

Cul-de-sac

Autumn/Winter

Someone randomly chose three Chinese characters – the concepts of deafness, landing and firewood – and decided to print them all over the fabric for our sheets this season. The label says RAVENTÓS TEXTILES, TARRASA (SPAIN), which is both geographically and conceptually far away from the Chinese master who, once upon a time, carefully wrote these symbols in calligraphy and then ate a simple bowl of white rice after finishing his work. He obviously wasn't the one who digitally formatted the characters so they could be printed on matching sheets, upholstery and curtains. Whoever it was, did they know the 8,000 characters in the Chinese dictionary? The 1,800 *kanjis* approved for use by the Japanese government in 1946? Or was it probably just a designer from the Iberian peninsula, completely unaware of that information? And what if it was a textile designer named Mireia Torrá who got her degree in London?

Indeed, it was Mireia – another victim, just like the rest of us, of the wide-spread idealization of the meaning of Chinese characters. Due to their calligraphic sophistication, we assume they must symbolize meaningful values like justice or understanding, or at least represent some sort of placid natural phenomenon, like a delicate rain (diametrically opposed to a downpour), when in reality our sheets are more likely decorated with mere morphemes of very little spiritual value (the concepts of deafness, landing and firewood). Even so, we're able to lie in them for hours, invaded by words that we wouldn't normally accept on our bed sheets if they were written with the Latin alphabet (not even Mireia). Mireia was simply following orders from the textile company director who hired her to come up with prints – to randomly choose three Chinese symbols (the concepts of deafness, landing and firewood) during a professional meeting held last quarter – and decided to sell the bed linen set with an oriental print, TERIYAKI model. Oriol Raventós, therefore, was the one responsible for what had happened to our sheets.

Meeting at Raventós Textiles to decide on prints for the season

- Oriol Raventós: Let's see, Mireia, what do you have for me? Something oriental, as I suggested? Oriental patterns are so in right now.
- Mireia Torrá: Yes, so what do you think?
- Oriol Raventós (quietly murmuring the syllable "hmm" as he studies it: *hmmmmmm*): I like it a lot. It's very simple. Chinese letters are so elegant, so there's no need to overdo it. The Chinese and the Japanese are so delicate. Well, orientals in general.

Oriental in general

And what if one night we dared to bring the duvet cover downstairs to the corner store and asked the Chinese owners to translate the print? They don't speak Mandarin, they speak Cantonese, but luckily the writing is the same. Would we really go down to the late-night corner store carrying a queen size duvet cover? Imagine ourselves among squishy, sugary gummy worms; 4-packs of flavored yogurts; plastic nets of oranges, lemons and onions. There we are, under the brush overhead light, asking: "Would you be so kind as to tell me what this item says that's supposed to cover our bed? See, the thing is, we aren't impervious to the meaning and Mireia, the designer, can't help us."

We wouldn't dare take the duvet down to the corner store, or the dollar store, or *Jade Dragon* where we order Chinese food a few nights a week. We also wouldn't call a certified Chinese translator. We're never going to know the meaning of the characters on the duvet cover and that's that. Whether we like it or not, thousand-year-old Chinese writing has been squandered away daily as if being thrown out far away from its corresponding recycling bin – corrugated cardboard, styrofoam, aluminum containers. Still, not understanding the symbols on a duvet cover isn't as dangerous as not knowing what a stoplight means when it's red or green. It's much less worrisome than not being able to read *Attention, slippery when wet* (tilted car over wavy lines on a yellow background) and, of course, it's not half as dangerous as not knowing how to decipher *Danger, live wire* (red bolt of electricity). Our duvet cover is more like a last-minute gift wrapped in yesterday's newspaper than a three-color stoplight or the traffic signs you have to memorize in

order to get your driver's license. In the end, Mireia and Raventós are not responsible for our vital successes or failures. We've all seen movies where someone tries to read encrypted messages where there's nothing actually to decipher – on the walls, in the newspaper – but Mireia and Raventós' intentions don't involve encrypting. And since they aren't encrypting and we aren't suffering from paranoia, then what's wrong with us, doctor? When faced with the authority of systems of meaning, why do we have the desire to interpret it all? Ban all alphabets: Chinese, Arabic, Cyrillic letters. Prescribe simple structures with superficial lines and colors, plain stripes or plaid prints, the equivalent of a season in a spa, far away from semiotics.

Spring/Summer

Another season: time to choose the tablecloth, but it has to match the dish towel, oven mitt and apron. After looking through a large sample collection, we opt for a traditional Scotch plaid. The fact that our tablecloths and children's private school uniforms will now have the tartan of the MacLaines, or the Kirklands, or the Abercrombies, doesn't mean a whole lot to us. It doesn't force us to cross or wait at the crosswalk. Once again, we've forgotten the commendable efforts of the MacLaine of Lochbuie in creating a pattern that represents them.

The MacLaine of Lochbuie creating their tartan (circa 1610)

- Fiona MacLaine: A'll take oot a a wee bit ae red and add some mair blue or oor kilt will look tae much like the Sinclairs.
- Alastair MacLaine: Fiona, do as ah say. Leave the red as is, the red is bonnie. It'll help tae see it from far away. We're descendants of the brave warrior Gilleana-Taughe, ye ken! Oor tartan has to hae the color of blood.
- Fiona MacLaine: Remember yer color blind, Alastair.
- Alastair MacLaine: Och Lassie! Do yee want them to confuse us with grass frae the highlands?
- Fiona MacLaine: Oh, Alastair, yer so stubborn! How no, whatever yee say; that's how it'll be then. Bairns! Here's the MacLaine tartan! But the MacLaine of Lochbuie, nae the Keppochs or the Clanranalds.

Their conversation is part of the fabric in my oven mitt, one of my tablecloths and my matching napkins, although they have no idea. All

the bravery of the MacLaine of Lochbuie clan and pride in the land they received from John – the first Lord of the Islands in the 14th century – are there for us to desecrate with the gravy we're taking out of the oven, with a "careful! oven mitt please! this is hot and I'm gonna spill the gravy." And they also appear in an updated version, modified by Mireia upon Mr. Raventós' request:

- Raventós: Let's see, Mireia, what do you have for me? Something Scottish, as I suggested? Scottish patterns are so in right now.
- Mireia: Yes, I think you're going to like this.
- Raventós: (quietly murmuring the syllable "hmm" as he studies it: *hmmmmmm*): The truth is it looks really, I mean really, good. And they're really colorful. Scottish plaids are so happy, classic and, at the same time, always stylish. But do me a favor, add a little yellow to the final pattern. It'll look good, it will make it warmer.

It will make it warmer

We look for warmth, well-being and comfort. The fact that this is advertising vocabulary is the very least of our concerns: we have fully appropriated it. Do we feel better eating on the MacLaine of Lochbuie's tartan with extra yellow? Do we digest our food better on that excess of color? We're not forced to eat *haggis*, *porridge* or *Scotch pie* on it, nor do we have to necessarily cross the street when the technological warbling birds urge us to do so. The auditory symbol of you-can-cross-the-street is a warbling bird, and the symbol of warmth and an intimate home is the tartan of the MacLaine of Lochbuie clan, which we can quietly enjoy with its warm tones, warmer today than in 1610 thanks to Raventós and Mireia.

Once again, we shouldn't blame the manufacturing-design team, although Fiona and Alastair would tell them off, the poor things, so from another century – they wouldn't understand that their tartan had become public domain. We've forgotten Fiona's efforts to avoid looking like the Sinclairs, an effort that has now been chromatically modified. Fiona, let's share Mediterranean recipes on your digitally-formatted tartan. Do you like the dishes with the apple-apricot-strawberry border? Wouldn't it make more sense to have your dishes decorated with apples, apricots and strawberries rather than clocks, sandals and lungs? And since it's for food, why not stick with the theme of gastronomy and draw

little stomachs around the edge? Who decided against stomachs? I look at the other side of the bowl and see that my dish was Made in Italy: PETRONE DESIGN. The architect is once again from another peninsula.

– Fiorella Petrone (partially translated for convenience sake): Yes, I tell you before that I want pleasing set of dishes, but stomachs too much risk Stefano. *Non sono divertenti, gli stomachi.*

– Stefano Gatti (industrial designer, also partially translated): Why no, Fiorella? You yourself talk of a line with great risk, you insist to move away from the classics, because they are boring you with the *mele, albicocche e fragole.*

– Fiorella Petrone: *Lo so, lo so, ma... Senti,* Stefano, that is what I say before, but now I change my idea: it is too much. Let us stay with apples, apricots and strawberries. They will give a better result, trust in me.

In between seasons

But what happens if this time we're the ones who don't want Fiorella and Stefano's apples, apricots and strawberries on the border of our dishes? We've already swallowed Raventós Textiles' genetically modified/transgenic Scottish plaid and their re-appropriation of Chinese calligraphy. We've been taking it for entire seasons, Mother's Days, Father's Days, Christmases... but it's all over: tomorrow we're going to the linen section of a department store where, with a mixture of disdain and relief, we will systematically rule out the Oriental, African and Aztec designs in chocolate and orange tones with crude drawings done by fake indigenous people. And we would go down the escalator empty-handed if it weren't for the fact that we still have the "color" white: there it is, nude and defenseless, with its lack of connotations, there for us to cling to after definitively abandoning all excess communication. Maybe with white dishes, white oven mitts, and white towels, apparently void of any visual messages, we could save ourselves some time and instead pay attention to more productive tasks. We could finally rest in the absence of color: maybe Fiorella and Raventós have opted for white in some of their collections to repent the sin of omission, of non-communication. They would save on ink, which would be the first domino in a set of advantages, followed by others that would fall one after another, once they've finally made their decision.

Mercedes Cebrián. *Cul-de-sac*. Translated by: Heather Higl

We cross our fingers, since Raventós is already asking Mireia to come to his office to discuss white. You can hear him all the way from here: he's proposing something about towels. You want the fringe to have drawings, curves, lines? Wow, we forgot about the texture! And even though we can't see Fiorella and Stefano together in Milan, we can assume that they are already testing out new designs on white, introducing Braille texts on tiles, dishes. There is no escape: Petrone Design's new line of products will be called BRAILLE. It will feature just that, texture; your fingers won't rest even though your vision will: that's the idea. Furthermore, white will bring us elegance, simplicity; it will fill the house with new adjectives. We will be forced once again to cross when the light is green and to not touch for danger of live wires.

Mercedes Cebrián
(translated by Heather Higl)