

Ziru (Melody) Ling

Critical History I

Seminar Paper

Introduction

On October 29, 2019, Harvard Business Review conducted an in-depth interview with 15 executives from Wechat, the most popular social media and online chatting platform in China at the moment. As we know, Wechat is a huge success in China due to its convenience of use, seamless user experience, and integration of multiple functions in one platform. It is currently the default option for social networking in China where users aggregately send more than 45 billion messages a day (Julian Birkinshaw, Dickie Liang-Hong Ke, and Enrique de Diego). Regardless, in the interview, the Wechat executives mentioned the significance design played in their success. Specifically, they said that the key factor contributing to their success was the abandonment of the standard design thinking model. Instead, they used a different design methodology called “grand design”, where they see more suitable within the Chinese market environment (Julian Birkinshaw, Dickie Liang-Hong Ke, and Enrique de Diego).

This Wechat case catches my attention to both design methodologies in general and their places in the world. As we know, in today’s time, the definition of design gradually becomes more and more interdisciplinary. Instead of staying in the realm of fine arts and visual languages, it abandons the old and outdated concept and rises to the center of various modes of capital production, business models, critical theories and more. As a result, designers are constantly encountering different frameworks and methodologies that they have to choose from and apply to their design work. As we know, by definition, those design methodologies are a series of coded

and simplified steps that perform the function of breaking down a larger problem into tangible and reachable steps. On one hand, it is definite that they provide a guided framework for problem-solving in this interdisciplinary field, making cross-functional communications easier and industrial procedures more standardized. However, on the other hand, standardization and regulation of design methodologies also run the risk of imposing a singular notion on different systems that might require differentiated functions. Examples of this might include potential cultural imposition, incompatibility between a specific design methodology and its larger environment, as well as the inability of certain processes to reach a desired outcome.

Nevertheless, as seen in the subtext mentioned by Wechat's executives above, we are currently experiencing some form of monopoly at the moment where industry standards are dominated by one or two popular design methodologies where they are treated as a one-for-all solution, especially in the case of design thinking. As we know, the term "design thinking" was first introduced in the 1960s in the United States by several key players such as Herbert Simon and Robert McKim, as well as the architect and urban designer Peter Rowe (Vinsel). It first aimed to expand and redefine previous approaches of design, and it has gained huge popularity ever since despite that it was not officially codified into a specific term. Later on, IDEO, being already one of the biggest design firms at the time, seized this opportunity. As IDEO rises to the pioneer who systematically integrates design with business values, the company also becomes the spokesperson for the term design thinking. At the same time, their unique management style integrating experts from interdisciplinary fields successfully helped them gain traction of their theory and methodology. After IDEO formally introduced this term and successfully promoted it to the market, design thinking becomes the go-to solution for all kinds and all scales of design, ranging from small startups, large consumer product corporations, various consultancies, non-governmental

organizations, educational regimes, and many more. This phenomenon can be seen both internally in the U.S. where it originated, as well as all over the world in other countries that do not have the same history and social environment as the U.S.

As seen in the history of design thinking and the Wechat case above, all of these backgrounds brought interesting questions and we are starting to see that while design thinking seems to be the only alternative for design at the moment, it seems to derive itself from very specific historical instances, and may not be applicable in certain cases as seen in the success of Wechat. On the other hand, it is sometimes fascinating to think that a design methodology of such specific instances can be used as a dominating voice, so much that it forms a kind of Imperialism (Tunstall 235), running the high risk of eliminating the diverse voice in design. Therefore, inspired by the Wechat case while holding the assumption that a popular design methodology is a reflection of a larger socio-political and economic system, this essay is deemed to explore the method of design thinking and its specific social circumstances leading to its formation and success in the U.S., as well as trying to prove that design thinking is not a one-for-all solution that would seamlessly fit into other countries or systems that are different from that of the United States. I will approach this argument by (1) elaborating on potential social circumstances that lead to the popularity of design thinking in the U.S.; (2) using the case of Wechat as a starting point to analyze the specific social circumstances in China as a driving force; (3) analyzing why design thinking could end up being incompatible within two different systems. I will conclude this essay by further analyzing the extent of political inflection and cultural imposition of IDEO, as well as the look-ahead significance of this argument.

Design Thinking and its Underlying U.S. Environment

In this section, I will first briefly elaborate on the theories that form my initial hypothesis, which believes that design methodologies are highly related to and influenced by specific historical, socio-political, and economic environments. Then I will give a detailed analysis and speculation of what specific circumstances lead to the formation of the design thinking framework.

The official definition from IDEO describes design thinking as “a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer’s toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success” (IDEO). Lie at the center of this definition are three key components of design thinking that make it what it is - user desirability, technical feasibility, and business viability (see Fig. 1). The proposition of business viability successfully channels this concept to the market that enables circulation and growth, incentivizes constant sparks of new ventures. At the same time, to reach its goal of technical feasibility, it successfully integrates cross-functional teams that perform functions other than design, such as engineering and business administration. Finally, the focus on user desirability aims at taking the down-to-top approach solving real needs coming from our consumer-citizens in society.

Adding on to the above qualities, another notable key signifier of design thinking is its iterative process and non-linearity of a product cycle. The five phases of a product cycle defined in design thinking is “empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test” (Siang Teo Yu and The Interaction Design Foundation) (see Fig. 2). This cycle is also repeatable and should be iterated as many times as possible before reaching the ideal outcome. Behind this is a key idea of agile development, putting the product to test in a free market through trials and errors. In a free market system where the market is naturally determined by consumer demands, design thinking tries to

leverage this quality successfully while also, in turn, constantly stirring the market with new launches, enabling healthy economic growth and stimulation.

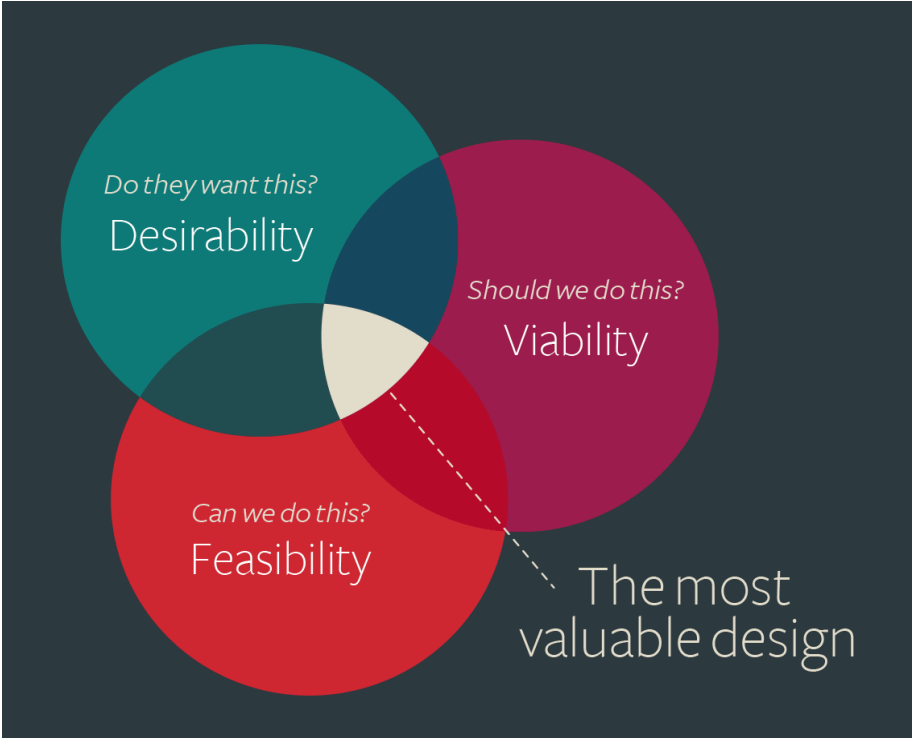


Fig. 1, Design thinking’s three key components (IDEO)



Fig. 2, Design thinking’s iterative process (Siang Teo Yu and The Interaction Design Foundation)

After the above dive-in, it is certain that design thinking is the typical design methodology that fits into specific social frameworks. Lying at its premises is a strong belief in human-centered individualized power and the almost “American dream”-like determination to solve important social problems through innovation and capitalist venture creation. The integration of a user-centered down-to-top approach together with the high focus on market profitability brings it to the center of the larger environment in contemporary America, fitting it seamlessly into the fundamental system of liberal democratic capitalism. Indeed, this larger U.S. social environment derives its place in history, tracing back to a series of historical instances. The capitalist economic structure retains its form as early as the Industrial Revolution when human beings witnessed the convenience brought by mechanical reproduction and automation. The concept of mechanical reproduction drastically changed the definition of art and design. According to Benjamin in his article *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, “Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes” (Benjamin 2). By making art and technological development inseparable, it marks the earliest spark of the origin of design not residing in the realm of aesthetics but ended up lying at the center of business and technology. After that, arriving in contemporary America, when the economic boom of the postwar era took place, the significance of economic value retains its form within a further belief in technocratic and scientific systems as a strategy to solve societal problems and realize social reforms, while relying less on traditional public sectors and authority-centered policymaking. At the same time, the postwar era also witnessed the golden age of capitalism with the fall of communism taking

place. The development of an economic-driven, consumer-oriented society thus becomes the central strategy of various social and political institutions.

At the same time, the American-dream-like manifestation of designers' powers and user-centered focus of design thinking also reflects the coexistence of the capitalist economy and the U.S. liberal ideologies. The liberal ideologies can be traced back to as early as the Enlightenment period that establishes the central values of individual rights, freedom, and consent. It later evolves into the main guiding principles behind the U.S. democratic system where the essential and ultimate governing bodies of the country are distributed through the population of citizens. It also develops the American legal system characterized by popular sovereignty, representative government, and separation of power. In totality, it promotes the image of hearing, interpreting, and integrating different voices, and treats the overall balancing of collective individuality as the desired social outcome. This model observes a high-level parallelity with design thinking where the whole process starts from the central focus of users and their individualized needs. The recent popularity and promotion of good user experience as the key to successful launches also help prove the point that users are the central deciding forces and they have the liberty to alter important big corporate decisions. The new products and features are actively produced from real user needs instead of passively imposing their wills on users as a voice from the top.

As we can see, the concept of design thinking, or synonymously human-centered design, captures the wave of a liberal-capitalist social system so timely and effortlessly, choosing the right time and location. In the article, *The Urban Precariat, Neoliberalization, and the Soft Power of Humanitarian Design*, the author Cedric Johnson further characterized design thinking and human-centered design as possessing "corporate complex and neoliberal governmentality" (Johnson 449). Looking forward, further seeing how exactly design thinking fits into contemporary

environments, we are now living at the important time of late-Capitalism and Neoliberalism where the basic social structure of the United States is already reformed, and we are thinking of ways to solve the problems resulting from it. Neoliberalism is defined as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 71). Thus, what we could further derive from it is the continuing focus of integration between liberal-democratic ideologies and the free-market economy. Under Neoliberalism’s assumption is the interdependence between the two where the freedom to privately exchange goods and services and the privatization of larger significant institutions should automatically form an ecology that produces social wellness. This obviously further emphasizes design thinking’s role in the bigger picture as designers gradually treat larger social problems all as design challenges. According to Cedric Johnson, “Humanitarian designers express commitment to modified notions of capitalist economics and a faith in social improvement through technological development and conservative social engineering” (Johnson 458). We are experiencing a wave where design comes to the forefront of the economy, creating continuous and emerging private institutions ranging from all kinds of sizes, making profits or stirring the economy with the belief of solving wicked problems. This exactly corresponds with the Neoliberal ecosystem of a free market, because “Within the humanitarian design movement and the wider humanitarian–corporate complexes, economic problems are reframed as design challenges and as such, taken out of the realm of public debate and political remedy” (Johnson 459).

Therefore, as a conclusion, the structural similarities of the design thinking process and the U.S. liberal government with a capitalist and democratic system lay the foundation that pushes

design thinking's success. The contemporary development of neoliberalism further automatically forms a dynamic ecosystem that puts a free market to the premises of social reform. Using design thinking, designers actively choose to engage in social problems as design challenges and provide economic-viable solutions through the establishment of private institutions. All of these laid a strong foundation for design thinking's success and monopoly.

Countries with Different Social Environments Other Than the U.S.

Although it is profitable and liberating for design thinking to be integrated into the larger U.S. environment, it is true that the premises of design thinking rely on the set of ground rules mentioned above that, without which, cannot ensure design thinking's success in the first place. When we turn our lenses away from the leading voices of America and look at other countries in the world, we do not see such a seamless integration of design thinking as above. Rather, we cannot think of a better reason integrating this model to a different system other than the inevitability of cultural hegemony. Speaking to that, people are gradually starting to realize design thinking's inherent incompatibility within different social environments. The success of Wechat in China, as the company decides to use a different core design methodology, becomes the perfect example. As we know, China and the U.S. remain a lot of differences in terms of economic structure, governmental regime, societal values, and many more. As design becomes indispensable in all sorts of developments, it is wise for Wechat to observe a similar structure between its design and the larger Chinese social system, instead of imitating the prominent conditions in the U.S.

According to the executives from Wechat, the leading methodology that attributes to their success is a term called grand design. The main difference between grand design and design thinking is that, instead of imitating a down-to-top and incremental approach, grand design's

model is more top-to-down and thus requires more careful, comprehensive, and visionary planning at the beginning, while allowing fewer trials and errors once the product is launched into the market. According to Wechat's founder Allen Zhang, "We argue that the grand design approach to innovation – where a new product or service emerges fully-formed in the mind's eye of the innovator before it is developed and commercialized – can be more effective than design thinking under certain circumstances, most notably when a market is in its early formative stage of development" (Julian Birkinshaw, Dickie Liang-Hong Ke, and Enrique de Diego). Behind this idea is a key meritocracy mindset that, instead of being the key decision-makers, users are essentially resembling a world in a flux. Ultimately, they have no clear idea of what they really want. The result of such spread-out individuality and different voices can be chaotic, and thus any genuinely good solutions, in the end, are meant to be moderated and balanced, trying to reconcile different voices without having the opportunity to push for the extreme and perfection.

The grand design approach observes many structural similarities to Chinese society. The approach where the leaders are the key decision-makers resembles Chinese social values in many ways, ranging from family hierarchies, organizational behaviors, and the governmental setup. Behind all of these is a fundamentally different social contract that is distinct from America's. The power structure that dominates Chinese society is essentially from the singularity of wills instead of collective voices. With a long history rich in monarchy and meritocracy, it is strongly believed that the wisdom and virtue of one or several key players can lead and help society progress. Therefore, it views the certain extent of hierarchy necessary to achieve efficiency and effectiveness. Nevertheless, this distinctive social contract is due to a series of complex historical and political reasons that it is quite impossible and unnecessary for me to elaborate on details, as my focus is on design methodologies and social environments. Instead, I want to focus more on the general

cultural values and habits that play significance in Chinese society and is thus reflected in different social functions. As we observe the pattern of a high concentration on high-level decision making, we see similar hierarchical organizational structures where key resources are not evenly distributed but possessed by certain executives at the companies; at the same time, we also see traditional Chinese families where the key decision-maker is the senior male, and children tend to not be able to disobey the wills of their parents. Deriving from this, design, as an organizational function, would fit more seamlessly into the whole cultural value with a grand design approach. This approach would eventually experience fewer frictions in both the processes of product development, as well as when the product is communicating with real end-users in the market. On the other hand, the Chinese larger environment also allows users to adapt to certain behaviors under this model more quickly, since eventually Chinese users, as consumer-citizens, would expect something coming from an organization with higher hierarchical order to be more official and privileged, or can withstand the test of time.

Besides the general overview of Chinese cultural values with an implication of its distinct social contract that is related to grand design, the concept of grand design also plays out well within the current Chinese market conditions. As we know, the Chinese market quality observes some extent of western Capitalism where consumer-oriented products are constantly generated to stimulate the economy. Because of this, China is experiencing an economic boom over the past 40 years where trade liberalization and foreign investment changes the economy completely. “From 1979 (when economic reforms began) to 2017, China’s real gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an average annual rate of nearly 10%” (Morrison 1). This freedom of economy allows grand design to be played out in the first place as corporate innovations are strongly encouraged. However, despite that, it is true that the Chinese market has not reached the most mature form of

capitalism. Due to drastic historical changes and political reforms between Mao and the post-Mao period, Chinese society is experiencing huge “class stratification, socio-economic inequalities, and social mobility” (Bian 91). Therefore, we are still experiencing certain forms of governmental interference and government-related institutions that take control of the market while exercising monopoly to a certain extent. According to Cedric Johnson, “Poor nations, we are to believe, did not adopt the political, social, and economic institutions that would have enabled capitalist development” (Johnson 451). As China’s economy has not reached a completely steady state, some sort of interventions is necessary for pushing the economy towards the right path. Grand design, a typical schema used in large corporations such as Tencent that invented Wechat, serves exactly as a top-down guiding entity produced by certain authoritative digital monopolies, observing the same market structure and economic strategies. As Wechat maintains similar principles from the time it was built that lasted until today, it actively leads the market instead of being thrown inside different market fluctuations and turmoils. Unlike design thinking, it does not follow trends and waves while trusting users and consumers enough to leverage important decisions. Some key design features, such as the few integrations of advertisements and the simplicity of the chat function despite the ever-changing mobile chatting conventions, remain the almost-artistic ideals that are transferred to consumers. Similar to the Chinese economy that works better with the extent of intervention, Wechat is using the same interventionist strategy as grand design is actively encouraged to shape the trend in design, social media, and communications in general.

The above reasons all attribute to grand design’s success in China. Behind the innovation in design methodologies is a clear recognition that parallelity in social structure and quality makes a product or a design method itself adapt quicker and more seamlessly into the larger environment. China’s inherent belief in hierarchical leadership styles that produce the best and most efficient

outcome plays a huge role in grand design, as well as its active take on leading social trends and market economies.

Conclusion on Design Thinking's Incompatibility with Different Environments

As Wechat's executives elaborated on grand design, they also briefly mentioned its incompatibility with design thinking. According to them, "Design thinking works well in established and mature markets where user needs are properly understood and innovation tends to be incremental, whereas the grand design approach has greater scope to succeed under conditions of high uncertainty, and where user needs are unknown and potentially malleable" (Julian Birkinshaw, Dickie Liang-Hong Ke, and Enrique de Diego). It is clear that if we compare design thinking to grand design, they observe generally opposite frameworks and principles. To conclude, in terms of the general direction in decision making and how it is passed, design thinking is more down-to-top whereas grand design tends to be top-down. As design thinking believes in the value of individual experiences and opinions and tries to meet popular needs, grand design believes more in the efficiency and effectiveness of decision making from people of higher rankings or intellectual backgrounds. This also results in design thinking observing an iterative and chaotic process while grand design is more linear and decisive. As a result, two contrasted systems tend to find little common ground. As design methodologies are largely reflections of society, we need to find more cause-effects and patterns before being dominated by a popular and "privileged" design methodology in the first place. Design thinking is certainly not a one-for-all solution that could fit into all places, especially in China, and thus we should try to abandon some of the inherent privileges attached to it that are derived from social circumstances.

Indeed, the above analysis uses an example to make a quite distinct comparison between two different design methods, and two value systems are revealed behind that cannot reconcile. This happens to be the story where they are almost the opposite. However, in reality, there are a lot of circumstances that lie somewhere in the middle of this axis or do not fit into this spectrum I defined completely. Thus, it is also not my intention to introduce a dichotomy to the realm of design and solely argue that we should choose either the one or the other exclusively. Instead, my point is that as design methodologies reflect so much about values, economies, politics, culture, and etc., it is extremely important to diversify voices in design so that we do not run the risk of imposing one voice on the other, both in design and in the form of larger system it carries and ensembles. Speaking to that, in the last part of this essay, I will elaborate on the significance of this topic and why it matters by engaging more in the critical lenses from a larger perspective.

Why it Matters

Design thinking should not remain a singular voice in both the fields of design and the corresponding social environment. This applies to not only the internal environment where design thinking finds its way to be suitable, but also to external environments where the cultural, economic, and political values of design thinking are imposed.

Internally in the U.S. environment itself, although it brings huge market profitability and user empathy with the circulation of design thinking, too much concentration on one single methodology would bring non-inclusiveness eventually. As I mentioned above, it is extremely liberating for individuals when designers identify every societal problem as design challenges to leverage their power on. However, there is also a downside to this, as the strong voices of designers present certain exclusiveness on other voices. According to Cedric Johnson, “Pilloton and others

who claim that all problems are design problems are basically correct, but their technocratic manifestoes imply that these are problems to be solved by professional designers, and not by unions, social movements, neighborhood assemblies, worker cooperatives, and political organizations through the process of debate and public action” (Johnson 470). As designers play the role of saviors and remain privileged, there is a potential threat in eliminating other societal functions that remain in other sectors in the market. Some of these sectors tend to be traditional and well-established, thus they tend to run the risk of restructuring and being forced to adapt to a design-dominant environment. Moreover, the demographic breakdown of designers is also not entirely inclusive but observes a certain pattern of gender, race, and class. In a design-dominant society, the power is ultimately belonged to and controlled by these certain demographic groups, resulting in potential further class solidification and restructuring of minority groups where their voices are less likely to be heard.

Adding on to that, the more severe threat that design thinking brings is from one culture to the other. When it is marketed and promoted as a one-for-all solution to other countries, there is potential cultural assimilation that, by adopting design thinking principles, other countries end up being hegemonized by American ideologies. According to Tunstall, “the IDEO document positions Western design companies in a unique hierarchical position enabling them to guide non-Western institutions on how to solve problems” (Tunstall 236). By inhabiting this hierarchical position, it turns a form of ideology unique to its own into a form of Imperialism that is imposed upon the others. Speaking to dominance and inhabiting an Imperialist position, its voice ultimately becomes “the one” while all different methodologies, such as grand design in China, carry the voice of the “other”. This similar pattern of “othering” can be observed when any culture tries to stand at the higher position seeing other cultures, and it is evident in the longstanding relationship

between the east and the west. From Said's *Orientalism* where the concept between the one and the other is significantly carried out, it further exploits the significance stating that "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 13). Design thinking, if remaining an undiversified voice, follows this pattern in an unignorable way.

The other lens engaging design thinking's dominance as problematic is a key term called the salvage program. This happens when some culture takes the position of attempting to "save" the other culture due to reasons such as poverty or cultural regression. Essentially the problematic mindset is that they define cultures that are different as civilizations that have fallen behind. As Tunstall also mentioned that "values from design thinking draw from a progressive narrative of global salvation" (Tunstall 236), we see that design thinking, when marketed as a comprehensive and effective solution, takes such positions where they perceive their own methodology as the most advanced. On this notion, Clifford also wrote an essay specifically on the salvage paradigm defining it as "reflecting a desire to rescue something 'authentic' out of destructive historical changes" (Clifford 169). This notion of salvage also implies an idea that salvages are necessary and there are some cultures that require help from more dominant cultures. Essentially it is setting up the same boundaries as "one and the other" like those in *Orientalism*, where design thinking has been used as a strategy to bring "modern" progresses in other countries.

As we see the threats from both the perspective of "othering" and the salvage paradigm, we should reach a conclusion that a diversified voice is extremely important in not only design practices but every part of society. Our world has a rich history in colonialism where the mindset of imposing one on the other is both inherent and contingent. Nevertheless, as we arrive at the era of post-colonialism and decolonization, we should do the same on not only territories and

properties, but also ideologies and intellectual properties. As Philip, Irani, and Dourish mentioned in their article *Postcolonial Computing: A Tactical Survey*, “Postcolonial Computing advocates a focus not simply on the negative critique of constructions of cultural difference, but on the productive possibilities of ‘difference’ itself” (Philip, Irani and Dourish 7). This not only focuses on diversified voice but also on the extent of creativity and possibility it could possibly bring. Essentially, we want the world to carry the concept of culture as fluid and generative instead of rigid and carefully boundarized. Therefore, design thinking, like every other design methodology, should not remain a cultural imposition and political inflection, but only as a string in thousands of new and emerging design methodologies and systems, together contributing to a dynamic global environment.

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