



0108

## Designing Culture

### In Between of Authenticity and Imagination

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*“Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? [...] The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. [...] And so, if you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists, and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere.”*

(Oscar Wilde, 1889)

This provocative insight of a famous poet shall be the guide and inspiration of this exploration.

#### 1. Outline of the hypothesis

##### 1.1. Patterns of perception of foreign cultures

W. Faulstich (1996), a German media-theoretician, has coined three patterns to describe, how another culture is regarded in media: “exotic”, “salvation” and “horror.” Considering the semantic surplus value – products, their design and their communication can be regarded as media as well. They tell a nice little story, to express ourselves to the outside and stimulate our inner moods, like a daydream. And images of foreign cultures are predestined to that.

For that reason the above patterns can be applied also to products.

In the pattern “exotic” the other culture offers an exciting adventure, fascinates because of strangeness and a discovery will widen the own horizon. The products are often related to foods and drinks of ‘leisure and break-time’. A beer called “Braumeister”(German for brewmaster) or a snack with Habanero the hottest chili pepper in a Mexican surrounding want to suggest that they provide an ‘original’ experience and quality.



In the pattern “salvation” the other culture provides a missing value, promises rescue and satisfaction. Here the products are related e. g. to ‘natural health’ like traditional medicine and tea from China; or to ‘proper work’ like stationary of functionalistic appearance and additionally decorated with German words like “praktisch” (practical) or “nützlich” (useful).

In the pattern “horror” the other culture appears superior, aggressively attacking the own identity and self-confidence. But in overcoming this confrontation, “horror” effects also purification and enables development and improvement.

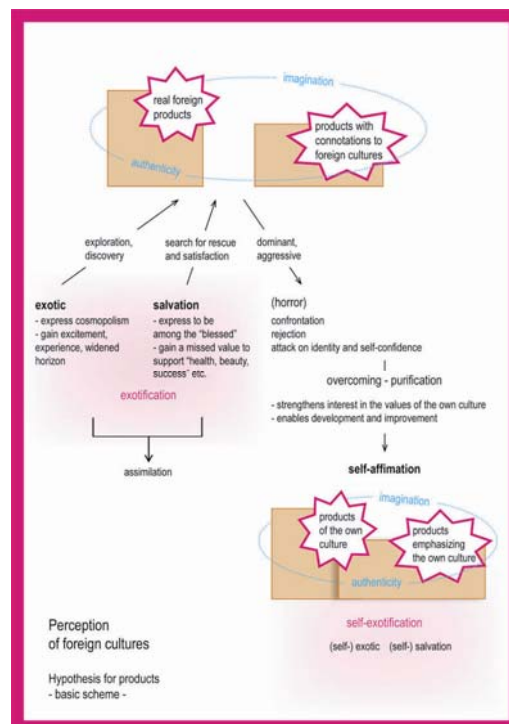
When applying Faulstich’s patterns to products, and in order to sell them, I suppose, that “horror” is not the proper term. Instead of this I suggest “self-affirmation”, for products resulting from a confrontation with “horror”, who emphasize the values of the own culture.

Recently an increase of products making use of a variety of Japanese aesthetic styles and attitudes is evident. E. g. “miyabi”, the splendid, colourful courtly style of the heian-era about 1000 years ago; or the muted and subtly spiritual “wabi-sabi” aesthetic of Zen-buddhism as well as nostalgic, naïve-optimistic graphics referring to the showa-era, the 60s and 70s years of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the time of the upturn in Japanese economy.

Modified to fit today’s consumer’s needs they are applied to the design of products themselves, their packing and / or advertisement and cover a wide range of goods, from cigarettes and chocolate up to entertainment electronics.

We can suppose these are results of the pattern “self-affirmation”, but depending on every single product, I think, the patterns “exotic” or “salvation” are also suitable.

This means, that all the introduced patterns can be applied to the own culture as well.





## 1. 2. Exotification and self-exotification

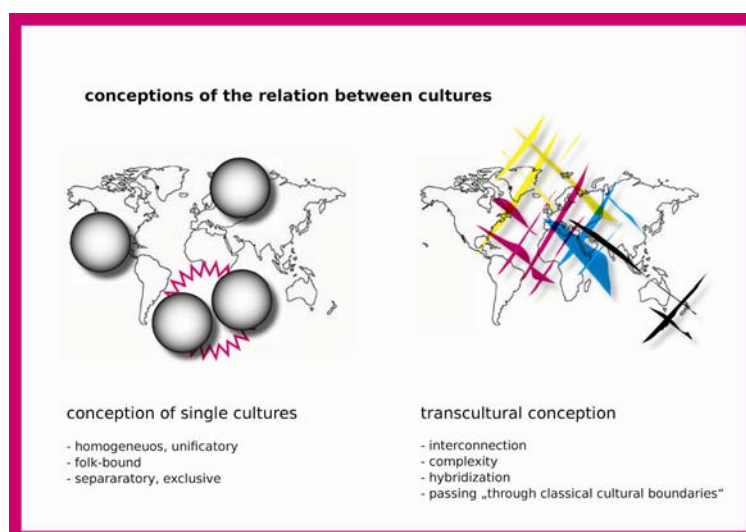
The products of all patterns have in common, that they are strikingly make use of typical, well-known, easily understandable icons and symbols of the cultures they are related to, in order to attract and convince the general public of the customers.

These stereotyped views are due to cognitive phenomena. Conceptualization (structuring the perceptions by categorizing them) and filtering (only perceiving what's important and striking for us) enable us to deal with the complexity of information, which e. g. emerges when we are confronted with a foreign culture. This is – at first – natural to human being, and neither good nor bad.

An employment of simplified and salient features of a foreign culture to products in order to provide a easy consumable escape from every-day boredom or cure to unsatisfied needs, can be blamed as an “exotification“ – a less harsh word for “exoticism”. Both describe – no matter, if the foreign culture is admired or just curios and exciting – a selfish attitude towards this other culture, emphasizing only those aspects which are of interest for the own purpose – with woefully little attempt to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the other culture.

One could suggests, that a Japanese designer, creating products inspired by the rich aesthetic heritage of his own culture, is not affected by this. However, assuming that a designer is not experienced with all the aesthetics of his own culture of any times and any contexts, the same cognitive processes of conceptualization and filtering like in the case of the foreign culture will be operated. From my point of view, it does not make a difference, whether a Japanese designer uses ‘Fraktur’-typography for German bread or a famous Zen inspired ink-painting for Tofu (soybean curd). In the first case it is exotification, in the second self-exotification.

And in addition, many of these products with a Japanese touch – the exception are those products with the nostalgic showa-era-image – may also attract a foreigner in Japan. The salient features creating the images meet also their fancy ideas about Japan. And therefore we also have to question, to what extent the Japanese designer is influenced by foreign views of his culture as well.





### 1. 3. Authenticity and Imagination

What does exoticism as well as self-exoticism mean to the authenticity of a design? Isn't the cultural origin of an inventor a proof of the authenticity of his work?

Authenticity seems to be more a matter of strategy, making the people believe, they get "the real".

This strategy was e. g. applied when the Japanese confectionery Juchheim, specialized on German traditional cakes and cookies, entered a loss of sales and decided to consult the renowned German design office Peter Schmidt Group to revise and renew the brand in the sense of an authentic contemporary German design.

Coinciding with the strategy of authenticity we often can record statements concerning the disapproval of stereotyped views, and according to von der Osten-Sacken (2004) exactly like this Armin Angerer of Peter Schmidt Group emphasized that they didn't wanted to serve the clichés of cuckoo clock and Neuschwanstein-castle. Sounds noble, but at last – to be sold – a design has to meet, to attract and to fulfill the expectations of customers. The result is successful. But can e. g. a cake range called "German festivals" with one piece dedicated to Berlin Love Parade, another one to the Munich Oktoberfest be described as 'authentic'? They are very narrative and nice; however I consider them as a self-exotification influenced by the experienced Japanese images of Germany.

A prominent example for the twisting of imagination and authenticity is the Japanese Retailer MUJI in Europe. Although they started in Japan with a cheap and basic, no-brand'-strategy, when they debut abroad, in London in 1991, their simple, no frills but stylish products has been celebrated as an authentic and modern transformation of the traditional Zen-aesthetics, representatively mentioned are the G-Mark-prize-winning translucent poly-propylen storage-boxes which remind to "shoji" – the paper-made slide-doors of the traditional Japanese house.

But this is not the only imaginative projection MUJI offers. Another example is the development of its image in Japan. Because of the concept of optimizing production processes and reducing packaging in order to provide good value at low prices, MUJI got associated with the "less is more"-idea of German functionalism represented by the company 'braun' (yet others would say Scandinavian design as well) and was popular as a salutary opposite pole to waste of resources and bubble-economy-luxury at that time.

And today also MUJI emphases its link to the values of Japanese aesthetics: In Summer 2005 posters in the Japanese cities displayed a single unpretentious tea cup of the MUJI range in the famous interior of the tea-room at Ginkakuji-Temple, where it is said the first tea ceremony in Zen-buddhist manner was held.



#### 1. 4. Transculturaliy

The various and twisting perceptions of MUJI may have led the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban to this statement: "It's the **Most Universal Japanese Idea.**"

This example as well as those products of Japanese self-exotification that also attract foreigners illustrate, how cultural aesthetic images interact and hybridize each other, can not be torn apart anymore, in inspiration and in perception.

Therefore the German philosopher W. Welsch (1999) considers the concept of "transculturality" as "appropriate to most cultures today".

At first glance this concept just seems to use another prefix – so far we have 'interculturality' or 'multiculturalism' – but it is more. The prefix 'trans' enables to adjust the primary premises, to sketch "a different picture of the relation between cultures" by which a change in point of view is possible.

Welsch argues that the traditional way to regard culture is to think of single cultures as islands or spheres. This "concept is characterized by three elements: by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation. Firstly, every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals, making every act and every object an unmistakable instance of precisely this culture. The concept is unificatory. Secondly, culture is always to be the "culture of a folk", [...]. The concept is folk-bound. Thirdly, a decided delimitation towards the outside ensues: Every culture is, as the culture of one folk, to be distinguished and to remain separated from other folks' cultures. The concept is separatory."

But a closer look reveals that the cultural constitutions aren't homogeneous inside and separated to the outside. Inside – "from society's macro level through to individuals' micro level" – many different lifestyles can be observed. Consider people from the working-class, from wealthy families and those of the alternative scene, and think of the keyword "patchwork identity".



And to the outside, in the consequence of migratory processes, worldwide communications systems and economic interdependencies: “Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other. Lifestyles no longer end at the borders of national cultures”. In fact, the intersections and transitions between cultures are more natural than any assumed uniformity of a single culture.

Welsch concludes that the traditional conception of culture “cannot cope with the inner complexity of modern cultures”. Moreover the traditional position is the cause for many conflicts between cultures. He suggests to quit this traditional concept towards the concept of transculturality. The prefix ‘trans’ has two meanings: One from ‘transverse’ in the sense of passing “through classical cultural boundaries” and one in the meaning of ‘transcend’, to go beyond the classical attitude.

Transculturality promotes exchange and “attentiveness for what might be common and connective” apart from “the polarity of the own and the foreign”.

It is evident that this way of thinking substantially concerns every part of human life, but to come back to the topic of this exploration: products and their use of connotation to cultures.

Welsch offers also another aspect to the above introduced product examples.

Concerning population as well as merchandise or information, he says: “Cultures today are in general characterized by hybridization. For every culture, all other cultures have tendentially come to be inner-content or satellites.” For the case of merchandise this means: “more and more, the same articles - as exotic as they may once have been - are becoming available the world over [...]. Henceforward there is no longer anything absolutely foreign. Everything is within reach. Accordingly, there is no longer anything exclusively ‘own’ either. Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others - to whom the indigene himself belongs.”

Welsch illustrates this in his annotations with two examples:

- The first is an anecdote from a Japanese restaurant in Kyoto Welsch visited in company of Japanese friends. They explained to him that everything in there is genuine Japanese, and seemed to be annoyed by his question, whether really everything in the restaurant is completely Japanese, also the chairs. They insisted on authenticity of everything, but Welsch had already recognized the chairs as the model ‘Cab’ designed by Mario Bellini and manufactured by Cassina in Milan.  
This example shows how indistinguishable products can become. These Japanese regarded an “Italian” chair as a piece of their own culture.
- Based on the example of the Austrian ski resort area Tirol he demonstrates how a specific regional culture increasingly becomes only decoration and aesthetic production. Consider the cuisine, there are dishes called “Tiroler Gröstl”, ‘Kasnocken’ or ‘Schupfnudeln’ and they look like it, but actually they are modified to international standards of food processing. And so the entire ‘Tirol’ is only an atmospheric production and ornamentation. Under the surface, in its substance it is – from the lift systems to the toilets – similar to every other ski resort in other areas and countries.

What is “foreign”, what is “own” – this differentiation has dissolved. And when it seems clearly, it might be just contrived, invented, designed to spark our imagination.



## **2. Empirical approach**

This is so far the outline of the hypothesis. It has to be widened by empirical examination to verify the presumptions. What kind of images, feelings, and associations does the product evoke in the eyes of the consumers?

### **2. 1. Collection of products**

The decision was made, to start at first with focus on products which conspicuously make use of cultural connotations. Packaging design of every day life products – especially food and beverage – is a very suitable product-category, also offering a huge amount of examples.

“Experiment shopping tours” in departments-stores and supermarkets have been done with Japanese people as well as with people of several nations residing in Japan to collect those kind of products.

A remarkable observation of this “experiment shopping” is that Japanese people – requested to search for products which make use of cultural images of a foreign country they like – just collected products like this.

But the Non-Japanese – requested to search for products which make use of cultural images of their own country – bucked against these products. In their eyes, details of completely different products were more able to make a connection to their culture. The typical, stereotypes employing products were commented sarcastically or dismissed as simply not to be trusted. And again and again they emphasized, that these products do not make them feel “like home” in no way, that they were only made to attract the taste of the Japanese.

I suggest that the request made a too strong link between these type-cast products and the differentiated cultural identity of the informants, so they had to insist strictly on authenticity.

### **2. 2. Questionnaire supported interviews**

A set of 14 products have been taken from this collection: 7 examples with connotation to China (a culture suitable for findings concerning the pattern “exotic” as well as “salvation”) and 7 examples with connotation to Japan (for findings concerning the pattern “self-affirmation”). All items are products of Japanese makers. Some of them have been discussed in Japanese Design Magazines

The interviews were held in small groups of three, including a group of Chinese people, a group of designers, students etc., well balanced between male and female.

The asked questions included interesting parts of the products, feelings and thoughts during an imagined use and – considered the product is a person – from which country does it seem to be from, an associative question. AND: The participants have not been introduced into the hypothesis.

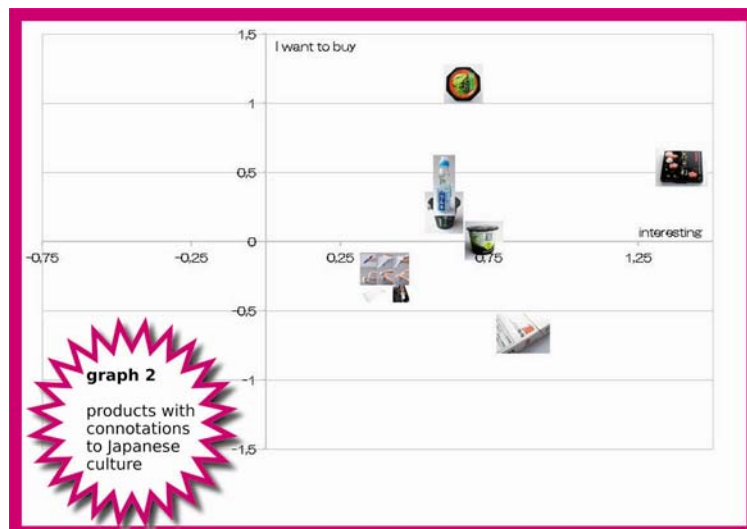
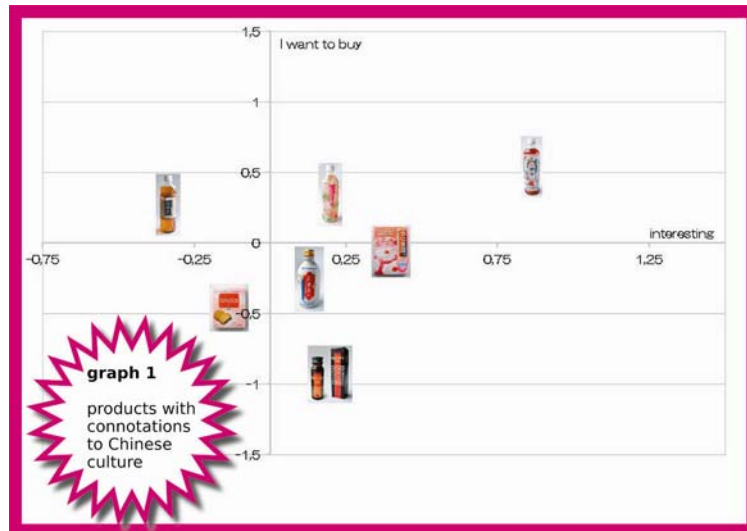
### **2.3. Observations and key findings**

Even the very first look at the selected products confirms Welsch thesis that cultural connotations tend to be just ornamentation on the surface. Many products create their atmosphere by colour, patterns, illustrations / photographs, typography, i.e. graphic design, by choices of name or other keywords and in the case of food



and beverage of course by typical ingredients. Only a few examples express it by the shape of the dish or the product itself. The others make use of standardized packaging.

The influence of this decoration is reflected in the answers to the question, which part of the product is interesting.



The main part of the result consists of independent statements, but the first question was about the extent of the interestingness and probability of purchase of the products. From the data a graph could be generated. The first one displays those products with connotation to China, the second those with connotation to Japan. The products with Japanese notion are strikingly more located in the quarter of “interesting and I want to buy” than products with Chinese notion.

As mentioned before Japanese styled products are a fashion in Japan at the moment – this may be an explanation. But there is a more general reason conceivable. When Faulstich introduced the patterns of cultural





perception he emphasized that the patterns 'exotic' and 'salvation' are "boring" because of the process of assimilation in which the foreign things are brought in line with the predominant taste and sooner or later they will lack of any appeal. This assimilation seems to be the same what Welsch calls "inner-content or satellites"

A very good example for this assimilation is the Oolong-Tea from SUNTORY. Oolong-tea was introduced to the Japanese market as the most typical Chinese tea, but a Chinese informant explained to me that the Chinese aren't as fond of it as the Japanese commercials may suggest and they don't have it in PET-bottles at all. However the image was set and the tea is on the Japanese market now for years and people are really used to it. And although the commercials still draw pictures of China, only 47% of the participants mentioned an association to China, the majority 60% made a connection to Japan. The tea not very not exciting anymore, but it is trustworthy, referring to the "I want to buy"-quarter.

The differentiation into Chinese and Japanese connotation of the products is done by me, but do the participants agree with that interpretation?

Except of the Oolong tea and the Jasmine tea – more associated to Japan – China respectively Taiwan or Hong Kong were definitely the most mentioned countries, but Japan was associated also very frequently, and depending on the product forms of hybridization were clearly stated.

But is there an exotification, an excitement or healing possible under the circumstances of assimilation and hybridization? I define an indication for exotification respectively self-exotification as statement about feelings or impressions connected with a culture. Like this quotation for the medicine look-a-like nutrition supplement drink: "...with characters looking like Chinese characters or hieroglyphs it seems to be really effective." Japanese businessmen are supposed to love to drink these kinds of elixirs to gain activity when they are too tired. To intensify the recovering-effect a decoration of ancient looking Chinese characters and other mysterious symbols is applied to create a mood of the secrets of traditional Chinese medicine.

But actually in the range of products with connotation to China such kinds of statements are rare and ambiguous. Healing / salvation is definitely a theme, but a cultural connected imagination is not clearly stated.

Like in this example of another functional drink on black tea base with Ginseng-extract, called "Canton Beauty" more addressed to women. Canton refers to the Chinese Province Guangdong in South and it suggests containing the secrets of the beauty of Chinese women: "While drinking I pray that my skin will become beautiful. Although the effect of Ginseng extract is uncertain, it is stimulating the fantasy." Healing/salvation is definitely a theme, but a cultural connected imagination is not clearly stated. The wish to be healed is often projected to hard working people in Tokyo or Office-Ladies. And here they are supposed to think: "Can I really become as beautiful as a Chinese?"

Additionally, when the product is described as a person, it is like "Japanese women, traveling China (2 nights – 3 days journey); because it is like the Japanese travelers, who neatly just pick those places in China with delicate food and scenery (blinding out every other topic of concern)" – a strong blame of exoticism.

There are often complains of feeling cheated by a product, and criticism because of their purposeful use of a cultural connotation are expressed. Like "This is an original product!" the foolish Japanese who seem to use



this may say, but [...]It definitely does not look like an original product!” for the popular Chinese pudding Annindoufu as an instant-dessert-mix from the big Japanese maker AJINOMOTO. Not only the products are criticized, but also the naïvity of consumers, followed by recommendations like: “I want to have a much tastier Annindoufu at the Chinatown in Yokohama.” Or “If you have to buy something like that, it will be better to buy a foreign-made product of that kind, this intensifies the feeling.”

The Chinese participants however didn’t reject this product, but if you suggest it may make them feel home, you will be disappointed: There is no comment like this. Generally they pointed out, that all these products with Chinese image really try hard to look Chinese, but they still seem very Japanese. Compared to ‘real’ Chinese products the Japanese ones appear very decent and inconspicuous.

The “Aroma Refresh Tea” mixed from Oolong and Jasmine tea was the most positively judged product in this range – by both, the Chinese and the Japanese interview partners. It received Chinese complements like “It is close to the Chinese Style, like a Japanese costume play” or “The flowers are so beautiful. I will feel very happy like these flowers. [...] Chinese are enthusiastic.”

Among the product range I classified with “connotation to Japanese culture” the participants agreed to a high extend.

And here we can find several imaginations to be called self-exotification. One of them is related to Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan with many temples and palaces of beauty. Kyoto was very frequently associated with a very positively judges product, an ice-cream with powder green tea – used for the tea ceremony – and black sugarcane-syrup from the southern Japanese islands Okinawa. Comments range from “It makes me want to visit Kyoto!”; “The package looks like black and red lacquered ware and creates a luxury feeling.” to “extraordinarily Japanese”; “Japanese style is really good, isn’t it?!” and “I consider what kind of things can ‘heal the Japanese.”

Remarkable are many statements that reflect the awareness of the Japanese aesthetics being exotified by foreigners like “It seems to be appealing to European people.” An interesting example is a furoshiki, a piece of cloth to flexibly wrap and carry goods, re-designed in a contemporary way. There is tolerance like “I imagine an Italian designer who smartly adapts the culture of the foreign country (Japan, in this case)” and critic as well, like: “It blatantly flatters foreigners and young people.” or “It seem to me like a selfish arrangement of an item from a foreign country, only obliged to the own conveniences and pleases.”

The statements of the Chinese people don’t confirm this impression in this case: „I can’t use it [...] Japanese people often use it.”

But the ice-cream with powder green tea is commented in an exotifying way: “Isn’t it perfect Japanese style?!” Moreover, one of the Chinese participants just claims another of the positively judged products, the chocolate pralines in style of the Japanese sweets as ‘Chinese’: “The collocation of the colours is beautiful. And the style of the Chinese characters is special”; “(It is) Chinese; the characters are in the style of China.”

The same chocolate with red soybeans was described by the Japanese with statements like “This is an idea that can only occur in Japan” or “[While eating] I confirm that I am Japanese.”



To summarize the findings: There are statements that prove the blurred borders concerning the questions “What is ‘foreign’, what is ‘own?’”, foreign cultures as ‘inner content’ of another, hybridizations; but on the other hand there is also authenticity demanded and stereotyped, salient features are able to spark exotifying imaginations.

### 3. Conclusion

About hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde did not recommend traveling to Tokyo for seeing a Japanese effect. Much later the products of MUJI were able to provide a Japanese effect far from Tokyo. And today, if you want to see a Japanese effect, you can come to Tokyo by all means.

The product examples of this research are almost taken from Japan – and although the Japanese approach has its specialties like every country has – we are able to collect similar product examples in any consumer-society-country.

This is only the start of a research on this theme. Next steps could focus on examples from another country to define similarities as well as specialties and precise the circumstances of cultural perception in patterns of “exotic”, “salvation” and “self-affirmation”.

Subsequent to this, the investigation could switch to design objects, which make a less striking use of cultural features. But we can find them on a meta-level, it is the knowledge about the cultural background of the designers and makers, and an interesting point to examine could be, whether a detailed information about that influences the recipients in matters of exotification: E. g. how do they regard a chair designed by a Brazilian and manufactured in Italia, or a German brand coffee maker, created by a British designer with sympathies for the Japanese retailer MUJI...?

And besides consumer perception, there is also the question, how do designers deal with cultural interactions. They may have an affinity to a certain foreign culture or they may have been confronted with stereotyped expectations of how their design should be because of their cultural background. How do such kinds of experience influence work and strategic self-conception?

Cross cultural design activities are emerging and in these processes the images of cultures seem to detach more and more from their origins. They are becoming myths which only happen in our subjective imagination.

A fascinating point is that these myths seem to derive from the conception of single cultures, the contrast of ‘foreignness’ and ‘ownness’ but at the same time they are transcultural hybrids and can be decoded in many different ways.

This is puzzling, complex and full of contradictions.

Who is brave enough to blame Oscar Wilde of exoticism?



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