

# Embracing Traditional Chinese Culture Through Design

Jiaxuan Li

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Designing objects arousing the resonance to traditional cultural values with modern Chinese and inspire them to carry out those values in details of everyday life.

**Jiaxuan Li**

# Embracing Traditional Culture Values Through Design

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Industrial Design in Industrial Design in the Department of Industrial Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by Jaixuan Li 2017

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

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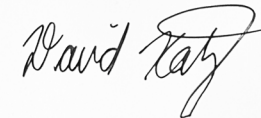
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For my family, teachers and classmates



## Abstract

As a designer from China I am constantly focused on my passion for design of China, This interest comes from both my commitment to deep-rooted Chinese traditions, and my concern with regards to the gradual loss of traditional cultural values within contemporary society.

As a product designer, I really like designing daily object, through exploring the relationship between consciousness and behavior. I consider this connection in order to make objects more meaningful to users.

This project discusses the current situations of Chinese traditions and cultural values, and the challenges they face to survive in the contemporary world. My mission is to arouse the resonance to traditional cultural values with modern Chinese and inspire them to carry out those values in details of everyday life.

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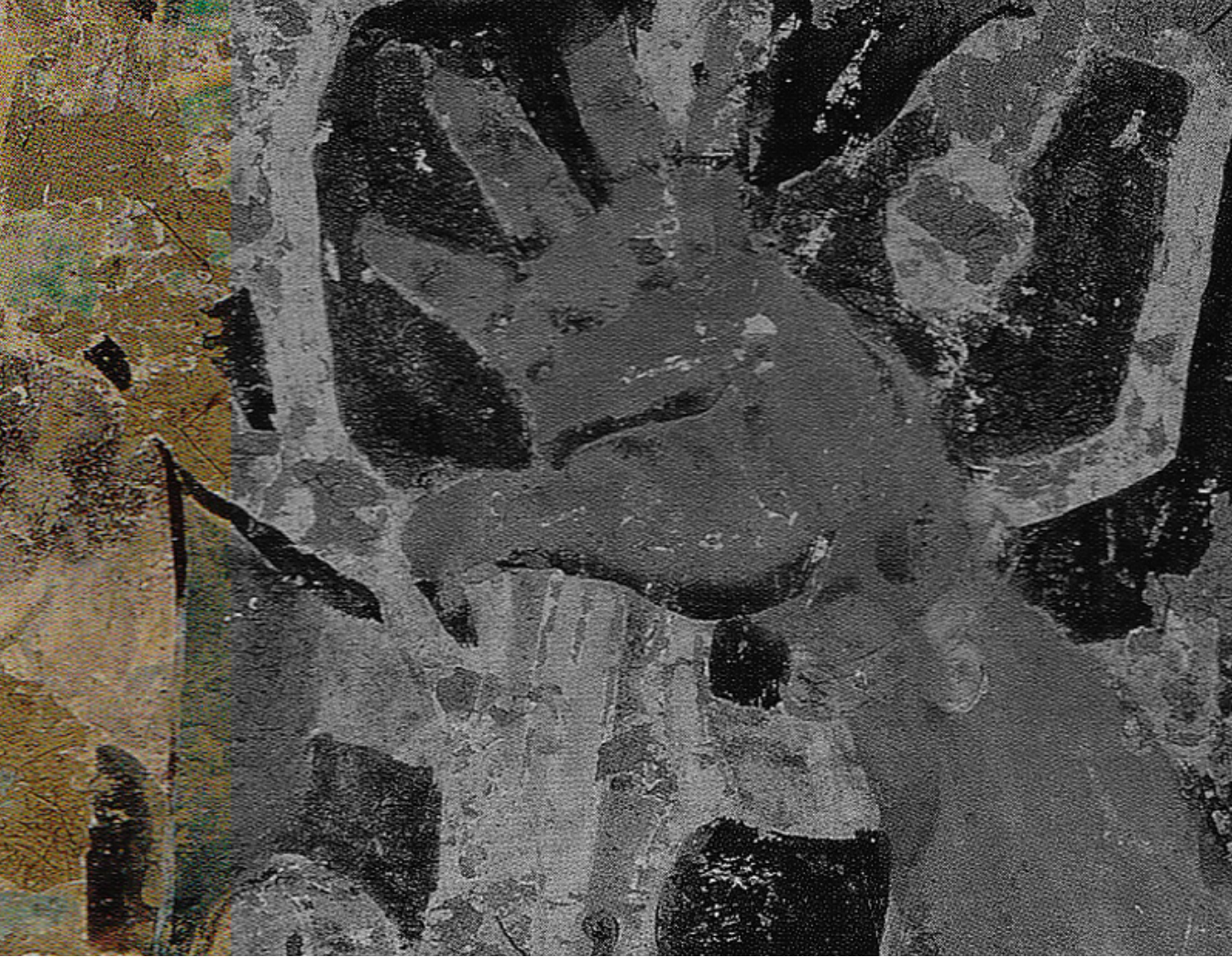
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## Chapter 1 Introduction

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Something is happening in the contemporary world.



This kind of design must be from Japan and that definitely comes from America. Why are we always able to distinguish the origins of a designed object at the first sight? We way in which we judge what we are looking at relates to the distinctive cultural qualities of a country. What is the design style of China? Embracing Chinese culture within my own design process will be helpful in order to develop this unique design character.

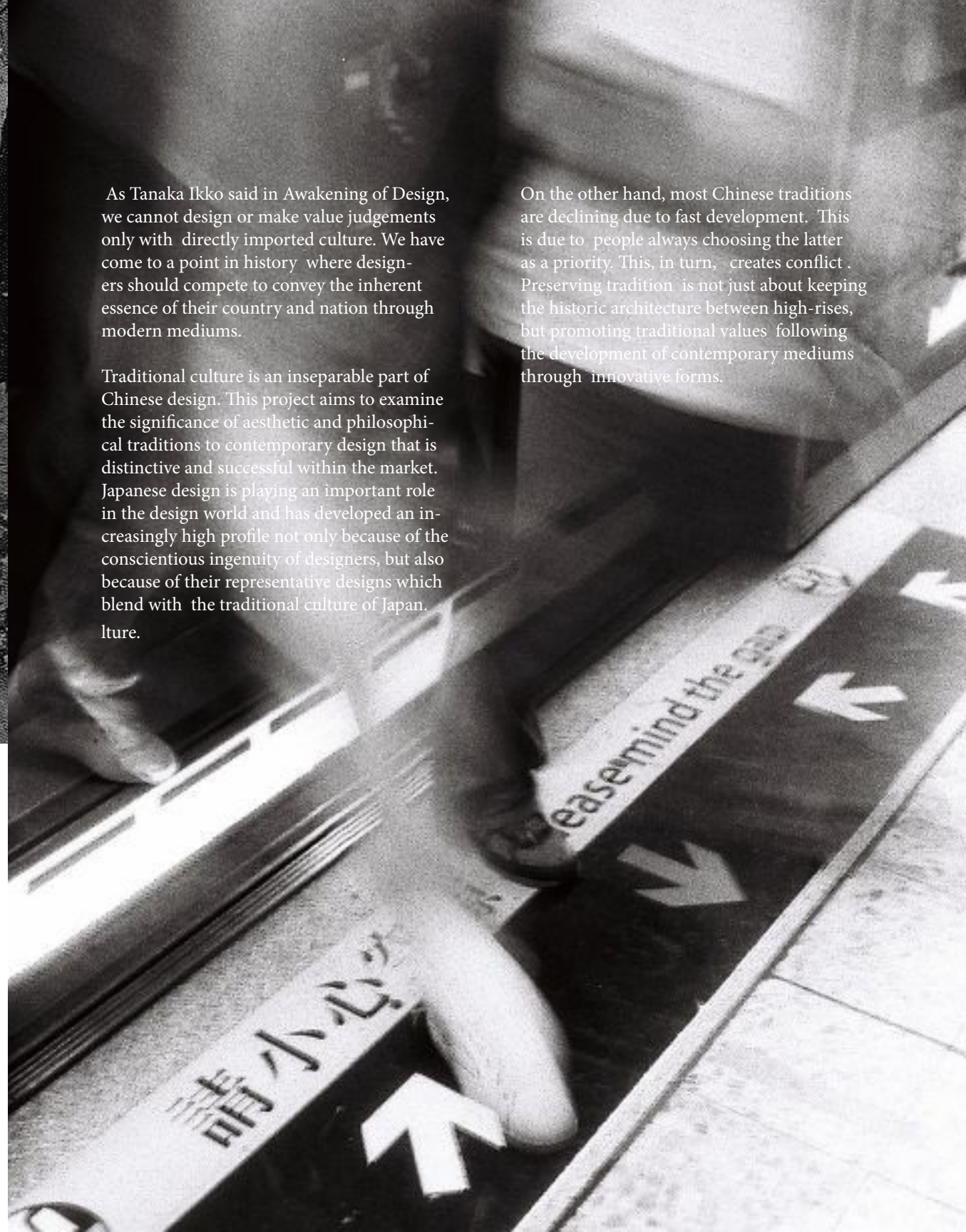
I have a personal relationship with Shanghai, having lived there for several years. I found the city is to be an encapsulation of China. With the rapid growth of technology and industry, traditional cultures, such as handcrafts, art and customs are disappearing gradually.

The main reason for the collapse of old traditions is the change in people's thinking, and the infusion of western culture and methods after China became liberated.

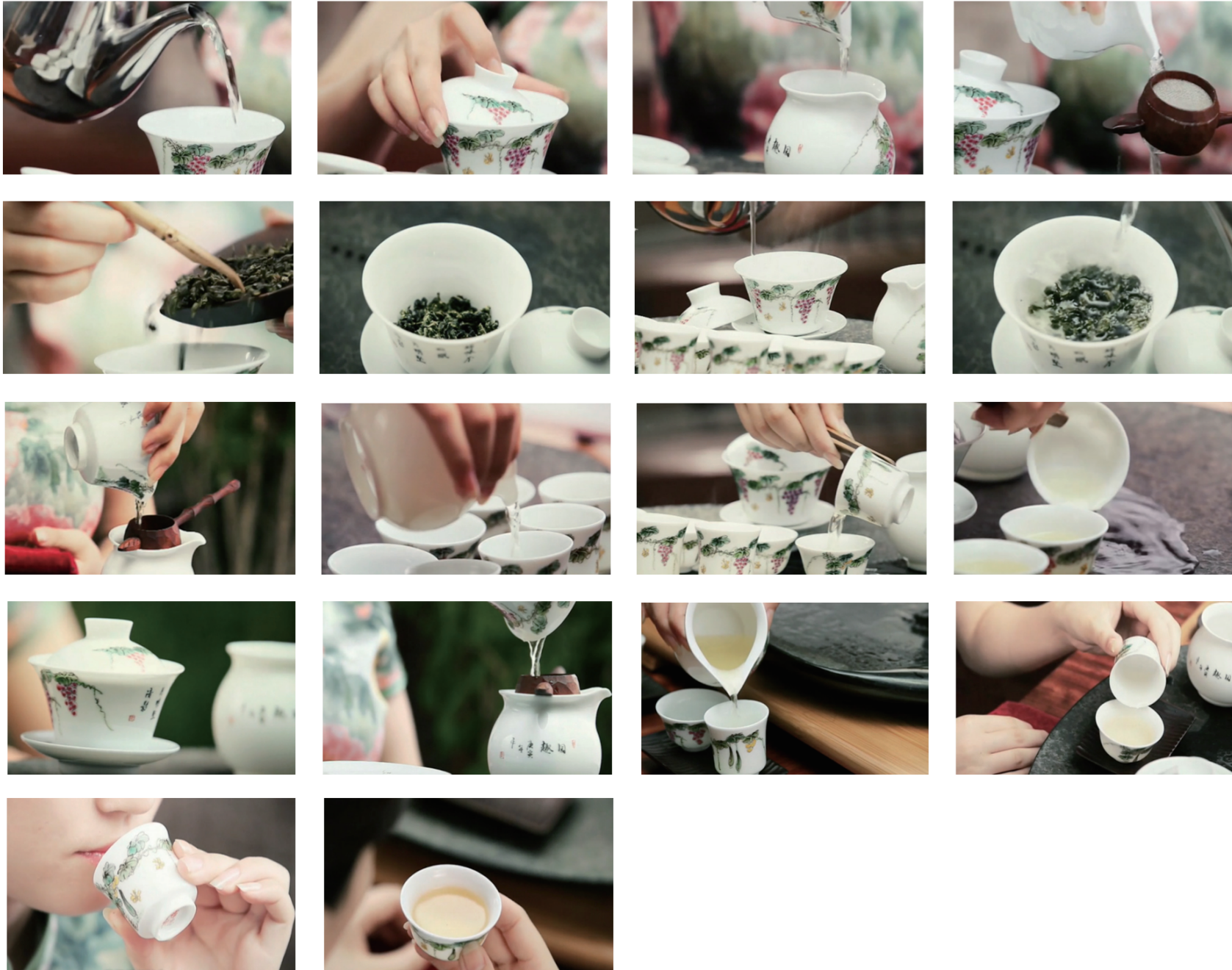
As Tanaka Ikko said in *Awakening of Design*, we cannot design or make value judgements only with directly imported culture. We have come to a point in history where designers should compete to convey the inherent essence of their country and nation through modern mediums.

Traditional culture is an inseparable part of Chinese design. This project aims to examine the significance of aesthetic and philosophical traditions to contemporary design that is distinctive and successful within the market. Japanese design is playing an important role in the design world and has developed an increasingly high profile not only because of the conscientious ingenuity of designers, but also because of their representative designs which blend with the traditional culture of Japan. Iture.

On the other hand, most Chinese traditions are declining due to fast development. This is due to people always choosing the latter as a priority. This, in turn, creates conflict. Preserving tradition is not just about keeping the historic architecture between high-rises, but promoting traditional values following the development of contemporary mediums through innovative forms.







The initial direction of this project comes from a very personal experience. My father is always making kongfu tea at home and I found it was very interesting to have tea in this traditional way. Kongfu tea is an important part of Chinese culture, which started from the Tang dynasty . I would not usually drink tea in this way, unless my father was making it.

I started my research by learning and understanding the traditional tea event as it is carried out across China. I found an expert of Chinese tea who operated a tea business in China. I asked her to show me the professional process of tea making.

### The basic steps of Chinese tea ceremony

Warm the tea ware and tools



Wash the tea



Warm the tea ware again using hot tea




Make the first round tea





Smell, taste and enjoy


Tea ceremony as a very traditional activity has become a kind of performance nowadays, even though it has functioned as a daily event through history. I asked some college students in China and also some older generations like my parents and their friends about their opinions of this tradition.




  
“ Traditions remind of tedious things but modern things mean to be easier and simpler. ”


  
“ I'd like to pursue some thing new and interesting ”


  
fast pace lifestyle made people more likely be attractive by the things simple and straight.


  
“ traditions are something abstruse and harder to understand.”

  
“I'm not having no interests in traditional things,I'm just have no time for it.”

  
“ Tradition and modernity are in conflict but tradition itself is continuous”

  
“ Understanding the spirit of traditions will be helpfui to our work and life ”

  
“ we shoule understand, choose and succeed”

  
“ If you can understand the essence,whether it's traditional or morden is less important. ”

## Traditional handcraft

### Interview no.1

Quansheng Xin has been a carpenter for almost 50 years, starting from the age of 16. He owns a small wood shop in TianJin, China. I got the chance to visit his studio last summer when I was back in China and he was so generous to share his work and career with me. He describes his concerns as this:

*“Over the past two years, I have taken 48 apprentices, teaching them all of what I know. At this moment, passing down the skills is my responsibility and what I want to do most.”*

What do you think that machines has gradually replaced manual labour?

*“Craftsmen are placed in an awkward position due to the improvement of technique. But I'll still insist on what I'm doing. No matter how fast the machine is, it's different from manual work anyway. The objects built out by hand are also built out by the heart, which are more precious as they are full of emotions created by the maker.”*



Xin is teaching his apprentice how to plane wood



Xin's on the way to his wood shop where located on a old street around by many ancient buildings. There are many craftsmen like Xin



He is also the consultant of local factories.



## Traditional customs

In the past, China has primarily been an agricultural society. One of the strongest values of that time is that people were completely family-oriented.

An old Chinese saying goes like “Food is the paramount necessity of the people”. The stability of society depends for the most part on whether there is enough food.

Therefore, farming became the most important activity of a family, which also naturally formed stronger relations between family members. Therefore many customs were created at that time to celebrate the harvest and good wishes with all of the family

However, with the emergence of the modern, industrialized and urbanized society, the pace of modern city life is becoming faster and faster.

As a consequence, the quick-fix lifestyle today is getting more and more popular, which means that people are becoming more and more independent from their families compared with the past.

Therefore, many customs of the past are gradually abandoned. Even though there are several customs that are trying to survive, through small numbers of people, the majority are increasingly losing interest in them.



## Traditional spirit

Compared with the loss of traditional handicrafts and customs, the loss of emphasis on traditional Chinese cultural values and morals is having a more serious impact on contemporary society.

Some food producers and sellers ignore their responsibility to assure safety, and turn to a variety of dangerous chemicals which often help them cut costs and increase sales, which leads to many tragic deaths of children.

Similar occurrences in other business fields are risking more people's lives, especially the wellbeing of children.

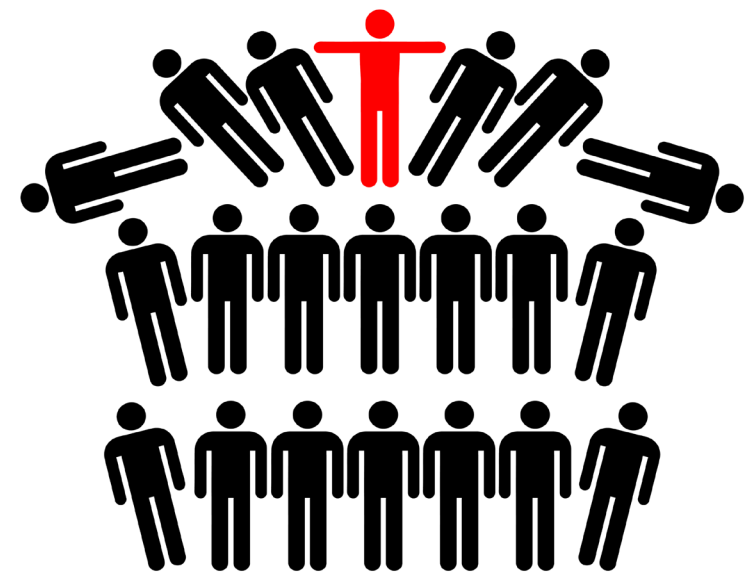
While most people blame the Chinese government for their negligence relating to regulatory practices, the root of these tragedies is that the real issue of commercial morality is not being focused upon.

Between their conscience and the personal benefits they will gain, some producers and sellers choose the latter, which has become one of the biggest dangers to society.

However, it seems to me that it is more than greed and lack of morality that is at the heart of this situation. The contempt for human life is leading such deterioration which is associated with the collapse of the traditional Chinese value system, which emphasizes a focus on people and the relations between them.

I came across another report, from the publication the People's Daily dated Jan 29th., which impressed me a lot. The story was about a young man who climbed over the wall of a wildlife park in Ningbo just for escaping the entrance fee. The consequence of this was that he died because he jumped into the tiger reserves and was killed by them before he could be rescued. At the same time, the tigers were killed by the police. I was shocked by the comments of the public below, almost half of these discussions were arguing that the man had deserved to die. I am concerned that there is no longer a sense of justice. Human life is easily disregarded. This man broke the rules and paid for this with his life. We definitely should not be partial to any immoral behavior, but we also should not discard the life of a human.

There are around by those cold and detached heart covered by the coat called justice and rational in our society. People nowadays seem to be less valued due to the moral culture. That is why so many immoral happenings are taking place in China today, such as campus violence and food safety issues. People are becoming more and more self-centered.



## Chapter 2 Making Decisions

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Abandon  
ignore  
or  
inherit?

# Current Situation

Modern Chinese society is less connected to the past than at any time in its history.

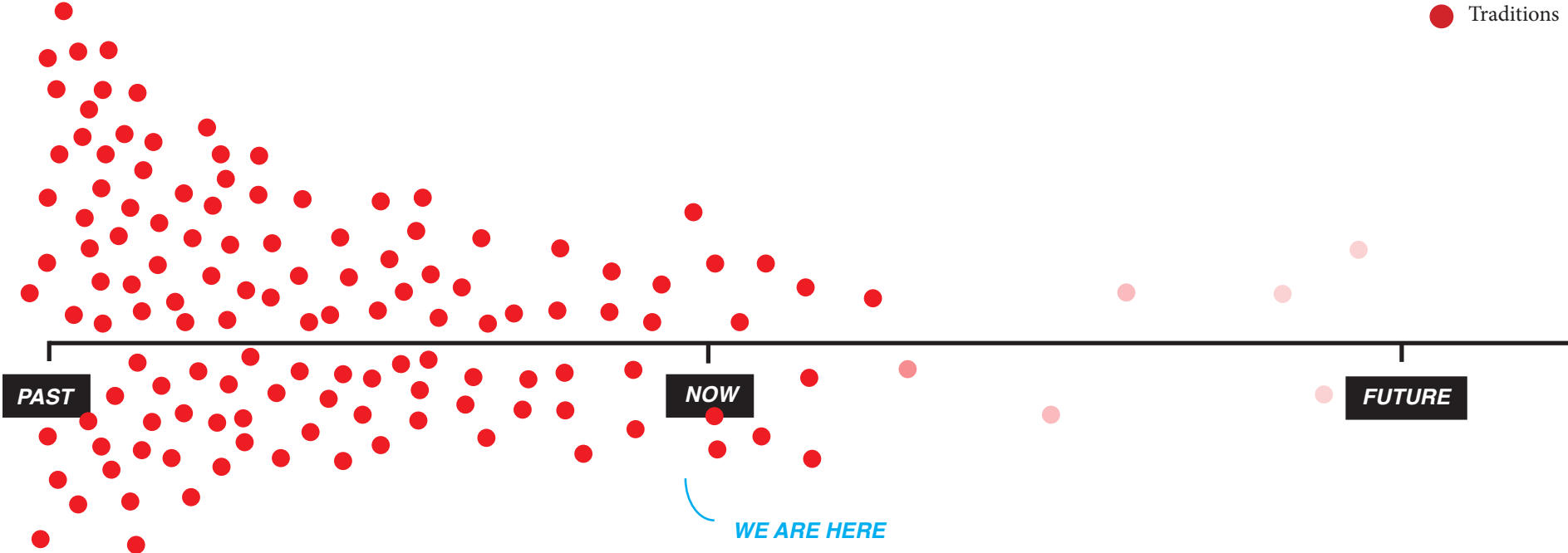
The country has experienced thousands of years of development and evolution, and countless traditions that ancestors left in place were both abandoned or continued throughout that whole time period. As a person living in the current climate, I am curious and concerned:

**What is the underlying reason for both the elimination of traditional culture from contemporary life, as well as the reason it remains relevant now?**

**When will traditions fade away? Will some of the traditions fade away from this generation?**

**Does it depend on the choices that are available to us?**

**What will happen in future generations if we make the wrong decisions?**



## Destiny of Traditions

Not all of the traditions that were valued in the past are practiced today. Many traditions died out through neglect, but some of them became abandoned because they no longer fit contemporary social norms.

Foot binding as a traditional custom within Chinese feudal society was abandoned around the end of feudal society because the idea of male superiority became obsolete. In the past, small-sized feet were regarded as the symbol of beauty, so young girls were forced to bind their feet with cloth for several years. The process was painful and harmful to the development of bones.

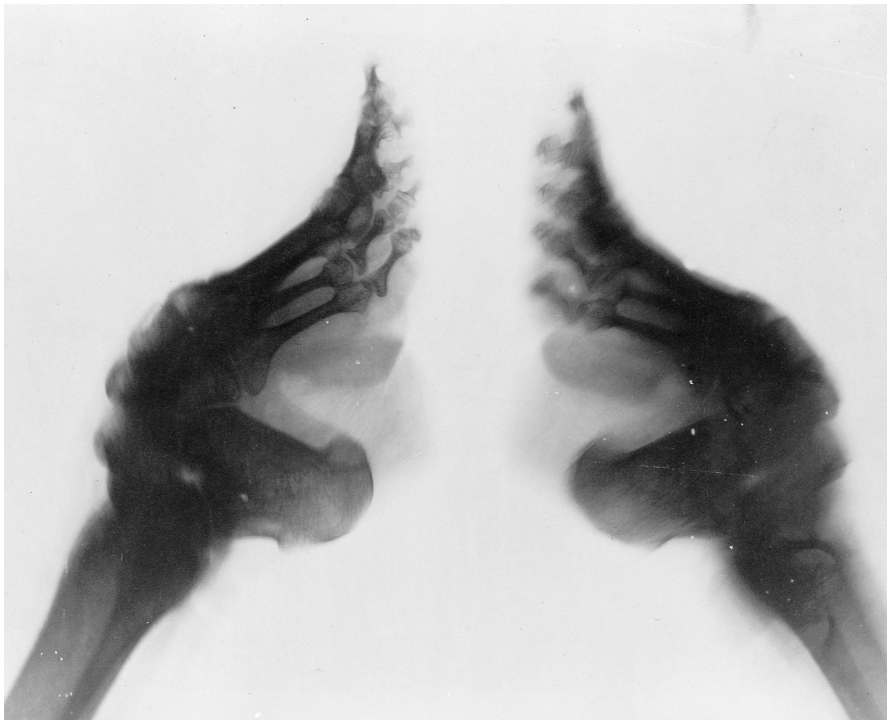
Women were in a difficult position in earlier times, girls were not allowed to be educated and they were not offered the same opportunities as men.

People started to recognize gender equality and the power of women at the end of the feudal society and those unfair traditions to women were eliminated in most areas of China. But they become precious historical references which have been documented and preserved in museums for future generations to know that part of their history and tradition.

I found that once a tradition is unable to match mainstream values and beliefs, it will be eliminated naturally.

Meanwhile, there have always been many traditions fitting present philosophies, that are relevant, but continue to face extinction. For example, 24 solar terms which are 24 seasonal division points created by ancestors thousands of years ago to guide farmers during their work, are still used in some agricultural places in China. But for many young adults nowadays, who grew up in cities, they do not have any knowledge of farming, and cannot even say the names of the 24 solar terms.

In this case, how will modern generations make decisions confront traditions?





## Interview no.2

To understand the opinions of younger Chinese people relating to how they deal with traditional values in contemporary society, I emailed a group of college students in China, who I found from Donghua University, with a number of questions. Here are some of their responses.

**Q: Do you think your generation needs to inherit traditional cultural values? If so, why?**

“I think the best way of respecting and inheriting Chinese culture is to completely clean out the feudal culture and rotten culture.”

“Select the essence and discard the parts that are gross”

“Traditional culture must be inherited, but it doesn't mean simply copying things from our ancestors. It should be developed with the aim to progress society.”

“It depends on if the tradition is still meeting the needs of the development of modern society. For example, the Chinese characters and chopsticks are bound to be inherited, while foot binding was definitely abandoned for good reason.”

“I think the loss of traditional customs, etiquettes and art is the most serious worry, but as kinds of art manifestation, they are changeable. What needs to stay constant is the spirit of culture.”

**Q: What have you done personally to inherit Chinese culture?**

“ My family is still celebrating the Chinese festivals in a traditional way. For example, having the red antithetical couplets on our door during the spring festival, and eating mooncakes at The Middle-Autumn day.”

“ I like Chinese calligraphy and I learned it when I was a little girl. At the beginning, I started to learn it just out of interest. But in the future, I'd like to introduce it to more people”

## Inheritance

Inheritance is a kind of connection, connecting the past, present and future.

If there is no one to carry out traditional crafts, such as embroidery and chinaware, or put up spring couplets to celebrate the Chinese spring festival, or eat moon cake in Mid Autumn festival and make lanterns in the lantern festival, all of these will just become artworks or documentaries kept in museums and turn into memories that will disappear eventually.

Most of the traditions are to a great extent carrying the essence of Chinese culture, which are the objectified form of abstract values.

So preserving and inheriting them is also good for the maintenance of Chinese traditional cultural values.

However, most young adults in China know the importance of inheriting traditional culture, but what they haven't realized is that they are in a position to turn this perception into practical action .

**Chapter 3 As a designer,  
my ambition is to...**

“Once upon a time, so-called ‘Chinese design’ might have meant using older, antique aesthetics in design, such as dragons or other traditional imagery. Now, what is more important is the conceptual thinking behind design: what is delicate about an object; how you are going to balance nature and the man-made environment; how you can more intellectually connect family and practice. “In China, designers need to create products with authenticity. The roots of a culture need to be embedded into an object. That’s what we connect with. We have a lot of resources in our long history, but it’s not necessarily about simply linking to the past. We need to explore these resources and find ways to make them relevant in today’s world.”

Eric Chan

Designer and entrepreneur  
Founder of ECCO Design

# The Goal

The goal of this project is to encourage those living within contemporary Chinese society to love and care about each other in the details of life, and to remind them to always be the type of person who is loving and caring.

Because I am Chinese, I really would like to design something that could be important for Chinese people; something that could change their life for the better.

As people nowadays seem to be less interested in moral culture, many immoral happenings are taking place in China today, such as campus violence and food safety issues. People are becoming more and more self-centered.

So what I really want to do with this project is to reconnect modern Chinese people with the essence of Chinese culture its spirit and values.

The cultural values of a country influence its national psychology and identity, which transpires for a long time through history, in order to be the right philosophy that Chinese people always insist on, that which is permanent, stable and continued. More generally, it is more like the guideline of life leading Chinese people to be stronger.

Most traditions that exist nowadays are those that people always do at specific times or situations, but the spirit or thoughts behind them are more significant for modern Chinese people to keep in mind.

## **Chapter 4 Experiments**

**Tea-Shirt**

**Tea Candle**

**Unstable Mirror**

**Built-up Chopstick**

**Unreasonable Pitcher**

**The curved tableware**

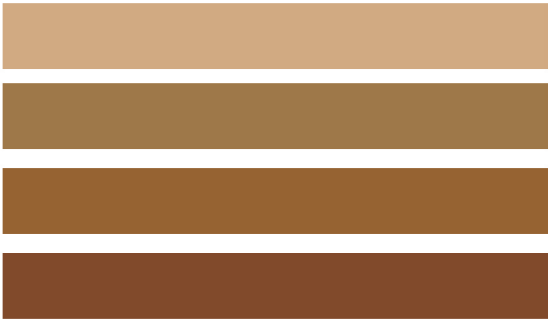
# Experiment one Tea-Shirt

I studied the traditional Chinese tea ceremony at the beginning of this project in order to try to bring the spirit behind the ceremony to modern lives.

The complicated process of this traditional activity may no longer be suited for contemporary lifestyles, but the feeling created during the process, such as peacefulness and harmony, deserve to be treasured.

In this experiment, I got some common white T-shirts and dyed them with different kinds of hot tea. The first part of this experiment is to see if the color and the smell of tea can remain on the t-shirt. The color turned out successfully but the smell unfortunately only remained after the first wash.

The color of Oolong and Longjing





The second part of the initiative is more concerned with testing the social acceptability of this tea-shirt - for example, is it an item of clothing that can be worn in public?

I asked my friends to put on the tea-shirt for one day. Two of them love tea and drink tea very often, while another is not so interested in tea.

Both of the two tea lovers were quite excited to see the tea-shirt and couldn't wait to wear them. They were impressed by the color and idea. They introduced their new tea-shirt to many people they met on that day and talked a lot about their interest in tea in general. The tea-shirt therefore became a conversation starter.

The only problem that they identified, which they requested that I examine, is how to ensure that the smell on the tea-shirt remained for much longer. They felt this was crucial because this is another really important connection to the culture of tea. After wearing the tea-shirt, cultural pride was felt more strongly. "I feel it makes me proud as a tea lover and as a Chinese" said Zizi.

## Experiment two Tea-Candle



This experiment is an extension of the tea-shirt experiment. Here, I try to use the smell of tea to arouse the peaceful and humble feeling generated by the traditional tea ceremony.

Even without the real, authentic ceremony, I wanted to consider how to create the similar atmosphere so that people can experience the same feelings. All of this made me think of the burning candle with its powerful smell. I decided to make some candles that could imitate this smell.

I spent a lot of time thinking about the way of extracting how to extract the fragrance from boiled tea. The biggest problem that I had was the incompatibility of water and wax. Because professional extraction methods were not accessible to me, I had to make some prototypes by myself to test out the idea. I collected several kinds of boiled tea leaves and mixed them with wax separately so that the color of the tea leaves is shown outside.



The smell, as expected, wasn't quite strong. Although it didn't work well, I was convinced that there must be ways to transform the smell of tea to other materials.

Both of these experiments are trying to connect modern people to the spirit of the traditional tea ceremony through two main elements: color, and smell. These elements are singled-out through their application to daily objects.

The purpose of these experiments is to learn how those objects affect people's lives behaviorally and psychologically. For the first and second experiments, I found there are mainly psychological changes. Because the spirit I focused on is a kind of frame of mind, it ends up creating a mood and encouraging emotions, rather than encouraging a type of behavior.



## Experiment Three The Unstable Mirror

This is an experiment that aims to turn what one person can do into a thing that two people can do together.

I decided to work on this notion as after studying the system of cultural values, I found that most of the values are about the relationships between people, including love, honesty, loyalty, and consideration .

These values have continued to teach generations how to get along with other people including your family, friends, colleagues, and even strangers. However, those values should not only always be kept in every Chinese person's mind, but also should be put into practice.

The concept of unstable mirrors comes from the question I asked "How long has it been since you looked at your mother very carefully?"

We can look at ourselves in the mirror every day, but what if we become a part of a mirror looking at the person in front of the mirror conversely.

Out of curiosity, I made this unstable mirror that cannot stand by itself, so if you want to use it, you have to ask someone to hold it for you, otherwise you may also be asked to hold it for another person.

The aim is to provide people with an opportunity to look at each other more closely, especially at those who are most close to us but also are the most easily overlooked in our lives.





For the first round of the experiment, I invited Yang, a ceramic grad student in Risd, and her mother to use the mirror at their home. WHO IS YANG? Yang held the mirror when her mother was combing her hair. The in return, her mother held it for Yang as Yang was making up. During the process of helping each other, there were few conversations. I asked them what were they thinking when they looked at the other, and both of them were emotional in their replies.

Yang said that, as the typical Chinese family, parents and kids are not very good at communicating with each other. As a consequence, relations between her family members have always been tough. She had seldom showed her love to her parents in a positive way in the past. She also said that understanding is so important to when keeping good relationships within a family. She hadn't looked at her mother so closely for a long time. "There was one moment that made me want to hug her."

The other round of the experiments is between my friend Creama and her boyfriend Jackson.

Jackson complained that Creama spent too much time on applying her make-up every time before they went out. I gave the mirror to them. Creama was quite reluctant at first and did not allow Jackson to look at her when she was putting on her make-up because she thought that using a mirror should be a private experience. But, finally, she agreed to dry her hair with Jackson holding the mirror. At this point I thought to myself, why not design a hair dryer for a couple, so that they can dry each other's hair. I thought that this would be a more direct and reasonable way for a couple to share the experience. Both Creama and Jackson agreed with this idea and believed that this joint hairdryer would be a better way in which to improve their relationship.

Sometimes, those who are most close to us are the people we care about the least. The unstable mirror was created in order to remind people to care about those we love through looking closely at each other on a regular basis. However, the unstable mirror itself is a little bit compulsive for people to use in their daily life. The emphasis on changes of behavior is too abrupt. Before I telling people the intention behind the decision of the round shape mirror, they didn't tend to ask someone to help them but tried to find a support.



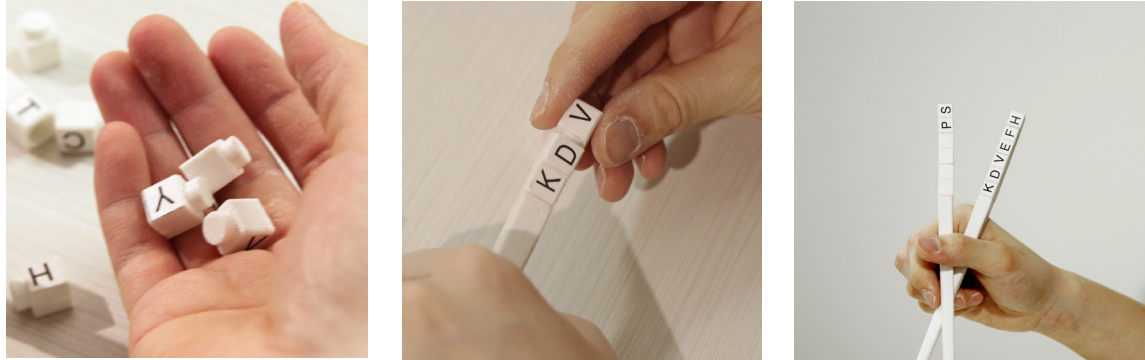
## Experiment Four Built-up chopsticks



Filial piety has long been one of the core concepts of traditional Chinese culture. In the past, people regarded this notion as being about 100 percent obedience to an elder family member. However, with changes in society and people's perceptions in general, the idea of filial piety is now also different from the traditional understanding

For today's family, the responsibility of the daughter means mutual respect and understanding between two or three generations, especially kids and parents. But in many Chinese families, the communication between younger and elder generations is quite inefficient. This is not only because they lack opportunities to communicate their thoughts and emotions, but also because they don't know how to communicate with each other properly.

This experiment aims to trigger people's thinking about the modern filial piety through an object. Chopsticks, as one of the most common objects used in family meals, could be a good prompt for family relationships. At the same time, having a meal together is one of the best communication opportunities for the whole family.



The front part of the chopstick is not long enough to use unless it is built up by the user. Every tiny cube can be connected with each other and there is a letter on each cube for users to form any word that they want.

The word as a message will be shown to all of those around the table, and may become a topic people can talk about during the meal.

As a tool to provide children and their parents with an opportunity to communicate with each other, it may be successful, but only to a certain extent.

Considering both the behavioral and psychological impact of the object, the built-up chopstick is also not powerful enough because it is too functional and educational to arouse people's deeper reflections on the relationship in the long-term.

## Experiment Five The Unreasonable Pitcher

This experiment comes from the keyword “Li” Courteous. It is a little bit difficult to define what “Li” is at this stage

As in the past, it was a system of ethical rules in the form of etiquettes and ceremonies to standardize people’s behaviors. But these no longer work for contemporary society because of the changes in lifestyle and perception, from conservative to open-minded. I started to re-think the meaning of it in modern times .

I grew up in a traditional family. My father told me that “When you need something, think about if someone other than yourself who needs it as well,” a comment that has continued to influence me a lot. I therefore came up with the idea to create an object that reminds people to think of others before yourself.

Through my experience of observing people at a meal, I found most people do not actively seek to serve others and people do not think that is rude. In fact, this seems quite normal nowadays. There are so many details like this in our lives, which are so insignificant that people will easily neglect them, but this reflects the fact that people are becoming more and more self-centered, and even they themselves do not realize that . So I decided to make something in order to help people to reflect on the unconsciously selfish behavior they exude, and realize what is the right thing to do .





This experiment looked into how I could guide people to serve others at the table. I decided to improve the regular water pitcher design, in order to remind people to serve others first.

Through observing pouring gestures, I found there is a way to make serving others easier; change the spout position by turning it by 90 degrees. At the same time, it becomes more difficult for one to pour water for himself. Because this is a slight change to the design, the participants did not realize the difference until they picked it up to serve themselves. They felt surprised after the initial confusion.

Compared with the experiments and objects before, this one is more successful and satisfying. So I decided to go deeper and make it more practical.



I really enjoy the making process, even though it took me a lot of time to figure out the best way to make the object. After trying many different methods and experiencing failures again and again, finally I made it by slip casting.









## Experiment Six The curved tableware

In everyday life, it is quite common for people to hand over something to another. To show respect to superiors, people usually hand things with both hands.

But in more situations than not, they think it is unnecessary. To people they are most familiar with, they frequently forget to show respect in these everyday situations

Given this, I tried to design a series of bowls and plates which required people to hold them with both hands.

I started by studying the reasons why people are more easily able to take a bowl with one hand. Because of the low weight and the rounded shape of the base, it is quite easy for people to handle the bowl in this way



I experimented with several forms and finally figured out the round base and the curve of the side to function better. To make it more difficult to hold, I planned to bring the center down by making it solid on the bottom and thinner on the top.

The curve of this series makes it better suited to a holding gesture with both hands so that the products are able to inspire people handing over them with two hands to show the respect to each other.





## **Chapter 5 Conclusion**

As the topic I chose is quite educational, it was important to keep the outcomes from being intentional.

In order to not make people feel stressful when they are using them, the objects should be very subtle. But on the other hand, the outcome also needs to be powerful to cover profound implications.

To strike a balance between these two extreme aspects, a more effective method connected the understanding of main implications of traditional values in the contemporary world, as well as the observation of people's potential behaviors, with a slight transformation of objects. This encouraged people to follow the right values.

I started with embodying the values separately, because I think they are independent due to the different subjects.

Until I carried out a series of experiments, I realized that all aspects of the values are built on each other. For example, the idea of the pitcher originally came from the core values of Politeness, however, under different circumstances, and with different people, it could be extended to the act of considerable care for parents. In general, this idea is all about loving and caring in the world.

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## Images included

Page 2 MoGao Caves in DunHuang. <https://www.askideas.com/30-most-beautiful-paintings-inside-the-mogao-caves-in-dunhuang-china/>

Page 6 Chinese tea ceremony. <http://www.exploration-online.com/2014/07/01/the-chinese-tea-ceremony/>

Page 18 X-ray for bound feet. <https://starttrekking.wordpress.com/2014/08/24/one-size-fits-all/>

Page 45 The Chinese Tea etiquette. <https://www.teaguardian.com/tea-hows/true-chinese-tea-ceremony/2/>

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