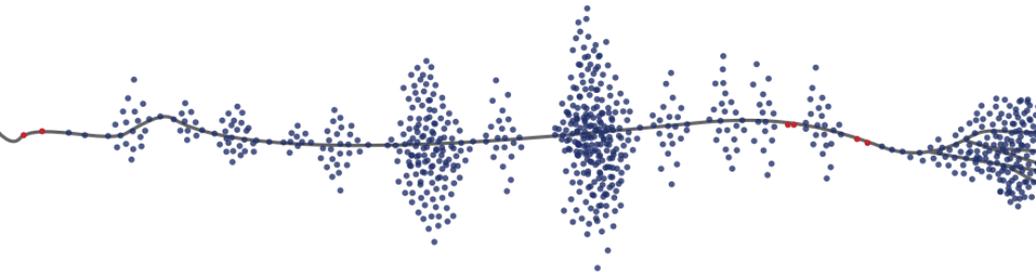


# Red Mat

*A Design Experiment*





## Background

China is increasingly influencing how this planet will look in the coming century — economically, politically and culturally. Heading up global insights in an innovation consultancy, my role provides a particular perspective on what is happening in China: primary research reveals the nuances of how it's citizens view themselves and the world around them; interactions with multi-national clients that are eyeing up what already is or will soon be the world's largest economy; and conversations with Chinese brands looking to move up the value chain as they compete both at home and in the global marketplace, all within a timeline that meets both short terms market wins and long term strategic goals. It provides unique lens through which to see what has come to pass and what will be.

While I am based out of Shanghai much of my time is spent travelling to a pretty diverse set of countries for field research, client meetings and general fact-finding and I've seen first-hand how growing Chinese commercial influence triggers a range of emotional responses to from suspicion and fear to jealousy, admiration and respect.

Despite having travelled and researched extensively across China I don't pretend to fully understand this country, in the same way that I balk at saying I understand 'Europe' or the 'Americas'. But since an initial visit in 2004 I've had hundreds of conversations with a wide gamut of Chinese from wealthy entrepreneurs through to migrant workers, housewives to

truck drivers, taken tours of homes, shadowed interactions with the world around them, documented lives, and have arguably experienced facets of China that most people, Chinese included don't appreciate – their strategies for getting by, for getting ahead, the brands they covet, their hopes, aspirations, fears. Most of this work is driven by Chinese and multinational commercial clients and I consider myself fortunate to have this perspective and grateful that these participants, people are willing to open up and share.

At the same time I'm dealing with my own conflicts. I've worked on and have shaped products that have sold in the hundreds of millions - the scale at which these these organisations operate, and also a scale at which comes a particular sense of environmental and social responsibility. I've seen some of the best and worst of what globalisation can bring – from providing a stable income and potentially life-saving technologies through to human and environmental exploitation; products that deliver on their brand promise and many that don't; from having a sense of control over one's destiny to becoming a very small, seemingly insignificant cog in a massive global machine. For our worldly experience, fancy job titles, airs and graces – I, you, we are also bit players in this global economy.

By now there are very few people left on the planet that aren't in some way impacted by globalisation – as producers and consumers – those few who make a decision to opt-out must do so consciously. Despite greater traceability through the supply chain, our touch points to this interconnected system that churns out ever more, ever faster inherently limits our understanding of the whole. We can talk about globalisation, buy into it, buy from it, demonstrate against it, but for most of us its scale and complexity defies comprehension. Part of the machine is dedicated to designing, prototyping, testing and pushing to market connected products and services that know more about us, than we ever will about them.

It's as if we were standing on the top of a hill and are now running at full pelt into the fog below – not quite knowing what lies ahead, letting gravity and momentum carry us, and doing our best to avoid the silhouettes of objects as they loom into

view, chased by the fear of stopping.

Most people understand the critical role that China plays in sustaining and furthering this globalised economy. But if you're reading this there are some nuances I'm guessing you haven't truly absorbed: as the global economic centre of gravity continues to shift towards China++ many of the multinational companies that put products on your shelves will increasingly be designing for China 1st, they'll increasingly design out of China; and will increasingly be led by and draw from a pool of highly skilled, highly experienced Chinese talent whose design sensibilities appeal to a global customer base, but which is also grounded in and for 'China'. It's here today but is unevenly distributed across the design and manufacturing process.

In the next decade we're going to see new hybrid products/services that have an global impact on the scale of the mobile phone and nascent social networking services, but created, designed, manufactured in China, whose primary market is Chinese, that couldn't have been made anywhere else and for whom the Rest of the World is a marketing afterthought. It's cultural, political, technological and ideological values will be resolutely mid-21st century Chinese having absorbed the aspects of the globalised marketplace that are analogous with its worldview, and ignoring the rest. It'll draw the formal and informal manufacturing ecosystem, local business and intellectual property environments that are a trajectory of today's and on a very Chinese aesthetic.

And you'll be queuing up to buy it, and buy into it.



歡迎光臨

Welcome

# The Experiment

The goal was to conduct a design experiment that would provide perspective on China today, reflect on China's changing global role and hold up a mirror to its national identity.

The experiment was conducted within the following six rules:

1. It must engage people from across China.
2. Every Chinese person must be able recognise the final thing that is made.
3. None of the people taking part should understand what is being made, until the exact moment that it is made.
4. Only Chinese people and services can be used.
5. That the experiment goal and process is reviewed after each step.
6. The process must be transparent, in-so-far as it doesn't compromise Rule 3.

To call out some nuances behind the rules:

- » Rule 3 mimics a characteristic of globalisation where individual roles in the thinking, production, consumption of things are blinkered – from a worker on the Foxconn factory line, a shop assistant at the retail point of sale, a shipyard worker stacking a container, a consumer pulling a shiny new product out of the box, or a child growing up close to a recycling plant — motivations can be met on an individual or organisational level, but still only a small part of the whole process is visible, and the overall goal is not known.
- » The pace of corporate research doesn't support much time for reflection. Rule 5 is about ensuring there is enough time to reflect upon and change the final outcome as the process unfolds, with regular check-ins with the local research assistant to gauge feelings, intent, when and where the process might end up stepping over the line. In any country it takes a while to feel out where social boundaries lie, in China especially so.
- » In a world of information overload and/or filter failure transparency does not equate to revealing the purpose of the experiment but merely leaves a data trail or back story to satisfy piqued minds.



The decision of what to make was inspired by expeditions to first, second and third tier cities across China and the realisation that an abundant and very Chinese raw material had been hidden in plain sight — the ubiquitous red welcome mat that sits outside many Chinese restaurants and shops.

Most local Chinese wouldn't consider the red mat to be part of their rich culture preferring to draw on something with more apparent positive connotations such as literature or music, or more likely adopt something more hi-tech and forward looking: Shanghai's iconic skyline; bullet trains; an active space programme; scientific exploration in the Arctic; an appreciating yuan; or a growing global presence. Conducting interviews in China over the years I've had push-back from some for dwelling, even in passing on what they consider to be "old low-tech china" and I hope these people will bear with me now.

Nor would most foreigners consider the red mat as a strong cultural touchpoint. However for many foreigners Chinese food (in most cases – local interpretations of Chinese food) is literally their first taste of 'Chinese culture', and the red-mat sitting outside the restaurant is one of the first touch points of that experience.

Virtually every community in China has someone selling red mats made by brands such as 3A, 3G and 8A to name but a few. A plain red mat can be yours for 45 RMB (€5, \$7) and for between 120 – 420 RMB (< €51, <\$66) depending on the complexity you can commission a custom design which is cut, heat pressed or stamped onto the mat. This ubiquitous low-tech, high volume product has every right to stake its claim as being emblematic of the manufacturing base that has become the foundation of modern China, even if it is now relegated to a bit part, forgotten, down trodden.

In the months before formally initiating this experiment time was spent exploring the material, commissioning custom designs, visiting fmat customisation workshops. Through continued proximity to the material, the iconic yellow embossed into red sponge the idea of what to make took shape: *a Chinese national flag*.

There are few symbols of national identity more recognisable and loaded with meaning than a nation's flag with highly established rules and rituals around their use. Flags are raised on poles, saluted to, waved by crowds, draped over coffins, hung from doorways and when the occasion demands become a focal point around which to gather.

Working on or with a symbol of a nation heightens the need for sensitivity. For a foreigner working with the national symbol of another country this applies doubly so. This is not new territory — the professional life of a researcher with work travel and field studies forcing similar decisions around local norms — from something as notionally simple as using the most appropriate greeting, whether to remove shoes on arrival in the home; to understanding when to respect local authority figures and when to challenge them. Whilst most people instinctively follow or are blind to these nuances, for someone attuned to local sensitivities a visit to a foreign country lead to hundreds of these choices. Working on a nation's flag brings issues around the respect of another culture into clear focus.

It is worth noting that for something so ubiquitous it is not surprising to find more personal, trivial or flippant use of the national flag whether its animated QQ icons; embroidered flags; celebrations of China's 60th anniversary; promotional food; NBA stars raising their local profile the list of places where flags have been reinterpreted in a way that the medium wins out over attention to detail or regulation. To put the issue of a foreigner handling of national symbols into perspective, China is probably the world's largest exporter of other nation's national flags adorning pretty much anything that is adornable.

The tension between the form of the mat and our pre-conceived notions of its function creates a cognitive dissonance — the otherwise unconscious act of walking on a mat is checked by our ingrained behaviours around respect for the authority of a symbol of national identity. Taking one step back: most objects around us don't consciously register and for good reason — if they did we would spend our entire time assessing and reassessing their impact on our current context. Is it dangerous? Is it useful? Will it break? Whom does it belong to? Where



can I buy it? To maintain a constant awareness of everything would be like opening a door into new exotic curios shop every second of every day. Even the professional observer of everyday life becomes inured to what lies around us. A flag made from new pieces of red mat material triggers a pause for thought, challenges us to unlearn what we take for granted.

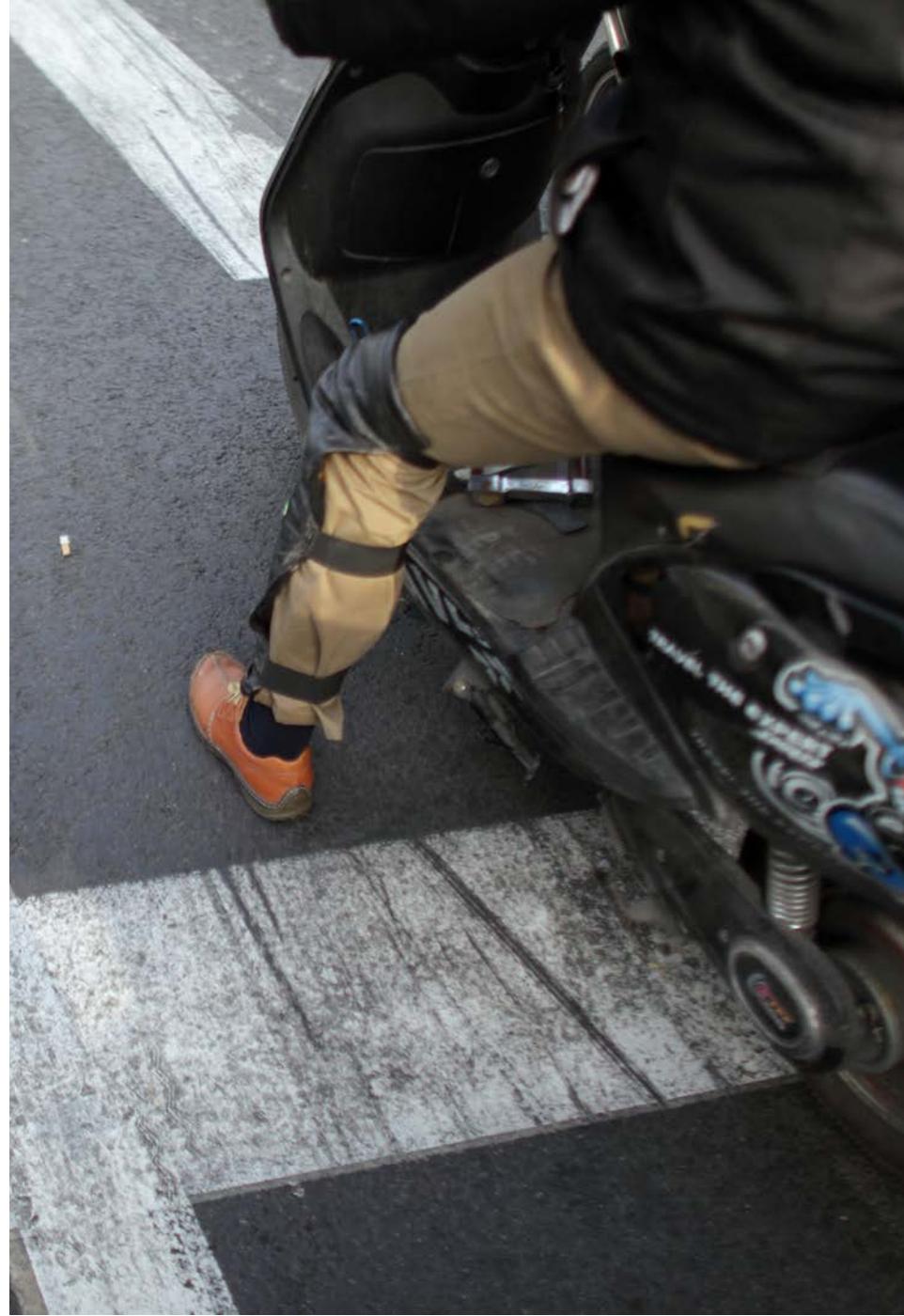
Red Mat is very much a process driven experiment with over ~20 discrete tasks and many more sub-tasks required to complete the design. Given that the experiment needed to be conducted in Chinese a local Chinese assistant was hired to execute the tasks and to support the feedback loop.

One of the first tasks was to set up an accountant to handle money payments. From this point on I'll switch to 'we' to include myself, my assistant, other people that are partaking in the experiment, wittingly or otherwise.

§

We deliberately set no final deadline for this experiment, with the pace of responses and our own need to reflect on the decision dictating the final delivery. A Sina Weibo account was set up to share out progress and point people to tasks that required input — in due course another 9 accounts would be set up with various Chinese services. We made no attempt at building a Weibo following wanting to understand how growth evolves organically in response to the tasks and once the flag was assembled.

At the outset of the experiment we were unsure as the optimal number of people required to complete the different task within the spirit of the rules. Crowd sourcing is often assumed to involve engaging with many, it is 'a crowd' after all. We assumed there needed to be enough of a community to make engaging them in tasks easy, but small enough to manage/guide and minimise the risk the the final goal would be discovered. We hoped to tease out the optimal service platforms, number and type of participant for different types of task by the end of the experiment.





## Services

A variety of services were used over the course of the experiment - each platform supports public and private communication between its members.



Taobao

Online shopping site similar to eBay, Rakuten and Amazon and part of the Alibaba Group which also owns Alipay - the preferred escrow payment platform on Taobao and AliWangWang - the chat platform on which buyer and seller can discuss and negotiate prior to purchase. Taobao also supports an agent network that can make purchases on a buyer's behalf.



Alipay



AliWangWang



Zhubajie

Crowdsourcing site, where micro-payments can be made. Similar to Amazon's Mechanical Turk.



Sandaha

Crowdsourcing site.



Diao Cha Pai

Online survey tools, similar to Survey Monkey.



Sina

China's dominant social networking sites - a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter.



Weibo

Sina's microblogging platform.



renren

Social network, strong on college campuses, similar to Facebook.



MapBar

Mapping service, supporting custom maps.



China UnionPay

Interbank network in China connecting ATM networks and points of sale.



QQ

Popular instant messaging platform owned by Tencent.

## The Design a Flag Task

At first blush this was easy to complete – go onto Taobao and purchase an accurate vector graphic of a Chinese flag. The file, bought from an independent designer cost 150 RMB (€18, \$24). A torrent site could have served this purpose for free but we wanted to remain open to the designer/seller being able to adapt the design based on feedback. The seller provided background information on the design of the flag – for example adhering to national regulation GB 12982-2004 of the National Institute of Standards for making a Chinese national flag.

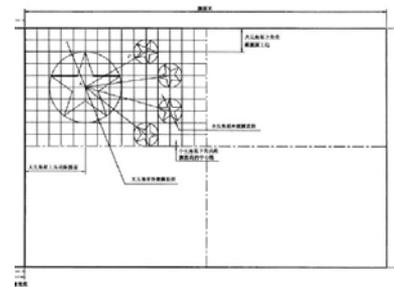
As any consumer in China knows what you buy and what you get is not necessarily the same thing, so we set up a quality control sub-task for posting to a Chinese crowdsourcing or wang zhuan site — it literally translates to ‘earning online’.

For the quality control sub-task we asked 20 people to challenge the “correctness” of the flag graphic if they found anything wrong they were rewarded a nominal sum of 4 RMB (€0.5, \$0.6). A total of 100 RMB was allocated to the task that would include the 20% commission taken by the site.

Initially the crowd sourcing site Zhu Ba Jie rejected the task, because the task description included words considered sensitive. The task was rewritten and posted to crowdsourcing site San Da Ha replacing e.g. words like ‘national’ with ‘flag’ and the task was finally accepted. (We also considered crowd sourcing site Renwumatou as a third option). After posting 20 people completed the task with no-one challenging the flag’s technical accuracy, but a few people questioning its colour. This was not surprising, while a flag layout is tightly specified colour is normally specified as a range depending on what kind of material it is printed on. As one of our crowd sourced responders pointed out that the way to verify the colour was to “cut your finger and compare with the colour of blood”.z



Vector graphic of Chinese flag, accurate to the National Institute of Standards GB 12982-2004 cost 150 RMB. Verification with 20 people, 100 RMB.



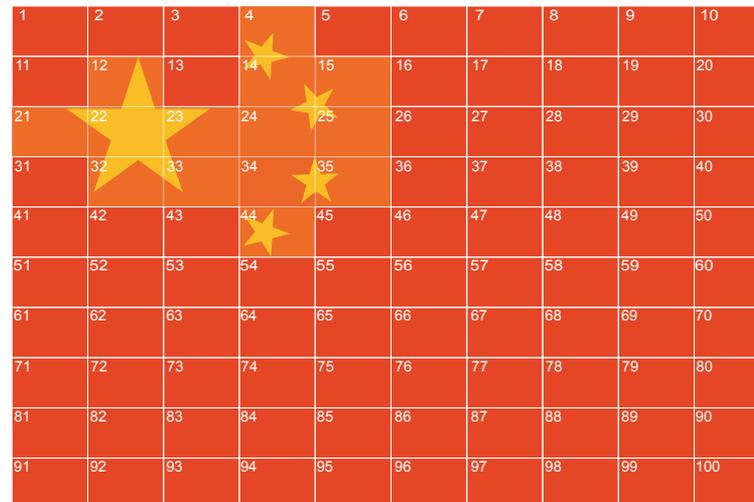


## The Number of Pieces Task The Custom Mat Task

The optimal number of flag pieces depended on expected effort to marshal source material from across China — did we want to source from a dozen locations or thousands? In the end we settled on a number that seemed manageable, 100.

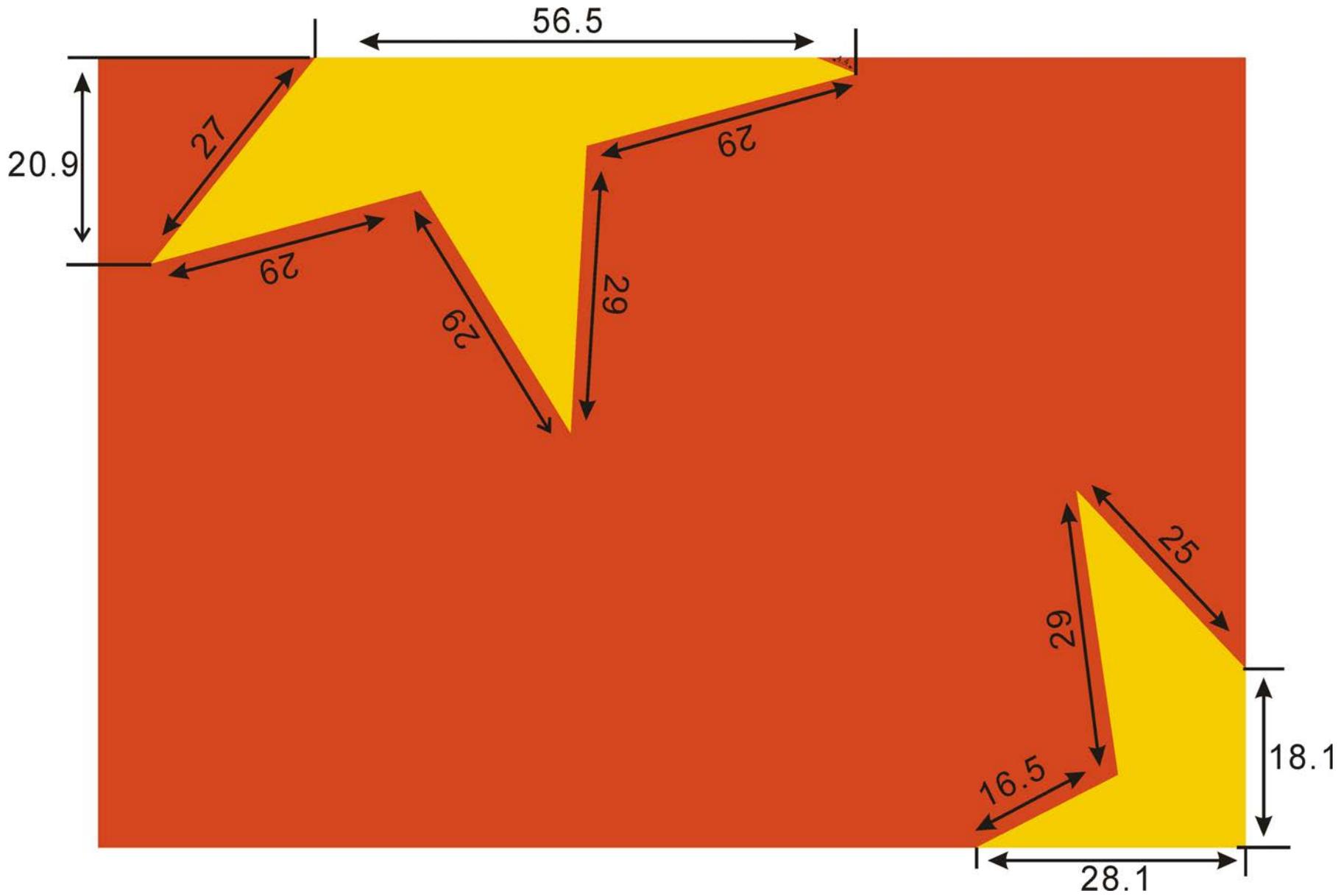
Welcome mats come in various standard sizes and we opted for a size large enough for the whole to have visual impact, small enough for individual pieces to be manageable by a one person – 120 x 80 cm the same dimensions as a flag. The other standard sizes are 90 x 60 and 150 x 120.

A designer was hired from Taobao to calculate work out how the flag would be constructed and to create vector graphics for each of the fourteen custom designs. Finally the lines of each custom design was measured out to aid an accurate final construction.



*A total of 14 custom designs would need to be commissioned to build the flag, the remaining 86 being plain red mats. From this task on in order to minimise exposure to what was being built no individual handled more than one customised mat.*

*Previous page: one of fourteen custom mat designs.  
Next page: custom design with measurements.*



## The 100 Locations across China Task



Sourcing mats from 100 locations ‘across China’ raises many thorny questions. Where should they be resourced? Do we want representation to be equitable? Representative of what? Equitable for whom? Does geography matter? Ethnicity? Income? Modernity? Poverty? Power?

A question was posted to Weibo asking for help in identifying a list of locations that represented ‘across China’ and after a fair amount of discussion the final tally of “representative locations” was fixed on:

- » 4 municipalities e.g. Beijing, Tianjin
- » 5 ethnic autonomous regions e.g. Inner Mongolia, Tibet
- » 23 provinces e.g. Hei Long Jiang; Tai Wan
- » 2 special administrative regions i.e. Hong Kong, Macao

Within this list there was plenty of scope to drill down to exact cities, towns or villages – so for guidance we turned to survey site Diaochapai and taking advantage of the heightened travel activity in the Spring Festival we posted a survey asking which towns/cities were considered representative of each of these municipalities, ethnic autonomous regions, provinces and special administrative regions. The design of the questionnaire was iterated based on feedback from the crowd - which corrected some replication in the responses. The 100 locations were logged in a spreadsheet and then transferred to local mapping service, MapBar. We originally used SouGou for mapping but switched to MapBar after frustrations with the map interface.



*The preferred list of 100 locations, outline by the Weibo community and then refined using Diaochapai.*

As anyone who has worked with map services knows – maps are inherently political: the position of borders; what is emphasised; what is hidden; the names that are adopted are all grounded in the world view (and regulatory landscape) prevalent in that country. Many international map service providers defuse this sensitivity, in part by serving up different maps depending on location of the computer making the request.



## The 100 Shops Task



淘宝网



The next step was to find 100 shops in these 100 locations, something that seems like it should be pretty easy to complete, but which ultimately took a fair amount of effort and lateral thinking.

In our first attempt a question was posted to Zhu Ba Jie to find stores that sell red mats online and post town/city of the seller. The first person to post the store details online would receive 5 RMB, once its location had been verified by two other people (in a verification sub-task). Whilst a lot of replies were posted to this question — most responses were cut and pasted from Taobao rather than people looking in their neighbourhood as we had hoped, and there was a significant volume of poor quality answers that needed to be filtered out.

For our second attempt we set up a sales team of four people and one supervisor to go onto Taobao and find *any* shop in each of the 100 locales (which was listed in Taobao) and based on the photograph of the store posted online call them to ask if there was a red mat seller also located in the same market. The Taobao shop-owners became our buyers and through this approach we found another fifty eight shops selling red mats. We offered a tiered reward depending on perceived difficulty with the first 65 locations at 10 RMB, the next five received 15 RMB, the penultimate reward was 20 RMB, and the final batch received 30 RMB.

To receive the reward for finding a store an order for a mat needed to be placed, within budget i.e. the buyer would need to negotiate the cost of the mat with the seller on our behalf. For the 14 mats that required a customised design the individual was sent a PDF showing the exact dimensions of the customisation. Communication with the sellers was conducted through Ali Wang Wang the AliPay Instant Messaging platform.



The final list of 100 shops in 100 locations, outlined on Weibo, fleshed out on Diaochapai and Zhubajie, and ultimately found using Taobao. Red: original locations that were not found. Green: original locations that were found. Blue: new locations.

Online stores were paid through Zhifu Bao, initiated by the experiment's accountant. For physical stores their bank account details were requested and a deposit was sent. The balance was sent once the mat was sent.

The remaining thirty five shops were located using Taobao agents who were paid between twenty and eighty RMB commission to track down the missing shops and to make the purchase. Given that it would be easy for agents to fake where they bought the mats from and claim the commission anyway the addresses of each sender was verified in a later sub-task



新柳



天牌



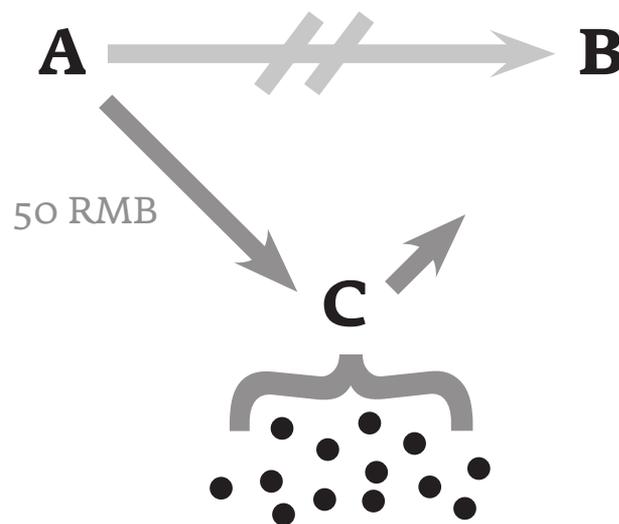
20:50  
21:50

## The Anonymised Rewards Task

We needed to pay people small sums for crowd sourcing tasks, mat purchase and other tasks but we also wanted to explore putting distance between our accountant and the payee, by transferring money through an unknown (and potentially untrusted) third party. The question, in a nutshell — if Ai pays Baozhai and asks him to forward the money to Chunhua, what is the likelihood of the money arriving in Chunhua’s account?

Again we posted a question to the Sandaha crowdsourcing site asking for volunteers to receive and pass on 50 RMB, for the opportunity to receive a 2.4 RMB reward once receipt has been confirmed. The task was initially rejected by Zhu Ba Jie for being too sensitive, we assume because it deals with anonymous money transfers, something that is an issue the world over (for those interested in the topic, read the Know Your Customer, KYC requirements that financial institutions need to adhere through). With adapted text, the task was accepted on Sandaha where 161 persons paid attention to the task, 13 signed up to be part of the experiment and 10 people were selected to be intermediaries for the money. In the public forum the members that responded to this task questioned its purpose assuming that it was one way of finding team members that can be trusted for an apparent follow on task; and it’s a test of people’s moral quality. In a follow up question we asked whether they would return a wallet if found on the street, most said no unless they thought it was part of a TV programme and they were secretly being recorded.

We received confirmation that 6 final recipients (60%) received the payment, implying that 4 intermediaries kept the cash (there are other variations, the final recipients could have lied about receiving the final payment in order to entice a second payment, the final recipients who ‘received’ money could have been lying for some unknown reason; money could have been sent by the intermediary but was not received by the recipi-



ent; or the intermediary and recipient could collude or even be the same person — fairly standard cryptography challenges to solve).

It might be argued that the 40% “failure rate” is a successful filtering exercise where (in the context of this single task) 4 people removed themselves from pool of people for whom a follow task might be run. Interesting follow up tasks include repeat payments through one individual, and reactions to different cues as to the purpose of the payment.

While this is an interesting research topic in its own right, we decided to proceed using direct payments between the accountant and the recipients.



# The 14 Random Locations Tasks

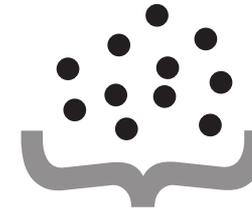


We wanted to find fourteen shops out of the hundred to create customised mats and posted a question to crowdsourcing site Zhubajie asking people to propose methods of choosing random locations. Respondents were directed to a newly set up group on QQ where they could propose different methods and the entries were posted to the online survey site n DiaoChapai. The community voted which one was the best and the winner received 50 RMB. Over nine hundred people were exposed to the task on Zhubajie and twenty eight made contributions on renren, with considerable discussion and creativity about how to choose.

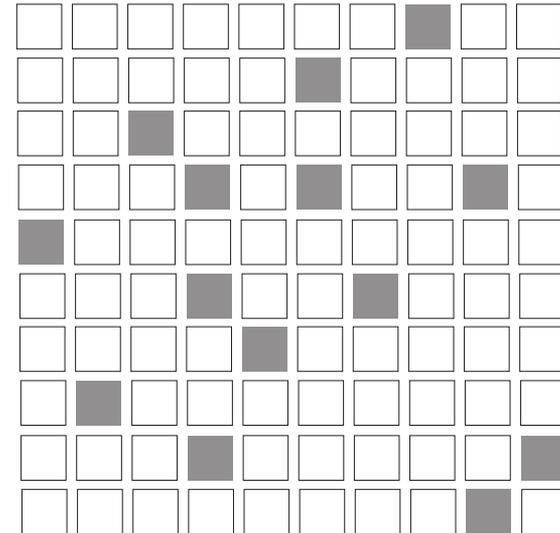
Suggested randomisation methods include: spinning sticks; throwing darts; rotating plates; games of chance — dice, cards; having random passers-by pick names out of a hat; matching cities to surnames; by phonogram; randomisation code; by population; income; latitude and longitude; sequential position on map east to west.

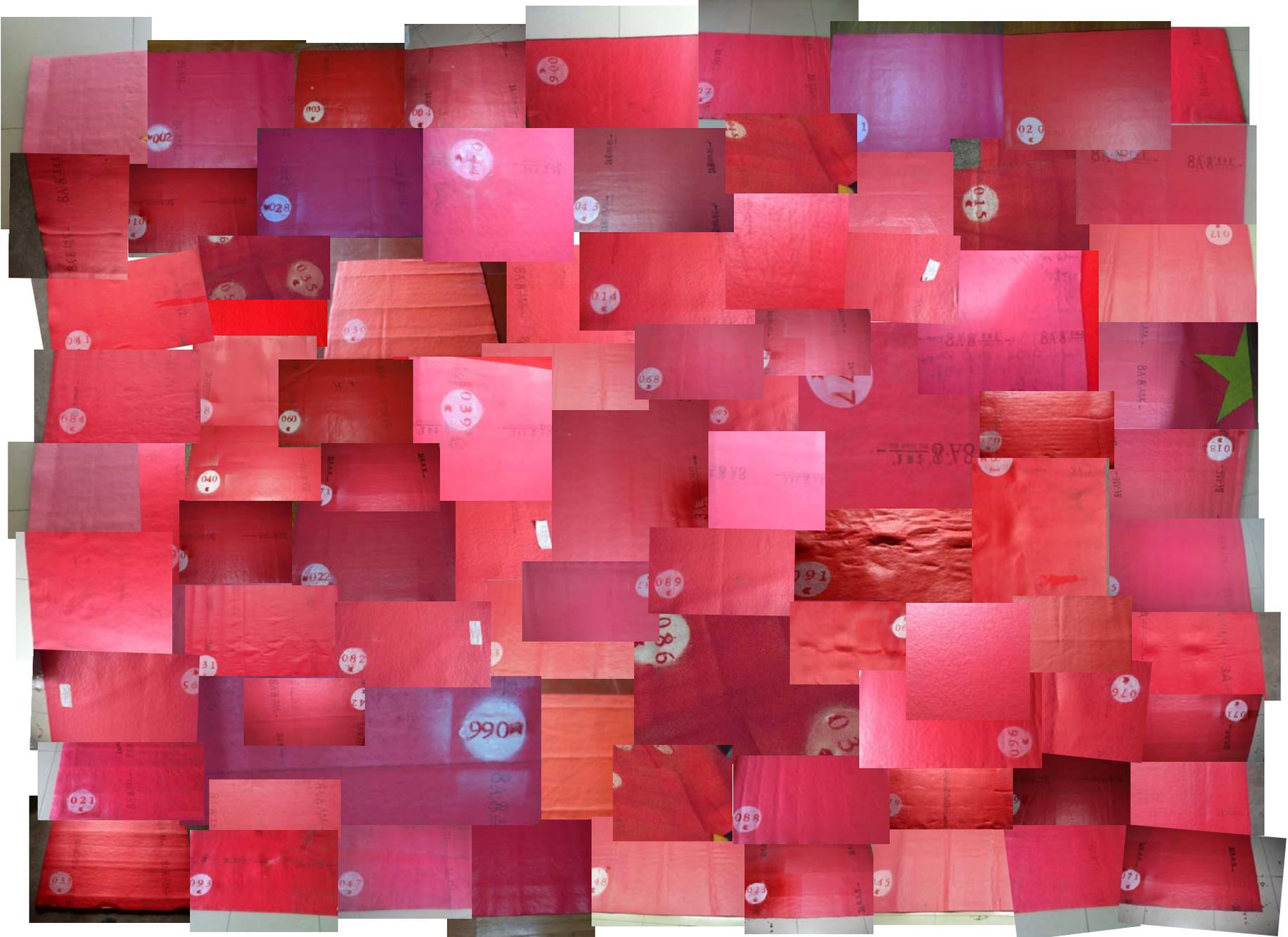
The entries for these tasks can still be found online, at least until they achieve a natural link-death or are taken down by their hosts. There is a natural tension between Rule 3: that none of the people taking part should understand what is being made and Rule 6: that the process must be transparent. In practical terms this meant containing overlap between the ad-hoc communities that would spring up between tasks which would naturally inhibit large communities building over time.

The users on the crowdsourcing sites can be split into two categories: those that are skilled and are ready to work on large projects for a decent wage; and those that are unskilled looking to mop up small payments for trivial tasks. The latter are often employed to be *pushing hands* (推手), people who are paid to shill products in online forums.



50 RMB





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## The Purchase, Verifying & Shipping Tasks



With the shops identified the purchasing process was relatively simple: eighty six red mats could be shipped as default red designs and fourteen custom designs.

Prior to the assembly task we wanted to verify that the mat's that were shipped were properly designed and to annotate each mat.

We broke this process down into a number of tasks:

- » The Randomised Custom Order Location Task: the location of the fourteen custom orders were chosen facilitated through Sina and renren.
- » The Stencilling & Photography Location Task: fourteen more locations were chosen for the verification tasks, we settled on universities in Xian, Xiamen, Shanghai, Shijiazhuang, Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Changsha, Kunming, Chengdu and Lanzhou. Volunteers were sought in each of the fourteen locations and were asked to take part in an "art experiment".
- » The Stencil Design Task: fourteen stencil kits were made and shipped out to the volunteers in each of locations, along with spray cans and instructions. One volunteer was assigned the sub-task of teaching the others how to properly stencil the reverse side of the mat, and posted a video with instructions to Yukou.
- » The Stencilling Task: The volunteers were each mailed one customised mat, and six red mats (with two people each receiving additional red mat to round it out to 100 total), which they were asked to stencil. The mats arrived directly from 100

sellers. No individual volunteer would see more than one customised mat. Each mat was stencilled with a three digit number e.g. 062, and each student was assigned unique randomly assigned numbers between one and a hundred (the number selection was chosen through a separate Random Number Assigning Sub-task.

- » The Photography Task: Another volunteer in the same location was asked to photograph the front and back of the mats and to mail these to a Red Mat project mail account: bangbangjun@qq.com.
- » The Shipping Task: Finally the mats were all shipped to a warehouse in Shanghai.

We had anticipated some failure and built some redundancy into the experiment by commissioning an additional 6 plain red mats which were not needed. Surprisingly the shipping had an 100% successful delivery rate with all mats arriving on time.

节能降耗 清洁生产





## The Assembly Task

The first assembly of the flag took place in Beijing on the 1st April 2012, using fourteen volunteers selected from the TEDx 798 Factory event where the experiment was first openly presented by the author. (A separate talk about the experiment hosted by a Beijing university was cancelled due to the subject matter being considered too contentious, at that time security situation in the capital was in a heightened state of alert).

The fourteen volunteers were gathered and driven to a large warehouse where they were asked to complete the assembly without it being revealed what they were assembling. An 8 x 12 meter area on the floor was taped off, and shoe sleeves (to protect the mats from dirty shoes) were supplied, along with the parcels containing 100 mats. Their instructions were to “unpack the parcels and construct the design within the space provided”.

The process was videoed and each of the 14 volunteers had the right to demand that the recording be deleted (the same protocol is used in field research with the assumption that the participant owns the rights to their own image). However, prior to any deletion other volunteers will have the opportunity to persuade this person (or persons) to change their mind. In the event, no-one asked for the video to be deleted and it was in due course published online. We had estimated 45 minutes total assembly time, but in the event it took only fifteen minutes. The speed of completion was helped by a leader rapidly emerging from the volunteer group to assign tasks and provide direction. The seemingly random numbers stencilled on the reverse of each mat and the 30 minutes spare time led some volunteers to believe that they had missed the point of the assembly. After the assembly was complete and the volunteers left the venue, the mats were packed up and trucked back to the Shanghai warehouse.



*A second and final assembly task was carried out in Shanghai again with 14 volunteers, but this time at night on the roof of a building. The process was videoed from a distance from an apartment in a nearby tower block — a still from the movie shown above and also posted online. Participants were given 20 minutes to complete the task with otherwise identical instructions to the first assembly.*

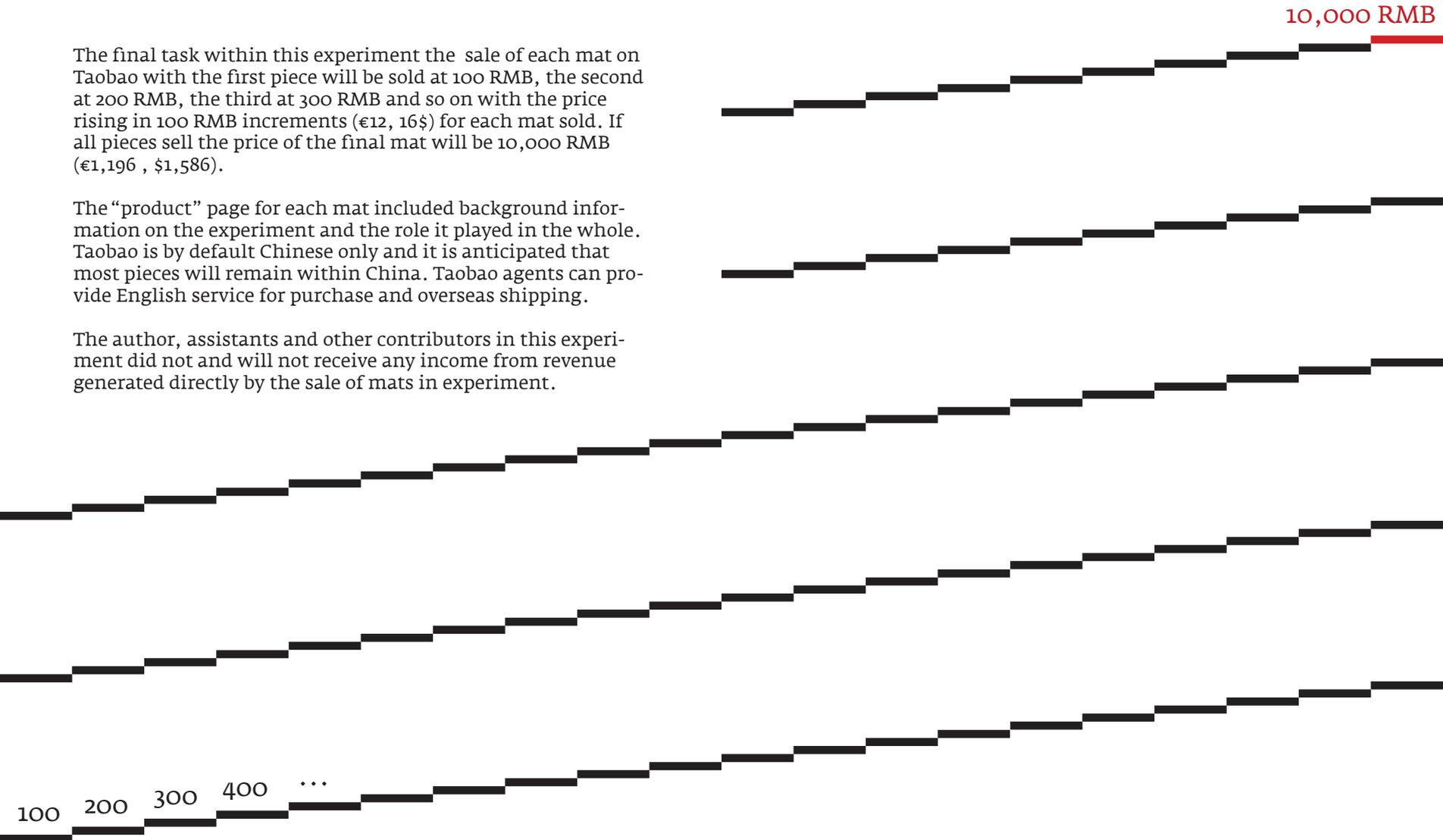
# The Fixed Market Task

淘宝网

The final task within this experiment the sale of each mat on Taobao with the first piece will be sold at 100 RMB, the second at 200 RMB, the third at 300 RMB and so on with the price rising in 100 RMB increments (€12, 16\$) for each mat sold. If all pieces sell the price of the final mat will be 10,000 RMB (€1,196 , \$1,586).

The “product” page for each mat included background information on the experiment and the role it played in the whole. Taobao is by default Chinese only and it is anticipated that most pieces will remain within China. Taobao agents can provide English service for purchase and overseas shipping.

The author, assistants and other contributors in this experiment did not and will not receive any income from revenue generated directly by the sale of mats in experiment.





## Flipping the Mirror

The purpose of this experiment was to better understand China today, reflect on China's changing global role and through reactions to the piece hold up a mirror to China's national identity.

When all pieces of mat are sold or after 12 months (whichever comes sooner) the income from sales will be tallied up, commission paid to Taobao and the remaining money will be made available for the following:

« All revenue generated from this experiment will be made available to Chinese artists to run similar experiments exploring national identity, taboos and trust in countries of their choosing.

Commenting on other countries comes easily, but comfort levels shift when the lens is turned one's own country, culture, practices. When Chinese designers, thinkers and artists run similar experiments in other countries where will they choose? What questions would they ask? What taboos would they challenge? And ultimately what would they learn about themselves?

## Flipping the Mirror

The purpose of this experiment was to better understand China today, reflect on China's changing global role and through reactions to the piece hold up a mirror to China's national identity.

When all pieces of mat are sold or after 12 months (whichever comes sooner) the income from sales will be tallied up, commission paid to Taobao and the remaining money will be made available for the following:

» All revenue generated from this experiment will be donated as grants to Chinese artists to run similar experiments exploring national identity, taboos and trust in countries of their choosing.

Commenting on other countries comes easily, but comfort levels shift when the lens is turned one's own country, culture, practices. When Chinese designers, thinkers and artists run similar experiments in other countries where will they choose? What questions would they ask? What taboos would they challenge? And ultimately what would they learn about themselves?



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# Thoughts

The real purpose of the Red Mat experiment was fourfold:

1. To hold up a mirror to China today.
2. To understand personal ability and willingness to adapt to local social, cultural and legal norms.
3. To normalise China to non-Chinese.
4. To provide Chinese artists, experimenters and tinkerers with a foundation and resources from which to conduct similar experiments at home and abroad.

It will take a while before these play out.

intent  
cultural awareness  
trust  
exploitation  
timeliness  
signal versus noise  
the “reveal”  
transparency  
shape  
perspective  
purpose  
continuity  
accuracy  
sacred form  
taboo  
self-censorship  
transparency  
authority  
self-constraint  
ecosystem  
geographic centering  
responsibility  
layers  
legality  
self-centeredness  
community  
aesthetics  
moral compass  
selfishness  
hesitancy  
tension  
cognitive dissonance  
cultural calibration  
pseudo-anonymity  
efficiency  
depth  
reflexivity  
ethics



6 months and counting  
 100 locations across China  
 310+ people actively engaged in tasks  
 5,000+ people exposed to the tasks



## About the Author

This experiment was funded and conducted by Jan Chipchase with logistical support of a local Shanghai based research assistant.

Jan has spent the last decade working at the intersection of design, innovation and strategy and sits on numerous advisory boards including at the Institute for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion; Frontline SMS; Makeshift Magazine; The Pecha Kucha Foundation; the Grameen Foundation App Lab; and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

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## Colophon

Written in those moments before the house wakes.

All photographs by the author on travels across China. Quirky lens distortions on some of the photos courtesy of a Voigtlander zomm.





