



Hot Topic - The East is Red Hot

By John Heskett

My views on the questions posed are influenced by living in Hong Kong and spending most of my time doing research into design practice in Asia, which is in my opinion one of the most exciting regions on the planet in its past and in its potential.

The scale of population and development, however, means that problems are at multiple levels and frequently huge. In China, for example, there is a wealthy middle-class who can be found living mainly in the three great urban agglomerations of Beijing, Shanghai and the Yangtse River Delta, and Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta, including Hong Kong. Most of the western imports and the better examples of Chinese design are currently directed at this wealthy minority – in fact, the main role of designers is acting as procurers for luxury good brands. User-centred design focussed on the needs of this group generates demand for wants and indulgences, not needs.

In contrast, in the west of China, levels of rural poverty have in some cases changed little for centuries. A village I visited in Yunnan, not one of the poorest, had an average income of US\$150 a year. The rural population needs help but in the mushroom-growth of manufacturing on

capitalist lines, they are regarded simply as a source of cheap labour, while opportunities for access to health care and education are declining.

Another problem in concepts of user-centred methods revolves around the fact that China is still a communist state, and despite the growth of private industry, the state still owns substantial elements of the economy. A command economy is still in place, with decisions, often in great detail, still made by bureaucrats. In this system, there is no concept of the market, and equally, no concept of user- or customer-needs.

The rigidities of the bureaucracy are also layered on a deep and complex cultural heritage that is often difficult to penetrate. Space in the average Asian home is very limited and much of social life is spent outside in restaurants, tea-houses and communal areas. Researchers coming to China expecting to enter homes are surprised and frustrated at their inability to penetrate this dimension of life. Some people might let them in if payment is offered, but this too can distort research responses. In other words, even research techniques are subject to cultural variations.

Political disruptions have also affected people's sense of their history and cultural heritage. In China there is a generation who grew up in the years of Mao-tse-tung's Cultural Revolution, which attempted to obliterate evidence of the past and destroy its influence. It succeeded far too well. In Cambodia, the horrific atrocities of the Pol-Pot regime similarly destroyed much of the fabric of the nation's cultural inheritance

Yet a sense of traditional values is necessary if cultural diversity in Asia is to be preserved and transmuted into relevant modern forms. The imposition of Western standards could destroy much of relevance to us all. To give just one example: in China there are distinct ways of buying, storing, preparing, cooking and serving food, handed down over some four thousand years. They are basically simple, requiring a limited range of implements that are used flexibly. Think, for example, of the versatility of chopsticks against the range of implements used in Western dining. If we want to talk about environmental considerations, this Chinese practice combining simplicity with flexibility is not only an important principle of sustainability, but is the basis of one of the world's great cuisines. It really does achieve more with less. Yet who understands this? Who is designing to enhance and preserve this capability?

My point is: if we really want to improve life in regions such as Asia, and so much needs improvement, then we need new concepts of user-centredness. These must go beyond converting people to the constant Western emphasis on frenzied consumption. That may be in the interest of large companies interested only in satisfying shareholders' desire for larger returns without

considering the consequences, but if we in the design community are to interfere with people's lives around the world on a substantial scale, we need better reasons for doing so than that.