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## Design thinking and culture, Part II, China

How does culture influence design thinking? Reflecting on my participation in (<https://knowwoborders.wpengine.com/design-thinking-goes-to-college/>) and observation of (<https://knowwoborders.wpengine.com/design-thinking-and-innovation-in-istanbul/>) design thinking, I made the assumption it was a process, uninformed by culture.

While such an assumption is questionable in any culture, it is especially problematic in Asian cultures. Indeed, unlike the high content cultural communication practices of European and U.S. cultures, Asian cultures tend to be highly contextual. To understand design thinking in China, for example, we must consider contextual non-verbal factors such as harmonious relationships, hierarchy, and setting.

In one study of the influences of design thinking on Chinese culture, (<http://studenttheses.cbs.dk/handle/10417/6147>) a researcher interviewed Chinese professionals who participated in design thinking activities. Informants reported frustration with the process, stemming from cultural practices inherited from China's Confucian past.

The Chinese value collectivism and harmony over individualism. I found restaurant meals in China a very instructive illustration of collective harmony. Think about it. When Americans order in a restaurant, they will study the menu, order their meal, and receive a plate of food based on an individual preference. While a person may offer a taste of the meal to another, he or she is in control of the food — from determining how much to eat to taking home an individual doggie bag.

Not so in China. A group (often within the group) will decide what to order. Tables are usually round, with no one at the head of the table, and are equipped with a lazy Susan — a revolving stand or tray on a table. The waiters will serve many different plates of food to the table and place them on the lazy Susan. The group will share the food, politely selecting small helpings from the variety of choices. The food is shared. There is no concept of my plate of food versus your plate of food. There is marked preference for harmony, sharing food together.

This preference for harmony has an impact on the design thinking process. Expressing openly and spontaneously one's own ideas can be interpreted as a lack of restraint or even direct confrontation. Rethinking a project at the

prototype phrase (<https://knowwoborders.wpengine.com/unpacking-design-thinking-prototype/>) based on feedback conflicts with the Chinese preference of a prototype being “fully mature” before being presented to the group.

There is also a deep respect for hierarchy in China, which fosters a culture of obeying rules rather than creating new products and services. I experienced this phenomenon myself when I observed a design thinking class in the engineering department at Princeton University. When discussing how to initiate the design thinking process, several Chinese students taking the course politely asked the professor for permission to speak before expressing a shy tentative thought in the ideation phase (<https://knowwoborders.wpengine.com/unpacking-design-thinking-ideate/>) of design thinking, and did not respond when the professor chided them to “take a chance.”

*In China, identity is part of a social network of status and loyalty that defines how people are to act toward each other.*

My observations mirrored survey data and interviews. From the cultural point of view,

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sequence) it is difficult to debate or question a superior. “... Chinese people ... are shy and reserved to talk, unless opinions are fully ready to jump out of their mind, otherwise they don’t speak up.”

Expressing spontaneous thoughts that may quickly fizzle, a common occurrence in design thinking. In China, identity is part of a social network of status and loyalty that defines how people are to act toward each other. Design thinking could very well represent an invitation to lose face in front of a hierarchical group from a Chinese point-of-view.



Keeping in mind the traditional values of collective harmony and respect for hierarchy, do these ideas continue to be important among the younger generations in China? Young people tend to be better acquainted with the world than their elders. Many have studied abroad in Europe and the United States.

Cultures often undergo rapid change with affluence. The cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede (<http://Hofstede>, "A European in Asia," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 10(1), 2007.) has seen patterns of increased individualism among younger Chinese generations. Will it lead to creativity or reinforce that Chinese success lies in incremental change?

DESIGN THINKING. CULTURE

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## AUTHOR

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Karen Collias (<https://knowwithoutborders.org/author/karen/>)

My name is Karen Collias and I founded Knowledge Without Borders™ to infuse creativity and innovation into the most salient educational issues affecting global contemporary society. I attribute my enthusiasm to cross the borders of traditional knowledge domains to the multi-disciplinary nature of my education and professional experience. The first in my family to go to college, I have a Ph.D. from Columbia University. My professional experience focuses on interdisciplinary research, teaching, and strategic thinking at a variety of institutions, including Princeton University, the Smithsonian Institution, and the U.S. Department of State. I currently am crossing borders to write about creativity and innovation in education and philanthropy.

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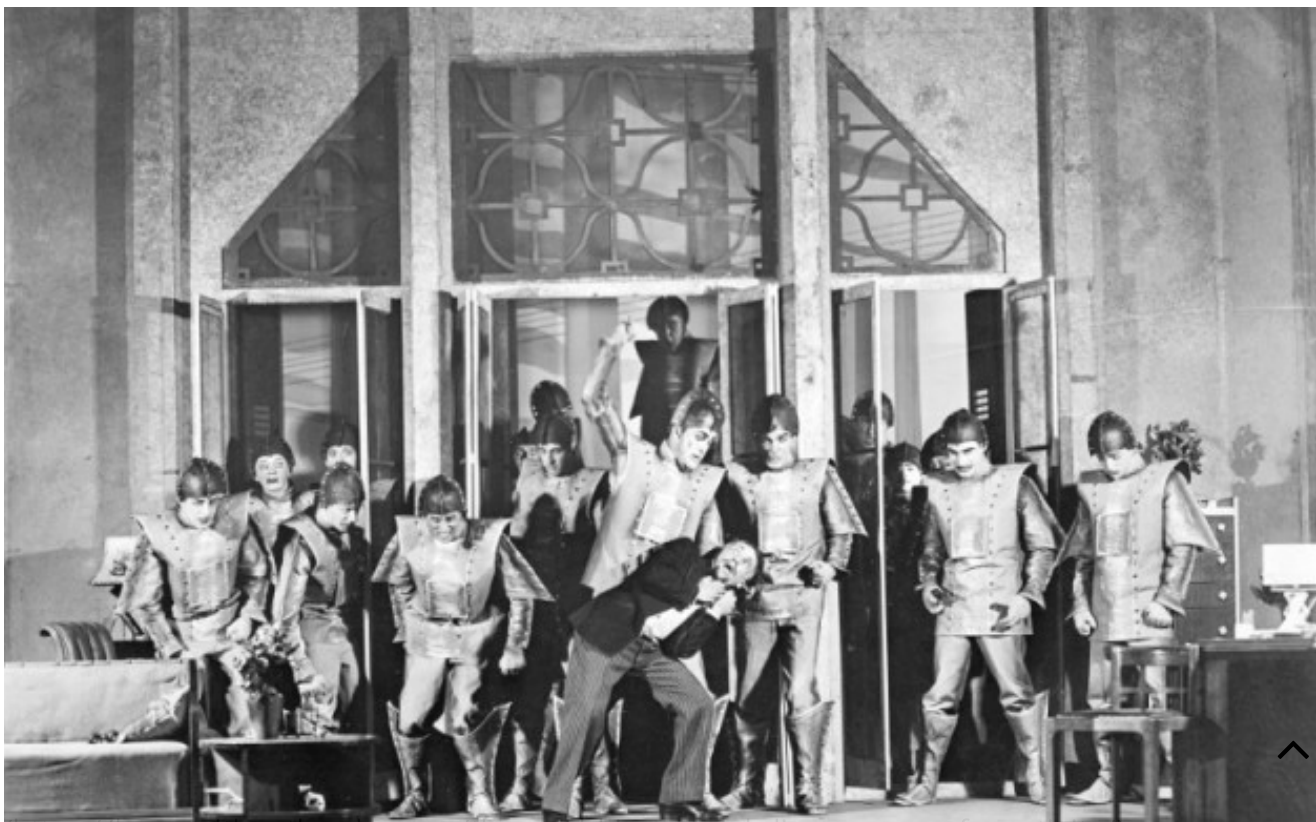






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## COMMENTS

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Emma

FEBRUARY 14, AT 00:39

Hi , I am a college student from China. Your opinion on the Chinese culture and design thinking is very inspiring. I am exploring how to better impart the design thinking to the younger generation (like 6-12years old ) in China, and I always know that the culture difference is big problem. Do you have any experience in this? Thank you~~ :)

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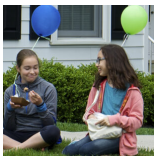
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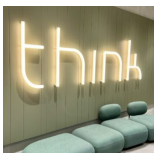
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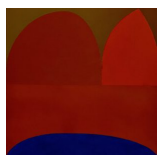
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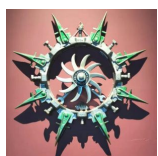
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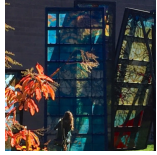


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