

## Nostalgia as emotional infrastructure in *Guócháo Cháowán*: Cultural memory, identity, and symbolic design

Flavia Luck and Jin Jiangbo\*

**Abstract:** This article explores how *Guócháo Cháowán*, contemporary Chinese art toys, employs nostalgia as an emotional infrastructure to engage cultural memory, negotiate identity, and reimagine symbolic design. Through the analyses of cases such as PopMart's *SPACE MOLLY*, Rolife's *Nanci*, and *52Toys' Super Active Series*, the study examines how simplified forms, symbolic aesthetics, and culturally coded narratives transform these playthings into affective interfaces that reconnect consumers with reconfigured visions of Chinese heritage. Positioned at the intersection of tradition and modernity, *Guócháo Cháowán* exemplifies how visual storytelling and symbolic play are strategically employed to render cultural memory both emotionally accessible and commercially resonant. Nostalgia, in this context, emerges as a dynamic force that fosters affective engagement, supports cultural continuity, and enables playful reinterpretations of identity in the face of rapid social change. Framed within a qualitative and interpretive methodology, the article combines visual semiotic analysis with cultural discourse analysis to trace how restorative and reflective modes of nostalgia operate within these toys. The study demonstrates that *Guócháo Cháowán* does not merely replicate the past; instead, it mobilizes symbolic elements—colors, motifs, materials, and narrative references—that activate shared emotional memories while simultaneously aligning with youth-oriented visual culture and global design trends. Finally, the article argues that *Guócháo Cháowán* functions as cultural artifacts that extend beyond aesthetic appeal. They offer a powerful example of how nostalgia can be designed, circulated and experienced, not as mere longing for the past, but as a creative and affective strategy for negotiating cultural belonging in the global era.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, *Guócháo Cháowán*, cultural memory, symbolic design, Chinese identity

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\* Flavia Luck; Jin Jiangbo (✉)

Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, China

e-mail: flaluck07@gmail.com (corresponding author)

## **Introduction: Reimagining the past; nostalgia in Chinese designer toys**

In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch (1959, 143-144) posits that “the content of the ideal is a desire to return to the perfection of an imaginary past”. This conceptualization situates hope not as mere escapism but as a dynamic, culturally embedded force that mobilizes memory, imagination and affect to project alternative futures. Within this theoretical lens, nostalgia emerges not as passive longing, but as an active component of cultural production and symbolic engagement.

*Guócháo Cháowán*, culturally encoded playthings, materializes a collective desire for the recuperation and re-signification of Chinese traditions within a contemporary framework. Inheriting the emotional strategies of Hong Kong’s art toy scene and integrating the affective immediacy of *kawaii* aesthetics, these objects transform nostalgic sentiment into a structured semiotic practice.

Their emotional appeal is not incidental but deliberately designed: a strategic activation of symbolic play that bridges past imaginaries with future aspirations. Within the *Guócháo Cháowán* ecosystem, symbolic play becomes a mechanism for emotional investment and cultural re-articulation. Playful interaction with these designed objects does not merely evoke individual memories; it fosters a shared affective economy wherein cultural knowledge is both preserved and dynamically reconfigured. Thus, the emotional value embedded in these toys transcends simple consumer attachment: it constitutes a recursive feedback loop where nostalgia, imagination, and identity co-produce and sustain new cultural narratives.

This article explores how *Guócháo Cháowán* leverages nostalgia as an emotional infrastructure that shapes the visual language and symbolic function of art toys in contemporary China. These toys are not simply inspired by tradition; they transform it. The integration of traditional elements such as Hanfu, classical poetry, dynastic symbolism, and folk motifs into simplified, emotionally expressive forms, connects *Guócháo Cháowán* toys and players in a process of cultural reimagining. Nostalgia here becomes both a design strategy and an affective mode of consumption—bridging personal memory, collective heritage, and future-oriented identity formation.

Delving from visual culture and material semiotics, this study portraits how Chinese art toys act as cultural devices, objects through which cultural memory is performed, aestheticized, and circulated. *Guócháo Cháowán* - within the broader context of China’s evolving

design culture and youth consumer behaviour - emphasizes the role of nostalgia in sustaining emotional attachment, reinforcing identity, and enabling the reinterpretation of cultural narratives in a globalized marketplace. Finally, this article argues that *Guócháo Cháowán* exemplifies the transformative potential of nostalgia when embedded in symbolic play. As a dynamic reconfiguration of Chinese identity, these art toys materialize memory and desire, offering not a return to the past, but a playful and emotionally resonant reimagining of what cultural heritage can mean today.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in cultural analysis and visual semiotics. Its aim is to examine how *Guócháo Cháowán* toys function as affective artifacts that mediate nostalgia and emotionally engage contemporary Chinese consumers in processes of cultural heritage reinterpretation. The research draws on interdisciplinary perspectives from cultural studies, memory studies, material culture, and visual design theory, integrating them into a cohesive analytical framework that addresses both symbolic and emotional dimensions.

Given the layered nature of nostalgia, ranging from restorative to reflective, and the hybrid positioning of *Guócháo Cháowán* between tradition and innovation, a multi-method strategy is adopted. The analysis includes semiotic decoding of selected art toys, discourse analysis of brand narratives and consumer-facing material, and close reading of visual elements drawn from iconographic references and stylistic morphology. Particular attention is given to the emotional grammar of these objects: how nostalgia is encoded in symbolic motifs, colors, costumes, materials, and forms, and how these aesthetic choices invoke cultural memory and temporal imagination.

The case studies selected, PopMart's *SPACE MOLLY* series, Rolife's *Nanci* collections, and *52Toys' Super Active Series* Hanfu-inspired figures, were chosen for their direct engagement with Chinese cultural motifs and their explicit narrative framing around tradition, innovation, and emotional resonance. These examples are examined as cultural texts within a broader *Guócháo* discourse, which mobilizes nostalgia not merely as sentiment, but as a design logic and cultural strategy.

This approach is also sensitive to the material and symbolic hybridity of the toys under analysis. Rather than reproducing cultural

heritage in static forms, these products reconfigure it through strategic stylization, cross-cultural references, and emotional cues. The study thus foregrounds designer toys as cultural artifacts, objects through which cultural memory, affect, and identity are co-produced. Through these methodological tools, the research aims to reveal how *Guócháo Cháowán* toys embody a cultural logic of continuity and reinvention, and how nostalgia operates within this system as both a force of emotional attachment and a vector for imaginative reengagement with heritage.

*Restorative and reflective modes of nostalgia in designer toys*

From this perspective, nostalgia becomes a structuring emotional force within cultural practices. As Svetlana Boym (2007) articulates in *Nostalgia and Its Discontents*, the construction of past imaginaries, when intersected with contemporary desires, shapes how future realities are envisioned. Building on this, William Kurlinkus (2018) describes nostalgia as a multidimensional phenomenon that engages memory and tradition as tools for cultural reinterpretation.

Derived from the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (pain), the term was coined in 1688 by the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer to describe a pathological yearning for a home that no longer existed. Over time, it evolved from a medical diagnosis into a broader emotional and cultural phenomenon—revealing deep insights about modern human experience. Though often associated with loss, nostalgia also involves a romantic engagement with imagined or idealized pasts.

Nostalgia is intrinsically tied to modernity. It emerges in response to the anxieties provoked by rapid change and the concept of progress. As the pace of life accelerates, nostalgia functions as a counterforce: not simply yearning for a past space, but for a different experience of time—slower, more harmonious, and resonant with childhood or dream-like states. This aligns with David Harvey’s notion of “time-space compression” and Alvin Toffler’s concept of “future shock,” which illustrate how modern perceptions of time fuel symbolic behaviors, including emotionally driven consumption. The symbolic weight of such behaviors, as argued by Bourdieu (1986) and Baudrillard (1994), reinforces the value of emotionally coded material culture.

Boym (2007) distinguishes between restorative nostalgia—centered on reconstructing the perceived truth of the past—and reflective

nostalgia, which embraces ambivalence, complexity, and reinterpretation. In design, nostalgia becomes a lens for rethinking the present and reimagining possible futures. Kurlinkus (2018) emphasizes that nostalgia deepens user engagement with cultural memory, producing emotionally meaningful artifacts.

*Designing memory: Cultural heritage in Guócháo Cháowán*

Fredric Jameson’s critique of the “nostalgia mode” in late capitalist culture argues that the commodification of memory results in flattened simulations of history. However, within *Guócháo Cháowán*, nostalgia operates in layered ways—both as aesthetic strategy and emotional affect. Like the *kawaii* aesthetic, which unconsciously elicits emotional flow states, nostalgia within these objects mobilizes memory to influence consumer choice. Examples of restorative nostalgia can be found in: PopMart’s Chinese New Year Molly by Kenny Wong, which references Lunar New Year rituals, red color symbolism, and traditional lantern motifs (Image 1); Rolife’s *Nanci Chinese Poems and Songs Series*, which integrates classical poetic elements, Hanfu, and imagery drawn from traditional painting (*guóhuà*) (Image 2) and *52Toys’ Super Active Series*, which features female figures in Tang-style Hanfu engaged in modern postures and hobbies—creating an interplay between dynastic heritage and contemporary youth culture (Image 3).



Image 1. Chinese New Year Molly By Kenny Wong x POP MART. Source: The Toy Chronicle



Image 2. Rolife’s *Nanci Chinese Poems*. Source: The Toy Chronicle



Image 3 *52Toys Super Active Series*. Source: The Toy Chronicle

The design elements in all three examples evoke cultural symbolism associated with prosperity, celebration, and heritage. PopMart’s Chinese New Year collection is particularly linked to the Lunar New Year and the presence of the color red is deeply embedded in Chinese tradition, symbolizing luck and happiness, while the lantern being held is often associated with unity and festivity. The second example,

Rolife's *Nanci Chinese Poems and Songs Series*, incorporates traditional Chinese aesthetics such as Hanfu (traditional Chinese clothing), ancient poetic motifs, and cultural references tied to nature (e.g., bamboo, plum blossoms, and cranes) which symbolizes harmony and continuity, vital components of traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. These elements, thus connect directly to China's literary and artistic heritage, drawing from classical poetry and 国画 (guóhuá-traditional Chinese painting). The third example, *52Toys Super Active Series*, showcase female characters dressed in Hanfu reminiscent of the Tang dynasty, which is iconic in Chinese cultural history for its elegance and artistry. Their hairstyles and accessories mimic those often depicted in traditional Chinese paintings and sculptures, evoking a sense of historical nostalgia. Their postures, on the other hand, respond to nowadays activities usually performed by the younger generations. We can assume that these figures partly integrate restorative nostalgia through the incorporation of traditional cultural motifs and its symbolic and cultural dimension, appealing to the collective memory of traditional heritage, while simultaneously targeting modern consumer behaviors. However, they do not reproduce the exact same materials and aesthetics of these traditions, they reinterpret them.

These examples reinterpret rather than replicate tradition. They draw on shared cultural memory while appealing to modern consumer aesthetics, thereby positioning the past as a mutable design resource.

#### *Symbolic play and emotional consumption in contemporary Chinese toys*

The SPACE MOLLY series by Kenny Wong exemplifies the prospective dimension of nostalgia, as articulated by Boym. Debuting on August 11, 2022, Kenny Wong's IP MEGA SPACE MOLLY embodies the spirit of a modern-day explorer, showcasing the importance of what it means to discover and rediscover "the things you find along the way". Keeping alive the soul of the art toy movement, this series was inspired by diverse artistic expressions which combined modern art, popular culture, and street art between others. With the promise of acquiring a unique story and design concept behind each product, artists who co-branded and cooperated convey their emotions and ideas about the promising future, and engage with consumers expectations of receiving not just a high- end plaything, but also an artistic experience. Back to the second form of nostalgia identified by

Boym, the reflective one accepts that the past cannot be truly recreated and instead, finds ways to reflect, interpret, or reimagine it. Nostalgia, in this regard, acts as a strategy for survival, especially for those in marginalized or displaced conditions. Embodied in *Guócháo Cháowán*, particularly on playthings like the SPACE MOLLY series, it makes of them not merely an artistic device but a way of coping with the impossibility of returning to an idealized time (Kurlinkusop 2018).

From this perspective, nostalgia can be positioned as an historical emotion, which attached, can become a form of memory practice. As memories are not statics, nostalgia becomes the driving force for continuous definition and reinterpretation. This evocative dimension, also mediates and assist at the reinforcement of cultural memories in the transmission and continuity of traditions throughout time.

Examples of such evocative dimension can be found on the MEGA SPACE MOLLY 400 As part of the brand's objective towards the innovation and inheritance of non-heritage culture, in 2022 PopMart released its first product entirely made of tin, MEGA SPACE MOLLY 400% Silver Sea Flower • Tin (银海生花•锡) (Image 4).



Image 4. PopMart MEGA SPACE MOLLY 400% Silver Sea Flower • Tin

It was produced in collaboration with the 1885 founded Malayan pewter manufacturer and retailer, Royal Selangor, who holds a tradition of casting craftsmanship for over 250 years. Aesthetically, its pattern design was inspired by the Chinese cloud pattern, which integrates Eastern and Western cultural elements. Its carving intends to showcase the collision between tradition and modernity.

As it proved that the artisticization of trendy play and craftsmanship have a profitable niche in the market as well as collection value, in 2024 they released the MEGA SPACE MOLLY 400% hidden gold without trace • Wood (藏金无痕•木) (Image 5).



Image 5. PopMart MEGA SPACE MOLLY  
400% hidden gold without trace • Wood.  
Source: PopMart.com

This project was born under the premise of injecting modern power into traditional elements to rejuvenate them. Evoking the spirit of the wood carving art, historically linked to the ancients' respect for nature, the MEGA SPACE MOLLY wood series integrated this traditional art into a new world, where young people are immersed in. In order to achieve this objective, the brand contacted Huang WangWang (黄旺旺), the fifth generation heir of a century-old carving family, and also founder of the national trendy brand Simutang (司木堂) to reimaging this traditional art from the field of *Cháowán*. He utilized a technique originated in the Shang and Zhou dynasties, mostly used on metal artifacts, in order to be able to mix wood with gold: it represented a cross- border dialogue between both materials, as according to the artist, “wood” is a symbol of the pulse of life, and gold injects vitality on Molly’s soul. Aesthetically, the artist not only worked on the surface of the plaything, but also integrated Chinese traditional motifs that added a “second skin layer” of significance. The

presence of the mythological Kui Long (夔龙) dragon at the back of the helmet guards Molly and recalls the armor warriors of the Shang dynasty. This pattern, added at the helmet also symbolizes a momentum of majesty and bravery. All in all, the artist interpreted Molly as wooden skin holy fighter, rendering into the laws of nature and protecting everything in the world.

At end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025, PopMart announced the release of a non- tangible heritage series, the MEGA ROYAL MOLLY Florals China (Image 6).



Image 6. PopMart 2025 ROYAL MOLLY Florals China. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/>

Inspired in the ancient Chinese ceramic culture of Jingdezhen (景德镇) in Jiangxi province, it reproduced the traditional techniques of “porcelain rolling process” (轧道工艺) also known as “pickpocketing” (扒花). Developed during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, this ceramic decoration technique presents high technological difficulty, as it requires the porcelain to be fired at high temperature and extremely precaution in order to avoid scraps on the surface. The process refers to “pastel” to the use of glass white material as the background color, on which later is added a colored coat. “Rolling” is how carving is denominated, part of the process in which a tool like a rusty needle is used to carve fine phoenix tail lines alike, in order to draw ornaments like flowers, birds, landscapes between others, on the surface of the art piece.

Wang Xiaofeng, president of the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Association (中国非物质文化遗产保护协会), pointed out the relevance of this joint innovation between Jingdezhen ceramic culture and PopMart, providing new possibilities to the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese culture. The exploration of the brand in the collision of non-tangible repertoires of cultural heritage and integration of tradition on new trends, can be assume as a new modality of culture consumption aimed to endure the transmission of the culture of the era through playful artistic expressions.

These examples highlight how nostalgia functions not just as design inspiration, but as an aesthetic method for cultural survival, especially among younger consumers. The integration of historic symbols, materials, and iconography affirms cultural continuity while offering playful reimaginings of Chinese tradition.

*The aesthetic politics of nostalgia in Guócháo Cháowán*

As demonstrated, both restorative and reflective nostalgia reject the deterministic views of history and open space for negotiation, hybridity and collective participation. This process aligns with Hall's (1997) view of identity as continually reconfigured through temporal and cultural interplay. *Guócháo Cháowán* operates through this hybridity, where simplified toy morphologies combine Chinese symbolism with pop cultural references.

The result is a localized expression of globalization: a two-dimensional design culture influenced by Japanese character design and Western pop aesthetics. Contrary to Pohl's (2009) concerns about globalization's homogenizing effects, this hybridization enables cultural reassertion and expands the global visibility of Chinese design. Nostalgia here functions as both a memory practice and a forward-looking design strategy.

Economically, this is a deliberate counter-strategy to reclaim the narrative of Chinese aesthetics in a global market. *Guócháo Cháowán* toys not only appeal to new young consumers, but also transform passive audiences into co-creators of cultural memory, resonating with Carr's (1982) view of consumers as historical agents.

The behavior of these new generations of consumers, particularly among youngsters, reflects both Bourdieu's cultural capital dynamics and Canclini's hybrid modernities. Emotional investment and symbolic consumption drive value beyond aesthetics—narrating self-identity, national belonging, and creative continuity. The everyday satisfaction

of nostalgia-laden consumption becomes a subtle yet meaningful act of identity reaffirmation.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined how *Guócháo Cháowán* - Chinese art toys—operates as emotional infrastructures that mobilize nostalgia to engage cultural memory, negotiate identity and communicate symbolic meaning. Positioned at the intersection of tradition and modernity, these playthings reconfigure heritage into emotionally resonant forms, transforming collective memory into a site of playful interaction and aesthetic consumption. Rather than offering static reproductions of the past, *Guócháo Cháowán* materializes reimagined fragments of Chinese cultural identity, embedded in objects that resonate with contemporary consumer sensibilities.

Nostalgia, as demonstrated, is not treated as passive longing but as a dynamic cultural force. Through both restorative and reflective modes, it enables the revival and reinterpretation of traditional aesthetics, rituals, and narratives. The toys analyzed—such as PopMart's *SPACE MOLLY*, Rolife's *Nanci*, and *52Toys' Super Active Series*—encode symbolic elements that evoke shared cultural references, while simultaneously incorporating visual strategies that align with global design trends and youth-centered aesthetics. This duality situates *Guócháo Cháowán* within a hybrid design culture, where the emotional appeal of heritage is reconstructed through forms that are both nostalgic and future-oriented.

Visual storytelling, symbolic design, and simplified morphology function not only as aesthetic choices but as memory practices. These toys act as mnemonic devices that foster emotional engagement, allowing consumers to participate in the re-articulation of cultural narratives. In doing so, they facilitate the reinforcement of collective identity in a fast-changing and globalized environment.

Finally, *Guócháo Cháowán* portrays how nostalgia—embedded in symbolic play and visual culture—becomes a productive force. It bridges generational experience and cultural pride, enabling young consumers to engage with heritage not through preservation alone, but through reinterpretation. As this article has shown, the nostalgic design of *Guócháo Cháowán* is not simply a strategy of aesthetic reference, but a mode of cultural continuity—transforming designer toys into emotionally charged artifacts that animate memory, affirm identity,

and contribute to the evolving landscape of Chinese cultural expression.

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