The Emergence of Chinese-Influenced Design as an International Automotive Design Language
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Introduction
Although China is considered one of the world’s largest automotive industries, its lax attitudes toward intellectual property (IP) historically have filled the market with plagiarized designs and foreign imitations. More established international brands are often inspired by their cultural heritage, such as Jaguar’s British charm or Cadillac’s American grandeur. In contrast, because of a less established automotive history and a past reliance on foreign design kits, Chinese automotive brands have been criticized for lacking a unique identity. However, during the past decade, the Chinese automotive industry has experienced massive development as a result of supportive Chinese government policies; mentoring from experienced foreign experts; the growing confidence of young, local designers; and a world-leading automotive home market. Now, Chinese brands not only create a design language of their own but also use Chinese aesthetics to influence the designs of more established international brands. As a result, Chinese automotive design has become an international automotive design language.

Automotive Innovation Spurred By Government Support
The Chinese government has a strong track record of promoting policies and incentives to which local government officials and citizens strongly adhere. During the past 40 years, Beijing has used its increased opulence and political will to motivate innovation from the top down. In 2006 the government began implementing a medium- to long-term plan for developing science and technology, including financing successful technology zones, with the ambition of transforming China into a world leader in technology by 2050.1 These policies have intensified through the years and to the present day. One strategy, called the Belt and Road Initiative, focuses on launching China’s automobile manufacturing industry into the global market. Industry insiders hail the initiative as a foundation for improving international automobile relations.

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According to Cui Dongshu, Secretary-General of the China Passenger Car Association, “[w]ithin the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese automakers will have [a] wider scope and [an] emboldened vision. As a result, they are forming overseas partnerships and establishing joint manufacturing plants….” The initiative not only has created an advantageous political climate for Chinese automakers to develop international cooperation, but also has focused on long-term goals, such as promoting the development of authentic Chinese brands. Xu Haidong, an assistant to the secretary-general of the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers, adds that “Chinese carmakers have embraced the concept of selling brands and services, upgrading from the earlier idea of simply selling cars.”

These government policies have motivated native Chinese car brands to explore their cultural heritage with the ambition of creating a unique brand identity. The organization Geely Design leads the way in the foremost Chinese automotive manufacturer, Zhejiang Geely Holdings Group (ZGH). ZGH currently owns seven major car brands, including Volvo, Lotus, Proton, London Taxi, Volvo Trucks, Geely Auto, and Lynk & Co. Geely Design exists as an organization within ZGH and currently facilitates designs for Geely Auto and for Lynk & Co.

Redesigning Chinese Automotive Brands with Cultural Heritage Inspiration

Geely Auto, established in 1997, is China’s largest privately owned automotive brand. Until 2012, Geely Auto’s in-house design capabilities were limited. Instead, new projects were outsourced to external consultancies, and the contracts were awarded based on their proposed sketches. The result was an unattractive, incoherent, and derivative range that lacked a unified design language. For example, during the 2009 Shanghai Auto show, Geely Auto’s luxury GE sedan was heavily ridiculed for copying the exterior design of a Rolls-Royce Phantom. However, in 2012, Peter Horbury, who revived the Volvo brand as design director, was appointed senior vice president to oversee design at Geely. He immediately made Geely Design an official organization within ZGH and assembled an experienced international team to address Geely Auto’s design problems. Geely Design recruited experts from established brands, including Guy Burgoyne, its Shanghai Studio Director. Burgoyne came to Geely Design with more than 25 years of diverse, global experience in the automotive industry, including at Volvo and Renault. The organization established two main studios: one in Gothenburg, which currently focuses on Lynk & Co, and the global headquarters in Shanghai, which services Geely Auto. The world-class global design center in Shanghai was built in 2014 on the site
of the 2010 World Expo. Establishing the Shanghai studio was crucial to forming and strengthening the core of the global Geely Design team. Under Horbury, the Shanghai studio focused on studying the needs of the Chinese market and using Chinese culture as a foundation for Geely Auto to develop its own design language, as Horbury enthused in 2014:

People want the exotic; they still like buying things from overseas, and ever since the days of spices and silk, China has had something on offer. So we hope to bottle that and put it into sheet metal, especially interiors.⁴

Horbury adopted a similar approach during his successful tenure at Ford, where he was credited with reviving its U.S. styling. Earlier in the 1990s, he was acclaimed for rejuvenating Volvo’s design by infusing cars with characteristics of Swedish architecture and furniture. Speaking about his design inspiration, Horbury explains, “[t]here were a lot of Swedish elements, curves that you only see on Swedish buildings on the tops of windows, very flat curves. You see it all over Scandinavia. It was just looking for those things, and it often takes a foreign pair of eyes to spot them.”⁵ Throughout his career, Horbury has acquired a reputation as an outsider with great insight. He has been praised for his astute ability to innovate and adapt native motifs to create innovative, successful car designs. He aspired to do the same thing at Geely Design.

The Horbury-led period at the organization is known as Geely 3.0. The first product from this new global design team was Geely’s flagship sedan, the GC9 (also known as the BoRui in Chinese and the Emgrand GT in some foreign markets). With this model, Horbury was eager to show that Geely could design a global car that reflected its Chinese roots:

All of these lines and features are designed to look as if they were not drawn with a marker but with a calligraphy brush. This is one of the details with which we have tried to introduce a flavor of China into our design. My ambition is to create a global design language but with a hint of where we come from.⁶

The GC9’s dynamic, powerful exterior contrasts with its luxurious, refined interior. The influence of Chinese architecture can be seen in the instrument panel (see Figure 1); its curved shape is inspired by an ancient bridge in Hangzhou called the Broken Bridge (see Figure 2). Horbury describes it this way:

The bridge is in stories of legend. It is very typically Chinese, with a long, long, very soft curve that goes down and out. We put that curve on the instrument panel of the [GC-9 flagship sedan concept car]. It’s a unique shape.⁷
Hangzhou’s Broken Bridge is an example of Chinese stone arch bridges found ubiquitously in China. The arches and their form represent unique achievements of Chinese bridge building, developed as early as the Eastern Han period—indeed independently of those in the West. Although the bridge has undergone many renovations since its creation during the Tang Dynasty, “the memory of its form was never lost.” The bridge is steeped in local culture and has been the inspiration for many Chinese poems, including an integral scene in one of China’s most famous stories, “The Legend of the Lady White Snake.”

In addition, the GC9’s interior shows hints of Chinese heritage with the use of traditional Chinese patterns. The speaker covers and instruments adopt a Chinese-inspired graphic, called 回纹 (hui wen) found in Chinese art, craft, architecture, and pottery (see Figure 3), as well as in building entrances and floors. Geely Auto’s flagship sedan differentiates itself by incorporating these uniquely Chinese-inspired design elements into its interior (see Figure 4), fulfilling the brand’s goal of looking forward toward global trends while hinting at the company’s origin. As Burgoyne emphasizes, “[w]e’re incorporating some small hints of the past but mixing it with a very fresh take on what we see as Chinese flavor.”

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9 Ibid., 188.
The GC9’s successful design was awarded a first-place finish as the 2016 “China Car of the Year” (see Figure 5), beating out major international rivals, such as Jaguar and Maybach. Successful design approaches reappeared in newer Geely Auto models, such as the interior of the Boyue NL3, a mid-sized sports utility vehicle (SUV), the dashboard of which features the same Hangzhou bridge-inspired curve over the center console. This same curve later appeared in the design of other Geely Auto vehicles, including the GS crossover hatchback and the GL sedan, released in 2017. The same year, Geely Auto reported total sales exceeding one million units, cementing the company as one of China’s top-selling car brands.

Bridging the Gap in Chinese Automotive Innovation

Critics might claim that the recruitment of foreign experts with little previous Chinese experience, such as Peter Horbury and Guy Burgoyne, distracts from the idea of Geely Auto as an authentic Chinese brand. However, in the past 20 years, many successful Chinese companies in other industries have tried to achieve equal recognition with foreign competitors by filling major innovation gaps through foreign acquisitions and partnerships. In addition, Chinese firms often have placed foreign talent in senior positions.
For example, in 2010, John Roese, the former chief technology officer (CTO) of Nortel, was recruited by a leading Chinese mobile phone company, Huawei, to lead its North American research and development (R&D) efforts. A year earlier, former British Telecom CTO Matt Bross had been hired to oversee Huawei’s $2.5 billion R&D budget and operations.

A barrier facing design education in China is a lack of relevant education or knowledge of strategic design among Chinese senior management, “some of whom finished their education at a primary level and thus have no idea about design.” In contrast, Horbury and Burgoyne’s vast experience as automotive designers offers valuable first-hand experience to young developing Chinese designers. Horbury and his team not only have filled gaps in expertise but also acted as mentors to less experienced Chinese designers. In fact, Horbury is noted for supporting younger designers: “I don’t have all the ideas anymore, so I depend on these young hot shots.”

Geely Design has cultivated a core group of young Chinese stylists: “Some of the Chinese guys are really flying now,” Horbury says; “…And they’ve got good mentors.” According to Bont and Liu, another obstacle facing Chinese designers is that Asian societies are more prone to authoritarian leadership than others. This style of leadership can be detrimental to creating an environment in which new ideas and creativity can flourish. However, under Horbury and Burgoyne Geely Design has successfully nurtured local talent.

The first generation of Chinese talent has since taken over the mentoring role for the next generation of graduates, moving into design management roles and even, in a few cases, serving as design directors. Pan Wei Tian, an exterior car designer based in Geely’s Shanghai studio, is one young Chinese designer who has benefited from the tutelage of Geely Design’s experienced foreign design mentors. In 2017, he was appointed lead exterior designer for Geely Auto’s concept multi-purpose vehicle (MPV). This MPV, introduced at the 2017 Shanghai Auto Show, continues Geely Design’s ambition of being globally focused while hinting at the company’s Chinese origins. The design’s dynamic and almost aggressive shape is inspired by private jets, while its Chinese heritage can be seen in the floral forms curling at the front of the vehicle (see Figure 6) and in the rear lamps, which dynamically fold into a design inspired by Chinese paper lanterns (see Figure 7). The MPV design combines innovation and identity, displaying a confident future direction (see Figure 8). Geely 3.0’s goal was to reach a level competitive with international automotive rivals and to define its design language.

Now, as Geely Design approaches a fourth phase, it has shifted its focus toward expanding the organization’s design ambitions, moving from tangible aspects of design to emotional and

14 De Bont and Liu, “Breakthrough Innovation”: 3, par. 3.
sensual aspects. Mian Gu, a Chinese color and trim designer in the Shanghai studio, explains how she mixes traditional Chinese influences with a contemporary twist to create Geely Auto interiors. She references the terraced rice fields found in China’s Yunnan
province as a source of inspiration for the layered trim panels inside the Boyue. The luxurious landscapes of China’s Yunnan province have long been associated with beauty, freedom, and pleasure. Gu enthuses about Geely’s desire to adapt to Chinese tastes: “I think in China most customers want materials that look very luxurious.” Gu explains how her work strives to tap into this emotional connection to Yunnan’s cinematic landscapes to invoke a sense of pleasure for the user. Similarly, the interior of Geely Auto’s concept MPV, which Gu worked on, focuses on creating an experience for the user. The vehicle is layered with advanced features, such as the bio-sensor integrated seat stitching fabric that can change color according to the mood or clothing color of the user. The spacious interior incorporates the important Chinese idea of the traditional family (parents, grandparents, and children), and space and seating arrangements are crucial parts of the cultural character. These innovations demonstrate Geely Design’s ambitions of moving from a competent brand to a confident one, an authentic Chinese brand in the global market.

Chinese Tastes Influence Global Automotive Brands

Geely Auto’s homegrown success has proven that Chinese-influenced design can produce stunning, award-winning work. However, some may argue that its position as a strong Chinese domestic brand with nascent global exposure limits its influence on international automotive design. For Chinese automotive design to flourish, it must have a global platform. An increasingly strong Chinese automotive market has created an incentive for international brands to design products that appeal to Chinese tastes. In 2016 China’s automotive market outsold Europe’s by 40%. “Ten to 15 years ago, companies brought existing designs or even dated designs to the Chinese market,” says Chelsia Lau, chief designer at Ford Asia-Pacific; “[c]onsumers in China are no longer satisfied to accept designs directly copied from overseas and are now far more discriminating and demanding.” General Motors had its China-based team design the 2010 Buick LaCrosse because the car sells better in China than in the United States. In 2012, Volkswagen designed and launched its Passat in China and introduced it to the North American market a few months later. BMW and Mercedes have modified their car designs to satisfy the Chinese car market’s demands for luxury. These adaptations include increasing the size of their luxury sedans by 5.5 inches to add more backseat legroom and offering features such as temperature and music controls for the backseat area. These design alterations specifically serve affluent Chinese customers because they prefer to employ a driver and ride in the back. Ben Cavender, senior analyst with Shanghai-based China Market Research Group contends, “[t]hey want to feel like a VIP, like they are being catered to.”

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Buick’s 2009 Business concept is another example of how design choices have been made to satisfy Chinese tastes. The cut of the headlights mimics traditional Chinese liuli glass (see Figure 9). The rear seat encompasses the passenger in the same manner as an emperor’s throne, reflecting the idea that, in China, a car acts as an indicator of wealth and power. Because of the demands of the large Chinese market and the ambitious expansion of Chinese companies into the West, some of these Chinese characteristics might make their way to other parts of the global market.

Chinese Brand Eyes Global Markets
ZGH launched its newest brand, Lynk & Co, in October 2016, aiming to be the first Chinese carmaker to enter Western markets. The brand, firmly positioned between Geely Auto and Volvo, was designed by Geely Design’s Gothenburg studio under the direction of Peter Horbury and studio director Andreas Nilsson. The brand’s first product was the 01 (i.e., “zero one”), a crossover sport utility vehicle (SUV) based on the compact modular architecture (CMA) platform. This highly flexible platform allows common designs, engineering, and production to be shared between car models and brands. The 01 shares the same platform as Volvo’s XC40, which also is a compact SUV. The intention was to create a European feel that also meets Chinese tastes, and so the car’s Lynk & Co badge is a sharp-cornered square outlined in silver, containing an abstract representation of two black, interlocking stones (see
Contrast between east and west can also be seen in the brand’s exterior design. According to VP of Advanced Design Stefan Rosen, the exterior of the 01 combines two different design forms at the same time: European sleekness and sculpting and intricate and ornamental detailing of Chinese forms. The front hood’s large and slightly curved surface is detailed with two horizontal line creases that run from the daylight running lights (DRLs) onto the hood’s surface, looping back to form a subtle diamond shape detail at the hood’s edge. Lynk & Co 01 has already launched in China, where the target audience is young, technology-savvy urbanites. For these users, a smartphone is an integral part of their lives, and the interior design reflects smartphone features and familiarity. All 01 models come with a large central touchscreen (see Figure 11) and telematics systems that are always connected to the Internet and the car’s own cloud. (BMW targeted a similar Chinese audience by redesigning and re-engineering the 2016 BMW X1, incorporating upgraded technology, such as “iDrive” and “BMW Connected” technologies, as standard.)
The 01's exterior design is inspired by its global ambitions. It adopts a concept referred to as “mega-city,” which references the skyline of global cities, such as Manhattan in New York City and Shanghai. At the front of the car, two fender-top headlamps and a broad, narrow-slit grille have been incorporated. Long, twin-linear LED lights on top of the hood allude to neon city signage. For tail-lights, an array of vertical hash marks are punctuated by an angular loop on the side (see Figure 12), a shape that repeats on the front quarter panels. The car’s interior illumination system is controlled through the use of an on-screen persona chosen by the user, setting off the surrounding space. The light patterns are inspired by the graphics of pedestrian crossings and the visual Morse Code of lit and darkened windows in a cityscape. The 01 thus has been designed to address the needs and preferences of the global and connected generation of Chinese consumers.

Conclusion
Lead by the pioneering organization of Geely Design, Chinese automotive designers have grown in confidence and achieved recognition as creators of an authentic design language in the global market. Significant developments in the past last decade—with strong support from Chinese governmental policies—have allowed Chinese brands to explore their own unique cultural heritage. With help from foreign experts, Chinese designers have bridged the gap of innovation to ensure a strong, sustainable future of creativity. A strong Chinese automotive market has encouraged local and established international automotive brands to create designs specifically aimed at Chinese consumers. However, for Chinese automotive design to succeed on the global stage, it has to overcome challenges, including limited support from the Chinese government outside of China and the need to adapt to diverse tastes of an extremely complex international market, dominated by established brands. Lynk & Co's launch in Europe in 2020 is expected to offer Chinese brands a major breakthrough as it takes Chinese-influenced automotive design to the global stage.