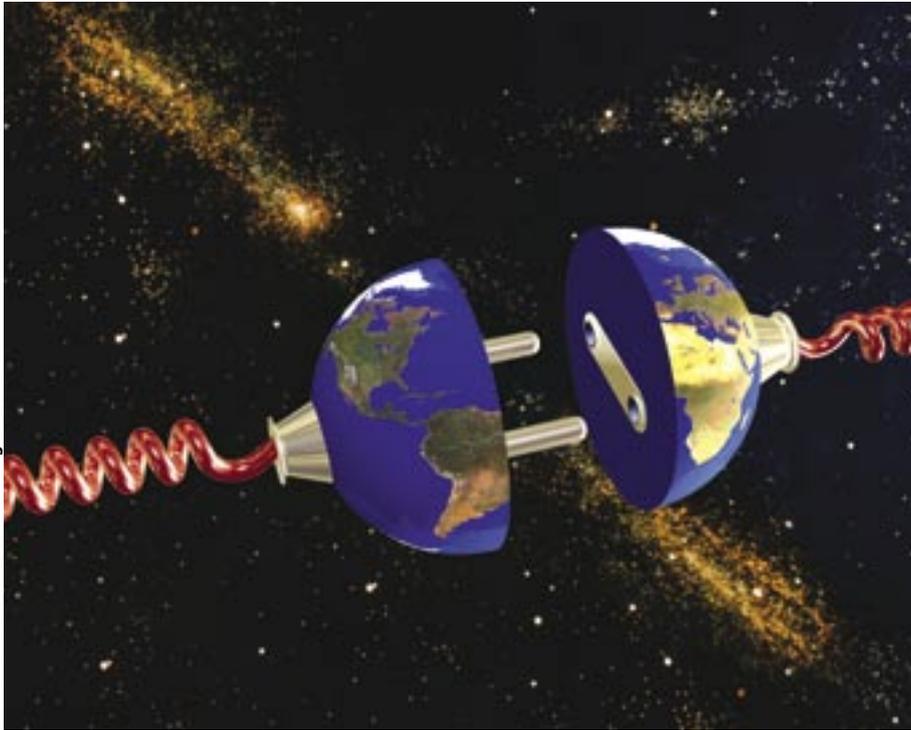


CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

unplugged

the hidden characteristics of electrical plugs



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Plug design is an over-determined subject. Which is why finding an electrical socket that fits can drive you crazy. Forget practicality; plug design says much more about a nation's character and priorities. Surely, the main driver isn't pragmatism but idiosyncratic cultural prestige, like maintaining a national airline or auto company – think Royal Air Nepal, or the Saab. As Freud might have said as he struggled to cram his iPod charger into the overloaded power strip in his study: There are times when a plug is not a plug.

Origins

Harvey Hubbel, a restlessly productive American, patented the first widely used power plug and receptacle in 1904. Around that time, electricity companies charged less for lighting than for other purposes, so he invented an elegant two-blade plug and a matching receptacle that could be screwed into a standard light bulb socket (which he had also previously patented). Eventually, in a kind of evolutionary frenzy, many other inventors and countries developed plug systems of their own instead of adopting the US stan-

dard. And now there are at least thirteen different styles of plugs, passing along at least four different domestic voltages and frequency combinations. A confusing electrical cornucopia.

Some of our favorites

The standard American plug is a triumph of efficiency – a brutally simple design that gets straight to the point. There is the safer, grounded, three-prong version, but the simple two-blade option is the most popular. Perhaps mirroring the American "You-Are-On-Your-Own" ethos, this existential design offers few safety margins; the flat blades are not polarized – it is easy to receive a shock or overload a circuit if you don't exercise good judgment. Leave it to the French to produce an elegant send-up of the American design. Their svelte plug has two cylindrical pins, with rounded polished metal tips that converge ever-so-little. And their plugs can slip into a wide variety of sockets – as long as they incorporate 4mm diameter openings spaced 19mm apart. Annoyingly, these plugs usually fit too loosely; in other words they have lots of panache but lack commitment.

Contrast that with the rational so-

phistication of the German 'Schuko' plug. Like the French system, the 'male' plug also has sexy round contact pins. But the plug is also grooved with 'female' channels to receive masculine contacts from the receptacle making the plug and its receptacle androgynous, like some character in a German art house movie.

The British plug is considered one of the safest in the world. It is polarized and grounded, with a massive body that incorporates an internal cartridge fuse. But the high extraction force can be inconvenient for anyone whose grip is weaker than Margaret Thatcher's in her prime. To ease matters, handles and straps for these monsters have been produced, but for some reason (stubbornness, perhaps?) they have not proved popular. Whatever, these plugs are as solid as a Yorkshire pudding.

Of late, the Australian plug has quietly been creeping up on the rest of the competition. Much less bulky than the British model, it still incorporates many of its cousin's safety features. This plug goes to work at 220-240V, transmitting energy with less effort than the 110-120V of the American system. It is polarized, and features a slender earthing pin and two flat contacts that form a 'V'. Like its American counterpart, there is an ungrounded version as well, with only two angled blades; if you're a real cowboy, you can easily bend them straight with pliers to make them fit into an American socket. But this is not advised unless it is Chinese New Year and you are already prepared for loud noises and fireworks. Not surprisingly, China has adopted (ok, copied) most of the favorites mentioned above. Currently, it uses the American, British, and Australian types interchangeably. Experienced China-watchers, however, believe that the Australian model will soon become the favored Chinese standard. We can only guess what this means for future political developments and the balance of world trade.

Note: in China, the sockets are upside down, relative to the Australian model – a touch of national pride? Or a reference to the antipodes? Who knows? More interestingly, new 'standard' Chinese electrical receptacles are designed to accept a very wide variety of international plugs; this can only be interpreted as a repudiation of a singular Confucian electrical ideal. In its place, we have a profoundly Taoist strategy that balances the masculine Yang principle with the Yin. This kind of accommodation should be the way of the future, or at least something to look forward to in the Chinese New Year. ■

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