

An investigation of the local industrial design industry in China: A micro view

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Abstract

The research on the development of the industrial design industry is of great academic value and historical significance in design studies. Based on the criticism of the heroic approach, this study investigates the local industrial design industry in Sichuan Province, China, from the perspective of anonymous history. It aims to understand better the details of the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan and encourage further research on the local industrial design industry in China from a micro view. The study explores the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry in Sichuan through qualitative research methods such as field research, interviews, and questionnaires and examines the selected research objects by means of phenomenological depiction and analysis. This approach reveals some meaningful characteristics of the design and consumption ends of the local industrial design industry at the micro level. It concludes that many aspects of the anonymous part of the local industrial design industry remain untouched, and further investigation is needed to shed light on them.

Keywords: Anonymous history, Local industrial design industry, Small and micro enterprises, Consumers, Users

Extended Abstract

Introduction: Since the rise of the industrial design industry in Sichuan in recent years, an in-depth investigation into it (as one of the studies of the development of the local industrial design industry) has become increasingly important in terms of both academic value and historical significance. Thanks to the contributions of many researchers, the theory of anonymous history has developed considerably in design studies. It provides a new perspective to explain the historical process of modern design and has begun to attract the attention of researchers in China, inspiring methodological innovation in this field. At the same time, the traditional heroic approach has limitations in summarizing the historical process of Chinese modern design, especially in revealing local developments. The industrial design industry in Sichuan, as a local activity, is often ignored in traditional narratives. Therefore, based on the theory of anonymous history, research on the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan can re-examine the research object by shifting the focus from the master narrative to a microscopic investigation. This approach reveals the historical characteristics of grassroots activities in the industrial design industry in their anonymous state.

Purpose and scope: From the perspective of anonymous history, this study reveals the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry in its unknown state in Sichuan. The findings will help better understand the details of the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan and encourage further research on the local industrial design industry in China from a micro perspective.

Method: Against the theoretical background of anonymous history, this study targets the local activities of the design and consumption ends (namely, design agencies and consumers or users) of the industrial design industry in Sichuan at the micro level. In terms of methodology, the study primarily relies on qualitative research methods. Specifically, it involves phenomenologically depicting and analyzing the selected research objects and the collected information. The specific methods used in this study include document analysis, case study, and comparative analysis. Data collection is conducted through field research, interviews, and questionnaires. Among these methods, field research and interviews are mainly used to collect basic information about industrial design agencies. Questionnaires and interviews are used to gather basic information about consumers or users of daily necessities living in Sichuan and to understand their attitudes and opinions.

Findings and conclusion: First, based on the theory of anonymous history, the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry in China would come to the fore. The details of the development of the local industrial design industry are difficult to disclose against the backdrop of the master narrative and heroic approach. Second, from the perspective of anonymous history, this study explores the design and consumption ends of the local industrial design industry in Sichuan at the micro level, and examines the selected research objects by means of phenomenological depiction and analysis. In the process, some remarkable results emerged. Although different from the star design agencies often mentioned in the master narrative, unknown industrial design agencies, as small and micro enterprises, are also an integral part of the industrial design industry. The evolution and growth of these companies or enterprises contribute to the progress of the local industrial design industry as well. Therefore, their present state, achievements, and the problems or challenges they face deserve attention. In addition, anonymous consumer and user research is of vital importance. Their consumption and usage patterns, preferences, and attitudes are closely related to the marketing, innovation, and brand strategy of the local industrial design industry. Future studies could explore the relationship between consumer behavior and local identity in greater depth, examining variables such as age, cultural affiliation, and digital market dynamics. Third, although the findings are limited in this study, the introduction of mixed methods combining qualitative and quantitative means will provide a considerable outlook for further research on the development of the local industrial design industry in China. Future studies that integrate quantitative methods will support the qualitative findings, thereby constructing a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of local design industries. Finally, many aspects of the anonymous part of the local industrial design industry still remain untouched, and more investigations need to be made to shed light on them. Through the above-mentioned methods, the concept of anonymous history could be further applied to other regions of China, to different scales of industrial design enterprises, and to varied consumer contexts.

Keywords: Anonymous history, Local industrial design industry, Small and micro enterprises, Consumers, Users

INTRODUCTION

Along with the rapid development of science and technology, industrial design, as the starting point of the innovation chain and the source of the value chain, has become a key to promoting the high-quality development of the manufacturing industry. The development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan, an important economic center in western China, is not only connected to the transformation and upgrading of the regional economy but also an important support for the realization of a sustainable development strategy. Since the rise of the industrial design industry in Sichuan in recent years, in-depth investigation into it (as one of the studies of the development of the local industrial design industry) has become increasingly important in terms of both academic value and historical significance. From the perspective of anonymous history, this study will reveal the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry in Sichuan under an unknown state. The findings will help to understand better the details of the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan and encourage further research on the local industrial design industry in China from a micro view.

Theoretical Background

In 1936, the publication of *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (the revised edition entitled *Pioneers of modern design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*) by Nikolaus Pevsner marked the beginning of the study of modern design history. After the 1940s, Reyner Banham (1960) and Siegfried Gideon (1948) made new contributions to this field, reflected in the works *Theory and design in the first machine age* and *Mechanization takes command: A contribution to anonymous history*. The former expanded the scope of modern design history, while the latter first proposed the theory of anonymous history as a critique of Pevsner's heroic approach. From the 1970s to the 1990s, researchers such as Penny Sparke (1986), Adrian Forty (1992), Jonathan Woodham (1997), and John Heskett (1985) maintained their focus on modern design history. These researchers had a broader theoretical view and examined modern design history through different methods. This represented a shift from historical narrative to analysis and interpretation of modern design history from a sociological or cultural perspective. Among them, Forty criticized the heroic approach and emphasized the social nature of design activities. Meanwhile, some researchers began to reflect on the methodology of modern design history. Representative contributions include Clive Dilnot's (1984a, b) papers *The state of design history, Part I: Mapping the field* and *The state of design history, Part II: Problems and possibilities*, Victor Margolin's (1995) paper *Design history or design studies: Subject matter and methods*, as well as Forty's (1995) paper *Debate: A reply to Victor Margolin* and Woodham's (1995) paper *Resisting colonization: Design history has its own identity*. They all explored the idea of anonymous history from different perspectives. Later,

Kjetil Fallan (2010) summarized the methodological issues of the heroic approach and anonymous history in his book *Design history: Understanding theory and method*. Finally, the study of modern design history underwent a theoretical turn toward the perspective of anonymous history.

Chinese researchers have conducted much research since the emergence of modern design in China during the 1980s. A pioneering work is the paper *Chinese modern design: A retrospective* by Wang Shouzhi (1989). After entering the twenty-first century, methodological discussions gradually appeared in this field (Yuan & Wu, 2007; Li, 2008; Xu, 2008; Yi, 2017; Yuan, 2017; Zhou, 2020; He & Ogata, 2021). The researchers also examined the methodology of modern design history from different angles, such as writing style, approach, typology, cultural studies, and comparative analysis. Among them, Shouyun Yuan (2017) explicitly discussed the topic of the heroic approach in the study of modern design history. Regarding research on the design industry, some researchers began to realize its importance as well. Shuai Zhu (2013) emphasized that researchers should pay more attention to the development of the design industry. Later, Shuo Li (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of the development of industrial design in Britain and China from a macro view.

Because of the contributions of many researchers, the theory of anonymous history has developed considerably in design studies. It provides a new perspective for explaining the historical process of modern design and is beginning to attract the attention of researchers in China, inspiring methodological innovation in this field. Meanwhile, the traditional narrative of design history, represented by the heroic approach, has been unable to summarize the historical process of Chinese modern design fully, and it is even more difficult to reveal the local development of modern design activities. The industrial design industry of Sichuan, which is closely connected to everyday life, represents local activities of modern design. Due to the lack of direct connection with the heroic approach to Chinese modern design history, the industrial design industry of Sichuan is usually ignored or overshadowed by the traditional narrative. As one of the sources of China's industrialization and modernization, the development of modern design in Sichuan is an integral part of Chinese modern design history. However, according to search results from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), no article on the industrial design industry of Sichuan from the perspective of local history has been published so far. Therefore, based on the theory of anonymous history, research on the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan can re-examine this subject by shifting the angle from a master narrative to a microscopic investigation and showing the historical characteristics of the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry that remain unknown. The link between anonymous history and the local design industry lies in how local design activities, which are still undocumented and receive little attention, are revealed during the design and consumption stages and how their significance is ascribed. This perspective provides a rich, vernacular archive of place-specific solutions, material wisdom, and aesthetic tendencies forged by everyday practice rather than master narratives. It also cultivates a deeper, more personal connection to the region, in which consumers recognize their own lived experiences and familial traditions reflected in these artifacts, transforming passive consumption into active participation in regional identity formation.

METHODOLOGY

Against the theoretical background of anonymous history, this study targets the local activities of the design and consumption ends (namely, design agencies and consumers or users) of the industrial design industry in Sichuan at the micro level. In terms of methodology, the study mainly relies on qualitative research methods, which involve phenomenologically depicting and analyzing the selected research objects and the collected information. This approach, which originated from the theory of Edmund Husserl, focuses on understanding and describing the essence of the research objects. It involves key aspects such as direct observation, rich description, thematic analysis, and validation.

Participants in the research include three owners who are running a local industrial design agency and 24 consumers living in cities in Sichuan, such as Chengdu, Yibin, and Zigong. Their ages range from 15 to 75, and their occupations include factory worker, company employee, teacher, civil servant, and college student. The specific methods used in this study include document analysis, case study, and comparative analysis. Data collection is conducted through field research, interviews, and questionnaires. Field research and interviews

are primarily used to collect basic information about industrial design agencies. The interviews focus on three aspects: business conditions, representative achievements, and problems or challenges faced. Questionnaires and interviews are used to collect basic information about consumers or users of daily necessities living in Sichuan and to understand their attitudes and opinions. The questionnaire includes the following questions: (1) Which channel(s) do you choose to buy daily necessities? (2) What do you think is the most important factor in purchasing daily necessities? (3) Do you think industrial design is important for daily necessities? (4) Are you concerned with the place of production of daily necessities? (5) Do you tend to buy daily necessities made in Sichuan? (6) What is your attitude toward daily necessities made in Sichuan and the quality of their industrial design? The interviews then focus on explaining the reasons for the answers.

The research procedure is as follows: First, the present state of the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan is introduced through document analysis. Second, the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry in Sichuan and its organic relationship with daily life are investigated through a case study and comparative analysis. Third, the main characteristics of the research on the local development of the industrial design industry are summarized in the conclusion (Figure 1). As the flow chart shows, once the target was set, a literature review and information disclosure application were first made to conduct document analysis. Then, research objects were selected based on document analysis, followed by field research and interviews with the selected local design agencies, as well as questionnaires and interviews with the selected local residents. An analysis was then conducted to present the results based on the collected data, which included the basic information from field research and questionnaires, and the attitudes or opinions collected from interviews, and a conclusion was finally drawn.

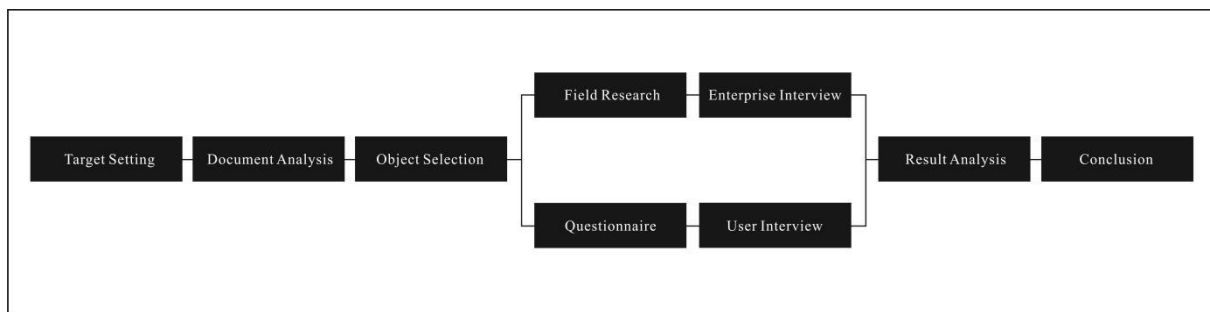


Figure 1. The flow chart of the study

FINDINGS

The State of Development and Studies of the Industrial Design Industry in Sichuan

Since the reform and opening up in the 1980s, Chinese government has valued the development of the industrial design industry. The Eleventh Five-Year Plan proposed “to develop professional industrial design”. The Twelfth Five-Year Plan proposed “to promote the transformation of industrial design from appearance design to up-market comprehensive design services”. The Thirteenth Five-Year Plan proposed “to support the construction of industrial design centers”. In addition, industrial design also shoulders the responsibility of achieving the national strategic goal of Made in China 2025” (Liu, 2019). The series of policy guidance, as well as the establishment of the market economic system and the wave of industrialization, together set the historical background of the rise and development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan. In this context, the industrial design industry has also made remarkable achievements in Sichuan in recent years. For instance, activities such as the Sichuan-Taiwan Industrial Design Awards have stimulated design innovation, promoted design incubation, and provided strong support for the high-quality development of the manufacturing industry. Meanwhile, the local government has also introduced a series of policy measures, such as the Guidance for the Creation of the Sichuan Provincial Industrial Design Research Institute (*Sichuan Shengji Gongye Sheji Yanjiuyuan Chuangjian Zhinan*), to speed up the establishment of an industrial design innovation system and promote the development of high-end, intelligent, and green manufacturing.

In respect to research and statistics, in the first chapter of the book *Zhongguo Gongye Sheji Nianjian 2006-2013* (China Industrial Design Association, 2014), the state of industrial design education, design institutions, and industry organizations in Sichuan is summarized in a highly general way. This study mentions explicitly that industrial design agencies in Sichuan are primarily concentrated in Chengdu. By the time the book was completed, there were nearly 20 companies engaged in industrial design, and the companies listed are mainly a few-star design agencies, such as Luokeye Design Co., Ltd., Jialantu Design Co., Ltd., and Langjian Design Co., Ltd. Nevertheless, for the development of the industrial design industry in western China, including Sichuan, current studies still compare it with the more developed coastal areas and summarize its situation, in a stereotypical manner, as being in a backward and marginalized state (Ren & Sun, 2023; Sun et al., 2019; Wang, 2023). But relative backwardness does not mean stagnation, nor does it mean that its development lacks historical significance in the context of Chinese modern design history. In addition, in December 2023, an information request was made to the Sichuan Provincial Department of Economy and Information for “the annual number and revenue of all industrial design agencies in Sichuan Province in the past 10 years (from 2013 to 2022)”, and a formal reply was received in January 2024, which stated that there are no statistics so far.

According to the above statement, the following facts can be confirmed about the research on the industrial design industry in Sichuan: (1) At present, researchers mainly focus on the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan from a top-down perspective and incorporate it into the structure of the master narrative; (2) From an overview, the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan is usually summarized in a general and brief way, lacking the support of empirical details; (3) In terms of comparative analysis, the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan is often given a relatively backward stereotype; (4) In terms of quantitative analysis, the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan lacks diachronic and dynamic long-term statistics. In other words, the specific activities of the industrial design industry in Sichuan still need further research to be revealed. Based on the theory of anonymous history and shifted from an overview perspective to a microscopic perspective, the following investigation analyzes selected companies (the design end) and individuals (the consumption end) and shows the details of activities in the industry. As research objects, these enterprises and individuals have an organic connection with the development of the industrial design industry in Sichuan and can be regarded as the cells of the grassroots activities of the industry at the micro level.

An Analysis of Anonymous Activities of Industrial Design Industry in Sichuan

Different from the previous studies, which mainly contained macroscopic narratives or focused on the star design agencies in the region, this study conducted interviews with three industrial design agencies that belong to the type of small and micro enterprises and are relatively unknown, and made a brief comparison (Table 1).

Table 1. A comparison of three industrial design agencies in Sichuan

Name	Characteristics	Strategies	Challenges
Yiting	Broadest scope, offering industrial design and production, modeling, packaging, and exhibition services.	Expansion and upgrading through commercial design, school-enterprise cooperation, and international competitions.	Domestic and international environment, local industry chain, suppliers, manufacturing, and potential stagnation.
Yingxiangli	Specialized in wine showcase market, targeting major cities.	Focus on professional design services, relying on personal relationships to open market space.	Capital chain issues, difficulty in receiving payments.
Wanmeng Muzuo	Specialized in children's furniture market, selling products online.	Focus on product sales performance, relying on social media platforms for market testing.	Continuous supply of successful products, quality and cost control, and market promotion on new media platforms.

These agencies are Chengdu Yiting Industrial Product Design Co., Ltd., founded in 2007 (hereinafter referred to as Yiting); Sichuan Yingxiangli Wine Cellar Engineering Co., Ltd., founded in 2014 (hereinafter referred to as Yingxiangli); and Chengdu Wanmeng Muzuo Children's Furniture Shop, founded in 2022 (hereinafter referred to as Wanmeng Muzuo). In addition to being small and micro enterprises, these three companies have

one thing in common: their founders all majored in industrial design at universities in Sichuan. This commonality indicates the entrepreneurial efforts of local design professionals. All three companies are located in Chengdu, which reflects that, as mentioned in the previous section, Chengdu has indeed developed into the center of industrial design activities in Sichuan and offers considerable market opportunities to industrial design firms, including small and micro enterprises. In terms of business scope, Yiting provides the design and production of industrial products (Figure 2) and also offers design services such as modeling, packaging, and exhibition, which could prove to be the broadest among the three samples. Yingxiangli and Wanmeng Muzuo are smaller in scale and more specialized in scope: the former mainly targets the wine showcase market (Figure 3). At the same time, the latter focuses on the children's furniture market (Figure 4).



Figure 2. Air purifier designed by Yiting

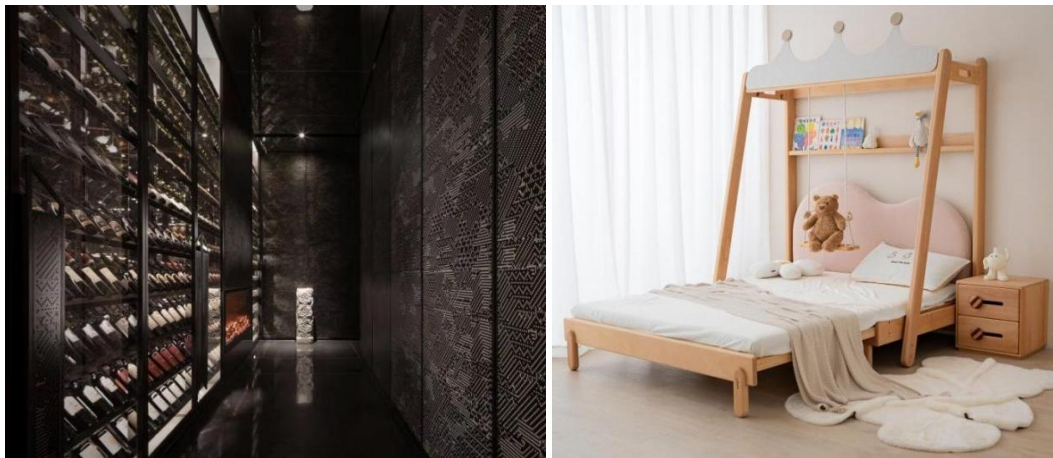


Figure 3. Wine showcase designed by Yingxiangli

Figure 4. Children's furniture designed by Wanmeng Muzuo

The differences among the three companies are further amplified when it comes to expressing their representative achievements. Yiting not only carries out commercial design activities but also actively participates in school-enterprise cooperation and international design competitions. It has been awarded various honorary titles by the local government, showing a strong trend of expansion and upgrading. Yingxiangli emphasizes, in its achievements statement, that the company provides professional design services for customers in major cities (e.g., Chengdu, Shanghai). As a design agency that mainly sells products online, Wanmeng Muzuo highlights its considerable sales performance on the internet. When asked about the problems or challenges encountered, Yiting gave the broadest answers, involving the impact of the macro environment at both the domestic and international levels, the timeliness of the local industry chain, suppliers, and manufacturing, and possible stagnation in its own development. For the same question, Yingxiangli's answer is very direct: the core issue is the capital chain problem, highlighted by the difficulty of receiving payments. Wanmeng Muzuo's answer is also relatively micro: it includes the continuous supply of successful

products, quality and cost control, and market promotion on new media platforms. From a comparative analysis viewpoint, although these three small and micro enterprises are founded by design professionals and are located in Chengdu, their development strategies, marketing means, and the problems or challenges they face are very different. Yiting provides a wide range of industrial design services and manages to show its comprehensive strength by creating a brand image. When facing problems or challenges, its way of thinking is more macro and systematic. Yingxiangli depends on the maintenance of personal relationships to open up market space when providing specialized design services, while Wanmeng Muzuo largely relies on social media platforms to test the market. When faced with problems or challenges, the focus of the latter two companies is different due to the diversity in their business operations, but both concentrate on how to deal with and solve the practical difficulties of the moment. This possibly suggests that they have not yet developed to the point where they need to consider a macro strategy.

During the interview process, the owner of Wanmeng Muzuo ranked the importance of decision-making factors that she learned from communication with customers of the e-commerce platforms. The ranking from high to low is as follows: (1) quality, (2) word-of-mouth evaluation, (3) function, (4) price, (5) brand image. According to questionnaires and personal interviews with 24 daily necessities consumers living in Sichuan through social media, this study obtained the statistical result of ranking the importance of the same decision-making factors: (1) quality, (2) word-of-mouth evaluation, (3) function and price (tied), (4) brand image. Among these respondents, 92% have had a whole experience of online shopping. This result indicates some features of internet marketing and the purchase of industrial products. The number of target group samples collected in this study is too small to have statistical value, but the analysis of some typical cases is still worth mentioning. The following are the results of the case study. First of all, although the vast majority of respondents buy daily necessities through the combination of e-commerce platforms and brick-and-mortar stores, two respondents (aged 31-40 and over 60, respectively) said that they are only willing to buy goods offline. The respondent in the 31-40 age group (male, bank clerk) rated word-of-mouth evaluation as the most important factor in decision-making and said that e-commerce platforms are extremely unreliable in this regard. The respondent in the over 60 age group (male, retired worker) believed that the price factor is the most important in decision-making. However, being older, he faced some technical barriers and resulting insecurity that prevented him from buying goods on e-commerce platforms. Otherwise, the advantage of the low price of online shopping should have been a positive factor to stimulate him to use online shopping methods. Second, consumers participating in the survey have similar opinions on the two questions concerning local brand image building: (1) Do you tend to buy daily necessities made in Sichuan? (2) What is your attitude toward daily necessities made in Sichuan and the quality of their industrial design? For the first question, 79% of the respondents answered “no”, while for the second question, 75% answered “indifference”. In other words, at least within the scope of this study, it does not show that Sichuan local brand image building is good enough to have consumers express a strong preference. Nonetheless, there are a few exceptions. A respondent aged over 60 (female, retired civil servant) answered “yes” and expressed a preference, citing nostalgia as the main reason, which is closely related to her age. Another respondent in the 15-20 age group (male, college student) gave the same answer, explaining that the reason was the identity associated with highly commercialized local cultural symbols. Therefore, due to the age difference, the roots of the positive attitude towards the Sichuan local brand image form a strong contrast in motivation. On the one hand, the design triggers nostalgia in the pre-modern context, while on the other hand, it fosters cultural identity in the post-modern context.

Limitations

In terms of research limitations, large-scale questionnaires cannot be carried out because of the limited research grant, and there is no basic statistical data on the industrial design industry in Sichuan so far. Although this study shows some meaningful details of the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry in Sichuan at the microscopic level through qualitative research methods such as phenomenological depiction and analysis, the findings are only one-dimensional and cannot be cross-checked by quantitative methods such as official statistics and large-scale questionnaires. Therefore, the research on this subject needs to be further developed. Quantitative and qualitative methods will be integrated to form a mixed-methods design, yielding more in-depth and detailed results.

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions could be drawn from the investigation described above. First, based on the theory of anonymous history, the grassroots activities of the industrial design industry in China would come to the fore. The details of the development of the local industrial design industry are difficult to disclose against the backdrop of the master narrative and heroic approach. Second, from the perspective of anonymous history, this study explores the design and consumption ends of the local industrial design industry in Sichuan at the micro level, and examines the selected research objects by means of phenomenological depiction and analysis. In the process, some remarkable results emerged. Although different from the star design agencies often mentioned in the master narrative, unknown industrial design agencies, as small and micro enterprises, are also an integral part of the industrial design industry. The evolution and growth of these companies or enterprises contribute to the progress of the local industrial design industry as well. Therefore, their present state, achievements, and the problems or challenges they face deserve attention. In addition, anonymous consumer and user research is of vital importance. Their consumption and usage patterns, preferences, and attitudes are closely related to the marketing, innovation, and brand strategy of the local industrial design industry. Future studies could explore the relationship between consumer behavior and local identity in greater depth, examining variables such as age, cultural affiliation, and digital market dynamics. Third, although the findings are limited in this study, the introduction of mixed-methods research combining qualitative and quantitative methods will provide a promising outlook for further research on the development of China's local industrial design industry. Future studies that integrate quantitative methods will support the qualitative findings, thereby constructing a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of local design industries. Finally, many aspects of the anonymous part of the local industrial design industry remain untouched, and further investigation is needed to shed light on them. Through the above-mentioned methods, the concept of anonymous history could be further applied to other regions of China, to different scales of industrial design enterprises, and to varied consumer contexts.

Author's Contributions

This study was created by a single author.

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Competing Interests

There is no potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Committee Declaration

Ethics committee approval was obtained on 01.09.2023 by Modern International Art & Design Academy Ethics Committee, Chongqing Technology and Business University.

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Figure References

Figure 1: Created by the author.

Figure 2: Yiting. (2024). *P401 Air Cleaner*. Idingcn. <https://www.idingcn.cn/cases/689886ae853718ea2abcf44> (20.11.2024).

Figure 3: Taken by the owner of Yingxiangli, Zhanpeng Wang.

Figure 4: Taken by the owner of Wanmeng Muzuo, Qin Tang.

Author's Biography

Zhiyong Wang obtained his PhD at the School of Design, Southwest Jiaotong University. He is now a lecturer of Modern International Art & Design Academy, Chongqing Technology and Business University. He blends academic interests with modern design history, sociology of design, and modern design education.