

On Chopsticks and the Personal Politics of Design

On November 21, 2018, Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana was forced to cancel their “Great Show” a few hours before it was scheduled to happen in Shanghai. The reason for the sudden cancellation was the airing of a controversial commercial for the brand’s “D&G Loves China” campaign aimed at the lucrative Chinese market. Dolce & Gabbana is the eponymous brand name for the duo comprised of Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana—the latter of whom demonstrated an unapologetic and controversial response to public outrage over the ad on social media. Gabbana’s response to an already heated situation led to guest celebrities and models withdrawing attendance. This culminated in the cancellation of the promised “Great Show.”

The ads presented a Chinese model in a glamorous red dress trying to eat a variety of Western (i.e., popularized Italian) foods—pizza, spaghetti, and cannoli—with chopsticks. She occasionally laughed at her difficulties in picking up these foods, while hiding her mouth behind her hand. She looked very shy. Her exaggerated

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clumsiness was meant to be ridiculous and funny, but the male narrator of the video provided patronizing and clueless suggestions like, “Don’t attempt to use the chopsticks as knives,” while she keeps poking at the abnormally huge plate of food. The ad, by design, leaves the audience with the choice of two feelings: humiliation after witnessing the reinforced stereotype of submissive, innocent and unsophisticated Asian girls, or confusion as to what message the video was even sending.

Among all the reasons for the outrage that prevailed in both the Mandarin and English-speaking Asian communities, the least relatable to someone who is not familiar with Asian culture is the claim that people are offended by the ad because it appropriates chopsticks for Italian cuisine. Chopsticks are the symbol of Chinese national pride, after all. This exemplifies the ignorance and cultural misunderstandings of the luxury design industry and makes us aware of the changes it needs to make in response to a globalizing market—especially

in terms of communications—as certain buying markets (here specifically referring to China) require culturally customized messages and products in response to their growing economy and buying power. The traditional tactic of winning consumers’ hearts by adding some local decorative element to the original product/service is now considered half-hearted or is even aggressively rejected as condescending.

Designed products are political—take chopsticks for example. I recall a few years ago, when I first landed in the US from China, the feeling of disappointment when walking around Chinatown and witnessing everyone’s mastery of chopsticks—Chinese or not. I thought the practice was unique to some Asian cultures, but it turns out that it had lost its symbolic meaning in such a diverse place. I secretly mourned for something I thought was mine. Since then, chopsticks are not a homesick reminder of my country, but rather a representation of the culture shock and disconnection I used to experience daily.

In Korea, chopsticks are made of iron so people won’t take on the smell of pickled vegetables, while in China and Japan, most chopsticks are made of wood. The object-world of chopsticks is narrowed down into the category of one type of utensil based on their utility, and I wonder if the same principle applies to the fact that my Korean friend and I shared the same ambiguous “Asian” identity in America, even though its political and ethnological meanings vary from one mind to another. Being “Asian” has utility, too, mostly in conversations of equal rights where the Asian diaspora is narrowed down to a uniform group of people seeking the same things. It seems to matter less how one individual’s character differs from another.

Some designers prefer to step away from identity conversations, so that their work won’t be evaluated on their nationality or cultural origins. I can’t help but wonder if this type of self-protection will generate a psychological fear of personal stories, leaving design studies an empty field, to supposedly be filled with efforts of inviting marginalized groups into the conversation. Can we still hold the assumption that

it's possible to talk about design without considering its political context? If design professionals have certain responsibilities to society, then accepting one's identity (or proactively making changes to improve these identities) as a minority should be part of the conversation.

After graduating from the MA Design Studies program at Parsons, I started a panel series called IN SYNC, inviting Asian female designers to tell their stories of experiencing identity crisis, how they communicate using a second language, what helped them to overcome self-doubt, and how these experiences assisted them in their design practice. I expected a singular group of people in the audience, but the turnout was more than "Asian." The experience of being marginalized or living as a minority is quite universal. As long as there is a power dynamic, there will be a group potentially feeling oppressed.

My hope is that this crisis is temporary. In a session on "self-knowledge," a Chinese-born designer who studied in Finland and later worked in the US shared an anecdote with the audience:

When I was in Finland, one day I finally gave up socializing after 10pm. I thought I would lose my friends since clubbing is a local social activity, and I was trying to fit in until that moment. But this was really not me, and I decided to quit. Surprisingly, I kept a few friends, and I made some new ones by staying true to who I am. The takeaway is that sometimes you can free yourself if you don't label your own decisions and preferences with external factors such as identities or region of birth.

She experienced a process, which we can learn from, to resolve identity crisis: recognize, address, develop a new perspective.

It is very difficult to switch from a mindset of collectivism to one of individualism, all while keeping oneself open-minded. It's like working out a muscle; it's demanding. But these conversations are empowering because they are told by an Asian female to a group of Asian females in the audience, among others. To free yourself from the constraints of identity, you have to first acknowledge it.

The same day the Dolce & Gabbana show was canceled, the major Chinese television network CCTV published a high-quality video titled “Do You Really Understand Chopsticks?” featuring families from both the North and South, cities and suburbs, gathering together in celebration. The video went viral, and presumably whoever was annoyed at the D&G ad found peace. But even now, I can’t help but wonder if chopsticks ever really belonged to me. ■

Qionglu Lei is the founder of IN SYNC, a panel series based in New York City, that focuses on communications issues in the design community. You can read more about IN SYNC at www.insyncnyc.com. She is also an alumna of Parsons School of Design’s MA Design Studies Program.