

# Creativity: stimulant of the masses

Kunal Sinha, Ogilvy, shows how creativity permeates modern Chinese society

‘CREATIVITY IS ABOUT something that is valuable and allows us to experience life afresh. It can turn the useless into useful, save space and energy, lighten up life and make it more colourful. With creativity things are more comfortable, more interesting, and more fun’ (Lian Qingguang, 26 years, IT engineer, Zhongshan). -

Chinese art is making waves in auctions the world over. The nation's cities are awash with the most ambitious architectural projects the world has seen. Meanwhile, restoration projects are giving old buildings a new lease of life and providing unique environments for citizens and tourists alike to partake of China's rich heritage. The question that begs to be answered is - is this creativity a mass movement, or is it confined to a few? It was in the search of everyday, commonplace creativity that the Discovery team at Ogilvy embarked on a journey on the streets of China, in the marketplace and into people's homes. This is a short account of that journey.

## People's Republic of bicycle (T-shirt slogan)

Even as China's automobile industry roars ahead, millions ride bicycles, motorcycles and motor-scooters on the streets.

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As they do, they not only have to deal with chaotic traffic, but with extreme weather conditions and pollution. Come summer, almost every woman riding a two-wheeler dons a sheer white cover over her dress, snaps on a sun visor and gets going. Obsessed with fairness, she cannot afford tanned face and arms, and these 'sunscreens' provide physical protection from glare and grit. Shops sell sun visors by the dozen, and cotton ponchos are available in many styles, with and without lace trim.

When temperatures drop to freezing and below in winter, the same two-wheeler riders have another problem: freezing hands. Riders do not bother with gloves. They attach cheap leather or PVC tubes to the handlebars of their bikes, and slide their hands into them to keep warm. Protection against the elements is also what trishaw drivers across the nation seek. They improvise, laying out discarded advertising signs - pieces of PVC sheet from old billboards - on a bamboo frame to prevent themselves and their passengers from getting wet in the rain or roasted in the sun.

Take another situation. Cruises on the Yangtze River are popular among the wealthy and the upper-middle class. Children from impoverished families line the river in some stretches to beg. But because the river is deep in places and the current strong, they attach small bags to long bamboo poles and thrust them towards the deck of passing ships, collecting a lot of renminbi.

‘Creativity comes when you are in a difficult situation,’ said a group of young men we spoke with in Wuxi, in Jiangsu Province. When you are under pressure, you have to think about the problem, from a different angle, and come up with a solution.’ Life itself provides the masses with creative inspiration, and that is not very different from what inspires ‘creative people’-

## Limited resources

Many Chinese have limited cash. Making their money go further is a key driver for creativity.

Gao Qi, a 33-year-old engineer in Beijing, glued together pieces of a broken

vase and drilled holes in it, into which he inserted plastic flowers. This new vase is even more beautiful than the one that broke,’ he said proudly, finding greater value in his craftsmanship.

>• In Guangzhou, we observed that a shop owner had fixed a ‘No parking’ sign on a broken chair; rather than discard it, he used it as a frame for the sign. Another used old plumbing to create striking signage for his apparel shop. A homeowner in Wuxi embedded broken porcelain pieces in a circular pattern at the entrance to his home, to make an anti-skid surface. A fruit-seller in Beijing reused the canopy of an old umbrella by fixing a bamboo pole and making a sunshade.

Ni Kai, a 25-year-old bank clerk in Wuxi, showed us how he had fashioned toy spiders from discarded electrical wires. ‘I like changing the useless into the useful,’ he said.

The usual instinct for most people would be to throw away the chopsticks that come with takeaway noodle meals. But Gu Hongmin, a manager in a state-owned enterprise, washed and stashed them until she had enough to create a pen stand.

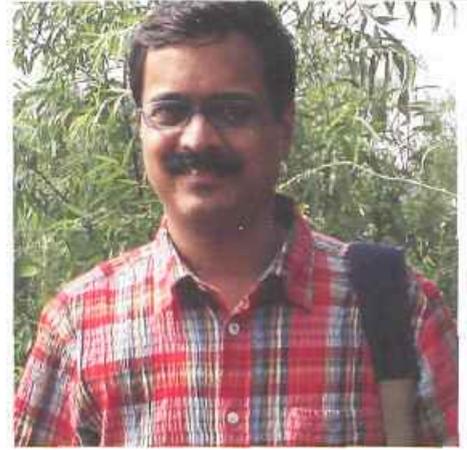
On a grander scale, the art districts of Dashanzi and Moganshan are examples of recycling existing spaces for new uses - the studio owners here did not have to spend any money to build the basic structures. It is such unusual use of everyday things that people find interesting.

How do these people get their ideas? Are they born creative, or is it a sense they acquire? ‘You have to be observant. Go out to different places, maybe you'll spot something simple that you haven't thought about before, and that could spark off an idea. No observation ability means no inspiration,’ opined a group of women in Wuxi.

## Organising life

An important function that creativity serves for common people is to help them make their lives more organised. Many living environments in China are small and cluttered. When Zhang Haitao, a 35-year-old IT professional in Zhongshan,

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creates a stand out of corrugated board to store his compact discs, or Zhu Ying, a 27-year-old government officer in Wuxi, nails a couple of potato-chip containers on her bathroom wall to store wet umbrellas, they are merely trying to organise things in their homes and being unwittingly creative. A favourite look-in place for many young couples in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou is the 35m<sup>2</sup> showflat in the IKEA store. The design optimises every cm<sup>2</sup> of space, organising living and storage areas aesthetically and cost-effectively. 'Creativity is about someone or something doing beyond what is expected', the group in Wuxi told us.

Often, it was the sheer pleasure of adding beauty to their lives that spurred people's creative instinct. They revel in the appreciation they earn from friends, family and colleagues. Ma Junwei, a nurse in Wuxi, makes bouquets using chocolates: The flavours of the chocolates can be changed depending on the person who you're giving it to.' It was an interesting, beautiful twist to the practice of gifting flowers and chocolates to loved ones. On Valentine's Day in 2007, one of the hottest-selling items was a bouquet of small teddy bears. That the soft toys would not wither after a couple of days seemed appropriately emblematic of the duration of the romance.

On the banks of the Yellow River in Lanzhou, we observed young couples painting figurines of comic characters together. For the less artistically accomplished, yet creatively and romantically inclined, little shops in Nanjing's underground 'Fashion Lady' market will paint portraits of your loved ones, surrounded by hearts, on T-shirts.

Others imbue everyday objects with beauty and splendour. He Weidong, a 23-year-old salesman, collects stones, paints designs on them and arranges them in his home. Yang Qianxi, a 25-year-old teacher in Chengdu, draws lovely, attractive pictures on eggshells and stones, and gives them to his friends. Hu Ke, a 26-year-old engineer in Chengdu, made a clothes bin using his wife's Hello Kitty wallpaper. It was bright, cheerful and unique.

### Do it yourself

DIY is on the rise, and businesses - big and small - are beginning to recognise the trend. Little shops in markets such as Yu Yuan in Shanghai and Fashion Lady in Nanjing hawk applique hearts and stars, beads and ribbons to sew on jeans and skirts. Adidas has introduced an Adicolor range of white shoes, which come in a box with paint tubes buyers can use to create their own designs.

China's streets are awash with people making a living out of craft and creative skill. At almost every popular tourist destination, you are likely to be accosted by artists who sit you down and quickly sketch your portrait for 10 or 15 renminbi (\$1.35-2.00).

In Shanghai's French Concession, an old man sits on the pavement, under the shade of a plane tree, and fashions trishaws, bicycles, dragons and animals out of pieces of wire. (Wu Yifan uses the same materials, but creates fascinating Japanese manga characters and retails them for 100RMB (\$13.50) at a boutique - he obviously has a smarter business model.) In a busy marketplace in Guangzhou, we spotted two women in their sixties making colourful six-inch-tall dolls out of wool and selling them for 20RMB.

### Humour

Some people consider humour to be a key ingredient of creativity. It should be about expressing or capturing the lighter side of life. Creativity makes life colourful; it brings delight in an otherwise routine or depressed life', the young male group in Zhongshan said.

One of them always arranged the bones of the fried chicken he ate into a human form, on a napkin, using the Colonel's face as the head of the figure. One of the strategies employed for humour was the juxtaposition of the unexpected; a good example of which is the extremely popular song by Yang Chengang. 'Wo ai ni, ai da mi', which literally translates to 'I Love You Like Mice Love Rice' was a perfect example of breaking away from routine expressions of love, such as the scent of flowers and the

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sight of the sea. Many referred to text messaging and online chats (and the use of emoticons) as humorous creativity played out in everyday life. The latest fad to hit the screens in China is Tuzkism, based on a simple, expressive rabbit character Tuzki, created by Wang Momo, a student at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute.

What was common to most of the people we spoke with or visited was that they hardly fit the conventional definition of 'creative' or 'artistic' people. Neither were they young teenagers who embrace creativity as a way of adopting and projecting an identity. These were engineers, accountants, nurses, teachers and government officials, yet they were practising some form of creativity or another.

In most cases, they undervalued their own creativity: 'We just find solutions to everyday problems, what we have are little smart ideas. That's dealing with life', Truly creative people, they felt, 'always come up with ideas - it's regular behaviour for them'. The true measure of creativity would be in terms of a big impact on people around, or even society as a whole.

In other cases, recognition by people around them - spouses, colleagues, friends and relatives - provided them with a sense of accomplishment and superiority: 'After I had finished doing up my home, I could not wait to show it to my friends', Tian Guo told us. Zhang Xuesong felt, 'Because of my creative ideas, I can do things others can't.'



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