

The Approach of Design Management in China

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Abstract: Similar to industrial design, the concepts of design management were introduced into China by educators and scholars after 2000. It is because they considered design management can fill the increasing gap between theory and practice in Chinese design education, which is caused by a limited body of knowledge of Chinese industrial design from Europe, America and Japan. However, the effect of design management also stimulates some suspicion. This study proposed a distinct approach of design management in China, influenced by the history of modern China in politics, culture and economics. Based on this, the content of Chinese design management is expressed via practice in three aspects: education, business and design.

Key words: *Design Consultancy, Design Education, Design Management, Internal Design.*

1. Introduction

The term of Design Management initially emerged in Japan and Britain in the 1950s and by the 1990s had become well established [5, 7]. In both countries, its developments were based on the management practice of design. However, after forty years, design management is still considered as a young discipline which is underdeveloped and under-researched. It needs to accumulate data and information through studies of practice, leading to theory building and the formation of a body of knowledge.

Design management was introduced into China by scholars at the end of the 1990s. As a new discipline, its current concepts in China were mainly from the west, instead of being based on Chinese local experience. On the other hand, the emergence of design management in China in practice is heavily linked to the development of industrial design in China, which in turn is tightly connected with Chinese policies, culture and economy. Based on an evolutionary view of industrial design and design management in China, this study attempts to illustrate the approaches to design management in China. It also explores the characteristics and problems of Chinese design management that constitutes its present-day reality. Finally, the direction of future studies of design management topics in China is indicated.

2. The Emergence of Design Management in China

Though it is generally admitted that content of design management in China is generally learnt from foreign countries, some Chinese researchers argued that concepts of design management already emerged in Chinese tradition around 2500 years ago [13]. Its initial concept is reflected in *Kao Gong Ji*, which is the earliest national regulation of handcraft technology in China. In it, consciously related design management was expressed in six aspects: to determine product design strategy, a company should rationally evaluate its resources and

opportunities, and develop an understanding of markets and consumers; co-operations among different traditional crafts are emphasized. With it, product efficiency can be improved to match the demand for mass production; the detailed design process and its management should be recorded; there are four factors for controlling quality of product: material, technique, localization and timeliness; criteria for evaluating designs and products are proposed; a way of planning schedule of projects is introduced.

However, it is difficult to assess how far these recommendations were adopted and the extent to which they had continuity in Chinese economic activity. Modern design management was not introduced into China until the end of the 1990s. It was in 2000 that, after some design management seminars held in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou, design management was gradually referred into the Chinese design field [15]. Books including design management in their titles have emerged since 2003. Nevertheless, these books are similar in their content, resources, objectives and author's background. With little space specifically relating to China, their contents are dominated by information from Western countries. All the books are edited, instead of 'written.' In this instance, some of them have been criticized for their low quality.

3. The Practice of Design Management in China

In practice, design management related topics cover a broad scope, ranging from commercial and industrial firms to design consultancies and universities. In these bodies, design management varies in its performance and content with different evolutionary paths.

3.1 Design management education

Design management education emerged at the end of the 1990s in China, being first introduced by some professors in leading design schools, such as Hunan University, Tsinghua University and Shanghai Jiaotong University. In 1999, senior undergraduate students in the Academy of Arts and Design, Tsinghua University, began to study *Design Strategy*. At the same year, the first postgraduate students of *Design Strategy and Management* were accepted. Later, design management and its related subjects were taught in Hunan University and Shanghai Jiaotong University. In 2001, China Central Academy of Fine Arts and the University of New South Wales co-operated in an international short-term class of design management. In the next year, an international conference of design management was hosted by Tsinghua University in China [4]. In the following years, numbers of universities began to establish design management subjects for undergraduate and postgraduate curriculums.

Most of these initiatives in China have been based on education in Industrial Design or Design & Arts. It is either a subject of industrial design, or a branch of research initiatives. Although design education has developed for thirty years in China, a gap between theory and practice still is a main problem. In this instance, design management was introduced by educative world as an effective way to fill the gap.

3.2 Design consultancies

The earliest Chinese design firms emerged in Pearl River Delta (PRD) in the 1980s. In most cases, they were staffed by people drawn from design sections of manufacturers during the restructuring of organizations. These

design teams were normally independent economic entities and offered design services for related enterprises. They filled the gap between the demands for professional design services and the shortage of designers. The success of these early design practices encouraged the establishment of other design firms in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) and Yangtze River Delta (YRD). At the same time, another type of design firm, design house, emerged in Beijing [17].

According to their different forms and contents, six types of design firms can be identified. They range from internal design, designer firms, cooperative design companies, independent design firms, government-supported design firms to design studios in colleges [2, 3, 6, 8, 17]. Furthermore, the characteristics of these Chinese design firms can be seen to include an open attitude, a large number of graduated designers, high-level computer skill, and traditional master-apprentice relationship [10].

3.3 Internal design

Although Chinese manufacturers began to establish their own design sections from the 1950s, the work content of these sections was usually limited to the decoration of product or engineering design [9]. Artists employed by these manufacturers were known as *Mei Gong* or “art workers” [14]. The real modern internal design departments largely emerged in the 1990s, especially in transportation companies. To achieve high quality design, these companies established their own design sections as industrial design centers to attract talented designers and experts [2]. However, the original work of these design sections was heavily focused on designing products for Chinese market with either cheaper versions of Western designs or slightly modified versions of local products [16].

At this time, foreign companies that had invested in or established their subsidiaries of design in China, began to play essential roles in promoting design in Chinese companies. These design offices are normally established via foreign direct investment (FDI) from famous brands. They focus on designing products tailored for Chinese consumers to occupy this largest growing consumer market in the world [1,11,16].

With increasing pressure from these international brands and desire for expanding global markets, Chinese companies gradually changed their attitudes toward design and managed to enhance their design capacity by various means, such as focusing on design research, collaborating with foreign design consultancies and establishing overseas design offices [1,12,16,18].

4. The Approach of Chinese Design Management

The approach of Chinese design management is formulated from above three aspects: the fields of education, business and design (Figure 1).

In China, industrial design was first introduced in the academic field. It was teachers in colleges and universities who introduced modern industrial design after they returned from overseas study in the early 1980s. Later, they managed to promote industrial design through their design practice in design studios or design firms. At the same time, design education also supplied the designers who were beginning to be demanded by enterprises for

developing their internal design ability. These early endeavors by educators built the foundations not only of industrial design education, also of design management education. In fact, design management education in China has largely evolved in the context of industrial design education and is considered as a supplementary subject in most cases. However, problems in industrial design education also influence design management education. Current design management education in China is also based upon Western theories, which have been introduced by scholars who had studied overseas. As a result, a gap has emerged between design practice and management of firms or design consultancies.

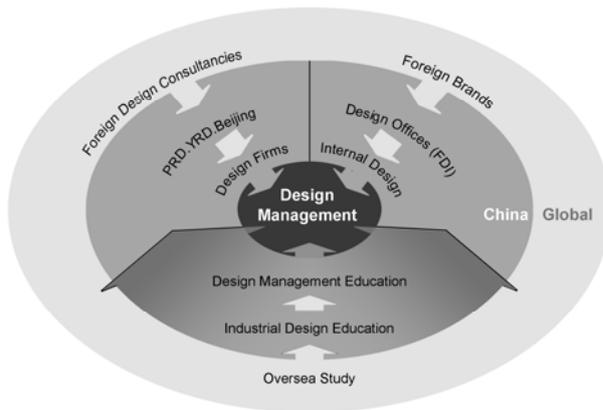


Figure 1. The approach of Chinese design management

With the open-door policy, China became one of the largest consumer markets in the world. It not only attracts foreign companies to invest, but also foreign design consultancies. The establishment of design studios by foreign brands is a main motive power for employing design in Chinese companies. Confronting intense competition in both local and global market, Chinese companies began to realize the value of design from their international competitors. Some leading Chinese companies have benefited from their investment in internal design and have become successful examples [9]. Their structures of design organizations, relations of design and business, and ways of enhancing competitiveness via design have built the content of design management in China.

Foreign design consultancies and FDI contribute to the development of design in China in two aspects. First, the spill-over of knowledge and technology from foreign design consultancies has improved the quality of Chinese designers. Chinese design firms have also benefited from it. Second, in the PRD, the earliest Chinese design firms emerged because of its location as a hinge of export to Hong Kong and international markets. In the YRD and Beijing, the emergence of design firms is directly influenced by increasing FDI, which offers more opportunities of international design business.

Concerning the development of the Chinese approach to design management (figure 1), three main characteristics have been identified. First, the development consists of three aspects: Chinese education, business and design. Secondly, foreign theories and practice play an important role in influencing the Chinese approach of design management. Thirdly, design management education has been a foundation for development in design consultancies and enterprises.

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