

# THE NEXT CULTURAL REVOLUTION

THE CHINESE DON'T GET **CREATIVITY**, RIGHT? SURE, THEY CAN STAMP OUT A WIDGET, OR KNOCK OFF A DVD, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO IMAGINATION, THEY JUST DON'T HAVE THE GENE.

WELL, KEEP TELLING YOURSELF THAT.

By Aric Chen  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW ROWAT



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rriving for breakfast on a recent morning in Beijing, Jennifer Wen Ma looks as self-assured as the glittering new buildings rising around her. Her eyes convey a kind of benign ferocity, a flicker of knowingness that's jarring in a 33-year-old. But then again, for all her youth, Ma is carrying an unlikely burden: the aspirations of 1.3 billion people.

A Beijing-born, New York-seasoned artist, Ma is part of the seven-member creative team masterminding China's great coming out party—the opening ceremony of next year's Beijing Olympics. Leading her group is acclaimed filmmaker Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*); celebrated artist Cai Guo-Qiang (New York's Museum of Modern Art, London's Tate Modern, an upcoming retrospective at the Guggenheim) is also on board. But, younger than her colleagues by a generation or so—and with an artist's résumé that includes a video work, projected onto a tousled bed, of a woman engaged in what she politely calls “self-comfort”—Ma is emblematic of a newer, edgier China. The opening ceremony will no doubt be a G-rated affair, but when the Olympic torch finally arrives in Beijing next year, Ma wants to smoke out your clichéd ideas about her country—and those of your 4 billion fellow viewers—right along with it. “We’re going to try to keep the ribbon dancing to a minimum,” she says. “Whatever we end up doing, the bottom line is to showcase the innovation of the Chinese people. Everyone wants to project a very modern image—one that will stun the world.”

China is not content to serve as factory

to the globe. Call it economic foresight, or cultural pride, but despite the stratospheric growth of its economy—10.7% last year—China knows that cheap labor alone can't sustain the boom. While a flurry of activity (and, yes, a government five-year plan) has stressed scientific and technological innovation, look a little closer and you'll see that creativity in art and industry—in design, fashion, media, and the like—is fast becoming a driving national mission.

Look past the behemoth Three Gorges Dam, past a highway system that will be larger than America's by 2020, and China is building a creative infrastructure, too, at breakneck speed. You can sense it in the trendy restaurants and slick boutiques popping up in major cities—and in the gritty ex-warehouse and factory districts where imagination-driven companies are joining the cafés and art galleries that first settled in. Newsstands are brimming with glossies such as *Vision*, *Urban*, and *Modern Weekly* that, joined by online counterparts like Coldtea, feature international trends alongside promising local talents. China's answers to YouTube (Tudou and Yoqoo) and social-networking sites (Douban)—along with an estimated 34 million (and skyrocketing) blogs—are bringing in digital reinforcements on a national scale.

Combine all of that with a counter-diaspora and reverse brain drain of talent, and the overall result is a kind of primordial soup thick with the building blocks of creative enterprise. Emerging from it is an army—small, but growing—that's working to reinvent how China thinks and works.

Of course, that process has been under way for some time. Homegrown corporate giants such as Lenovo, which swallowed up IBM's personal-computing unit in 2005, and the appliance maker Haier, have made notable strides in design and innovation. The Sonys and GMs of the world are starting to get real mileage out of their Chinese design studios. Veteran filmmakers such as Zhang and Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*, *Temptress Moon*) and stars like Ziyi Zhang (see page 70) are producing work that competes internationally while fashion designers Vivienne Tam and Han Feng (both long based in New York) have earned global followings as well. Judging by the coun-





CHINA'S NEW  
CREATIVE  
CLASS

► **JENNIFER WEN MA** | member, Creative Committee, 2008 Olympics

The youngest member of the seven-person committee planning next year's Olympic opening ceremony, Jennifer Wen Ma, 33, hopes to roll out a whole new look for China at the inauguration of the games. Working under legendary film director Zhang Yimou, she promises a radical departure—and a minimum of ribbon dancing. Photographed in front of the rising Olympic Stadium in Beijing.

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try's Olympics plans—expect some of the most radical architecture the world has ever seen—even the old-guard bureaucrats seem to be getting the idea.

But does China have what it takes to become a creative *superpower*? At first glance, even the Chinese seem unsure. “We asked a thousand 15- to 35-year-olds in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou to rank the 20 or 25 words that best describe China,” says P.T. Black, an American-born partner of Jigsaw International, a Shanghai-based trend-forecasting firm that counts major multinationals as clients. And “‘creative’ placed close to last.”

Still, for those raised with the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, the world of Communist Youth Leagues and Little Red Books doesn't figure into the equation anymore—it's all about the Internet, new media, and MTV. China's overall population may be aging faster than almost any on earth, but its younger generations benefit from one creative staple long denied their elders: a sense of possibility. “These are people who have seen nothing but growth,” Black says, “nothing but China getting the Olympics, Yao Ming going to the NBA, nothing but optimism.” And, for some, nothing but the tantalizing proximity of a vast new affluence: By one count, the average age of China's 400 richest people stands at 46.5, versus 65.7 in the United States—bringing a 25-year-old in China a full generation closer to the average gazillionaire. “There's a sense that creativity is where you make money,” Black continues. “People are getting rewarded for it, and that's only going to inspire more.”

**IF ANYONE COULD BE CALLED** Great Leader in this new countercultural revolution, it's Ou Ning. Originally from the southern province of Guangdong but now based in Beijing, Ou, 37, is typical of the kind of frenetic multitasker you're liable to run into here these days: A writer, filmmaker, music promoter, and graphic designer, he has founded several alternative magazines to boot. His latest project is Get It Louder, a roving biennial exhibition of young creatives that's billed as the first of its kind in China—a road show for the country's grooviest generation that, this spring and summer, is having its second run in Beijing, Shanghai,

and Guangzhou. “In Chinese society, it's always the old people who have power,” says Ou, who's dressed in a pair of pea-green Nikes to complement his austere eyewear and uniform of black. “We want to create a platform for young people to speak their own voice.”

Packed with everything from animation and illustration to architecture, fashion, and (almost literally) the kitchen sink, the first iteration of Get It Louder in 2005 was a designer-palooza that showcased 100 mostly Chinese up-and-comers—half from the mainland, with an average age of 25. Thousands came to check out the punk and skater graphics; sound, video, and art installations; and enough cool T-shirts to outfit New York's Williamsburg, L.A.'s Silver Lake, and London's East End combined. And then there were the parties. “A lot of people drank so much they just crashed on the sofas,” Ou recalls, “which is how I think exhibitions should be.”

It might sound like Sino-slacker anarchy, but Ou and his cadre are on the international business radar—and getting bigger. At the inaugural Get It Louder, the German faucet maker Grohe was so impressed by Shanghai architect Chen Xudong's “Water Corridor” installation that the company asked him to come up with some new product concepts. And Chivas tapped another participant, a collective called Unmask, to design whiskey and cocktail glasses for its sponsored events. “The most interesting work is coming from advertising, PR, and marketing, because they have the money,” says Shaway Yeh, the editorial director of the Shanghai-based publication *Modern Weekly*. Pulling out a boxed set of 13 books, sponsored by Rémy Martin's Louis XIII cognac, she flips through a tour de force of sophisticated layouts, pull-out postcards, origami-like pages, and photographs that can be rearranged as in a scrapbook. Each book pays homage to one of China's cultural movers and shakers; all are the work of Les Suen, a 31-year-old Shanghai design whiz.

The massive influx of foreign multinationals, and the growth of their Chinese competitors, has given local talents new chances to stretch and prove themselves at home. More significant, those talents are starting to find demand overseas.

Last November, the *People's Daily* proudly announced that China had become the world's third-largest exporter of creative services and products. Granted, how creativity was defined—and how much of the country's \$969.1 billion in 2006 exports was “creative”—seems a bit unclear. Still, “the last 20 years have been about the West moving East,” says Philip Dodd, a consultant and BBC radio host whose London-based firm, Made in China, is helping Chinese cities develop their creative industries. “But the next 20 years will be about the East moving West.”

Dodd, who's at work on everything from an electronic-arts biennial in Shanghai to an animation festival in Beijing, isn't just talking about Haier washing machines at Best Buy or Chinese herbal remedies at Whole Foods. He means culture, too. He points to a contemporary rendition of the ancient tale of *The Monkey King*, directed by a Chinese theater impresario—and set to a score by Blur frontman Damon Albarn—that will headline the inaugural Manchester International Festival in England this month. And Dodd could have gone on: Not long ago, Cao Qiang, a young Chinese fashion designer, won the grand prize at an international competition—sponsored in part by the lofty French body that designates haute couture. From Germany to Japan, Chinese industrial-design students are also starting to rack up awards. Guest-edited by two Chinese artists, the latest issue of the global-culture quarterly *Colors* pays homage to the country's emerging creative gusto. And products by young designers like Lin Jing and Eddie Yip are making the cut at choosy retailers such as Milanese style mecca 10 Corso Como and “urban vinyl” phenomenon Kidrobot in the United States.

On a more monumental scale, three Beijing architects erupted onto the international stage last year when they clinched the competition to design a condo high-rise outside Toronto. Their winning scheme, set to begin construction this year with an estimated \$114 million price tag, is a dramatic 56-story tower that spirals and undulates like a giant ergonomic barbell. And the units were such a hit that these young architects—who call their firm MAD Design—have since been asked to build a second tower



next to the first, while other commissions have been flooding in from Denmark to Inner Mongolia. China, known as the playground for the world's most adventurous architects, is now exporting some flash-forward designs of its own.

"The young generation in China is unbelievably strong," says Stefano Boeri, who, as editor of the Italian design bible *Domus* (he's now at *Abitare*), oversaw the launch of the magazine's Chinese edition last year. Boeri is referring to China's emerging architects, but his words resonate more broadly: "They still need to metabolize," he continues, "but in a few years, they'll produce something new. Of this I'm absolutely sure."

Meanwhile, don't overlook that other Chinese characteristic: determination. "Recently," says Ou, the *Get It Louder* founder, "there was a series of television documentaries explaining the rise of empires. Everyone here watched it very closely." They were, he says, looking for pointers.

**TO GET A SENSE OF HOW** Chinese creativity might evolve, just look across the East China Sea. "The Chinese see Japan as a role model, because it was able to modernize without losing its visceral culture," says Amy Gendler, who runs the AIGA's Chinese outpost—the design organization's only presence outside of the United States. Indeed, those who once dismissed Japan as a backwater of the imagination eventually ate those words as the nation became a global force in fashion, design, architecture, and pop culture—not to mention cars and consumer electronics.

Likewise, "there's a strong desire in China to become internationally relevant while maintaining a Chineseness," says Gendler, who also teaches graphic design at Beijing's top-notch Central Academy of Fine Arts. She's not talking about dragons and phoenixes. She's talking about people like Li Weiran. A soft-spoken 31-year-old, Li graduated from the prestigious Beijing Film Academy and went on to make TV commercials in China for the likes of Nike, Pepsi, and Google. With a keen cinematic eye and brilliant wit, Li's ads spoof hackneyed scenes from Chinese life: a generations-old family feud, complete with a flying chicken (don't ask), that's finally resolved over a bottle of Master Kong green tea. Or an unwitting util-

ity worker, perched high on a telephone pole, turned into a human basketball hoop by a group of teens slam-dunking his workman's bag. (It was part of a series for Nike called "Anytime.")

"I like to get my creativity from real life," Li says, sipping a coffee at a trendy bar overlooking Beijing's Houhai Lake. "Most of my ads are localized, about experiences the Chinese can relate to, while maybe borrowing some Western ideas," he continues. Li started off with a bang when, at just 25, he directed a television commercial for UNICEF, which won China's first-ever Gold award at advertising's career-making One Show in New York. "It was an extraordinary ad that I remember well," One Club president Kevin Swane-poel recalls six years later. "As good as any I've seen." Apparently, Sony agrees; it just hired Li to help produce some new ads for the domestic markets in China, Japan, and Korea.

In other words, as China's influence expands, and its young creatives refine their export-grade material, the notion of Chineseness is expanding along with it. After all, you wouldn't think of MAD's Toronto towers as being typically Chinese. But "there's a reason we hid the buildings' structure," explains firm partner Qun Dang, referring to their torqued, sinuous exteriors. "China didn't have an industrial revolution like in the West, so the structure isn't the main concern. Instead, it's about the beauty of the natural form, a more eastern philosophical or Chinese way of thinking." In light of the current infatuation with expressive architectural gestures—think Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid—it's tempting to argue that the world is catching up with China.

Not that China doesn't have some work to do. Overall, its education system still does little to inspire. And then there's the weight of government censorship (a heavily redacted Internet, for example), red tape, and all that nagging piracy—though Beijing is working on a national design policy that promises, officially at least, to better protect intellectual property rights while promoting new education initiatives. What's more, while the country has spectacularly leapfrogged into contemporaneity, the flip side, many Chinese will tell you, is that there's not much of a pop-sub-culture foundation to build on.

Even here, however, the vacuum is fill-

ing fast. "Street culture is becoming the biggest influence in China," says a hip and prolific Shanghai designer who goes by the name Ji Ji. His branding and identity clients already include Nike, L'Oréal, and Shu Uemura, but the 35-year-old also has five stores: four for Shirt Flag, his T-shirt line known for ironic takes on Mao-era graphics, and one for Under Oath, a more architectural and conceptual fashion collection. "Right now, we're following the Western world, but we don't want to copy," he says. "I think we'll have our own street culture soon."

Or consider Da>Space. A year-old gallery and store in a former factory building in Shanghai, it has hosted everything from a life-size, apocalyptic take on an army tank to an extravaganza, called "I, China," that got more than 80 emerging artists and designers to personalize a specially commissioned toy figure. Da>Space is entirely self-funded—no corporate sponsors allowed—which makes it an anomaly in this cash-hungry milieu. Sponsors tend to want to take over, explains Lin Lin Mai, one of Da>Space's four 35-and-under partners, and while her design firm, Jellymon/JMGS, has counted Nike and ad giant Wieden+Kennedy as clients, she and her cohorts want to "go more slowly here," she says. "It takes time to develop a subculture before it gets latched onto the mainstream."

That's it: time. China just needs time. Yet in a country where everything is happening at warp speed, where neighborhoods and even skylines are transformed overnight, waiting around isn't an option. And so, from the grassroots to the very top, young Chinese are ramping up. Just think of Jennifer Wen Ma, as she spends her days and nights contemplating how to project an ascendant China at the Olympics next year. "It's a heavy burden—not only to show the world a new side of China, but the Chinese people are expecting a lot too," she says. "Everyone, it seems, is ready for a renaissance of creativity." They won't have long to wait. **EC**

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*Aric Chen is a contributing editor for I.D., Surface, and Interior Design magazines and regularly writes for The New York Times, Art + Auction, and other publications.*

*Feedback: loop@fastcompany.com*