

JING HE



DOES REAL ALWAYS TRIUMPH?

In her research and work on creativity in copying, Jing He finds a way to express its impact on Chinese design culture and identity from her European vantage point. Exploring a culture of imitation and the quandary of “realness” in design, she finds that in China today, “Nobody connects to the present, it is like the present is not real life and real life will only come in the future.”



Tulip Pyramid - Copy and Identity, 2016
Courtesy of Roehrs & Boetsch

I first met Jing He back in 2015 when she was a student in Eindhoven, already busy working on her detail-rich, collage-like sculptural pieces. The work was phenomenal, but what I remember most about that initial encounter was a simple story she told me about her dad. It struck hard, one of those deceptively modest anecdotes that someone shares, and you never really forget. She told me that once during a trip back to Kunming, her hometown in south China, her father suggested they take a walk to look at Park 1903, a nearby development of housing, shopping centres, office space and recreation facilities. When they arrived, her dad chuckled at the development's centrepiece – a fake Arc de Triomphe with a glass facade and colourful LED lighting.

“My dad thought it was funny, but I was more confused,” Jing told me. “Why did we need this here? I had a weird feeling that I couldn't let go of. I know this happens because of how the Chinese imagine European traditions – they end up with this random mix of different styles from Baroque to Gothic. In China these have no specific origin so it all just ends up evoking a sort of Disney reality.”

Jing's childhood in Kunming was fairly typical. She spent afternoons hanging out with her friends and listening to music, although she distinctly recalls that the music was

often on counterfeit cassette tapes and CDs. “We all had fake stuff,” she says. “It was the only way to reach Western pop culture because the government controlled so much, but there were subcultures within the fakes. Sometimes a very specific fake became what everyone wanted to own. So it is not like we sat around sad that all we had was rip-offs. Not at all. We created a different focus, a unique way of wanting and owning and differentiating ourselves.”

After moving to Europe in 2009, Jing started encountering design school tutors who constantly badgered her about this upbringing, asking her to focus more on her “Chinese identity”. Initially it annoyed her, but eventually the forced confrontation with how her place of birth might be influencing her work started to matter more.

“At the Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam I didn't want to think about being Chinese,” she says. “I was much more focused on form and construction, but slowly I came to think about how generations of Chinese are growing up with these strange Disney visuals, and how their memories will be dominated by this sort of aesthetic.”

Accordingly, her vision towards objects, jewellery and sculpture started to incorporate a glance backwards to make a loop with trade, production values and copy culture

... and the germ of her very unique approach to design was formed.

And recognition came early. In 2016, after her Master's stint at Design Academy Eindhoven, she earned global praise for one of her earliest attempts to materialize her research on creativity in copying – a take on a pair of traditional Dutch tulip vases.

For this project, she invited five young Chinese designers to reflect on their country's pervasive culture of imitation by creating two layers for a tulip pyramid vase. Their work was based on a back-and-forth set of precise instructions sent digitally from Jing. Each contribution was sent over to Europe and was rife with misunderstandings and errors – typical of what happens when trying to copy anything based on a set of instructions – but Jing layered the contributions as is into a most unlikely tower. For the second vase, she herself borrowed or copied elements from iconic Dutch designers that she combined with fragments from her own work to create a sort of assimilated self-portrait.

The vases were an editorial and critical success and further catapulted Jing down this path of cultural hybridity, exploring the tension between Chinese design culture and its perspective from Europe. Almost all her work since has included some sort of incision into the quandary of “realness” in design.

In 2018, for *GEO-DESIGN: Alibaba. From Here to Your Home*, Jing collaborated with Chinese influencer Erbi Chen who broadcast her hugely popular fashion and shopping channel live from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. “This was not a performance or even a copy of reality,” says Jing. “It was very real – everyday work. I think it brought a necessary spotlight to this truth. What I was interested to explore was why Chinese people seem to constantly experience such anxiety about everything. There is a lack of inner peace and I think it is because there is too much denial. Nobody connects to the present; it is like the present is not real life and real life will only come in the future. This ends up meaning that everything thought and done is temporary.”

As Erbi Chen, dressed in colourful hats and coats reviewed snack bars live into her phone with exaggerated voices and cute whimsical gestures, 60,000 people clicked in to watch live. “It might seem like a joke, even ridiculous, but if we don’t accept and understand what is going on now, there will never be much of a future,” explains Jing.

Also in 2018 and in a deliciously ironic twist, the same Arc de Triomphe building in Kunming that so bemused Jing’s father and came to influence Jing’s design thinking, invited her to participate in the inaugural exhibition of their new art gallery, Kunming Contemporary Gallery. “I was quite surprised,” she says. “They called to say the gallery was opening on the 9th floor of the office building, and would I participate.”

Jing was unsure but opted to turn her critical position into a research project using the Arc de Triomphe as a constantly copied cultural artefact.

Her resulting sculpture, *Attachments – Arch*, explores the gap be-

tween image and context, inviting viewers to dance the divide between illusion and truth. The shape of Kunming installation resembles the famed French monument, but uses angles and corners in its form. So she presents only half an arch with the other half being completed in an adjoining mirror that ‘fills’ the absent cultural value of the building the exhibition sits in. It also reflects on the motivation and values of the real estate developers responsible for the whole project.

“I assume they dropped the arches because angles are more functional and the building is a very commercial one,” says Jing, “but without the arches, a structural archetype rife with engineering and political history loses its meaning. The impact is lost.”

Next, in 2019, Jing presented *XiangXie-Elysium* (a combination of the Chinese translation of the Champs-Élysées and paradise). It was inspired by a road in Hangzhou that was built to resemble a typical Parisian shopping street. “What I like about the street is that nobody really cares,” she says. “It looks like Paris, but everyone just uses it in the way that they need. There is no special feeling because it is Paris.”

Some of the wall sculptures show French facades peeling off supposedly fancy buildings to reveal more mundane uses. Others juxtapose this sort of mundanity with how streets in Paris are being used by the *gilets jaunes*.

The undertone of all these projects is China’s often unmentionable colonial past. “In China nobody talks about history, particularly any colonial reasoning for what exists now,” Jing says. “The focus is only ever on the commercial narrative. Kunming, for example, is linked to France via a railway from Vietnam that the French constructed in the early 20th century to access the



XiangXie-Elysium, 2019, courtesy of Roehrs & Boetsch, photo: Michael Dellefant



Attachments - Arch, 2018
Notes on Region, Contemporary Gallery Kunming, Kunming, CN
Courtesy of Roehrs & Boetsch

region's natural resources. Today all you hear about is Kunming's 'international relationship' with France, but never that that connection only exists due to colonialism. The real estate developers where I come from wanted to highlight the cosmopolitan side of a frontier city, which is really only a way to turn its colonial history into a commercial endorsement."

As is often the case with this sort of copy-architecture the intention is a play between nationalism and contempt. "It is saying we too can have the same thing," Jing says. "They want it because they perceive of famous Western architecture as a symbol that proves one's strength, and an image of cultural authority." It is important to point out here that Jing's research is not so much about the usual fake-real narrative, but rather the original - copy binary. Each project meticulously unravels the power structures that lie behind a copy. "To me it's about immersing myself in the copy mentality to explore what lies behind it, and also trying to discover a new potential for it," she explains.

Indeed, in her most recent work called *Arches of Triumph*, Jing takes this unravelling a step further to speculate on how an acknowledged relation between original and copy can extend into something uniquely different and relevant. Using Paris' Arc de Triomphe again as a motif, she takes basic geological principles and applies them.

In geology there is constant movement in Earth's outer layer along defined lines. When the movements are bigger, the shift reorders materials to create surface structures. Using this same thinking, Jing draws lines on a map between existing fake or copy Arc de Triumphe from Washington DC to Pyongyang and Kunming. "All of them are monuments to patriarchy," she says. "There is a lot of

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violence and contested history behind each and every one, even the arch in Kunming, which is a completely functional office building, but home to a lot of aggressive and violent economic activity."

Along these fictitious "fault lines", Jing imagines what might happen if the deep geological push, pull, squeeze and realignments were not just below-the-ground physical occurrences, but also above-the-ground cultural shifts with tangible results. "This thinking is a way for me to use different materials to create a visual language," says Jing.

Jing starts in Pyongyang, North Korea where the world's largest triumphal arches were built to celebrate the 70th birthday of Kim Il-sung, the former supreme leader of North Korea. "It symbolizes the two victories over the Japanese and American invaders that lead to independence and mark the establishment of their socialist system," she says.

Prior to the 2017 UN sanctions, the Mansudae Art Studio in Pyongyang exported the construction of large monuments and was an important source of revenue for North Korea. The studio is possibly the largest art factory in the world and has extended the socialist realism of the former Soviet Union into the 21st century making many projects in, for example, Algeria, Botswana, Cambodia, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Germany, Malaysia, Mozambique, Madagascar, Senegal, Syria, Togo, Zimbabwe as well as all statues of the Kim family for North Korea.

Reports suggest that Mansudae Art Studio has built as many as 3,400 statues of Kim Il-sung. "But what would happen to those statues if North Korea was ever to reform its economy like China did in the 1970s and join the global market?" asks Jing. "Often when systems

fundamentally change, statues and monuments are knocked down, eradicated from sight."

So with this scenario as a start point, Jing activates a speculative "earthquake" in North Korea. "Let's imagine that all the Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il statues in Pyongyang were dismantled and refashioned to build a new monument," Jing says. Her resulting object is a "fake" or "copy" Arc de Triomphe - a headless pair of men surrounded by security cameras.

"I will speculate that similar to China, the North Korean economy will develop very fast and the government will try to supervise the people carefully," she says. "Development will not necessarily be good for democracy, but it will give the government more power to supervise us. As is always the case, economic and technological developments give totalitarian powers better tools to control people."

Interestingly in May 2020, the Chinese government banned both "copycat" and "weird" architecture, although without ever really defining the terms - unless you're happy with the precision that buildings should be "pleasing on the eye".

"The rules remain very vague," says Jing, "but I guess this is the last Arc de Triomphe we will see in China and who knows, but imagine if France develops in a way we can't even dream of today and their monuments for some reason are removed. There might be a day when people go to North Korea or Kunming to study its arched buildings."

And maybe even to copy them. <