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When is a Chair Not a Chair?

According to Dr. Alex Gordon, Founder of Sign Salad—the cultural branding agency, the very answer is rooted in understanding social and cultural change, particularly in a market like China. The chair pictured here, called “Fake Chair” by XYZ Design in Shanghai offers “a fantastic example of this new consciousness among Chinese youth.”

Dr. Gordon continues, “It merges cultures as Louis XV style collides with traditional Chinoiserie, creating a precarious and uncomfortable balance. The whole piece is brought up to date with upholstery made from replica handbags. This last detail is so clearly a reference to and rejection of that culture of fakes. This is not merely a piece of furniture; it is a manifesto for change. It stands as a representation of the emerging consciousness of Chinese youth —fused, melded, precariously balanced, witty, challenging both the authentic past and the branded present.”



Alex Gordon recently presented his views on how “China is Looking for Answers” at an ANA-Internationalist seminar for marketers. He uses the science of semiotics in his marketing work, as “an insight tool aiding the development of culturally relevant brand and communication strategies. Semiotics investigates the relationship between brands and culture through the medium of signs — those symbols and images in any form of brand communication or in cultural products, which represent or code emergent cultural shifts. These can be anything from logos, to architectural and design developments, popular cultural icons, as well as more intangible signs of changing social patterns like language and behavior. Semiotics helps to understand how brand meaning and cultural meaning is made, how it changes over time, and how to manage that meaning so that brands may successfully create cultural disruption to gain consumer attention and achieve category differentiation.”

But back to the chair, particularly as one has to ask, Can you even sit in it?

“This chair”, says Dr. Gordon, “represents the Chinese consciousness asking about what it means to be Chinese today, what is Chinese culture, how is it defined, where are the boundaries between Western and Chinese culture, the divisions between old and new, past and present? Chinese youth are asking more questions than providing answers. Traditionally, the world of Chinese design has been beset by what has been described as a culture of fakes, geared at enabling Chinese youth to own the logos of Western luxury categories from watches to handbags that were once forbidden to them, as well as to export them to the West. But a culture of fakes is also a celebration of the virtuosity of skilled reproduction on a mass scale. It signifies a culture dependent on other people’s creativity. The precision of the copy does not compensate for the lack of innovation. If such skill were put in the service of indigenous invention, what powerful visions would emerge?”

“The very fact that it is called the ‘Fake Chair,’ says Dr. Gordon, “codes the belief that any comfortable accommodation between West and East is not authentically achievable, that implanting Western consumerism into China is somehow creating a fake or inauthentic culture. This constant search for the meaning of identity is fertile ground for brands looking to capitalize on Chinese youth culture, for they can offer to play a role in helping to ask the questions. Brands must acknowledge and employ the tension of a culture with no clear answers, if they wish to capture the attention of Chinese youth. They must surely be partners in the exploration, in the powerful self-examination in which Chinese youth culture is beginning to engage.”



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