

Synthetic Occidenterie

At the front of Meitao Qu's exhibition 'Furnishing Shangri-La' is an oversized dollhouse titled *SKU4651, Tier-2 city series* (2026). Presented on a flatbed trolley, the dollhouse is encased in commercial packaging, reminiscent of the popular Japanese toy brand Sylvanian Families. Through the plastic film-coated cutout in the middle of the baby-blue patterned box, a stretched high-rise apartment complex made of laser cut MDF is visible. This miniature building, with European-style Juliet balconies and baroque vertical windows, is covered in patchy grey paint to resemble concrete. European architectural touches, such as those seen here, are found widely in contemporary housing developments throughout China and the phenomenon is referred to as *ou shi* (欧式), or Euro-styled.¹ Following the Reform and Opening Up of China in 1978, the country's adoption of a market economy has led to the emergence of a new affluent class with substantial private wealth. As a result, there has been an explosion of housing developments that mimic Western architecture to attract and cater to this new middle and upper class. The title alludes to how you now see such developments in Second Tier Cities, which are cities undergoing rapid development and growing economic importance but have yet to rival First Tier Cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, where these stylised buildings originated. Qu has given this pseudo-brand of toys the apt name 'Prospect Country' to reflect how the adoption of Western architectural styles, or the more extreme developments themed entirely around idealised cities like Paris and London, is attractive to this new class, as it becomes symbolic of their newfound wealth and China's modernisation.

The walls surrounding *SKU4651, Tier-2 city series* are painted in a bright green colour. Roughly a third of the adjacent walls are covered in this shade of green, somewhere between a pastel mint and an olive green. To most people, this hue simply conjures the vegetation used as adjectives to describe the colour and the various attendant symbolic associations with nature. Qu, though, has used this specific chromatic mixture as it was present throughout the Soviet Union in both domestic and industrial spaces. Red is the colour often connected with the Soviet Union and, indeed, China. But as Anastasiia Gerasimova explains, the colour red was celebratory in the Soviet Union and green was 'the colour of routine, the colour of bureaucracy, the colour of daily hopelessness under the Soviet regime'.² While this shade was widely used in China before the Sino-Soviet Split, the colour has persisted in the interiors of public housing and factories for some time. Qu even remembers that her school's walls were painted in Soviet green. The colour is not featured in 'Furnishing Shangri-La' to evoke such childhood memories, but rather to capture China's 'post-socialist' position today. Soviet green now lines the floors of the large-scale factories that have become the backbone of the country's new market economy, providing hope to the middle and upper-class managers of these factories at the detriment of those working-class labourers struggling to make ends meet in poor working conditions.

SKU4651, Tier-2 city series conjures the factory through the Soviet green walls and through the flatbed trolley. Despite the dollhouse being singular, the setting implores us to consider it as one among many. The dollhouse as a reproducible product is a synecdoche for the real buildings modelled on Western cities that have been erected on an unprecedented scale across China. These developments often quite literally replicate the architecture of Western cities and transplant it into China. On the outskirts of Hangzhou in Tianducheng, there is an entire complex modelled on Paris, France, featuring a scaled-down Eiffel Tower and

¹ Winnie Wong, 'Architectural Copies', *Artforum*, 52 (March 2014), < <https://www.artforum.com/columns/architectural-copies-219379/> >, [accessed 25 September 2026].

² Anastasiia Gerasimova, 'Soviet Green', *Saturated Space*, April 6 2021, < <http://www.saturatedspace.org/2021/04/soviet-green.html> >, [accessed 25 September 2026], p. 3.

Haussmann-style apartments. Whereas Western culture and aesthetics privilege the original at the expense of the copy, Chinese culture has traditionally conceived of the copy in an entirely different light. In the book *Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China* (2013), Bianca Bosker observes how ‘the ability to render a good copy has, historically, been taken by the Chinese as a marker of technological and cultural superiority, and the coexistence of an original and its virtually indistinguishable double does not trigger the ontological crisis that is characteristic of the West’.³ This historic tradition of valuing the copy, however, shaped orientalist conceptions of China. British architect Owen Jones (1809-1874) wrote in his book *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) that ‘the peculiarity of the Chinese is their fidelity in copying’.⁴ The construction of such themed developments continues to strike Western audiences as odd – one need only look at the numerous media articles about these cities from the late 2010s. Yet, those who can afford to buy these architectural copies consider them as symbolic of their newfound wealth and the country’s modern internationalism. Qu’s *SKU4651, Tier-2 city series* troubles these different systems of appreciation and disregard for the copy across geopolitical borders.

The reverse of the dollhouse’s box features a picture of a housing development in Dalian and an image of French Louis XV-style living room furniture to ‘pair with’ your equally Euro-styled apartment. Royal blue leather sofas with luminescent gold-painted cabriole legs and ornate trim are set in a sitting room beneath a decadent chandelier. Those who occupy such themed or Euro-styled buildings often purchase furniture to match the exterior, for it, too, symbolises wealth, status and modernity. *Ode to Ornament* (2026) through the entryway behind the dollhouse is an estranged example of the kind of furniture one might find in these apartments. The central pillar is not upholstered, as seen in a typical nineteenth-century borne settee, nor are the armrests and spindles positioned to allow you to sit on the luscious, tufted cushions with a lilac Turkish damask fabric. Atop the central column of *Ode to Ornament* is a stepped pillar cap painted in stone-effect paint, containing real stone to more authentically resemble natural limestone. The column itself is adorned with yellow Chinoiserie wallpaper inspired by a hand-painted wall covering now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, formerly given to the Shernfold Park estate by a Chinese ambassador in the nineteenth century. In the original wallpaper with a pastel green background, flowers and plants branch off in different directions amid richly detailed birds and butterflies: a scene of several local figures drinking tea surrounding a pagoda lies at the bottom.⁵ Chinoiserie is, of course, a Western interpretation of Eastern decorative styles popularised alongside the Rococo movement. Wealthy households in eighteenth-century Britain would line their parlours with such patterned wallpaper and various artefacts from the East as symbols of the British Empire’s global power. The craze for Euro-styled furniture and apartments in contemporary China mirrors the Victorian obsession with domesticating the East.

Between each enclosed seat of *Ode to Ornament* is an integrated side table with an international plug socket and a plastic gold-and-pearl cover. The table itself is veneered in Santos rosewood, and the whole construction is, in fact, made from machine-routed MDF and plywood coated in mahogany and Ebony black wood stains. Single ornate electroplated brass wall sconces flank the central column. While these features seek to evoke the ornamental excess seen in Victorian Britain or, indeed, Regency France, the materials are cheap, low-cost imitations of the rather decadent materials used in the past. Qu’s choice of materials to evoke

³ Bianca Bosker, ‘The Fascination with Faux: Philosophical and Theoretical Reproduction in China’ in *Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China* (Honolulu, Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013), p. 25.

⁴ Owen Jones, ‘Chinese Ornament’ in *The Grammar of Ornament: A Visual Reference of Form and Colour in Architecture and the Decorative Arts* (Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016 (1856)), p. 275.

⁵ See ‘Wallpaper 1790 – 1820 (made), Victoria and Albert Museum, < <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O218594/wallpaper-unknown/> >, [accessed 25 September 2026].

New China's craze for Euro-style apartments and furnishings is conceptually pertinent, for owning them is never about having the real, authentic thing, but evoking luxury and, in turn, wealth and status. Hence, Qu refers to the *ou shi* (欧式) trend as a form of *synthetic occidenterie*. New middle and upper-class homeowners in contemporary China adopt the reverse position of the historic Orientalist through imitation and veneer. As Bianca Bosker observes in relation to the literature used to sell these housing complexes, the Euro-style obsession is purely aesthetic and ignores 'the democratic, individualistic, liberal traditions of Western cultures'.⁶ *Ode to Ornament*'s lack of functionality points to how the adoption of this style is purely symbolic and serves no other purpose. The title of the exhibition, 'Furnishing Shangri-La', is an ironic nod to the craze's purely figurative purpose. Shangri-La is the name of the fictional monastery found in the Tibetan mountains within the novel *Lost Horizon* (1933) by British author James Hilton. In 2001, the government changed a city's name in Yunnan from Zhongdian to Shangri-La to boost its economy through tourism. Qu's 'Furnishing Shangri-La' urges us to consider the nuances of Euro-style architectural remaking and domestic adornment in New China, which takes you on a circuitous route back to Victorian Britain and Regency France through socialist China.

⁶ Bosker, 'Manifestations of Westernization: The Anatomy of China's Simulacrascapes' in *Original Copies*, p.60.