since 1978. This section focuses on this historical period to look at the changes in its industrial and economic policy settings, and the position in which design was situated. This section not only gives the necessary context for the development of design-related policy in China, but also helps to understand the relationship between the Chinese government, industrialisation, and the policy-making around design.

4.2.1 From 1949 to 1978: heavy industries and the planned economy

As S.X. Liu (2016:53) noted, China's road to modern design was unique because of its political, economic and cultural history. Before the founding of the PRC, China essentially had no modern industries. From 1949 to 1978 (also recognised as Mao's era), China can be understood as 'a heavy industry-oriented planned economy', as this section will expound. This is one of the fundamental reasons for neglecting modern industrial design in China during this period.

Throughout the PRC's path to industrialisation, there has been a lasting debate between 'heavy industries' and 'light industries' (Wu and Wen 2006:39). Heavy industries involve the production of heavy equipment and facilities, machine tools, huge buildings and large-scale infrastructure, as well as the mineral industry and the raw material industry. Heavy industries are usually capital-intensive, which require a central command to mobilise resources for production. By contrast, light industries commonly refer to consumer products, such as furniture, food and household appliances, which are usually less capital-intensive and more consumer-oriented. The design industry, at least in the contemporary sense, is more related to light industries.

X. Sun et al. (2020:3) concluded that, there were typically three models of national industrial development since the industrial revolution, namely the US-UK model, the Germany-Japan model and the Soviet model. The US-UK model started with light industries for capital accumulation, and then used this capital to develop its heavy industries. Germany and Japan began with government-controlled heavy industries, especially the military industry, while simultaneously, private companies invested in the light industries. Despite their different approaches, these two models were developed under a Capitalist market economy. By contrast, the Soviet model was under a Socialist system and a planned economy; it focused primarily on heavy industries and aimed to build up an independent and coherent industrial ecosystem by the 'whole-nation system'²⁰.

From 1949 to 1978, China's industrial policies generally followed the Soviet model which 'emphasising the Heavy, and neglecting the Light' (重重轻轻 *zhongzhong qingqing*). A distinct feature of this model was that all industries were guided by the government's macro-regulated Five-Year Plans (五年计划 *wunian jihu*). After the PRC was founded,

²⁰ The term 'whole-nation system' is often used to describe a system that mobilises the resources of the entire country to achieve specific goals, such as industrial and technological developments, military, and even national sports competitions.

the CPC immediately announced its ultimate mission: “Shifting [China] from an agricultural nation into an industrial one” (Wu and Wen 2006:39) and “transforming China into a powerful, industrialised Socialist state” (Kirby 1955:269). In 1952, a guideline for the whole country’s industrial policy was announced whereby “the process of heavy industries determines the speed of industrialisation, thus we must emphasise the large-scale development of heavy industries” (Wu and Wen 2006:42). Under this ethos, the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) was established under the Sino-Soviet Alliance (Giorcelli and Li 2021), which primarily focused on 156 major projects in heavy industries, supported by technology transfer and assistance from the Soviet Union (B. Zhang et al. 2006:110). Later, the Second Five-Year Plan (1958–1962) inherited the overall mission of “prioritising the heavy industry as the major strategic goal of the Socialist development” (X. Sun et al. 2020:3).

Such a development model was later described in lively terms as “lots of guns and not enough butter” (Giorcelli and Li 2021:26), it referred to the situation where people’s daily lives and wellbeing—including food, clothing and other daily necessities—were dangerously ignored under the heavy industry-focused development. After 1958, Mao began to question this Soviet approach and decided to “combine the light and the heavy” (Wu and Wen 2006:40). However, Mao’s new plan was interrupted by several geopolitical conflicts, such as the Sino-Soviet split, the Vietnam War and the China-India conflict, which forced the central government to shift its focus from industrialisation to military and national defence constructions during the Third Five-Year Plan (1966–1970). Later, during the Cultural Revolution period from 1966 to 1976, China’s light industries were seriously damaged by chaotic national political turmoil (S.J. Peng 2019:42). In short, in Mao’s era from 1949 to 1978, given the country’s low-level industrial basis, China’s central industrial policy focused extensively on heavy industries, while China’s light industries remained underdeveloped with low productivity.

In addition to China's underdeveloped light industries, another crucial factor necessary for a modern design industry was also in an inadequate position: a coherent consumer market. As Heskett (2016:238) argued, one of the shortcomings of China's industries during this period was the lack of consideration for customers' needs and desires. According to S.Z. Wang (1989:62), China had a "cumbersome and poor national market" prior to 1978. Guided by Mao's concept of the 'state monopoly of purchase and marketing', China's production and supply were highly centralised and nationalised, whereby the production of foods and daily necessities was under the instruction of the national distribution bureaucracy, manufactured by national factories, and distributed by national department stores; and consumers needed to use ration stamps issued by the central government to buy the products (T. Zhang 2021). With such a production and distribution model, producers and designers did not have any pressure to improve their products to compete within the market, and they were also unable to receive any direct feedback from ordinary customers. Consequently, industrial design, commercial design, packaging design and advertising design appeared to be irrelevant for this model of production and distribution.

To sum up, in Mao's era from 1949 to 1978, China's industrial and economic circumstance can be described as 'a heavy industry-oriented planned economy'. By contrast, the contemporary design industry resides on the opposite side: light industries and a market economy. In this regard, both China's industry and market had little need for the value-adding feature of design, let alone the policy-making around it.

It is also worth mentioning that despite this zero presence of modern industrial design and commercialised design activities in Mao's era, visual communication design nonetheless played a central role in national identity-making. As noted by Huppertz (2018:117), the design of everyday life in Mao's era mainly focused on visual propaganda, such as the Mao suit, the Little Red Book, Mao badges and political posters. Additionally,

during this process, the pervasive use of the colour red shifted in its symbolic meaning—from a colour that represented Socialism, to a visual code for the Chinese nation. The impact was far-reaching and nowadays the colour red has become a defining visual character for the Chinese nation, both domestically and internationally. Even though there was no apparent design policy *per se*, visual and communication design in Mao's era appeared to function as a symbolic instrument of allegiance and patriotism.

4.2.2 From 1978 to 2013: 'the world's factory'

This section explores China's industrial and economic settings from 1978 to 2013, and its influences on the government's policy-making around design. As David Mann, the global chief economist at Standard Chartered Bank noted: "From the end of the 1970s onwards we've seen what is easily the most impressive economic miracle of any economy in history" (Harrison and Palumbo 2019). According to the World Bank (WB 2022), China has had an average annual economic growth of about 9% per year since 1978, and more than 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty. In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy that year, and it is expected to become the world's largest economy around 2030 (Lippit et al. 2011).

Two major cornerstones of China's 'economic miracle' were Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy (改革开放 *gaige kaifang*) in 1978, and China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 (Mees 2016:21). With the help of domestic economic reform and global market demands, China soon became 'the world's factory', which contributed greatly to its economic growth. As a result, China's design industry also experienced drastic development starting from scratch. There is a consensus shared by both Western and Chinese scholars (S.Z. Wang 1989; Buchanan 2004; W.S. Wong 2007; M. Wang 2018)

that Deng's Reform and Opening policy also marked the beginning of China's modern design movement. However, in this period from 1978 to 2013, design was still not a focal point of the central government's policy-making. This section explains the reason why.

As the largest economic reform plan in the PRC's history, Deng's Reform and Opening policy, which aimed at achieving China's economic growth while maintaining its commitment to Socialism, resulted in "a massive inflow of foreign capital, technology, and management knowhow, which shifted China's vast labour resources and space to its rapid economic growth" (Kobayashi et al. 1999). After 1978, China started to embrace the market economy. The central government's role attempted to adjust itself from the overarching commander to the assistant for economic development. As a result, enterprises and industries gradually opened up for private capital investments. From 1978 to 1997, the number of private companies in China was boosted from 0.34 million to 9.73 million, while the output value increased dramatically from 423.7 billion to 11.37 trillion (Wu and Wen 2006:41).

At the same time, light industries were emphasised as the new mission for China's path to industrialisation (S. Peng 2019:43). In this reform era, China thrived and became 'the world's factory': it became the world's largest exporter of goods in 2009, and the largest trading nation in goods in 2013 (McKinsey 2019:2). An evident example is China's home appliances industry, also known as white goods, such as refrigerators, washing machines, rice cookers and air conditioners. Until the early 1980s, China did not have any assembly line for white goods; however, after the Reform and Opening policy, more than 300 international experts were invited to offer advice and technology transfer into the Chinese industry. By 2006, China was already making 70% of the world's toys, 60% of its bicycles, 50% of its shoes, 50% of its microwave ovens, 33% of its TV and air conditioners, 25% of its washers, and 20% of its refrigerators (K. Zhang 2006:257).

This time of change marked the beginning of China's modern industrial design. One of the most significant changes happened in China's design education sector, as design historian W.S. Wong (2007) pointed out, during the reform era, China's arts and design institutes were desperate to understand the landscape of international design education, they invited international designers and scholars to introduce experiences and knowledge to Chinese students, such as the Hong Kong graphic designer Daiqiang Jin, the American designer Walter Landor and the Chinese-American design scholar Shouzhi Wang. Design education in China has expanded dramatically in the mid-1990s in order to catch up with the ever-increasing demands in the commercial and industrial sectors (W.S. Wong 2007:8). However, as Heskett observed, China's newly established educational system at that time could not produce industrial design graduates capable of a wide range of work in industries (Heskett 2016:311). Meanwhile, the central government had gradually begun to pay attention to industrial design. In 1979, China's first professional organisation for industrial design, China Industrial Design Association (CIDA), was approved by China's State Council, which aimed at promoting industrial design to improve the competitiveness of Chinese products and manufacturers (Woodham 2016).

However, even though as 'the world's factory', China dominated the global production of goods in terms of sheer volume, the design and distribution of products were mainly controlled by overseas companies because Chinese manufacturers at that time generally lacked the ability to design products for the world market (Heskett 2016:347). China's largest personal computer maker Lenovo is a good example here. As reported by He and Jia (2007), Lenovo started to run its own R&D, manufacturing and sales in the domestic market since 1984, but only hired its first designer in 1996, and formed its first design department in 2004; while for many small corporations, design was not being prioritised for business growth.

For the central government, design was also not a focal point. Around 2010, scholarly discussions of China's design industry were relatively scarce. Instead, journalists took up the role and responsibility of reporting on developments. Some of the most significant reports were done by journalist Yuan He from *China Computerworld* magazine²¹. As the first Chinese magazine reporting on the information technology (IT) industry, businesses and consumer electronics, *China Computerworld* was also concerned with China's design industry as a whole. From 2007 to 2009, Yuan He has written several opinion pieces on China's lack of a holistic national design policy. She interviewed a number of key figures in China's IT and design industry, including entrepreneurs, designers and also scholars, to capture a sense of anxiety that shrouded China's design industry, as shown in the title of an article, "Chinese Design's Hunger for Policy" (He 2008). In this article, Yuan He interviewed 'the founding father' of China's industrial design, Prof. Guanzhong Liu²², who said that: "In China's entire institutional set-up, design has zero presence." (He 2008).

In 2004, China's National Development and Reform Commission (国家发展改革委员会 *guojia fazhan gaige weiyuanhui*) attempted to initiate a national industrial design policy. As the vice president of China Industrial Design Association, Liu has participated in the whole process of policy making. As Liu recalled, the biggest challenge for the policy making team was to convince the central government of the significance of industrial design for China's economy. When the central government asking the policy making team to provide the historical data industrial design's contribution for China's economy since

²¹ *China Computerworld* magazine is the Chinese edition of *Computerworld*, an American information technology (IT) and business magazine which is owned by American media company, International Data Group, Inc. (IDG). *China Computerworld* was first published in 1980 by IDG and China's Ministry of Information Industry (Forbes 2006).

²² Prof. Guanzhong Liu was born in 1943, after graduating from Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design (Germany), he went back to China to establish China's first industrial design education system (Tsinghua n.d.). As one the most well-known design scholars in China, he has been widely recognised in China as 'the founding father of China's industrial design' (Tsinghua 2018).

the founding of the PRC, the team could not find anything to support the argument (He 2008).

One of the reasons for the neglect of national design policies was China's inadequate integration and collaboration between different governmental departments; establishing a national design policy needs central command (He 2008). Before the implementation of China's first national design policy in 2013, there were several policies that mentioned design. However, they were rather scattered across different domains and governmental departments (S.X. Liu et al. 2018). Most of them were aimed at the service industry and the cultural industry, which considered design merely as a supplementary feature.

To sum up, during this period from 1978 to 2013, China's industrial sector experienced extensive growth, but it was mainly focused on manufacturing and exports. In a sense, design was not the primary concern for growth, both for private companies and the central government. Policy-making around design was only occasionally mentioned as a supplement for related industries, such as the service industry and the cultural industry.

4.3 China's First National Design Policy

This section takes a detailed look at China's first national design policy, titled Innovation Design (创新设计 *chuangxin sheji*). Here, I adopt the policy triangle framework (Walter and Gilson 1994) as the approach for analysing this policy. This framework contains three sections: context, content and process. Applying this framework, the 'context' section offers an overview of the Chinese government's current industrial strategy, and its self-evaluation of China's design industry, it explains the rationale behind the policy-making:

where the problem is, as well as why and how design is able to solve it; the ‘content’ section includes an interpretation of the term Innovation Design, it also covers various policy advice for key industrial domains; the ‘process’ section reveals a roadmap of the future development of Innovation Design, from 2016 to 2050, which illustrates the vision of the Chinese government for the future of China’s design industry.

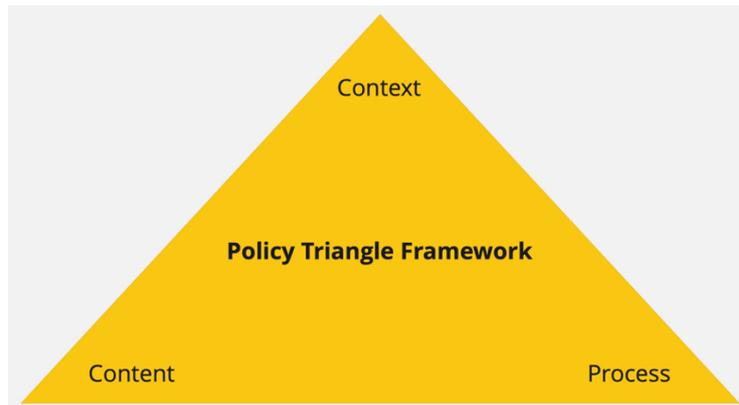


Figure 4-2: Policy Triangle Framework (Walter and Gilson 1994).

4.3.1 CONTEXT: Chinese design, according to China

This section unpacks the context of China’s first national design policy. It starts with an introduction to China’s grand industrial plan, the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative, in which China’s national design policy was situated as a sub-policy. Next, this section explains the rationale behind the policy-making, which sees design as an instrument for cultivating innovation. Lastly, this section includes a self-evaluation by the central government and policy makers on the shortcomings and challenges of China’s design industry.

‘Made in China 2025’ initiative

China’s economy will go up a level, and our exported products will also go up a level. We cannot always sell shoes and socks, clothes and hats, and toys.

— China’s Premier Li Keqiang (Reuters 2014)

As Wei et al. (2017) estimated, from 1980 to 2015, China’s real manufacturing wage has increased by 14-fold, which has contributed greatly to China’s economic growth. Moreover, according to its official announcements, manufacturing continued to be China’s major development focus. After 2012, Chinese officials repeatedly promoted “placing the substantial economy, especially the manufacturing industry as the core of China’s economic and industrial development” (Han 2022) as one of the primary agendas under Xi Jinping’s leadership. However, China’s manufacturing sector faced numerous challenges, such as “the lack of key basic materials, reliance on exported core components, limited key technologies, the lack of research on advanced basic processes, limitations in application, and an underdeveloped service system” (S.X. Liu 2016:53). All these shortcomings resulted in the global reputation of ‘Made in China’ as being synonymous with “imitation products and low-quality manufacturing” (S.X. Liu 2016:53).

With this in mind, the Chinese government’s fundamental motivation is to upgrade China’s manufacturing industry, and to promote a concept of ‘three transitions’: “From Made in China to Created in China, from Chinese speed to Chinese quality, from Chinese products to Chinese brands” (Cui and Yao 2014). In 2015, the Chinese government launched the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative – a national industrial plan aimed at upgrading China’s manufacturing sector from low-end manufacturer to high-end producer of products (Cyrill 2018). According to Kennedy (2015), this initiative drew direct inspiration from Germany’s ‘Industry 4.0 plan’, which centred on intelligent

manufacturing. Similarly, ‘Made in China 2025’ heavily emphasised high-tech industries, such as “new energy vehicles, next-generation information technology, advanced robotics and artificial intelligence” (McBride and Chatzky 2019). This initiative was later promoted by the Chinese premier Li Keqiang as his ‘Project Ace’ (F. Yang 2016).

However, the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative received enormous criticism from several major industrialised democracies, such as the US, Australia, Germany and France, which “see China’s efforts to become a dominant player in advanced technology as a national security problem” (McBride and Chatzky 2019). One of the central complaints pointed to China’s use of subsidies; even though many governments provide subsidies to domestic companies and households in various ways, but in China, “subsidies tend to be more focused on using the country’s banks and equity markets to support high-tech firms and strategic industries” (Y. Huang 2021). For the US, the argument here was that China’s ambition to control entire supply chains and to reduce its dependence on foreign technology, was a threat not only to the US’s dominant position in technological sectors, but also the global innovation system as a whole (McBride and Chatzky 2019). Goldkorn (2018) even argued that the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative stood at the heart of the US-China trade conflict. Similarly, for EU countries, Chinese subsidies would distort the global economy, and pose a threat to European firms’ market access and intellectual property protection. Since then, the Chinese government has started to downplay the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative, and even dropped it from government reports (Harada 2019). But the initiative itself still survived. As an analysis by Fitch Rating has showed (Kawase 2022), from 2015 to 2022, China’s government subsidies have distributed to companies that were closely associated with the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative, such as automakers, EV battery maker, chips and display makers, and biotech drugmakers.

As mentioned in [Section 4.1](#), China’s first national design policy was included as a sub-policy of the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative. In the official document of ‘Made in China

2025', there is a short section that focused on the strategic mission of improving China's capability of innovation design:

To demonstrate innovation design in key areas, such as traditional manufacturing industries, emerging and service industries; to build a number of innovation design clusters with world influence, to cultivate a number of specialised and open industrial design enterprises; to encourage OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) enterprises establishing design research centres, shifting from manufacturing to designing and branding; to improve [China's] education system for design and innovation; to establish a national design award; to cultivate the whole society's enthusiasm for design and innovation (SC 2015).

That is to say, the 'Made in China 2025' initiative was introduced under the Chinese government's aspiration of "building a strong manufacturing nation" (X.F. Liang 2020), wherein design was identified as a crucial instrument to achieve this nationalist goal.

Design as an instrument to cultivate innovation

In evaluating China's rapid growth since 1980, this national design policy concludes that China had 'latecomer's advantages'. Learning and experience gained through imitating products and services from advanced countries have contributed greatly to China's development in its early stage (Fan 2020). However, the 'follower' position was no longer capable of sustaining China's continued growth, and its manufacturing industry is "on the tipping point of shifting from following to leading" (PTSRIID 2016a:58). For China's

policy-makers, the strategy for moving beyond this follower positioning is cultivating indigenous innovation.

In 2018, three key researchers from the project team published an article “The New Role of Design in Innovation: A Policy Perspective from China” (S.X. Liu et al. 2018) in *The Design Journal* to introduce China’s first national design policy to international audiences. In this article, the authors summarised China’s old model of industrial development as ‘[i]ntroduction, digestion, absorption, re-innovation (IDAR)’ (S.X. Liu et al. 2018:41); that is, when Chinese companies had fairly weak technological foundations, they sought experiences and knowledge via technology transfer from international companies, and then aimed to digest and absorb them into their own knowledge, and to generate re-innovation based on overseas experiences. However, the problem with this IDAR model is that Chinese enterprises have relied too much on the ‘introduction’ component of this process, but less on ‘digestion and absorption’ (X.Q. Wang 2010:120).

In order to change the existing model and cultivate indigenous innovation, S.X. Liu et al. (2018:42) noted that China was aiming to focus on design’s ‘transformative role’, which “is integrated with digital technologies and advanced manufacturing to create a national innovation system, new business model, and platform”, the core aim for China’s first national design policy was “to represent the new role of design as leadership in innovation in the knowledge economy”.

Challenges in China’s design industry

With the focus on design’s role in innovation, this national design policy also offers a self-evaluation on four current shortcomings and challenges in China’s design industry,

spanning investment, previous policy focus, Chinese society's awareness, and design education.

Firstly, China's manufacturing companies generally had a low capability of design and innovation, they preferred to focus on short-term economic benefits, instead of long-term investments in R&D. In 2014, China investment in R&D made up only 2% of its total GDP, which was lower than the 3-5% average for developed countries. Even though companies have been aware of the value of design, innovation and R&D, but they still preferred the old path of imitation, rather than innovation, because of the greater risks involved (PTSRIID 2016b:20).

Secondly, China's central government did not have a top-level, unified national design policy. Since 2011, many executive departments in China's State Council had gradually begun to realise the positive role of design policy on the industry, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT)²³. They have issued several small-scale policies to promote industrial design, cultural and creative industries, and service industries. However, due to institutional barriers, these existing policies were fragmented and lacked unified management; more importantly, these policies only considered design as a supplementary feature for other industries (PTSRIID 2016b:21).

In order to jump out of this 'institutional barrier', and to set up a 'central command' for policy making, China's first national design policy was not launched by the executive

²³ These three departments are all under the State Council's administration, They are parallel departments with different functions. NDRC is a macroeconomic agency, MIIT is in charge of determining "China's industrial planning, policies and standards" (CG 2014), MCT is responsible for the cultural industries and tourism. They all value design as a supplementary feature for their interests, but their focuses vary.

departments above, but by the Chinese Academy of Engineering (CAE), which is “the highest honorary and advisory academic institution in the nation’s fields of engineering sciences and technology. It is dedicated to uniting outstanding talents in engineering to lead innovation and development in China” (CAE n.d.). As a result, China’s first national design policy was initiated as a ‘grand consultancy project’, it was then submitted to the central government, and later endorsed by president Xi Jinping, as I have noted in [Section 4.1](#). The decision of choosing the highest research institution as the initiator of national design policy, indicated that China’s central government has treated design policy making not merely as a ‘policy’, but also as a research project which focuses on self-examination and reflection, as I have introduced in [Section 4.3.1](#).

Thirdly, from companies to the general public, the Chinese society did not have adequate enthusiasm for design, the value of design and innovation has not been fully realised. As noted in PTSRID (2016b:21), many Chinese manufacturing companies were reluctant to pay for product design services, for instance, NewPlan Design Co., Ltd is a Chinese product design consultancy based in Shenzhen, China; around 2013, its average design consulting fee for foreign companies was 1,000,000 RMB, however, for Chinese companies, the fee was only around 150,000 RMB. In addition, as China has long lagged behind Western countries in terms of the economy and technology, the long-standing sense of backwardness has left the Chinese public and industry with little confidence in Chinese design (PTSRID 2016a:19).

Lastly, even though the number of design students in Chinese universities was high, but the quality of China’s design education still lagged behind Western countries. Taking industrial design as an example, in 2015, there were over 300 higher education institutions in China have design courses, and the number of designers trained were more than 10 times that of the same year in the US (PTSRID 2016b:21). However, the policy document evaluated that, the level of training under China’s model of design education was limited.

In addition, China's design education system was established chaotically, design courses were established under different schools with different disciplinary requirements, such as mechanics, art, media, computers and architecture. How to establish an integrated education system, was still in an initial stage in China(PTSRID 2016b:23).

4.3.2 CONTENT: Innovation Design

This section comprises a brief introduction to the policy's main contents. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, China's first national design policy was launched as a grand consulting project known as 'Strategy Research on Innovation Design' (创新设计战略研究综合报告 *chuangxin sheji zhanlue yanjiu zonghe baogao*), led by the Chinese Academy of Engineering, in August 2013. The main policy document of the consulting project was then published in 2016 under the same name and included three main sections: (1) The conceptualisation of the term 'Innovation Design'; (2) The significance of Innovation Design for China; and (3) Policy advice to key industries.

One of the major findings of this consulting project 'Strategy Research on Innovation Design', as noted by S.X. Liu et al. (2018:45), is the conceptualisation of Innovation Design. According to China's national design policy documents (PTSRID 2016a; 2016b), the idea of Innovation Design is based on Yongxiang Lu's 'evolution of design' theory, from traditional design (Design 1.0), to modern industrial design (Design 2.0), and then Innovation Design, namely Design 3.0. This conceptualisation starts with a grand narrative that human civilisation experienced an evolution from the agrarian age to the industrial age, and finally to the networked knowledge age (Y.X. Lu 2015:150). According to the document, as part of this evolution process, design has experienced changes in

various aspects, such as its use of materials, resources, power systems, modes of production, and techniques, as well as its purpose, value system and cultural implications.

In the agrarian age, design was categorised as traditional design, centring on customs, furniture, armoury, ritual objects and household objects, and mainly supported by manual production, with natural materials, such as wood, leather, processed metal, ceramic and glass. In the industrial age, after the First and Second Industrial Revolutions were initiated in the West, design took the form of modern design. Producers could use industrial machinery and steam engines to produce highly sophisticated industrial products using composite materials, such as alloy, concrete and high polymer material. Design 2.0 greatly contributed to the formation of modern lifestyle, and the variety of products has fulfilled the ever-growing need of modern society.

As Y.X. Lu (2015) described, the next phase is the networked knowledge age, which relies on information, knowledge and data as the primary resources. New industries and technologies have emerged, such as the Internet of Things, big data, artificial intelligence, cloud computing and cloud services. Through the globally connected design network and services, this new form of design activity highlights green and low-carbon production, integration, co-creation and sustainable development. In this vision, the conventional industrial design that has been dominant for nearly ten decades can no longer fulfil the future needs of human civilisation in the networked knowledge age. Design needs to evolve and get ready for the new challenges facing humanity and for the next industrial revolution. In this light, design has been put into a new role to boost innovation. In the Proposal for Developing Innovation Design to the Central Government, Innovation Design was defined as follow:

Innovation Design is a creative integrated innovation and activity. Facing the knowledge economy, it targets industries with the characteristics of green,

intelligent network, coordination, and co-creation and sharing. It enables radical innovation of technology, process, management, and business model through integrating with science and technology, arts and culture, and business based on user-centred design. Innovation design includes various design fields, such as engineering design, industrial design, service design, etc. and combines them with a systematic thinking. As an echo of the fourth industrial revolution, it facilitates transforming scientific and technological achievements into productivity.²⁴ (S.X. Liu et al. 2018:45-6)

The policy claims that, the promotion of Innovation Design will benefit China in three ways. Firstly, the primary mission of promoting Innovation Design is to upgrade China's manufacturing industry and to achieve 'three transitions': "From Made in China to Created in China, from Chinese speed to Chinese quality, from Chinese products to Chinese brands" (PTSRID 2016a:17). For the government, design will empower Chinese manufacturing to shift from imitation to independent innovation, and greatly improve the quality and efficiency of Chinese manufacturing. Secondly, in terms of ecological considerations, Innovation Design will enhance global sustainable development and promote low-carbon and green products. Thirdly, the policy sublimated the role of Innovation Design onto a nationalist level to drive the promotion of China's cultural soft power, and to enhance national security (PTSRID 2016a:28). As emphasised by Yongxiang Lu, principal investigator of this national design policy, the overarching goal of this national design policy points directly to China's nationalist agenda "to realise the Chinese dream, and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Y.X. Lu 2017:79).

²⁴ The definition of Innovation Design was originally offered in China's national design policy (PTSRID 2016a:7) in Chinese. In S.X. Liu et al. (2018)'s article published in *The Design Journal*, the authors have offered this translated version.

Moreover, the policy document also contains policy guidelines for ‘four key industrial domains’: (1) manufacturing equipment, including numerical control machines and computer-aid software; (2) innovative raw materials; (3) information and communications technology, including semiconductor chips, Internet of Things and cloud computing technology; (4) medical and healthcare products (PTSRID 2016a:65).

4.3.3 PROCESS: a roadmap from 2016 to 2050

This national design policy also establishes a strategic roadmap for the future development of design in China. It separates the time period from 2016 to 2025 into three phases: 2016–2025 is ‘the phase of laying a solid foundation and to promoting demonstration projects’ (强基示范期 *qiangji shifan qi*); 2025–2035 is ‘the phase of comprehensive improvement’ (全面提升期 *quanmian tisheng qi*); 2035–2050 is ‘the phase of [Chinese design’s] leap-forward to a world-leading position’ (跨越引领期 *kuayue yinling qi*) (PTSRID 2016b:48–50).

Each phase has different task in work. In the first phase from 2016 to 2025, the policy document states that China’s design industry will still be immature, the key task is to lay a solid foundation for its design industry and a National System of Innovation, and to promote ten demonstration projects in key industries, namely “the metallurgy of iron and steel, automobile, home appliances, electrical energy, engineering machinery, high-end equipment production, new energy and modern service industry” (PTSRID 2016b:49); In the second phase from 2025 to 2035, the primary task is to combine China’s well-development design industry with national strategies; finally, the policy team envisioned that, in the last phase from 2035 to 2050, Chinese design should possess a world-leading,

coherent ecosystem for innovation, China's design industry will provide new job opportunities and incubate new sub-industries for the Chinese society.

4.4 China's National Agendas and National Design Policy

After the detailed introduction to this national design policy's context, content and process in the previous section, it is clear from the Chinese government's perspective that design has been placed onto a significant position of industrial transformation, innovation, national security and ecological sustainability. China's first-ever national design policy is an ambitious plan that not only aims to fill all the current gaps in China's manufacturing industry, but also aspires to the construction of a world-leading, coherent ecosystem for Chinese design before 2050. More importantly, it reflects the Chinese government's vision to achieve its nationalist goal: 'National Rejuvenation'. This section is a detailed analysis of the association between China's national design policy and the Chinese government's nationalist agendas from three perspectives: 'National Rejuvenation', innovation as discourse power, and national branding by design.

4.4.1 'National Rejuvenation'

This section explains the goal of China's first national design policy which points directly to China's nationalist agenda: 'National Rejuvenation'. As I have argued in [Section 3.1.4](#), the 'Century of Humiliation' is the fundamental historical narrative of Chinese nationalism and in responding to this narrative, 'National Rejuvenation' became China's

essential nationalist agenda. Becoming an ‘industrially strong nation’ (工业强国 *gongye qiangguo*) has always been positioned centrally in Communist Party of China’s doctrine. As also noted in [Section 4.3.1](#), since Xi Jinping’s tenure post-2012, the government has set “the substantial economy, especially the manufacturing industry” (Han 2022) as one of its core political goals. In the official document of the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative, ‘National Rejuvenation’ was repeatedly emphasised:

The manufacturing industry is the main body of our national economy. It is the basis of our nation, the tool to revive our nation, the foundation to strengthen our nation. Establishing a manufacturing industry with world-class competitiveness is the defining path to a strong nation...it will build a solid foundation for realising the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (SC 2015)

As a sub-policy of the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative, China’s national design policy also echoes the same nationalist end-goal. Yongxiang Lu, the lead representative of the policy-making team, noted that the overarching goal of this national design policy points directly to China’s nationalist agenda “to realise the Chinese dream, and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Y.X. Lu 2017:79). Similarly, the policy document also stated that “to realise the Chinese dream of becoming a strong nation” (PTSRIID 2016a:60) is the national design policy’s fundamental aspiration.

4.4.2 Innovation as the central focus

For Chinese policymakers, design is the primary tool to achieve their vision of upgrading China’s manufacturing industry from low-end production to high-end manufacturing, and

for boosting innovation—as the central focus of this policy. This section analyses such a central focus, and its association with the government’s nationalist goal.

Globally, national design policies often reflect the government’s primary concerns over its economic and industrial productivity in a certain period, with a focus on design as the instrument for problem-solving. Driven by these primary concerns, national design policies usually identify a central focus, and which was often included in the title of the policy. For instance, the British Utility Design Scheme highlighted ‘Utility’ as the focus for the design policy that dealt with the shortage of materials and labour during the Second World War (Attfield 1999:2). Moreover, the focus of national design policies can shift radically under the government’s changing priorities in industry and economy (Woodham 2010:29). For India, the Eames India Plan in 1958 focused on developing a modern industrial nation and preserving India’s rich heritage of craft tradition. However, in its 2007 Indian National Design Policy, the priority was adjusted to the “global positioning and branding of Indian designs and making Designed in India a by-word for quality and utility in conjunction with Made in India and Served from India” and promoting “designed in India, made for the world” (GI 2011:4).

In China’s case, the Chinese government’s new preference for design has placed extensive emphasis on the term ‘innovation’, as in the title ‘Innovation Design’. As this section will argue, one of the underlying motivations is to improve China’s soft power in the design sector. Innovation, as defined by The Oslo Manual, is “the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service) or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization, or external relations” (OECD 2005:6), globally, the term ‘innovation’ has been used pervasively in the formation of national design policies (Woodham 2010:35) and also in their terminologies. Nevertheless, China’s use of innovation design contains another layer of significance. As I have noted in the previous section, there were extensive descriptions

and arguments in China's national design policy document expounding the significance of innovation for China's design and manufacturing industry from a practical perspective. However, this focus on innovation is not just in practical terms, but also largely associated with the soft power argument around design.

Innovation was, and still is, the biggest branding challenge for Chinese design, for the overall global-national image of China. In his opinion piece on Chinese design 'Which way will the dragon turn? three scenarios for design in China over the next half-century', Dilnot (2003:11) noted that, in China, "R&D means not research and development but replication and duplication", which has resulted in the global image of 'Made in China' as synonymous with "imitation products and low-quality manufacturing" (S.X. Liu 2016:53). China's current strategy is to alter the global-national imaginary of 'Made in China' by nurturing IPR (Intellectual Property Rights)-friendly commodities of distinct "Chineseness" (F. Yang 2016:169) to compete with established national images within the global IPR structure; in other words, the aim is to 'joining the club' of IPR-based global commodity circulation.

Discourse power

An intriguing significance of this emphasis on innovation relates to the Chinese government's concern over China's 'discourse power' in design. Since Xi's leadership, various political neologisms and buzzwords have been created by the CPC for both domestic and international dissemination and propaganda. For instance, as I have noted in [Section 3.1.4](#), the 'Chinese dream' was a new term to describe "a collective dream to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (X. Li 2015) both industrially and culturally. In 2016, a new term 'discourse power' (话语权 *huayu quan*) emerged from the

government's official narratives, and later developed by political and economic commentators to describe “the right to speak and be heard, or the right to speak with authority” (Jones 2021), or as Pandalai (2021) interpreted, “the power to prevail”.

Chinese officials have defined ‘discourse power’ as a part of soft power. In October 2020, the state media *Xinhua News* published an article about Xi Jinping’s exposition on China’s discourse system and how to build it (P. Xu 2020). For Xi, the international mediascape is still one in which ‘the West is strong, we are weak’ (西强我弱 *xiqiang woruo*). That is, in terms of setting international agendas, the West holds strong discourse power while China does not. In the CPC’s view, the reason why China has always been misunderstood and attacked on various issues is because of the lack of discourse power. In order to alter this situation, establishing China’s discourse system is the key, according to the Chinese government. As Xi himself put it:

We should accelerate the construction of China’s own discourse and discourse system, to use Chinese theory to explain Chinese practice, and to use Chinese practice to sublimate Chinese theory. We need to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that blend China and abroad, and to present the Chinese story and the ideological and spiritual power behind it more fully and distinctly. (X.L. Li 2021)

The mentality behind this reflected China’s “increasing confident and capable [sic] in propagating terminology and vocabulary that carry normative impact” (Jones 2021). Moreover, the Chinese government’s emphasis on discourse power not only concerns with setting political agendas, but also focuses on increasing China’s influence in the academic realm. In another speech (P. Xu 2021), Xi Jinping noted that the most important feature of China’s discourse power is to establish China’s own system of philosophy and social science by including China’s own academic theses, thoughts, concepts and

standards. Or to put it differently, the Chinese government's concern over 'discourse power' is much more profound than merely political argument or diplomatic debate, but rests, philosophically, on the creation of knowledge, as the core of China's discourse power, and also soft power more generally.

Innovation Design as discourse power

The significance of soft power and national branding was also briefly mentioned in China's first national design policy: "Innovation design will improve national cultural soft power"(PTSRIID 2016a:8), and "we need to gradually promote the culture of design to the level of brand competition" (PTSRIID 2016a:38). The policy-making team's attempt to enhance Chinese design's soft power aligned with the Chinese central government's emphasis on 'discourse power'. As explained by the policy-making team (S.X. Liu et al. 2018:45), the conceptualisation of the term 'Innovation Design' and the 'evolution of design' theory were the major findings of China's first national design policy. This can be seen as an attempt to generate China's own design knowledge and discourse on what is design, and what is design going to become in the future.

In the global system of design, the power of generating and popularising new terms and concepts has been monopolised by the industrial West—or as Turner (1989) argues, design itself is a discourse embedded in the ideological formations of the First World. In his study on the coloniality of design, Kiem (2017) also made a strong connection between the coloniality of design and the coloniality of knowledge that created an epistemic hierarchy in design that privileged Western knowledge over non-Western knowledge.

In recent years, many design concepts have been invented and popularised on a global scale, such as social design, inclusive design, transcultural design, design thinking, speculative design and democratic design, to name just a few. None of them have been contributed from a non-Western context. As Tunstall (2013:203) described, non-Western societies have been positioned at the bottom of the design innovation hierarchy, and play the role of receivers or dependents of Western knowledges and trends. For instance, design scholar Abdulla (2019) noted that middle-class design students in Jordan have started to ‘design’ for the poor, without considering the real-life context, simply because social design has become a global trend. This is a good example of how “[d]esign from the Global South is constantly evaluated against Western design...[and how, in turn, the countries in the Global South] often look to these design centres for models, without necessarily understanding the consequence of blindly borrowing its methods” (Abdulla 2019:256).

Chinese design, likewise, was a follower of international trends and knowledge. As a Chinese design scholar Prof. Mingheng Wang noted: “When facing new ideas imported from the West, we expect the East can generate [its] original thinking; we should not give up and turn our minds into the colony of the West” (X.Y. Yuan 2014:2). In enhancing China’s soft power, the Chinese government has aimed to portray China as “an originator and exporter of knowledge and innovation”, not just “a passive receiver of the knowledge and innovation of others” (Cho and Jeong 2008). Under such a mentality, the conceptualisation of the ‘evolution of design’ and the idea of ‘Innovation Design’ came into being as the foundation of China’s first national design policy. This can be seen as China’s attempt to make its own contribution to the design world, and to improve Chinese design’s ‘discourse power’.

4.4.3 National branding by design

As noted in [Section 2.2.3](#), branding a global-national image is one of the fundamental impetuses of investing in design at a national level. It is also the most common approach for national design policies in the industrial age, such as in Japan, the UK, Denmark and Switzerland. However, in China, there were few policy directives in its first-ever national design policy pointing at practical ways for national branding based on products. China's national design policy saw the great weakness of China's industry as the lack in innovation and the ability to create the basic infrastructure for a national innovative system, such as design software and large machinery. Such a focus is fundamentally different to the conventional approach of design policies. But why? This section critically examines this question.

The Chinese government's focus in design policy-making can be examined via two perspectives. The first perspective relates to the Chinese government's self-positioning of Chinese design's status quo. China's national design policy highlights the infrastructure of design industry and manufacturing as its primary task in stage one, such as numerical control machines and CAD (computer-aided design) software. Based on a top-down evaluation, the policy still positions Chinese design at an immature, initial stage, and as a follower of global innovation. Thus, enhancing the foundation and infrastructure for design and innovation, and building an ecosystem for design—from producer, to consumer, and also mediating channels—are the more urgent tasks for China's design industry. In this vein, the focus on national branding should therefore be located at a later stage, or be seen as an organic outcome of earlier efforts. By contrast, for most developed countries, such as Denmark, Switzerland or Japan, their basic foundation of design and innovation has long been established; therefore, their focus on national branding is considered as reasonable.

The second perspective opposes the national image focus of design policy making, and considers it as outdated or insignificant. The policy approach to focus on styling and industrial products was considered as an effective way of promoting national branding based on industrial products. For example, the Japan model appeared to be very successful from the 1950s to 1980s, and many countries that followed the Japan model have equally experienced successes in their industries.

However, as many have argued, the object-focused approach has greatly ignored the integrated role of design in innovation. This has been well-argued in Heskett's years of study on design policies. For him, design policies can be effective when they have a long-term commitment to design, but they must make sure to face and adapt new changes, demands and opportunities. If design and related policies fail to evolve, they will become "just another problem confronting our societies, rather than a contributor to solutions" (Heskett 2016:302). For instance, Japan's design policy in the 1990s and Britain's design policy since the 1980s have been evaluated as failures. In 2005, when Heskett was invited by Britain's Design Council to advise on Britain's design policy, his first advice was to "stop talking of industrial design in the context of creative industry" (2016:328). This is because the focus on styling "reduces design to a limited level incapable of delivering anything else but whimsical and superficial decorative or formal solutions" (Heskett 2016:329).

Heskett's influences are evident in China's first national design policy. He was a professor of design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University from 2005 to 2012, where he worked with many Chinese design scholars, including two key policy-makers in China's national design policy-making team, namely Xiangyang Xin, and Sylvia Xihui Liu who finished her PhD studies under Heskett's supervision. In 2019, when Heskett's book *Design and the Creation of Value* was published in China, Xiangyang Xin wrote the preface for the Chinese edition: "When working with Chinese scholars, [Heskett] has made tremendous

contribution to China's design management and design policy research.....John Heskett has influenced a whole generation of Chinese design scholars, including Sylvia Xihui Liu and me." (Xin 2019).

China's approach is, in fact, not unique. Since 2010, design's ever-growing significance in driving innovation has become a common approach across the world. For instance, the European Commission published *Implementing an Action Plan for Design-Driven Innovation* to highlight "a more systematic use of design as a tool for user-centred and market-driven innovation" (EC 2013:4). Innovative UK²⁵ issued *Design in Innovation Strategy 2015–2019*, which urged the UK to move away from the old understanding of design as merely "a tangible output—something's form, layout or appearance—or to refer to a styling activity" (UKRI 2015:5) towards design's role in boosting technological innovation. Similarly, Japan's *Design Policy Handbook 2020* (METI 2020) also highlighted the changing role of design in "the global wave of the fourth industrial revolution" (METI 2020:2). That is to say, even though China had been generally absent in the traditional object-oriented approach of design policy making, in this new global trend of innovation-oriented policy making, China has kept in step with other nation-states.

Upon analysing the policy, it is clear that it values the integrated role of design in innovation, and the adaptation of new technological and social challenges, such as digital technologies and environmental challenges. By contrast, the object-focused, national image-building approach is seldom mentioned. Lu's conceptualisation of Innovation Design can be seen as an attempt to redefine and evolve design for future technological, social and environmental challenges.

²⁵ Innovative UK is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the UK's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (UKRI 2015).

4.5 Summary

Overall, this chapter is a case study that aims at answering the first research sub-question: What role is design playing in the realisation of nationalist agendas from the perspective of the Chinese government? In this chapter, I have first recorded the changes in industrial policy and design settings in China since the founding of the PRC. From 1949 to 1978, in Mao's era under a planned economy with a focus on heavy industries, China had no need for modern industrial design's value-adding feature for commodities, let alone policymaking around design. Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy in 1978 and China's accession to the WTO in 2001 are two milestones of its growth in the manufacturing sector and design. Scholars have noted that the opening policy marked the beginning of China's modern design movement; however, as 'the world's factory' focused on manufacturing and exports, design was still not China's primary concern. When entering the 21st century, even though many corporations were hungry for a national design policy, the state government could not care less about design, until 2013. The drastic changes in terms of design in China's policy settings have indicated that design's instrumental position has been completely determined by the state's self-evaluation of the primary tasks.

Secondly, using the policy triangle framework, I unpacked China's first top-level national design policy which titled as 'Innovation Design', specifically its context, content and process. From the central government's point of view, the old model of technology development which China had followed since the opening up, known as 'introduction, digestion, absorption, re-innovation' (IDAR), is no longer sustainable for China's ambition to shift from 'a follower to a leader'. Design could step in to boost indigenous innovation, and help China to shift from Made in China to Designed in China; from China speed to China quality; from Chinese products to Chinese brands. China's national design

policy also established a roadmap for the period from 2016 to 2050 as a vision for its development. As envisioned in the roadmap, in 2050, China will have a world-leading, coherent ecosystem for innovation design.

Lastly, this chapter analysed the relationship between the Chinese government's nationalist agendas and its national design policy concerning three topics: 'National Rejuvenation', 'innovation' and 'national branding by design'. For both the 'Made in China 2025' initiative and this national design policy, the ultimate goal echoes China's essential nationalist goal of 'National Rejuvenation', to revive China to become a strong nation in manufacturing. In this particular context, 'innovation' is not only a matter of hard power, but also points to China's soft power in the realm of design. The conceptualisation of the 'evolution of design' and 'Innovation Design' is closely related to the Chinese government's recent political agenda to establish China's 'discourse power', and to create its own knowledge and academic concepts. In other words, this next phase of Chinese design is no longer satisfied with being a follower of Western trends in design; rather, it is attempting to create its own understanding and interpretation of what is design, and what will design become to confront future social, technological and environmental challenges.

'National branding by design' has been regarded as the most common approach of national design policy-making since the post-war period, such as the Japanese model of design policy. This product-oriented approach concentrated on styling to make products desirable and marketable, which represent national labels in the global market. This approach was, and still is, an effective way of promoting national branding in the industrial world. However, as Heskett criticised, this approach often neglected design's holistic role "as a dynamic element in innovation and adaptation to change" (Heskett 2016:232). When going through China's national design policy, even though the notion that innovation

design can promote China's cultural soft power is clearly cited in its policy documents, national-branding-by-design does not seem to be its primary concern.

The final point to make is that despite Heskett's (2016) thoughtful criticism of the conventional national branding approach, the question of whether national-branding-by-design is an invalid or inefficient policy approach is still worth discussing. A focus on the innovation-driven nature of design does not contradict or eliminate design's in-built cultural influence, and its role in constructing global-national imaginaries. As I will show in the next chapter on the Huawei brand, focusing on people's daily reception, consumption, and generation of national identity, the role of national imaginary-building seems to be more relevant and significant; however, the strategic aspect becomes less evident for design's role in Chinese nationalism from below.

Chapter 5. Huawei Smartphones: Symbols of National Pride

5.1 Chapter Outline

In my interviews with Chinese consumers on the issue of Chinese design and national pride, I asked them to name three iconic brands/companies/products that can represent today's Chinese design. The answers varied from Fashion brands Alexander Wang, Chinese fashion designer Ma Ke's²⁶ works, to architecture firms MAD and I. M. Pei, and also technological companies such as smartphone makers Huawei and Xiaomi, and drone maker DJI. In these answers, the most frequently mentioned is Huawei.²⁷ In investigating design's role in Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiments, I choose Huawei's most representative product – Huawei smartphones – as the foci of this case study. As I will explain in the following paragraphs, I do so for two reasons.

Firstly, in the twenty-first century, technological artefacts, particularly smartphones, have their unique position in symbolising nationalism and national identity in a banal way. As Prideaux (2009) pointed out, studies of nation and nationalism have focused heavily on the overtly political, traditional and official symbols of the nation and national identity. However, nationalism is not restricted to 'official' symbols, but is often 'grounded in the everyday', such as popular culture and commodities (Edensor 2002:17). In investigating the relationship between material culture and national identity, Edensor used the automobile as an iconic example in nationalist imaginaries. A car is a "quintessential

²⁶ Ma Ke is a Chinese fashion designer, she owns the ready-to-wear brand EXCEPTION de Mixmind, and the Haute couture brand WUYONG. She is well known for her designs for China's 'first lady' Peng Liyuan.

²⁷ The interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, seven out of ten interviewees nominated Huawei as the representative brand of today's Chinese designed products.

manufactured object” (Sheller and Urry 2000: 738), the performance of car production is the indicator of modernity, which symbolises the progress in national economic and industrial virility (Edensor 2002:122), and contributes to consumers’ pride to their nation-state. Stepping into the age of information technology, phones have replaced cars in the symbolisation of national progress in economy, manufacturing and design. When Hadlaw (2019) investigated design and Canadian nationalism, her case study was also a phone—the Contempra, the first telephone designed and made in Canada in 1967, which embodied consumers’ nationalist sentiments of Canadian-ness. As she argued, phones are technological artefacts that “are the result of long and complex processes involving many participants and numerous gatekeepers... [they indicated the nation-state’s] manufacturing capability, political and economic policies, and social reception” (Hadlaw 2019:241). In this regard, smartphones become the appropriate point of entry to investigate designed technological artefacts’ embedded cultural and ideological meanings.

Secondly, why I choose Huawei but not the other phone maker Xiaomi? Among all other Chinese smartphone producers, Huawei is the only company that is involved in debates and conflicts around nationalist sentiments. As mentioned by W. Zhang et al. (2020a), Huawei is one of the most powerful Chinese companies, the largest telecommunications equipment producer and also the most successful Chinese company in internationalisation; the company is most widely known for its consumer-electronic products, especially its most successful product—smartphones. In 2018, Huawei took over from Apple and Samsung, and became the top smartphone brand in the Chinese domestic market with annual sales of US\$52 billion (IMR 2018). Huawei’s achievements in internationalisation strategy and smartphone sales in the domestic market, have made itself a reflection of China’s technological and commercial progress, as I will expand in

[Section 5.2](#). It is also one of the Chinese companies that invested in design in early stages²⁸.

Moreover, Huawei is at the centre of trade and technological tensions between the US and China. It is a name that has appeared frequently in international news reports over the last few years, for how it got banned by the US, and also in relation to the company's CFO Meng Wanzhou, who was arrested in Canada in 2018 and released to China in 2021. Many international media outlets commonly conclude that Huawei smartphones' success is a result of China's rising consumer nationalism (Kan 2019; Kharpal 2019b). For example, during the US-China trade and technology conflict since 2018, some Chinese consumers called for a boycott of iPhones and instead supported Huawei smartphones, in response to the US's 'bullying' of Huawei (Kharpal 2019b), as a latest example of China's rising consumer nationalism. Huawei is a timely and interesting, yet contested, case to explore. However, the association between Huawei and Chinese nationalism is much more complicated than conventional consumer nationalism, as this chapter will explain, whereby design has played a significant role in Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiments around the company and its products.

As Hadlaw (2019:241) argued, technological objects must be understood within certain industrial, political and social circumstances. The general objective of this chapter is to use the Huawei smartphone as a case study to explore the role of design played in Chinese nationalism 'from below', that is to say, from the perspective of average Chinese consumers. The chapter draws on three in-depth ethnographies and touches on three major questions: (1) How is Huawei associated with nationalism in China? (2) Is the rise of Huawei phones a result of consumer nationalism? (3) What is the role played by design in Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiment?

²⁸ Please find details on Huawei's investments in design in [Section 5.4.2](#).

5.2 Huawei and Chinese Nationalism

This section examines Huawei's association with Chinese nationalism. Firstly, by analysing the in-built patriotic elements in Huawei's name, and the company's role in the US-China trade and technological conflict, I offer a historical and political context to understand Huawei's connection to Chinese nationalism. Secondly, by using an ethnography of participant Wang, I unpack Chinese consumers' grassroots celebration of Huawei as a national brand. Lastly, I review Huawei's official attitude towards the company's association with Chinese nationalism.

5.2.1 The name of Huawei

Let me begin with Huawei's name. It is not hard to find the in-built patriotic element if one can understand its original Chinese name: 华为 (*huawei*), which consists of two Chinese characters: 华 (*hua*) and 为 (*wei*). 华 (*hua*) simply means China, it is also one of the seven characters in the People's Republic of China (PRC): 中华人民共和国 (*zhonghua renmin gongheguo*). 为 (*wei*) means achievements or promises. Simply put, Huawei's literal meaning is often translated as 'China's achievements'. According to the founder Ren Zhengfei, when the company was founded in 1987, the name 'Huawei' was inspired by a poster with a slogan hanging in this office: 'Our hearts go with China, and we need to make achievements.' (心系中华, 有所作为 *xinxi zhonghua, yousuo zuowei*) (S. H. Yu 2017).

The naming of Huawei echoes Gerth's (2003) study on China's consumer culture and nationalism. In the mid-twentieth century, consumer culture in the Republic of China (ROC) has experienced a process of nationalisation where nationalist names with the prefix 'guo' (国 *guo*)—which means 'national'—were given to many categories of material

and cultural goods, such as national medicine (国药 *guoyao*), national opera (国剧 *guojù*) and national products (国货 *guohuo*). For Gerth, the widespread use of this prefix has contributed to the process of nationalising consumer culture, which was a “primary mechanism of developing nationalism in China” (2003:8).

As I mentioned in [Section 4.2.2](#), owing to the introduction of Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening policy (改革开放 *gaige kaifang*) in 1978, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has shifted from a planned economy to a market one, numerous state-owned and private corporations were later established. During this period, many companies began to incorporate the prefix ‘hua’ (华 *hua*) in their companies’ names; for instance, the conglomerate company Huarun (华润 *huarun*), the Huaxia Bank (华夏银行 *huaxia yinhang*), the Beijing based retail company Hualian (华联 *hualian*), the Shenzhen based technology company Huaqiang (华强 *huaqiang*) and, of course, Huawei (华为 *huawei*).

When Huawei was founded in 1987, the Chinese market was dominated by foreign telecommunication products, the birth of Huawei and many other companies occurred in the context of “a grand zeitgeist of patriotic entrepreneurship” (Meng and Bi 2017). In this vein, the nationalist name-giving practice in China from the mid-twentieth century (Gerth 2003) has continued in the PRC during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. For Gerth, the name-giving with a patriotic motivation has “mutually reinforced and bolstered the idea of the nation as a primary classification” (2003:8). As I will illustrate in later sections of this chapter, even though Huawei has tried to restrain the popular sentiment that is pushing Huawei to become a national brand in China, the name itself has planted a seed within the brand, which the public’s nationalist sentiment can rest on.

5.2.2 Huawei at the centre of the US-China trade conflict

As Gries (2004) pointed out, nationalism does not exist in isolation; rather, it is dependent upon interactions with other nation-states. In China's case, international relations are crucial for the evolution of Chinese nationalism, such as Sino-Japanese and Sino-American relations (Gries 2004:135). Since 2018, the trade and technology conflict between the US and China is the most recent incident that has thrust Huawei into the forefront of the Chinese general public's nationalist sentiments.

The US-China trade conflict began in 2018 under the Trump administration, which accused China of "unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft" (BBC 2020). The conflict then started as the US and China imposed tariffs on goods imported from each other. In 2019, the conflict in trade had escalated to the technology realm when the US President Donald Trump drafted an Entity List of Chinese companies that were seen as threats to US national security, which included ICT companies Huawei and ZTE, the Chinese drone maker DJI and the video equipment maker Hikvision (Horowitz 2019).

Huawei was at the centre of this conflict. In May 2019, the US President signed an executive order prohibiting US companies from doing business with Huawei and providing Huawei with products and technologies. At the same time, Western countries, particularly US allies such as the UK, EU, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, imposed a 'global embargo' on Huawei (Fung 2019). This resulted in two major disruptions to the company's businesses. Firstly, Huawei used to be the major supplier of 4G network infrastructure and a potential supplier of 5G network facilities for many Western countries, including several states in the US; the global ban excluded Huawei from major Western markets. Secondly, Huawei's consumer business was heavily dependent on global supply chains, especially the production of microchips; the global ban has caused serious damage to Huawei's smartphone manufacturing, which generated half of the company's

revenue before 2021. In Huawei's 2021 annual report, the revenue of its consumer business had dropped by 49.6%, compared to the previous year (Huawei 2021).

The arrest of Meng Wanzhou further escalated the conflict. In December 2018, at the request of the US Department of Justice, the CFO of Huawei, who is also the founder Ren Zhengfei's daughter, Meng Wanzhou, was arrested at Vancouver International Airport and later charged with bank and wire fraud, as well as surreptitiously doing business with Iranian firms in violation of US sanctions (Niedenführ 2020:341). The Huawei ban and the Meng Wanzhou incident sparked a new wave of nationalist sentiment in Chinese society. For many Chinese netizens, the US was perceived as behaving like a 'bully' towards China and Huawei. Some Chinese netizens went as far as advocating for boycotts of American technology brands, as well as demonstrating support for Huawei by switching from Apple iPhones to Huawei smartphones (Kharpal 2019b). As the next section – an ethnography of participant Wang – will further illustrate, Huawei has been celebrated by Chinese consumers as a national brand, and buying Huawei products has been portrayed as a patriotic act.

5.2.3 Participant Wang: Huawei as a national brand

Wang is a 28-year-old chief manager in an accounting firm founded by her father. Five years ago, she went back home to manage her family business after her father passed away. It turns out that she is very good at management, just like her father. Wang belongs to China's middle-class consumer group, according to L.A. Yu's anthropological research, who defined the middle-class in China in the following terms:

[Their] annual income is over 300,000 yuan. They are usually the middle-level managerial staff in the companies and are accountants, lawyers, scientific and IT workers, or professionals engaged in art. They can afford their own homes, cars, high-quality household electric appliances, art collections, and some luxury goods. (2014:76)

As a savvy consumer of consumer electronics and also a loyal Apple user, Wang owns almost all of the Apple products, such as an iPad, an iPhone and a MacBook, as well as a range of small gadgets, such as an AirPods and an Apple pencil. She was quite satisfied living in the ‘Apple ecosystem’, but she also has a Huawei smartphone for an intriguing reason: as a ‘tip’ for her job. As the manager, her job includes a great deal of business development which requires her to meet constantly with local entrepreneurs. She noted that many Chinese business owners are very patriotic: “I am not sure if they are real patriots, but at least they need to act like patriots when talking with strangers, to be politically correct.” They are enthusiastic about discussing politics, the US-China relations and also Huawei. If there is a need to break the ice when meeting with new clients, she will show her Huawei smartphone as a talking point, such as how good the smartphone is, and how unfair Huawei’s treatment by the US has been. For her, this ‘tip’ works very well; it can immediately establish a sense of shared views, and helps her to cultivate a trustworthy relationship with new clients.

Her ‘tip’ of using Huawei as a symbol of patriotism is not unique; it has been widely used by many public figures, celebrities and online influencers in Chinese society. A good example is Kokolevskii Vladislav (known by his Chinese name 伏拉夫 *fu lafu*), a Russian-born internet influencer in Chinese social media, who has over 11 million followers on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). His video contents are mainly about life in China and the core theme has been strictly consistent: how great he thinks China is, and how wonderful it is to live in China as a foreigner. In his video content, he constantly uses his

fluent Mandarin to praise Chinese foods, city infrastructures and Chinese products. This is the secret of success, not only for him, but for many internet influencers who have come from all over the world to China—to ‘design’ their characters as ‘foreigners who have suddenly realised China’s greatness’, which is something that is welcomed by Chinese audiences. On his Douyin title page, Vladislav’s self-introduction is ‘Love China! Love hotpot! Sharing my wonderful life, aspiring to get a Chinese green card!’ Similarly to my participant Wang, one of his ‘tips’ involves the use of a Huawei smartphone. In one of his most viewed videos posted in 2018, he exaggeratedly shouted, “Chinese products are amazing...I use a Huawei phone all the time!” as evidence of his love for China.

In this vein, the Huawei smartphone has become a consensual material object for nationalist sentiments. By using a Huawei phone, people are exhibiting their loyalty to the nation. That is to say, Huawei smartphones have become the present-day Mao badges in signifying the user’s loyalty to the nation. Huawei products, such as phones, tablets, TVs or speakers, and even the logo itself, have national symbolic value, becoming an everyday flagging (Billig 1995) of nationalism in a banal way. For instance, when celebrities and online influencers on Chinese social media Weibo were being criticised for using iPhones or Samsung smartphones, they shifted to Huawei products on Weibo in keeping with the expected political correctness. Even the founder of Huawei, Ren Zhengfei, has been questioned by netizens about why he has an iPad, instead of a Huawei tablet (Warwick 2019).

At the same time, however, this nationalist labelling is also damaging the brand’s reputation. Even though Wang owns a Huawei phone, she cannot help expressing her disgust at the ‘nationalist aura’ (民族主义光环 *minzu zhuayi guanghuan*) around the brand. “After all, not all Chinese people are enthusiastic nationalists.” Wang said. Internet memes that mock Huawei’s patriotic image have been widely produced and circulated online.

Wang showed me one such meme on her phone, depicting a person making a bow towards a Huawei store with the text description stating: “You don’t need to buy Huawei, but you should take a bow to their store” (Figure 5-1). “This is insane, right? How stupid, is it?” said participant Wang. “I am not against Huawei itself, but these patriotic Huawei fans are really making me sick. They are like Red Guards from the Cultural Revolution.”²⁹

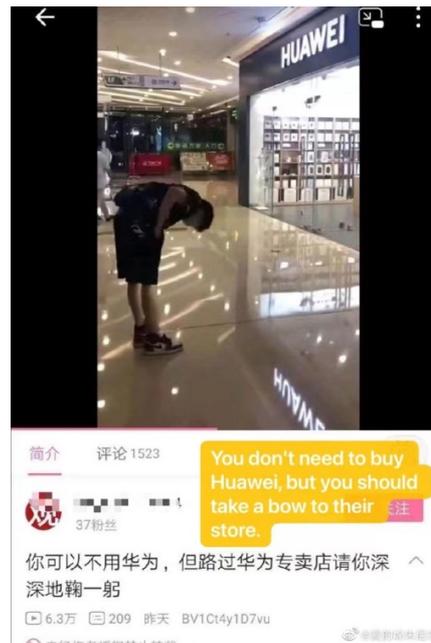


Figure 5-1: “You don’t need to buy Huawei, but you should take a bow to their store.” A screenshot from Wang’s smartphone.

5.2.4 Huawei’s attitude towards nationalism

In 2019, Huawei opened its new Huawei Ox Horn research and development campus in southern China. This 3.5-square-mile headquarter development was modelled as 12 different ‘towns’, with each town named after a European city, such as Paris, Verona, Granada, Cesky and Bruges (Kharpal 2019a); Gartenberg (2019) described this place as a

²⁹ According to my participant observation with participant Wang.

“clone of the whole of Europe”. According to Ren Zhengfei, this campus was designed by the Japanese architecture firm Nikken Sekkei using the idea of creating “a museum of the world’s most beautiful buildings” (Huawei 2019).

The campus is a good metaphor for the company’s vision of itself as a internationalised enterprise. Ren Zhengfei first founded Huawei in 1987 in Shenzhen as an import company selling various products including diet pills, fire alarms and later telephone switchers imported from Hong Kong into Mainland China. With this initial success, Ren set up a research team to develop their own telephone switchers, and the company gradually became a leading switcher producer in China, which established its foundation as a telecom giant (L. Sun 2017). Since then, Huawei has not limited itself to the domestic market; instead, it has followed a clear internationalisation strategy. In 1995, Ren drafted the guiding principle for the company: ‘Huawei Elementary Law’ (华为基本法 *huawei jiben fa*), which highlighted the company’s goal to become “a world-class equipment supplier” (X. Zhou 2018:4). As W. Zhang et al. (2020a) asserted, as of 2020, Huawei has already become the most successful Chinese enterprise in internationalisation.

If we look closely at Huawei’s official attitude towards Chinese nationalism, it is evident that it contradicted the Chinese consumers’ celebration of Huawei as the icon of national pride. Huawei has tried to avoid the association with nationalism, and treated it as a threat to its internationalisation strategy. As the founder, CEO, and the “man behind Huawei” (Pearlstone et al. 2019), Ren Zhengfei has received similar public attention as the company, since his voice generally reflects and determines the company’s direction. Despite his overall low-profile approach to media exposure compared to other Chinese entrepreneurs (Niedenführ 2020:343), ‘nationalism’ has been frequently mentioned in his public interviews and speeches over the last 20 years. When Huawei first established its internationalisation strategy in the 2000s, Ren published an article to clarify the company’s primary aim:

Huawei cannot avoid internationalisation, and we never have narrow nationalist sentiments that seek protection from the nation...internationalisation means getting rid of narrowed national pride...We have never called ourselves a national company, because we are internationalised. (ZF. Ren 2005)

During the US-China trade conflict, when popular nationalist sentiments surged around Huawei in China, Ren's attitudes towards nationalism became even clearer. On 21 May 2019, right after the US government implemented sanctions on Huawei, Ren organised a media session for both Chinese and international media outlets in which he explicitly addressed the issue of Chinese nationalism and Huawei:

Caijing³⁰: Now people have two completely different sentiments towards Huawei. Some have shown great patriotism and escalated their support of Huawei as a patriotic act. Some think that support toward Huawei has become entwined with patriotism toward the whole country; in other words, people will not be considered patriotic unless they support Huawei. This situation is now becoming more serious.

Ren: My children prefer Apple products over Huawei's. Does it mean that they don't love Huawei? Of course not. I have mentioned this quite a lot, and Richard Yu (CEO of Huawei's Consumer BG) was mad about me [sic]—he saw it as me promoting other companies' products over Huawei's. But this is the reality: We cannot simply say that one is patriotic if they use Huawei products and they are not if they don't use Huawei products. Huawei's products are ultimately commodities. People use them if they like them. Politics

³⁰ Caijing (财经 *cāijīng*) is a Chinese media outlet focusing on finance.

should be left out of it. Huawei is just a company. We have never said anything about contributing to Chinese national pride in our advertising. At our latest oath-taking ceremony, someone might have shouted something along those lines, but we immediately issued a file to discourage shouting out such slogans. They can hold celebration parties and give out medals. It's okay to say things like this privately in their spare time, sure, but we must never stir populism.

I often use a lot of examples just to throw some cold water on Huawei. We should not promote populism; populism is detrimental to the country. To have a promising future, China must be more open. Following the recent China-US negotiations, CCTV said China should further reform and open up. I was very happy to hear that. In fact, we should have reformed and opened up earlier.

(Huawei 2019a)

As Y.D. Luo (2021) noted, nationalism often contradicts multinational enterprises' internationalisation strategies, especially those that are greatly dependent on the global technology supply chain and the global market. Based on several official statements by the founder Ren Zhengfei, it is clear that Huawei is consciously keeping distance from Chinese nationalism in order to avoid damaging its internationalisation strategy and its brand image.

Further, as we can see from the quote above, he even compared Huawei's position with China's international position, allying Huawei with China's official goal of globalisation. In a sense, then, in facing the Chinese people's grassroots nationalist sentiments, Huawei is in a similar position with the Chinese central government. To recall Gries' (2004) argument, Chinese nationalism is not an exclusively top-down phenomenon because the Chinese state and its political elites have lost the hegemony over Chinese nationalist discourse. Moreover, Chinese nationalism from below often contradicts the state's policy

and view of nationalism. Even though Ren has repeatedly made such announcements, he cannot stop Chinese consumers from treating Huawei and its products as symbols of national pride. The making of Huawei as a national brand is more of a grassroots practice.

5.3 Huawei Smartphones as National Products

This section analyses the rise of Huawei smartphones from the perspective of consumer nationalism. I firstly start with an ethnography on a Chinese university teacher Liang, a loyal iPhone user who recently shifted to a Huawei smartphone. During my participant observation with him, I realised that the popularity of Huawei smartphones in China is not a singular phenomenon but situated as a part of a grand ‘New National Product Phenomenon’ (新国货现象 *xin guohuo xianxiang*) occurring in China since 2018. In a sense, Liang’s change in preference is not only for Huawei, but also for ‘Made in China’ as a whole.

5.3.1 Participant Liang: from foreign products to Chinese products

Born in 1986, Liang is a lecturer who teaches animation and computing at a local university. Growing up in a well-educated, middle-class family, he was overwhelmed by Western products, both culturally and materially. When it comes to cultural consumption, he was, and still is, living in a Euro-American cultural sphere, similar to many Westerners of the same generation. He is keen on Brit-pop music, Hollywood movies, American TV series, Marvel movies and comics. He seldom consume Chinese music and movies.

According to him, they are rather immature in many ways, such as their production and techniques.

Liang's experiences mirror Fong's (2004) anthropological research on Chinese teenagers' global identities. This generation grew up during Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening period. They embraced global cultural flows and have been heavily influenced by "images of wealthier societies that abounded in movies, advertisements, television shows, the news media, foreign products, and tales told by the elite few who had been abroad" (Fong 2004:631). Thus, they often felt that their own Chinese identity was inferior, and believed that China was weak in the grand scheme of things, not only in terms of cultural products, but also in material production, most evidently in industrial consumer products.

During his childhood, the consumption choices in his family were mainly decided on by his parents. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that his preferences have been deeply influenced by his parents, that is, the strong preference for foreign products and brands. In his parents' home where he grew up, home appliances are mainly foreign products, such as a Samsung TV, a Panasonic washing machine and a Siemens refrigerator. Liang vividly described a childhood scene where his parents had taken him to the department store to buy a TV:

In China, we have two big department stores specialising in home appliances. They basically sell everything, from water heaters, rice cookers, to televisions and washing machines. A funny thing was that they usually separate Chinese brands from foreign brands for in-store display. When you go down the aisle to the TV zone, on the right hand side you have local brands such as Hisense and Changhong, on the left you would see Sony and Samsung. I can literally smell the sophistication of the foreign products. This is not only because of their advanced features, better industrial design and so on, but also how the

products were displayed, even the demo videos had a better taste than local TVs. Most intriguingly, even the staff were good looking and elegant, with higher communication skills. I later assumed that this is because foreign brands can offer a higher salary to hire better staff. I mean, in my memory, foreign brands were a bundle of sophistication, not only product-wise.³¹

This environment has given him a taken-for-granted judgement that in the industrial consumer world, products offered by Chinese brands were lower in quality, taste and function. However, his preferences have changed drastically over the last five years. Liang got married last year and moved into his new apartment with his wife. After being approached, he offered me the opportunity to visit their new home, where they had made consumption decisions on their own.

The decoration in the new apartment followed a modern style, with clean white walls and a modern kitchen filled with Scandinavian-influenced furniture. I rarely saw Chinese elements in this modern home, and it was no different from an average British or Australian apartment. In terms of home appliances, the choices were mixed. They had bought several expensive consumer home appliances from foreign brands, such as a fancy espresso machine from the Italian brand Lelit, which cost him 15,000 RMB, a Dyson vacuum cleaner worth 3,000 RMB and a PlayStation 5 game console. His choices for basic home appliances, however, were all Chinese brands, such as three Gree air conditioners and a Haier washing machine, which Liang called ‘white goods’³².

³¹ According to my participant observation with participant Liang.

³² White goods refer to home appliances, such as washing machines, refrigerators, air conditioner, dishwashers, dryers and so on. Historically, these products were available only in white, which give them this name.

When I asked about the rationale for his consumption choices, Liang explained:

Of course, it is because of Chinese products' growing reliability and quality, and also design, especially for 'white goods'. I can say that I am an eyewitness to this development, and now it is the moment to celebrate national products. We are entering an era of celebrating the 'New National Products Phenomenon'.³³

His mentioning of the term 'new national products phenomenon' (新国货现象 *xin guohuo xianxiang*) is worth noting. In recent years, it is a popular phrase that can be easily noticed everywhere in China. Since 2018, Chinese consumers have started to celebrate almost all products from Chinese brands, ranging from fashion, cosmetics, baby products, to electronics, and referred to them loosely as 'national products'.

This phenomenon is the latest example of China's rising consumer nationalism, which denotes how products made in China have been associated with national sentiments. Nevertheless, the use of the term 'national products' is not novel in modern Chinese history; it was coined and promoted during the 'National Products Movement' (国货运动 *guohuo yundong*) during the early twentieth century. So, what's 'new' this time? Why does it matter to Huawei smartphones? The following section will be a deep dive into China's consumer nationalism, and the notion of 'national products'.

5.3.2 Consumer nationalism in China

This section aims to investigate the notion of 'national products' in China from the perspective of consumer nationalism, as the backdrop to Huawei smartphones' rise in

³³ According to my participant observation with participant Liang.

China. In this section, I offer a general discussion of consumer nationalism, consumer nationalism in China, and how consumer nationalism resulted in a binary between foreign products and local products for Chinese consumers.

Consumer Nationalism

In *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, Gerth (2011:2) defines consumer nationalism as follows: “Consumer nationalism refers to efforts to define buying (or consumption) as a political statement through the nonconsumption of things from an offending country or countries and the consumption of one’s own nationally produced goods and services”. In practice, consumer nationalism is a two-fold phenomenon, which not only refers to the invocation of national identity by rejecting imported products from a particular nation (J. Wang 2006), but also to promoting the consumption of local products as a way of helping the country.

For Gerth (2011:2), consumer nationalism is a combination of two great forces in modern history: nationalism and consumerism. Foster (1999:268) noted that, since the nineteenth century, all nation-states have experienced a process of commodification and become “imagined communities of consumption”. The central battleground for nationalism has changed from the nation to the market, while citizens have shifted to become consumers (Foster 1999:263)—or as Porter (2021) put it, ‘consumer citizens’. That is to say, the practice of nationalism for ‘consumer citizens’ has become not only a political act, but also a commercial one. Commodities and popular cultures have thus become the great force to produce and reproduce the national identity of the general public.

Furthermore, consumer nationalism is a transnational phenomenon; however, it is not unique to any specific country. Almost all countries have experienced, and are still

experiencing, a certain degree of consumer nationalism, including the US (Frank 1999), the UK (Hilton 2003), Australia (Fozdar 2018), India (Bayly 1986) and South Korea (L. Nelson 2000).

Consumer Nationalism in China

Across the world, nationalised consumer culture has played a central role in the creation and recreation of modern national identities (Gerth 2011:3). This is also the case in the construction of Chinese nationalism. In his seminal book *China Made*, Gerth (2003) conducted detailed research on the ‘National Products Movement’ (国货运动 *guohuo yundong*) in the ROC during the early twentieth century. As he concluded, the ‘National Products Movement’ referred to how “a broad array of political, economic, and social forces placed cultural constraints on consumption through a massive but diffuse social movement” (Gerth 2003:4).

This movement included top-down mandatory laws for using Chinese materials, boycotts against Japan’s imperialist invasion, exhibitions and advertisements to promote Chinese made products, and so on (Gerth 2003:4). The participants of this movement ranged from the ROC’s government, and Chinese companies, to ordinary Chinese consumers. As he also aptly concluded, this movement was significant in constructing the modern Chinese nation and Chinese nationalism: “The consumption of commodities defined by the concept of nationality not only helped create the very idea of ‘modern China’ but also became a primary means by which people in China began to conceptualize themselves as citizens of a modern nation” (Gerth 2003:3).

For the Chinese society, the ‘National Products Movements’ has had two long-lasting

impacts on China's consumer nationalism. The first impact is the coinage of the term 'national products' (国货 *guohuo*). By and large, consumer nationalism movements worldwide have always involved creating unique terminologies and vocabularies, such as indigenisation, domestication, import-substitution, autarky and de-foreignisation (Gerth 2011). In this Chinese case, the creation of 'national products' was an act of nationalising consumer culture. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the creation of new vocabularies with the prefix of 'national' (国 *guo*) was a crucial mechanism for bolstering the modern idea of 'being Chinese' for the ordinary people, in the first modern Chinese nation—the ROC. The same terminology of 'national products' has been adopted in the twenty-first century in the form of the 'New National Products Phenomenon' (新国货现象 *xin guohuo xianxiang*), in which Huawei was involved.

As noted, consumer nationalism is often a two-fold practice, which includes the rejection of imported commodities and the supportive consumption of locally made products; they are the two sides of one coin. In China, consumer nationalism also contains these two sentiments. In this respect, the old 'movement' and the new 'phenomenon' have more similarities than differences. However, there is a significant difference in the focus and emphasis in these approaches. Overall, the old 'movement' highlighted the rejection of foreign goods, more so than supporting Chinese products. On the other hand, the new 'phenomenon' places greater emphasis on buying local brands and products.

Foreign products as social aspirations

As J. Wang (2006:189) noted, when the nationality of products becomes "the central meaning of a commodity", consumer nationalism often results in a binary between foreign products and local products. The second impact of the 'National Products Movements' is that it has popularised such a binary in Chinese society and played a central role in the

construction of consumer nationalism in China, as this section will explain.

The global image of ‘Made in China’ is often associated with ‘low quality’, ‘cheap’ and ‘fake’. For Chinese consumers, their impression of ‘Made in China’ products was similar to the global image. By contrast, as Chan (2015) noted, Chinese consumers often regarded foreign goods in terms of social aspirations to be modern and civilised. Here, I will use the terminology of ‘foreign products’ (洋货 *yanghuo*) in Chinese, and its changing symbolic meaning in the Chinese society, as an example to further unpack this argument.

For Gerth (2003:180), the terminology of ‘foreign products’ (洋货 *yanghuo*) in Chinese together with its symbolic cultural meaning has moved beyond simple binarism, and reveals Chinese consumers’ complicated, and often contradictory, sentiments towards imported goods, exemplifying both allure and fear. The Chinese term for ‘foreign’ is ‘yang’ (洋 *yang*), which originally referred to ‘the ocean’, but it has evolved to describe “imported goods, ideas and knowledges that come from the other side of the ocean” (Su 2017:11). ‘Yang’ has been combined with other terms and used in many categories in the Chinese vocabulary: for example, when the bicycle was first imported to China from the UK in the late 1890s, it was initially called ‘foreign horse’ (洋马 *yangma*); similarly, matchsticks were ‘foreign fire’ (洋火 *yanghuo*), suits were ‘foreign clothes’ (洋装 *yangzhuang*), tomatoes were ‘foreign persimmons’ (洋柿 *yangshi*) and onions were ‘foreign scallions’ (洋葱 *yangcong*) (Su 2017:11).

The symbolic meanings of the term ‘yang’ in China have shifted drastically over time. The term initially implicated foreign, novel and unfamiliar things which Chinese consumers refused to adopt. Later, after the Chinese market’s total embrace of imported goods, ‘yang’ shifted in meaning to mean the collapse of Chinese tradition and an embrace of Western norms (Su 2017:12). In the 1899 issue of the Shanghai-based media outlet *Newspaper of Recreation and Game*, there were two reports that exhibited the socio-cultural implications

of a bicycle in Chinese society: (1) a Chinese farmer sighed emotionally: “The foreign horse [the bicycle] shows that Westerners are more advanced than us.” (2) students look down upon one of their teachers, simply because the teacher does not own a bike (T. Xu 2007). Here, owning a ‘foreign horse’ indicates the new, Westernised, modernised, civilised and advanced state of life (T. Xu 2007). These example underlines the sense of cultural cringe in relation to Western industrial products.

Chan noted that the concept of ‘yang’ has become the social aspiration for “Chinese consumers who aspired to be modern, fashionable, progressive or civilised” (Chan 2015:236). For instance, the term ‘foreign aura’ (洋气 *yangqi*) is a unique Chinese adjective that is used to describe a person’s stylish, fashionable and good-looking outfit, and is still an extremely common expression in contemporary Chinese language (Su 2017:11). Similarly, in anthropologist Yunxiang Yan’s seminal research on China’s first McDonald’s store in the 1990s, he recorded how this Western cheap fast food became a sophisticated high-level restaurant for Chinese consumers: “People even felt more sophisticated than the people who passed by” (Yan 2009:211).

This conception of foreignness as good, new and fashionable has been thus transformed into a crucial value that dominates Chinese consumers’ imagination of high-quality goods. Buying foreign or local brands has become a Bourdieusian judgement of taste, and a symbol of social class. This is fundamental to understanding many phenomena in the Chinese consumer market today, including why the rise of Huawei has various symbolic meanings, which will be unpacked in the following section.

5.3.3 Huawei smartphones and consumer nationalism

This section illustrates the association between Huawei smartphone and consumer nationalism, around one intriguing term: ‘Proud’. Along with the Chinese ‘white goods’ bought by Liang, he recently changed from using an iPhone to a Huawei smartphone—a Huawei P40 Pro Plus, which cost him around 7,600 RMB. Liang stated:

It is not a cheap phone, to be honest. [The price of] an iPhone is usually around 5,000–6,000 RMB, Huawei smartphones are even more expensive. But it’s worth the price, Huawei [smartphone] is a great product; high quality, fine material and good design. I would say that Huawei smartphones are the most effective representation of what is ‘Made in China’ today. I even feel proud of using it.³⁴

‘Proud’, is an intriguing term in such a context, which I will analyse it in this section from two perspectives: social status and national pride.

Social status

Switching between different smartphone brands seems to be a mundane consumer activity, but the consumption choices may imply something else. Based on Bourdieu’s (1984) idea of cultural distinction, Lury (1996:186) argued that “consumption is an instrument of both identification and differentiation, a means by which individuals mark their relationship to particular social groups and their position in socially stratified societies”. L.A. Yu (2014:83) has observed that smartphones are social status objects in

³⁴ According to my participant observation with participant Liang.

Chinese society. It is worth noting that, despite China's immense economic rise, there is a high degree of income inequality in Chinese society, which has been acknowledged as one of the most unequal economies in the world (Chen 2020). In China's smartphone market, the polarisation of the rich and the poor has resulted in the corresponding polarisation of the low-end and high-end phone markets. More interestingly, before 2012, this polarisation existed as a simple binary with Chinese phones as low-end and foreign phones as high-end.

As noted in X.Y. Wang's (2016) research, before 2012, there was a common judgement that brands like Samsung and Apple were 'good brands'; by contrast, 'bad brands' referred to Chinese-made counterfeit phones. Users of Chinese phones were mainly migrant workers from rural China, who had less economic, social and cultural capital (X.Y. Wang 2016:53). Conversely, using an iPhone in China was a symbol of high social status, which reflected the owner's economic and cultural capital for appreciating technology, innovation and fashion trends (L.A. Yu 2014:84).

One of the reasons for this distinction between foreign phones and Chinese phones lies in the drastic transformation of China's smartphone market. In only one decade from 2000 to 2010, China has changed from a country where only a few people owned landline phones, into a society with one billion mobile phone users (Flannery 2012). Before local phone makers were capable of producing high-quality smartphones, the market for high-end smartphones was dominated by foreign brands, such as Nokia, Motorola, Samsung, and later, Apple, featuring sophisticated hardware, reliable software and attractive industrial design.

The year 2012 marked the shift in China's phone manufacturing industry, the end of the *shanzhai* era (X.Y. Wang 2016:53) and the rise of Chinese smartphone brands, notably Xiaomi, OPPO and Vivo. However, the initial strategy of these Chinese brands was still

aimed at the low-end market, to make budget phones at a low price. As shown in the 2012 sales volume data chart (Table 5-1), China’s smartphone market was dominated by Samsung (22.5%), Nokia (16.2%) and Apple (12.8%); local budget smartphones were not status objects for consumers from a higher social class for whom foreign brands were still dominant (IMR 2012).

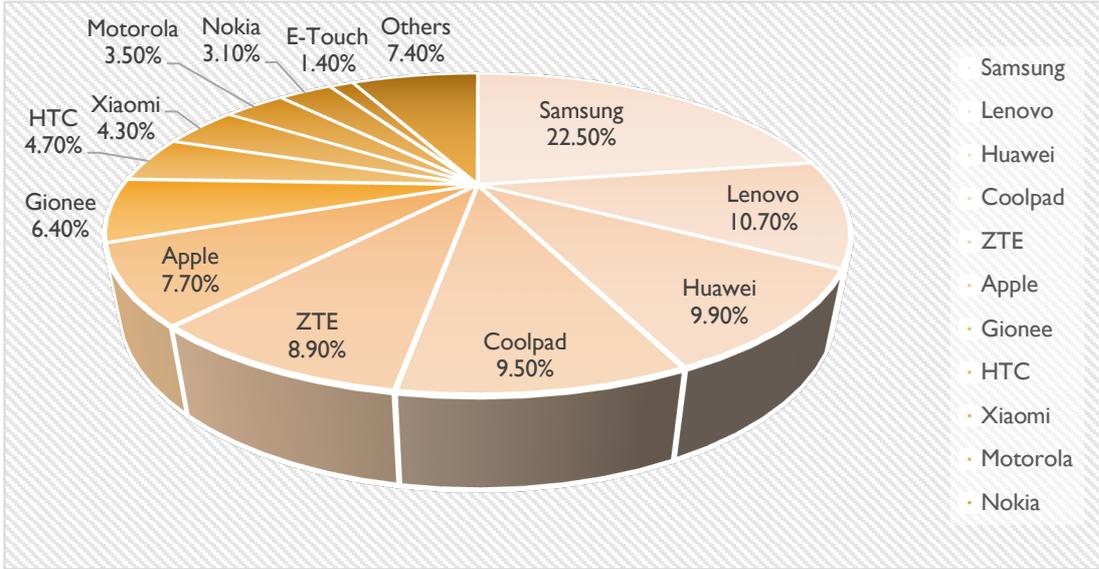


Table 5-1: The sales volume for each brand in the Chinese smartphone market in 2012 (IMR 2021).

Similarly, around 2012, the telecom company Huawei joined the local smartphone market with the same strategy by launching its first low-end Android phone, Huawei Honor U8860. However, Huawei failed to compete with its local counterparts, such as Xiaomi. Since then, Huawei has redirected its strategy to focus on the high-end market, determined to target Apple and Samsung as its competitors (Rui and Xiong 2018). It launched two major product lines: the ‘P’ series and the ‘Mate’ series. The ‘P’ series highlighted fashionable industrial design and high-quality camera, aimed at high-income young consumers, whereas the ‘Mate series’ was marketed towards entrepreneurs and business groups. This new strategy turned out to have long-lasting success and helped

Huawei overtake Samsung’s market share. In a 2017–2018 report (IMR 2018), Huawei had become the biggest smartphone brand in the Chinese market (Table 5-2). Meanwhile, Samsung’s market share in China had dropped drastically from 24.5% to 2.4% since 2012.

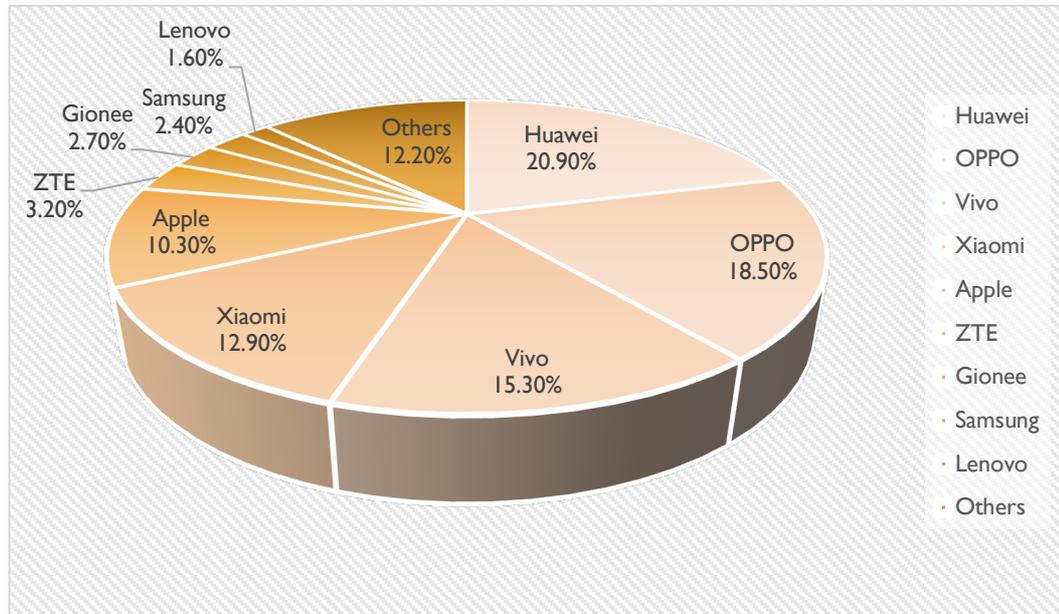


Table 5-2: The market share in the Chinese smartphone market in 2017 (IMR 2018).

Interestingly, the same report (IMR 2018) also indicated that Huawei’s users had the highest income among all brands (Table 5-3). This finding echoes their social status. As mentioned, the iPhone was a symbol of higher social class, good taste and technological avant-garde, which attracted high-income consumers. Huawei’s successful high-end strategy had made its smartphone a similar symbol, a phone that consumers with higher incomes can use with ‘pride’. Other reports indicated that Apple had gradually lost its luxury status in China because of Huawei’s rise (Lung 2020). Research in 2018 claimed that Apple users in China were seen as the ‘invisible poor’ compared to the ‘rich’ Huawei users (T. Li 2018). In this vein, the ‘pride’ that Liang had described can be related to the re-making of the Huawei smartphone as a consumer product to show the users’ distinctive higher social status, compared to people who use other Chinese brands, and even foreign brands.

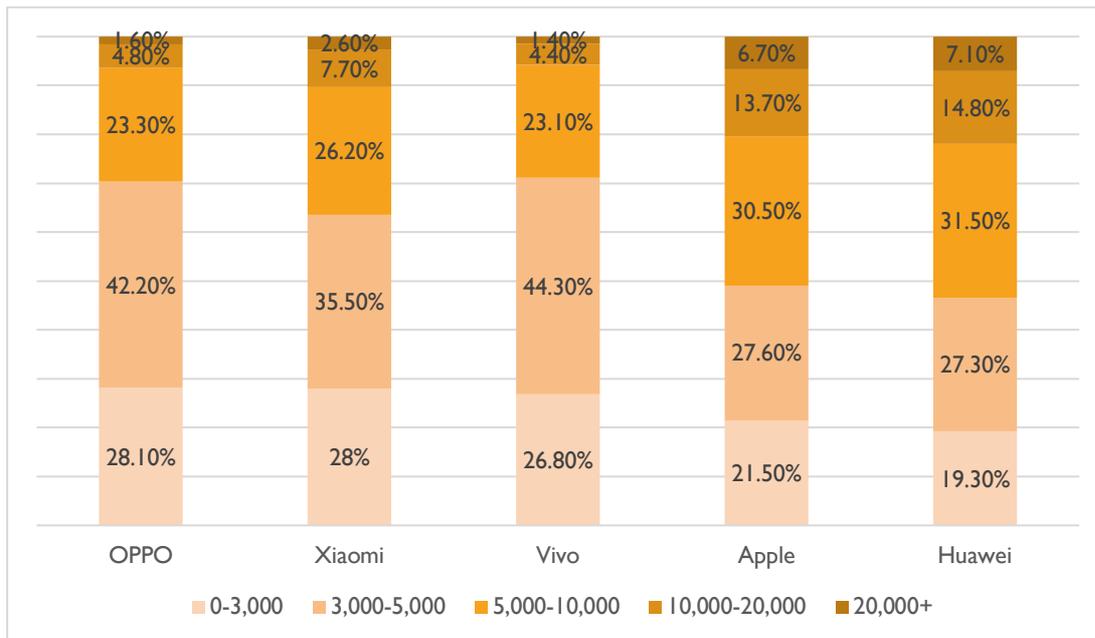


Table 5-3: The monthly income (in RMB) of users of different phone brands in 2017 (IMR 2018).

National pride

Besides social status as a major driving force, another crucial factor is that the Huawei phone has become a symbol of China's improvement in commercial and technological innovations. Overall, the rise of Chinese smartphone brands since 2012 indicates Chinese consumers' growing confidence in local products. As shown in a report on the changes in China's smartphone market (Table 5-4), consumer preference for foreign brands and Chinese brands has shifted dramatically from 2011 to 2015 (ZDC 2015).

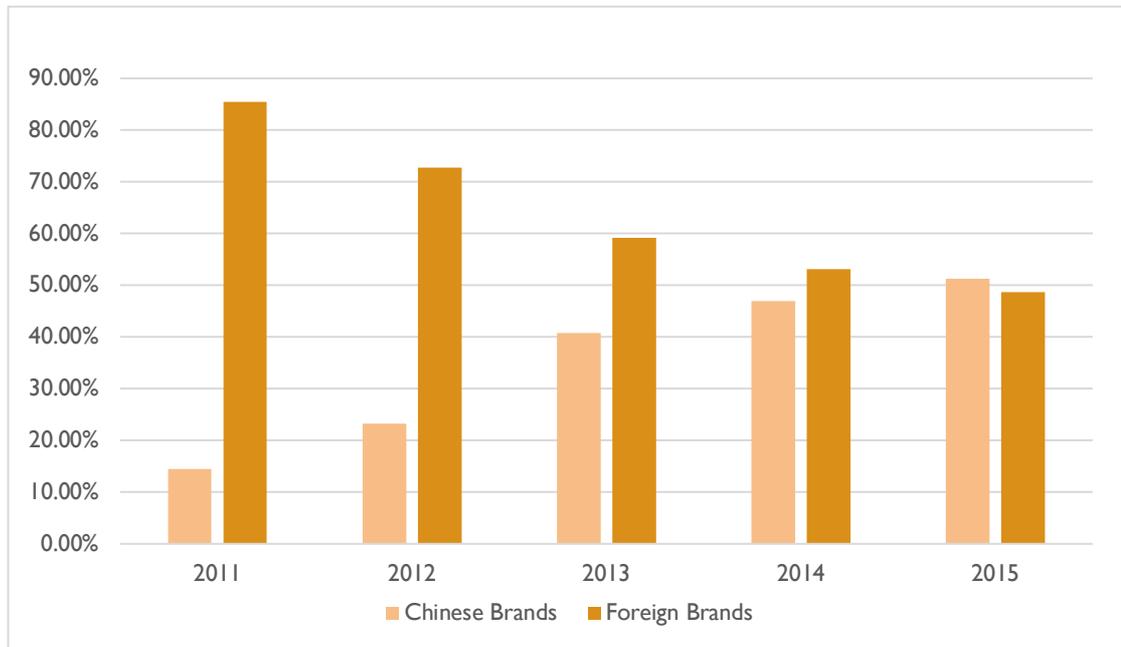


Table 5-4: Chinese smartphone consumer preference for foreign brands and Chinese brands from 2011 to 2015

(ZDC 2015)

The growing quality of Chinese smartphones has generated a sense of national pride for Chinese consumers. Moreover, Huawei’s successful high-end strategy has pushed this sentiment forward, as participant Liang said: “[Huawei shows that] China not only can make good phones, we can also make high-end phones!”³⁵ Given the historical favouring of the foreign over the local, the newly emergent emphasis placed on material and technological symbols of national pride is more of a grassroots demand. Huawei’s success fits perfectly with this narrative. At the same time, however, this is not unique to Huawei; other brands, such as DJI, also function as a symbol of national pride from the perspective of the masses.

For ordinary Chinese consumers in the ‘bottom’ group of nationalism, the nationalist sentiment often resulted in a “genuine sense of triumphalist pride for their country” (B.

³⁵ According to my participant observation with participant Liang.

Wong 2022). However, this sentiment requires material evidence. As participant Liang asked: “I always hear from the news saying how great China is. I did not buy that story. When your life is surrounded by Western brands and products, how can you say that your country is great? Where is the evidence?” For him, the Huawei smartphone has become convincing material evidence of China’s progress. Why is this the case? As Edensor (2002) argued, nationalism is not only restricted to political and official symbols, but also shaped by commodities. To support this argument, he further investigated how a car plays an iconic role in nationalist imaginaries: “the performance of car production has been conceived as a significant measure of national economic and industrial virility and an indicator of modernity” (Edensor 2002:122).

When stepping into the age of information technology, phones have replaced cars’ role in the symbolisation of nations’ technological, economic and industrial progress. In her study on design and nationalism in Canada, Hadlaw (2019) showed how the Canadian Contempra phone became a symbol of Canada’s achievements in modernisation. Similarly, as the first Chinese company to produce high quality smartphones, the Huawei smartphone has made itself the perfect candidate for ordinary Chinese people to regard as a source of national pride.

5.4 Design’s Role in Chinese Consumers’ Nationalist Sentiments

So far, the investigation on Huawei smartphones fits in the spectrum of consumer nationalism; however, my research indicates that the Huawei case, and even the grand ‘New National Products Phenomenon’ (新国货现象 *xin guohuo xianxiang*) as a whole,

have merely extended from consumer nationalism, and has a strong emphasis on design.

5.4.1 The new focus on design

As argued earlier, from the perspective of consumer nationalism, there are more similarities than differences between China's old 'National Products Movement' and this current 'New National Products Phenomenon'³⁶ (新国货现象 *xin guobuo xianxiang*). However, when moving beyond consumer nationalism, some fundamental differences can be identified, especially the focus on design, as this section aims to unpack.

Gerth (2003) once described the old 'movement' as a legacy that had lingered after 1949. It successfully implanted the modern sense of nationalism into many aspects of Chinese consumer culture, which formed the basis of what it means to be Chinese in the modern China (Gerth 2003:356). Moreover, it has popularised the notion of 'national products' and the use of slogans, such as 'Chinese people should buy Chinese products', and 'buy national products to support China', in the modern Chinese vocabulary (S. Zhu 2021).

However, scholars have generally concluded this 'movement' as a failed experiment (Gerth 2003; L. Zhang 2016; S. Zhu 2021) because it failed to actually promote local consumption, let alone boost local manufacturing industries. During the 'movement', China had an extremely underdeveloped manufacturing industry, thus products were largely of a low-quality and sold at cheap prices. As a result, national products were mainly supported by lower income families, while the elite and rich consumers preferred sophisticated and fancy imported products with higher quality and higher symbolic social

³⁶ In the following sections, I will simply refer to the 'National Products Movement' as the 'movement', and the 'New National Products Phenomenon' as the 'phenomenon'.

status (L. Zhang 2016:136). That is to say, in the old ‘movement’, the rationale for consuming ‘national products’ was often driven by mere nationalistic emotions, but not by practical demands (L. Zhang 2016:145).

One of the reasons, as L. Zhang pointed out in her book *A Brief History of Design Culture in the ROC: Everyday Life and Nationalism*, was “the absence of design as a core competitiveness” (2016:127) in the old ‘movement’. She analysed the official criteria for national products as “[c]apital, management, materials and labour” (2016:126), which mainly focused on issues in the economic realm, but not on the product itself. In this respect, when facing the ‘invisible hand’ of the market economy, national products cannot meet the competitiveness of the market and the expectation of consumers (2016:127). S. Zhu (2021) made a similar argument in his recent study on the new ‘phenomenon’. For him, design was not completely invisible in the old ‘movement’, but it fundamentally lacked ‘the mindset of design’ in a modern sense. In short, both the supply and demand sides in the ‘movement’ were not ready for national consumer products. By contrast, the new ‘phenomenon’ is the result of the joining of forces between the suppliers and demanders of national products (Tsinghua 2019). More importantly, the defining feature of the ‘phenomenon’, as S. Zhu (2021) claimed, is design.

On the supply side, following several decades of development after Deng’s Reform and Opening policy, China now has a relatively coherent industrial system, and has even been recognised as the world’s biggest industrial powerhouse (Bajpai 2021). As I have argued in Chapter 4, the Chinese government has sought to upgrade its manufacturing industry ‘from Made in China to Created in China’ since 2016 (PTSRID 2016a:17), and issued China’s first national design policy. For Chinese manufacturing companies, investments in R&D have increased drastically over the last few years. For the first time in history, not only can the basic quality of many ‘Made in China’ products compete with foreign counterparts, but also they are comparable in terms of technological innovation, branding

and design. And particularly in the case of consumer electronics, some Chinese products have become highly competitive and even dominant on a global scale; for example, the Chinese drone maker DJI is now “one of just a few Chinese technology brands to claim global dominance in high-end consumer hardware over the past decade” (Cadell 2022), accounting for around 70% of the world’s consumer drone market as of March 2020.

On the demand side, Chinese consumers’ confidence in national products is increasing. According to the Nielson (2019) report on China’s consumer trends in 2019, 68% of Chinese consumers preferred homegrown Chinese brands over foreign brands. Most significantly, this report showed that the majority of the supporters of Chinese products are from middle and high-income families in top-tier cities. This is fundamentally different from the ‘movement’, which was mainly supported by the lower-income class. The quality of design has thus become a defining criteria for the consumption choices of Chinese consumers. In 2017, Chinese consumer demand for ‘designed’ goods tripled compared to 2013 (CBNDData 2018). The consumers are becoming more conscious of ‘design’ as a crucial value of products, as in their aesthetics, quality and materials. In this vein, Huawei smartphones become the most obvious case that represents this trend, in which the company’s emphasis on design strategy meets consumer interest in design as an added value. In the following two sub-sections, I will unpack both the supply side and the demand side of the Huawei phone to explain why and how design has been emphasised.

5.4.2 Huawei’s investment in design

The contemporary shift in design in Chinese products also applies to Huawei. As mentioned in previous chapters, modern industrial design was an almost invisible element for the manufacturing industry and for business until the 1990s. In 2005, Heskett

submitted a research report to the British government titled ‘Design in Asia: Review of national design policies and business use of design in China, South Korea and Taiwan’, as part of the ‘Cox report’³⁷. In his report, Heskett noted that in 2005, design was still relatively unimportant even for leading Chinese manufacturing companies, and as a result, products still remained at a low standard (2016:318). To support his argument, Heskett used five Chinese companies as case studies, including Huawei. Huawei hired its first designer in 1993; the number subsequently rose to 54 (out of 22,000 employees in total) in 2005. As he observed, design was not implemented consistently in Huawei. Industrial, engineering and designers were working in separate areas with no direct contact, and they “still [had] no role in proposing product concepts” (Heskett 2016:318). One reason is that, in 2005, Huawei’s major business was the provision of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) equipment and services to large enterprises, but did not involve the production of consumer electronic products for the consumer market (Rui and Xiong 2018), thus the R&D on consumer demand was not its major priority.

The year of 2011 was a turning point for Huawei’s design strategy, when Huawei formed its CBG (Consumer Business Group) department and started to produce consumer electronics, such as smartphones, tablets and personal computers. This new department began to place emphasis on two criteria: industrial design and user experience. The role of designers was elevated to a higher level: “The company started to realise the importance of design, and released administrative power to the design and user experience departments...[to the extent that] when contradictions occur between design and

³⁷ The full name of the Cox report is ‘The Cox Review of Creativity in Business’, led by Sir George Cox. It aimed to boost the UK’s creative industry and economic success. Design was a crucial part of the review. The review saw emerging economies, such as South Korea, China, Brazil, Russia and India, as competitive threats to the UK’s industry (UK National Archive 2005). In this context, Heskett was commissioned by the Design Council to conduct an associated review on ‘Design in Asia’, and advise on the UK’s design policy.

engineering, engineering must make a compromise to fulfil the design” (Rui and Xiong 2018:201)

Moreover, Huawei’s use of design had begun to be associated with the company’s global branding strategy, by using design as an added value to construct a high-end brand image (Rui and Xiong 2018). This was done by increasing investments to collaborate with international design organisations and design universities. In 2015, Huawei opened its first global research lab on innovation in aesthetics and design, the Paris Aesthetics Research Center, which hired “ten designers in luxury design, fashion, automotive, 3D, digital, and brand strategy, including French designer Mathieu Lehanneur” (Mortimer 2015); in that same year, Huawei partnered with the Royal College of Art (UK) to explore the company’s future design strategy for product and experience design (RCA 2015). Huawei also collaborated with icons of Western industrial design to support its high-end brand image. For instance, in 2016, Huawei started a long-term collaboration with Porsche Design³⁸ (Morris 2016), which sets out to develop limited edition phones—PORSCHÉ DESIGN HUAWEI Mate RS—every year. As Richard Yu, the CEO of Huawei’s smartphone business, commented on the collaboration: “The PORSCHÉ DESIGN HUAWEI Mate RS is the perfect blend of today’s most innovative smartphone technology and luxury design” (Porsche Design 2018). In fact, this focus on design turned out to be a major factor in accounting for Huawei’s success in the high-end phone market, which has met the demand of the new generation of Chinese consumers, as the next subsection will reveal.

³⁸ Porsche Design is a German design studio under the automobile company Porsche. It was founded in 1972 by F. A. Porsche, the grandson of Porsche’s founder Ferdinand Porsche.

5.4.3 Participant Cao: on the moment of use

The experience of using this Huawei phone means a lot to me. For the first time, I started to rethink Chinese products, culture, and China itself.³⁹

— Participant Cao

Justice (2012) noted that Chinese consumers' growing interest in design is one of the important factors in "China's design revolution", especially for the younger generation. My participant Cao fits perfectly into this category. Her experiences represent how Huawei smartphones have become representative of Chinese design and national pride. Cao is a young Chinese fashion designer who has studied and worked in Milan, Italy. Similar to participant Liang, she grew up in a well-educated middle-class family in Shanghai, China, which held the view that the West is generally superior to China in many aspects, an impression that is deeply rooted in her childhood memory. But for her, such background influences were even more profound. According to Fong, studying abroad was part of "a broader strategy of upward mobility" (2004:636) for many Chinese families, especially when it came to sending their children to study in the US, UK, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Such a judgement came from these two generations' identification with wealthier societies (Fong 2004:635). Cao had been determined to go abroad for education since the age of twelve. At the age of seventeen, she went to Florence, Italy, to study fashion and communication design, and then moved to Milan for work. She has stayed in Europe for almost ten years. Further, her perspective on the duality between 'foreign' and 'Chinese' is much more radical than Liang's:

When I was in high school, USA was my dreamland...I was in love with Hollywood movies and American pop music. I even refused to buy any Chinese

³⁹ According to my participant observation with participant Cao.

products and consume Chinese pop cultures. You can call me radical, but I did think that they were rubbish.⁴⁰

Moreover, because of her interests in arts and design, Cao's judgement on the overall image of China has always been closely related to design. At the age of fifteen, she had already decided to study fashion and design, but felt disappointed when searching for a fashion design degree course in China: "If you compare [Chinese schools] with world-leading design schools, such as Parsons and Rhode Island School of Design, Chinese schools cannot even compete." She was determined to go abroad for design education. In terms of consumption choices, she regarded industrial design as the determining factor—that is, the styling, quality and function. When it came to Chinese products, she radically thought that, prior to 2015, there was no such a thing as 'Chinese design'. For her, the nation-state's ability to produce high quality design, is a reflection of the nation-state itself. To support her argument, she gave me two examples: Germany and Italy. Since 2005, Cao became a fan of German design, and started to consume various of German cultural products, she even learnt the language for three years. Even though she has stayed in Italy for almost ten years, she regarded Italian design as boring, traditional and lacking innovation: "Guess what, I think Italians and the country itself are exactly similar to their design; boring and lacking innovation!" As she recalled, before using a Huawei smartphone, her opinions on China were no different to her friends in the West: China could only copy products from the West, often at a low quality. As she put it, her 'spiritual relationship with the motherland' was thus very loose.

Her first Huawei smartphone was the milestone in changing her mind. She had been a loyal Apple user since high school who didn't trust any Android phones, especially the Chinese ones, until she noticed the Huawei posters all over Milan's streets since 2016. She

⁴⁰ According to my participant observation with participant Cao.

later bought a Huawei P20 Pro phone when visiting her home in 2018, but according to her, the consumption choice had nothing to do with national identity and was completely based on practical reasons. Before buying the phone, she had read many online product reviews, which all recommended the Huawei smartphone as a good product. In other words, her consumption choices did not come from nationalist sentiments, but the other way around. The experience of using the Huawei phone has remoulded her national identity:

Using this Huawei phone is a really great experience. What has amazed me are both the design of the product, and the function of the OS [operating system]. Since then, I cannot help but recommend Huawei smartphones to all my friends in Italy. Meanwhile, I feel proud that China can also have well-designed phones.⁴¹

That is to say, nationalist sentiments did not initially influence her consumption choices. However, after using the actual product, and appreciating its design, her patriotic sentiments have been ‘activated’: “The experience with this Huawei phone means a lot to me. For the first time, I started to rethink Chinese products, culture, and China itself. Turns out there are many really good Chinese designs out there, which I have not noticed before.” Now, she calls herself a ‘Chinese patriot’. Even though she is still working in Milan, she is active on the Chinese social media, commenting on international politics and defending Chinese interests. This has, in turn, resulted in a more conventional consumer nationalist behaviour. Since 2019, several conflicts have happened between foreign brands and the Chinese market, such as the previously mentioned Dolce and Gabbana incident and the controversies with Nike and Adidas concerning Xinjiang Uyghurs, to the extent that these brands have faced backlash from, and boycotts by, Chinese consumers.

⁴¹ According to my participant observation with participant Cao.

Similarly, Cao stated that after she became a ‘Chinese patriot’, she will never buy any brands that have ‘insulted’ China. She has also become more and more open-minded about Chinese products.

Nevertheless, Cao was not satisfied completely with Huawei’s design. During our conversation, she also had some complaints about Huawei’s design standard from a professional point of view: “Generally, I don’t think Huawei’s design has caught up with Apple’s. Overall, the exterior industrial design is not as stylish as the iPhone; the functions still cannot compete too.” I asked: “Will you switch back to iPhone later on?” She said: “Not in the near future. My next phone will be Huawei, I guess...Huawei is already good enough as a Chinese product.”

Interestingly, a similar conversation also happened during my participant observation with participant Liang. Seven months after my visit to Liang’s apartment, I met him again at a local Starbucks. Liang had bought a new Huawei product, a wireless headphone, similar to the Apple AirPods wireless headphone. After using a Huawei phone for seven months, he also had complaints: “For example, this headphone could not switch smoothly between devices, when I want to connect it with my laptop or tablet. The Apple headphone, on the other hand, is much smoother.” He admitted that in terms of the hardware and software ecosystems, Huawei still cannot compete with Apple. “Do you regret it?” I asked. “Switching from iPhone to Huawei?” He said: “Of course not! I am generally satisfied with this [Huawei] phone’s design quality. Huawei is good enough as a Chinese phone, even though there are minor shortcomings, I can live with them, not a big deal.” During these two conversations, the two participants used the same expression: ‘good enough’. In a sense, the nationalist sentiment has a particular influence on people’s attitude towards ‘not-good-enough’ designs.

5.5 Summary

The main findings of this chapter are as follows:

1. The making of the national symbol of Huawei is a grassroots process, even though this multinational enterprise has tried to avoid becoming a national icon, which contradicts its global strategy and damages its brand image. In particular, for Chinese consumers, Huawei smartphones have become the material evidence of China's progress in technology, industrialisation and internationalisation.
2. The popularity of Huawei smartphones is situated in the context of a grand national celebration of 'national products', with certain characteristics of consumer nationalism. In terms of nationalist sentiments, Chinese consumers place emphasis on the symbolic meaning of 'national products'.
3. Moreover, the phenomenon has moved beyond consumer nationalism, and has a distinct focus on design. The capability to produce high-quality designed commodities is a complex representation of a nation's cultural, industrial, technological and economic achievements. For consumers, Huawei smartphones symbolised China's progress, and this was a determinant for choosing this product, a perception that was enhanced in the process of using the actual product.

This is the unique position within which Huawei and Huawei smartphones are situated in Chinese nationalism. In the first section of this chapter, by going through several moments of the Huawei brand, including its naming and its central position in the US-China trade and technology conflict, I illustrated why the association with Chinese nationalism was inevitable for the brand in such a national and global circumstances.

I then used three different ethnographies with participants Wang, Liang and Cao to deliver the main arguments of this chapter. Participant Wang's experiences showed that Chinese people need such a national symbol more than the company does. The evolution of the Huawei smartphone as a national symbol has its socio-cultural function in Chinese society, even though the Huawei company and its founder have constantly tried to avoid any connection with Chinese nationalism in official channels, public speeches and publications. Liang's recent shift in consumption choices from 'foreign' to 'Chinese', from iPhone to Huawei smartphone, indicated that the popularity of Huawei smartphones in the Chinese smartphone market was not an independent phenomenon, but part of the national celebration of Chinese brands and products. Huawei's success in the high-end phone market has brought a sense of pride in social status and nationalist sentiment. For Cao, as a design-savvy consumer, design has always been the major criterion for negotiating her consumption choices. Even though her choice to buy a Huawei smartphone was not driven by consumer nationalism, over the course of using her Huawei smartphone, Cao gained an appreciation of its function, aesthetics and quality, generating a sense of national pride in her.

In sum, the case of the Huawei smartphone is not merely an example of conventional consumer nationalism; rather, it has also focused on design. As Hadlaw stated, "designed objects cannot be understood outside of the weight of their industrial, political and social histories" (2019:241). The uniqueness of design's effect on nationalism from the bottom-up is due to the fact that design is a complex representation of a nation's cultural, industrial, technological and economic achievements. This consolidates the argument that the making of the Huawei smartphone as a symbol of national pride is mostly a grassroots process, since the everyday experiences are more persuasive than top-down nationalist statements.

Chapter 6. Design Awards in China

6.1 Introduction



Figure 6-1: Chinese designers of Midea rice cooker attending the 2019 iF Design Award Night in Munich, Germany. Photo: Forca.

On 15 March 2019, the iF Design Award, an internationally renowned German industrial design competition, held its annual ceremony at the BMW Welt, Munich, Germany. My interviewee Forca is a Chinese architect working in Munich, and also an active internet influencer in the field of design. At this awarding ceremony, he was invited by the organiser as a Chinese media representative. In 2020, he accepted my request for an interview to share his experiences around iF Design Award. As Forca recalled, that year's iF Design Award ceremony was a bountiful night for Chinese design. Out of a total of 2,079 awards presented at the event, one-third were given out to Chinese designers and

brands (iFIDA 2019). The award-winning Chinese design projects ranged from gad architecture's affordable housing design, Y. Studio's communication design, WeChat's mobile payment system, Hanergy's solar roofing tiles design, to Midea's rice cooker (Figure 6-2). However, 15 years ago, Chinese design was seldom seen at this award, or in any other international competitions.



Figure 6-2: Chinese award-winning design products at the 2019 iF Design Award. Photo: Forca.

Design awards have become a hot topic in China. Since 2013, there has been an ongoing obsession with international industrial design awards among Chinese manufacturing companies, consumers, design schools and even local governments of some cities. International design competitions are now crowded with Chinese designers. The logos of various international design awards are prominently displayed on the packaging design of and advertisements for Chinese products as a badge of good design, from smartphones to skincare creams, from home appliances to baby products. Chinese consumers see

design awards as an important criterion for consumption choice. In particular, the German Red Dot Design Award, iF Design Award, the American International Design Excellence Award (IDEA) are celebrated in Chinese media reports as ‘the world’s top three design awards’ and ‘the Oscars for design’; Japanese Good Design Award (G-Mark) is regarded as ‘the Asian Oscars for design’.

By contrast, China’s central government and academic elites hold an opposing view on the popularity of international design awards. They have expressed criticisms of and concerns with Western awards from a national security perspective. Notably, Prof. Guanzhong Liu has lashed out directly to the media: “iF and Red Dot Design Awards are scams aiming for China’s money!” He has urged China to build its own benchmark for design awards (J. Zhang 2018). In China’s first national design policy, which was issued in 2015 (S.X. Liu et al. 2018), “establishing China’s own national design awards” was one of its crucial strategies. In 2016, China initiated its own design award, China Good Design Award, as part of China’s first national design policy. This award took a different approach for selecting ‘good design’ to fit China’s national interests, by exclusively emphasising engineering machinery and infrastructure projects, such as high-speed rails, COVID-19 testing labs and coal-digging machines.

Why is this the case? How are the differing takes on design awards impacting on the relationship between Chinese nationalism and design? The previous two chapters have examined design’s role in Chinese nationalism for the Chinese government and Chinese consumers respectively. In this chapter, I use design awards in China as a case study to investigate and compare the complicated relationship between the government and the people with regards to design’s role in nationalism. Based on several interviews with practitioners and consumers regarding design awards, and rich content analysis of policy papers and media reports as well as data collected from these design awards, I introduce the complicated but intriguing landscape of design awards in China, and touch on

questions such as the following: Why have international design awards become events that are being collectively obsessed over in China? How have international design awards helped to construct the emergent culture of design in China? Why are the Chinese government and academic elites treating design awards differently from Chinese consumers?

In this chapter, the discussion on design awards in China mainly focuses on three international design awards (German Red Dot Design Award, German iF Design Award, Japanese Good Design Award) and one Chinese design award (China Good Design Award). Even though there are numerous international industrial design awards operating in China (Table 6-1), the three awards listed above are the most well-known to Chinese designers, companies, media outlets and consumers. In [Section 6.3](#), there is a detailed analysis of the popularity of these awards, including why they have been celebrated as ‘the world’s top three design awards’ by Chinese media outlets, and why they have experienced a process of ‘canonisation’ in China and the ensuing impact of this.

Since 2006, various Chinese design awards have begun to be operated in China by professional associations, private companies, universities, and municipal or provincial governments (Table 6-2). However, the China Good Design Award is the only national design award. It was launched by the Chinese Academy of Engineering (CAE), a national advisory academic institution that is directly subordinated to the State Council of China, thus reflecting the Chinese government’s attitude towards setting up China’s own benchmarks for selecting ‘good design’ to fit China’s national interests.

Name	Country	Year	Organiser	Organiser Type
Red Dot Design Award	Germany	1955	Red Dot GmbH & Co. KG.	Private Company
iF Design Award	Germany	1954	iF International Forum Design	Commercial Organisation
Good Design Award	Japan	1957	Japan Institute of Design Promotion	Official promoting body
IDEA	US	1980	Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA)	Non-profit organisation

Table 6-1: A selected list of active international industrial design awards in the Chinese market.

Name	Year	Organiser	Organiser Type	Participants
Red Star Design Award	2006	China Industrial Design Association	Professional Association	International
Kapok Prize	2006	City of Guangzhou	Municipal Government	International
Governor Cup	2008	Department of Industry and Information Technology, Guangdong Province	Provincial Government	Domestic
China Good Design	2015	Chinese Academy of Engineering, the State Council	Central Government	Domestic
Contemporary Good Design	2015	Red Dot Design Award, Germany	Private Company	Domestic
Design Intelligence Award	2016	China Academy of Art	University	International
The Golden Goods Award	2020	New Maker New Made-in-China Promotion Association	Private Company	Domestic

Table 6-2: A selected list of Chinese industrial design awards.

6.2 A Collective Obsession with International Design Awards

The origin of design award schemes can be traced back to the UK's Council of Industrial Design (CoID), established by Winston Churchill's national government in 1944 (Sung et al. 2009). Since then, design awards were often organised to promote domestic industrial competitiveness and cultivate the public's awareness of design (Cobanli 2014), especially in nation-states such as the UK, Germany, Italy, Japan and the US, which are on the top of the design and innovation hierarchy (Tunstall 2013). With the global circulation of commodities and ideas, design awards from these nation-states have been successfully commercialised, expanded and promoted as international design awards involving global participation.

Even though design award have become a fairly conventional practice in Western societies, but for China, which is usually regarded as 'the world's factory' and the 'copycat nation', the cultural implications of international design awards are much more profound. Before 2005, Chinese designers barely registered on the radar of global design awards, but soon after 2013, international design awards have grown in popularity, as a collective obsession, across every sector of China's design industry, ranging from design education and local governments, to Chinese companies and consumers. In this section, I will unpack this collective obsession with international design awards from four perspectives.

6.2.1 Chinese manufacturing companies

I will first explain Chinese companies' obsession with international design awards, starting with two sets of data collected from iF Winners Design Excellence (iFDA 2019) (Table 6-3) and Good Design Award Online Gallery (GDA 2019) (Table 6-4) respectively. The

two sets of data show that Chinese design's involvement in various international awards follows a similar pattern. Before around 2005, Chinese participation in international design awards was negligible, compared to Japan's long-time involvement in the iF Design Award, and Korean design in the Good Design Award since 1954. From around 2005 to 2013, the number of Chinese design entries grew steadily, but was still limited to the top companies, such as Lenovo and TCL. However, after 2013, Chinese design then went into a stage of 'awards obsession'. At the 2019 iF Design Award, of the 2,079 awards in total, one-third were awarded to Chinese companies, almost 5 times more than in 2013 (iFDA 2019).

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy in 1978 signalled the beginning of China's modern design movement (S.Z. Wang 1989; Buchanan 2004; W.S. Wong 2007; M. Wang 2018). Out of all genres of design, industrial product design was the least developed in the 1980s (S.Z. Wang 1989), mostly due to the underdeveloped manufacturing industry and consumer market. As Fang (2018) argued, the value of design could not be appreciated without an open market economy. In high-wage economies, participation in design awards is a commonly used business strategy to promote industrial competitiveness among companies (Temple and Swann 1995). However, for China at the beginning of this millennium, most private companies were not sophisticated enough to adopt design as a strategy, especially in the manufacturing industry.

The Numbers of iF Awards by Country, 2000-2019

	China	Japan	Korea
1954-1999	0	424	4
2000	0	36	0
2001	0	47	0
2002	0	35	2
2003	4	40	9
2004	5	45	1
2005	84	93	15
2006	92	74	52
2007	84	93	86
2008	60	98	118
2009	118	108	141
2010	109	81	160
2011	56	120	146
2012	60	122	168
2013	113	136	204
2014	181	177	206
2015	184	155	208
2016	270	173	272
2017	424	199	262
2018	609	193	287
2019	649	195	236

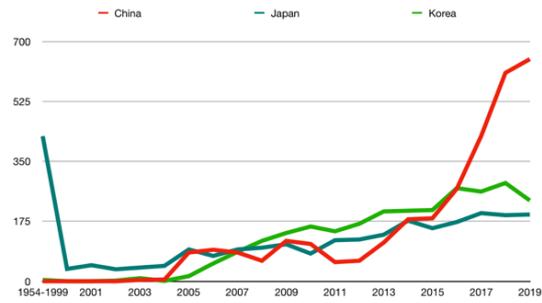


Table 6-3: The number of iF Design Awards by country from 2000 to 2019.

The Numbers of G-Mark Awards by Country, 2006-2018

	China	South Korea
1957-1999	0	33
2000	0	12
2001	0	23
2002	2	13
2003	0	10
2004	0	19
2005	0	24
2006	1	36
2007	0	46
2008	0	37
2009	0	47
2010	2	42
2011	1	39
2012	9	45
2013	10	66
2014	18	74
2015	23	51
2016	34	47
2017	75	50
2018	82	49

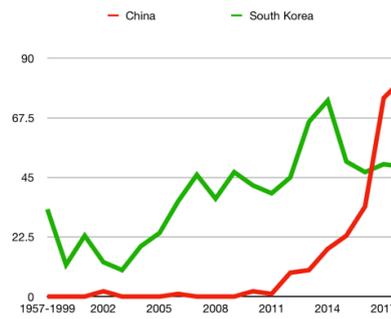


Table 6-4: The number of G-Mark Awards by country from 2006 to 2018.

Why are Chinese companies in the twenty-first century so obsessed with winning international design awards? I will analyse two reasons in detail. First, participating in international design awards can be seen as an exercise for Chinese companies' design and branding strategies. The dramatic increase in the participation of Chinese companies in international design awards coincides with their growing awareness in branding and design. In an officially issued book series *Forty-Year History of the Brand in China*, S.M. Huang et al. (2019:25) summarised the five periods in the evolution of Chinese brands: “icebreaking (1978–1983), wild growth (1984–1991), upgrade (1991–2001), booming development (2002–2012) and breakthrough (2013–2019)”. In 2005, there were 18 Chinese companies listed in the Fortune Global 500—an annual ranking of the top 500 most valuable corporations worldwide published by *Fortune* magazine—and only two of these companies were related to manufacturing: the electronics contract manufacturer Foxconn and the state-owned automotive company FAW Group (Fortune 2005). In 2015, the number of Chinese companies quickly increased to 106, which included companies such as Huawei and Lenovo (Fortune 2015). The ‘breakthrough’ period of Chinese companies’ brand awareness overlaps with Chinese design’s increasing participation in design awards.

As the core aspect of Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening policy, foreign investments started entering the Chinese market following the implementation of advanced business strategies, which became models for Chinese corporations to imitate tactics, such as branding, advertisement, corporate identity design and participating in design awards. When China first made its presence known in international design competitions around 2005, the major players were mostly the Chinese branches of foreign companies, such as Samsung, Motorola, Philips and Nokia. At the 2005 iF Design Award, 84 awards were listed in the category of ‘China’, but more than half were awarded to Samsung Shanghai, the Korean electronics company’s Shanghai branch (iFDA 2005). By contrast, corporations in China had only just started imitating the design strategies of their foreign

counterparts. Lenovo, the biggest Chinese personal computer maker, had hired its first designer in 1996 and established a design department in 2004, and only then could it start to consider participating in design awards as a business strategy. As He and Jia (2007) noted, formulating a design strategy was not the major concern for small players in the field.

That said, the design award obsession since 2013 was mainly initiated by new start-up companies within the internet industry. China's booming digital economy had not only offered the public a more connected digital lifestyle (Keane and Su 2019), but also new means of producing and distributing design, advertising, branding and interacting with consumers (S.M. Huang et al. 2019:709). A new generation of internet-based manufacturing start-up companies began to appear, with a stronger emphasis on design, and a rather flat corporate structure to empower designers as key decision-makers, who in turn acted aggressively to participate in design awards. As M. Zhang (2017) observed, international design awards became the 'must-have' for Chinese tech companies; the primary goal for some design start-ups was to win all the major awards in a short period of time. Xiaomi, a Chinese smartphone and Internet of Things company, is the best example. It was founded in 2010 but had almost immediately become the youngest company on the 2019 Fortune Global 500 list (Barrett 2019), due to the company's focus on design as the most crucial strategy, and also its extremely high involvement in international design awards.

The second reason is that having logos of famous design awards on products is an effective promotional tool in Chinese domestic markets. On Xiaomi's packaging design, logos of various international design awards are often prominently displayed (Figure 6-3). Another prominent example is the Chinese smartphone start-up company Smartisan Technology Co., Ltd. Founded by Yonghao Luo, an internet influencer with 16 million followers on Chinese social media, Smartisan's branding strategy was aiming for a similar

consumer base: specifically, the new generation consumers who have a particular preference for design and aesthetics. In 2015, after the company’s product won the iF Gold Award—the highest award in the iF Design Award—Yonghao Luo used his strong social media influence to promote Smartisan’s achievements, and even ‘educate’ his customers about the landscape of international design awards during a keynote speech in Shanghai. This was picked up by China’s domestic media and consequently, among all the design award schemes, the iF Design Award has had the biggest exposure to the general public.



Figure 6-3: The logos of various international design awards are printed on Xiaomi’s packaging. Year: 2019. Photo: Guanhua Su.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that participating in international design awards is not free of charge. Most of the international design awards operating in the Chinese market are commercialised awards, which require participants to pay a series of fees. Let’s take the iF Design Award as an example. According to its official website (iFDA 2022), a pre-submission registration fee of around €250 to €450 is needed to enter the ‘iF Online

Preselection'. If successful, candidates need to pay another €200 for the 'iF Final Jury' evaluation. If candidates win the award, they need to pay an additional €2,700 as the 'Winner's Fee', which includes unlimited access to using the iF Design Award logo on their products and advertisements. Their award-winning product will also be featured on iF Design's website, granted points for the global iF Ranking, and receive invitations to the iF Design Award Night ceremony. In other words, after Chinese companies have invested effort and money in international design awards, the logos are the most direct and long-lasting promotional tool that they can use on their products and advertisements.

6.2.2 Chinese consumers

Chinese companies' strategy of promoting design awards has met Chinese consumers' growing confidence with local products, and their growing demand for design. For ordinary Chinese consumers, Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy has led to a significant growth in income, and also the creation of a potential market that was fully open for imported goods. As mentioned in [Section 5.3.2](#), from 1978 to 2010, the sophistication of foreign products resulted in a widespread judgment of imported Western industrial products as "fashionable, progressive or civilised" (Chan 2016:236). Buying imported goods symbolised a sense of modernity, prestige and foreign lifestyle (L. Zhou and Hui 2003), whereas Chinese products were old, of bad quality and poorly designed. This preference was later described by Mueller et al. (2015) as 'consumer xenocentrism' in the Chinese market. However, as I have analysed in [Chapter 5](#), a new wave of national celebration of 'national products' has started to rise since 2018. According to the Nielson (2019) report on China's consumer trends in 2019, 68% of Chinese consumers prefer homegrown Chinese products over foreign ones; moreover,

the majority of supporters of Chinese products are from middle and high-income families in China's top-tier cities.

Here, I will take interviewee Yuan and Li as examples. Yuan is a Chinese middle-class consumer who values design awards as a key factor in her consumption choices. In 2021, she bought two Chinese-made products that were explicitly promoted with Western design award logos. The first product is an electric fan from a Chinese brand, Airmate. She had not even heard of the brand before, but what caught her eye was the edgy design, and the iF Design Award's logo prominently promoted in the product's advertisements. This fan, with a rounded body, has very clean surface design, and there is only a small logo of the Airmate brand on the bottom of the product. The iF Design Award logo has been conspicuously placed on the top of the product. The second product is a baby perambulator from a Chinese brand, Good Baby, which won the 2018 Red Dot Design Award: Best of the Best. This brand was already relatively famous in China, and was well-known for selling low-price baby prams. This award-winning pram is Good Baby's first high-end product, with a price that is five times higher than its other products.

When making product consumption choices, Yuan always values quality, aesthetics and design as the major factors. For her, the problem for Chinese products is that, there are too many new Chinese brands and consumer products on the market, but no trustworthy criteria to verify their quality and design. In this sense, international design awards have become the primary, or even the only criteria, for differentiating Chinese products. "If a Chinese product has won iF or Red Dot Design Awards, it means that this product has received global recognition as good design" Yuan said.

However, interviewee Li's attitude is slightly different from Yuan. For Li, in many categories, imported products are still superior to Chinese ones. In Li's words, he is a hardcore Sony fan who owns a set of Sony products, such as a Sony TV, a PlayStation 5,

an expensive Sony noise-cancelling headphone etc., Even though he knows that many Chinese TV makers have already made their marks in both domestic and international markets, such as TCL, Hisense and Skyworth, but Sony is still better than Chinese brands, especially in relation to their quality of industrial design, user interface and user experience. In terms of international design awards, Li said that he knows them very well, especially Red Dot design awards, but what he does not know is that Chinese companies have been active in attending and winning these international awards in recent years. After I showed him the data about Chinese brands' participation in international awards, he was impressed and said:

Wow... I didn't know that before. It means something, it means that Chinese products' quality of design has improved a lot, they have received professional recognitions in design. But it won't necessarily change my [consumption] preferences, after all they are just design awards, it does not mean that the products have received consumers' recognition.⁴²

For him, international design awards can hardly become the defining factor for his consumption choices, however, when I asked that "Are you proud of it, when Chinese products' quality of design is rising?" He said: "Yes of course, it means that we also have good design in China. Design is important, I am proud that some Chinese products can also compete in the global scale."

Design competitions and design awards essentially represent evaluations of 'good design'. As noted on the iF Design Award's official website: "The iF logo marks good design and is a badge of quality for consumers and the design community alike" (iFDA 2022). The obsession of both Chinese manufacturers and consumers can be seen as a mutual trust in

⁴² According to my interview with Li.

the credibility of international design awards, as the definitive proof of good design. Based on my in-depth interviews with Chinese middle-class consumers, international design awards can provide authentication for some of their consumption choices, but more importantly, it symbolises Chinese design's progress as a source of national pride. As Yuan proudly asserted: "More importantly, having more Chinese products winning famous awards really means that Chinese design, as a whole, has been globally recognised as good design too."⁴⁴

6.2.3 Local governments

'Made in China'—the globally recognised label speaks for itself, and it is where China's branding challenge lies. China was, and still is the renowned 'world's factory', assembling products designed in California, London or Berlin. This processing and assembling stage has boosted China from an agriculture-based society to an industrialised economy in just over four decades. Even though China overtook the US to become the world's largest manufacturing power in 2011 (Elout et al. 2013), design, technology, innovation, creativity and other value-adding elements continue to be regarded as China's soft power conundrum (M. Peng and Keane 2019).

Chinese policy-makers see the national dependence on export-oriented production and low-wage labour as the biggest threat to a sustainable future. Following the nation-wide emphasis on evolving 'Made in China' to 'Created in China' (Keane 2006), local governments have channelled their resources to help promote 'design', 'creativity' and

⁴⁴ According to my interview with Yuan.

‘cultural industry’, which includes building dedicated design museums (Arshad 2017), launching design festivals and inviting international design awards to set up local branches.

In 2018, Peter Zec, the initiator of the Red Dot Design Award, partnered with the local government of Xiamen, a provincial capital in Southeast China, to launch the second overseas Red Dot Design Museum. As the local media felicitated: “The opening of this museum is indeed a magnificent milestone for both Xiamen’s cultural industry and design industry” (R.L. Huang 2018). More details about this collaboration were later revealed: Red Dot had asked for an annual fee of €3 million and for a 1000-square-meter space within the museum that they could use for free. After Red Dot’s offer had been rejected by two other cities, Xiamen accepted their deal in 2015 (D. Li 2018). In November 2019, another German design awards, iF, announced that their first overseas design centre will be located in Chengdu, China, as a creative hub for designers, start-ups and exhibitions. The CEO of iF International Forum Design, Ralph Wiegmann, commented to local Chinese media that the consociation implies that “Chengdu is becoming the international design city. In terms of architecture and design, China is going to outpace other countries, and becoming the world’s creative superpower” (J. Wang 2019).

Interviewee Forca described his first visit to iF Design Award CEO Ralph Wiegmann’s office: “A huge painting of a panda was hanging on his office’s wall. Panda is a symbol of China and also Chengdu city. He values China as an important client and collaborator.” Localising international design awards, for both governments and awarding bodies, is a win-win strategy. Local governments are willing to pay for the image of ‘Western design legacy’ as an indicator of China’s progress and international influence in design, and as proof of achievement in cultural policies initiated by Beijing. For foreign awarding bodies, China is an important client with the largest designer community and consumer base. These awarding bodies have also noticed the local governments’ hunger for collaboration. At the same time, countless Chinese manufacturing companies have rushed to enter into

international design competitions, attempting to erase the negative image of ‘Made in China’.

6.2.4 China’s design education system

Along with manufacturing companies, consumer and municipal governments, the obsession with design awards has also entered China’s design education system. In two interviews conducted with design students from School of Art and Design in Chinese universities, interviewees Ruoxi and Xu both noted that attending design awards was always a big thing during their design education. Their teachers encouraged all students to submit their final coursework to renowned design awards, both domestic and international. Xu is a fourth year design student from North-western China, he said:

Our teacher said to us that we should use this opportunity [of participating in design awards] to test our work in design competitions. The teacher encouraged the best students to apply for international design awards, such as Red Dot, and the rest of us applied to domestic awards, such as Red Star Award and Design Intelligence Award...Of course, international awards are superior than local ones; we understand this right after entering the university.⁴⁵

Ruoxi is from a Southern Chinese city, she described her first impression of international design awards:

I didn’t know anything about international awards before I entered the university. But there was a course about visual and communication design when

⁴⁵ According to my interview with Xu.

I was in my second year, our teacher gave us a special lesson about the landscape of design awards in the global scale. I remembered clearly that Germany is the most renowned country in design awards... Red Dot right? Since then, I started to pay attention to these international awards.⁴⁶

For these two design students, even though they are from different universities in different cities, but understanding the landscape of international design awards, have become necessary for Chinese design students. But why? This section investigates this question by reviewing the development of China's design education.

In China's planned economy era prior to 1978, only a few schools offered design education under the Chinese arts and crafts tradition (Buchanan 2004). Modern design education was initiated in Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening era after 1978, and later experienced a massive expansion in 1997 (Chumley 2016). China now has the largest population of design students worldwide. In 2010, 1,448 universities nationwide offered design programs and approximately 400,000 students were enrolled in design courses; by comparison, the US has 38,000 design graduates annually (P. Xu 2011). However, this 'great leap forward' in design education has received incalculable criticisms (L. Peng 2007; Tong 2008) as the major reason for many disorders within China's design education curriculum. The obsession with international design awards is part of these disorders.

In 2018, a scandal broke out around China's design education and the Red Dot Design Award. A junior lecturer in a Chinese university received an accelerated promotion to professor after his visual design project *Open Air Cinema National Museum* won the highest Red Dot Award. However, not long after the promotion, his award-winning project was revealed to have plagiarised British illustrator Russell Cobb's work *New Ideas II*. The

⁴⁶ According to my interview with Rouxi.

university immediately dismissed him and Red Dot withdrew his award under public pressure (Leng 2018). This scandal triggered heated discussions in China, mostly around the individual's misconduct and the Red Dot Design Award's reputation. But one question has remained unasked: Why did a commercial design award lead to an accelerated promotion in Chinese design education? It must be acknowledged that placing blind trust in the status of international design awards is not an isolated incident. The evaluation of teachers according to the number of international awards received is widespread in Chinese universities.

In the case of design schools in China, the rapid educational expansion has led to a serious shortage of qualified teachers. One of the most renowned Chinese design professors, S.Z. Wang (2018) once described the current situation of design education in China as “sprinkling salt in a swimming pool”, whereby salt referred to the limited number of teachers and the pool symbolised the huge number of students. According to him, the student-staff ratio in most American schools is 3:1 or 4:1, whereas in China it is often 21:1 or even 40:1 (S.Z. Wang 2018). Additionally, thousands of newly established universities have tried to boost their reputation and attempt to be distinctive from others in a short period (Tong 2008). In the face of this ‘rush hour’ of development and mutual demand, compounded by the lack of domestic benchmarks for design, international design awards have become the most direct reference for both the teachers’ professional capability and the schools’ reputation.

This pragmatic obsession with design awards has entered China’s design educational pedagogy and curricula. J. Xu and Gu’s (2014) study investigated the Red Dot Design Award’s influence on China’s design education. Red Dot Design Award’s sub-line, the Red Dot Concept Award, is the most attractive award to Chinese universities because of the relatively low entry requirements and the higher chances of winning. China, along with South Korea, have the largest number of applicants in this competition worldwide.

Many Chinese universities even organise ‘design awards tutorial groups’, especially for Red Dot awards, with teachers embedding this requirement in the curriculum, and making it compulsory for students to apply for the awards (J. Xu and Gu 2014:85). One of the reasons, as L. Peng (2007) argued, was the existing gap between industry, education and the market; design students in China were mostly trained in theories, but did not have enough chance to practice, which is crucial in design education.

However, the benefits of winning these awards are not obvious in students’ professional lives. One of my interviewee Qi has graduated from his university for five years. In his third year, his team won the Red Dot Concept Award. He recalled: “We received compliments from our success from the teacher, and also our school. We once believed this award would help us finding better jobs after graduation” However, when he applied for his first job in a local design consultancy, he found out that companies did not evaluate ‘student’s concept design awards’ as a major advantage: “When I started the actual work, I found out that the real world scenarios are completely different from those concept awards. Those experiences [learnt from concept awards] can hardly apply to my job.”⁴⁷ That is to say, as J. Xu and Gu (2014) have criticised, awards for ‘concepts’ are certainly not the ideal way for students to improve practical design skills.

Moreover, for teachers in China’s design education system, encouraging students to participate in international design awards, has another practical reason. I interviewed Lu, a junior lecturer who teaches landscape design at a local university in Southern China. In his academic career, helping students win design awards is regarded as his teaching achievements, it is also one of the criteria for promotion to higher positions, according to his university’s regulations. In landscape design, Chinese Society of Landscape Architecture (CHSLA) award and International Federation of Landscape Architects

⁴⁷ According to my interview with Qi.

(IFLA) award are the most renowned competitions. According to him, IFLA award which was founded in the UK in 1948, is “more useful” for his future promotion than the Chinese CHSLA award. When I asked about the pervasiveness of encouraging students to apply, he said: “Others [other teachers] are all doing it, if you don’t, they will get promotions first... It is a competition between teachers.”⁴⁸

To sum up, an obsession with international design awards can be seen as a result of China’s fast-track educational expansion since the 2000s. When China’s design industry has yet to develop its own benchmarks of design competitions, and a clear mechanism to evaluate students’ and teachers’ educational outcomes, design awards become the most obvious, if not the only, touchstone of ‘a good student’ and ‘a good teacher’.

Aside from these practical considerations, the fundamental cause of this malaise is related to how Chinese design education has been structured under the universalised knowledge system of modern design. Following Fry’s critique of the “singular universal dreams of design worlds” (1989:24), it has to be noted that countries at the margins are unable to compete with sophisticated Western design education. This situation is not unique to China. Abdulla similarly remarked that Jordan’s design education had only “copy-pasted [Western design education] into the curriculum” (2019:257). According to L. Peng (2007:5), China’s design education system was imported from “Bauhaus and other Western design education systems”; it has unconsciously ignored its local cultural contexts and historical traditions, and has blindly borrowed from the West. In doing so, it does not simply teach students universal design methods, aesthetics and ideas, but also uncritically cultivates understandings of the global design landscape and the canons of Western design, including famous designers and brands, iconic products, as well as international design events, such as design festivals, fashion weeks, UNESCO cities of

⁴⁸ According to my interview with Lu.

design, design awards and competitions. In the department of Industrial Design at the North China University of Science and Technology, the corridor walls are decorated with posters about famous international design awards and award-winning products (Figure 6-4). Hence, international design awards not only have a practical function in Chinese design education, but they have also become cultural symbols signifying how Western criteria are the ultimate goals for Chinese designers to ‘catch-up’ to.

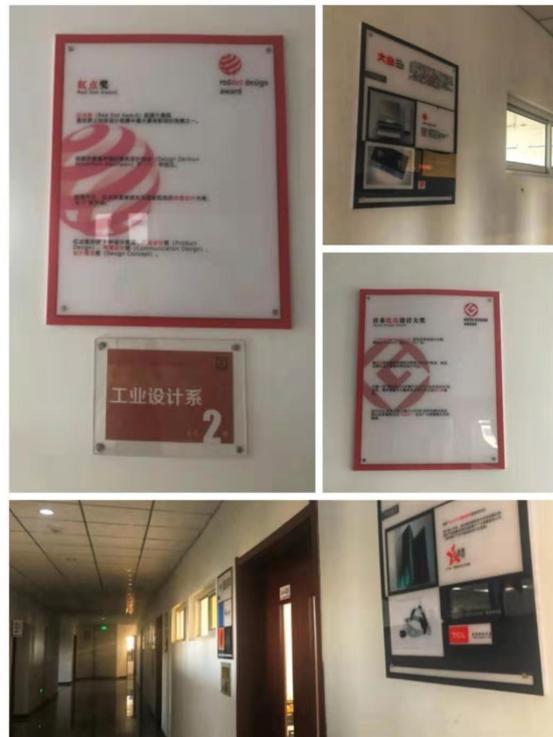


Figure 6-4: Posters of international design awards, in the department of Industrial Design, North China University of Science and Technology. Year: 2019. Photos: Guanhua Su.

6.3 Canonised Awards: ‘The World's Top Three Design Awards’ and ‘the Oscars for Design’

After reporting on the collective obsession with international design awards in China, this section aims to explain such an obsession. First of all, I will offer a content analysis on two of the most prominent fabricated terms used by Chinese media outlets when describing or referring to international design awards. After that, I will unpack the ‘collective obsession’ phenomenon as a ‘canonisation’ process, which is a common process in design histories in the West. I will then discuss the impact of such a ‘canonisation’ on Chinese design from two perspectives.

6.3.1 ‘The world's top three design awards’ and ‘the Oscars for design’

Before the collective obsession broke out, the cachet of international design awards was not well-understood by Chinese general audiences, neither did they comprehend the structure of the global design landscape. China’s award-winning companies and media outlets have put enormous efforts into self-promotion by introducing these international awards to China’s general public. However, the cultural context around those awards was lost and recreated during the process of dissemination. In Chinese media outlets’ descriptions of international design awards, two particular terms stand out: ‘the world’s top 3 design awards’ (世界三大设计奖 *shijie sanda sheji jiang*) and ‘the Oscars for design’ (设计界的奥斯卡 *sheji jie de aosika*). What is intriguing about these descriptions is that they have never appeared in the Western context. Instead, they were fabricated during the dissemination and circulation process in China for various purposes and cultural reasons.

According to Chinese media outlets, the German Red Dot Design Award, iF Design Award and the American International Design Excellence Awards (IDEA) are regarded as the world's top three awards. But in fact, a world-recognised ranking of design awards has never existed. In the post-industrial era, design award schemes and competitions are often initiated by all sorts of stakeholders ranging from private organisations to governmental departments, based on different design disciplines and judging criteria (Cobanli 2014); it is, therefore, meaningless to have a worldwide ranking. Even though some design award schemes have longer histories or received more applications and media attention each year, 'the world's top three design awards' has never been designated as such. This description is, therefore, a myth that only exists in the Chinese context.

It is almost impossible to trace the origins of such a myth. Nevertheless, the earliest media report using this term appeared around 2007—the same time when Chinese companies started adopting international design awards as a business strategy. This news report was a promotional piece for the personal computer maker Lenovo, which claimed that they are “the first Chinese corporation to win all [of] the world's top 3 international design awards: iF, Red Dot and IDEA” (XY. Wang 2007). From then on, such a description has become taken for granted in China; the phraseology remained the same over a decade later in 2019: “Recently, BULL G28 socket board has been awarded Red Dot Product Design 2019...it is regarded as ‘the world's top 3 design awards’ along with iF Design Award and IDEA” (Sina 2019). In similar advertorials, ‘it is regarded’ is a common expression, but regarded by whom? The sources of these rankings remain a mystery.

Another fabricated description—‘the Oscars for design’—often appears together with ‘the world's top 3 design awards’. The aim of such a description is also to contextualise the significance of international design awards for the general public. In my interview with Forca, he noted that the iF Design Award has consciously attempted to imitate the Oscars' awarding ceremony, but this term ‘the Oscars for design’ has never appeared in the

Western context. “It is more of a unique Chinese saying.” said Forca⁴⁹. Moreover, for Chinese media outlets, Red Dot and iF are both regarded as ‘the Oscars for design’, while the Japanese G-Mark Design Awards is ‘the Asian Oscars for design’. For instance, a Red Dot-winning Chinese company usually prefers to use “Our product has won an Oscar for design!” (Romoss 2019) as the title of its advertorial article, without even mentioning the award’s actual name.

But why has a Hollywood film award been mentioned repeatedly to describe design awards? The answer echoes China’s obsession with the Oscars—which had already lingered for decades before this current obsession with design awards. China’s film industry shares a similar situation with its design industry: they were both modern cultural industries introduced from the West, which now have a vast number of practitioners as well as rather well-established ecosystems in China; however, although they are located within one of the world’s largest consumer market, they only have limited influence on the global scale. The Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars, has a category called ‘Best Foreign Language Film’ for non-US produced movies. Since Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening policy, Chinese movies have actively involved in the race but there is still no winner to date (Q. Liu 2019). R. Zhou (2012) stated: “Every Oscar season...the tidal wave of obsession sweeps into China, causing massive foams of envy, denial and interpretations.” For this reason, the Oscars has become the most representative cultural symbol of Western cultural sophistication and authentication for good movies for the Chinese masses, with an undoubtedly high reputation and the strictest selection standard.

That is to say, as the most representative symbol of “American cultural hegemony in the film industry” (Shin and Gon 2008:125), the Oscars tends to be the most straightforward analogy for the Chinese media to use persuade the public to regard the design awards in

⁴⁹ According to my interview with Forca.

the same way, and to expand such ‘spontaneous consent’ from the film industry to the design industry. Moreover, ‘the Oscars’ is not a metaphor that is exclusive to design awards; it is ubiquitous in every domain in China whenever the more prominent awards in that field needs to be described, for instance, the Academy Awards for Cultural Industries is described as ‘the Oscars for Cultural Industries’, and the Game Awards is regarded as ‘the Oscars for Games’.

6.3.2 The canonisation of international design awards in China

The pervasive use of ‘the world’s top three design awards’ and ‘the Oscars for design’ implies that international design awards have experienced a process of canonisation, especially iF, Red Dot, IDEA and Japan Good Design G-Mark. Canonisation is a ubiquitous process in the style of writings of earlier design historians, such as Nikolaus Pevsner, Sigfried Giedon and Reyner Banham (Julier 2014:84). When the public was generally unfamiliar with the culture of design, there was a strong need in the industry to build a respectable status for the design profession and to promote design consumption. In this light, ‘great’ and ‘pioneer’ designers and their works were established, celebrated and turned into design canons by authoritative interpretations, such as design historians, journalists and commentators, and then “conveyed to a wider public via popular articles and textbooks” (Walker 1989:57). Canonisation can be understood as an organic process in the formation of global and regional cultures of design. In a sense, then, a phenomenon that happened in the mid-twentieth century in the West has been parachuted into China in the twenty-first century. Chinese design practitioners were attempting to establish their own canons to educate the consumers by borrowing these icons from the West, or even creatively rebuilding commonplace Western notions into canons, such as international design awards. It is worth noting that, international design award is not the only design

canon that China has borrowed from the West. In her study on the China Design Museum, Arshad (2017) offered a rich analysis on how the image of the Bauhaus had been reconstructed and decontextualised to fulfill the ideological need for Chinese design to develop.

However, the impact of canonisation on Chinese design is complicated. On the one hand, the formation of global and regional cultures of design requires design canons. When lacking an influential domestic evaluation system of good design, international design awards have filled the gap in China's design industry. Interviewee Forca said that even though China's economy has undergone dramatic development, Chinese society's awareness of good design still lags behind the West. The winning of iF Design Awards indicates the international recognition of Chinese design's tremendous progress. These award-winning companies can catalyse the Chinese consumers' judgement of taste and design and aesthetics. To some extent, the Chinese manufacturing companies, Chinese consumers, China's design education sector and even municipal governments have all benefited from participating in and collaborating with international design awards. Hartley and Montgomery (2009:61) have noted that, in China's fashion industry, self-measuring China's achievements against global benchmarks has been a vital move in developing its own fashion industry. Similarly, international design awards have boosted the development of China's own design industry, when it needed such well-established benchmarks for good design.

On the other hand, relying on international design canons also indicates Chinese design's dependency on the global design system. This has resulted in the Chinese government's and the academic elites' anxieties and worries over the future of Chinese design. In the next section, I will unpack the opposing attitude towards international design awards from the Chinese academic elites and the Chinese government.

6.4 National Cultural (In)security and Good Design for China

Despite the collective obsession with international design awards in China's design sector, the Chinese academic elites and the Chinese government hold a different, even opposing, attitude towards international design awards. Moreover, their motivations focus mainly on China's national interests, such as national cultural security, and the question of how to select designs to fit China's long-term nationalist goal.

6.4.1 International design awards in the eyes of Chinese academic elites

As Walker expounded, there are at least three possible endings for design canons: "Become a cultural monument beyond the reach of criticism, or it may suffer a decline in reputation and be forgotten, or it may be subject to re-interpretation and re-evaluation by a younger generation of critics examining it from new perspectives" (1989:57). Bauhaus, as the most representative Western design canon in China, is often celebrated as a cultural monument of modern design in China, but criticisms of international design awards have been raised especially by China's academic elites in the design sector.

In April 2018, the German Red Dot Design Award faced its biggest reputational crisis in the Chinese market. Prof. Guanzhong Liu, a think tank member of the central government, complained in an interview: "Red Dot is a scam aiming for China's money!" (D.Y. Li 2018). Given Liu's huge influence on and reputation in Chinese design, his criticism immediately drew enormous attention on a national scale.

In response, the Head of Communications and Public Relations of the Red Dot Design Award, Bjorn Steinhoff, issued an official statement in Chinese: "Because of Mr.

Guanzhong Liu's criticism, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce you to the Red Dot Design Award and our way of working" (XIDW 2018). In this official statement, Steinhoff highlighted Red Dot's reputation as an internationally established brand, their expertise in evaluating good design, their popularity in China's consumer markets, and most importantly, their enthusiasm for supporting Chinese design and their desire "to help China to build a broader communication platform for the industries" (XIDW 2018).

However, the direct criticism of Red Dot was not the main argument that Liu wanted to make. In the same interview, he made a much more serious general claim that the dominant position of international design awards in China symbolised how "Chinese design has been controlled by foreigners". He recalled a debate between 'the wine bottle and the high-speed rail train' that happened in a design award:

When we [Chinese judges] proposed that China's high-speed trains should be awarded the top award, the foreign judges disagreed: 'It's just a graphic design.' I cannot stand this statement. For China, the significance of high-speed train is not about aesthetics and form; it has brought Chinese people an evolutionary way of transportation...They [German judges] wanted to give the biggest award to a French wine bottle with a bow-tie-shaped thermometer on it... Are they capable of evaluating design for China? They don't even understand what is more important for our society. (D.Y. Li 2018)

The essential disagreement in this debate was over who had the authority to evaluate what is good design for China's interests. For Liu, such conflict in a design award is not a matter of design skills, but "a matter of national strategy" (D. Li 2018). Liu's criticism has also raised a series of debates in Chinese academia, where scholars have expressed similar concerns over the issue; for example, a renowned Chinese scholar W.Z. Song (2018) backed Liu's claim, and argued that international design awards are no longer valuable for

the current state of Chinese design, and urged the state government to take action on building China's own design awards to boost cultural self-confidence. How are we to understand such a serious, and seemingly nationalist criticism, over international design awards? In the next section, I will analyse this conundrum from a 'national cultural security' perspective.

6.4.2 National cultural (in)security

In this section, I analyse Chinese academics' and political elites' take on international design awards, specifically their nationalist concerns from a 'national cultural security' perspective. The notion of national cultural security is a political subject that had been highlighted by a considerable number of Chinese policy-makers and nationalist intellectuals long before China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 (Keane 2011). They identified the localisation of culture—the importation of Western culture—as a potential threat to China's cultural sovereignty, and even emphasised it as a 'cultural crisis' (Knight 2006). China's official cultural policies have kept this notion in mind and focused on "keeping the cultural openness while preserving the national and local diversity against Western hegemony of culture and ideology" (Xing 2019) for the past 20 years. Despite a high degree of international cultural exchange and openness, China has stayed highly vigilant regarding its 'bottom line' on culture and ideology.

However, what is really behind all these endeavours on cultural security is, in effect, a sense of cultural insecurity. Ahearne refers to cultural insecurity as the national cultural relationship between "historical models and epigones, between colonisers and colonised, between various kinds of centre and periphery, between dominant powers and subaltern satellites" (2017:267); for instance, cultural insecurity can refer to "the Australian envy of

the supposedly uncomplicated cultural confidence of UK popular culture production, and New Zealander envy of the supposedly uncomplicated cultural confidence of Australian popular culture production” (Ahearne 2017:267). For non-Western countries, when facing the coherent system of Western knowledge and the Enlightenment discourse, they are adjudged to be ‘pre-modern’ and have to adjust their positioning with reference to the dominant genealogy of knowledge. This inevitably risks non-Western countries getting lost in the binary debate between ‘modern’ and ‘tradition’, and the process of self-adjustment includes a radical denial of their own system, values, culture and even language. During the process of self-evaluation, a sense of cultural insecurity and uncertainty grows.

When considering the global circulation of ideas of design, it should be noted that inequality and unevenness have long been embedded in the notion of ‘global design’. Aldersley-Williams (1992) launched a profound critique on the vagueness of ‘global design’. When he asked designers “what is global design?” the answers usually were famous international brands, such as Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, essentially “global distribution of a national products which reflects nothing more profound than the power of their manufacturers” (Aldersley-Williams 1992:8). Indeed, designed objects often functioned as national identity markers (Aynsley 1993) based on country of origin (COO) stereotyping. The national images and the hierarchy of industrial/economic capability travels through the global channels of communication about goods and design (Fallen and Lees-Maffei 2016), such as “Designed in California and Made in China”, “Italian Furniture” or “German Cars”, with positive or negative connotations. The modern world of design, as Fry (1989) argued, has its centre and margins; it elevates European, Euro-American and Japanese design to the top of the hierarchy (Tunstall 2013), and expands their ideas, principles and trends to the rest of the world, which makes the latter “constantly evaluate [their design] against Western design⁵⁰, stripped down to stereotypes,

⁵⁰ As previously mentioned, even though Japan is an Asian country, it is often categorised along with Western industrial countries when discussing the global hierarchy of design and innovation (Tunstall 2013).

misunderstood and taken out of context” (Abdulla 2019: 256). The fundamental reason for this ‘blind-borrowing’ is that non-Western cultures are too insecure to define their own preferences and interests, least of all an independent discourse of design for their own cultural sake.

In the case of China, the obsession with Western design canons has infiltrated into every aspect of contemporary Chinese design. By acting as symbols of Western design’s supremacy, design awards from the West became crucial forms of mediation between the world system of design and the local system, transforming trends, tastes, discourses, design methods and business strategies into the emergent Chinese design industry. Driven by cultural insecurity, these Western canons have been digested, reinterpreted as something different from their origins, and even transformed into mediating channels between producers and consumers in China.

Parallel to the canonisation of international design awards, existing Chinese design awards are being devalued by its own domestic consumers and designers. Several local Chinese design awards have already been initiated by influential organisations, such as Red Star Design Award (红星设计奖 *hongxing shejijiang*) by the China Industrial Design Association since 2006, and Kapok Design Award (红棉设计奖 *hongmian shejijiang*) hosted by Guangzhou city government also since 2006. However, they are regarded by Chinese designers and companies as being not authentic enough. In a comment posted on Zhihu.com on 26 January 2014, a director in a Chinese manufacturing company claimed that: “Chinese awards such as Red Star are not worth mentioning at all, we have never considered participating.” (Miedu 2014). In a sense, then, Chinese companies are not just looking for any design awards, but Western design awards with their in-built ‘Westernness’.

In this light, we can understand Chinese academic and political elites' nationalist concerns over design awards. For them, losing control over the power of evaluating what is good design, is a matter of national cultural security. They therefore urged the Chinese government to make changes and inaugurate China's own influential design awards, using China's own criteria of good design. As a result, in 2015, the Chinese central government initiated the first high-level national design award: China Good Design Award.

6.4.3 China Good Design Award

As I have discussed in [Chapter 4](#), even though the modern design industry has developed drastically in China since Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy, design was never prioritised in the government's policy settings. As Prof. Guanzhong Liu puts it: "In China's entire institutional set-up, design has zero presence." (He 2008). Compared to South Korea's national design policy that was introduced in 1988, and Japan's in 1951, Chinese design indeed needed a 'central command', as He (2008) indicated.

As noted in [Section 4.4](#), in 2015, China's first national design policy was finally implemented under a grand consulting project by the Chinese Academy of Engineering titled 'Strategy Research on Innovation Design' (创新设计战略研究综合报告 *chuangxin sheji zhanlue yanjiu zonghe baogao*) (S.X. Liu 2018). This project made such a profound impact that the State Council included it in the "Made in China 2025" initiative as a crucial strategy to alter the branding challenge in manufacturing sector. In the policy, "setting up national industrial design awards" was emphasised as a major move. The China Good

Design Award⁵¹ (中国好设计奖 *zhongguo hao sheji jiang*) was launched as a component of the national design policy in 2015 by the China Innovation Design Industry Strategic Alliance (中国创新设计产业战略联盟 *zhongguo chuangxin sheji chanye zhanlue lianmeng*).

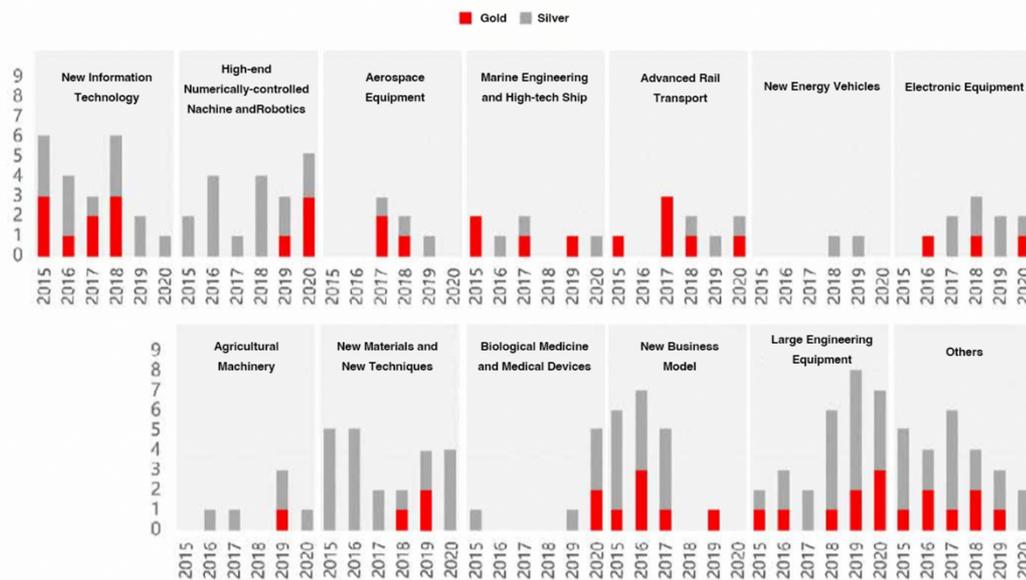


Table 6-5: Categories of award-winning products in the China Good Design Award from 2015 to 2016 (J. Xu 2021).

Unlike international design awards’ interest in consumer products, the China Good Design Award has a strong preference for non-commercial, national industrial products and systems, which aligns with China’s first-ever national design policy’s focus. Table 6-5 reviews categories of award-winning products in the China Good Design Award from 2015 to 2020, which are mainly limited to the following: new information technology

⁵¹ It should be noted that other than this China Good Design Award, which is organised by China’s official organisations, there was another award with the same name, organised by the German Red Dot Design Award in August 2015. As a sub-line of Red Dot, this award used the same jury and evaluation system as the mainline award, but focused exclusively on the Chinese market. The slogan for this award was ‘design for China’ (B.T. Luo 2015). However, the name of this award was subsequently changed to Contemporary Good Design Award to avoid confusion with China’s design award.

industry, high-end numerical control machines and robotics, new energy vehicles, aerospace equipment, marine engineering and high-tech ships, advanced rail transport equipment, electronic equipment, agricultural machinery, new materials and new techniques, biological medicine and medical devices, new business model and large engineering equipment. Among the inaugural winners in 2015 were the national high-speed rail train, BeiDou navigation satellite system and DJI drone (CGD 2015). In this vein, we can notice a significant difference in the Chinese government's preference for 'good design'. For them, the primary mission is to upgrade China's manufacturing industry, rather than championing commercial innovations in the consumer market.

The use of the term 'good design' in the award's name is worth noting. As Hayward (1998) described, the good design lobby became a common instrument for promoting public awareness of design within commodity culture in the post-war era. This has usually taken place as competitions or exhibitions, such as the Britain Can Make It (BCMI) exhibition in 1946 (Woodham 1997), the Good Design exhibition and awards initiated by the Chicago Athenaeum and MoMA since 1950, Japan Good Design Award in 1957 and Good Design Australia which dates back to 1958. Despite similar implications of utility, affordability, cultivated taste and, later on, sustainability as 'universal values', good design campaigns always have a nationalist aspiration to boost the domestic industry and market. However, for the awards that are active in China, good design is a business with a highly competitive market, as mentioned in Red Dot's official statement (XIDW 2018). For the Chinese government, 'good design' contains strong nationalist implications.

Setting up new design awards or changing the established criteria can be an easy way to shift the competitive situation between the dominant party and the newcomer in an industry (Gemser and Wijnberg 2002). China's national design award echoes the debate between the wine bottle and the train: What is 'good design' for China's current social situation? And can Chinese practitioners make their decisions independently and

consciously? As of the end of 2022, the obsession with Red Dot, iF and IDEA is still prevalent in the consumer section. Despite efforts to establish China's own benchmarks for design, the outcome still remains as a question.

6.5 Summary

Based on a detailed investigation on design awards in China, this case study has critically examined the different attitudes between the Chinese government and Chinese consumers towards international design awards, and also design's role in nationalism.

Since 2013, there has been an ongoing obsession in China with Western design awards, collectively among almost all actors in the design industry, including manufacturing companies, Chinese consumers, China's design education system and media outlets. The participation of Chinese manufacturing companies in international design awards dramatically increased after 2013 because of their increased efforts to focus on design and branding strategy. International design awards have become the pathways to 'catch-up' with international counterparts, and also serve as effective promotional tools in China's domestic market. Meanwhile, Chinese consumers' growing demand for designed goods has coincided with their rising confidence about Chinese products. For Chinese consumers, international design awards are badges of Chinese design's achievements and global recognition. For some municipal governments, such as the cities of Chengdu and Xiamen, collaborating with famous international design award organisations marked their political achievements in promoting design and creativity, in order to comply with the central government's policy focus. Chinese design universities have also paid great attention to participating in international design awards.

Moreover, international design awards have been canonised in the Chinese context. Chinese media outlets frequently described the German design awards Red Dot and iF as well as the American award, IDEA, as ‘the world’s top three design awards’ and ‘the Oscars for design’. Canonisation is a process in which design icons are celebrated by authoritative interpretations and later accepted by the public, to catalyse the emergence of a culture of design. This process of canonisation first appeared in the West during the twentieth century. In China’s case, the canonisation of international design awards can be seen as an organic way of constructing China’s own culture of design, by borrowing design canons from the West, and even by creatively reinterpreting them into new concepts.

The effects of canonisation are two-fold. On the one hand, when lacking convincing local benchmarks to evaluate good design, international design awards played a significant role in the development of China’s own design industry and culture of design. All actors in Chinese design have benefited from participating in, collaborating with or consuming the image of international design awards. Winning Western design awards also helped to generate a sense of national pride for the Chinese consumers.

On the other hand, borrowing heavily on Western design canons indicated Chinese design’s dependency on the global design system. For the Chinese government and academic elites, this symbolised a ‘threat’ to China’s national cultural security because “[k]eeping the cultural openness while preserving the national and local diversity against Western hegemony of culture and ideology” (Xing 2019) has been the core agenda for China’s cultural policies. Chinese academic elites in the design field have been concerned with the question of who has the power to define what is good design for China. One representative figure is also Prof. Guanzhong Liu, who characterised Western design awards as “scams for China’s money”, and cautioned that “Chinese design has been controlled by foreigners” (D. Li 2018). Consequently, he urged China to build its own influential benchmarks for design.

Building China's own national design award was one of the crucial elements in China's first national design policy. The China Good Design Award was established by two official organisations. This award takes a different approach from Western commercial awards by selecting good design to fit China's national interests. Based on the criteria of this award, large and innovative engineering machinery, infrastructure projects, robotics and new energy automobiles are good designs for China's national interests. The China Good Design Award focuses primarily on upgrading China's manufacturing sector, but neglects design's nature as popular culture and as a crucial representation of the average Chinese person's sense of national pride.

In conclusion, the top (government) and the bottom (general public) groups of Chinese nationalism are chasing the same nationalist goal—the Chinese dream of rejuvenation to become a prosperous and strong Chinese nation; they both think design plays a key role in achieving such a nationalist dream. However, they consider design from different contexts with different requirements. The government cared more about design's strategic role in developing China's progress in the industry, and also in bolstering its national cultural security; by contrast, the people valued and focused more on the everyday experience designed objects, as well as material evidence of national pride. This is why even the academic elites lashed out against international design awards as 'scams' and 'threats', even though these awards are still popular in consumer markets; moreover, the newly established China Good Design Award, which neglected design's nature as a part of popular culture, cannot resonate with the general public's attention, and cannot contribute to Chinese design's global influence in the short term.

Chapter 7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Discussion

After three deep dive cases studies, this chapter discusses the key findings of the thesis. I also compare my research findings with existing academic understandings that I have reviewed in [Chapter 2](#), and assess the extent to which my study has contributed to the existing understanding of design's role in nationalism. Finally, I list implications for future research in regards to design and nationalism in China.

7.1.1 Design in the Chinese government's nationalist vision

As outlined in [Section 4.3](#), since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese government's attitude towards design has gone through at least three stages. Firstly, from 1949 to 1978, China was a heavy industry-oriented planned economy, in which the modern design industry had little role in China's central industrial policy-making. Secondly, Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy (改革开放 *gaige kaifang*) in 1978, and China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, marked the beginning of China becoming the world's factory (Mees 2016) and also China's modern design movement (S.Z. Wang 1989; Buchanan 2004); however, for the central government, design was not a focal point of its growth model as the world's factory to produce and export low-end manufacturing goods. Thirdly, in 2015, the Chinese government issued its first high-level national design policy, titled 'Innovation Design', which sought to move away from the world's factory approach, to boost an industrial transition "from Made in China to Created in China" (PTSRID 2016a:17), and ultimately,

to realise its primary nationalist agenda: ‘National Rejuvenation’ (民族复兴 *minzu fuxing*).

Throughout several shifts in China’s policy-making around design, under China’s highly centralised state-led model, the government’s considerations of design (whether through neglect or high-level attention) was driven by a macro-level interest in the nation’s whole industrial and economic productivity. That is to say, even though China has moved away from a Soviet model of planned economy and gradually shifted to a market-driven one since 1978, the central government and the Communist Party of China are still playing decisive roles. However, how does the Chinese government’s highly centralised role influence its instrumentalised use of design? The evidence lies in its first national design policy, as I will discuss in the following paragraphs based on the findings from the first case study.

‘Key industrial domains’

China’s national design policy has offered policy guidance to several key industrial domains, such as high-end manufacturing equipment, engineering machinery, the steel industry, electrical energy, solar energy, semiconductor chips, innovative materials and medical products (PTSRID 2016a:86). However, mass-manufactured consumer products were not the primary focus of its design policy-making. As noted in [Section 4.3.1](#), during Mao’s era (1949–1976), China’s industrial policy focused on capital-intensive heavy industries, under the belief that heavy industries were more important than light industries (consumer products) in realising China’s goal of socialist industrialisation. Even though the excessive concern over heavy industries has been abandoned, to some extent, in China since Deng’s Reform and Opening policy, a similar approach has reappeared in this national design policy in 2015. For the Chinese government, these capital-intensive

industries are at the core of realising China's nationalist mission of building an industrially strong nation, and are crucial in establishing national competitiveness (PTSRID 2016a:65).

It is worth mentioning that China's first national design policy was solely led by the Chinese Academy of Engineering, a sub-institution of the State Council of China, with no other governmental organisations involved. However, in other countries, the ministries of trade have always played the central role in national design policy-making. For instance, Japan's national design policies were led by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI 2020), whilst Denmark's Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs was one of the crucial actors in design policy-making (DG 2007). South Korea's only design body, the Korea Institute of Design Promotion, is affiliated with the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy.

As Heskett argued, one of the key objectives of national design policy worldwide is "to gain economic advantages in international trade" (2016:229) and this objective is often realised by promoting national products in the international market, which is the responsibility of departments of economy and trade. A good example here is the Danish national design policy *Design Denmark* (DG 2007) in which there was a section specifically on "commercially oriented and international design competencies...[to] restore Denmark's position as an international design elite" (DG 2007:27). By contrast, no clear commercially-oriented policy advice has been offered in China's national design policy. That is to say, China's departmental settings around its design policy-making which was determined by the centralised arrangement under the Chinese Academy of Engineering, has resulted its policy focus around 'key industrial domains' but less commercial oriented. Future challenges remain, such as how to promote Chinese products abroad, and how can Chinese products alter the national image. Without the participation of national trade departments, these challenges cannot be thoughtfully considered.

Design's new role in innovation

China's first national design policy has heavily emphasised the term 'innovation', as shown in its title Innovation Design (创新设计 *chuangxin sheji*). For the Chinese government, design has been regarded as a tool for incubating innovation and change, and boosting a transition "from Made in China to Created in China" (PTSRID 2016a:17) in high-end manufacturing. However, promoting national branding based on designed commodities has been less emphasised in China's current design policy. In this section, I will discuss the implications of such an emphasis on innovation.

As noted by Munch (2019:200), the global process of industrialization, commercialization and the opening of the world market during the last century, have ignited an international competition among nation-states around industrial design. Such competition promoted a form of 'national branding' based on the explicit design of 'national' industrial goods, which was regarded as the most common and conventional approach in national design policy-making, as in the policies initiated by the UK's Council of Industrial Design to promote the use of design in UK products in the post-war era (Choi et al. 2011:71), Japan's Good Design Selection System in 1957 (Aoki et al. 2013), and the successful promotion of Danish Modern and Danish Design in the global market (Hansen 2006), to name just a few. During the 1980s and 1990s, national design policies have been implemented in more Asian nation-states, such as Korea, Singapore and India, which aimed at altering the national image from cheap manufacturing to excellence in design (Raulik-Murphy et al. 2010).

However, scholars have pointed out that this approach has gradually become dated (Choi et al. 2011; Heskett 2016), since it reduced design to a limited level that only focused on making products desirable and profitable, but failed to cope with new technological changes (Heskett 2016:300–329). As mentioned in [Section 4.5.2](#), China's national design

policy was influenced by John Heskett, who was an influential critic of the old approach. China's policy-making team deliberately moved away from the old object-oriented design policy and shifted to design's role as a driver for innovation. Moreover, China's new approach was situated as part of a global shift in national design policy-making from object-oriented to design-driven innovation, as I have outlined in [Section 4.5.2](#). Nation-states and regions, such as the UK, Japan and the EU, have also issued similar design policies or proposals that called for a more systematic use of design for innovation, and moved away from the 'dated' use of design as merely a 'styling activity' (EC 2013; UKRI 2015; METI 2020).

Likewise, as reviewed in [Section 2.2.3](#), existing literature on design's role in nationalism for governments is mainly concerned with the object-oriented national branding approach of national design policy-making (Gimeno-Martínez 2016:134). The findings from my research have attempted to move beyond this articulation to consider whether the shift from object-oriented to innovation-oriented has fundamentally changed the role of design in realising nationalist agendas of governments. I argue that, even though the governments' focus on design has shifted, their instrumentalised use of design has remained consistent around national competitiveness in global technological and economic competitions.

National competitiveness is a concept coined by the American economist M.E. Porter (1990), which refers to a nation-state's ability in terms of wealth creation, economic performance and productivity. In the industrial age, industrial products were at the core of promoting national competitiveness in the global market. It was reasonable at that time for object-oriented national design policies to focus on design's role in making industrial products more desirable and marketable. When moving away from product-focused global competition, governments shifted their focus to innovation to adopt new technological challenges, such as artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, and green

energy. A more systematic use of design as a tool for innovation gradually became the key to improving national competitiveness (EC 2013:4). As Huppertz argued, “regardless of how technologies unfold, design’s role remains essential in not only shaping such technologies but also adapting our lives to the new situations they create” (2020:11). For governments, no matter how technologies evolve, and no matter how the outcomes of design expanded from tangible industrial products into experiences, services and systems, design still plays the central role in enhancing national competitiveness.

To sum up, China’s case offered a timely example in understanding design’s role for the government in realising nationalist agendas. Even though China was generally absent in national design policy-making before 2013, it became an active participant in the global shift in national design policy making from object-oriented to design-driven innovation. My research has offered a new level of understanding on design’s role in nationalism from the top, which was focusing primarily on the object-oriented approach and national branding. The findings have indicated that, no matter how technologies evolve, instrumentalist use of design by governments has emphasised the construction of national competitiveness.

7.1.2 Design and nationalism for Chinese consumers

As I have mentioned in [Section 1.1.2](#), one of the gaps in the existing literature pertains to how the mainstream approach has largely focused on design’s top-down, instrumental function in industrial, economic and cultural policy-making and often neglects the role of designed objects in people’s everyday experiences of nationalism. Design scholars Fallan and Lees-Maffei have called for greater attention to examine “the relationship between mass-produced designed artifacts and nationalism for the people” (2016:15). My second

case study contributed to this call by analysing Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiment around Huawei smartphones, and asked, what is the role of design in Chinese consumers' grassroots nationalist sentiments?

A grassroots celebration of Huawei smartphones

The findings of this case study suggested that Chinese consumers' celebration of Huawei smartphones as symbols of national pride was largely a grassroots phenomenon. Since 2018, two events have sparked a wave of nationalist sentiment in Chinese society: Huawei CEO Meng Wanzhou's arrest in Canada in 2018 (Niedenführ 2020:341) and the US sanctions on Huawei in 2019 (Fung 2019). In response, many Chinese consumers have chosen to switch from Apple iPhones to Huawei smartphones (Kharpal 2019b) to support the company and China in the context of the US-China trade conflict (BBC 2020). As my participant observation with [participant Wang](#) showed, the Huawei smartphone has become a signifier of the user's loyalty to the nation. By contrast, Huawei and its founder Ren Zhengfei have publicly rejected any association with nationalism and urged users not to buy Huawei products because of nationalist sentiments (Huawei 2019a).

Why was Huawei so nervous about nationalism? As Y.D. Luo (2021) noted, nationalism often contradicts multinational enterprises' internationalisation strategy, especially for those that are reliant on the global technology supply chain and the global market. As the most successful Chinese company in its internationalisation strategy (W. Zhang et al. 2020a), being labelled as a national brand is potentially a threat to Huawei's internationalisation strategy. Moreover, being labelled as a national brand was seemingly damaging to Huawei's brand reputation domestically, as shown in my study in [Section 5.3.1](#), where non-nationalist consumers in China have tried to avoid buying Huawei

smartphones because of their unwillingness to be labelled as nationalists.

In a media session, Huawei's founder Ren Zhengfei compared the company's situation with the Chinese government, arguing that nationalism is not only detrimental to Huawei's internationalisation strategy, but also to China's opening-up (Huawei 2019a). That is to say, when facing Chinese people's grassroots nationalist sentiments, Huawei is in a similar position to the Chinese central government. At the same time, however, to recall Gries' (2004) argument, the Chinese government does not have the monopoly over Chinese nationalism; the people's popular nationalist sentiments often contradict the government's primary nationalist agenda. Similarly, in Huawei's case, even though Ren Zhengfei has repeatedly rejected Huawei's association with Chinese nationalism, he could not stop Chinese consumers' grassroots nationalist sentiments in portraying Huawei and its products as symbols of national pride. After all, the Chinese name of Huawei (华为 *huawei*) can be interpreted as 'China's achievements'.

China's rising middle-class consumers and their rising senses of nationalist pride

In 2017, when I was discussing the rise of Chinese design and Chinese people's national pride with a professor in Britain, he asked: "Do Chinese people feel that this is the moment?" "What moment?" I asked. By that time, I did not fully understand his question. When doing this PhD research, I realised that his question fits perfectly with the motivation of my research, and it has acted as a key driver for this research to carry on. 'The moment' refers to Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiment, that this is the moment when China is finally becoming a strong nation. As I will discuss in this section and the following section, such a sentiment is supported by China's rising middle-class consumers, and their demonstration of new social status and new national identity through the

acquisition of goods.

In her fourth edition of *An Introduction to Design and Culture: 1900 to the Present*, Sparke (2020) added her latest discussion on China's rising middle-class consumer. For her, China's current situation mirrors the developments in the mid-nineteenth-century Britain and the early twentieth-century USA. When China developed as an industrial power, the urban population has become increasingly wealthy; as a result, China is experiencing "a rapid shift in emphasis from production to consumption" (Sparke 2020:254). As noted in [Section 3.3.3](#), China's middle-class consumer base is growing rapidly; McKinsey estimated that by 2030, China may be home to "about 400 million households with upper-middle and higher incomes", and steadily to become "a crucial market for categories geared toward consumers with higher incomes" (Zipser et al. 2021). In the process, China's middle-class consumers have shown a strong demand to demonstrate a new social status by consuming high-quality goods and a highly conspicuous aesthetic. The Chinese market is not only crucial for international companies, but also for Chinese manufacturers. In responding to Chinese consumers' demand, Chinese companies have begun investing more in design, branding and lifestyle with high-tech products (Sparke 2020:254).

Sparke's observation coincides with my research on how Huawei smartphones have become social status objects for Chinese consumers in [Section 5.3.3](#), participant Wang noted that he felt 'proud' of using a Huawei phone, because it is the first Chinese company that can produce high-end smartphones to compete with Apple and Samsung. Moreover, this explains why more and more Chinese companies have started to invest more in design, as I have discussed in [Section 5.4.2](#). However, what has not been emphasised by Sparke, is that Chinese companies' progress in producing high-quality products, has resulted in consumers' growing confidence in Chinese products and brands and, ultimately, in their nation-state as a whole. That is to say, when realising that 'China can also make high-end products', China's middle-class consumers began to feel that 'this is the moment for

China's rise'. As I will expand in the next section in detail, this sentiment has resulted in the consumers' rising consumer nationalism.

Consumer nationalism

A common conclusion made by mainstream international media outlets is that the rise of Huawei is a result of China's rising consumer nationalism (Kan 2019; Kharpal 2019b). The findings of this case study confirmed that the popularity of Huawei smartphones does contain certain characteristics of consumer nationalism. Consumer nationalism, as defined by J. Wang (2006), refers to "[t]he invocation of individuals' collective national identities in the process of consumption to favour or reject products from other countries." (J. Wang 2006:189); this is well demonstrated in the behaviour of Chinese consumers in supporting Huawei and boycotting iPhone during the US sanctions on Huawei (Domm 2019).

In [Section 5.4](#), I further explored in detail how the popularity of Huawei smartphones was situated in an ongoing national celebration of 'Made in China' products since 2018, known as the 'New National Products Phenomenon'. At the core of this phenomenon was Chinese consumers' turn against foreign brands, and their growing confidence in domestic brands and products (M.Y. Jiang 2021). For Lury (1996:186), "consumption is an instrument of both identification and differentiation, a means by which individuals mark their relationship to particular social groups and their position in socially stratified societies". L.A. Yu (2014) and X.Y. Wang (2016) have both observed that smartphones are status objects in Chinese society. Before 2013, using 'foreign' phones symbolised higher cultural capital through an appreciation of technology and design, whereas Chinese phone brands were labelled as 'bad brands' by Chinese consumers (X.Y. Wang 2016:53).

This was due to Chinese phone makers' strategy of producing low-end budget phones, compared to high-end phones predominantly made by foreign brands, such as Apple and Samsung. What is different about Huawei is that it was the first Chinese company that has successfully shifted its strategy into making high-end phones to compete with iPhone and Samsung. In 2017, Huawei became the biggest smartphone brand in China, and replaced Samsung's domestic market share (IMR 2018). As a result, Huawei users started to be portrayed as 'rich' (T. Li 2018). Meanwhile, iPhone has gradually lost its "luxury social status in China" (Lung 2020). That is to say, Huawei was the first Chinese phone that could act as a 'status object' in Chinese society.

For ordinary Chinese consumers in the 'bottom' group of nationalism, their nationalist sentiment often resulted in a "genuine sense of triumphalist pride for their country" (B. Wong 2022). However, this sentiment requires material evidence. As participant Liang said: "I always hear from the news saying how great China is. I did not buy that story. When your life is surrounded by Western brands and products, how can you confirm that the country is great? Where is the evidence?" For him, the Huawei smartphone has become convincing material evidence of China's progress. Why is this the case? As Edensor (2002) argued, nationalism is not restricted to political and official symbols, but also shaped by commodities. To support this argument, he further investigated how a car plays an iconic role in nationalist imaginaries: "The performance of car production has been conceived as a significant measure of national economic and industrial virility and an indicator of modernity" (Edensor 2002:122). When stepping into the age of information technology, phones have replaced the role of cars in the symbolisation of the nation's technological, economic and industrial progress, as in Hadlaw (2019)'s study on design and nationalism in Canada, where she showed how the Canadian Contempra phone became a symbol of Canada's identity as a modern nation. Likewise, the Huawei smartphone has become a symbol of national pride for many Chinese consumers.

Design's role in Chinese consumers' rising nationalist sentiments

What is design's role in Huawei's association with Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiments? Chong (2022) demonstrated that, "globalisation and the enveloping reach of the global economic order have incited new ways of envisioning the nation—through material achievements", which he described as 'material nationalism'. Similarly, Chinese consumers pay greater attention to high-quality Chinese products that are symbolic of China's rise. Furthermore, this symbolic meaning can be shifted or reinforced through the actual use of the product. In Hebdige's (1988) seminal work on the changing cultural significance of the Italian scooter cycle, he noted that the symbolic meaning of a designed artifact can shift radically through different 'moments': production, consumption, use and mediation. The case study on Huawei smartphones highlighted 'the moment of use' in Chinese consumers' increasing nationalist sentiments. The popularity of Huawei smartphones has extended beyond conventional consumer nationalism, which highlights buying as a political statement (Gerth 2011). Consumers of Huawei smartphones highlight 'using' as a source of national pride—that is to say, the sense of national pride was accelerated and reinforced through the everyday use of the actual product.

In [Section 5.5.1](#), I compared the old National Products Movement in the Republic of China during the early twentieth century, with the New National Products Phenomenon that has been ongoing since 2018. In his detailed study on the old National Products Movement, Gerth (2003) described it as a failed experiment. One of the reasons, argued Chinese design historian Li Zhang, was "the absence of design as a core competitiveness" (2016:127). By contrast, one of the defining features of the New National Products Phenomenon was the growing design quality of Chinese products (Zhu 2021). Similarly, this was the case with Huawei smartphones. As I have outlined in [Section 5.5.2](#), Huawei's growing investment in design is the defining factor in its successful high-end smartphone strategy, such as its emphasis on industrial design and user experience in phone

production, the establishment of Huawei Paris Aesthetics Design Center, as well as its partnership with the Royal College of Art (UK) and German design company Porsche Design.

Huawei's efforts and investments in design have met Chinese consumers' growing demand for high-quality design goods, and connected with Chinese consumers' national pride. As the ethnography on [participant Cao](#)'s experience indicated, consumers may not buy products because of nationalist sentiments, but through the process of using, experiencing and appreciating a high quality, well-designed product by a Chinese company, the sentiment of national pride can be generated over time.

In examining design's role in Chinese consumers' nationalist sentiments, my findings aligned with Fallan and Lees-Maffei's (2016:16) argument that the relationship between design and nationalism is "extremely practical, concrete, and material", they contribute to the first gap in literature that I have noted in [Section 1.1.2](#). Furthermore, I argue that the uniqueness of design's role in nationalism from below lies in how it highlights the moment of use in "the intimate relationship between people and things" (Edensor 2002:105). The case of Huawei smartphones offered a latest example of how designed technological artefacts take on cultural and ideological meaning, and how such meaning making is grounded in people's everyday experiences.

7.1.3 Comparing the top and the bottom on design's role in nationalism

In nationalism studies, scholars have pointed out the necessity of examining the interactions between the 'top' group and the 'bottom' group (Gries 2004; X.C. Liang 2011; A.D. Smith 2011). However, this perspective has not been thoroughly investigated in the

existing literature on design and nationalism. My third case study on the different attitudes towards design awards by Chinese consumers and the Chinese government has offered an opportunity to investigate their interaction around the role of design in nationalism. The findings have suggested that examining the interaction between the central government in the ‘top’ group and the people in the ‘bottom’ group is crucial in deepening our understanding of the multifaceted nature of design, and its dynamic role in nationalism.

Both the Chinese central government and Chinese consumers regarded design awards as a crucial way for Chinese design to develop; however, their attitudes towards design awards contained two fundamental differences. The first difference was related to the notion of soft power. As I have introduced in [Section 6.2](#), since 2013, there was a collective obsession with international design awards in China’s design industry, ranging from manufacturing companies and consumers, to the design education system and even local governments. From the perspective of Chinese consumers, their growing demand for designed goods coincided with their rising confidence about Chinese products. Whether products had been validated by international design award bodies, such as German design awards iF and Red Dot, became a crucial factor in their consumption choices of Chinese brands and products. For Chinese consumers, international design awards are badges that validated Chinese design. The large number of Chinese products participating in and winning international design awards signalled progress for the international reputation of the ‘Made in China’ label, and an improvement in Chinese design’s soft power, which in turn generated a sense of national pride.

As I have analysed in [Section 6.3.2](#), overall, when lacking domestic benchmarks for good design, such a collective obsession with international design awards was beneficial to China in establishing its own design ecosystem. However, for Chinese academic elites and the Chinese government, relying heavily on foreign design awards has threatened China’s

national cultural security, which reflected a weakness in Chinese design's soft power. Design often participates and gets embedded in the government's creation and implementation of authority (Gimeno-Martínez 2016:136). For the Chinese government and academic elites, their central concern is about 'who has the authority to evaluate Chinese design'. Regarding Chinese design's participation in international design awards, one of the most influential figures in Chinese design, Prof. Guanzhong Liu, claimed that "Chinese design has been controlled by foreigners" (D. Li 2018). For him, the authority of evaluating design to fit China's socio-cultural interests cannot be in 'foreign hands', and building China's own national design award system is an urgent task.

Another difference in attitude between the central government and Chinese consumers towards design awards lies in their evaluation of what is good design for China's national interests. For Chinese consumers, consumer products with high-quality design are the most evident material symbols of their national pride. For the government, good design should fit its nationalist agenda of industrial transformation. As Prof. Guanzhong Liu stated: "Good design is not good looking, it is not merely market success of the product or technological achievements. Good design should facilitate social progress, and [industrial] transformation and upgrading of the nation" (G.Z. Liu 2020). In 2015, China's first national design award, the China Good Design Award (中国好设计奖 *zhongguo hao sheji jiang*) was established as a result of China's first national design policy. Based on the criteria of this award, we can have a clear sense that, for the Chinese government, large and innovative engineering machinery, infrastructure projects, robotics and new energy automobiles are good designs for China's national interests.

Design's role in nationalism in different contexts

As I have analysed above, the different attitudes towards international design awards have revealed that there are, likewise, fundamental differences in the Chinese government's and Chinese consumers' emphasis on design. Here, I will further clarify this argument by building upon Heskett's analysis of 'design in different contexts'. For him, design contains "a very different set of requirements and constraints and a different scale of thought" (Heskett et al. 2017:222) between the context of production and the context of use. National economies consider design primarily in the context of production, in which design is an instrument of productivity that can deliver economic value and technological opportunities. Heskett firstly highlighted the economic role of design, which can "add and create value and contribute to the competitiveness" (Heskett et al. 2017:90) for governments; he further drew on new growth theory to emphasise the significance of technology and innovation in economic growth, and design's vital role in "the translation of technological possibility into specific form" (Heskett et al. 2017:213). On the other hand, users are concerned with design primarily in the context of use; that is, they emphasise the utility and meaning of products. For users, utility relates to the capability and the possibility of competency provided to users by a design (Heskett et al. 2017:231), which is the fundamental factor in their evaluation of good design. Additionally, products have symbolic functions in people's lives; as noted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:87), people often attach meaning to, and derive meaning from, products.

Heskett's comprehensive summary has revealed the multifaceted nature of design in different contexts for different actors. It is a valuable approach for this PhD research in thinking about the synergies and differences between the government and consumers in terms of design's role in nationalism. For the Chinese government, which considers design in the context of production, design's instrumentalist function of achieving national competitiveness is the primary concern. National competitiveness can be

reflected in the creation of economic value through the delivery of new technological and innovative opportunities, and also through the creation of soft power. On the other hand, for Chinese consumers in the 'bottom' group of nationalism, they focus on Made in China products in the context of use. Different from the government's concern over national competitiveness, consumers care more about how these products can be utilised in their everyday lives, and how these products can symbolise China's industrial, cultural and commercial progress, which are their fundamental criteria for good design.

In a sense, then, design awards in China have become a timely example which reflected the synergies and differences around design's role in nationalism for the 'top' group (the government) and the 'bottom' group (the consumers). As I conclude, they are chasing the same nationalist goal: the Chinese dream of rejuvenating to become a prosperous and strong Chinese nation, and they both think design plays a key role in achieving such a nationalist goal. However, they focus on different facets of design in different contexts. The government care more about design's strategic role in developing China's progress in the industry; by contrast, consumers' concerns primarily lie in the context of use, in which designed products contribute to nationalist sentiments.

Will the top and the bottom's requirements for design and nationalism converge?

As discussed previously, the government and the consumers' requirements for design's role in nationalism seem to be pulling in two directions. One of the issues that emerges from these findings is that, will their requirements and expectations for design and nationalism converge in the long term? Given that when doing this research, China's national design policy has only been implemented for five years, and has not yet taken hold in China's design and manufacturing industry. Most of the existing successful

Chinese products with high-quality design do not have clear connections to the first national design policy, such as products/brands that I have listed in Section 5.1, Huawei smartphones, Xiaomi smart home products or DJI drones.

The underlying question worth discussing, is to what extent can top-down government-initiated design policies become effective to help the industry to generate well-designed products? Historically, the evidence is mixed. Successful cases abound, such as the UK's (Choi et al. 2011:71), Japan's (Aoki et al. 2013) and Denmark's (Hansen 2006) design policies in the mid-twentieth-century, and South Korea in the late-twentieth-century who followed the Japanese model. By contrast, some policies are less successful, as I have noted in [Section 4.4.3](#), Japan in the 1990s and the UK's policies since the 1980s have been evaluated as failures.

For Heskett, successful national design policies seem to depend on two factors: “the existence of authoritarian characteristics in government and relative industrial stability” (2016:299). However, when “relative industrial stability” is challenged by new economic and technological changes, bureaucratic organizations are often “ill-equipped to understand and dynamically respond to change on any level” (2016:300). In a sense, national design policies are, in effect, national industrial policies; without a thorough consideration of the existing technological opportunities, national design policies cannot function as a leading role to national industries, and even have the danger of being futile. If they can tackle these challenges, and effectively help the industry to generate well-designed consumer products and to meet the consumers' demands for good design in the context of use from below. In that case, the government's and consumer's demand for design's role in nationalism can be converged.

Based on Heskett's thoughtful remarks, how can we evaluate China's current approach of design policy-making? Firstly, as we can see from its national design policy, and China's

approach to its national design awards, Chinese policy makers have focused on innovation, technological and environmental challenges; moreover, the one-party state does have the “authoritarian characteristics” as mentioned by Heskett (2016:299). It has the possibility and commitment to push China’s industry forward. Secondly, as I have noted in [Section 3.3.3](#), China’s domestic market has become increasingly important for Chinese manufacturers, when facing the shrinking global demand for Chinese products in the post-Covid world economy (DW 2023). The Chinese central government has realised that the current challenge for China’s manufacturing industry is to meet “the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life” (Xinhua 2017), that is, to meet China’s rising middle-class consumers’ ever-increasing demand for better products with high-quality design in particular (Justice 2012; Sparke 2020).

7.2 Contributions to Knowledge

As noted in the introduction chapter, existing studies on the interaction between design and nationalism are mainly concerned with Western contexts. Experiences from non-Western nation-states, especially China, are often neglected. This PhD research has added new perspectives from China by providing a comprehensive landscape of the role that design is playing in nationalism in China for both the government as well as for the people, and how their concerns and interests over design synergise with and differ from each other.

In this research, experiences from China make three major contributions to existing studies on design’s role in nationalism. First, by examining the Chinese government’s new emphasis on design as a top-level policy focus, this study indicated that in the current

global shift in national design policies from object-oriented into innovation-focused, the essence of governments' instrumentalised use of design has kept unchanged, it remained consistent around national competitiveness in global technological and economic terms. Secondly, this study moved beyond the conventional consumer nationalism narrative, and highlighted the unique role of design in people's grassroots nationalist sentiments, it added a new layer of investigation in terms of how the symbolic meaning of national progress in designed objects can be determined and reinforced in the moment of use. Lastly, by comparing the 'top' and 'bottom' groups in nationalism and their different foci on design, this study deepened our understanding of the multifaceted role of design in nationalism. This research proposed a holistic structure for investigating design's role in nationalism—that is, to look simultaneously at design's role from the 'top' group's (the government) and the 'bottom' groups' (the people) perspectives, as well as their interactions—which can be adopted to investigate similar topics in other nation-states and regions.

7.3 Implications for Future Research

As Fallan and Lees-Maffei (2016) urged, national frameworks should be reinserted into contemporary academic understanding of design. Overall, this PhD research is a timely examination of how is design associated with nationalism in the Chinese context, but it has only revealed the tip of the iceberg that is the interaction between these two pervasive phenomena. The following are the implications for future research arising from this PhD.

- (1) This thesis has mainly discussed the role of design in nationalism, but not the other way around: the role of nationalism in design. These two angles may have similar

concerns, but the foci are fundamentally different. Given this, some valuable questions for investigation would include the following: Is nationalism shaping the production of design? Furthermore, can designers' nationalist sentiments influence their designing process and outcomes? Can nationalism affect consumers' using experiences; and to what extent can consumers tolerate badly designed national products? Grounded ethnographic evidence would be required to support these investigations.

- (2) Will a Chinese design identity emerge? Negotiating between tradition and modernity is a long-standing debate in every aspect of contemporary Chinese culture, including design. Regarding the future of Chinese design, the impact of China's ancient traditions on its contemporary design industry, and how they construct a sense of national pride, are yet to be examined. In his article 'How Chinese nationalism is shanghaied', Pye (1993) pointed out the contradiction between nationalism and modernisation. As a result, he concluded that Chinese people often fell into one of two extremes: extremely rejecting of foreign influences or extremely self-deprecating. To contextualise this conclusion, it should be noted that when his article was published, China did not have any evident industrial or technological achievements. However, as shown in this thesis, the rise of China's manufacturing industry and the emergence of its design industry have become material symbols that ordinary Chinese people can grasp as proof of China's success. However, Pye's assumption is still relevant today, as what we see in recent Chinese designed products suggests that there is still a disconnection from China's ancient traditions of making. In this vein, a relevant question for further investigation could be: Will a Chinese design identity emerge in the future?
- (3) Globalism and nationalism are not contradictory ideas. In the global exchange of products and ideas, international perception is crucial for the sense of national pride

among the general public in China. Designed products are important national image markers. To what extent will Chinese products' growing design quality influence China's global-national image abroad? And how will it influence Chinese people's nationalist sentiment of 'triumphalist pride in their nation-state'?

- (4) Overseas ethnic Chinese are important members of Chinese nationalism in a broader sense. Will Chinese design's progress influence the cultural identity of being Chinese for overseas Chinese groups? And how would this interact with and influence Chinese nationalism in the People's Republic of China? These are intriguing questions for further investigation.

7.4 Conclusion

7.4.1 Chinese nationalism and Chinese design, intertwined

Being British is about driving in a German car, wearing Italian clothes, heading to an Irish pub for a Belgian beer and some Greek olives, then going for an Indian curry washed down with some Australian beer before going home to collapse on your Swedish furniture to watch American shows on a Japanese TV. (Brooke, n.d.)

This was the most quoted reply when a national newspaper asked for a definition of Britishness, which indicated a sense of inclusion and acceptance of cultural and material influences from other countries in the contemporary British national identity. When reading this, one might wonder why China's government and consumers are so fixated on, and proud of, having Chinese smartphone and car brands? As well as why they are so

sensitive about the reputation of the ‘Made in China’ label? The answer lies in the historical weight and the contemporary development of Chinese nationalism. This section sets up the conclusion to the thesis by discussing the intertwined relationship between design and Chinese nationalism.

In estimating the current development of nationalism on a global scale, Modood (2019) noted that a new type of ‘multicultural nationalism’ was appearing mainly in Anglophone countries, which emphasised the capability to accept multicultural influences, and the positive inclusion of minority groups and their cultures, which can create an overarching sense of national pride in being generous, inclusive and open. By contrast, Modood noted that in other parts of the world, such as China, India and even the US, an older form of nationalism centred on the majority group and culture was still present either as an emergent or the dominant politics. Here, Modood’s observation on China has echoed the primary agenda of Chinese nationalism: ‘National Rejuvenation’ (民族复兴 *minzu fuxing*), a long-lasting and shared aspiration to revitalise the Chinese nation from being poor and weak into becoming a strong nation with its own material and cultural achievements—just like it was before.

In [Section 3.2](#), I unpacked how industrialisation and cultural soft power are two persistent themes in Chinese nationalism, I argue that these two themes are where design and nationalism have intertwined in China. Firstly, the industrialisation theme indicated China’s nationalist agenda of ‘building an industrially strong nation’ and that China’s manufacturing sector was no longer satisfied with merely being ‘the world’s factory’, but rather, it aspired to make the industrial transformation to become a high-end producer of goods to make manifest the “From Made in China to Created in China” slogan (PTSRIID 2016a:17). That was why the Chinese government has, since 2013, begun to instrumentalise design to achieve such a goal. Making more investments in design as a value-adding tool has become the most feasible way to upgrade China’s manufacturing

sector. Secondly, even though ‘Made in China’ products are ubiquitous in the global market, its global national-image is still largely associated with ‘cheap’, ‘copy’ and ‘poor quality’. Altering this global-national image became crucial in order to meet the national goal of enhancing China’s cultural confidence. These two themes—industrialisation and cultural soft power—were not only crucial to the Chinese government’s nationalist agenda, but also were manifested in ordinary Chinese people’s nationalist sentiments.

Additionally, it is worth noting the changing circumstances of international relations in recent years. As shown in my case study on Huawei, another reason for China’s increasing emphasis on nationalism, national industry and national products since 2016 was the US-China trade and technology conflict which started during the Trump administration. At the time of writing this conclusion in 2023, the tension has not ended, even though the 2020 US election had resulted in a change of government; instead, the conflict has further escalated. In 2023, the US government issued new restrictions on China’s tech companies, and even called for a national ban on TikTok (Shepardson 2023). In this ongoing conflict between the world’s two largest economies, or in Samuel P. Huntington’s (1996) words, ‘the clash of civilizations’, it is reasonable to predict that China will continue to support its national industries in order to lighten its technological dependence on the West, and to support ‘Made in China’ products which generate a sense of national pride.

7.4.2 Answering the research questions

In [Section 1.2](#), I introduced the main research question: *What role is design playing in nationalism in China?* This main question in turn gave rise to three sub-questions. This section wraps up the key findings of this project by addressing these research questions directly.

Sub-question 1: What role is design playing in the realisation of nationalist agendas from the perspective of the Chinese government?

The overarching goal of China's first-ever national design policy pointed directly to China's nationalist agenda: 'National Rejuvenation'. For the Chinese government, becoming a strong nation in manufacturing and technological innovation (XY. Lu 2017:18) is regarded as one of the crucial steps in realising this nationalist agenda. Accordingly, design has been instrumentalised to achieve a transformation in China's manufacturing sector 'from Made in China to Created in China' and 'from copying to innovating'. Moreover, the Chinese government's use of design was situated in the context of a global shift in national design policy approach from an object-oriented one to an innovation-driven one, indicating that, globally, governmental interventions in design have been consistent in constructing national competitiveness, regardless of the different approaches in national design policies.

Sub-question 2: What is the role of design in Chinese consumers' grassroots nationalist sentiments?

As the 'bottom' group in Chinese nationalism, Chinese people's nationalist sentiments often resulted in a sense of triumphalist pride in their country. As we have seen in the thesis, Chinese consumers' celebration of Huawei smartphones reflects their longing for material evidence of China's rise, from a manufacturing hub of cheap counterfeits into a country that can make high-quality products. In the context of this nationalist sentiment, the role of design is a complex everyday symbol of China's cultural, industrial, technological and commercial achievements. Design functions in consumers' nationalist sentiments mainly in the context of use. For Chinese consumers, using and experiencing

high-quality designed products with national labels allows for a sense of national pride to be generated through their everyday experiences.

Sub-question 3: What are the synergies and differences between the ways in which the Chinese government and Chinese consumers are engaging with design as a mechanism for nationalist agendas?

The Chinese government and Chinese consumers both identified design's role in achieving China's nationalist agenda—rejuvenating China to become an industrially and culturally strong nation. But they consider design in different contexts, as well as from the perspective of different requirements. The government emphasises design in the context of production in which design is a strategic instrument to enhance national competitiveness through the creation of economic value, the delivery of new technological and innovative opportunities, and the use of soft power. On the other hand, for consumers in the 'bottom' group of nationalism, they focused on designed products in the context of use, through the utility that designed products can provide, the symbolic meaning of things, and nationalist sentiments.

7.4.3 The multifaceted role of design in nationalism

Design and nationalism, two seemingly irrelevant terms, have many similarities in contemporary society. As I mentioned in the [Key Terms section](#), I place emphasis on the professionalised activity of design, which was regarded a product of 'Industrial Modernisation' (Huppertz 2020:9). Similarly, nationalism was considered as a by-product

of modernisation and industrialisation (Özkırıklı 2000:85). Furthermore, design and nationalism have both become pervasive and crucial features of our contemporary world. Under a modern world-system with nation-states as basic units, the association and even combination of design and nationalism is thus inevitable.

Moreover, design and nationalism are both complex and multifaceted phenomena. China provides a valuable case for understanding design's dynamic role in nationalism. Gries (2004:116) argued that the Chinese government has lost its control over Chinese nationalism; the people's concern over Chinese nationalism often differs from the central government's policy in nationalist agenda settings. My research on design and nationalism in China has pointed to a similar direction: even though the government and consumers are chasing the same nationalist goal, and they both regard design as a crucial element for the nation's wellbeing, nonetheless they do not have the same short-term nationalist goal and pursuits.

The existing perception of design is shifting from 'designing more material things to designing services and experiences'. For governments, regardless of how technologies evolve, design will still be a core strategic instrument for maintaining national competitiveness, regardless of whether it is in the form of the old object-oriented approach, or this current global shift that highlights design as a key driver for innovation. However, for the people, the material outcome of professionalised design activities—the final products—are still valid markers of national sentiments and national identity.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Sample Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

Your involvement with design industry, and basic understanding of design:

1. What is your age and current occupation?
2. Do you have any educational background related to art or design?
3. If yes, do you think you are a much more informed consumer in relation to designed products/design lifestyle, compared with non-professionals? If no, do you often rely on experts'/influencers' suggestions on consumption choices?
4. As a consumer, do you have a conscious preference for 'designed' products, meaning products with a clear added value of design, or an image of design.
5. How much will you pay for good design? Please give examples of your recent consumption decisions on designed products.
6. What's your understanding of 'good design'? Please give a few recent examples of good design and bad design around you.
7. What do designed goods mean to your social life?

Design and national cultural image:

8. What's your take on the relationship between a country's cultural image and design?
9. Please name three countries/regions that have the strongest design capacity in your opinion, and why?
10. To what extent does the capability of design affect a country's global image in your opinion?
11. What is your general impression on 'Made in China' and 'Designed in China'?
12. Please name three iconic brands or products that can represent Chinese design.
13. What is the major factor impacting on Chinese design's global cultural image?

Design, consumption, COO (Country of Origin) and national identity:

14. How does COO (Country of Origin) influence your consumption behaviours? Please give examples in different product categories, such as fashion, automobiles, home appliances and digital products such as smartphones.
15. Does your national identity affect your consumption behaviour?
16. In which product category, do you prefer Chinese brands?

-
17. In which product category, will avoid you Chinese brands?
 18. In which product category, has your preference changed significantly during past decades?
 19. Please describe your recent purchase of ‘Designed in China’ products, and your decision-making process.
 20. Will the progress in Chinese design contribute to your national identity and pride?

On design awards:

21. Are you familiar with international design awards? Please name some awards that you know of.
22. Where do you get information about design awards?
23. Do you prefer award-winning products in your consumption decisions?
24. Have you heard of ‘the World’s Top 3 Design Awards’ and ‘the Oscars for design’? What’s your take on these two descriptions?
25. Do you know any Chinese design awards?
26. Between international awards and Chinese awards, which one is more influential for your decision making?

27. Could you describe your recent purchase of any award-winning products?

28. Have you noticed that more and more Chinese products are winning design awards?

Do you see this as evidence of progress?

Appendix B: Descriptions of Participant Observation

Who can participate?

You have been invited to participate in this study for one of the following reasons:

- a) You are a casual consumer of Chinese digital products, such as tech gadgets, smartphones, Internet of Things, home appliances, etc.
- b) You recently switched your smartphone into Huawei smartphone.
- c) You are keen on the idea of design as both a lifestyle and a symbol of better taste, or you prefer to buy products with implications of ‘design’ and the added value of design.

What will I be required to do?

Involvement in this study will be short-term participant observations, which means the researcher will observe and discuss your actions in relation to the consumption, use, maintenance and exhibition of Huawei smartphones and other Huawei products.

The study may include the following:

- The researcher will conduct a short visit to your home or office at your invitation and under your guidance, for approximately 60–90 minutes, to observe your everyday use, maintenance and exhibition of digital products (including Huawei products), and the socio-cultural implications of products with different COO (Country of Origin).
- The researcher will accompany you while you make consumption decisions on smartphones online or in-store, to ask interview questions such as how will COO

influence your decision, and whether the image of ‘Made in China’ has changed over the past 10 years, and what is your experience of using a Huawei smartphone.

- Participate in an in-depth interview with the researcher for approximately 60–90 minutes. This interview will be audio-recorded with your permission. Data used from the interviews will be made anonymous and may include the use of anonymised quotes.

Appendix C: List of Interviewees and Participants

Interviewees:

Forca, male, a Chinese architect in Munich, Germany, online influencer on architecture and design.

Mako, female, a design practitioner working in Berlin, Germany.

Vale, female, a French product designer, working in Shanghai, China.

Ruoxi, female, a design student in a Chinese university.

Xu, male, a design student in a Chinese university.

Lu, male, a university lecturer, teaching landscape design.

Qi, female, a Chinese PhD candidate in design.

Yuan, female, a middle-class Chinese consumer who has strong preference for award-winning design products.

Li, male, a middle-class Chinese consumer who prefers imported products to Chinese products.

Participants for Participant Observation:

Liang, male, a university lecturer, teaching animation and design in Xi'an.

Wang, female, a Chinese entrepreneur in Shenzhen.

Cao, female, a Chinese visual designer working in Shanghai.

The names of people in this thesis have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Appendix D: Publications During Doctoral Candidature

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