

Decolonizing Shanghai: Design and Material Culture in the Photographs of Hu Yang

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In considering the current state of design in Shanghai, particularly in relationship to the question of globalization, it would be easy to fall into the traditional binary East-West narrative that sets up inherent tensions between a native Chinese past and Western influences ushered in by the colonial era. Remembering the significant imprint left on Shanghai culture through the partial occupation by Western nations of France, Great Britain, and the U.S. from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, one can sympathize with the many scholars, critics, and popular commentators who have promoted such readings. After all, even the physical composition of the city, with its distinct historical Chinese and colonial districts, serves as a daily reminder of Shanghai's complex political and cultural past. The dichotomy is further accentuated by the metropolis's present role as one of China's main entry ports of business and cultural exchange with Western nations. In these early years of the twenty-first century, however, prudence should compel us to reassess whether the single East-West narrative, with its accompanying subtexts of center and margin, colonizer and colonized, remains sufficient for describing the complexity of the milieu of design and visual culture of contemporary Shanghai.

In addition to questioning our conceptual framework, we also must address the issue of source material when dealing with design in Shanghai. A natural and common approach is to undertake a survey of the design products available on the Shanghai retail market. From this, one can easily construct a narrative about the types of cutting-edge global design products available in Shanghai today. However, while this type of product survey offers information about market availability, it remains one step removed from the consumer, showing what is available for sale, but revealing only marginal information about actual acquisition and the behaviors of Shanghai consumers and their cultural predilections towards design and visual culture. Also, while this type of approach may indicate something about the values of a limited subset of the Shanghai population, it tells us little about the pervasiveness of these values, and nothing about the values of those outside of this group. What are the people of Shanghai actually bringing into their spaces? What is the spectrum of their sensibilities concerning design? In what

ways do Shanghai households embrace global culture? How do they view and construct their identity through their products and environments?

Shanghai photographer Hu Yang's recent *Shanghai Renjia* collection offers a useful medium external to the product market through which to consider some of these issues. A look at his photographs reminds us of the limitations of a simple East-West gaze. We are encouraged to look at alternative narratives that embrace a more complex notion of global culture and cultural hybridities in order to ground our understanding of contemporary Shanghai sensibilities concerning design and material culture.

Hu Yang's collection of five-hundred photographs entitled *Shanghai Renjia*, promoted under the English title "Shanghai Living," is undoubtedly the most extensive and revealing visual study of Shanghai households in recent years. This collection of portraits of people living in Shanghai, shot within the contexts of their own homes and possessions, and made from January 26, 2004 through the end of February 2005, offers a compelling glimpse into the private material lives of contemporary denizens of Shanghai. The interior spaces, furniture, household objects, architectural details, fabrics, and clothing selected by the subjects of the photographs give insight into the cultural complexity of a place like Shanghai.

Hu Yang's work finds its roots in the reportage and documentary photography traditions that emerged in China toward the latter decades of the twentieth century after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The photographers of this period were heavily influenced by the nineteenth-century European social realism and the early-twentieth-century Russian Socialist Realism that dominated state-sanctioned Chinese visual representation from the 1950s through the Cultural Revolution. Although their ideological aims might have differed from their predecessors, photographers such as Liu Xiaodi, Zhang Xinming, Lu Yuanming, Zhou Hai, Zhang Dali, and Yang Yong continued the tradition of documenting conditions affecting the peasant and working classes, including industrialization, the rise of urbanism, and the migration from rural to urban life. Even though growing from the same representational soil, Hu Yang's work, with its constructed stance of cool objectivity, differs from photographers such as Zhou Hai, who take a more overt social position as in the work of early photojournalists Riis or Hine.

Hu Yang's work shares an affinity with the portraiture work of Liu Xiaodi, Jiang Jian, and Lu Yuanming. Hu Yang makes his distinct mark, however, by bringing his exploration of portraiture fully into the architectural interior and by foregrounding the relationship between self and personal surroundings. Lu Yanming's work in the collection entitled "Shanghaianders" from 1990 to 2000 operates in a similar format. But Lu focuses more narrowly on the theme of the subculture of an old Shanghai caught in the midst of transition, while Hu Yang addresses more diverse social and cultural

concerns across a broader spectrum of classes.

As is common within the traditions of portraiture painting, the environment and the products in Hu Yang's photographs become an extension of the bodies of the subjects. In fact, although the figures provide focal points in the photographs, they are frequently overshadowed by the context because the figures are relatively small in scale, are usually off-center, and are frequently only partially visible. In many cases, only the background objects appear in discernable focus because the slow exposures of the shots reduce the moving figures to a blur as they cook, eat, type on laptops, play games, pluck musical instruments, and smoke. Possessions become transformed into surrogates for the individual corpus.

The photographs offer a great deal of information. Taken with a tripod and color film using a Contax 645 camera, a camera that offers increased sharpness due to its medium format and its vacuum system film back which holds the film perfectly perpendicular to the picture frame, the photographs capture tremendous detail. Natural realism is accentuated by the use of a narrow-angle lens with only on-site natural and ambient lighting. Accompanying each photograph are the names of the subjects, their professions, and their provincial origins or nationalities, if they are not Chinese. There also are short written statements of about 50–150 characters in which the subjects share personal comments about such topics as work, relationships, social status, hopes, regrets, and aspirations.

The sheer volume of Hu's photographs and the uniformity of his approach invite us to use his collection not only as works of art, but also as "readable" sociological documents. As Professor Lin Lu of Shanghai Normal University writes:

These images open a door. As we enter in—whether we walk into a living room, pass through a study, enter a bedroom, or directly look upon a small empty space—we can see the brilliant diversity of the people of Shanghai. We can see that uniquely Shanghainese attitude toward life.... After you *read* these photos, perhaps you will have a better understanding of Shanghai.¹

Hu Yang, himself, supports this view of his work, stating in an interview with Meng Tao, editor of *Chinese Photography*:

I wanted to capture the natural flow of the lives of the people of Shanghai. Therefore, when I was shooting, I did not approach it from the standpoint of an artist: instead, I observed with a historical or a sociological perspective. If I had photographed from the position of an artist, then I would have produced subjective photographs. What I wanted was not fine art photography. Rather, I wanted a visual documentary of the people currently living in Shanghai.²

1 Lu Lin, "Cong Jingtou Yuyen Jieshi Hu Yang de [Shanghai Renjia]" Hu Yang, *Shanghai Renjia*, translation and emphasis by E. Tai (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 2005).

2 Meng Tao, "Yingxiang Difang Zhi" in Hu Yang, *Shanghai Renjia*, translation by E. Tai (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 2005).

Figure 1
Hu Yang, "Claude Hudelot," 2004



Reconstructing an Elusive Past

It is evident from the collection that for some of the photographed subjects, history, tradition, and continuity with China's past remain important lenses through which to shape the physical world of the present. This connection to the past is expressed by the possession of objects that visually reference Chinese cultural traditions: classical paintings, calligraphy, antique or reproduction furniture, architectural artifacts, and ceramics. In instances when these references are small in scale or limited in number, the products operate as curios, small general signifiers of the past mixed in among objects from the contemporary world without any apparent hesitation. In other cases, however, the volume and visual prominence of objects of antiquity within a space increase dramatically. The density of these references to history reveals a stronger conscious expression of a real or desired cultural connection to the Chinese past. At times, these objects even seem to gather syntactically to form emphatic and ideologically charged "statements" about the past.

The most salient example of this is the portrait of Claude Hudelot, a French diplomat who has taken the Chinese name Yu Dele (Figure 1). Photographed in his parlor seated in a seventeenth-century Ming-style chair, Hudelot is surrounded by his Chinese cultural artifacts: a wooden altar table, a blue and white covered porcelain jar, an orchid and three bonsai, a pair of hexagonal ceramic planters, a number of figurines of Chairman Mao, a silkscreen of Mao and Dong Biwu, a wooden birdcage, and photographs of old architectural details. To complete the picture, Hudelot himself has chosen to be photographed bedecked in a white Chinese tunic set, complete with matching socks and Chinese shoes from a past era. Hudelot, an avowed devotee of traditional Chinese culture, pays his respects to the culture by surrounding himself with artifacts of a bygone Chinese past from the Mao era and dynastic eras, even down to the garments enveloping his body.

If Hudelot strives for fidelity to a specific ideal historical cultural antecedent, his referent remains elusive, whether for lack of knowledge, for lack of economic capital, or for the near impossibility of his task. While the chair represents a classical late-Ming to early-Qing Dynasty design, the altar table is of an entirely different genre. Its combination of dark wood, everted flanges, and tracery of bamboo lattice evinces a late-Qing southern Chinese tradition. The pictures hang over the altar table in symmetrical pattern, but the bulky horizontal mass differs from traditional compositions. Where one might normally find an ancestral portrait, hangs a silkscreen of communist leaders Mao Zedong and Dong Biwu by contemporary artist Wang Ziwei. The bonsai, nondescript common specimens found in any market differ from the traditional art form with a history dating back to the second century. One of the plants, not a miniature tree at all, is merely a common asparagus fern planted *à la bonsai*. Tucked in a shadowy space on the floor, the birdcage is, counter to expectations for a traditional Chinese scholar's abode, only a decorative piece. His outfit references yet another social genre. The scene is a *mélange* of mixed metaphors, an array of signifiers plucked and separated from their original contexts of signification, with a generic kinship to "China" and "the past" as their only common denominator. Yet, on the whole, it is not a tasteless, kitsch collection of objects. Rather, it is merely a thoughtful foreigner's limited conception of an authentic China.

We are reminded of Edward Said's discussion of exclusions which inherently accompany all Orientalist enterprises.³ In Said's case, Orientalists—limited by their fascination with classical periods and with a textual universe, partly because it was the only information available to them—excised other aspects of culture from their discussions. When these Orientalists encountered the actual contemporary cultures of the countries of their specialization, they responded with sadness at the abyss between reality and the historic "civilizations" they had studied. Hudelot and others like him are not the scholars about whom Said writes, but their personal biases are equally present. While their search is not for a single classical past embedded in a textual archive, they nevertheless retain a similar, albeit generic, search for signification in the past and its artifacts. In the process, actual histories, both from the present and the past, become muddled.

As sentimental and sincere as these contemporary Orientalists might be, their China is a constructed one existing only in an imaginary landscape, not an historical one. Their nativist passion, lacking comprehensive cultural knowledge, drives them to sample external signifiers of an elusive past with the abandon of a contemporary deejay musical artist. The past becomes aestheticized as artifacts become governed, not by intellectual content, but by a "decorator's eye" imposing an external ideal, such as a monochromatic palette scheme of beige, wood, and sepia earth

3 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). See Chapter 2, "Orientalist Structures and Restructures."

tones. Even a contemporary lithograph must then fulfill the dual requirements of “agedness” and conformity to the decorator’s brown palette.

Like Said’s *Orientalist*, Hudelot encounters the real Shanghai and responds with a passion infused with undertones of activism. As he writes in his personal statement:

The best part about living in Shanghai is being able to witness its development and change ... like the traditional culture and contemporary art of China. I also like Chinese silk, Chinese clothes, and shoes. They are very comfortable. There are too many people in the streets, too many cars. It makes me nervous and gives me pressure.⁴

Though he speaks positively about being able to witness change, his statements and his possessions belie an undercurrent of resistance. Lamenting the presence of too many people and too many cars in the street, usual signs of progress and change, he instead avers his love for traditional Chinese culture, silk, clothes, and shoes. His embrace of these symbols of a mythical traditional China becomes nothing short of a moral act, an act of resistance against a rapidly changing Shanghai. It becomes his responsibility to save the “true,” dying China. In a curious spin, ownership and consumption, extending even into the sartorial realm, become the primary weapons of revolution.

It probably is no coincidence that, in Hu Yang’s photographs, interiors with strong overt historical references are rare and are almost all limited to the interiors of foreign nationals. In fact, the majority of foreign nationals in Hu Yang’s photographs make a point of including significant visual references to the Chinese cultural past in their home furnishings. In the photos, native Shanghaiese also include Chinese antiquities among their furnishings, but there is rarely the pervasive compulsion about the past seen in the furnishings of the foreign nationals, and certainly no attempts to don period dress to match one’s furnishings. This is not to say that the foreign concern with the past does not include some creative twists, such as British fashion designer Simon Ma’s (Ma Xingwen) portrait showing the top of a seventeenth-century Ming Dynasty folding bow-back chair humorously spliced onto a base fashioned after Gerrit Rietveld’s Z-chair, designed in 1934 for the Schroeder House. Nevertheless, these examples show a propensity by the foreign nationals living in Shanghai toward a fascination with a Chinese past constituted primarily in visual form.



Figure 2
Hu Yang, “Wang Ying,” 2004

In contrast to these examples, we see Wang Ying, a Shanghaiese university professor who also has a reverence for tradition (Figure 2). However, her abode is simple: a wooden desk, a bed with a simple wooden headboard, and a plain wooden bookcase—nothing pre-twentieth century. Wang, out of focus as she plucks a zither upon her bed, is dressed in a simple buttoned shirt,

4 Claude Hudelot in Hu Yang, *Shanghai Renjia*, translation by E. Tai (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 2005), 114.

revealing very little through her personal appearance. One does not read Wang's connection to the past in her consumption habits. Instead, it shows up more subtly in her activities and interests, as revealed in some calligraphic sketches informally taped to a wall and a brush drawing of a horse taped to a closet. The archaic calligraphic styles and the brush painting patterned after the Tang Dynasty master Han Gan of the eighth century, coupled with the classical zither playing, demonstrate a traditionalist's inclinations. It is in these simple gestures that one reads Wang's persona, reinforced in her personal statement:

I want my own personal courtyard where I can plant fruit trees for all seasons. I'd invite my good friends over and under the trees we'd try the fruits, taste wine, play the ancient zither, and appreciate painting and calligraphy.⁵

Like Hudelot, Wang looks to the past, but her ideal is the classical literati scholar, who, culturally and socially well-rounded in the arts of literature, music, calligraphy, and painting, enjoys these skills in the social space of the literati coterie, as immortalized in such classical pieces as the fourth-century Wang Xizhi poetic work *Lanting Ji Xu*, "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection." Wang Ying's ideal is not demonstrated primarily by way of possessions, but in activities, interests, and a way of life. At the same time, it is not an ideal fully entrenched in the past, for strewn on Wang's bed are a book on Audrey Hepburn and a personal compact disc player, both hinting at comfortable engagement with a broader contemporary world. If Wang's values are expressed in her possessions, it is more through a general sparse simplicity, rather than through acquisition of specific objects. Even the non-scholar Shanghai natives in Hu's collection who express explicit nationalist or nativist sentiments do not manifest their ideology through possession of historic artifacts. There are no dynastic period furniture pieces, no early porcelains, and no early garments. Perhaps the contemporary Orientalists resort to such overt visual references to the past because these are more accessible; they can even be purchased.

To be sure, Hu Yang's collection also shows roles reversed in plays of "occidentalism," as seen in the portrait of Tang Zhenan, whose home is filled with reproduction European gilt-encrusted furnishings (Figure 3). Though Tang takes pride in pointing out in his personal statement that he enjoys "collecting Western artware," his possessions seem almost an unintentional parody of the past. A porcelain-enameled chandelier with pictorial medallions and bright gilt makes nodding references to the *gros-bleu* soft-ground porcelain pieces set in ormolu that emerged from the renowned French Sevres kilns starting from the mid-eighteenth century; but the curious integration and detailing of these elements in the form of a chandelier expose it as a twentieth-century product. Similarly, the clumsy fluting and proportions of a pair of Corinthian columns

5 Wang Ying in Hu Yang, *Shanghai Renjia*, translation by E. Tai (Shanghai: *Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe*, 2005), 114.

Figure 3
Hu Yang, "Tang Zhen An," 2004



and the exaggerated scale of the relief frieze sculpture on a fireplace mantel lack the subtlety of past prototypes. Other furniture, gilt frames, and porcelain pieces are similarly awkward. Like Hudelot, Tang's possessions make references to another culture, age, and time, but not with historical accuracy. Operating within a circumstance of historical ambiguity, these individuals' attempts to represent a native ideal through material artifacts prove to be elusive tasks.

These Orientalist and Occidentalist examples would appear to justify the employment of an East-West matrix. After all, even the subjects themselves explicitly frame their cultural preferences in terms of the categories of "Chinese" and "Western." However, we should take care to temper this view by acknowledging the frequency with which similar phenomena occur within the "Western" context, as found in the many households in the U.S. and Europe that exhibit similarly clumsy attempts to recreate past Western styles. Has not Pottery Barn and Martha Stewart built their empires on the eternally elusive, yet sentimentally appealing, ambiguous historical referent? Perhaps it is not simply an East-West dynamic, but equally a contemporary phenomenon brought on by the fickleness and ephemerality of cultural memory.

Furthermore, the artificiality of an essentialist approach can be seen in the example of ceramics, a product prominently featured in both the Orientalist and Occidentalist spaces. With origins dating back to the fifth millennium B.C., early ceramics in the region which was later to become China, enjoyed a fairly independent beginning. However, by the first century of our era, when the trade routes west of China became more formally established, connecting China with the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire, external influences began to exert themselves upon Chinese aesthetic sensibilities. Scholarship continues to debate the nature of those influences, including the incorporation of foreign-inspired metal designs into ceramics, but by the Tang Dynasty in the seventh to tenth centuries, the abundant explicit depiction of people with Western features in ceramics demonstrates the clear intertwinement with so-called

Western culture. Chinese porcelains entering Europe through Dutch and Portuguese traders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had an enormous influence on European ceramic forms, and on the development of European porcelain centers in places such as Vincennes, Vienna, Meissen, and Paris. Conversely, this trade also influenced Chinese manufacturing as European tastes, themselves hybrids, were communicated back to China through custom orders. This is not to even mention the many other external influences on Chinese visual form such as the exchanges ushered in by Jesuit missionaries, including Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Guiseppe Castiglioni (1688–1766), and Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–1768). Clearly, any attempt to align porcelain according to purely Chinese or purely Western taxonomies would be a problematic undertaking.

Infinite and Inextricable Hybridities

The main argument found in Hu Yang's photographs against the employment of a blanket East-West interpretation in the situation of Shanghai is the fact that overtly Orientalist or Occidental responses like that of Hudelot and Tang comprise only a minute percentage of the collection. Probably 99 percent of the subjects in the photographs demonstrate no such clear historical, nativist proclivities in their furnishings. Nor do their material artifacts seem to be explicitly divided or aligned according to the boundaries of China or the West. This runs true across the gamut, regardless of the socioeconomic class of the subjects.

Take, for example, Sun Chuanli, a Shanghainese technical secondary school teacher, whose abode could almost be in any urban center in the world (Figure 4). His living-dining room—painted chartreuse on one wall and dark carmine on the other, and furnished with a melamine laminate cubical shelf wall unit—manifests a contemporary aesthetic vocabulary common in the flat-packed retail market of young urban consumers throughout the world. Above a pair of matte aluminum metal folding stools and a table with a natural beech top is a recessed wall alcove with three glass shelves displaying framed pictures, two model motorcycles, and a collection of motorcycle helmets. A paper eagle kite is hung at the ceiling line of the room, while a Tang Dynasty tri-color reproduction horse and some miniature Han Dynasty reproduction bronzes adorn the

Figure 4
Hu Yang, "Sun Chuanli," 2004



shelves. In front of a desk with a computer tower is an upholstered green floral-patterned chair draped in red and white print cloth.

Two observations stand out. The first, as mentioned, is the transferability of this space with other urban spaces throughout the world. Sun's attempts to express his individuality even as he adopts a generic contemporary vocabulary rings familiarly as a way people throughout the world today commonly seek to carve out meaningful material existences within the circumstances of postmodernity. This picture could be anywhere. The second observation is the apparent seamless harmony between items that might be coded as Chinese or Western. Sun, who indicates that he hopes to one day own a Harley Davidson motorcycle and to promote motorcycle culture, easily displays his U.S. motorcycle paraphernalia alongside his "Chinese" decorative wares. These items combine comfortably in facile coexistence in his world without any apparent irony, angst, or conflict.

Helen Tiffin describes a circumstance in the process of hybridization of postcolonial cultures in which "a dialectical relationship is created between European ontological and epistemological models, and local drives, to create independent identities,"⁶ not unlike the struggle described in the work of Homi Bhabha. For Tiffin, it is through a process of rereading and rewriting, what she calls a "counter discourse," that the dominant hegemonic system is subverted. We may perhaps grant that Sun Chuanli's embrace of consumption products selling at the global scale could be considered participation in a dominant hegemonic system. But when we look further for the sort of counter discourse about which Tiffin speaks, we seem to be at a loss. The semantic choices in Sun's possessions may reflect vastly different etymological histories, but they seem to exist harmoniously within a new integrated language, as if it were a single discourse.

Stephen Slemon offers some mediation to Tiffin's concept of a resistant hybridity through his rejection of an automatic assumption of synonymy between postcolonial acts and resistance acts.⁷ The former acknowledge ways in which one cultural group may adopt or integrate values of another cultural group; while the latter describes radical acts of resistance against a colonizing culture. For Slemon, local culture can be something other than resistance. This model seems to be more in keeping with Sun Chuanli's reaction to his cultural situation, for his response appears much more integrative rather than resistive. Insistence on the presence of a dialogue between East and West reaffirms the colonial relationship of center and periphery by assuming that every act of local culture is necessarily obsessed with the question of identity vis-à-vis a dominant center.

The example of Lu Chen, a Shanghainese civil servant, provides further insight into this topic. All of the furniture in Lu's portrait is from the global furniture retailer IKEA: an unfinished INGO pine table, STEFAN chairs, and LEKSVIK shelf and TV bench.

6 Helen Tiffin, "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter Discourse," *Kunapipi* 9:3 (1987): 17–34.

7 Stephen Slemon, "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World," *World Literature Written in English* 30:2 (1990): 30–41.

Graphic adornment on Lu's wall is comprised of a *Forrest Gump* film poster and a poster for an experimental theater festival in Shanghai. His decorative items include a statue of the Venus de Milo with her breasts bound with twine and a Russian nesting doll. Visible titles on his shelves include a *History of the People's Republic of China*, a Bible, and Asian rock music magazines.

There are two ways one could read this scene. On the one hand, one could interpret this as an example of the pervasiveness of Western commercial culture asserting its dominating will upon the passive subject, Shanghai. On the other hand, one also could interpret this as the pervasiveness of global culture simultaneously being enacted upon many stages, including Shanghai, with many agents and actors, including the people of Shanghai. It is this latter type of view that Arjun Appadurai maps out with his dissolution of traditional political and geographic boundaries, and his introduction of new global relationships in such arenas as ethnoscaping, technoscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes.⁸ Similarly, Simon Gikandi speaks of the presence in the global setting of infinite "conjuncture and disjuncture" and "hybridity and cultural transition," a "multiplicity of relationships" not seen in the world of the empire.⁹

In both Appadurai's and Gikandi's new understanding, it is upon the global stage that culture is created and undergoes evolution. Culture is not produced within a single national or geographic boundary only to be shipped out intact to a foreign subject. Instead, it constantly undergoes transformation in a fully participatory process by all players at the global scale. Such a view renders the center-margin, colonizer-colonized framework practically obsolete as globalization becomes the lens, not Westernization or Americanization.

Reading in this light, we would not see Lu Chen's Shanghai as existing in a marginalized cultural hinterland, where it passively

Figure 5
Hu Yang, "Li You," 2004



8 See Arjun Appadurai, *Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001) and *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

9 Simon Gikandi, "Globalism and the Claims of Postcoloniality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100:3 (2001): 627–58.

receives the intellectual and material products of a dominant center. Instead, we would see Lu Chen's Shanghai as a locus of world culture as well, a territory that lends its space to the global arena of experimental theatre and popular cinema, and a territory that participates in the mass global market even as it interjects its own history, its own rock music, its own manipulations of iconic art figures, and its own understanding of faith into the global mix.

One may, perhaps, accept a global reading of the material possessions of people such as Sun Chuanli, Lu Chen, and Li You, whose contemporary furniture, sleek freestanding tub with lip-shaped headrest, and projection screen video system could easily fit into the spaces of people of similar social status in Paris, London, New York, or Milan (Figure 5). However, could the global lens extend to those of lesser socio-economic status in Shanghai? Are they not the disenfranchised, disconnected native *other*, with all the attendant connotations associated with such a status? Wei Yufang's portrait provides some clues (Figure 6).

Wei, his wife, and their four children, shown occupying their one room abode, are larger in scale than practically any of the subjects in other photos due to the close camera angle needed to capture the tiny room. Surrounding a bunk bed occupying about one-third of the room, the ceiling, walls, and front bedrail are papered with advertisements with both Chinese and non-Chinese figures, including Ronald McDonald and Hamburglar advertising characters for McDonald's. A small desk and table serve as a cooking and dining area, atop which sit a rice cooker, aluminum pot, and two plastic thermoses. On the wall, two adapted two-liter soda containers serve as a toothbrush holder and a spoon caddy. Above, on the wall, are three paper certificates of awards two of the children have won. Lighting from an overhead source and from a dangling naked bulb illuminates telephone numbers written across the walls.

Due to the Wei family's poverty, there are probably less than one or two hundred items the children will encounter on a

Figure 6
Hu Yang, "Wei Yufang" 2004



daily basis at home for the duration of their childhood. Of these items, aside from perhaps a rice cooker, some porcelain spoons, and chopsticks, almost none are categorically “Chinese” in nature. And even items such as chopsticks that seem Chinese have permeated the global sphere and are quickly becoming elements of world culture. True, the specific details of objects including the plastic thermoses differ from that of other places, but the basic colorful plastic forms share obvious kinship with thermoses elsewhere. Although this family lives at the lowest rungs of economic status in Shanghai, their bland standard issue twentieth-century products do not differ at a fundamental formal level from items outside of China. While it may contain no identifiable uniquely Chinese visual vocabulary, this scene definitively is Chinese, for these are the very material artifacts this family touches, sees, and encounters everyday within their lives in Shanghai. Even in this poor Shanghai household, McDonald’s graphics are a casual everyday sight; a father’s T-shirt sports a graphic of the U.S. flag; and the wall and the ceiling meets with the same stock carved-wooden cornice trim one might find elsewhere in the world. Notable is the banality and utter disregard for the orientation and positioning of the McDonald’s graphics. They are not accorded any special siting or articulation as a revered “foreign” icon. Just as in generations past, these transcultural images and products will leave their imprint on these children’s memories, not as a foreign visual experience, but as their own. If there is a gap between the artifacts in this photograph and artifacts in the West, it derives mainly from differences in economic status between the two places, not differences in East-West visual and material vocabularies.

This example falls short of the sophisticated global culture Appadurai envisions, but it represents a cross-cultural hybridization that goes beyond a unidirectional colonizer-colonized relationship. James Clifford acknowledges such a complex hybridity when he sees indigenous culture constantly operating in a mode of articulation that uses and rapidly alters the dominating cultural epistemology. Authenticity becomes moot because the search for a trans-historical authenticity is not available; for even before the colonial moment, culture was always a system of articulations and nods reflecting a broad range of influences.¹⁰ Generations of Shanghainese have lived with just such a hybridity in which images of inextractable origin have been internalized and incorporated into their visual and cultural vocabulary. These are the forms that evoke childhood, past, home, and sentimentality for the Shanghainese. To try to go back and extract and categorize these visual mixtures into essential categories would be an artificial, not to mention impossible, task because the general, the ecumenical, and the global have become transformed into the local. While nativism seeks a nonexistent wholeness and cultural purity, the acknowledgement of an infinitely intertwined hybridity sees the cultural machine as one that is always messy, ambiguous, nuanced, and compromised.

10 James Clifford, “Indigenous Articulations,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 3:2 (Fall 2001): 468.

Towards Integrated Global Narratives

Polarized, essentialist models of interpretation present severe limitations, because the expedient distillation of the diverse qualities of a place into the problematic categories of “East” and “West” requires extreme acts of exclusion and revision. At best, such characterizations overlook the complexity and variability of place and of responses to the dynamics of the colonial and postcolonial situation. At worst, they disguise and perpetuate dominant narratives by reinforcing hegemonic matrixes of center and margin.

The application of a model of globalization, or at least a complex inextricable hybridity, to the situation of Shanghai allows one to escape the problems engendered by a binary model. It permits distance from a narrative that locates Shanghai in a reified stagnant past with no place to go but backwards, even as the West is allowed to dominate the territory of modernity and remain an ever-evolving signifier of cultural progress. It allows one to avoid being cornered into the exaggerated aesthetics of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Europe or China in the vain search for representations of an unadulterated essential culture. And it frees Shanghai from having to be subjected each generation to a new audit of cultural influences according to a specious, schizophrenic spreadsheet categorized in terms of self and other. Indeed, the design and material culture documented in Hu Yang’s visual images compels us to jettison any simple binarisms of *East* and *West*, *Occident* and *Orient* and bids us to take on alternative narratives such as hybridity and globalism to describe the multivalences and complexities of Shanghai in the early twenty-first century.

Only within this framework can we begin to understand the state of Shanghai design and material culture, for Shanghai design can no longer be extracted into simplistic categories. It must be understood and embraced as a complex amalgam of infinite origins and influences.