

Product Design

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Having turned unapologetically inward in a bid to curb Covid and boost domestic consumption, China's design scene is buzzing with new products and benefitting from a fresh wave of patriotic consumerism. We break down the challenges and opportunities on the mainland that will give outsiders the insight they need to compete.

Summary

Chinese Covid Innovations

Like in the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to challenges and innovation in China, both within and beyond the medical sphere. From pop-up quarantine wards to pathogen-filtering cars, Chinese designers are finding solutions on macro and micro levels.

Contextual Architecture

From the sprawling imperial palaces of Beijing to the futuristic skyline of Shanghai, Chinese architecture has never failed to make an impact. Taking inspiration from local surroundings, history and culture, many of China's newest and most noted buildings are about more than just form and function.

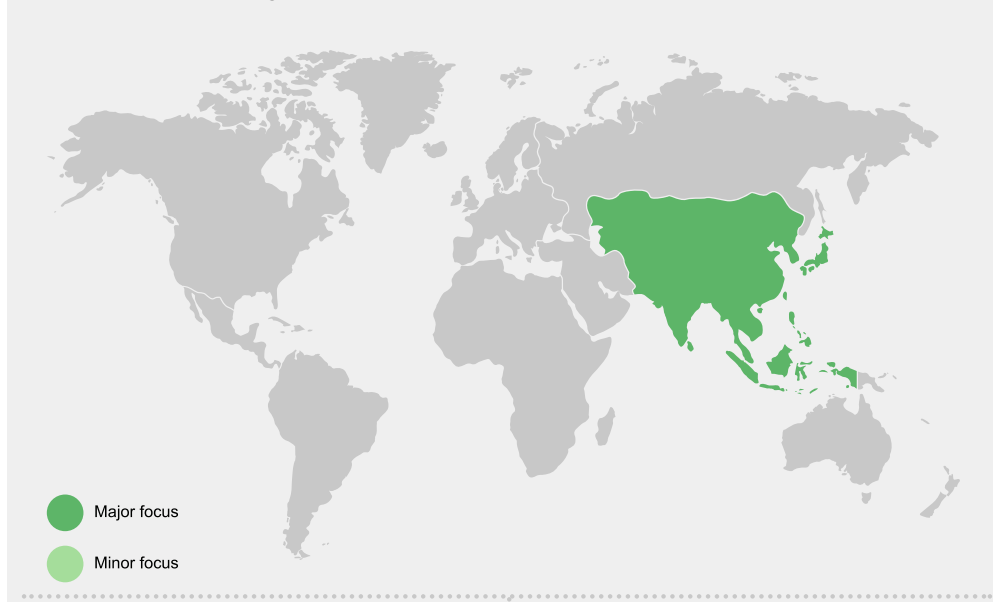
Pride of China

Having emerged from the Covid crisis with both its economy and population relatively unscathed, China is enjoying a wave of patriotism, especially among younger cohorts. The interest in home-grown brands and cultural touchpoints, strengthened by international tensions, has led to a surge in nostalgic designs and exclusive-for-China products.

Backing Sustainable Habits

Awareness of sustainability is increasing with each generation in China, with 81.8% of those aged 20 and under saying they think about how their consumption habits impact the environment ([Daxue Consulting](#), 2021). Meanwhile, 89% of Chinese consumers say they "would actively look to buy from brands that are setting ambitious targets to achieve regeneration" ([Wunderman Thompson](#), 2021). This could explain the revived appreciation for renewable naturals, such as bamboo and rattan.

At A Glance The Regional Focus of this Report – Global



Relevant Industries	Trend Duration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Architecture/Design Construction/Property Home/Interiors Automotive & Transport Packaging Materials 	
	Innovation Platforms

Key Stats +

Chinese Covid Innovations

2.27bn As of October 31 2021, China had administered about 2.27 billion doses of the Covid-19 vaccine, whereas about 7.07 billion doses of the vaccine had been given worldwide

Contextual Architecture

632m China has some of the tallest buildings in the world, including the 632m Shanghai Tower and the 599.1m Ping An International Finance Centre in Shenzhen

150m New restrictions on the building of skyscrapers dictate that cities with populations of less than three million must not build skyscrapers taller than 150m, while the limit for larger cities stands at 250m

Pride of China

+80% Kering reported a retail rebound for Q3 2020 in certain regions: comparable growth was 18% in APAC, 44% in North America and 80% in China

75% Three in four customers of China's blind box market leader Pop Mart, which was recently valued at \$7bn, are 18-to-35-year-old females

600% Blind box sales in China increased 600% between 2018 and 2019

76.3bn The art toy market in China is projected to be worth 76.3bn (\$11.9bn) yuan by 2024

1.5bn The Beijing-based Palace Museum made 1.5bn yuan (\$234m) from the sales of collectibles and branded everyday products in 2017

\$1.4m In 2019, the Sanxingdui Museum earned \$1.4m from the sales of art toys and mystery boxes that harnessed its intellectual property

Backing Sustainable Habits

81.8% More than four in five (81.8%) Chinese aged 20 and under say they think about how their consumption habits impact the environment

89% Eighty-nine per cent of Chinese consumers say they would actively look to buy from brands that are setting ambitious targets to achieve regeneration

\$192bn The revenue of processing timber and manufacturing wood, bamboo, rattan, palm and straw products in China is forecasted to reach \$192bn by 2024

92% The majority (92%) of Chinese believe the government should drive regeneration and 91% think businesses should get involved

Chinese Covid Innovations

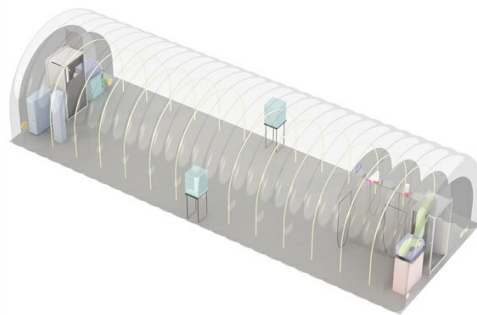
Just as in the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to challenges and innovation in China, both within and beyond the medical sphere. From pop-up quarantine wards to pathogen-filtering cars, Chinese designers are finding solutions on macro and micro levels.

- **Mobile & Inflatable Chambers:** The moveable **Huo-Yan laboratory** (named after the mythical Chinese character of the Monkey King, who can instantly and accurately identify monsters) is a mobile nucleic acid detection lab and quarantine ward. Developed by genome sequencing company **BGI Genomics**, the lab automatically unfolds in one minute and can be built into a fully functioning ward in 20 minutes.

The extendable structure allows a quick response to an outbreak by facilitating the testing of millions of people and the quarantining of thousands. Consisting of an inflatable membrane, it can be adapted to different thicknesses according to incubation needs while positive air pressure ensures a simplified structure and sealed system. By switching the positive pressure to negative, the membrane can be shrunk to be packed, stored and transported efficiently. Huo-Yan labs have so far been delivered and used across China and in seven countries around the world, including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kazakhstan and Ethiopia.



BGI Genomics



BGI Genomics



BGI Genomics



BGI Genomics

- **Safety in Motion:** Pathogen-filtering air systems in cars have been popular for some time in China, a country with notoriously bad air pollution. Domestic manufacturer [Geely](#) is levelling up with its [Healthy Car programme](#). In early 2020, it launched its first intelligent air-purification system in the Icon SUV that uses the vehicle's air conditioning to prevent and eliminate pathogens in the cabin. According to [NIOSH](#) (the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) ratings, the system provides N95 protection at roughly the same level as a medical-grade mask. Also, see [The Brief](#).

Geely is also ploughing 370m yuan (\$58m) into the development of other virus-fighting technologies, including micro-positive cabin pressure and self-sanitising handles and buttons.



Geely Icon



Geely



Geely

- **Breathe Easy at Home:** Showcased at the [Appliance & Electronics World Expo 2021](#) in Shanghai, the new Hunter air purifier from Chinese household name [Gree](#) brings hospital-grade virus protection into the home. Reported to kill airborne hand, foot and mouth viruses, as well as H1N1 avian flu and 99% of Covid-19 particles, the device was first tested at a hospital in Wuhan.



Gree



Gree



Gree

Contextual Architecture

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- **Outdoors/Indoors Marketplace:** Chinese wet markets, typically visited daily by the older generation, have long been sites of social discourse and an integral source of food knowledge. But, given the rise of online grocery shopping and the bad press wet markets received after the initial Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, the practice of shopping at markets has been falling out of favour, especially among younger generations.

A new project for Fresh Mart in the central city of Changsha by Shanghai-based design firm [Lukstudio](#) hopes to breathe new life into the experience with a supermarket concept designed to become the centre of community for younger shoppers. A wooden frame with different features and textures ties the various areas of the concept together. The dry goods section is marked by stacked milk crates that double as lanterns after dark. A metal mesh canopy hanging over the fruit and vegetable section mimics the tarpaulin usually found at outdoor markets and, with its emblematic corrugated pitched roof, an on-site restaurant is a nod to street food stalls. All this is combined to create a sense of the outdoors and provide a modern update on one of the most familiar but somewhat outdated features of Chinese food culture.



Lukstudio



Lukstudio



Lukstudio



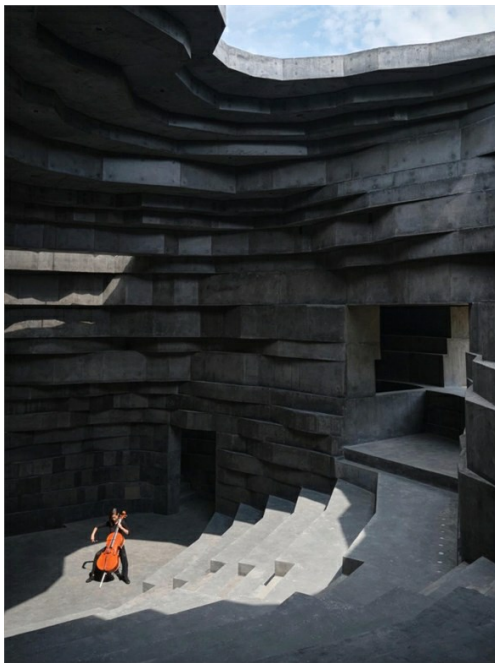
Lukstudio

- **Reverberating Vistas:** Beijing-based practice [Open Architecture](#) is responsible for some of the best-loved cultural buildings in China, including the [transformation](#) of aviation fuel tanks into a riverside gallery in Shanghai. Its latest project, [Chapel of Sound](#), nestled in the hills outside Beijing, is primarily a semi-outdoor concert hall but also “a chapel without religion” – a place of quiet contemplation.

To reflect the local surroundings, the team mixed concrete with an aggregate of crushed local mineral-rich rocks and created a rippled surface mimicing the sedimentary layers of the landscape. Rather than opting for traditional soundproofing, strategically placed openings pierce the façade and roof, serving the dual function of absorbing internal sound and allowing light, sounds and views of the surrounding natural environment to permeate the structure.



OPEN Architecture



OPEN Architecture



OPEN Architecture



OPEN Architecture



OPEN Architecture

- **Echoing Cultural Cues:** Opened in 2020, the [Liyang Museum](#) by Shanghai design firm [Crox](#) has already become an icon of the Jiangsu province. With a sinuous shape inspired by the jiaoweiqin, a traditional Chinese string instrument and symbol of the region, the building reflects both the culture and the immediate geography of its surroundings. The museum boasts multiple entrances and open spaces, encouraging visitors to flow between the inside and outside elements. “From the Asian point of view, architecture is seen as part of the whole of nature, which contains both inner and outer space – space that connects humans, earth, and everything in the universe,” the architects said.



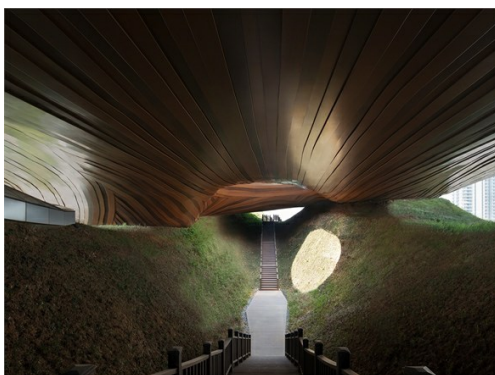
Crox



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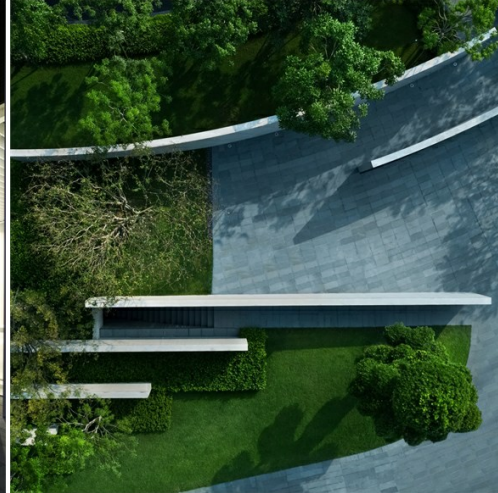
Crox

- **Cosmological Vernacular:** The [He Art Museum](#) in the Guangdong province only opened its doors to the public in March 2021. It was designed by Japanese Pritzker Prize laureate [Tadao Ando](#) and takes inspiration from ancient Chinese cosmology as well as regional architecture.

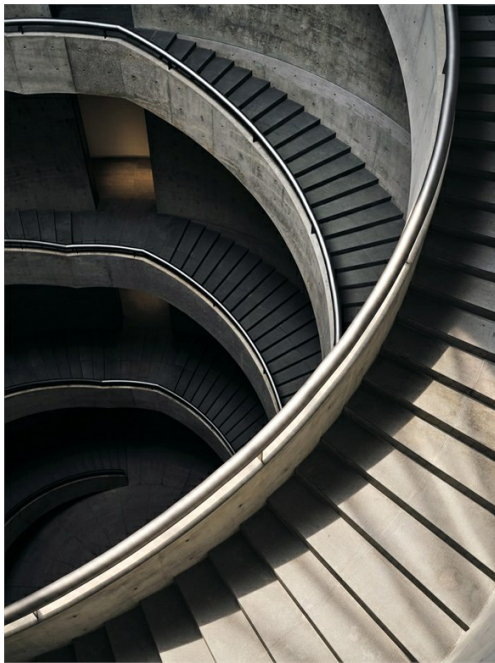
The compound embodies the Chinese philosophical concept that “the sky was round and divine; the earth was flat and square”. Its striking aesthetic is the result of combining circular components – influenced by buildings from southern China’s Lingnan region, an area known for its crescent-shaped ponds and tilting walls – with the square lines and symmetrical approach of the courtyard homes from the country’s central plains.



Tadao Ando



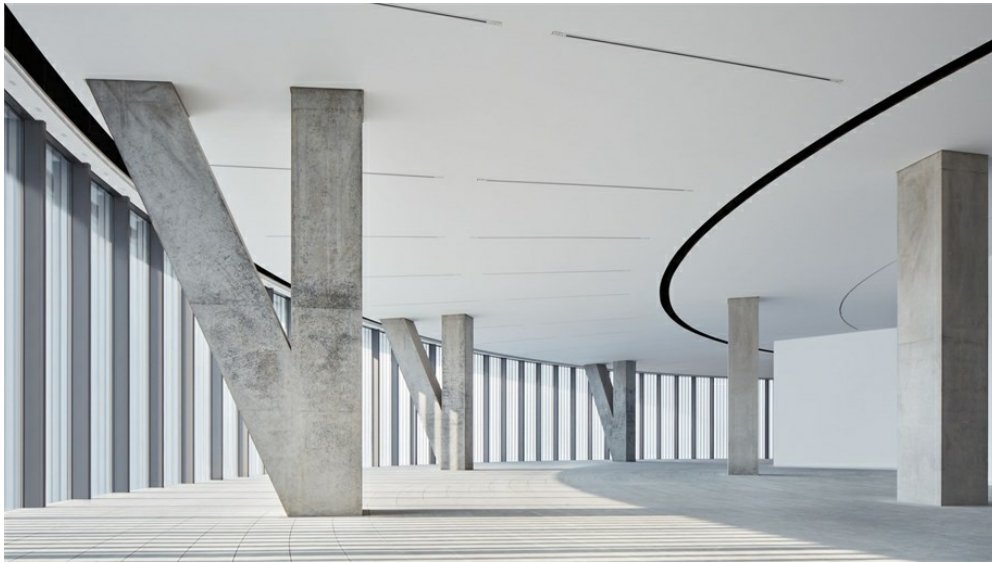
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Pride of China

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- **Channelling Traditional Tools:** Demonstrating how it's not just grand gestures that feed national pride, the humble steelyard counterbalance served as an inspiration for a special-edition timepiece for Swiss watchmaker [Rado's](#) True Square collection. The weighing device has been "anchored in Chinese life for almost 2,000 years", said the designer [Yuan Youmin](#), founder of Hangzhou-based design firm Studio0909.

Hours are marked with dots as a nod to the graduation marks on a steelyard rod, while the hands represent the arms of the scales, and the round dial is meant to be the weighing tray. The back features an etching of a phoenix, a symbol of tradition and rebirth in China. "The watch brings together thousands of years of Chinese culture with contemporary minimalist design to create a sophisticated timepiece that combines different cultures and epochs," Youmin said.



Rado x Yuan Youmin



Rado x Yuan Youmin



Rado x Yuan Youmin



"In traditional Chinese life, the graduations on steelyards are represented by colours like silver or gold..."

The unfussy lines of the disc-based pendant are inspired by unpretentious lighting designs of yesteryear. Yet, cast in aluminium, they feel very modern. Explaining the exercise in simplicity, Hu said: "Asian design has in the past fallen into two extreme categories within the usual stereotypes – the primitive and craft-oriented, or the exaggerated fanciful with bling-bling material. The Everyday light is an attempt to break that stereotype and celebrate the humble, the quiet and the mundane – sensibilities deeply embedded in Asian culture."



Stellar Works



Stellar Works



Stellar Works



Stellar Works



Stellar Works

- **Museum Chic:** China's museums, which own the property rights to their collections as government-sanctioned "intangible cultural assets", have been creating their own customised products for years – much to the delight of China's younger generations that have snapped up limited-edition merchandise with gusto.

In July 2021, the [Sanxingdui Museum](#) in the Sichuan province released a toy character inspired by the region's famous masks. Meanwhile, the Dunhuang Research Academy in the Gansu province and the Henan Museum got in on the [mystery box](#) craze, where sealed boxes feature a random surprise assortment of products.

With 100 million "post-90s" Chinese youngsters visiting virtual museum gift shops on e-commerce platform [Tmall](#) in 2019 ([New Cultural and Creative Consumption Trend Report, 2020](#)), both domestic and foreign brands have been keen to get involved. [L'Oréal](#) partnered with the [National Museum of China](#) to create a limited-edition lipstick gift set in 2018, while Chinese sportswear brands [Li-Ning](#) and [Peak](#) both participated in museum tie-ups in 2020.

Also see A China-First Market in [Young China's Beauty Boom](#).



Sanxingdui Museum bronze mask



Sanxingdui Museum toy designed by Zeng Zhou



Sanxingdui Museum toy designed by Zeng Zhou



Li Ning x Dunhuang Museum



L'Oréal x National Museum of China



L'Oréal x National Museum of China

- Just-for-China Tech:** In response to a thriving Chinese electronics market and a strong desire for products that feel unique and customised, Samsung created the luxury Heart of the World product line in partnership with China Telecom. Its latest launch is the **W22 5G**, an ultra-premium version of the Galaxy Z Fold3 5G, exclusively for Chinese fans, selling for an eye-watering 16,999 yuan (\$2,654). The phone has a Phantom Black finish, a gold spine and a logo that spells out Heart of the World in Chinese characters, signalling status and national pride.



Samsung x China Telecom



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Backing Sustainable Habits

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- **Furniture’s Renewable Refresh:** Woven bamboo objects have been used in China for thousands of years. Now, young creative studios are updating traditional craft techniques for an aesthetic refresh.

Shanghai-based [Studio Monana](#) and Jingdezhen-based studio [Lu](#) leverage bamboo’s inherent flexible resilience in self-supporting designs with a minimal need for joints, glue or screws. Meanwhile, Shanghai-based [Qiu Design](#) reimagines woven caning (a technique dating back to ancient China) using rattan imported from Indonesia in furniture pieces that feature both structural and decorative webbed panels. For the Looming Screens for Hangzhou-based furniture brand [Ziihome](#), designer Zhou Xiaying was inspired by traditional Chinese screens, positioning a rattan caned panel on top of a circular wooden base.



Studio Monana



Cui Zihua



Cui Zihua



Qiu Design



Qiu Design



Ziihome



Ziihome

- **Automotive's Natural Move:** The push for natural materials even extends to China's automobile industry. Instead of lining the interior of the electric ET7 with plastic, Nio (often dubbed the Tesla of China) has opted for German invention Karuun, making it the first production car to feature this material made from rattan that was harvested manually in Indonesia.

The sustainable surface material has a decorative, natural linear grain. It's lightweight, with a delicate capillary structure that offers unparalleled translucency, making it suitable for even interactive backlit interface panels.



Nio



Nio

Nio



Nio

Future Insights

Invest in Health Solutions

Although China has largely been successful in controlling Covid-19 through a watertight system of national and localised lockdowns, less effective domestic vaccines and densely populated cities mean protection against the virus is still a top priority for the government and Chinese families. Brands that can deliver proven prevention and treatment solutions could win big with both individual consumers and the state.

Celebrate China

“Made in China” is increasingly a statement of pride rather than shame, especially among younger generations. Foreign brands can join in with the patriotic backslapping by teaming up with Chinese designers – as in the case of Rado – celebrating Chinese culture and history or releasing exclusive products for the Chinese market.

Stay Curious about Context

Chinese architects are no longer designing structures simply to stand out but to reflect and compliment their psychical and philosophical surroundings. The significance of this will only increase in light of the [recent crackdown](#) on skyscraper “vanity projects”. Take a leaf out of Fresh Mart’s book and consider how a new concept can recognise and revive what came before.

Reap the Benefits of Regenerative Interest

As the Chinese government continues to at least pay lip service to action on climate change, sustainable products and natural materials will only become more popular. Brands that succeed to cater to an innovation-hungry audience while making consumerism more virtuous will benefit from this trend.

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