A Discussion on Furniture Rental Service for Urban Migrants in China——From the Gain of a Lifestyle Design Research in Hong Kong & Beijing

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Abstract. This article describes the results of a study on lifestyle design research in relation to the consumption of space & furniture of the urban migrants in China. The methodology adopted was based on online investigations of life patterns and residential situations of the straits and desires concerning with furniture and space. The results showed that Chinese urban migrants might be a suitable audience for renting furniture service, while the persona ‘Artistic Youth’ seems to be the most potential consumer group. The study found that an adequate service should be considered with Functional categories, Styles, Grade, Price and Accessory products, then a viable furniture rental model was initially conceived. The study also proposed the different emphases on furniture rental service between Hong Kong and Beijing: HK’s would focus on practical function and full use of space, BJ’s should pay more attention to whether it can improve the quality and taste of living.

1. Background
In 2016, there were approximately 245 million migrant workers in China, accounting for 1/6 of the total population, whose average age is less than 30 (29.8) [1]. In Beijing, 40% of the resident population are urban migrants (8.08 million) [2]. In Hong Kong, 10404 mainland talents have come in through a ‘Quality migrant admission scheme’ and a total of 57,000 mainland people settled in this city within the same year [3].

China’s urbanization begins in the early 1980s, which is developing rapidly but at a low level [4]. It has brought about tremendous changes to municipal environment and lifestyles. In order to understand the living conditions of the urban migrants, HK Polytechnic University launched a lifestyle research project in Hong Kong and Beijing to investigate the consumption of space & furniture for them. This was a design research project which aims at investigating daily utilization habits and primary requirements of space & furniture. On the chance to provide deeper insights of spatial and furniture consumption preferences to formulate appropriate design ideas for them.

2. Lifestyle design research
Lifestyles are important because the ways of living can be transformed into consumption patterns, while specific lifestyles showed certain rules of consumer goods, we can also comprehend ways of living by studying the consumption patterns [5]. Lifestyle research can provide richer information than simple demographic data because: (a) Lifestyle is a group phenomenon; (b) Lifestyle covers all
aspects of lives; (c) Lifestyle reflects individual’s core life interests; (d) Lifestyle shows differences in various demographic variables [6-9]. The term has a more restricted sociological meaning in reference to the distinctive style of life of specific status groups, with contemporary consumer culture it connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness [10-13].

Based on the lifestyle space framework (Figure 1) of Benny Ding Leong in Asian Lifestyle Design Lab (ALDL) in HK Polytechnic University which is designed for China and comparable areas of Chinese society and culture, the research focus and tool selection were determined from four aspects including context (structural factors), behavior (material consumption), organization (consumption pattern) and ideology (attitude). It discusses the living mode, residential property, cultural background, consumption habit and ideology of urban migrants from two dimensions of space and time.

Figure 1. Lifestyle space (Leong, 2007)

3. Research process review
Given the diversity of respondents, a pilot survey was conducted online to identify the target population. It shows that our audiences have many characteristics in common: young, highly educated, under a transition stage from college to society, engaged in mental work, currently lack of wealth reserves and living in rental houses, etc. After classification and filtering, 20 participants (10 from HK, 10 from BJ) were recruited as target samples. We sent each of them an electronic document package which included a personal demographic card, a series of questions on new house purchasing & home decoration, a VALS [14] questionnaire, a set of photo journey tasks, and a pair of lifecycle diagrams of workdays and holidays. After receiving their feedbacks, we organized and analysed their responses and conducted in-depth interviews immediately. The research process is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Project research process
4. Findings
Our participants showed great enthusiasm, many of them expressed hopes on following up the project. On the basis of information and desires they shared, we began to understand their hidden ideas and to sum up the main straits and gaps faced by their lives, and finally found some research directions which could be explored further. For instance, a good modal of furniture rental service would be a helpful choice for them.

4.1. Why may urban migrants need furniture rental services?
It is found that most of new urban migrants are living in rental houses. All our respondents have changed their residence during last three years. Migrants described their current living conditions as ‘Temporary Arrangements’. Under such circumstances, they did not want to spend too much energy or money on shelters. Many of them would rather have a rough and miserable living condition than frequent moving and disposing of old furniture and necessaries.

Although many migrants complained about the extremely bad quantity and quality of the existing furniture, they would be very careful to consider buying a new piece unless absolutely necessary. This is because many landlords forbid tenants to leave their belongings when they left, and the process of transportation and disposal is extremely troublesome.

4.2. Which type of urban migrants in China may ask for the service of rental furniture?

4.2.1. Traditional conceptual limitations. The Chinese character ‘富’ represent the meaning of ‘wealthy’. It has a radical ‘宀’ on the top symbolizes ‘houses’, a ‘一口’ in the middle symbolizes ‘male labor forces’, and a ‘田’ at the bottom symbolizes ‘fields’. More than 2000 years farming economy generated a traditional Chinese wealth view: Thinking highly of the tangible asset.

Compared with other nations, Chinese attach more importance to ownership than usufruct. They tend to accumulate material wealth for future generations. Under the impact of entrenched indigenous value, it may not be that easy for traditional Chinese to accept an occupying form as renting.

4.2.2. Persona classification. With this concern, we asked our participants ‘Will you consider renting furniture if the quality is guaranteed and the price is reasonable?’ Beyond our expectation, half of the 20 participants expressed a willingness on trying. Although we have not done extensive research all over the country, this rate is conceivable higher than an average proportion.

In order to explore what type of urban migrants may ask for the service, we clustered all the interviewees into 3 types of persona: Pragmatist, Materialist and Artistic Youth. Each persona has his/her typical character tags. (Figure 3)

From the classification results, persona ‘Artistic Youth’ shows a most willing to try furniture rental services. It accounted for 9 of all 20 participants. Most of them are around 30 years old, have stable relationships or just stepped into marriages.

They are vanguards, usually have busy work with nice income, have independent minded and clear pursuit of future. They hold avant-garde values, comprehensive abilities and spirits of exploring. They would love to build a simple but quality life, while the current living environments still leave big gaps from their ideal states. Therefore, they seem to be the potential consumers of an early furniture rental service. And with the development of the economy, the proportion of such cluster will continue to increase.
GEORGE (26), found a job as a technician in Beijing after obtaining his Bachelor Degree. He has been in a relationship for 1 year and expects to settle down soon. He wants to find a long term residence which would be close to his office and affordable in price. For him, functional utility is the most important factor on selecting furniture and home decoration.

SOPHIE (25), just got out from school and is on her first job as a clerk in Beijing. She goes out several nights a week. She is a big fan of some luxury brands. She wants to have a residence to invite friends home. She hopes the furniture and decoration in her house could be good-looking and fashionable.

AMELIA (29), became an designer after she got her Master degree in HK. She and her husband are enjoying their world of two people. They have good income to afford a quality life, but can’t afford the expensive house prices in HK for now. They want to have a separate and quiet space for reading, handcrafting, watching movies and listening to music. For them, quality is much more important than quantity and price on purchasing of furniture and decoration.

**Figure 3. Persona profile**
4.3. Which types of furniture might be the most popular ones?

4.3.1. Functional categories. From the feedback of lifecycle diagrams and in-depth interviews, we know that urban migrants seldom cook at home. They spend much time on PCs and smartphones. Their longest stays are in bed or in sofa. Hypothetically, if someone’s willing to customize a piece of furniture for them, what they want is a large and soft couch or a comfortable and spacious bed. Besides, many of them desire to have a set of terminal furniture which can meet all requirements of relaxing, working and dinning at home.

4.3.2. Styles. Nordic Style is the highest frequency word mentioned by the interviewees. From the pictures they chose for their ideal home decoration, the following keywords can be used to describe their favorite home style: simplicity, modern, warm, bright, soft, wooden.

4.3.3. Grade & Price. 10 respondents mentioned IKEA during interviews. This brand wins itself a place in its stylish design and affordable price. People described IKEA as a good choice for rental phases, but they would love to choose other brands of better quality when decorating their own houses. Regards IKEA as a reference, at its price, consumers will tend to buy rather than rent. For a rental mode, a more upscale and expensive category might be more suitable.

4.3.4. Accessory products. Since some interviewees said they like to do activities on the floor, a soft carpet will be sought-after. Since some respondents wondered a romantic family atmosphere, an adjustable light may be a good helper. Since some others wanted to invite friends over for weekend, a set of home theater equipment will be popular. Decorative accessories (as rugs, mirrors, artworks), household appliances (as DVD, televisions, hi-fi equipment) can also be added into the list to meet the needs of users and to improve their quality and taste of livings.

4.4. What’re the keys to a successful furniture rental service?

The interviewee who refused to try furniture rental service declared two major concerns: Fear of damage to rented furniture and Dislike using a second-hand furniture. It appears that a value and outstanding rental service should both provide high quality products and professional supporting services. Firstly, there should be dedicated service structures guaranteed for furniture’s newness and cleanliness. Secondly, there should be a varied and appropriate price setting with short and long term plans available to suit different budgets. Simultaneously, there should be professional supporting service to take care of delivery and setting up from the beginning till removal of furniture in the end. Figure 4 shows an ideal furniture rental process here.

![Figure 4. An ideal furniture rental process](image-url)
5. Discussion

5.1. Different emphases on furniture rental service between Hong Kong and Beijing
The primary objective of furniture rental service for urban migrants is to meet functional requirements and improve the user’s quality and taste of life. Due to the social system and cultural differences, the living conditions and matching house rental model vary greatly between Hong Kong and Beijing, which inevitably affects the implementation of furniture rental services and design priorities.

Frankly speaking, any rental service in Hong Kong must encounter a very embarrassing situation - there has no extra space can be used to exploit. In Hong Kong, with the outrageous housing prices and extremely limited living spaces, no material product is as valuable as disposable dwelling space. Customarily, no matching furniture is prepared for a rented house, in addition, the landlord requires the tenant to dispose of his own furniture when he left. This may provide a market for renting practical necessities furniture (such as beds) for some short term tenants. From our interviews, Hong Kong respondents wanted furniture to be maximize functionality and saving space.

Meanwhile, furniture rental service shows a better prospect in Beijing. Most Beijing migrants are living in rental houses with shabby facilities. They’ve got certain financial capabilities, but are resigned to the present states. Beijing’s living space is not as cramped as imagined, many rental rooms still left plenty of idle space.

Furthermore, urban migrants in Beijing hold relatively higher requirements for the quality and taste of living environment. They are more sociable. (Of the 10 participants interviewed, 8 said they were very gregarious and wanted to invite friends to their homes.) They pay more attention on face-saving. Compared with Hong Kong interviewee, they engage in more leisurely work and spend more time at home.

From all these points of view, migrants in HK and BJ would have different priorities when renting furniture: HKs would focus on practical function and full use of space, BJs would pay more attention to whether it can improve the quality and taste of living. Figure 5 illustrates some of the design entry points for migrants in Hong Kong and Beijing.

![Figure 5](image-url)
5.2. Limitations and directions for future research

Research on rapid urbanization and floating population has been a pop topic for years, and the project presented here could be regarded as a preliminary exploration of Lifestyle Research on it. As with other qualitative research work, there are still limitations should be noted.

Firstly, although this study was conducted in two mega cities with representativeness of different regions, cultural developments and social systems in China, the results may not be generalized to the entire population of urban migrants in Hong Kong and Beijing. The screening of the study objects also has limitations restricted to the channel and platform of participant recruitment.

In addition, the methodology employed in this work were all carried out in online forms. The validity of the migrants’ self-reported data on lifestyle patterns is also a concern. And there was not much opportunity to control the seriousness of the participants and the authenticity of the feedback information.

Besides these limitations, the current research provides very specific starting points for future research. For instance, a group of urban migrants are found as potential consumers of a compatible furniture rental service, which might serve as an independent valuable subject for further practicality study. Integrating the correlations between consumer habits and lifestyles, we found it is well worth the effort to make product (service) design relevant to daily life-pattern analysis, environmental psychology variables and core value induction, which may expand the research model to a wider group of audience and improve the understanding of consumer demands.

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