

HOME

DESIGN



Wall lamp/fly swatter by Taiwanese designer Hsiang Wang, who struggled to find contacts and exhibition opportunities in Britain after completing his master's degree. Photos: SCMP Pictures

BRIDGING THE EAST-WEST DESIGN DIVIDE - IN LONDON

Chinese designers face stiff competition in Britain, but offer hope for development despite trouble shaking off the Made-in-China tag

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In a trendy industrial space bordering a West London canal, an eclectic series of objects sit on podiums, amid coffee drinkers and creative types at work. Among them are a ceramic chihuahua in a neckerchief, labelled by its creator, Zhou Lu, as a home accessory; a delicate, extraterrestrial-looking table poised as if for lift-off; a panel of architectural designs for a Buddhist temple in the heart of London; and a stool in mint-green metal tided, fantastically, the Silent Farter.

These are just a few recent offerings from London's Chinese diaspora designers, and they signal a growing creative confidence amid a challenging landscape.

"The Made-in-China tag has brought some difficulty to Chinese designers trying to work in the UK or around Europe," says designer Elva White, who curated the exhibition, "Cheers", for the UK China Art and Design Association's (UCADA) festival, which ran during September's yearly London Design Festival.

"There are some issues that particularly affect Chinese designers here, and this was a way for them to talk about them, and also get some needed attention for their work."

The association developed out of an informal group started by White and other graduates, mostly from London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, and last year it secured the backing of the Chinese embassy and the British Council.

China's reputation as a manufact-

uring hub, combined with the negative publicity about its quality control and the youth of its design scene, can weigh heavily on Chinese designers looking to make it big overseas.

Many move to Britain for a more cosmopolitan education and a stronger cultural design heritage, and hope to stay on and develop their career afterwards. But recognition is hard to come by, and they face stiff competition from their better-placed European counterparts. China is not yet widely known for design talent, despite efforts by the government to reposition the country through events, trade agreements, and by promoting the cultural and creative fields as new industry pillars.

Staffan Tollgard runs a high-end interior-design studio in London's Notting Hill and credits Asian design as a strong influence in his work, but he believes that the manufacturing stereotype has done damage.

This year he co-established a company, Kurate, to promote and import products by Chinese-based designers, but he expects that, despite the success of the studios he's working with, which include Neri & Hu, MWV and HC28, he has a task ahead in educating the British consumer. "We're basically saying that there are some really interesting things coming out of China at the moment, so please, rethink your idea that it's just a copying nation," he says. "The closeness of the designers with manufacturers there, for example, means that prototypes are quicker to make and modify. We're really seeing capabilities being pushed."

In this sense, initiatives such as UCADA's that challenge conceptions of modern Chinese art and design are coming at the right time. Last year David Jia, who founded one of China's most successful industrial manufacturing firms, LKK Design, opened a branch in London - his first outside China - and he sees the obstacles as unavoidable.

"It's going to be a hard road: we have to change the European mentality about China's ability to do good design, and there are always problems of cultural understanding, and of detailed communication between designer and customer," he says. "But they can be overcome. And it's our responsibility as a leader in this field in China to try to open this path."

Through working with diaspora designers, UCADA organisers have come across other issues that need addressing. "Many young Chinese designers who arrive in London to study are less likely to have or build a



(Clockwise from above) Hsiang Wang and his dustpan and broom; Zhou Lu's chihuahua; Alice Wang's Silent Farter and Constant Shaker; Guangyuan Li's Reading Chair.

good network, or self-promote in the way that others do, partly because of language difficulties and a lack of confidence," says Lucy Shum, who directs the UCADA festival.

Some of the exhibitors agree. Taiwanese designer Hsiang Wang says that he struggled to find contacts and exhibition opportunities in Britain after completing his master's degree. Shanghai-based Zhili Liu, designer of the delicate Shrub table, describes

overseas exhibitions to join. Funding is a problem, however. Architect Guangyuan Li and his design partner Mohamed el-Khayat took their Reading Chair to the last Milan Furniture Fair and were pleased with the interest and the opportunities that followed. Yet the chair alone cost them £2,000 (HK\$25,000) to transport; they found they were unable to afford the Beijing event, even though the chair would have made a splash in a relatively commercial programme.

The British experience can be quite different for Chinese architects. Na Li works for Foster + Partners and exhibited her design for a Buddhist temple at Cheers. Ten years in Britain have given her a comfortable grasp of British sensibilities, and she believes that her background adds value to her résumé. "In a bigger company, as someone who can speak Mandarin and understand the cultural landscape, you can help it make a lot of connections in China," she says.

"And although I benefited from the more open methodologies here in terms of exploring my work, I feel that I'm still able, like a Spanish, French or any other nationality architect, to bring a fresh perspective."

The position of this diaspora community between East and West holds promise. Alice Wang, designer of the noise-amplifying Silent Farter chair, designed to prevent guests hiding behind anonymity, and the Constant Shaker chair, which calculates calories burned by a fidgeter, opened her Taiwanese-based studio following eight years in London. She says cross-cultural designers can fill the gap between experimental design and the products making it to the shelves.

"Being trained for a few years in Asia focuses you on how to keep the price minimal. In Europe they often care more about the concept, the humour or the theory behind a design, but can struggle to bring these ideas into manufacturing. Merging the two could only be positive."

Boosting such opportunities and firming up the connection between the two regions could help China's design credentials develop.

As more internationally trained designers and architects are returning to China to become industry leaders, they bring with them the aspirations of older design cultures in which design is infused into every environment - each bin and bus stop - rather than something found in galleries and appreciated only in creative circles. In this way, "Designed in China" may some day take on some broad-based resonance.

"At the moment I think there's a wall between China and Europe, and it's hard for us to see what we're doing on each side," says Na Li. "But we both want to. I think it's definitely time for us to try to close the gap."

STYLE
DAVID RODEN



What: Tempo stool and umbrella stand, designed by Pauline Deltour in chrome-plated steel wire
Why: The stool is stackable and the stand has a transparent polycarbonate container to collect water
How much: HK\$12,000
Where: Inside, 12/F, Horizon Plaza, 2 Lee Wing Street, Ap Lei Chau, tel: 2873 1795

What: Stool in red stainless steel, HK\$1,590; umbrella stand, HK\$2,250
Where: Alessi, 2/F, Prince's Building, 10 Chater Road, Central, tel: 2869 6377



What: Wood pendant lamp and speaker
Why: This solid-wood ceiling lamp is also an efficient and unique speaker system with 360-degree sound capability
How much: HK\$29,800
Where: PLC Galleria, 50 Morrison Hill Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2836 3839



What: Bone and resin inlay cabinet
Why: This handmade cabinet, with intricate inlay, is as beautiful to look at as it is functional
How much: HK\$12,000
Where: Inside, 12/F, Horizon Plaza, 2 Lee Wing Street, Ap Lei Chau, tel: 2873 1795



What: Hour glass
Why: Boil your eggs the old-fashioned way using this luxurious hand-carved palm wood and silver timer
How much: HK\$3,900
Where: John Hardy, Lane Crawford, IFC mall, Central, tel: 2118 3388



What: Spring indoor fountain
Why: Rearrange the polished stones in this water feature, designed by Christian von Ahn, to inspire relaxation
How much: HK\$3,790
Where: Exclusivites, 1/F, Ruttonjee Centre, 11 Duddell Street, Central, tel: 2521 8626

RENOVATIONS

Smaller is better when it comes to remodelling

Reuters in Washington

Thinking of a home renovation? Smaller might be better. Adding a sweet sunroom or luxe master suite sounds great, but don't expect to recover the costs soon.

On average, US homeowners who made home improvements this year only picked up 58 cents in home equity on their remodelling dollar, according to the Cost versus Value survey released on Thursday by Remodelling magazine. That's down sharply from the 2005 peak, when a new project immediately earned back 76 per cent of its cost in higher home prices.

Homeowners who do less costly

replacement projects do slightly better at recouping their costs than do those who spend big bucks on additions and new construction, with projects like replacement roofs and front doors earning 64 per cent of their costs back in resale value. Remodelling projects earn back 57 per cent, on average.

The average home improvement project cost US\$44,734 this year; that's down slightly from the US\$45,593 figure for last year. But resale values fell more, producing a 3 per cent decline in the cost-value ratio.

The good news for homeowners is that all of those projects continue to get more affordable, as contractors keep cutting their prices to stay busy during the ongoing housing slump.

"There is so little new construction," said Sal Alfano, Remodelling's editorial director. "When commercial and new construction drop out of the picture, that leaves remodelling." Prices for materials have remained pretty constant, he said.

Alfano thinks home remodelling might start to pick up at the end of next year, and expects much stronger growth in 2013. The most popular projects tend to be ones that are more affordable, such as replacing a garage door or replacing windows with more energy-efficient ones, he said.

Families should decide how long they want to stay in the home and whether the new project will improve their lives enough to justify the expense. For example, if it's going to cost an average of US\$83,118 to add a basic family room, and the resale value of that project is just 60.2 per cent or US\$50,004, they can expect to spend US\$33,114 that they will never recoup on that family room.

If they think they will stay for 10 years, they can decide whether or not US\$3,311 is an affordable and reasonable amount to spend every year for the pleasures of the extra space.

We have to change the European mentality about China's ability to do good design

DAVID JIA, LKK DESIGN FOUNDER

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