

Chabuduo! Close enough ...

Your balcony fell off? Chabuduo. Vaccines are overheated? Chabuduo. How China became the land of disastrous corner-cutting

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In our apartment in central Beijing, we fight a daily rearguard action against entropy. The mirror on my wardrobe came off its hinges six months ago and is now propped up against the wall, one of many furnishing casualties. Each of our light fittings takes a different bulb, and a quarter of them are permanently broken. In the bedroom, the ceiling-high air-conditioning unit runs its moisture through a hole knocked in the wall, stuffed with an old cloth to avoid leakage, while the balcony door, its sealant rotted, has a towel handy to block the rain when it pours through. On the steps outside our door, I duck my head every day to avoid the thick tangle of hanging wires that brings power and the internet; when the wind is up, connections slow as cables swing.

The apartment is five years old. By Chinese standards, it's far better than the average. Our toilet works, while in many of my friends' houses, flushing the loo is a hydraulic operation akin to controlling the Nile floods. The sockets do not flash blue sparks when plugged in, and all but two work. None of the lightbulbs have ever exploded; and the mirror merely broke away, rather than falling spontaneously from the frame. The shower is not placed next to the apartment's central wiring and protected by nothing more than rotting drywall.

I am a believer in Hilaire Belloc's 1911 epigram:

It is the business of the wealthy man

To give employment to the artisan.

I barely qualify as wealthy, even in China, and artisans are few and preciously guarded. Most of the time, when I've called in help, I've been left standing in a flooded bathroom with a panicked 20-year-old assuring me that he thinks he can get the pipe back on.

My time in China has taught me the pleasure and value of craftsmanship, simply because it's so rare. To see somebody doing a job well, not just for its own reward, but for the satisfaction of good work, thrills my heart; it doesn't matter whether it's cooking or candle-making or fixing a bike. When I moved house some years ago, I watched with genuine delight as three wiry men stripped my old apartment to the bone in 10 minutes, casually balancing sofas and desks on their backs and packing the van as tightly as a master Tetris player.

But such scenes are an unusual treat. (And, after losing the card for my master movers, the next time I shifted house, the moving team did a fine imitation of the Three Stooges.) Instead, the prevailing attitude is chabuduo, or 'close enough'. It's a phrase you'll hear with grating regularity, one that speaks to a job 70 per cent done, a plan sketched out but never

completed, a gauge unchecked or a socket put in the wrong size. Chabuduo is the corrosive opposite of the impulse towards craftsmanship, the desire, as the sociologist Richard Sennett writes in *The Craftsman* (2008), 'to reject muddling through, to reject the job just good enough'. Chabuduo implies that to put any more time or effort into a piece of work would be the act of a fool. China is the land of the cut corner, of 'good enough for government work'.

Yet sometimes there's a brilliance to chabuduo. One of the daily necessities of life under Maoism was improvisation; finding ways to keep irreplaceable luxuries such as tractors or machine tools going, despite missing parts or broken supply chains. On occasion, it was applauded as 'peasant' science or Stakhanovite virtue, but more often it meant trouble if noticed by a superior, since Maoism often matched the call for revolution with a pedantic insistence on the correct routine, especially in the factory or the farm. Improvisation could get you accused of 'sabotage' – why were you fixing a problem you hadn't caused? Besides, why would there be a problem in the first place, when things were so well-planned from the top?

But improvisation was a vitally needed talent, and a particular genius developed among some of the senior generation, now in their 60s and older: an ability to go beyond make-do-and-mend to the kind of skills displayed by the A-Team when they're locked in a barn by villains and they construct an armoured vehicle out of nothing but gardening tools and old tyres. More usually, chabuduo is the domain of a village uncle who grew up with nothing and can whip up a solution to anything out of two bits of wire and some tape. Gate broken? Don't worry about getting a new lock, we'll fix it up with some wire, it'll be chabuduo.

Today, the countryside is full of isolated inventors who build their own juddering planes or pond-going submarines from scratch, or craft full-scale catapults to resist demolition teams. Their mechanical genius has nowhere to go; they're stuck in a world of farm repairs and lunatic projects. But on a small scale, it's visible all over even the big cities, from the sidewalk salons assembled out of castaway furniture where layabouts and grandfathers play cards in the afternoon, to the numerous home-built roof shelters made by doting locals for Beijing's stray cats.

Yet chabuduo is also the casual dismissal of problems. Oh, your door doesn't fit the frame? Chabuduo, you'll get used to kicking it open. We sent you a shirt two sizes too big? Chabuduo, what are you complaining about?

At my old compound, the entrance to the underground parking lot was covered by a 20-metre-long half-cylinder of heavy blue plastic. Nobody had noticed that this made a highly effective wind trap, and it had been only crudely nailed to the brick foundations. Chabuduo, what's it going to matter? When a storm hit, the nails burst from the pressure and it was sent hurtling across the compound, smashing stone tables and trees; I came down in the morning to find it lying across the grass like a fallen jumbo jet's wing.

We were lucky, nobody was killed. But behind China's disasters, 'good enough' squats more often than actual malice: compromises that are mere annoyances in daily life become fatal when undertaken on an industrial scale. Problems that a keen eye or a daily routine can circumvent transform into deadly rifts when reproduced millions of times nationwide.

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Take the last year alone. You don't have a proper cold-storage chain to send vaccines? Well, stick some ice in the parcels and put them in the post. Chabuduo, and children cough to death. Why take the sludge to a disposal site? Just pile it up here, where everyone else has been putting it. Chabuduo, and 91 people are crushed by a landslide in Guangdong. Separate out the dangerous materials? What does it matter, just stick that nitrate over there. Chabuduo, and a fireball goes up in Tianjin, north China's chief port, incinerating 173 people.

'There's a Tianjin-level explosion every month,' a staff member at a national-level work-safety programme told me, asking for anonymity. 'But mostly they happen in places that nobody cares about.' Careless disasters are buried all the time; when a chemical plant exploded in Tangshan in March 2014, a friend there told me of the management's relief after the Malaysia Airlines flight 370 went missing the next day, swallowing up all other news and making sure nobody but them noticed, save for 13 widows.

But the small deaths pile up: on construction sites where men wield blowtorches without safety goggles, or dangle from tied-together lengths of old rope; from food poisoning from meat carried in unrefrigerated vans; from fires in badly wired apartments. The toll grows every day, especially among the poor, unnoticed and unrecorded by the institutions supposedly guarding them.

Many Chinese cities are half building site; I've gone on walks through back alleys that resembled Super Mario levels, full of grinding wheels shooting out flurries of super-heated sparks, bricks dropped from scaffolding above without warning and cords strung across the pavement. 'Why don't you put tape around that?' I asked at one spot, pointing to a guttering pit next to the road, deep enough to break a neck. The migrant workers shrugged. 'Nobody told us to.'

In a 1924 article, the critic Hu Shih turned chabuduo into an eponymous parable. 'Mr Cha Buduo', his protagonist, lives his life by the principle of 'Close enough'. 'Certainly you've heard people talk about him,' wrote Hu. 'So many people say his name every day.'

Mr. Cha Buduo doesn't understand why he misses trains by arriving at 8:32 instead of 8:30, or why his boss gets angry when he writes 1,000 instead of 10, or why Iceland is different from Ireland. He falls ill and sends for Dr Wāng, but ends up getting Mr Wáng, the veterinarian, by mistake. Yet as he slips away, he is consoled by the thought that life and death, after all, are close enough.

For Hu, the cure for this hazy malaise was modernity; the tick of the railway station's clock, the carefully kept account book, the doctor's prescribed remedy. He wanted an end to the veneration of fuzziness, mysticism and incompetence that, in his parable, eventually cause the public to pronounce Mr Cha Buduo a Buddhist saint and 'Great Master of Flexibility'. Hu's contemporaries, educated in Japan or the United States, longed to embrace the modernity of a new nation, and ditch the past and all its accumulated dust. But the flood of modernity, already lapping around China's cities even before Hu Shih's time, didn't bring care and precision; it destroyed it.

Even before Hu's day, overpopulation and globalisation were hitting China hard, driving huge migrations in the late 19th century. Chinese people were struggling with new technological and governmental norms with which they had no experience. The disasters of war and revolution cracked what traditions were left. Today, since China's head-first dive into the modern world began in 1979, mass urbanisation, internal migration and the constant flux of change have eroded most traces of the skills for which the country was once renowned.

Earlier this year, in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, I feasted – visually – on the Ming-dynasty plates that 16th-century Ottoman sultans favoured, the glaze still preserved and each marked proudly with its makers' stamp. Our sense of the material past might be biased toward the beautiful and the fine, purely because it's more likely to be valued and thus to survive. But ample evidence speaks to pre-modern China's skills, developed most particularly with the thriving commercial environment and rich merchant patrons of the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. The craftsmanship of China overwhelmed Europeans and Ottomans alike, sparking waves of awe and imitation.

Some arts, of course, have survived. Close to my home, a Manchu family still makes beautiful and funny scenes of Beijing life from tiny doll's furniture, the posed bodies of cockroaches standing in for human beings. But there is so little left. Wood-workers, lute-makers, coopers, weavers of rare cloth: they remain only in pockets.

To some extent, this is a normal historical process. In 19th-century Paris, Hamburg and New York, writers complained of builders who didn't know one end of a trowel from another, of plumbers more likely to smash your pipes than mend them, of glaziers whose frames would fall and shatter the next day. Rural migrants flooded the cities, looking for any day labour they could find, their own local skills useless in a new environment. In a generation or less, the rush of modernity invalidated talents developed over centuries.

But in much of the developed world, the sense of craftsmanship soon returned. There was the pleasure of invention, of the cutting edge, of developing new standards for a new trade. In late 18th-century England, brickmakers crafted their own rich metaphors, where, as Sennett notes, the invention of 'honest' brick (without any artificial colour added) reflected the manufacturers' own pride. Ford workers in the 1930s envisioned a gleaming automated future

made with their own tools. In contrast, Chinese workers have been stranded for four decades in a dead zone, where the old skills have been lost, but a new professionalism hasn't evolved. And the era of quick-and-dirty shows no signs of disappearing any time soon.

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Why is China caught in this trap? In most industries here, vital feedback loops are severed. To understand how to make things, you have to use them. Ford's workers in the US drove their own cars, and Western builders dwelt, or hoped to dwell, in homes like the ones they made. But the migrants lining factory belts in Guangdong make knick-knacks for US households thousands of miles away. The men and women who build China's houses will never live in them.

The average price of a one-bedroom apartment in a Chinese second-tier city – a provincial town of a few million people, straining at its own geographical and environmental limits – is around \$100,000; the average yearly salary for a migrant construction worker is around \$3,500. Their future is shabby pre-fabricated workers' dorms and old country shacks, not air conditioning and modern bathrooms. If what you're making represents a world utterly out of reach to you, why bother to do it well?

The opacity of Chinese companies means it's often hard to pin down the blame for even cataclysmic failure; the maker's marks once inscribed on every brick in a city's walls have been replaced with the mirages of holding companies and shell enterprises. Local governments fearful of higher unemployment and lower GDP work assiduously to shield their favoured businesses from any consequences for their actions.

The greatest gulf of all is between the planners in Beijing and the workers on the ground who implement their policies. Huge swathes of the country still operate under the logic of the planned economy, reacting to government quotas and guaranteed bailouts. Yet craft requires the feedback of users and the marketplace. The quota, set for everything from wordcounts for journalists to arrests for policemen, is a powerful spur to value nothing about the product except the speed of its production. Chabuduo: good enough for government work.

There is one glowing exception to the culture of chabuduo: China's tech sector, perhaps because it developed near-simultaneously with the rest of the world's. In other areas, Chinese factories and workshops weren't developing new trades, but taking over ones the West needed done cheap. There was none of the pride or knowledge earned by problem-solving or invention. By contrast, the e-commerce giant Alibaba has honed the art of getting goods from buyer to seller in a vast country to levels still unknown in the West – albeit possibly through the use of the Hobbit-like founder Jack Ma's network of magical fairy roads – while mobile

payment, fierce and relatively open competition and the money that flowed from it have produced their own set of brilliant skills.

Yet tech can't escape the curse altogether. Sloppy coding, broken apps and massive privacy failures are common, especially when China's state industries are forced to develop internal programs rather than use commercial ones for 'security' reasons. China's search engines are abysmal, simultaneously crippled by government censorship and protected from real competition. Baidu, the biggest, was struck by scandal earlier this year, after repeatedly promoting quack medical treatments in exchange for payment.

After the scandal, the authorities announced that they would take hard measures to ensure that Baidu performed better. And where reputation can't push responsibility, regulation can step in. But in practice, China's regulatory authorities are a void. Although each disaster is ritually castigated in the press, any follow-up is rapidly killed; the average lifespan of coverage of even a massive disaster such as Tianjin is less than a week, before the mandates of the propaganda bureau go out and the story disappears from the papers.

Everyday regulation is even less efficient, bound by a set of perverse incentives that have persisted for decades. Regulators, under-funded and under-staffed, aren't expected to cover every possible enterprise. Yet if they inspect a site or company, they're deemed to be responsible for any future disasters there, which can cost them their jobs, Party membership or even potential jail time. The obvious solution is for regulators to cover few sites and concentrate on the least risky areas, thus minimising their personal risk. This failure is compounded by the absence of a functioning civil legal system, especially for collective action; mistakes that could mean massive lawsuits in the West can be papered over in China. Even the death of migrant workers can be paid off with as little as \$5,000.

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All these factors work against the Chinese developing pride in their own work. And if they do, they better keep it to themselves. In the West, unions (for manual labourers) and professional associations (for groups such as doctors and lawyers) played a critical role in setting national standards. They gave people an identity that depended, in part, on both mastery and morality, a group of peers to compete against, and to be held to account by.

But, as Adam Smith argued in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), every profession 'ends in a conspiracy against the public' and the Chinese Communist Party tolerates no conspiracies except its own. Especially since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, any group that might represent a cross-national basis of resistance to the Party has been cut down. Unionisation, outside of the toothless and corrupt All-China Trade Union Federation, is a threat to the Party, which no more wants hod-carriers or rail workers across the nation to come together than it does Christians, democrats or feminists.

Under the Party umbrella, there is room for professional associations – but only at the top end of the scale. There's a Chinese Medical Association, but no China Plumber's Association. Even within those bodies, though, far more value is put on sticking to the official line than in creating a peer group. As the medical journalist Michael Woodhead has pointed out, in the West doctors have clear professional guidelines, and review bodies to keep them on the straight-and-narrow; in China they have only the flickering lamp of their own conscience.

In the end, what perpetuates China's carelessness most might be sheer ubiquity. Craft inspires. A writer can be stirred to the page by hearing a song or watching a car being repaired, a carpenter revved up by a poem or a motorbike. But the opposite also holds true; when you're surrounded by the cheaply done, the half-assed and the ugly, when failure is unpunished and dedication unrewarded all around, it's hard not to think that close enough is good enough. Chabuduo.