

# Collective Memory and Nostalgia

A New Perspective on Affective Design Strategy for the Chinese Market

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**Abstract:** The bandwagon of nostalgia in post-socialist countries (e.g. Russia, DDR) has recently attracted attention in various research areas. Politically, China is a socialist country, but in social and economic context, it has in reality been going through a similar experience to those former socialist countries during the 30 years' transition from a planned to a market economy. In addition, an intensively affective demand for nostalgia can also be found in China today and may be directly attributable to this transition.

The main purpose of this paper is to suggest incorporating China and Affective Design in to this specific research subject and propose a related design strategy. Firstly, the paper reviews the issue of nostalgia and the nature of the planned economy, and then it explores the relationship between planned economy experience, collective memory, and nostalgia. Secondly, it explores the design-related phenomenon of nostalgia in former planned economy countries. Thirdly, it proposes a potential affective design strategy for Chinese market – namely, mastering affective value in the design process through studying the target public group's collective memory of early experience.

**Key words:** *Planned Economy, China, Eastern Bloc, Nostalgia, Collective Memory, Early Experience, Affective Design Strategy.*

## 1. Introduction

In a market economy system, consumers usually have a number of choices for one product, and most consumer products are comparable with respect to their performance, features, quality and price, so it is often difficult for companies to differentiate their products from competitors (Thackara, 1997). In this context, emotional responses to products are considered as a decisive factor in purchase decisions by many researchers (e.g. Desmet, 2002; Norman, 2004). Accordingly, in order to gain an advantage in commercial competition, designing the emotional responses and experiences that products can evoke has become the new focus of the designers' work (Mugge, Schoormans, & Schifferstein, 2008). In today's Chinese market, the condition is similar. However, China had, until comparatively recently, a planned economy which switched rapidly to a market economy. For people who experienced the planned economy and early transitional period, this change may have led to some particularly affective requirements or desires, nostalgia perhaps being the most obvious and important one.

## **2. The Definition of Nostalgia: A Desirable and Complex Emotion**

Nostalgia is considered to be a sociological phenomenon that could help individuals to retain their identities after major life transitions or changes (Davis, 1979). It is an emotion or affect that could be experienced by almost all adults (Boym, 2002). Most contemporary researchers believe that nostalgia is a positive or at least a mixed emotion. Davis (1979: 18) defined nostalgia as a “positively toned evocation of a lived past” and noted that the nostalgic feeling is full of love, satisfaction, pleasure, joy, goodness and happiness of past and seldom infused with the negative emotions (e.g. hate, despair, frustration, shame etc.). In other research, nostalgia is viewed as a kind of complex emotion, which involves both positive and negative effects. Nostalgia is defined by Johnson-Laird and Oatley (1989) as a happiness-related emotion, a positive emotion combined with the realization that some desirable and cherished aspects of past are out of reach. Hence, in terms of my own current research, I consider nostalgia a desirable and complex emotion that is common in adults.

## **3. The Planned Economy System, Collective Memory & Nostalgia**

### **3.1 Background of the Planned Economy System**

A planned economy or command economy is a system in which the government regulates various factors of production and makes decisions regarding what to produce and how to distribute, for both consumer goods and factors of production (Nove, 1987). Because the planned economy was viewed as the standard socialist economy pattern, whereas market economy was for capitalism, it was implemented by most, if not all, socialist countries before the 1990s. It influenced billions of people’s lifestyle, experiences and memories. The People’s Republic of China transplanted the planned economy system from Soviet Union in the 1950s. Here I use the Chinese urban lifestyle in the planned economy period as an example to highlight a particularly important profile of the planned economy system.

#### **3.1.1 The Unified Job Allocation System and Lifetime Employment**

In the 1950s, a “unified job allocation system” was established as part of the planned economy system. By 1956, China had transformed most, if not all, private-owned industrial and commercial enterprises into state-owned or collective enterprises, and four million unemployed workers had been assigned jobs (Yuan, 1990). In addition, because unemployment was considered to be a capitalist problem only, firing workers was prohibited (Yuan, 1990). Consequently, the urban Chinese people all had jobs and enjoyed the lifetime job security and graduates were automatically allocated jobs until the 1990s.

#### **3.1.2 The Unified Wage System and Low Income Differences**

The national “unified wage system” was also formalized in the 1950s based on the Soviet model. Under this wage-system, the central government set the general wage policies and determined both the wage structure and differentials; the wage differentials between managers and workers, as well as between intellectual and physical labourers were intentionally kept very low. Generally speaking, the monthly income of a factory manager was only three to four times as high as that of an ordinary line-worker (Ding & Warner, 2001).

#### **3.1.3 Restricted Consumer Choice**

In the planned economy era, the consumption choices of the Chinese population were severely restricted. First, the supply of consumer products was under the control of the central or local planning authority. Most of products (including clothes, food grains, and sugar) were distributed to consumers through a rationing system. Every month each person would be given a fixed number of purchasing coupons which had to be used, in addition to money, to pay for products (Chow, 2007). If a consumer wanted to buy “luxury” goods (e.g. a bike, watch or TV set), he/she often had to get “special coupons” via personal contacts. Second, there were only one or two nationwide famous brands for one product category. Because products offered by these brands usually had best quality, and it was difficult for consumers to gain, most of people knew the big names of these brands and dreamed to own their products. Third, Imported products were rare and most were from China’s “brother countries” (e.g. Soviet Union), and in many cases, products from native Chinese brands shared similar design features with them. Fourth, the population could only shop in state-owned department stores, and almost all these stores sold the same limited range of products with similar functions, usages and styles at the same prices (Gamble, 2006). Under this system, products were always in short supply. Accordingly, manufacturers did not generally design and produce products based on consumer needs and wants but according to the state plan. The same product could be manufactured and sold for decades with few design changes or advertisement.

Today, Eastern Bloc countries have changed their political and economical system to capitalism and the market economy (e.g. Russia, GDR, and Poland etc.). At the same time, China, the largest socialist country with the largest population in the world, has become a socialist market economy country. In December 1978, the Chinese government formulated the policies of reform and opening the nation to the outside world. Then, in October 1992, China made it explicit that the objective of reforms was to establish a socialist market economy (China.org.cn, 2003). And finally, by February 2008, 77 countries had formally recognized China's full market economy status. Although the USA and EU have not yet granted this status to China and the centralized political structure still remains, in terms of Chinese people’s lifestyle and consumption, the planned economy has now become totally defunct. The magnitude of this is indicated by the Chinese habit of describing the Reform and Opening process as the “The Second Revolution”. In China today, a variety of brands, products, designs can be chosen by Chinese consumers; people are getting richer but the gap between rich and poor is becoming much wider; there is no guaranteed lifetime job allocation any more; people are facing much more pressure than before.

### **3.2 Planned Economy Experience, Collective Memory & Nostalgia**

#### **3.2.1 Planned Economy Experience & Nostalgia**

Many aspects of Chinese people’s lives have experienced immense discontinuity because of the economic system transition. It is same in post-socialist countries. Generally, when people are facing huge uncertainty or change in their lives, nostalgia could serve as an adaptive mechanism (Davis, 1979). This probably is the most important reason for this nostalgia trend.

Clearly, the planned economy system was not an ideal condition for living. It only satisfied the basic needs of people and kept everyone equally poor. If we see this from another perspective, however, people’s lives were relatively more stable and less stressful. Hence, people would be inclined to experience nostalgic feeling when they confront present pressures. This is very common for young generation living in big cities. Although they

never experienced working and supporting their families under the planned economy, the information they obtained from elder people or their simple childhood experiences are very likely to make them feel like nostalgia.

### 3.2.2 Planned Economy Experience & Collective Memory

In planned economy time, the restricted consumer choice actually easily made many of the small number of traditional restricted products, brands and designs (or styles if we cannot call them designs) classic and extremely well-known nationwide, even without any advertising. Besides, under such living conditions, people formed some particular but common behaviours patterns (e.g. DIY) to fulfil family needs. For instance, the sewing machine was a must for every Chinese family; parents often made toys for their children. Today, all these old brands, styles and behaviours have been uncommon for many years, but a large proportion of the population still remembers them.

## 4. Design-related Nostalgia in Former Planned Economy Countries

### 4.1 In Post-socialist Countries

“An emotion that emerges again and again in accounts of the post-socialist world is nostalgia. In many countries large parts of the population are prone to claim, with obvious feeling, that this or that aspect of life was better before the collapse of the communist regimes.” (Heady & Miller, 2006) Since post-socialist countries have large emerging markets, this nostalgia trend has attracted the attention of researchers not only from psychology and sociology, but also from business. Related studies suggested that nostalgia-evoking products and designs have become popular throughout the former Eastern Bloc, such as Russia (e.g. G lavproduct), Germany (e.g. Ampelmann) and Hungary (e.g. Tisza).

#### Ampelmann

In former East Germany, the feelings of nostalgia for life in the GDR are so pervasive that German even formed a word, “Ostalgie” (“Ost”, meaning East and “Nostalgie”, meaning nostalgia), to describe it. “Ampelmann” (Figure 1) is one of many successful design and branding cases in the nostalgia trend (Kopf & Wolf, 2007). The Ampelmann figures the walking and stopping symbols on the GDR’s pedestrian traffic light, also used by the schools to teach children about traffic rules during socialist period. After reunification the German government replaced those Ampelmann with the West traffic light man. In 1996 industrial designer Markus Heckhausen adopted the little men. The first Ampelmann product was the red and green “Ampel Lamps”. Then he established a design studio which has been developing Ampelmann-related products. Now the Ampelmann can be found on a variety of East German products and has successfully evoked people’s nostalgic feelings and symbolized East German cultural identity.



Figure 1: Ampelmann

## 4.2 Nostalgia in Socialist Market Economy China

China, the largest socialist country, is actually also experiencing a similar nostalgia for a bygone era. However, little research has been carried out in relation to China and this topic, probably because previous research paid attention mainly to the influence of political change and China remains a socialist country. In terms of economic conditions, lifestyle and consumption, urban residents in particular, have undergone a rapid rate of change, just as Eastern Bloc countries have. Thus, we should incorporate China, the largest market in the world, into this research territory, and view these markets as “the markets of former planned economy countries”.

### Warrior (Huili/回力): A Chinese collective memory element

Warrior was the only nationally famous basketball shoes brand during the planned economy period of China. Before the 1990s, owning a pair of Warrior shoes was the dream of almost every Chinese youngster. “*It was so hard to get one pair of Warrior shoes even you had enough money. If you were wearing Warrior decades ago, you definitely would enjoy the envy from your peers.*” Many Chinese middle-aged people who I interviewed said similar thing to me. But as China’s economic transition took place and it opened the market to foreign brands, Chinese people started to earn much more money and have much more consumption choices, Warrior, an once luxury brand were no longer a top shoe brand. By 2000, Chinese consumers could seldom find Warrior in department stores or professional sports stores but could in low-end markets, and only poor people were still wearing the durable but cheap shoes. Although Warrior almost disappeared, most Chinese urban consumers born before the 1990s still remember it and have their personal stories about these shoes. Some of them experienced the feeling of being envied by peers when wearing a pair of Warrior shoes; some used to view Warrior shoes as their young dream; some wore their parents’ Warrior shoes whilst taking sports classes in elementary and junior high school; others may not have had any direct experience with Warrior, but they heard their parents’ stories about them. No one can deny that warrior is now a modern cultural icon of China, a heritage that was almost lost during the transition time.



**Figure 2:** Ye’s “The Book of Warrior” and a pair of original Warrior shoes



**Figure 3:** “Huiyi-Huili” (Memory-Warrior)

In 2006, A Finnish-Chinese graphic designer Shumeng Ye who was inspired by her parent’s story about Warrior released a photography book – “The Book of Warrior”. Ye said: “I was really fascinated when I heard about their story: these shoes were the ‘it’ item in the 70s and my parents and their generation would daydream about a pair of Warriors back then. People would spend their weekend washing their Warriors and apply paint to keep them white! This reminds me even of my early childhood in the 80s in China when a fridge or a colour TV were the most coveted things.” (Burgoyne, 2008) This action reminded Chinese people of the “old friend-like” brand again. And more recently, a group of Young Chinese designers redesigned “Warrior” shoes. A new relative brand

“Huiyi-Huili” (Memory-Warrior) was built in 2008. This project was the first case of their Chinese old brand revitalization plan – “Reborn” (Reborn 2008). Without any advertising, they just launched a blog and showed some product prototypes online; this project caused a sensational effect in China.

## **5. A Potential Affective Design Strategy for Chinese Market**

“Part of who we are today is the result of who we were in the past.” (Mugge et al., 2008: 436). In consumer research field, Holbrook and Schindler (1989) argued that people tend to form lifelong preferences for cultural products (e.g. music) during their young ages. More recently, their research has proved that nostalgic effects should not be restricted to the arts- and entertainment-related or primarily aesthetic product categories. It is likely that almost any product can be the object of consumer excitement or enthusiasm. “The imprinting-like effects of early experience on lifetime preferences should be considered even for such durable and utilitarian products as automobiles.” (Schindler & Holbrook, 2003: 296) Similarly, in terms of designing better product experience for target users, to know this group’s past, how they grew up, what objects generally influenced their past, and learn to predict how to use their memories to design a better product experience could be valuable to designers. Based on this idea and the current situation in former planned economy countries, I would like to propose a potential affective design strategy for the Chinese market but also perhaps more widely transferable.

### **5.1 Studying Target Group’s Collective Memory of Early Experience**

#### **5.1.1 Defining key Concepts**

Firstly, there are three key concepts of this strategy that need to be defined: (1) “Collective Memory”, (2) “Collective Memory Element”, and (3) “Early Experience”. In my current research context, “Collective Memory” is defined as a group of people’s proverbially shared memory of non-physical and physical objects (e.g. behaviours, styles, products and brands etc.) that those people used to act or interact with daily, but no longer commonly available nor widely circulated. Such non-physical and physical objects are termed “Collective Memory Elements”. “Early Experience” refers to the childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. I will provide an experimental design case as an example to explain this design strategy.

#### **5.1.2 An Experimental Design**

Focusing on Chinese people who were born between 1975 and 1985, I made an experimental design project as part of a pilot study for my current PhD research. The main aim of this design was to explore the possibility of utilizing collective memory elements to design product and influence people’s emotions. Thus, I was not particularly concerned with manufacturing issues. Firstly, I collected a couple of collective memory elements of the target group through interviews. Among these collective memory elements were not only sensory ones (e.g. image, sound etc.) but also some behaviour patterns. For product design, it would be more interesting to influence users’ emotional response through usage, rather than appearance, because designing functions and usages is a crucial and particular part of affective design for product, whereas little research has been done from this perspective. Therefore, I chose one behavioural element of collective memory, “drawing watch on wrist”, to be the starting point.

#### **The description of collective memory element--“Drawing watch on wrist”**

Before 1990s, products were in fairly short supply in China, and even the ordinary wristwatch still was a kind of expensive luxury for most people. However, children all hoped to have their own watches. Therefore, parents all over the China often drew watches on their children’s wrists to make them happy. Children also liked these fake watches and often competed for whose watch was the most beautiful one. Things changed very quickly. Most Chinese urban families could already afford watches for their children by the mid of 1990s, and therefore the “drawing watch on wrist” had become obsolete. This behaviour, however, was also forever embedded in the collective memory of Chinese people who were born during late 1970s to early 1980s. Making “drawing watch on wrist” the starting point, I designed a transparent sticky watch which allows users to paint their own watches on their wrists.

**Design & evaluation**

30 urban dwellers (male 23, female 7) in Beijing (n=10) and Xi’an (n=20) who were born from 1975 to 1985 participated in this evaluation. The evaluation was divided into 3 steps, and participants were asked to express their affective responses when they absorbed different factors of this product.

**Step 1**

First, I showed Figure 4 to participants and did not explain anything about this design, then asked them to comment on it. Most of them did not express particularly positive emotions to it and many showed no particular emotional response. *“It’s not bad, but nothing interesting.”*



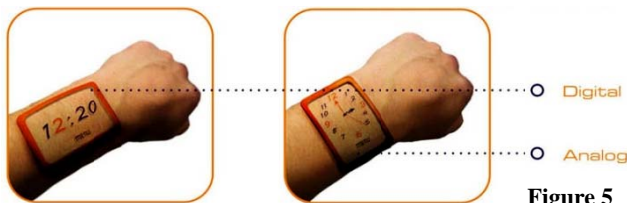
**Figure 4**

Unpleasant-Excited	Unpleasant-Average	No Emotion	Pleasant-Average	Pleasant-Excited
0	1	10	15	4

**Table 1:** Result for the first step

**Step 2**

At second step, Figure 5 was then showed and many participants changed their ideas about the design. Most of the participants showed positive emotions (e.g. pleasant surprise, inspiration, desire etc.) through their oral expression. *“It’s nice! I’ve never thought that watch could be like this.”* *“Hey, that’s much cooler than I thought when I just saw first picture!”* *“I really want to buy one, will you produce it? I hope it’s not going to be very expensive...”*



**Figure 5**

Unpleasant-Excited	Unpleasant-Average	No Emotion	Pleasant-Average	Pleasant-Excited
0	0	4	10	16

**Table 2:** Result for the second step

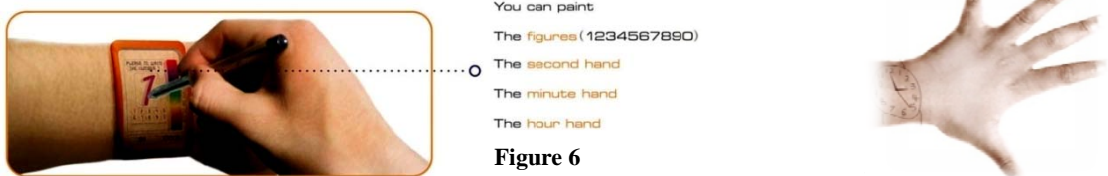
### Step 3

Finally, the collective memory element on the watch was showed and I told them that they could draw their own watches. Most of participants stated that watching this picture and anticipating using this watch recalled their happy childhood memories. Except for basic positive emotions, 25 participants reported nostalgia or nostalgia-like feeling; 14 of them recollect their own personal stories about this collective memory element. 23 participants said they used to experience “drawing watch on wrist”, when they were about 3 to 8 years old. 7 participants never did it but all of them already knew about “drawing watch on wrist”.

*“Wow! Ha-ha ... I still remember that my mom used to draw the watch for me. When my wrist with the watch, I just did not want to wash my hands, I wished I could keep it longer and my biggest wish was it could be working as a real watch. This watch really remind me some interesting stories in my childhood.”*

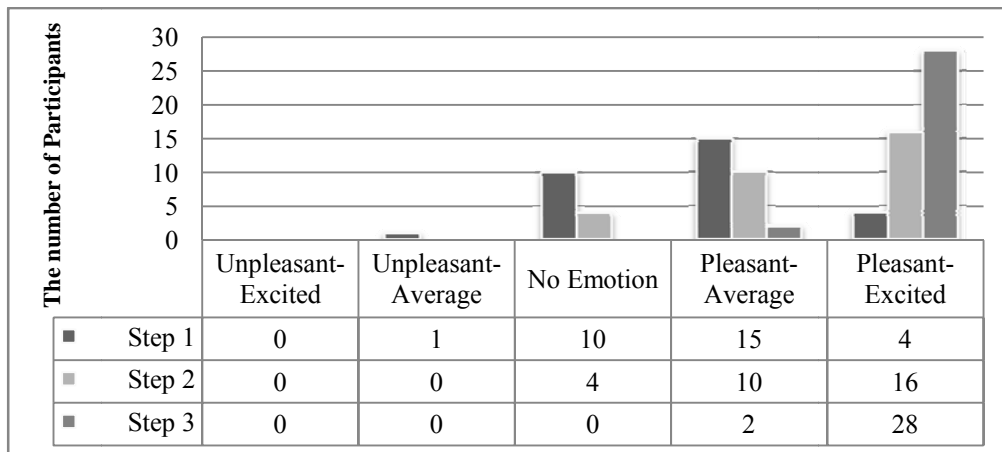
*“Great idea! I actually still remember a story about this (drawing watch). When I was about 3 or 4, I had a very good friend in kindergarten. This little boy’s father really could draw very beautiful watch on wrists. I asked his father to draw one for me, and he did. I was so happy, and showed it to all of my friends and my parents. Life at that time was so easy, even a fake watch could make me so happy, and I really miss this old friend of mine, I am going to call him later...”*

*“In fact, my parents felt it was dirty to draw something on the skin and I never had this kind of watch when I was kid, but I know a lot my friends had, so did my boy friend.”*



Unpleasant-Excited	Unpleasant-Average	No Emotion	Pleasant-Average	Pleasant-Excited
0	0	1	3	26

**Table 3:** Result for the third step



**Table 4**



## **Discussion**

First this experimental design proved that utilizing target group's collective memory of early experience to design product experience is feasible. Second, the design of nostalgia-evoking product does not have to look old. The appearance of this watch does not look old, even looks a little futuristic. However, a specific age-related segmentation of Chinese users could experience nostalgia and other positive emotions by knowing the function and usage. When it comes to nostalgia-related design, designers tend to restrict their thoughts in sensory elements (i.e. how to make things look, sound, touch, smell, and taste old). Product designers, however, could use behavioural elements to evoke users' nostalgia. Third, the product design with old factors and new features could elicit users' many positive emotions not just nostalgia and the emotions changed through time. During first seconds of realizing how to use this watch, most of participants showed pleased surprise. Minutes later, they started to express nostalgia by talking their own stories, and then showed desire, inspiration and some other positive emotions.

### **5.1.3 What's next?**

#### **Building a "Collective Memory-Emotional Response" database**

Building a "Collective Memory-Emotional Response" database for different generations in different former planned economy countries would be valuable. This database should record as many collective memory elements, and their relationships with different segmentations, emotional responses and anecdotes as possible. The major aim of this database should not be to offer any strict design rules, but to familiarize designers with the target user group effectively. Such anecdotal examples would be useful for designers to understand target users more deeply and grasp the affective clues, especially for those designers who do not share the same cultural background with the target group.

#### **Where to use this design strategy?**

As discussed previously, this strategy would be more feasible and effective for design in relation to former planned economy countries, because (1) these countries have experienced tremendous changes, which usually results in strong needs and longings of nostalgic experience; (2) in the previous planned economy period, state imposed cultural experience was likely to be more uniform across society than in non-planned economy countries, which means that people who experienced the planned economy period are likely to share more collective experiences or memories. However, this does not mean that this design strategy cannot be used for a market where people did not experience a planned economy. In the market economy system, for example, past popular culture elements formed through free consumer choice could also have similar impact and could be considered as collective memory elements. But, the number, intensity and scope of these elements might be fewer and less intensive.

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