Am I a Chinese Whisperer?

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Design

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Am I a Chinese Whisperer?

A Reflection on My China Journeys in Design

Simon Curlis
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Simon Curlis

21 August 2015
‘The journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet.’
Lao-tzu (604 BC-531 BC)

With each step of my journey I have learned a great many new things as well as old things in new ways; I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow travellers.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Soumitri Varadarajan, for enduring and sustained support through a momentous journey and the transformation of my design practice. Through your patience and guidance I have managed to navigate to this destination despite the challenges along the path.

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Ying Fangtian, of Zhejiang University, whose invitation to China initiated this research and who presented a perspective with which I could observe the world anew. Additionally, I thank the designers in Lab318 who have concluded their studies now, for generously taking time to introduce me to their China and a new sense of humour.

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With the conclusion of this research I need to express my gratitude to Amy Valent Curlis, who drove me to and from the airport, sharing support with a roving husband through an extraordinary journey and some protracted absences. To Sophia and Freya who make coming home and explaining things about China much more exciting.

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Abstract

A decade ago comparatively little was known about design in China, either in Australia or overseas. The existing sentiment was overwhelmingly that China was a looming threat to Australia’s manufacturing industry and that her design sector unashamedly copied everything. Industrial design in Australia has been concerned about a diminishing client base and how engagement with the Chinese manufacturing sector might adversely affect professional practice.

A Eurocentric view prevails in Australian design. On top of that, a parochial approach has meant Australian designers and manufacturers have missed out on opportunities to engage with China in a meaningful way. This study seeks to demonstrate where previously unexplored potential exists for meaningful and mutually beneficial interactions between the two countries, rather than maintaining the current antagonistic design relationship.

Through striving for an earnest and deep interaction with academic, business and social ecosystems in China, this study uses long term observations and experiences to speculate on developing ongoing and meaningful interactions. These include engagement through academic and commercial projects with the aim of transforming Australian and Chinese designers’ practice.

The process of converting these understandings into theoretical models has been transformative. It has enabled sharing and discussion of the significance of this learning, and offered insights for others to use in understanding China within a broader design discourse. These models offer opportunities to examine the Australian design context as well as opportunities for recasting the role of design. This includes capitalising on existing expertise and industrial capacity while investing
in market opportunities, which are innovative, uncontested or unattractive to centres of economic activity orientated towards mass manufacture.

The significance of this research has potential far beyond its immediate results. There is tremendous potential in transforming Australian designers' understanding of China and encouraging ‘engagement with’, rather than ‘employment of’ China. This opens up exciting and highly beneficial platforms for long term, ongoing projects both in the academic and business ecosystems.

The Chinese field trips, combined with integration of Chinese modes of teaching, designing and producing have altered this writer’s identity and approach to design and the world considerably.

The pursuit of academic publication, discussing models and methods for understanding China, will open up the possibility of further design relationships between Australia and China. These publications will be supplemented by a website with links to enable China-Design to be accessible to emerging designers and design graduates. This will be combined with designing and providing training programs for teaching staff in Melbourne, to assist with the introduction and dissemination of these models as a means of connecting with China. Continued trips to China, engaging with academics and students, will allow for a continued deepening of understanding and engagement.
There I was, mentally moving towards Brazil, about to embark on an exciting adventure. Somehow, while I had my head down, thinking, planning (okay, stressing) and checking my finances (again), the opportunity decided to depart without me. I remained in Melbourne, head up but hangdog, lamenting the anxiety which slowed me down, rendering me unable to jump on the train without a fat wallet and an even fatter Lonely Planet guide.

But other luck came calling. China wanted intrepid academics. I put my hand up slowly but – somehow – all of a sudden, I was committed. I was going to China. Really. Me. Now my subconscious self kicked in with a few questions (okay, clanging alarm bells) noting the implications flowing from my hand going up. I was heading into the ‘Other’ realm, towards the ‘yellow peril’. I remembered an image: a man standing in front of a tank, towering above it with his dignity even while shrinking before its bulk. That image appealed to me but rumours of his subsequent demise frightened me. I made a rule for myself: don’t stand in front of tanks, don’t create confrontations that will end crushingly.

I couldn’t make a rule about the confrontations within, however. They were in full swing. This was to be my first flight beyond my country. Sure, I had roamed to the furthest reaches of Australia. Yes, I’d encountered snakes, spiders, sharks and crocodiles, but they held no nightmarish connotations. I had confronted them and still retained my limbs – I felt like we were playing by rules we all understood. But the Chinese I encountered in my Melbourne were usually in Chinatown and furthermore in restaurants, smilingly offering sweet and sour things to be devoured. I had never needed to delve into my waiter’s origins or wonder about the development of his splendid cuisine. We were strangers.
Now I was going to this person's strange land. Hardly anyone I knew had been to China and those that had couldn't tell me anything about it. Well, except that it would change my world completely. I liked my world! What was going to happen? Did the stark words of my travel itinerary offer any clue to the experiences that were before me, or was I to plunge into a place of magical dragons, hard Communist mysteries, a maelstrom where every person was desperate to get ahead and only too happy to devour me along with the diminishing industry of my homeland? It wasn’t that I hadn’t encountered China at all. Most of the consumer goods around me were made there. Also, I had seen enough Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee films to glean a few things, including that Chinese staircases were for decoration because these amazing people could defy gravity and walk up walls.

The day came. It didn’t matter that I was 30 years of age, my parents insisted on taking me to the airport. I have to admit, I wasn’t sorry. Confrontation with the ‘Other’ felt imminent, new thresholds yawned ominously. I was scared. The cultural compass I had coveted was now useless.

My plane arrived in Shanghai Pudong Airport but I was in no hurry to depart it and dive into the great red unknown. But I had to, eventually. It wouldn't have done to hide in the luggage rack. I emerged into a cacophony: the noise of people, the chattering of ‘Chinglish’ signs on the walls, the roaring in my own head, a general feeling of looming disaster. Stern half-understood signs threatened retribution for various little-comprehended sins. I had a sudden vision I was going to spend the rest of my life breaking rocks and eating rice. Oh hand, why did you have to go up? As I stood at a counter filling in forms, I yearned for my suitcase like a long-lost companion. I quashed panicky thoughts that I would never see it again, that somehow I’d ticked a box which said ‘Please destroy my suitcase’ or ‘I deserve to go to jail.’ My heart pounding, my body temperature spiking, I suddenly felt that I’d heard my name: ‘See-mon Cer-is.’ I froze. I felt conspicuous, rattled and lonely so I joined the crush of ill-fitting suits ambling towards the gates.

A relative calm came over me. I was on a track. It might be the right one. There were so many people, the terminal was so enormous, and I couldn’t see where I was
going. But something was happening. Suddenly, the suit in front of me disappeared and I found myself standing at a barricade. A uniformed woman sternly looked from my documents to my person. I was sure my body temperature spiked 10 degrees with every glance. Could you be jailed for sweating? But then she passed back my passport and violently stamped my entry forms. I stepped forward. I was alive, not arrested, and now I just had to find my bag.

I felt a sudden surge of confidence. I was a traveller after all. I strode to Carousel 20 and waited. And waited. There weren’t many of us, bags or people. And then there weren’t any of us. And then my flight number shuffled off the display to be replaced by another. My confidence dipped. Swooped. Plummeted. I had a panicky feeling that I was wearing the sum of my wardrobe in China.

The sensible voice inside me knew to look for an information desk. The other voices in my head jabbered that the ceiling was six stories high, full of escalators, packed with purposeful people, and that all the signs were in Chinese. I was going to live here forever. Sensible voice calmly promised to learn Chinese. The other voices yammered and squealed. My legs carried me to a desk. Whether it was related to car hire, lost property or pet reclamation, I had no idea. “Knee how,” I said, mustering a happy tone. The attendant looked at me unblinking. Well, that was the extent of my Mandarin. I launched into a detailed and extended account of my predicament. In English. Inside I was crying: my socks were so sweaty, I must find my socks. I patted my pockets, looking for a saviour, and came upon my passport and my ticket. I showed them to her. They were a bridge. We communicated. She pointed me towards another desk. She understood me. I was a traveller again.

Following her instructions, I walked through the arrivals gate and into – gulp – China. Surely I was striding towards my bag and in it were all the socks required to conquer this land. I found the desk I needed, staffed with three bored attendants. Two promptly busied themselves with anything other than me. Their colleague was too slow. I told her my story. She listened. She told me to go back to the carousel. The carousel with no bag. The carousel on the other side of the ‘arrivals’ gate. I suddenly had a vision of a small Chinese man strapping my suitcase to his bicycle and
wobbling off with it into greater Shanghai. Somewhat desperate, bag-hungry, I decided to re-enter the arrivals hall. I had gleaned that Chinese bureaucracy favours the brave so I confidently approached the ‘out’ gate. Sleepy security guards at first presumed I was an apparition. No-one entered the ‘out’ gate, it just wasn’t done. Like large birds taking flight, they eventually flapped to intercept me. I was ushered to one side, the no-bag-side, and my sensible voice noted that impending violence is similar in any language. My feet felt glued to the ground. I was becoming a problem. The boss came. He listened to my pleas – I had condensed my story now, largely through desperation. He barked orders to his subordinate and I was led down the concourse to another entry where I again pleaded my case, again stripping my story of extraneous details, finding its very essence, though not exactly mentioning the sock situation. My sensible voice noted that when people think you’re crazy and stupid they look at you in a very similar way. But I was swiped back in. Back to the first information desk. Back to my first friend in China. I went back to her. Did she remember me? Had 100 sweaty foreigners stood in front of her since I had been there an hour – or maybe a week? – ago. I repeated my story, looking beyond her, looking up, looking at the ground, looking at the wheels of her chair as she slowly rolled it back and forth … in front of … my suitcase. My suitcase! My repository of socks! My friend with zips and wheels! She gave it to me. I took it, along with many deep breaths, and walked towards the ‘out’ gate again. I let my sensible voice gain the upper hand. I was entering China. Let’s say it was for the first time. I was managing and, just maybe, it was all going to be okay.

The preceding text is an edited version of journal notes recorded in July 2005
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Introduction

I commenced tutoring at RMIT University in 2002 assisting a lecturer in teaching Computer Aided Design (CAD) to first years. I quickly outpaced that particular lecturer whose interest lay elsewhere and created a niche for myself as available and capable in an uncontested role. As with most first time lecturers, I imitated what I valued from my learning experiences and changed what I was critical of. I progressed this way with reasonable responses from my cookie-cutter students and built more elaborate learning bureaucracy and fool-proofing into the learning program. This was challenged in 2004 when I was challenged to consider a radical alternative that empowered the students to set their own agendas and take responsibility for their progress and learning. The results were astounding and contributed to a Learner Centred Project that transformed the Department.

However, I remained in the same location and with an activated but not truly radicalised mind-set. I had been involved in a few conversations about going abroad to change perspectives on design. Until this time I had imagined going abroad to work, but not in a committed manner. The opportunity to travel to Brazil initiated some serious consideration of, and reflection on, my circumstance and career inertia. I made a conscious decision that travel could benefit me and staying was
calcifying into stagnation. When the opportunity to go to China arose I said yes in response, then started to consider what this really would mean.

In 2005 very little was known about Design in China, either in Australia or overseas, except for a sentiment that China was a looming threat to our manufacturing industry and that her design sector unashamedly copied everything. It seemed quite incongruous to me that a place that could not innovate would suddenly dominate in a sector that had been functioning for decades in Australia. My perspective that was of a middle class Anglo male based in a developed country. Asia, by comparison, was trying to catch up, what could I learn there that we didn't already know how to do better? My perception was that I was descending to meet the less evolved designers and would therefore shine in contrast.

Before departing I had a conversation with a colleague who suggested that I should go and not be an ‘uptight white guy,’ that my perception and truth would not be appreciated. The developing countries know what their challenges are and don't need someone to swoop in and tell them how badly things are going. I was advised to, ‘Tell them that China is fantastic, that the food is outstanding, the women are the most beautiful in the world and that I am constantly impressed but what I see. They'll know you are not being straight but they will love you for it anyway, because there is beauty there too, and you have to open your eyes to see it.’

Integrity, I had been taught, was demonstrated by honesty, and confronting issues directly had been the way I had worked. Now I was faced with advice not to mention the problem that I saw, and to ingratiate myself through self-censoring at the least, or transparent outright lies at the most.

After committing to my journey, and developing an agenda to establish a design practice in China that would facilitate further visits and perpetuate my commercial interest, the suggestion of completing a Masters in Design arose. Further study had also not been a consideration. Although this proposition resonated as it gave a particular mission statement for my field trip, and would provide access to otherwise competitive interests through the guise of research. Additionally, I believed that increasing my qualification level would formalise my interest and legitimise my presence.
At this stage I was facing a crisis of confidence. I was acutely aware of my discomfort with the politics of China and my personal disconnect with the culture. I had boldly committed to the venture and constructed a rationale. I was now facing the prospect of making this journey productive and profitable by recruiting opportunities that were challenging in my native tongue and environment.

Commencing further study coincided with inviting a Chinese academic on sabbatical to share an office which I was squatting in. Through conversations I began to slowly form a sense of China as a culture, a location and a design practice that I could and would invest myself into.
Discussion Design in China, with literature references

China has elevated herself from a state of stagnation to becoming a remarkable narrative of recovery and selective but increasing prosperity, China’s historical-cultural inertia and continuity remain remarkably intact and resilient yet pliable enough to allow new design ideas reinterpretation of traditions.

The overriding principle shared by authors, that I have encountered through their texts, is that China has millennia of cultural inertia as a foundation that contains achievements, inventions, social structures and cultural practices which will not be summarily discarded for modern efficiency, nor Western convenience.

It has been stated that designers who are intent on participating in Chinas’ industry must be immersed in China for a period of time to be able to identify and appreciate the layers of cultural meanings (Justice, 2012; Tharp & Munson, 2005). In my research project, the central focus has been to gain an understanding of the present condition of design in China as a fusion of history, culture and aspirations of Chinese designers.

The rise of China as an economic powerhouse fuelled by her position as a global manufacturing hub is of crucial significance for foreign designers such as those in Australia. Working with China presents challenges to the uninitiated designer in the global design industry. A set of challenges connected to issues of coping with a situation of production located within a foreign and alien culture dislocated from the sites of design and development.

As such the design industry is posed with the question: What will the effect of China’s rise in the manufacture, design and innovation and global influence be? More importantly, how should foreign designers engage with China, Chinese designers and manufacturers? And what are the concerns for Australian designers, industry and consumers in a China-orientated practice?

About Chinese Ways...

The competitive threat of China to production and design globally has caused anxiety in design communities of practice and commentary, (Tharp et al.,2005) in response, a series of designers and design commentators have visited China for
various events and engagements and have shared their experience and observations (Tharp et al., 2005; Nussbaum, 2005; Justice 2014).

Australian Designers have concerns about the impact of China, prompting the industry representatives, the Design Institute of Australia, to produce Design Practice Notes titled, “Design in Australia – Made in China (Kratzer, 2005) to provide insights into doing business with China and promote China as a destination for Designers (Roberts, 2007). Additionally, Government support through Austrade provide information, guidance and support in locating and establishing productive relationship in China. Austrade facilitate industry study tours which function as a ‘cultural icebreaker’ and demonstrate the willingness of Chinese government and businesses, including designers, to work towards a mutual understanding of the cultural landscape and cooperative business environment.

There are concerns about maintaining the quality of the products sourced through China, particularly as more companies move their production offshore. This view is changing as more brands and companies are recognised for maintaining quality whilst contract production is acknowledged as being sourced from China (Schoenberger, 2005). At the commencement of this project there were no smart phones available on the market. The smart device sector has evolved within the global sourcing environment and become viable due to the opportunities for affordable production supplied by Chinese contracted labour.

Concerns and perceptions about quality of manufacture are also changing slowly through engagement in tradeshows, such as furniture, lighting or home-wares, which Australian buyers are seasonally visiting. These retailers are gently providing an appreciation for the breadth of product offerings and price points available to appeal to any market segment. Inexpensive items are perpetually available through discount retailers, but the affordability of more expensive products such as Electronic devices and Audio Visual equipment have made China a more appealing trading partner for average consumers.

For branded product designers, such as kitchen appliances or power tools, it is the convention that only the flagship product line is designed locally. Many Chinese manufacturers produce vast quantities of generic low-price-point products rebranded
for specific retailers. This continues to fuel low-quality perceptions, while we disregard that the smartphone in our pockets have come from the same locations.

The rise of Chinese brands poses some concern for consumers, as familiar brands become uncompetitive with international product which have reduced costs which diminish consumer loyalty for national brands at purchase time.

Many of these consumer perceptions are based on smart marketing rather than realities of who actually owns the companies and where the products are manufactured. In a 2005 Powerhouse Exhibition, *Sydney Designers Unplugged* all the featured designers were engaged with global brands and manufacture in Asia (Hutchison, 2005). While brands have been sourcing design in Australia it was generally only their ‘flagship’ models that were designed with Australian expertise and investment. Notably of the brands presented in the exhibition, many had an Australian manufacturing presence which have since moved offshore. Sunbeam, Victa and Electrolux are some examples of brands with former Made in Australia credentials.

The notable and promising message from this Exhibition was that Australian Designers were finding opportunities and establishing relationships as global production shifted towards China. Melbourne based brand *Crumpler* are 99% made in China (Hespe, 2006). Concerns about maintaining brand quality while meeting competitive price point are addressed by David Roper, who comments “…China is becoming increasingly professional as it competes with cheaper manufacturing destinations” (Hespe, 2006).

Some loss of Australian production has met more public resistance, during 2017 all manufacturing of cars will cease in Australia. Public sentiment is that these products have an authenticity which cannot be genuinely replaced when the production is based offshore. The replacement of General Motors Australia, known as Holden, vehicles shift manufacturing to China has injured national pride, despite the fact that the parent company is not Australian owned and has limited independence from the parent companies in the US.

Some success stories for Australian Manufacturers are also present in the China conversation, companies such as Futuris, who produce Automotive seats and
interior component, have managed a transition from Australian to international production and innovation. In 2004, the company made a bold move to establish partnerships with Chinese manufacturers and gain access to a market ten times the Australian production capacity and growing. Futuris then established further relationships globally.
During 2010 Futuris had design centres in Australia, China and the US. (Futuris, 2015). Investing in design based in China has a two outcomes: firstly, that some production and Design can be co-located and secondly that a product developed in China will share the flavours of that ecosystem, i.e. that the designers immersed in a Chinese culture will imbue their designs with that culture.

“China’s cultural economy is situated between innovation and imitation”

Michael Keane

Presently, China is working through a transitional phase where imitation is not viewed with the same negative connotations that a designer would face in Australia. DIA Practice Notes acknowledge that “Traditionally, copying is a great compliment” (Kraster, 2005). For Chinese companies, the financial and time costs of ‘legitimate’ Research and Development (R&D) are prohibitive especially given the competitive price point expected to be achieved by Chinese and global customers. There are similar instances of copying behaviour in post-war Australia, due to the small population and large distances with European and USA based production, and also occurring in the meteoric industrial development in the USA after World War 2. Within the rapid churn of products for the manufacturing sector, as a shortcut, to replicate makes sense to practice (Tharp et al., 2005).

Additionally, copying behaviour is generally presented as a transgression by unscrupulous Chinese manufacturers, however Sydney Designer, Jon Goulder presents a different view “…someone takes a piece to China and asks them to copy and mass produce it and then takes it back to their country to sell” (Hespe, 2006).

While furniture and low technical investment products such as lighting may be prone to replication and dubious redesign variations, Complex Production is not immune to this issue. There have been legitimate concerns about copying in China including
some high-profile cases such as the Cherry QQ, which is a very close copy of the General Motors Daewoo Matiz. Similarly the Honda CRV doppelganger, the Laibao SRV (GemsSty, 2006), drew international media attention and legal cases. In the QQ case, some government intervention brought the parties to withdraw the case (Schenau, 2004) and in the SRV case the SIPO office declared the Design registration invalid (Schenau, 2003).

The clear resemblance of designs appears to draw a great deal of emotional attention and outrage that this might occur so publicly and be apparently allowed by Chinese authorities. What became apparent during my first field trip is that Chinese design academics and students were equally annoyed that their companies wasted an opportunity for Chinese designers to demonstrate their abilities and define a Chinese signature style (Barry, 2011).

Replication and duplication, colloquial Cantonese for R&D (Dilnot, 2003) may be more efficient than indulging unproven designers when a ready-made and market-tested product is available to be imitated, even if it’s a high-profile consumer product such as a car or a mobile phone, however, the issue for Chinese Designers defining a signature style and new products is affected primarily by a market that has been apathetic to investing in design.

Replica products can be supplied to markets in second and third tier Chinese cities where the genuine article may be too expensive, unobtainable or indiscernibly different, or the audience is incapable or unconcerned about the non-genuine nature of the article (Nussbaum, 2009).

Counterfeit branding and product replication or imitation are highly visible transgressions, however there are also cases of copying design functions through reverse engineering, the copying of functional products such as engines and then providing a differently styled exterior or the copying of a geometry of a functioning vehicle to minimise the development time for a new vehicle. Copying the functional elements of products, particularly internal components, are viewed as a far lesser transgression than imitating the form and aesthetic of an existing design, largely because it is invisible and undetectable for a consumer.
Chinese entrepreneurs have produced other competitive designed articles without the same level of hysteria, Social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook have Chinese counterparts in QQ, WeChat and Weibo.

These Chinese versions are similar to the functions and user experience of Facebook, Google and Yahoo, yet are adapted to Chinese characters and preferences. The concern for western technology companies is with the level of government intervention and requirements to adhere to political agendas.

As a Researcher over the last decade the internet and social media have provided opportunity for communication and sharing of ideas between Australia and China. The exchange of ideas and design concepts has facilitated replication but simultaneously has provided means of detecting infringements rapidly.

Some people, like Dilnot (2003), say that by consuming western technology one is adopting western culture. However, I would assert that adoption of products does not preclude Chinese retaining or redefining their traditional culture. Technology thus does not come scripted to be used in specific ways.

The exposure to telephones and the internet have provided the potential for communications and radical perspectives unprecedented in China’s isolationist culture. Designers in China are investing themselves in developing products suitable to their Chinese consumers at home and abroad, yet there has been no mass intellectual exodus. Chinese Designers are gaining inspiration from global sources and simultaneously creating selling products for the world while retaining a sense of culture and self (Justice, 2012).
About Development and Design…
The speed of design and production in China is extremely quick, due to the high number of capable and quick designers both in-house and in consultancies creating a highly competitive design market. It is not uncommon for designers to work long hours and do shift work to turn over projects, get them to production and gain investment return as fast as humanly possible.

Chinese domestic competition focusses on reducing cost and time as the method of gaining and retaining customers. In order to promote product manufacturing, which is where Chinese companies make their profits, design services and tool production are included costs rather than viewed and charged as separate activities. (Kratzer, 2005) and as a cause of devaluing activity of Design.

This time imperative orientated design practice creates issues for quality management and design innovation. Designers are under pressure to deliver with such efficiency that many will inevitably lead to rebadging of products for different markets, simple re-designs or replication to achieve their deadlines. Working without development time, there can be little deep consideration for the product and departure from existing scripts and manufacturing constraints. This is a liability for innovation.

Consumers are demanding product renewal and redesign with each season, however, there are multiple markets within China (Justice, 2012; Keane, 2004) and products can be progressively introduced through the hierarchies of top tier cities Beijing and Shanghai, through secondary cities, such as Tianjin and Hangzhou and further into towns and villages. This trickle down economy allows for a product cycle to find market and for products rejected in one market to be recast for sale in another.

There is a declared and considerable shift from “Made in China” to “Designed in China”, (Hempel, 2006) with the development of indigenous brands to satisfy domestic markets. Many of these brands have stated the ultimate goal to complete internationally. This shift can be seen in the rise of Chinese brands such as Lenovo and Haier. The Chinese manufactures are compelled to respect IP if they are to have brands recognised for their innovation and design contributions in their own right.
Companies such as Lenovo, established in 1994, have large domestic clientele and are consequently cash rich. This allows them to compete and, in this case, acquired international brand IBM personal computing business unit in 2005. Lenovo has a design innovation centre in Beijing where they develop global products including the ThinkPad.

Additionally, Chinese brands are seeking consumer markets in places neglected by dominant producers in Europe and America, Huawei for example is a brand gaining significant traction in Africa (IGIHE, 2011). China will supply to markets that may by diplomatically undesirable to USA aligned companies, which gains them significant market advantage and often agreements for access to other markets such as minerals and food.

About Education
During 2008, China graduated some 10,000 undergraduates with design degrees (Hempel, 2006), there are a number of concerns surrounding the Design education quality and potential oversupply of designers to an employment market that is dominated by manufacturing and design orientated towards production. Most graduates obtain a Bachelor degree when they join the jobs market. The resulting of Design educated population of design-literate graduates and practicing designers who are looking for ways of expressing themselves and promoting design that is uniquely Chinese.

An alternative view is having a great many design knowledgeable people in the workplace who are functioning in administration, business or labour, bringing other potential values of design thinking and design empathy to those roles. Additionally, a design literate Consumer culture can be expected to be more discerning and demanding of the products and services they encounter.

The Design awareness has developed significant prestige through high profile competitions such as Red Dot, IF and Redstar Design competitions that capture a large talent pool, induct Design students and companies to compete and establish trends through public exposure and critique. This also stimulates the Industries to try new product aesthetics and concepts after gaging public reaction, indicating potential market enthusiasm.
The 2008 Beijing Olympics became a significant opportunity to showcase Chinese design talent in Graphics, Architecture and Industrial Design to the global audience. The iconic torch designed by Yao Yingjia and the Lenovo Design Team, heralded that China had confidence in her designers.

The education pipeline is delivering large numbers of designers to industry potentially to the point past saturation, there is little doubt that China will develop ‘Design maturity’ without external intervention or validation. China has a proven track record for achievement, agility and rapid development, however presently there is in a window of opportunity where foreign designers are welcome and mutual advantage can be gained.

Since opening her doors, there is a great influx of people in China. As companies establish partnerships and operations in China, they inevitably send their management and expertise to maintain the production integrity and assist in training of Chinese staff and stakeholders. China doesn’t need foreign designers the large numbers of domestically trained designers are filtering into organisations and increasingly exerting influence over designs. Foreign trained designers are welcome, but need to fit into the company structures and contexts which can be difficult, but those who can fit in are welcomed (Justice, 2014).
Aims and Objectives

The objective for this research is to delve into the Design ecosystem and become in acquainted with the cultural and practice contexts in order to succinctly articulate the complex dimensions of the intellectual ecosystem for design within the University and its connections to practice.

Description of Project

My first field trip to China included two locations when I commenced planning, these sites were determined by the fact that I had an invitation to Hangzhou, in central China, which was followed by an invitation to visit Foshan University. These sites coincided with two production centres that I regarded as likely places to secure design work that would become the Practice-based Design Research on which my Masters would reflect.

At this stage my supervisor challenged me to be audacious and increase my ambitions, intimating that a great deal of what I would commence would likely fail or become redundant. Yet the suggestion was that in casting a broader net, and aiming for riskier but more lucrative opportunities, there was a greater chance of success, both commercially and as for my research practice.

I would impose upon my hosts and my Chinese colleagues to link me with academic and Industry contacts, and I would request site visits and design interactions from these hosts. I was compelled to be ambitious and fearless.

This field trip was initiated as a fact-finding mission, but with a series of addendum challenges – academic, design practice and personal – all conspiring to overwhelm the process.
Approach

My Approach for design research involved a series of activities which I undertook and recorded. This was followed by a reflective analysis and evaluation in order to adjust to meeting the developing requirements of the research. I undertook field trips to be engaged within the context and locale of the design practices I investigated and participated with. The field trips were targeted to visiting active manufacturing and design districts.

I have undertaken photography as a method (Nordeman, 1997) of recording the sites and activities I encountered and reviewed them after the event. I used photography to prompt the memories of my experiences and recorded fine details that would be impossible to draft or sketch with appropriate detail in a timely manner. Through reflections on the visual record, I analysed the events, drew conclusions and formulated questions for subsequent inquiries. The photographic record also illuminated elements of my sustained focus and allowed me to draw common threads from disparate events.

Sites that were most likely to yield encounters with Chinese commercial design and manufacturing practices determined field trip itineraries. This included a series of production facilities and retail venues. I determined to document a broad range of scales of manufacture, technical complexity, labour types and the auxiliary industries required to sustain them.

Similarly, I visited universities, polytechnics, research institutions, and research and development organisations to gain insights into the educational and intellectual contexts that were determining the strategy and emerging practices with which I would be engaging.

Many of the educational and commercial sites were visited on multiple occasions to gauge the changes, progress and pace of change over the life of the project. The transformations of each venue or its mission are documented for analysis and reflection.

During field trips I undertook significant amounts of data collection. I collected and catalogued trade literature and samples, educational publications and academic
program structures for review and consideration. Additionally, artefacts of everyday life provided insights into the Chinese community and cultural contexts as a point of comparison with Australia.

Throughout the research I have conducted unstructured conversations with participants. This practice has been initiated through my conversations in my shared office where day to day activity and serendipitous events stimulated conversations and insights into China in an organic manner, so as not to predetermine the outcomes or compromise the findings with an established Australian cultural and design milieu.

These conversations engaged design academics in both China and Australia. Many conversations were repeated on different occasions to retest the consistency of communication and contextual complexities that were not immediately apparent in the initial conversations. Revisited conversations often yielded further information and details that clarify and augment the initial information.

Framing and directing design studios is a method of incubating and testing ideas in a collective context. The studios engage with both implicit contexts of design and explicit Sino themes. Studios were constructed after particular events or observations during field trips and conversations with my Chinese counterparts. Each studio was directed with the intention of shared, parallel or progressive development with Chinese stakeholders.
Method

When Designers do research, we follow a three-part process of data collection, analysis and making conclusions. For this particular research project, the process followed has been

1. Data collection
2. Analysis
3. Develop model
4. Description of models

Each stage is briefly described below:

Data collection
Data collection included developing a reading list about Design in China with emphasis on Industrial Design but with broad interests in Chinese Culture and Art, Chinese design practices and history, design education approaches in China, approaches to research and Innovation.

Field trips were conducted from 2005 until 2013, eight journeys throughout China and returning on multiple occasions to Beijing, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, and Foshan. The objective of these trips was to engage with stakeholders and visit sites of design activity and significance, to gain insights into the contemporary design practices and approaches.

Throughout the Research, a photographic record has been maintained to sustain visual record and memory of significant events. This repository of photographs has then been further interrogated for reoccurring themes and instances of interest. Additionally, the photographs have served as a mnemonic of the events.

Throughout the research discrepancies in Language and Cultural approaches to design and Education, have been present a series of participant observations which allowed me to examine events and their meanings at the time and then later as clearer understandings emerged. These Participant Observations included activity in
both China and Australia where the participant discussion, and observed actions appeared to be incongruent.

Analysis
The Analysis stage included a review of activities and undertaken through studio practices of pinning up the objects and images collected during field trips. From these temporary installations and the presentations and discussions that followed, I would identify the key ‘components’ to the events and activities including design stakeholders and activities, production facilities and institutions. In addition to the People places and objects, I would also speculate on and identifying the ‘drivers’ of the Design activity. This process was used to develop and visualise an ecosystem of the Design conditions in China.

Develop model
Models for the chapters (and intermediate steps) have been constructed to describe, understand and explain the information gathered during the data collection and analysis stages of the project. Diagrams and visual models have been useful in creating a synthesis between the seemingly disparate element and information into a concise and coherent tool. The abstracted content has then become dislocated from the original events allowing for the models developed to become a tool and contribution to design research practice beyond this research project.

Description of models
The description of models leads the viewer through the model and offers a method for deploying it in Design practice and research. The objective was to develop tools for design practitioners, researchers, and students to engage with China and Chinese Themes in their practices.
Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 1. Agency by Design is an account of the Chinese industrial context through a case study investigating Furniture City in Guangdong Province. Through observations of the site and retail practices I discuss and speculate on production design practices, and the importance of design, in establishing and maintaining the site’s agency as a global venue for engaging with, and accessing, furniture design. Chapter 1 develops, through design narrative, a model for viewing and considering the import of design within the production and retail ecosystem for business-to-business transactions in China.

Chapter 2. Design as Agency is an account of a commercial interaction and the subsequent design studio proposition. Through consideration of this initiating event and the following project engagement, the chapter progresses through a series of observations that contribute to a design model that reflects on my understandings of comparisons between Chinese and Australian Industrial Design academics. Through this I demonstrate the project’s transformative effect on the design practice researcher. But I propose it as a way of identifying and categorising particular lenses for reviewing design practice and contributing to understandings of design in the Asian Century.

The concluding chapter, A Chinese Whisperer, reflects on my personal transformation through the project. My engagement with China has caused a change in my perspectives as a design academic and practitioner. I conclude by speculating on the further work and my intentions with the resolution of this project.
Introduction

My Field Trips in China involved a series of site visits that could be categorised as designers studios, production facilities and sites of cultural significance, in some cases all three simultaneously. The typical visit would include a welcome at the most senior persons office including freshly brewed green tea, a brief conversation to get to know each other then a well-worn script on the particular site and its excellent attributes, generally presented with the trials and tribulations of the business and desire to do more with limited resources and a highly competitive playing field with unscrupulous competition. This is generally followed by the site tour where one is exposed to a curated version of what the various companies engage with.

At first each site appeared to me as a motley collection of processes and frenzied yet inefficient activity. However as I became accustomed to the ritual for these encounters emerged it became increasingly apparent how to engage with the sites and an appreciation for the frugal investment for the maximum return. Each site visit over successive field trips offered more insights into industries that faced the Herculean tasks of engaging with design and distribution of their product in a sea of agile and ravenous competition. This is further complicated by the perception that all businesses are export capable and pleased to offer internationally competitive services at discounted rates.

Each visit would be proceeded by a meal, possibly better described as a banquet, which would involve all the key stakeholders form the sites visited and generally the people who had introduced me, often university staff who had existing or aspirational relationships. The conversation would inevitably lead to possibility of joint projects,
developing relationships and opportunities for profitable enterprise to evolve from the visit.

In the following paragraphs I have summarised a selection of production case studies which have contributed to my understanding of the China production ecosystem and how design is engaged with the various sites and enterprises. Complete case studies are available in the appendices. These brief descriptions are proceeded by an in depth case study of furniture design and production ecosystem in Guangdong province.

**Art Top**
Art Top is a design and product development consultancy owned and operated exclusively by Chinese designers working for domestic and international clients. Art Top was based in Shenzhen in 2005-07, and has gone through rapid commercial development and expansion including recently becoming a ‘Group’ with offices in Hong Kong. Art Top services B2B clients who are manufacturing products for Chinese and global markets such as mobile phones and exercise equipment. This is potentially the closest equivalent to the Australian design consultancy practice in activity, however the scale of expansion and increase in the company’s capability due to China’s developing manufacturing economies and design awareness is comparatively stratospheric.

**Guangzhou Motorcycle factory**
This factory assembles Chinese domestic branded motorcycles and scooters but is also contracted to assemble European branded motorcycles. China is an ideal environment for motorcycle assembly. The low cost of labour and a readily available semi-skilled labour workforce is competitive with fully automated assembly line production. A human assembly line is relatively agile and efficient for the relatively small quantities of motorcycle produced in each model before ‘retooling’ for the following model. This Factory was investing in research and development and design styling departments to capitalise on the lessons learned from contracted assembly and the increased production capacity and capabilities developed to meet the contracts. There is no evidence of B2C transactions at this facility.
Plastics Factory, Donguan
Donguan was developed as a factory district adjacent to Shenzhen, China’s Industrial Design City. The sprawling manufacturing parks were constructed to meet production demands of the Shenzhen design business community. This factory is uncommon in that it is owned and operated by a European expat, who has international contracts and employs non-Chinese designers for ‘design as narrative’ activity and design quality assurance for the international brand consumers’ expectations. The DFM designers and engineers are all Chinese graduates. This site offers design of products and tooling design and fabrication of (relatively) small plastic injection moulding tools. Additionally some injection moulding production and assembly of plastic products such as toolboxes takes place in the upper levels of the archetypal multi-level complex. This is unskilled labour using rudimentary equipment. This site is a closed community for production with accommodation and facilities for workers.

Shunde Furniture Fabrication Factory
Shunde District is comprised of many small independent furniture and component fabricators. The activity is labour intensive due to the agile requirements of batch production, a broad catalogue of product offerings and some relatively poor investment in manufacturing equipment. There is extensive use of particleboards with thin veneers of timber or printed-paper substrate coated in varnishes and lacquers. This is consistent for decorative mouldings and details, where the paper veneers comply with relatively complex forms. Working conditions were unenviable largely due to tight profit margins affecting minimal investment in company infrastructure. Many of these small operators supply through agents, catalogue and online environments such as Alibaba or Made in China.com. These are all B2B transactions.

Nanfeng Kiln Cultural and Creative Zone
Within the Nanfeng Cultural and Creative Zone is a working example of a dragon kiln. This particular kiln has been continuously operational since the Ming Dynasty five centuries ago. The Zone hosts a collection of craftspeople that specialise in traditional ceramics crafts. The operators here are likely to have considerable profile and credibility in the craft sector and produce low volume and high value through
small batch production. The site functions as an incubator and agent for promotion of the craft and crafts people.

**Tile City**
In contrast to the Nanfeng Kilns, Tile City is the retail showrooms for a district of industrial ceramics manufacturers. The display suites conduct B2B transactions for domestic kitchen and bathroom tiles. The majority of inventory is ceramic tiles with examples of glass and emerging materials present. Ceramic baths, vanity units, sinks, toilets and auxiliary products such as tapware are all included in the space partially to convey the materials and items found in the application environment. These items are also for purchase, but this is a secondary concern. This site is a former production site and currently used for B2B retail, warehousing and distribution. The production sites that cause visible dust and emissions pollution are being relocated outside major cities due to public health concerns.

These five examples of sites of design and production found in Guangdong My research demonstrate the breadth of production in a single province. Examples of Artisanal highly crafted items of Nanfeng kilns to the immense industrial kilns that Toilet Pans are fired dozens in a cycle. Some of this manufacturing has no Chinese design contribution including European branded motorcycles found in Guangdong alongside Chinese branded small capacity motorcycles and scooters that are found throughout China as Couriers, taxis and affordable transport. The common factor in each of these presented cases was each had Designers present and engaging with the production networks with the expressed objective of creating further opportunities for expansion and profitable enterprise.

For my practice it would be necessary to decode this ecosystem so that I could engage with it and explain it to designers aspiring to engage with China. This chapter provides and account of the Business to Business (B2B) ecosystem that I have observed in Guangdong and concludes with a model for where and how design may occur within the system such that designers can strategically engage with Chinese Industry.
Encounters in ‘Furniture City’

In the adjacent photograph is of one of the most memorable chairs that I have encountered. This is despite the shape being uncomfortable and longevity being questionable, which is unsurprising given the entire thing is constructed by welding stamping offcuts together. These are the discarded scraps acquired after cutting out the part you really want. An enterprising designer saw this waste stream and turned it into eye-catching furniture. As a designer who appreciates craftsmanship I admire this chair, but I wouldn’t envy the labour of fabricating this piece. To me what is astounding is the patience of the person fitting and welding the chair together. As we looked further through the store we found the same types of chairs in several different shapes. Initially I thought these might be strategic feature items to attract attention to the store and then sell the comparatively inconspicuous items placed next to them. When we asked about the unit cost we were quoted in lots of 50 or more. The salesperson answered my inquiry without an indication of concern regarding the labour required in such a piece or the variations in which it could be supplied. A deal could have been struck then and there and I would have received the delivery six weeks later. From the supplier’s view this was just another transaction. From my perspective the production potential evidently available in China had eclipsed my resources available in Melbourne by such magnitude that the scale of my world had shifted. I would realise just how profoundly when I reflected on what I had observed in Furniture City.
My Foshan field visits included a location known as ‘Furniture City’. It is an amazing place for every conceivable type of furniture you can imagine and quite a few you wouldn’t dare to dream of. The furniture is featured in an exhibition centre dedicated to being the hub between the Shunde district’s furniture production and global consumers. In this chapter I will provide an insight into what I have seen and the awesome potential Foshan has to offer for furniture design and fabrication, as a means of understanding ‘how China works’ and how ‘we can work with China.’

The Luofugong International Furniture Exposition & Exhibition Centre (Image 3.6) is a feature venue after local businesses established factories along the 10kms of the highway during the 1980s. Luofugong proceeded to establish the world’s largest furniture retail market from design to manufacture, effectively orientating the district of Shunde to become a furniture design and integrated manufacturing ecosystem in order to satisfy global market demands.

This colossal building is effectively a convention centre. On arriving and parking I was awestruck by the scale and presence of the street frontage. The size of the site is approximately equivalent to ten times the size of the average Australian shopping centres – devoted entirely to furniture in large scale commercial and assorted niche sectors. I was hoping to regain some sense of a ‘human scale’ when we got inside, however it felt like I was walking down a street – not the interior of a building.

Each of the shops was packed with furniture, collectively displaying a vast range of functional and occasional furniture each according to themes and contexts. My host kept trying to move me along, mindful of the venue scale and our limited time. Even so I had to investigate a shop that exclusively sold reclining massage chairs (Image 3.28). I have never been tortured quite as much as in this seemingly oversized luxury chair that appears to be super comfortable until you pushed some buttons. At this point the chair started undulating and crushing body parts in the most bizarre and unsettling manner.

As we progressed down to the core of the building – a six storey atrium that could have hosted football games without fear of the ball hitting the roof – a few things struck me. Firstly, the size of the building indicated some serious construction and
money invested to construct this furniture Mecca. Secondly, that this had apparently been successful. The people present were from every corner of the globe – attested to by the flags of many countries attached to the ceiling of the atrium. I talked with some of these people in the various hotels I was accommodated in and most were in Foshan to buy furniture or ceramics.

Each shop presented a different story, most were display suites where every item was for sale, like a bed store that also sells the flower pots on the night stand. The retail suites were like theatre sets – elaborately arranged furniture, in settings with layers of cushions, lamps and flowerpots, tea settings on every table and drapery by the kilometre. It is difficult to convey the vast range of inventory available. Some stores would be based on a theme such as traditional Chinese furniture, other stores on production methods such as timber furniture, some on types of furniture such as bar stools and yet others on particular contexts. Furniture for hotels, for example, featured decorative ornaments such as twelve foot versions of terracotta warriors to grace the foyers. I could speculate that I could find any type of furniture I could describe, or if it wasn't immediately available each store was ready to take an order and have a sample fabricated for my approval. Every incident or question was answered in the affirmative or with a referral to someone who could help.
Traditional Chinese Style

Some of the Chinese traditional styles are quite austere, with an exquisite quality of restraint in their use of material. Others are elaborately decorated with stylised lacquer and carvings of icons or animals such as bats, which represent longevity and happiness. Clouds feature prominently as an invitation for the benevolent gods to find comfort when residing in one’s house. Clouds may be featured as geometric designs or flowing illustrative carvings. Ideograms also are found in carvings. Each feature may have layers of meaning, to do with luck, prosperity and good health, but also to do with the particular furniture use and audience. I was quite taken by the general outpouring of mystical good will embodied in the furniture. The accumulation of furniture with optimistic elements can continually reinforce a positive state of mind creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A great deal of the traditional furniture appears as sets, like a group A chair on the right is for the husband as patriarch of the family and the left for his wife, submissive and humble. The central table has some additional significance. I have seen this in houses I visited, often with small shrines to the family ancestors located adjacent. This practice has an enduring resonance with Chinese people. The traditions practiced through rituals, material arrangements, icons and furniture are based in Chinese cultural practice, which is codified and intuitively understood by locals. However, the furniture found in Furniture City is not traditional but a hybrid design of contemporary production practices and modern interpretations of traditional designs, also including office desks that appear to be classical reproductions, however these objects cleverly conceal computer units and power cords. The traditional styles, it seems, can be treated as aesthetic overlays for modern furniture.

Similarly, rituals surrounding the drinking of tea can be quite elaborate in China. I don’t think these rituals are as disciplined as the Japanese tea ceremony, but Chinese practices appear to be much more practical and less severe in their social interactions. There are some amazing tea tables here, similar to a coffee table but set up for serving tea. The proportion and size are evident (Image 3.9) but what you can’t see is the entire functional systems within. There are tables with heating elements for the water and keeping the tea at the correct temperature. And given
that cooled tea shouldn’t be drunk there is a grille to pour it into when you would like a refill. This grille spills into a container that pulls out like a drawer for the host to dispose of after the guests have departed. It’s a brilliant mix of traditional style with modern functionality and a little bit of couch lethargy.

The proportions of Chinese chairs and couches is quite different to Australian furniture. The chairs are much wider, noticeably in the arms on arm chairs, and appear to be squatter and more substantial. My host explained this is largely to do with the ideal of being ‘strong’ or ‘formidable’. This concept of visual gravitas is echoed through Chinese architecture but is more apparent in the interiors of homes where people have the opportunity to express themselves through their environment. In many of the houses I visited these large pieces of furniture, generally a couch and two arm chairs surrounding a low table, a combination of a coffee table in height and a kitchen table length and width, dominated the typical lounge room. The size often dictates the location and layout within an apartment. The materials and decorative detailing add a further richness to a substantial visual diet.

For my Chinese colleagues, a great deal of this furniture found in the centre is far too luxurious and ostentatious to the point of being kitsch. Less elaborate fare can be found in their homes, which lead me to question ‘Who would buy such items?’ My colleague in Foshan explained that many of these items were sold to wealthy clientele to fit out penthouse style apartments as a show of status and wealth. Additionally, a great deal is not intended for the domestic market but destined to be sold to the Chinese diaspora who, through the furniture, are reminded of home and present a declaration of their ancestral origins when living abroad. This also reflects investment relationships (Christerson, 1997) with their origin towns and provinces. It is not uncommon for second and third generation diaspora to perpetuate this furniture style and connection with tradition.
Design for Melbourne

The manufacturers seem also to have taken influences from everywhere on the globe. Styles here included modernist simplicity, though many pieces I saw had Chinese proportions and design idiosyncrasies. Some of this furniture would look entirely at home in stores in Melbourne.

At one point in the tour, I encountered a shop that appealed for no particular reason. When we entered there was a familiarity about the store that echoed of home. I set about trying to puzzle it out while looking at some bizarrely compelling cushions and rugs made of leather strips. As you can see in the image (Image 3.10) this is shag-pile meets leather and the volume of pile makes the backing invisible. I was speaking with the salesman about the rugs and he asked where we were from. I replied ‘Audalia’ (Australia), which he followed up with a discussion about his distributors and retailers where we could purchase the items we were interested in. This had three implications. Firstly, that we were not serious buyers looking for a consignment of products, but he could still assist us to find what we liked with minimal impact on ourselves and also on him. Secondly, that this businessman already maintained a footprint in Australia, he wasn’t limited to the customers attracted to his store. We didn’t discuss whether he had a stake in the Australian operation or simply supplied an Australian retailer. The third factor was that he was completely comfortable with an Australian clientele and market place. He had identified our accents and was engaging quite fluently in Australian-English and custom.

I came across some jigsaw-shaped cushions that will cause some anguish for a colleague in Melbourne when he discovers that ‘his new idea’ has a Chinese cousin under production and ready to import. These projects are unrelated and my colleague’s market offering is unlikely to be contested because the Chinese-ethos is not protectionist. Any product or variation I can think up can be made and sold. There is no exclusivity on good ideas – simply an opportunity to sell a product. I can expect that any product that has been designed will influence other designers and manufacturers here. Anything successful in the market will be imitated and almost any idea can be made and tested in the market.
Design for Scandinavia

A second shop caught my attention because of the ‘natural blonde’ timber which contrasted with the rich red varnishes or darker shades common in Chinese furniture. Similarly, the citrus colours, which are only found in shopping centre ice cream stores, stood out. On further inspection the proportions of the furniture were not Chinese, it was very much in the Scandinavian approach, with an economy of material and general lightness to the objects that felt out of place after a few hours of seeing substantial couches and king size beds with rich dark colours. The lack of embellishments and clean lines were also out of character. However, I think this was designed by a local Chinese designer because of this grille detail (Image 3.11) which has the top hat line. The grille resonated in Chinese knots and architectural detail, so it was a slightly incongruous fusion. I wondered as to whether the designer spent a great deal of time researching Scandinavian furniture or spent some time abroad, and also whether this furniture was intended for the Chinese domestic market.

Initially, the timber appeared at a distance to be a solid blonde variety but on closer inspection was board constructed from short pieces all glued together. This is an inefficient process for constructing board, but a sustainable (Zheng, 2010) method of using off cuts of timber to manufacture a new design material from a waste stream and eliminate blemished or knotted pieces. The furniture pieces were constructed by machined joints with adhesives. Despite the chemical varnishes and adhesives, the material maintained a resonant aesthetic of nature.
Accessories

After wandering about for an hour I went through a fatigue transition after seeing so many impressive things. The furniture pieces shouting out their existence were everywhere, but as the visual cacophony abated many of the smaller details emerged and the incidental also became interesting. I found some shoe racks that line cupboards or walls – neat storage solutions. The slim boxes had been designed for cupboards but could also line walls, particularly in hallways, without diminishing circulation space. This product would work in small spaces such as typical Chinese apartments, but also had a series of price points and features to make it appealing in Western markets as an accessory to interiors or furniture suppliers.

The interesting thing about Furniture City was that everything was available there. Seeing so much in one place I had the opportunity to see gaps in the market and new opportunities made possible by new products or style changes. There is such a density of industry there that you can’t help but be influenced by others and find allies and competition with ease.

I encountered some large flower pots decorated with English phrases. I tried to work out the significance and realised that it didn’t make clear sense; the designer simply added it for aesthetic value. This prompted a rapid cycle of being offended then amused by the cultural appropriation. The design value was not quite clear other than being not a simple pattern or a demonstration of words one may like on their oversized pot. Really big things are one of the recurring themes in China; flower pots capable of fitting small trees, Terracotta Warriors at life size and some triple the size of the originals. These are mostly sold to hotels and institutions with big foyers and a need to make a statement. These are suited to and aimed at big architecture fit-outs such as hotels where the foyers are palatial and may be three or four storeys tall, typically with dining rooms overlooking. Large feature statues of cultural significance appear in most hotels, appealing to international business people who travel to China, partly to impress and partly to remind us of the longevity and gravitas of the culture.
As I walked around, a number of fragments began to form a map in my head about Furniture City and what the apparent and true purpose of this edifice really was. Each time we entered a shop we were summed up and either pounced upon or left to wander, generally the former. All of my questions were answered succinctly and calculators were used as a common form of communicating prices. This ritual takes the form of the shop assistant typing in a number and then my proposing a ridiculously small proportion of their number. The ‘digital haggle’ by calculator can become quite intense as the person you are bargaining with goes through a ritual of emotional responses and frustration, generally at our inability to communicate directly. In all of these cases my guide would translate for me and the shop assistants would know we weren’t genuine buyers, but in observing the ritual they just might land a sale. The astounding thing I learned during the first such encounter was that I was not talking about a single unit but a consignment of chairs. In that particular case the minimum order was 500 pieces per shipment. I did note that this amount was discussed after the price ‘negotiation’. I am unsure whether this was an addition to rebalance the profitability of the transaction or a strategy to make me go away!

It is possible to come to Furniture City, buy a lounge suite and have it delivered to your apartment, but one can expect to be looking at the high end of the market for that kind of sale, and delivery is local. Trans-China delivery is possible (Christerson, 1997) but discouraged. The conventional practice there is for business to business (B2B) sales. Buyers come here to procure consignments of furniture and have it shipped by the cargo container load to their local distribution site. There are big events held with each ‘season’ and annual fairs to attract global buyers, secure large orders and renew seasonal relationships. It is a full service place where you could conceivably walk into shop and select some furniture, make an order and have it freighted globally on any morning of any day of the year.

While in Foshan my accommodation would host assorted buyers from all over the globe looking for various products, and manufacturers who could fabricate to a design specification and ship the product. The hotels, restaurants, transport services
and the centre itself were all orientated towards attracting and servicing these customers. The interior ceiling of the design hall atrium featured many national flags of buyers (Image 3.14) in a gesture of recognition of the clientele. Sadly, the Australian flag was absent; however, I did note the New Zealand flag was present and both flags might have been considered an unnecessary repetition…
Buyers as Agents of Chinese Products

Having observed the furniture manufacture ecosystem in Foshan and speculated on the location for design within the system and how it may add value to the product outcomes and diversity, I was faced with the question of why this level of diversity is not available in Melbourne, despite the apparent global focus of B2B buyers. The variation in the range of wares and the opportunities for much higher quality of the products available for some reason has not transmitted to the Melbourne retail environment. A part of the explanation may be in the furniture distribution networks that feed our retail venues. Additionally the people who travel to China and select the offerings for import have agendas and price points of their own that fuel a misconception that Chinese manufacturers are only capable of producing goods which are cheap and nasty. Furniture City offers breadth of quality and price points that are available to all buyers. What we commonly observe in Australian retailers’ offerings is the low end of what is actually available. Two questions form in the absence of this product availability in Melbourne, despite its availability for purchase.

1. Who is deciding what is imported for retail?
2. What is motivating their decision making?

Vance Miller is an English kitchen retailer who travels to China (Robert Davis, 2007) in search of products and securing better deals than distributors can provide for him by circumnavigating the middlemen and seeing the manufacturers directly. There is a scene where he is inspecting a shower head and trying to negotiate a reduced price. The systematic disassembly of the product is punctuated by a Cockney commentary which provides some sense of his mind-set and intentions, which are a Machiavellian method to reduce costs. Miller’s tenacious Sino-endeavour includes finding products which closely resemble established brand offerings and relentless badgering of sellers until he reaches his desired margin.

Miller is prepared to go to the primary production source and, even to purchase the source to secure production for his distribution and retail chain. As the narrative progresses, Miller becomes more aware of the Chinese stakeholders within production and somewhat softens his ruthless approach throughout the
documentary. Miller in many ways embodies the motivations of buyers who travel to China. The promise of unparalleled profit margins combined with the spirit of entrepreneurialism drives many people to engage with China from the perspective of a pure profit making venture. Where Miller will travel intrepidly into the farthest provinces, these form significant barriers for most merchant buyers to connect directly with producers. Furniture City, by comparison, appears to be the ‘ultimate middle man’. It provides a retail space not unlike a Western shopping centre that caters specifically and directly to B2B buyers. Having seen the exceptional range of products that don’t make it through the agency of buyers, distributors and retailers, one can attribute this to ‘buyers’ behaviour and opinions. I would suggest that the Chinese producers are largely expecting that the world only requires inexpensive products.

Although buyers and producers in Shunde district are clearly pivotal in supplying international retail markets, up until this point the (designed) furniture is evident, but the location of designers within the ecosystem is still unclear. This environment requires a steady population of design thinking and trend-responsive aesthetic choices. The designers also have a role in the district in maintaining the energy and global focus on Lecong and the Shunde district as the destination for furniture procurement.

In the previous paragraphs I have given some insight into the retail space and the potential motivations of buyers, who largely dictate what we see in our home country’s business to consumer transactions, a narrow range selection from the possibilities available in Furniture City. I would like to speculate on where the designers sit within this production city and how the opening up of the design narrative offers further ways of understanding the value and potential of the Shunde district.
IF YOU TRY NOT KNOWING TO THE PEOPLE LIVING COUNTRIES IT ISN'T EASY TO KILL OR DIE FOR THE PEOPLE LIVING LIFE IN THE ONLY ONE I HOPE TELL I AM A DREAMER IN SOME DAY YOU'LL ONE AS ONE I HOPE SOME PEOPLE WILL LIVE SOME DOING AS ONE AS ONE AS NOT THE YOU MIND US AND ONLY DUE TELL TO THE THE PEOPLE MAY PEOPLE TELL I AM ONLY ONE
Mapping B2B Transactions

Shunde District is comprised of many people who all work with shared interests. Here I will explain how it works and speculate on how the complexities of the design and production ecosystem may play out. The common narrative is that when one walks into Furniture City and approaches any of the showrooms located within, it is possible to make an order of any piece of display furniture. The paperwork goes directly out the back to adjoining factories where the production will commence at once. I have represented this transaction narrative in Figure 1.1.

![Figure 1.1 – Furniture City Common Narrative](image)

In this case the key actors are:

- The venue of Furniture City (as a destination and agent for the furniture procurement ‘ecosystem’)
- The buyer (who wants an item; NB, this is a behavioural role not an individual)
- The showroom (which displays the products and production capacity)
- The display furniture piece (which has already been designed)
- The retailer, (who we assume is capable of negotiating sales and alterations from the floor stock)
- The production facility (this includes fabricators, original equipment manufacturer (OEM) suppliers and assemblers)
- Global logistics and shipping.

A complete key to these icons is available in the legend in Figure 1.8
This diagram shows the stakeholders in the transaction. The pre-designed furniture is exhibited in Lecong Furniture showroom, which is available to view, purchase and easily procure. There is, however, a notable absence of the designer in this scenario. Clearly the objects that are present have been designed, but the ‘Common Narrative’ assumes a designer is located within the production facility. I have been repeatedly told that I could make a custom request and it would be met by the craftsmen waiting to satisfy customers, and that anything was possible for a negotiated price. In such a case the design can be viewed as part of the production process. It is common practice to have in-house designers and design-capable craftsmen at the adjacent production sites. This can be described as Design for Manufacture (DFM) which is defined as process and concepts that enable a product to be made in large quantities efficiently. This activity can be defined as a subset of ‘Design’, which also includes activities orientated around aesthetic choices and form giving practices. This activity is essentially a narrative building exercise I will define as ‘Design as Narrative’. On face value Furniture City and the Shunde Ecosystem narrative are excellent cases of Service Design – encounters that enable people to achieve a desired activity, in this case procuring furniture. The customer is well served and has clear and rapid communication with the retailer and/or production advisors. Expectations can be discussed and negotiated with quantified resolution and often samples to establish domestic interest for Business to Consumer (B2C) transactions.

A second scenario is that the buyer arrives with a ‘design in hand’ and through Furniture City finds a suitable retailer that has a production connection. This assumes there is a linked connection between the showroom and the unseen but adjacent production facility out the back and that the furniture in the showroom is an example of the production capacity. As with all desirable narratives we can assume a congenial negotiation occurs and the products are shipped as in Figure 1.2.
This scenario introduces a few issues, the Design as an artefact of intellectual property (DIP) is now available to the production facility. In conducting DFM the production adjusts capability and potentially expands capacity. The agreement to produce may include product exclusivity, effectively making the producer a pure labour service accessed through the showroom within the Furniture City precinct.

Within this scenario the designer is independent of the ‘design’ but the ‘design’ may now take on new roles and be used in a series of ways, both legitimate and unauthorised (Trathen, Varadarajan, & Mayson, 2007) and with a range of consequences. In Figure 1.3 variations of the design, adaptations of the details or inclusion of the production method in other designs may stimulate other products.

Up until this point we have assumed the ‘common narrative’ of the production being linked to the showroom to be true when, in fact, these facilities may be delinked and entirely independent. The showroom is far more likely to be independent and act purely as a ‘middle-man’, duplicating the role of the venue. In this case the retailer may have relationships with multiple production facilities as is desirable in business relationships to ensure value and some leverage in production negotiations.
The Chinese business ecosystem including guānxì (sustained loyal relationships) would suggest ongoing and established relationships effectively linking the two entities through an ethical relationship framework rather than a legal one. This, however, is culturally binding and ensures the prosperity for all the involved parties. This practice is common amongst Chinese stakeholders including the Sino-diaspora but absent from many western B2B clients (Justice, 2012). Through a series of unstructured conversations, I have encountered buyers who have had dealings in China who have had significant financial restraints placed on the negotiations, either by their employers or by the market price point, as they have an obligation to remain competitive. The absence of guānxì allows a western buyer to insist on a lower price and necessitates a retailer to have multiple producers at different capacities and price points as represented in Figure 1.4

![Figure 1.4 – Furniture City Distribution Zone Narrative](image)

Negotiating with Chinese producers often involves investment in re-tooling for production facilities. Simple furniture often still requires jigs and fixtures, items that hold the parts in a specific position for joining. This complexity of the product and process, combined with production time per activity, are factors which determine the cost of production. The desirable outcome for a buyer at this point is for the producer to absorb these costs. Most Chinese manufacturers will factor them into the costs or offset the costs through additional revenue. In Figure 1.4 we can see a simple case of the buyer receiving the products at the desired price and the Chinese producer covering costs or creating supplemental income by distributing the design to a market not in direct competition with the original buyer.

Through this scenario we can see that the design, unchanged, could be globally distributed through the buyer producer-relationship without compensation to the
designer. Disregarding business revenue, the design impact potentially becomes global through this interaction.

Finally with a significant design there will almost certainly be imitations, homages and variations that seek to duplicate the same appealing features and characteristics. Figure 1.5 features a proliferation of designed products stimulated by the original design.

Figure 1.5 – Furniture City Proliferation Narrative

The Role of Design in the B2B Ecosystem.

Up until this point in the speculation the focus has been on the relationship between buyer and retailer/producer. However when re-examined to feature and speculate on the role of the designer within the ecosystem we can see greater variation, complexity and potentially more interesting results.

The two key roles of design in this ecosystem may be either as a visionary or as a problem solver:

- The visionary generates a suitable narrative for the product to make it desirable to purchase for the end user. These designers are often the flamboyant types that we see in coffee table books and design magazines. A great deal of this design emphasis is on the aesthetic and narrative attributes. This activity is defined as Design as Narrative.
The problem solver has the role of finding a suitable compromise between the visionary, the production requirements and the retail environment.

- These designers are often unseen. They may be aligned with the production facility where their value is in the optimisation of the product or in retail where their ‘problem’ may be more logistics supply chain or end user orientated. This activity is defined as DFM.

In the Chinese context many factories have engineers and designers orientated towards DFM. The majority of the time DFM is spent in making design compromises and solving problems to meet the production requirements regardless of the design origin.

As a design passes through the production supply chain, it may cause a series of effects and create auxiliary revenue streams. This is consistent for the buyer, retailer and producer. The end user wants value for their purchase and it is the end user’s desire that the designer is targeting through the given design.

Independent designers may become involved as we see in Figure 1.6. The central issue for designers is at which point in the supply chain their relationship may be, and therefore to whom they have professional and ethical obligations. Freelance designers are often entrepreneurial in their approach, strategically designing objects to trend. Alignment with retailers is beneficial because the designer receives current information on trends and buyer/end user trends. Freelance designers have a need to generate profile and nourish the ecosystem by bringing in ideas of differentiation and rethinking the current practices as a point of difference.

Figure 1.6 – Furniture City Independent Designers Inclusion Narrative
It is also conceivable that a retailer-developed design may be included in the general inventory to attract further buyers. Figure 1.7 describes the situation when an introduced design is brought to a retailer or producer and then is featured in the showroom. The flow of designs back into the ecosystem creates more revenue opportunities.

![Figure 1.7 – Furniture City Product Parallel Sales of Spec Design](image)

It is conceivable that a buyer will approach the retailer with a particular request that the retailer/producer knows he cannot satisfy within his current supply chain. I have witnessed the Chinese custom of never denying the request of the customer. This ‘can-do’ attitude is largely because the retailer is acutely aware of the production assets available and the network of allies and suppliers that may be called on for assistance. For example, if I request a chair in a different colour, the retailer is likely to know if one is available, its location and who currently has the asset. Retrieving an item from the store room, is more often code for ‘borrowing’ from another retailer or selling on behalf of a fellow retailer. This behaviour of agency extends to associated services.

The retailer may request a chair to be upholstered in a different coloured material, either within his supply chain or network. Similarly when a request comes in which the retailer can’t immediately meet within his eco-system (supply chain and network), the retailer will recruit appropriate skills form the local talent pool and establish new guānxì. Figure 1.8 also describes a simple recruitment of a designer into the ecosystem. The retailer in acting as agent ‘owns’ the relationship and acquires good will with the designer and commissioning buyer for enabling the procurement.
Shunde District

Throughout these speculations the site acts as the nexus between the participants, however the venue has a role of its own that needs to be considered within the Chinese context.

Historically, towns and districts have been tight-knit, cooperative communities to achieve collaborative goals such as agricultural harvest or mining and smelting metals. The idealised presentation in Maoist China propaganda was a formalised reorganisation of a more traditional village, where each community requires certain attributes to remain sustainable, such as central administration and social services but also aligns to the needs and policy of a national agenda.

Guangdong Province Foshan City has traditionally been a location for ceramics and localised furniture production that has evolved into an industrial ceramic industry and the Shunde district of furniture production. Furniture City is a macro ecosystem within this, which has an extensive network of partners and parallel industries. For a designer, this network provides multiple opportunities for design interventions and for sustainable employment. The global furniture design behemoth is obliged to constantly create new styles and ideas to satisfy the markets that it collectively services. The district provides opportunities for designers due to the mass of activity and potential for networking and establishing a design profile through events and exhibitions.

China hosts a calendar of tradeshow events including the China International Furniture fair (Furniture-china.cn, 2015) and assorted furniture fairs with specialisations such as office furniture (Ciff-gz.com, 2015). These events attract global buyers to view the entire range of products and establish connections with local producers. These events also showcase the current trends, which are promptly imitated by smaller operations lacking the resources to directly design and produce at scale.

Furniture Fairs are an opportunity to make sales, form relationships and gauge enthusiasm for trending furniture and new ideas. They target B2B trade but are
accessible to the general public and attract media and marketing that feature, promote and reinforce trends. This also revitalises the design ecosystem that aligns with this production ecosystem. Designers engage in the vision-making of the displays, establishing enthusiasm for particular narratives and styles. The Lecong furniture venue also holds trade fairs and exhibitions, but the value of having a perpetual showroom allows clients to continually visit without the same time pressure of a ‘fortnight event’. It also facilitates discussions and product development. This serves as a relationship development agent as opposed to the speed dating scenario of trade fairs, when establishing and maintaining B2B relationships.

Transnational Practice

The Shunde ecosystem is not isolated from global practices. It is geographically linked to Guangzhou, global furniture design production and consumption trends. As such Shunde requires constant nourishment from external sources. Global retailers, designers and end user desires ensure that local furniture designers and producers have work in matching and making trends generated outside China and in creating contemporary Chinese furniture available.

Where traditional craft production was village and then town based, the global supply chain has allowed for the entire district to become production orientated, with a Chinese domestic market potential that can sustain them, but with an export market that is potentially five times larger. The Lecong venue offers agency for the local production and access to China for global buyers and their constituent markets.

The value-added that a foreign designer can bring is through insights into global destinations to assist local production to be more targeted. For example, a Melbourne based designer can offer insights into the Melbourne character and temperament with a much more sophisticated eye than an exclusively Foshan based designer. Melbourne’s Sino-heritage offers many hybrid designers – both Australian born Chinese, and from the Chinese diaspora – an opportunity to link with the rising production capacities in China at a time when production capacities are diminishing in Australia due to unfavourable economic conditions (Fennessy, Varadarajan, & Curlis, 2009). Although Cantonese and Mandarin fluent designers have a distinct
advantage, Australian designers are increasingly forming partnerships with the production facilities in Foshan and surrounding districts. In many cases Chinese production is more time efficient and cost effective than an equivalent Australian based production source. The ‘can-do’ approach of Chinese production requires some familiarisation but the entire ecosystem is voracious for new designers, designs and commercial opportunities. This creates favourable conditions for establishing a design practice or co-design relationship with Chinese suppliers. Engagement is encouraged and enabled through extensive facilities, agents and the ability to just walk into Furniture City and start a conversation.
The B2B Model

This model (Figure 1.10) represents ways of thinking about how the furniture industry functions. The industry privileges ‘Business to Business’ (B2B) transactions as the primary way of constructing the furniture design and manufacturing ecosystem. The models have been constructed to define a set of transactions as exemplars of practice. Once I have constructed the models I then proceed to set out the elements and the meanings embedded within the very particular visible experience of furniture retail and manufacture in China.

This particular furniture ecosystem is constructed from four major elements:

1. Furniture City (the central element) is represented as a discreet example of the agency of retail venues such as the Luofugong venue but also the three other major venues (Excelguangzhou.com, 2015) that have risen to meet the consumer demand. This also includes the services that accommodate and facilitate International audiences to visit and practice business in Foshan & Guangzhou.
2. The Shunde District production ecosystem, including collective production facilities, distribution services and other auxiliary services required to bring Products to market at Furniture City.
3. The global consumption ecosystem, inclusive of the logistical activities from B2B Showroom to B2C showroom and promotional activities and marketing narratives which are largely conducted at the global sites of B2C transactions.
4. Design practice. There is a discreet sector focusing exclusively on design but there are additional instances of design throughout the production and consumption eco-systems.

In sector 1A – the Shunde production Ecosystem – there are 3 minor divisions representing narratives of Figures 1.1 through 1.7. The original premise that Furniture City was a single visit to fulfil a transaction is represented here and assumes the availability and mutual agreement of all parties at a single time and location. Regardless of the actual process, this is the premise by which a visit to Furniture City becomes attractive and business is viable. The following variations in
sector (B), where the retail and production actors are separate entities or (C) where retail, design and production form increasingly complex networks, do not alter the original premise for the B2B transaction.

Similarly global consumption can be viewed as a single B2B transaction, as in (D) and internal distribution and retail arrangements; this represents businesses with capacity regardless of scale, including multinational department stores and sole traders who maintain oversight from B2B through B2C transactions.

A more complicated scenario (G) arises with separate entities managing selection and importation, distribution and retail. The primary concern here is that any disconnection between parties creates potentially redundant transactions and opportunities for financial loss.

The (F) scenario includes design within the B2B transaction, potentially including a Designed in Australia – Made in China combination. (Hespe, 2015) This scenario includes brand managed B2B solutions where the products are designed and specified for a particular consumer market and production is outsourced.

The design sector is similarly represented as two separate elements: functional and rational DFM activities (G) and emotively motivated or subjectively creative activities defined as Design as Narrative (H). Design for Manufacture (DFM) refers to the rational design activity and thinking in bringing a prototype to production. This activity is primarily problem solving and production management. It may include activity orientated towards capitalising on a design such as using some OEM elements to create further products or variations for particular markets. These activities are largely orientated towards maximising return on investment.

In contrast Design as Narrative can be viewed as the creative or speculative thinking that often involves narrative to engage a B2C audience. This design activity is intimately engaged with the audience, feeding desire and aspiration in order to make transactions. This design thinking is affected by fashion trends and popular thinking. The designers in this sector may be responsive to the market or they may be
provocateurs, who set new socio-cultural agendas or socio-technical innovations with emerging materials, technologies and industrial capacity.

Discussion

This meta-model attempts to explain an ecosystem that contains uncountable variations, and could be fragmented into smaller elements that repeat similar behaviours in further B2B transactions. For example a (design) specified office chair may include OEM castors. To make a variation of this chair at a lower price point the producer may be compelled to use an alternative base and castor assembly but retain the original seat and back combination. Similarly a B2C buyer may request a corporate branded textile or a variation on floor stock that may include a detail or icon to meet the B2C brand expectation. This activity may be conducted by a buyer, a designer or a design manager who has a hybrid role.

It is important to state that these design sectors are not exclusive, either in education or practice. As with the yin yang symbol, production orientated designers solve problems through intuition and creative lateral solutions, and narrative orientated designers maybe inspired and challenged by emerging technical issues. Additionally the ‘craft of designing’ implicitly requires process and problem solving in order to deliver design solutions.

In some cases consumer product ranges may include all three types of transactions (D, E and F). For example Sunbeam, located in Australia, supply domestic kitchen appliances to department stores. Sunbeam have brand flagship products which are developed in Australia, but the low end of the product range includes low cost generic products which are sourced, badged and branded for distribution. This is a common practice where the discount appliance market is viable through the mass manufacture of global generic products. The development costs could not be recouped by a single retailer, however the collective retail market can be facilitated by agents such as Furniture City.

Finally Furniture City refers to a district and feature venues which have a market supporting year round market activity and potential for production and delivery at the
buyers’ requirements. This agency may also be viewed through events such as the Guangzhou Furniture and Shanghai Furniture Fair. These installations are temporary but create an intense time for targeted B2B transactions on a repeated annual calendar. These events stimulate consumer market interest and production transactions. Additionally the events align market trends and encourage industry competition and engagement when observing through a Design as Narrative lens. These events are more likely to feature radical designs and installations of haute couture furniture design in order to attract exclusive market leaders and set market expectation and trends for the following season.

Design as a distributed activity or as an equal player in the retail, production and design triad is an activity which is necessary to sustain and stimulate economic activity within the sector. The need for design to meet the needs of global and national consumer markets ensures that Chinese designers would be observing global trends but would also require designers with intimate knowledge of the client markets in order to effectively meet expectations.
Chapter 2. Design as Agency:

Forms of entrepreneurialism, scholarship and research.

I was in trouble. The meeting had reached an uneasy stalemate but it wasn't clear at what point the discussion had soured, however I presently tasted the result. Around the room were a series of Chinese academics, students, an Australian colleague and my translator playing witness to a discussion between a local manufacturer and myself. Curiously the emotional tension in the space didn’t need to be translated, I reached for the bottled water customarily supplied at these events to buy a moment to think and to quench my dry throat. I managed to get so close to an agreement then watch it slip away.

The meeting was hosted at Zhejiang University with a local manufacturer who developed products for the Chinese domestic market and were interested in export. The design concept and aesthetics that the company featured would not appeal in Melbourne. My proposal was to design and prototype an electric scooter in Melbourne targeted at the Western market. I would create a design studio that would act as a research incubator for the project.

I learnt a great deal from this event, the first being that getting a professional translator was important; having a design student translate between Chinese and English could be quite disruptive to the flow of information. The students were quite aware that they were communicating with potential employers on one hand and academics who were their teacher’s colleagues on the other. In retrospect I should not have accepted the offer for students to assist the communication because it was a compromised position. The student was ‘re-interpreting’ what I said so the company would receive a Chinese message, protecting her own University’s reputation and preventing any etiquette lapse or embarrassment that I should feel by not communicating in the conventional form.
The result was, of course, that the student would interpret what I said into something that was Sino-palatable, to avoid cultural entanglements or confusion, avoiding any cultural engagement or potential confrontation. In contrast, my cultural context and perspective was that misunderstandings were inevitable and able to be overcome. A transgression would allow for a restorative gesture and an improved understanding for both parties, this in essence was the exact reason I was in China, and in the meeting.

The result of this event was that on return to Melbourne, I would commence an electric scooter project with the expectation that a trade sample scooter would arrive within the month. I had committed to supervising a redesign and to return in four months with the ‘Melbourne Scooter’ prototype. On departure I had a design project, a client and hadn’t embarrassed my Chinese contacts. On reflection I had ‘Chinese Whispers’.
The Studio

Zhejiang University is spread across four campuses in the Zhejiang province capital Hangzhou, a former national capital during the Southern Song Dynasty. I was fortunate enough on my first field trip in 2005 to have been accommodated at the picturesque Yuquan campus and explored quite extensively. The site is an enclosed community nestled against some small, forested hills with manicured gardens between the buildings. The campus features the expected academic buildings, extensive student accommodation, dining halls that seat thousands of people for three sittings a day, as well as all the necessary amenities for staff and students. The buildings tell the history of the site; an eclectic mix of architecture including hi-tech modern buildings and others dating back to the pre-communist era.

University campuses in China are considered to be community assets. Morning tai chi classes are conducted on any available surface and a short walk through the campus will expose one to many forms: retired ladies with fans move in unison between the trees, older working people in work clothes practice with elegantly synchronised movements on tennis courts that will later in the day be used by students. When classes conclude, students spill out over the grounds occupying each space to host vigorous games of basketball, tennis and badminton. The athletics field has multiple soccer games running while being patrolled by runners, and joggers.

The studio that my colleague inhabited was a maelstrom of activity. A core group of regular students spent every waking moment in the studio completing projects, honing design and Computer Aided Design (CAD) skills and socialising through their computers. This group were dedicated, tech-savvy, ambitious, capable and fearless in their projects. They had extensive folios, a slew of competition prizes, were part time tutors and completed live design projects at a startling rate. My Chinese colleague had established a studio practice that was dedicated to establishing China as the world’s leading design country.
Practice Based Learning

On returning to Melbourne after my third field trip, I set up the design teaching studio titled Scooter EV as a pilot project. The intention was to demonstrate what I could do for the Chinese manufacturer by establishing a transnational design ecosystem based in Melbourne that would include China as a stakeholder and, through the process, identify challenges and opportunities for an enduring design practice.

There was a series of dimensions to the project that would need to work together to provide a solution for our Chinese client. I had committed to taking a manufacturer’s sample to Melbourne and doing a design re-casting project to make the scooter desirable as an alternative transport solution in a car dominated city. The studio brief actively engaged themes of ‘Design with China’ and DFM. I brought my design practice into the studio to share with students and also hosted a fortnight-long workshop, collaborating between industrial design students from Zhejiang University and RMIT University. Students preparing for exchange to China in 2007 were involved in cultural exchange activities with the visiting students.

Studio Practice Methodology

Taking a cue from my Guangzhou motorcycle factory visit (Appendix 03), I used the existing Chinese scooter as our benchmark to provide significant Sino-industry insights for the students in the studio. I had arranged for the sample scooter to be imported through Zhejiang University arriving mid-semester. I adopted a variation of the IEID model (Varadarajan & Fennessy, 2007) for studio delivery; this model divides the semester into four stages of three weeks. At each stage the students develop their concepts with a particular emphasis, which iteratively combine to ensure a well-rounded and rigorous design concept and execution.

![IEID Model Diagram]

Figure 2.1 – IEID Model
The four stages as represented in Figure 2.1 are: Immersion, Exploration, Intervention and Demonstration. Each stage concludes with a visual and oral presentation of the project’s progress with feedback and assessment to ensure that the students remain on track. The following is a description of the stages and how the project progresses through each stage:

**Stage 1 Immersion**
The Immersion phase is when we get the students to ‘dive’ into an area and become rapidly acquainted with the intellectual territory and key concepts. Most of the students will pick a thread of interest and follow that, allowing them to unravel reasonably complex ideas about the users, behaviours, sites of use, environments and desirable design attributes in a short time.

For Scooter EV, the students conducted design research into Melbourne as a location with a unique and high profile design culture. Through this design research the students are expected to develop key themes and identify and engage ‘end users’: The people who, we speculate, would buy and use the electric scooters.

**Stage 2 Exploration**
The Exploration Stage is when I assist the students to realise the relationships between key design concepts, and to understand what must be maintained and what areas are open to interpretation and manipulation. This deeper understanding is essential in reframing and re-ordering their project concepts and narrative to allow for innovations.

I programmed this in time for the scooter to arrive, when we would go through a ‘product autopsy’. This activity involves disassembly of the product in order to document the essential elements and decide what will be retained, what will need to be changed and what elements will require innovation. The process gives students an acute sense of what the product involves and the complexity of manufacture. The perspective provided for the students focuses their attention and effort on the design elements.

Within complex products such as vehicles, including scooters, there are highly developed engineering geometries that make the vehicles perform as they do. Changing these fundamentals changes the product and the feel of it when used.
Engineers are the leaders of function and create the frame geometry with production and performance in mind. Designers are responsible for the external skin and look of the scooter, along with all the features and controls. To maintain the integrity of the functional scooter we use ‘hard points’. The position of the wheels and relationship to the rider are fixed hard points. The handle bar, foot rests and seat locations allow for different sized riders and some adjustment.

At the conclusion of the exploration stage students provide visuals of their concept development and present them to a panel for critique and consultation. The students’ presentation includes a clear and concise understanding of the product, in this case an electric scooter, the ecosystem in which it is manufactured (China) and the ecosystem in which it will be used (Melbourne), both according to the intended use and potential for misadventure.

**Stage 3 Intervention**
At the Intervention stage the learning shifts from absorbing information to experimenting, analysing and proposing concepts for the design. The two prior stages are critical to students so they may design with informed and intelligently innovative concepts. The learner’s pent up emotional expression also becomes apparent at this point, their desires are visualised as much as the brief allows. My objective is not for the concepts to be purely reactionary to customer feedback and discussion but to generate visionary and radical design solutions that will make people crave the product.

We achieve the intervention design stage through hours of sketching and CAD, which is effectively digitally sculpting the form of the scooter to be appealing. The development of shapes and surfaces over the functional frame and engine can be arduous; students have to negotiate between their idealised concept of the scooter and the functional reality, which may not be altered due to the manufacturing cost and constraints.

**Stage 4 Demonstration**
The advantage of CAD is that the same information that is used to make models can be used to make the tools to make the parts for production. As the concepts are developed there comes a point when we are not developing but refining ideas. This
stage is called Demonstration. At this stage of conclusion we share our work with the stakeholders and general public to gauge reactions. This is also the stage of design that is most identifiable to laypeople as design activity. One can observe new ideas in a product form and potentially sit on the model to feel and know how comfortable it could be as a working prototype.

There are two design components here:

- Design for Manufacture, which includes information a manufacturer might need to make the product, and ideas about how the scooter will be assembled. This activity is difficult to do without industry engagement, working alongside the engineers and toolmakers, because every decision affects other people in the design team.
- Visual Communication is about inspiring people to look at the work and get excited about the ideas of electric scooters in Melbourne. This includes images that look like photographs of real scooters in key locations around Melbourne to create a link in the mind of the viewer. The students publish their folios online and projects can be viewed globally.

In the previous section I have offered a description of the method for conducting a design studio through the semester. In the following passages I will address the progress of the studio and the challenges faced in establishing and maintaining China as an influence within the studio ecosphere.

**Putting Theory into Practice**

About six weeks after returning to Melbourne and starting the semester, I had a visit from my Chinese colleague. I had anticipated that the scooter prototype would arrive at around this time also. When discussing the sample scooter required for the project my colleague replied that the project had been completed and delivered by his students some weeks ago. He went on to explain that the manufacturer’s expectation was for a maximum one month turnaround and that a four month project would be unacceptable. With this in mind he assigned the project for his students to complete – without troubling us.
My immediate focus was on a series of problems posed by this turn of events. Firstly, that the speed of this project was impressive. Had I completed the same project in a commercial design consultancy in Melbourne I could expect to take double if not triple the time. Secondly, that the ‘flavours of Melbourne’ could not be present in the project outcomes. Zhejiang students were capable but lacked exposure abroad, with no immersion into the culture and context only the thin veneer of Melbourne’s visual character could be expected. Thirdly, I had underestimated the pace of the Chinese design process and the client expectations, which was to provide a product to test the market rather than a process which would be valued in academic design terms, or to facilitate learning and understanding. China is renowned for a patient, long-term outlook. I realised that this outlook was facilitated by a thousand rapid steps and I had just tripped over on my first attempt at walking.

The scooter prototype would not be coming, which posed some issues for the legitimate industry linkage and relevance in the learning activity for the students and of the studio. Without the tactile link with the factory and therefore China, the studio would remain speculative and therefore a hypothetical simulation. I endeavour to provide ‘real world’ experiences in my studios. Through interaction with the scooter, and how it was fabricated and assembled I anticipated the students designing with Chinese stakeholders and DFM in mind. I had anticipated an increase in the students’ understanding and enthusiasm, therefore amplifying the effort they would apply to the project. The remaining link to China would be in the collaborative design workshop.
Collaborative Design Workshop

We would still host five students from Zhejiang University, a crack team of designers who were arriving mid-semester. I wanted to share with the RMIT students just how capable and ambitious the Chinese students were and how the prevailing attitude towards China was at odds with the designers and design ecosystem I had observed.

The group of students would be in Melbourne for a fortnight. In that time they completed a parallel visualisation of the project through their processes, but with observations of the site of Melbourne implicit in the design.

I had been generously hosted in Zhejiang and reciprocating was my social obligation. I organised for local students to conduct a series of activities in and around Melbourne so the visiting design students could develop familiarity and appreciation of the local context through the ‘eyes of their peers’. I wanted to provide a genuine experience so the visiting students would have an intimate understanding of Melbourne and the Western students’ approach to learning, designing and life.

When commencing a design project it is customary to have a briefing session. The ‘brief’ is the document that outlines a project including any constraints and particular attributes or questions that I expect the students to address in the process of answering the brief. It has been my practice to provide briefs that commence with a single sentence, as a provocation or proposition that is intended to challenge, inspire and direct the students’ design projects. In this way students quickly orientate and then read the remainder of the document with a particular ‘lens’.

In a Melbourne of the near future, what kind of electric scooter would be desirable enough for people to abandon their cars?

Brief Provocation, Scooter EV, 2007

In most briefing sessions the provocation commences a discussion or argument as expectations and emotions are rapidly elevated. In this particular session the Zhejiang designers were silent, took in all of the information and departed to commence the project with minimal discussion. Mostly the students wanted a very clear outline of what I wanted the scooter to be, whereas I expected them to discuss
their ideas, insights or inspiration. The students retired with a note of anxiety about them. The following day the students returned with a presentation of collective research. The students’ scooter dossier was a reasonably thorough analysis of the conventions for scooter design. It did however lack any Melbourne content. The scooters presented might work in China or throughout Asia, but Melbourne had not shown any enthusiasm for electric scooters, particularly with the existing aesthetic.

There were a few observations that I quickly made. The Zhejiang designers would operate as a team and quickly share out responsibilities and work separately but collaboratively. These students worked rapidly and efficiently but not with a great deal of discussion or divergence from task. This may have been compounded by the language gap, particularly in expressive design terms. The product outcomes were largely underwhelming, due to the conventional development of their project. The Melbourne flavour didn’t really develop despite the daily interactions into the city and around town. The final result came down to a single CAD modeller’s interpretation and a presentation template that I suspect had been used for design presentations throughout their study.

The collaborative workshop scooter contribution resembled current market offerings with no significant innovation or additions that would inspire change. Furthermore the result was a visualisation without significant technical consideration or detailing, therefore it would not offer us insights into the technical elements of the product or DFM in China. I discovered on reflection that the students had provided me with a similar quality of work to that which they had provided the scooter company. Chinese manufacturers, at that time, did not require well resolved concepts and would take great liberties with the design when implementing them into production (Trathen, Varadarajan, & Mayson, 2007). As such the design was largely visualising themes that would become stylistic overlays.

The RMIT students continued to develop their design concepts for a further six weeks of the Intervention and Demonstration stages. During this time the students made sketches, scale models, presentation boards, and compiled a folio of their design process. The comparatively slow and considered approach of RMIT students generated more radical propositions, with a clearer sense of Melbourne in many of the works. However, the lack of a working prototype had to my mind reduced the
ability of these students to engage with a practice of China as a manufacturing base. As a result the concepts, while radical, were largely unfeasible. In contrast the workshop results were feasible but uninspiring.

Learning from Failure

The Melbourne-based studio designed ideas without the industry insights I had intended to be conveyed, and without a significant reflection on the Melbourne experience ‘through Chinese eyes’. Although the results were an impressive evolutionary step for our local students, seeing the pace of development and decision making, they couldn't understand the value of the Zhejiang University concept. They were generally uninspired by the outcome. My role at this point was to ‘translate values’ for local students to show that ‘slow cooking’ of the project would yield a more flavourful result that would taste more acutely of Melbourne. The rapid development of the Chinese students’ work was easy to evaluate and reflect on largely because of its existence. It was available for comment and conversation. The Chinese students could take additional direction and complete a second concept in a few days and a third in a few more. Through rapid iterations they achieved many results. Additionally the RMIT narratives created in Melbourne were largely divorced from production whereas Chinese students operated in an industry-saturated academic environment that was reactive to the industry requirements.

Overall the semester result demonstrated a clear evolutionary step for the studio. Though not as ambitious as I had intended, it was still an improvement from previous semesters, and a cause of speculation and comment at the exhibition evening – which we customarily hold at the conclusion of each semester to engage with the entire student group, design community of professionals, alumni and students’ friends and parents.
Reflecting on Changing Practice

Comparative Roles of Academics in China & Australia

When I realised that a scooter prototype wouldn’t arrive, I faced some difficulty. I had made assurances to the student team that I would now be unable to fulfil. I reflected on the evolution of the studio and unenviable situation that had developed. It occurred to me that projects wouldn’t have evolved this way for my Chinese colleagues and I began to consider their roles in the projects that they conduct. My colleagues in China have three qualities that are central to their continuing success: Chinese design academics work rapidly, Chinese design academics are entrepreneurial in their practices, and that regardless of the issues they consistently deliver on their design projects. In the following passages I will elaborate on these observations to more clearly identify what the key attributes are.

Commercial designers in China practice at a rapid pace. Design academics are also operating at this same pace. To provide industry integrated experiences the Zhejiang University studio was not operating as a simulated studio environment but functioning at the industry pace. To operate effectively in this environment the design activity can be described as reactionary. The role of the design academic is to be a coach who recruits and trains up the team of designers to perform in this ‘real life design think tank’. The steady flow of industry projects requires applicable and rapid design capability.

To facilitate this rate of project turnover, the academics have a mindset to find and secure ‘clients’ and projects that will have multiple projects of increased demand on the team, in order to develop further design capacity. As such the academics need to have a vision for medium to long term benefit of client relationships in order to develop mutually beneficial design practices. The academics are required to examine trends and opportunities that will create long term development within the centre and consider the strategic relationships with other experts within the University that may contribute to new opportunities or practices that deliver within the current project scope. The mindset required to balance the immediate needs of the design team with the medium term development goals and consideration of long
term planning and return of invested time and effort, can be categorised as entrepreneurial.

Regardless of the pace of the project and the cost-benefit of the projects, the design team at Zhejiang University will deliver a project they have committed to. The continuing client relationship and reputation require the projects to reach a resolved design and to then be manufactured for the market. This cycle perpetuates with effort and can be eroded rapidly without continuous attention. Even projects with no apparent profit can be linked to longer term goals that will yield results. During my field trip visits to Zhejiang University I observed students designing projects through a 24 hour work cycle, eating and power napping in the studio, taking care to not allow each other to fall behind. I find the orientation towards the delivery of the design projects is admirable as a practicing designer and enviable as a design teacher.

In the previous passages I have considered the traits of my Chinese colleagues that lead to success. When reflecting on my own practice and that of my Australian colleagues I observed traits which were similarly admirable yet there was a noticeable incongruity in the academic practice, which I will address in the following section. When speculating on why our scooter engagement hadn’t succeeded, I was forced to admit that my ambition had been a significant overreach and that I couldn’t, at that time, achieve that level of design service remotely from Melbourne.

When I was teaching in Melbourne as a sessional staff member, during 2005, I thought I understood what an academic was, and what kind of work an academic did. My reasoning was based on observations of other academics in the department, their conversations and the activities that they undertook in their daily work lives.

This perspective changed somewhat when I arrived in China. Here all notions of the design academic were completely blown away by seeing Chinese design academics in action. This academic looked completely different. He was a smooth operator moving quickly between studio/office and industry client meetings, prototypes and university business. His behaviour and activity resembled that of a Chinese entrepreneur more than the academics I knew in Melbourne. He was motivated by
money and what that would enable him to do next. With each project he was ascending a ladder and only he knew the heights it would reach.

At that time our Industrial Design department was a group of people who only seemed to teach. There was an ongoing but elusive conversation about research, much of which was not evident in the teaching or department conversations. When they didn’t teach they were at home on ‘research days’ or out ‘seeing people’, or some other activity whose value was difficult to quantify for the department or the university. Clearly there were some exceptions, and points of achievement were treated with great fanfare and dined on for a few months.

Administration was a word that described a great deal of time. It referred to any activity that wasn’t teaching and evidently was not research. Coordination of courses, school and university meetings, timetabling and dealing with students issues were all conflated into hours of ‘disruption’ to an otherwise claimed productivity. Generally, the academics described their time as three activities; teaching, research and administration.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 2.2 – Design Academic Representation 2005

The Chinese design academics I observed were operating on the ragged edge of a completely different paradigm. From them I learned a great deal about how I could reconstruct my practice and workplace to achieve a great deal more. Let me elaborate on their practice and attempt to explain it in a diagram including all the activities they engage in. From this I will build a picture of what a design academic looks like in China.
My colleague is ambitious and wants to make money through his academic practice, which will enable him to do many more interesting things within the university. Through industry funding he can upgrade facilities without imposing on the university’s contested resources. Through establishing relationships in industry he can generate good will, income and be in an ideal position to capitalise on opportunities that arise through either university or industry sources.

To make money, he engages industry to discover ‘what they need’ and more importantly ‘what they want’. In response to these answers he sets up a design practice to service these needs and wants.

As an academic, one must teach courses, but my colleague saw the students as assets, not liabilities, in his limited time and great ambitions. His view was to establish a design office in which to conduct the coursework, and recruit and treat the students as if they were employed designers in a professional design practice. To do this he would provide them with a space to operate from with desks, computers and a small meeting room. This space wasn’t grand but it provided a location and the beginnings of an identity that would grow in reputation.

In many ways The Chinese design academic’s role as agent of between the University and industry stakeholders resembles that of the retailer, and the studio resembles Furniture City (see Figure 1.8).

![Figure 2.3 – Chinese Academic as agent of Guānxì](image)

He treated the students with a great respect. He took them collectively to restaurants for banquets, which in Chinese custom also functions as a business meeting and discussion space. These meetings are as much the sites of relationship building and
consensus as the studio. The induction of students into this space is a considerable appreciation of their participation in the studio and a demonstration of the affectionate patriarch that Ying is viewed as by his design team. It is also seen as a highly appropriate team building activity in China. This activity forms a bond between all the participants that holds currency many years later, even between students who had no direct association but felt obligation to the studio, and therefore to all its design graduates.

The reciprocal obligation of these benefits was that the students worked diligently within the studio. The students had keys and access to the studio 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The keys were unnecessary however, because students constantly inhabited the office. Students completed their coursework within the studio like it was a consultancy. They also completed other coursework in the studio, partly to maintain the identity that was growing, and partly to maintain personal motivation because this space had a positive energetic aspect. I suspect, however, that a great deal of their devotion was motivated by being present when new opportunities arrived.

The students received great exposure to live projects and received grades at the conclusion of their courses. It was not clear whether the students received financial compensation for the time they invested, however it is undeniable that the students held the studio in high regard and their academic supervisor with great affection and devotion. Graduates returned to the studio to get help and advice with their projects and to recruit students when they found design positions.

Here was a design academic who was treating the students as labour and the courses as a design project incubators for industry. The students did work experience and built up amazing skills collaboratively and competitively. Everyone was extremely passionate and hard working.

It occurred to me that this was a man of questionable morality after one event. He produced a tremendous amount of publications in his practice and suggested that we do some collaborative books. In fact he wanted to do three books over the following four months. I would have expected to struggle to complete a single book in that
time, so I asked, ‘How is it possible to do so much in such a compressed amount of
time?’

‘We will do some design books, we can collect images through the internet and write
about them then I’ll find a (Chinese) printer and we’ll print them.’

I was taken aback by the candid manner with he approached the task and method of
publishing. Ethically his suggestion was at odds with the academic environment I
was used to. He saw my hesitation and thought an example might be in order, so we
got to a local general book store in the city.

The bookshop was divided into departments resembling a library. We found, in the
Art and Design section, walls of books covering all aspects of design. There were
books on how to draw portraits, develop design sketching skills and techniques,
ergonomics and design analysis. Virtually any design activity was covered in the
book titles and content. Looking further into some of the content revealed a very
cavalier practice of using designers’ material. The publishers and authors were
treating all published material, on the internet or in print, as if it were declared
copyright free. Copyright aside, they were producing books and other publications as
all academics do. However the pace and proliferation of ‘research’ material was at
the ‘speed of light’. The Chinese design academics I observed were on the ragged
edge in many ways. They were producing huge amounts of design work, they were
producing publications, teaching and discussing better ways to do things and looking
for better opportunities to make more money, better products and bigger reputations
for their practice.

All of these stories and observations combine to define a Chinese design academic
in the following manner.

1. A teacher who has the students’ interests at heart; the teacher trains students
   in the manner of practice with a great deal of expectation and opportunity to
   learn.
2. A researcher, constantly publishing books reflecting on design and journal
   articles reflecting on the design work practice as is a requirement of the
   university.
3. An industry linkage agent (entrepreneur) doing industry projects and involving
   industry in university research projects for mutual benefit.
4. Reflecting constantly on design practice and how to improve and make more opportunities out of it.

![Diagram showing four parts of a Chinese Academic: Publications (Research), Industry Links, University Collaboration, Students, Graduate Employment, and Multi-disciplinary Projects]

Figure 2.4 – Chinese Academic: four parts

After three months I returned to Melbourne after being thoroughly immersed in the Chinese design ecosystem and it felt like someone had just turned down the speed of the world. My perception of possibilities shifted considerably. Yet the intertia of practice my teaching colleagues were teaching was now out of alignment with my view of what a design academic could and should be. The university appeared glacial and my colleagues seemed comparatively lethargic. It would take a further ten years to see a significant change in attitude and behaviours that began to vaguely resemble the Chinese academics' ecosystem.

There were some obvious reasons why we were not as agile as the academics in China – as I've described in my first diagram. The lack of flexibility in roles has, over the years, been divided and recast in a number of ways, all with slightly different motivations and emphases. This representative diagram is now starting to look more like the Chinese one I encountered in 2005.

RMIT academics are expected to make money for the university, although our methods are somewhat different. We do this in a number of ways. We apply for competitive funding, and usually to do this we have to have a project that the funding body will support. In many cases the funding requires that we have industry collaboration, which involves creating a project that is useful to and valued by the industry partner beyond the project time.
We can also engage in commercial consultation with industry, however this involves
the university administering our engagement. This comes with bureaucratic
restrictions, timeframes and a financial contribution for the university for these
services. It is comparatively different to guānxì (gentleman’s agreement) of Chinese
partnerships, however it does resemble the industry engagement of my Chinese
colleague’s studio.

So we are not just teachers, as we are often viewed and labelled. Nor are we just
teachers and researchers; this two-part division lacks the subtlety and complexity of
our activities. I would not divide our role into three parts, (teaching, research and
administration) as our time was theoretically divided in during 2006. The
administration is largely to fulfil the research or teaching needs, including timetabling,
course guides and course preparation.

In 2015 I would categorise us as a four-part model: Researcher, Teacher, Career
Curator and Industry Linker. The terminologies are refined further in the final model
for understanding design academic practice. Refer Figure 2.4.

Entrepreneur

One way of understanding China is that it is a small pond with an abundance of
fiercely competitive fish vying for the opportunities to improve their chances of
survival. At first glance this picture may seem bleak. Entering China in 2005 I felt like
a very small fish invited by my Chinese colleague who, as a fellow academic, would
hopefully help me to navigate the unfamiliar waters. On arrival I encountered a
character completely comfortable and thriving in an environment that was bubbling
with activity. My Chinese colleague had established Lab 318, a small design office
within the University. It accommodated postgraduate students who practiced as a
consultancy. They would work on industry projects from the local manufacturing
sector and design project referrals from within the University. During my time located
at Zhejiang University I observed and participated in client meetings, design briefing
sessions, and progress meetings and observed the designers’ rapid response to
briefs and development of products.

The designers inhabited the studio working on a steady stream of incremental
redesign projects for local companies, many of whom would release new product
lines every three months. Additionally the Lab would operate within the product
development teams of collaborators from around the university, particularly
electronic product design and IT related product innovation. The School of Computer
Engineering, where Industrial Design is located, were developing ‘smart product’
software and hardware such as the inner workings of robotic vacuum cleaners.
Bearing in mind this was two years prior to the first smart phone release, the market
acceptance of autonomous vacuum cleaners was untested (this was four years prior
to the first market release). The level of a university’s prestige in China is measured
through its research outputs, including patentable content and prestigious Design
Awards. Zhejiang University design students featured in Red Dot, Redstar and IF
China Awards as a profile building exercise. To maintain this level of achievement,
design students inhabited the studio throughout the week, around the clock, often in
shifts around their other learning and tutoring schedule. It was unclear how the
projects were funded and whether the designers completed the work within their
academic program or as part-time employment that supported their lives at the
university. What was unquestionable however was the devotion to the design
projects and the professionalism of the project outcomes.

My Chinese colleague liaised between the Studio, clients and production
stakeholders, maintaining a consistent presence and stewarding projects through to
delivery. He curated schedules and assigned project tasks and goals for the lab. The
design competitions, conferences and awards were all strategically curated for
maximum impact and leverage both within the university and commercial design
practice.

In this way the particular activity is best described as entrepreneurial as the design
was investment of time and effort into the development and demonstration of
innovation with an economic return as a means of perpetuating the design practice.
Educator

Landing in China can be a culture shock. Unlike some tourism where each encounter can be cheerfully reflected on later, spending a prolonged period in China requires investment in understanding culture and day to day peculiarities. Between 2006 and 2012 RMIT University Industrial Design sent 26 Students to China. As the resident expert I acted as an advisor and was involved with pre-departure preparation. I also acted as a mentor for Chinese students while on exchange as well as Australian students on return, helping them re-transition to RMIT and reflect on their time away. During 2008 I travelled to Foshan ahead of one such group of five students who spent the following semester on exchange. In this case I was there to conduct research and aid the transition for the students’ orientation. The group arrived in two stages due to different itineraries, one pair of Asian-Australian students flying direct and the other trio of Euro-Australians taking an interprovincial train from Hong Kong.

The distinction in this case is quite intentional because the students of Asian descent landed and adjusted quite quickly. They had travelled via Vietnam to visit one of the student’s relatives. So landing in Foshan was in effect a coming home. The trio who travelled via Hong Kong went through quite a different transition – considerable apprehension throughout the journey and, finally, relief.

We then walked into the city, which I have found to be the quickest way to acclimatise to the pace and character of Foshan. At the first pedestrian crossing I walked across to find myself alone with 5 students perched at the opposite kerb. My role in their orientation was largely as a tour guide of cultural confrontations, introducing to them my toolkit of ways to navigate China. That is not to say that I was fluently capable, I would openly share my knowledge and ignorance – offering support in their learning quests for understanding China and how they might operate there for the next 4 months. On their arrival day, I assisted them through the abrupt bureaucracy in accommodation and helped them buy local mobile phone sim cards, so they could be ‘connected’. We went shopping for incidental items such as toothpaste and gradually created familiarity in their adopted environment. We took taxis and public transport to enable them to become independently capable of getting around. In this group one of the students spoke Cantonese and the regional
dialect of Foshan, aiding the students’ communication with locals despite their rudimentary Mandarin.

Perhaps the most abrupt recognition that these students were in a new cultural paradigm was the second morning’s 8 am class. I had been invited to attend with them Professor Pei’s design studio briefing on ceramics. Although I have conducted public lectures and small workshops I would not claim to have taught in China. During this class I was treated with some deference and offered water, tea and a chair with the professor and a second lecturer who acted as translator. The students were welcomed into the first row of the room which had exceeded its capacity by a factor of two.

This field trip included meeting with a Melbourne graduate who had relocated his design practice to neighbouring Guangzhou, and encouraging the students to explore further using the Metro, which had been progressively constructed and was two stations away from linking with Foshan metro.

My experiences with China have to a considerable extent been through the eyes of students such as this group, and increasingly alumni who have design roles engaging with China. I shared with them my first faltering steps from 2005 and in return have been included in their learning and their developing awareness of strategies to complete their design projects. I was kept up to date with their industry engagements, extensive travels, cultural transgressions and misadventures. Whether they sought my advice or not, this steady stream of information formed many valuable insights into China and often took my understandings into diverse areas to which I would not have been exposed.
Scholar

The School of Architecture and Design has a particular model of practice based research that includes two seminars a year in which all research candidates share their projects and receive in-progress review and feedback. These seminars are known as the Practice Research Seminars (PRS). The PRS involve academics from diverse design backgrounds and allied areas who have some interest in the projects under discussion. As a candidate I would prepare an audio visual presentation and presentation posters that explained my practice and progress and then engage in a discussion about the project in a frank and honest appraisal. During these Seminars I have had engagements with a series of accomplished academics that have each provided advice on how to orientate and approach China as a cultural academic subject and a site of design practice and economic activity. Some of the strategies and inquiries recommended have been disruptive and tangential to my research. The texts and contexts they would offer were deeply academic, with historical and theoretical discourse that I found too awkward to associate with my experiences of China or to integrate into my understanding of the practice of design.

A number of these ideas I have discarded because they were too abstracted and dislocated from my experience and practice in 2005. I needed to conduct my learning in a manner that resonated with my understanding of design and its contribution to the world and research.

My first field trip was a fact finding mission that would provide me with some orientation through immersion into Chinese design and academic cultures and allow me to identify potential opportunities to become involved in the existing practices or to create design interventions that would stimulate a conversation or debate about transnational design disciplines.

In many ways this venture was pure risk. I had limited preparation due to China being out of our consciousness and short timeframes from commencing to being immersed in the project. I was not intending to become a Sinophile nor was I going to China as a missionary of Australian design. My intention was to gather a clear understanding through genuine personal engagement that would provide insights into Chinese context and culture, design in China and contemporary Chinese design.
which I felt would be an applicable way for advancing transnational design and for sharing with potential stakeholders.

Action research (Avison, Lau, Myers, & Nielsen, 1999) offered me a legitimate way to experience China through an authentic immersion with tangible outcomes and memories and experience that I could document, analyse and learn from.

Before I departed in 2005 my supervisor said ‘You will see the China that you look for’. These words resonated with me throughout my first and subsequent journeys. I was ever conscious of what I could see and what I was looking for. Many of my experiences are day to day life encounters that are unremarkable, except that through these incidental events I understood the Chinese milieu somewhat more clearly with time. I have seen China as a University honoured guest, as a Chinese tourist on a guided tour, as an academic researcher, as a designer looking for projects and a guy looking for a coffee, as an antagonist and a transgressor. These experiences are genuine and tangible in recall with a glimpse of a photograph or a mention in a conversation.

Similarly, reflective practice (Donald Schon, 1987) would aide me to delve into the China I encountered on episodic field trips, over and over again through photographs, diagrams and collections of detritus that would prompt memories and understandings. This was a lens which developed with time and would have a reoccurring resonance.

When I departed I had a Melbourne perspective through which I could view China. After my first field trip I had a Sino-perspective with which I could re-consider my understandings of Melbourne. This duality allowed me to conduct my design academic practice in a multi-modal manner, swinging pendulum-like between perspectives to reflect and learn from each vantage point. Throughout the project these perspectives gave a clearer view of each other and of design.
Researcher

In 2005 when the opportunity to go to China arrived I leapt at the chance. Serendipitously I was encouraged to consider formally commencing a research career. I enrolled in a Masters at that time with the opportunity to use this first visit as the foundation of a field trip. I had been sharing an office with Professor Fan Jinsong and gaining insights into the Chinese culture and culture of design in China for those months leading up to my departure.

My initial understandings of China were motivated and lead by my curiosity and interest in how I might establish better engagement with China and establish a commercial design practice that worked in and with Chinese interests. As such my engagement with China has always involved a latent design agenda. From the inception of this project I had the kernel of a Chinese program, although at first I could not comprehend what that might mean or what kind of design practice that may lead to.

The effect of this ‘fork in the road of thought’ was not to diverge in one direction, to the east or to maintain my ‘western mentality design’ (WMD) inertia but to begin encountering design with a dual approach. It was similar to using 3D glasses for the first time and finding static focus in red, static focus in blue but a 3D phenomenon when looking through both lenses at once. On reflection, seemingly innocuous conversations in my shared office became a collection of glimpses into Chinese ways of working, living and designing through a long series of disparate questions and answers that would coalesce into a nebulous vignette of China. I would absorb as much information as possible before my first field trip, and learned more afterwards when reflecting on the events of that trip with Fan.

Landing in China was perhaps one of the most exhausting events of my adult life. A combination of anxiety of the unknown and of missing the essential element that would form the mental keystone to my understanding led to a photographic practice to record everything. These photographs formed an essential record of my encounters and the pivotal events of my research practice. The record of my focus is collected through more than 1000 images over the period. When combined with field notes, diagrams and collections of objects from my journeys, my ‘conscious eye’ and
conscience awareness are laid open for examination and reflection. I am not a photographer, and my cameras have varied in quality, so the clarity of the photographic narrative is not always clear to the audience. However, I see these particular photographs in more dimensions than most. When viewing them I am transported to the locations and times of my journeys filled with the fragrance, cacophony and intensity of the locations and situations in which I was invested. As such the focal lens of the camera is to me as to seeing things through my developing ‘Chinese eyes’.

Mornings throughout China are punctuated by the hypnotic dance of Tai chi in its many forms. In the hills behind the Yuquan campus of Zhejiang University, a morning ritual includes ascending the forested hillsides on stone steps and following an aging master through the forms. Despite my lack of Mandarin, an enduring problem for my research, I managed to communicate my interest and be cajoled into the front row of participants by the A Yi (‘aunties’). After the session I was invited to return and did so for a series of mornings. I had made a conscious effort to adopt and invest in Chinese ways of doing things, being more local than local. The relatively short time of my immersion in China and long reflection of China included many moments of engagement in food, culture and incidental life. Through the collection of these experiences I have formed a way of navigating China and re-understanding Australia through a new lens.
Academic Design Practice Model

In the previous text I have elaborated on the model in the contexts of China and Australia to provide insights into the differences in our respective approaches. I have considered the contrasting positions of an Australian and a Chinese design academic in order to explain the contextual emphasis that shapes the approaches of designers. Through a process of diagramming, this model has been developed to compare and communicate design to academics practicing in China and Australia.

![Figure 2.5 – Four divisions of a design academic](image)

The model is divided into quadrants that represent the mind set and orientation of activities that academics undertake. The four quadrants are briefly described below.

**Researcher**: describes the activities associated with generating conventional research output as required in each territory. In Australia research is evaluated by achieving three key performance indicators: academic publications, generating research funding, and supervision and completions of post graduate students. In China academic publishing is important, as are competitions, intellectual property creation and establishing design research centres. As such, enterprise creation is considered a much greater achievement.

**Educator**: describes learning environment and orientation toward students. A focus on learning and teaching activity including engaging students in studio based industry projects and supervising their delivery of the projects.
Entrepreneur: refers to forming relationships, finding and capitalising on commercial opportunities. This is an activity of enterprise creation and industry engagement activity.

Scholar: has been categorised separately from research because I treat scholarship as the realm of individual inquiry and pursuit of understanding, whereas research largely describes achievement and dissemination for peer review and evaluation.

Relationship between Orientations

The four activity orientations (AOs) can be viewed in combination from the common external side which they face. The arrangement of the activity orientations is determined by the external engagement. These external engagements are categorised as Enterprise Creation, Knowledge Creation, Learning and Teaching and Industry Engagement, as visible in Figure 2.6. In the SEER model (Figure 2.9) I have provided specific examples of activities that sit between these two interfaces.

Figure 2.6 – External faces of relationships between Orientations (of a design academic)

Axis of Practice

A third tier of activity orientation is present in the diagonal axis of the diagram – a Design Practice Axis and Teaching and Learning Axis. These are similar to the original two division model of design academics at RMIT in 2005. However the intersecting arrangement offers opportunity for further polarity.
These polarised intersecting practices are design practice in tension with research practice and teaching practice in tension with reflective practice.

The four polarities are not intended to be antagonistic representations but reflect academic alignments which one prioritises at the expense of its ‘opposite’.
Figure 2-9. SEER Model.
A SEER Summary

The SEER model has been developed through a reflection on Chinese design academics when considering the similarities and differences with Australian design academics. The model has been created with a view to enabling both cultures of design to view and value each other’s practice. In my experience, the model was useful in understanding what I valued in China that I could introduce in Melbourne and reflecting on some of the results which were initially incongruous with my expectations. The SEER model is however a method for design academics to review their practice and plan and strategise for improvements in a globally responsive practice.

Reflection through SEER model

In 2005, I viewed myself as a teacher, and was rating myself quite well, when I encountered Chinese design academics and an entirely ‘other’ sort of practice. When viewed through a simple spider diagram overlaid on the SEER model. I would observe my academic practices as good as an Educator and fair as a Scholar, in that I was constantly reflecting and improving what I did, however the breadth of application of my scholarship was relatively poor with Research and Entrepreneurial practices as non-existent. I represent my 2005 practice in Figure 2.10

Figure 2.10 - SEER Model Reflection on 2005
In contrast my Chinese colleagues operated in a different stratosphere where Research Practice and Teaching were good with clear targets and a steady flow of activity and achievement. The area of least apparent performance was Reflective practice as the Design academics were strategically hitting their required targets but didn’t appear to be developing any philosophical or ethical position within their design practices which were predominantly process and outcome driven. The Area of performance I was captivated by was the Entrepreneurial practice which supported their Education practice through Industry based learning and Research outcomes. They had managed to create a whole field of activity in capitalising on local industry relationships, University based capability and created mutually beneficial enterprises and marketable product outcomes. This is reflected in Figure 2.11.

Figure 2.11 - SEER Model Reflection on Chinese Academics 2005

My Australian colleagues were comparatively mediocre. In Figure 2.12, I have represented my departments’ practices as being good Educators, however I would say that our intellectual position and ideas in this practice had stagnated and was at that moment facing a Learner centred rejuvenation. Similarly the Research practice was minimal and under self-scrutiny due to activities as Educators. The departments collective Reflective practice was good in that it was working through issues and intellectual positions as Educators and citizens of the University but little inspiring activity was demonstrable.
Overlaying the three figures to form Figure 2.13 and some deficits in my practices are clearly visible. Commencing as a Design academic in 2005 was partially in recognition of my effort and achievements as an Educator and the commencement of this project, which would be potentially beneficial to myself and by extension the department.

When reviewing my Practice in 2015 with the SEER model an entirely different story is viewable. In Figure 2.14 I have represented my current practice as a good Educator, it is not that I haven’t progressed since 2005 but my whole practice has been transformed and my improved teaching is balanced within a comparatively...
more holistic practice. My general Research Practice can be viewed as Fair however the completion of this research will be a personal milestone and consequently create further research opportunities and time to pursue them. My Scholarship has transformed quite considerably. I have in the past decade held almost every Teaching and academic administrative role in the Industrial Design Department and have a great deal of interaction with other elements of the University and colleagues through Australia and abroad. This has afforded me a broad foundation of knowledge and perspectives from which I can reflect on my practices. Within my practices can be observed forms of Entrepreneurship. Through each research project, design studio and academic role, I seek to create opportunities and enterprises, some of which have had successful outcomes and rewards. All of which have contributed to an improved design academic practice and department.

Figure 2.14 - SEER Model Reflections

I represent a comparison between 2005 and 2015 in Figure 2.15. This stark diagram offers an opportunity to reflect on the changed circumstance, time and outcomes of the project. I commenced this project to become "the China expert". An intention that I now consider well intended but naïve. Through my journeys I have encountered many experts and in their field this is undeniable. The term implies authority which for me sits uncomfortably, as Professor Loraine Justice notes, "I believe anyone who claims to know China who was not born there cannot claim to know the complexity and depth of the country the cultures and its people."(Justice, 2012)

Throughout my journeys I have been acutely aware of my ignorance and with each step my knowledge of how much more there is to discover grew until it would become overwhelming. At this point I simply sort to improve myself rather than reach some the unattainable ideal. I would introduce all that I leaned through my encounters with China and share it with my students, my colleagues through my
practice. As the Furniture City merchants had demonstrated put the idea into practice (or the market as it were) and let the results decide. I would act as an agent for China as a destination that could be transformative and let the participants determine their personal journeys. Through gentle nudges, suggestions and my academic design practice has my enthusiasm for China, Chinese design and Design with China as a stakeholder been disseminated through my department and university, not as a roar but as a whisper seeking to take hold. As such I would not assert myself as a China expert, but as a Chinese Whisperer.
Conclusion

I began my Masters by Research project in 2005 at a convergence of opportunities created by an enticing moment that irresistibly called for me to select a particular direction in my work. From that direction wafted fragrances and flavours that were exotic and new, illusively tantalising, and as it turned out one taste was not going to be enough.

Looking Back

When I commenced this project I imagined that I would be developing an international product design consultancy, an extension of my ambitions in my hometown context. On reflection this was the logical extension of the Melbourne design scene – designers were located in four scenarios: independent freelance designers, design consultants, in-house designers and designer-makers. My design practice in Melbourne had faced increasing pressure to reduce costs, invest in software and ITC, provide advanced technological solutions and provide production ready prototypes, all of which were prohibitively expensive in Australia.

China provided an opportunity to reset my practice with the potential advantages of gaining competitive advantage and realising an increased client base. The fortunate combination of hosting a Chinese academic in Melbourne and a fully funded invitation to visit Zhejiang University provided me with an opportunity to embark on a research project that would draw on my engagement with ideas and experiences Chinese. I was inspired by the idea of resetting my career in a new and challenging context, which was generally viewed derisively as a developing nation with Machiavellian business practice and poor imitators who couldn’t innovate. China could provide me with opportunities to demonstrate my design prowess, which I believed would captivate the local design community and industry. I naively believed this would enable me to establish a design footprint in China and grow my design practice into a sustainable business that would allow me to work between Melbourne and China.

I departed Melbourne as an ambitious design missionary. During my field trip I somehow ‘went native’ and returned to Melbourne with a profoundly reordered sense
of the world and my role as a designer within it. My exposure to China, my immersion into all things Chinese, would not submit to the optimistic and simplistic notions of China that I had before my first trip. That first field trip would be the first of several and China would lure me back for seven field trips in all. These periods of intense exploration and enthusiasm were interspersed with repeated disruptions in my non-academic life such as a motorcycle accident that laid me up for the better part of a year. At this time I began to travel, having never travelled before. These were to be short forays into India, Japan, Korea and Singapore. All these trips were powerful and contributed to redefining the scope of global design for me. These other trips, these dalliances, were not to endure. China had captivated me and resisted being easily tamed. Through my trips each event I engaged in would provide insights into China, and also pose questions. Questions that would require extended reflection, conversations, discussions and abstract framings to arrive at clearer meanings and formulations.

My project progressed with traffic between Australia and China which contained other activities which in addition to field visits. These were: conducting design studios and design workshops, hosting academic delegations, preparing and orientating students for exchange to China and observing the subtle but significant changes on their return. My shift in perception was dramatic enough to immediately affect how I viewed and worked with China and also with all the people who have undertaken this journey. It was not an easy thing to define to the uninitiated. I am unsure if I could have achieved this level of engagement and deep understanding had I conducted this project outside of a reflective research project.

The closing of the research project, this phase of the research project at least, has necessitated a looking back on a decade long investment of time and intellectual
attention. The process has illuminated the extent to which I have been transformed by the project. I used to be a typical example of my design education. My temperament, opinions and career inertia were based on the design practice model of Australia. I was an expert-generalist, one of many in a shrinking pond being impacted by the effects of globalisation. My approach in the past had been to make the most of the few highly competitive opportunities available in an increasingly conservative city. In retrospect my approach to design had stagnated in a paradigm that was already dated and fading in relevance.

The change in perspective afforded by being in China allowed me to view Melbourne through the lens of an outsider and see it for the relatively isolated ecosystem that it was. My perspectives have profoundly changed through the period of the research, and having an external perspective with which to examine and compare my home town and local industry has been a humbling experience. The ideas and practices that I encountered through my field visits offered insights into ‘other’ approaches and contexts of operation that have an immediate practical reality combined with an awareness that has a long term, that I would categorise as an archetypal Chinese perspective. The osmosis effect of my journeys had altered considerably my self-identity and approach to design and the world.

**My Personal Transformation**

On reflection, this period of intellectual and design practice metamorphosis has engendered in me new perceptions and new transnational capabilities. With regards to China I have an abiding interest, deep affection and enduring curiosity for her culture and her people. I have developed on my field trips understandings which have also grown in complexity and subtlety into what I categorise as a deep understanding of China. It is more than a travel guide veneer of cultural icons and is an essence that sinks into ones pores. The anxieties and ignorance I once had about China have dissipated. I feel capable and confident in my engagements with China and I take pleasure in assisting others to understand how to be comfortable with China as an entity in Design & Industry and as having an increasing influence in our region and globally.
My teaching practice has gone through a significant transformation though the journey of the project. In 2004 I was technically and procedurally orientated and sought to align students to a rigid code of behaviour and achievement. This changed when I adopted a learner centred approach that was by informed Chinese design education practices. Through these encounters with design work and discussions with the designers and their teachers I have been required to explain, justify, defend my methods and simultaneously consider the values and applications of other educators and learning approaches. These interactions have made my practice much more aware and much more resilient to new ideas, new and different approaches and a broader field of enquiry and application.

Through the project, my teaching practice has become transnational. I have greatly improved my inclusiveness of international perspectives and practices. The learning journey of students I teach has changed. In my teaching the student is no longer led through a specific journey but encouraged to construct their own meanings and understandings in a territory that is globally expansive and inclusive.

Through the process of conducting this project I have moved to a particular place of reflection and articulation. In the past I found writing confronting because I held certain views that were inflexible and I held some concepts as sacrosanct and others as incidental. The rigidity of my opinions constructed a narrative that was not amenable to a research program. I have since become a more reflective practitioner capable of constructing and undertaking action research projects. My documentation, including photography, has allowed me to capture the essence and detail of the project’s progression, supporting reflection of particular events over time and recording the genesis of the research. Through this reflection I have been able to convert my understanding into various theoretical models. Through these models, abstractions of particular ecosystems, I have become able to share and discuss the significance of my learning and offer insights for others to use in understanding China within a broader design discourse. It is through these models that I approach my teaching of design where China serves as a context and as an active stakeholder. For the students who have graduated in the last five years, their awareness of and acceptance of China and the Asian regions have been influenced by the existence of this research project. My transnational practice has allowed me
to take on roles in organising and promoting student exchange and in the coordination of particular, industry engaged and transnational studio courses within the Industrial Design program. As I pursue further leadership positions I imagine these models will allow me to promote and share a globally connected narrative of design education and practice.

**Design Academic**

As a design academic many of the concepts that I work with are visualised as a means of conveying the relationships and hierarchy of abstracted concepts. At a point in this research I took up a continuing position in the Industrial Design Program at RMIT University. I have since had occasion to reimagine my academic practice at RMIT through the lens of this transnational experience.

At the commencement of this project my orientation was primarily towards students, their learning and requirements for graduating with the requisite skillset to practice. This was largely in recognition of my casual tutoring position and the commercial design practice that I was coordinating. Over the duration of the project I have reformatted my approach to adopt a broader range of perspectives. These are inclusive of global and particularly Chinese contexts of practice and the perception I have acquired of the Chinese design academic practices. The model presented below represents a before and after snapshot based on the categories developed in Chapter 2 Figure 2.14.

When comparing the models in Figure 3.1 and Figure 2.14, it is immediately apparent that Research and Scholarship have changed from being minor parts for augmenting applied design to becoming substantial independent practices. Additionally I would categorise my previous commercial practice as a reaction to the limited opportunities available in Melbourne at the time. Commercially sustainable practice has largely been a matter of networking, an activity that I found intimidating and in which I lacked capability at the time.
Through a process of changing my locations and context to China and accepting that every interaction was a new learning opportunity, I reset an intellectual block, provided grounds for the recasting of my design practice and enabled greater risk taking due to the change in social conventions.

My colleagues in China are located within an ecosystem that includes a growing manufacturing sector that has a voracious appetite for design. Design is seen as a means of capitalising on market opportunities and developing products in the ecosystem of rapidly increasing capacity and emerging technologies. The Chinese academics focus upon developing appreciation of design by the business sector, in creating brand identity and in creating a Chinese design identity. They articulate a progressive change in the narrative of moving from Made in China to Designed in China (Yu, 2004). Within this frenzy of industrial activity, the Chinese design academic is obliged to be strategic in networking and developing expertise within their practice that will pay dividends throughout their careers. I have adopted this entrepreneurial spirit in response to changing manufacturing and commercial environment of Australia.

The model offers some opportunities to examine the Australian context and opportunities for recasting the role of design in capitalising on the existing expertise and industrial capacity while investing in market opportunities which are innovative, uncontested or unattractive to centres of economic activity orientated towards mass manufacture.

In the early 1980s Furniture City in Foshan did not exist. The impetus that allowed for its inception, growth and global presence was triggered by the desire of the local administration to capitalise on the available assets and opportunities. Contributing to the success of Furniture City were also the initiatives of developing a location, a site of activity, engaging a distributed labour force to coexist and work both competitively and collectively to create a critical mass of activity that engaged a global business audience.

When viewing the Australian context through the lens of this B2B model we can observe the absence of the scale of manufacturing orientation. It’s possible the scale of our population and distance between the independent industrial centres impacts
upon the construction of symbiotic ecosystems that is common in China. It is possible to speculate upon multiple futures that might enable the construction of scenarios of support to realise a level of local manufacture. The scenarios may point to the need for a program of restructure such as creating industrial parks focussed on particular capabilities and sectors of industry that can establish a level of density of activity and reap the benefits of co-location. Melbourne is one of few cities globally capable of design and development through to manufacture of vehicles. The opportunities afforded by the cessation of vehicle manufacturing generates a ready pool of highly skilled creative and technical designers cable of initiating innovation projects that are high value and low volume for exclusive markets. Situated within an industrial park, I imagine the potential for regrowth and sustainable manufacture are promising.

**Implications for the Design Industry**

This research into industrial design in China documents my design research practice, however, there are ongoing benefits for other stakeholders and an increasing relevance to the broader design practice community. Through the previous ten years, there have been 350 graduates who have encountered China through my studio teaching and some 21 who have been to China on an exchange. These graduates are now travelling through their careers’ with methods and confidence to deal with Asian themes and the returned exchange students with address books of, now practicing, contacts in China through their exchange communities. I have seen a few cases of my graduates employed on the strength of their knowledge of China and ability to engage with Chinese stakeholders in their Australia-based design practices.

Similarly, in the student community we are witnessing designers who have developed literacy for transnational sourcing and procurement particularly of rapid prototyping services but also for obtaining OEM components for working prototypes through internet based procurement and distribution such as ‘Alibaba’ and ‘Made in China’ websites. The International student community is particularly valued here for their mandarin web literacy and ability to translate and negotiate directly with suppliers. Even through this remote transaction, Australian domestic students’ awareness of transnational practice is greatly enhanced.
Graduate designers are increasingly required to travel and have intellectual agility to deal with suppliers and production based throughout Asia. The relatively recent practice of crowdsourcing has created a practice of entrepreneurial graduates who are leveraging from their web literacy, Asian sourcing, and global design market to generate new products and opportunities.

During my initial field trip during 2005, a discussion was raised about creating a “Two plus Two” programme between RMIT University and a Chinese university. In these courses a student commences two years at one institution, then progress to the other institution to complete their degree, receiving a transcript from both Universities. This proposal was not adopted by RMIT but was active with Canadian Universities in non-design fields. One can speculate on the challenges and rewards of such programmes, but there is a desire for hybrid degrees and double-degrees that enhance the possibilities for graduates and genuine transnational education rather than just an internationalised marketplace.

My Design practice is based within the institution, where the field of endeavour is broad and at the forefront of theoretical and applied design research. As such I hesitate to preach to a commercial audience who have more focused and immediate goals in practices that have honed their craft to suit their clients and production networks. Commercial design service providers being driven largely by immediate profit margins and short-term agendas, which are in tension with the University and philosophically at odds with Chinese business practices which seek to establish long term and deep relationship networks which perpetuate benefits and obligations. A genuine engagement with China will require an investment of time and financial contributions to building relationships and understanding of how China works and how the particular partners one networks with conduct and construct their operations.

The relevance of a graduate design community with Asian practice ties extends well beyond the University with a design community who are increasingly bound to Chinese sourcing and production challenges and perspectives. The Design Institute of Australia (DIA) have published ‘Practice Notes’ (Katzer, 2005), to inform their community about how to engage with China and Chinese manufacturers demonstrating there are significant needs and desire for professional practice to
engage with China. Practices such as Cobalt-Niche, based in Melbourne have established an office in Shenzhen to manage the ongoing China relationship. This model of practice is also present through IDEO, Shanghai and Lenovo IBM, Beijing. Global Practices and Design Service providers are increasingly choosing to invest in the Chinese operations to take maximum advantage of their relationships and to use local assets to manage and leverage the operations.

Design graduates are filtering into commercial practices which are demonstrating some awareness of China, however, the issue for design Clients is to understand that sourcing from China is entirely different to developing products in and with China. The publicised advantages of China manufacturing do come with significant financial and investment and relationship building.

Looking Forward

This project has been overwhelming and large. This did not happen by design but happened by circumstances, possibly passion. Over time the project lost its boundaries and in the process it became complicated and nebulous. Through the process of collecting, collating and curating this project into something that could communicate what I have learned I have needed to re-assemble it in multiple ways. For reasons of clarity many of the activities I have undertaken were not curated into this work. My writing process has been about selecting what could be distilled into a coherent narrative. Through this process I have come to understand a great deal about how to construct future design research projects that can be conducted in a more manageable manner.

From the conclusion of this project I am able to pursue another, parallel, line of inquiry for which I have enduring emotional attachments. Throughout this project I have sustained an interest in the field of personal mobility and urban transportation that I intend to develop through a doctoral program of study. This is not a departure from this project but has become enabled through the transformations I have seen in
Asia. The development and accessibility of new electric vehicle technologies and the need for more sustainable urban mobility offer continuity with Chinese stakeholders.

It is my intention to continue pursuing partnerships within Asia to develop products such as electric scooters and to contribute to the design discourse with a much more speculative futuristic and strategic concept development. I anticipate a continuity of my learning as there is a distinct need to work with regional stakeholders, which means working in a Chinese way with Chinese partners and interests. I have witnessed a global shift in genuine recognition of Asian aesthetic and taste through this project. I would anticipate in the future to be designing with a focus upon the region’s consumer requirements. I propose that this will increase to a point of dominating global consumer design. The flavours of Asian design will add new ways of considering products and services, I intend to be ‘in the kitchen’ while this feast of fusion is being prepared and served and savoured.

One of my first steps in moving forward would be to capitalise on the models that I have developed through this masters. I believe they have tremendous potential in transforming Australian designers’ understanding of China and encouraging ‘engagement with’, rather than ‘employment of’ China. To achieve this task I aim to pursue academic publication that will discuss the models and method for understanding China. These publications will be further resourced by a website with resources and links that enable China-Design to be accessible to emerging designers and design graduates. I will be designing and providing training programs for teaching staff, to assist in the introduction and dissemination of these models as a means of connecting with China. I have great aspirations for the models as a means of closing the gap in appreciation of China and all that she has to offer. I will continue to teach with China as a major influence. The models will assist in conveying the ideas to new students and colleagues. I will endeavour to encourage them to adopt the models and use them in their teachings about China in design and design in China, but also in recognition that global design is profoundly affected by the global influence and ascendance of China and Asia.
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