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Mythification of national discourses in Poster Design: rethinking expressions of Chineseness in the globalized world

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Poster Design / Chineseness studies / National identity / Post-colonial studies / Cultural studies

This paper takes the position of post-colonial and cultural studies theories, with particular focus on Rey Chow's (1998) discussion of Chineseness. The author borrows Chow's critiques, along with other works on the studies of Chineseness, as a framework to interpret the different identities projected in posters by designers from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan awarded in Hong Kong International Poster Triennial, from 2001 to 2010.

1.   Introduction

The Asia-Pacific Posters Exhibition 1997, jointly presented by the Provisional Regional Council and the Hong Kong Designers Association, marked the international vision of the Council "to establish Hong Kong as a leader in the Asia-Pacific region in the area of collecting and promotion of poster design" (Yim 1997: 5). Its successor event, the Hong Kong International Poster Triennial (HKIPT), first held in 2001, established a pattern of hosting an event every three years and will achieve its fifth triennial in 2013.

This unique event—with entries from all over the world (the majority from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) and a carefully selected international judging panel—has the perfect materials to contribute to the national/ethnic discourse of "cultural China" (Tu 1994), through both the eyes of the international jurors (the West) and the designers (the Chinese), on the self-presentation of identities in response to the region's geo-political setting. Thus, this paper uses materials found in HKIPT events to argue that the interaction of different viewpoints between the West and the Chinese has often resulted in mythifying national identities in a binary system. In this case, I use different constructions of "Chineseness", from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, as the center for articulations within this binary system.

Chineseness is embedded with rich possibilities for theoretical critiques of post-structural, post-colonial and internationalized cultural studies. Naturally, this paper perceives it is most appropriate to employ theories from these platforms, in particular Rey Chow's (1998) discussion on Chineseness, together with other works. With scholars in these fields pointing to the internationalization of cultural studies and hybridized identities (i.e.: Ang 1992, 2003; Abbas & Nguyet 2005; Shome 2009; Chow 2011) with the rise of Asia, this paper's argument leads to a rethinking of the expression of Chineseness in a globalized world.

2.   Theoretical considerations & studies on Chineseness

Rey Chow is one of the foremost scholars in the fields of post-structural, post-colonial and cultural studies. *Postcolonial Studies*, the first journal to specialize in this theory, dedicated a special issue—*Rey Chow, postcoloniality and interdisciplinarity*—to her in 2010 to recognize her contributions. In the article by Paul Bowman (2010), he points out that Chow is "at the theoretical and political discourses of 'Western' cultural studies, poststructuralism and feminism" (p. 248), particularly on "the way that 'China' and 'Chineseness' are figures" (ibid). Chow's disavowal of any essentialist thinking, such as on Chinese ethnicity and theories of "otherness", along with her skepticism towards cultural translation, are her trademarks. As Bowman (2010) comments, she holds a "rather different form of problematization of ethnicity" (p. 246).

This position can be evidenced in her article, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem" (Chow 1998), in which she points out "the habitually adamant insistence on Chineseness as the distinguishing trait in what otherwise purport to be mobile, international practices" (p. 3). Such "collective habit" (p. 3) by both Western and non-Western people is, in fact, the result of "issue of ethnic supplement" that can be traced back to historical factors and the hegemony of Western culture. In addition, such continual obsession with "Chineseness" is "a kind of cultural essentialism," or "sinocentrism" constructed "imaginary boundary between China and the rest of the world" (p. 6).

This article outlines this "imaginary boundary", such as "the logic of wound" or "victimization" (p. 6), the "standard Chinese" issue (p. 10), "binary oppositions" of ethnic difference (p. 13), and "mimeticism" (p. 18). Chow's critiques on Chineseness in response to readings between both the West and the Chinese provide this paper with a crucial frame of reference for the analysis of Chineseness. Chow's works on Chineseness or Chinese ethnicity grow out of the Chinese diaspora community in the United States, and can be described as debates of identity and representation (Cheung 2011) in cultural studies. Together with other scholars' works on modern diasporic Chinese from different parts of the world like Canada, Australia, Singapore and Malaysia, Chow's efforts strengthen theoretical and cultural issues of this topic at the international level.

In China, this notion of Chineseness caught the attention of scholars across the humanities disciplines in the mid-1980s, then, with the increase in foreign (Western) cultural goods, raised concerns

that the future of Chinese culture may be deserted, generating a wave of quests for the roots of Chinese culture along with heated debates. Regretfully, the 1989 Tiananmen incident ended those debates, although debates about Chineseness made a comeback shortly afterwards, and even caught more interest from the public and the government. Cheung (2011) alerts us that, "[a]s soon as cultural politics is pressed into the service of nation-building and supporting the rise of China as an international power, the question of Chineseness becomes more complex, and, in some perceptions, even dangerous" (p. 44). Cheung's concerns regarding China's nationalistic sentiments over Chineseness are precisely what Chow (1998) has been theoretically resisting on the notion of "standard Chinese."

This paper utilizes the above discourse framework and critiques borrowed from Chow (1998) to examine contemporary posters designed by Chinese designers and awarded in HKIPT events from 2001 to 2010. It argues that these works testify Chow's theories on mythifying national identities within a binary system between the West and the Chinese. To resist notions of "standard China" or "sinocentrism", this paper includes Hong Kong and Taiwan, as these three locales are inextricably connected geographically, politically, economically and culturally. Unfortunately, this paper must omit discussion of Singapore's Chineseness due to an insufficient number of samples. Singapore is regarded as the first symbolic universe of cultural China as defined by Tu Wei-ming (1994), the renowned Chinese philosopher; thus, Singapore's voice is equally important in the notion of Chineseness and should be examined in another venue.

3. The mythification of Chineseness in poster design

Following the basic structure of the Asia-Pacific Posters Exhibition 1997, each HKIPT has its own theme for the show. Each triennial is structured into three parts: competition, exhibition and symposium held at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, and the events claim to observe the guidelines endorsed by the Icograda (International Council of Graphic Design Association). According to the statistics of the organizer, from the first to fourth HKIPT, recorded entries came from more than 60 countries, with an average of more than 2,000 pieces of work submitted.

This paper finds that most of the awarded posters by Chinese designers are either constructing identities according to how "Chinese" is viewed within their own "national" context, or trying to resist the "antiquity privileges" (Chow 1998) in the essential Chinese elements with new international style visual language and messages. Here I argue that such constructions are insufficient to erase the established "cultural essentialism" in Chinese posters, and are mythifying national ethnicity. However, those works are able to create individual voices to resist the standardization of Chineseness and display the creative flair of Chinese graphic designers.

From ethnic supplement to the logic of the wound: the Chineseness of the PRC China

In light of Chow's critiques, it will not be surprising to find posters from HKIPT filled with antiquity elements capturing the West's imaginary images of Chinese. Throughout the 1970s to 1990s, designers from Hong Kong and Taiwan adapted such visualization approaches in their graphic design work. China, as a latecomer in the late 1990s, joined this creative strategy, diversifying cultural Chinese elements and surpassing what both locales had achieved previously.

Chinese films produced in China, such as those directed by Zhang Yimou, received negative comments for being "exoticized China" (Cheung 2011, p. 43) from Chinese critics in the beginning. However, such critiques changed after Zhong's films won international awards, with Chinese critics then agreeing with the West in praising the Chineseness. Cheung comments that it "reflected with cruel irony the incapacity of Chinese critics to break the cultural hegemony of the West, and was an unmistakable symptom of 'shiyuzheng' [aphasis]" (ibid). Consequently, when posters by mainland Chinese designers came into the international sphere later in the late 1990s, the public and media only cared about what international awards they had won.

Fang Chen's poster entitled "Victory" (figure 1) won several major international awards, including the 9th Chaumont International Poster, 11th Colorado International Invitational Poster Biennial, the 4th Trnava Poster Triennial; later, this poster also won the Gold award in 2001 HKIPT in the ideology category (HKIPT 2001). Unlike his colleagues with work appearing in the late 1990s, Chen rejected the use of antiquity elements. He picked up a universal theme, creating imagery that can be communicated ideologically across borders. This image shows a hand with three fingers blown away and the second and middle fingers intact, forming a "V", an internationally recognized sign for "victory". Here, I would argue that the conceptualization strategy of this poster is not much different from using antiquity elements. It is still structured within the "logic of wound" in Chow's term.

Theories for studies of Chineseness are problematic because it is becoming a challenge to distinguish the set of binary oppositions held by the West and the Chinese. Chow (1998) points out, "what is Chinese is often imagined and argued as completely distinct from its counterparts in the West, even as such counterparts are accepted in an a priori manner as models or criteria for comparison" (p. 13). In this case, we can praise the genius of this poster, but knowing that a mainland Chinese designer created it expands our imagination to its implications suggesting freedom for China, or its association with the "V" sign that students in Tiananmen Square held just a decade before this poster was created. It suggests what cannot be spoken outright, which is possibly understood by the Chinese and definitely fits the West's perceptions of repressed and suppressed communist China. This is the ultimate

reading of this poster.

Figure 1. Title: Victory, designed by Fang Chen, Gold award, Ideology Category, 2001 HKIPT.

Because this work won so many international awards, it received lots of publicity in the national printed design magazines and the local media where Fang Chen was teaching at that time, Shaotau University. With the international recognition that Chen received and the geo-political setting away from the central government in Beijing, this poster "Victory" is one of the rare, exceptional, risk-taking creations to be found in China. To close this story, Chen moved to North America in 2001 and has taught at the PennState University in the USA since 2002.

On resistance of being standardized: the Chineseness of the SAR Hong Kong

In Chow's (1998) article, she states that the official national spoken language, Mandarin, "inevitably surfaces as a problem" (p. 10) and "is a not a straightforward parallel to a language such as English" (p. 11). Because Chinese populations in China and Chinese diaspora communities all over the world speak different languages, and language is strongly connected with ethnicity and cultural values, Mandarin or Putonhua is a form of central hegemony constructed by the government and the West. In the case of Hong Kong, Cantonese, a "dialect" spoken daily in Guangdong province, was (and still is) shaping everyday local culture, ranging from literature to popular culture.

The work by Stanley Wong (a.k.a. Anothermountainman), entitled "*everywhere kowloon king. everywhere redwhiteblue. the code of kowloon king*" (figure 2), received the Gold award in the ideology category in 2010 HKIPT (selected by juror Kenya Hara) (HKIPT 2010). This work took two vernacular elements of Hong Kong—high-density polyethylene commonly made in the colours red, white, and blue; and calligraphic graffiti by legendary Tsang Tsou Choi (1921–2007)—as the main visual elements of the poster. These two objects are widely identified by people in Hong Kong as part of the unique ethnic identity of Hong Kong.

The first object, this tarpaulin material known as Red-White-Blue (RWB, or Hung-Pak-Nam in Cantonese), is widely used in daily life in Hong Kong. The designer, Stanley Wong, first used this material for his poster series for the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in 2001 as a tribute to Hong Kong's hardworking spirit. Since then, Wong has used this material in his other creative works beyond poster design along with enthusiastic creative communities including artists, photographers, students, and Cantopop singer Sam Hui. Jonathan Thomson (2005), the Hong Kong contributing editor for *Asian Art News*, captured this RWB fad with a report on the 2005 group exhibition with RWB theme.
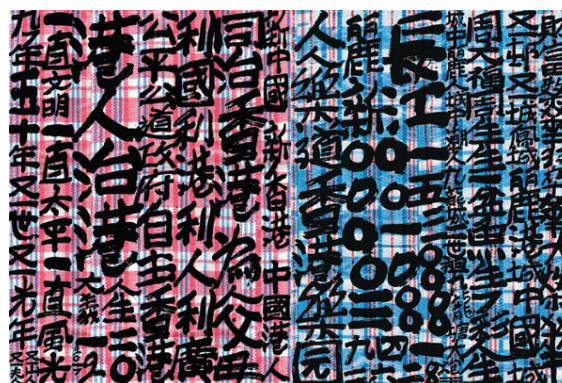

Figure 2. Title: everywhere kowloon king. everywhere redwhiteblue. the code of kowloon king, designed by Stanley Wong, Gold award, Ideology Category, 2010 HKIPT.

The second object is the calligraphic graffiti of a mad old man, Tsang Tsou Choi. A man with little formal education, he drew messages with black ink in Chinese proclaiming himself "The King of Kowloon" in public places throughout Hong Kong over a period of two decades. His scripts were viewed as graffiti and seen as a nuisance, but later became part of the cityscape of Hong Kong. His work even traveled to Venice Biannale in 2003, sold at Sotheby's, and was featured by *Colors Magazine* (Li 2011). Tsang hand his graffiti became a legend in Hong Kong, and he passed away in July 2007 at the age of 86.

Wong's award-winning poster at 2010 HKIPT borrowed these two magical elements signifying the cultural identity of Hong Kong. He not only made a tribute to them, but also reflected how the "binary oppositions" of ethnic differences are accepted in the

West and among the Chinese people of Hong Kong. To Western readers, the usages of RWB in such a wide context are different within their own cultural context, and the Chinese in Hong Kong proudly embrace such differences as part of their identity. Tsang's calligraphic art can be understood as spray-painted graffiti, which can be found in most Western metropolitan cities, but with the difference that it was in Chinese. Again, these binary positions are easy to identify and associate with their equivalents within one's cultural context.

The one-country, two-system remedy allows Hong Kong to continue whatever practices were left behind from colonial rule, including the preservation and solidification of its own cultural identity. Scholars who have studied the identity of Hong Kong commonly agreed that the city has its "indigenous culture without direct national imperative," as Eric Ma (1998) puts it; or as Allan Chun (1996) notes, "Hong Kong represents a distinctive variation on the theme of 'Chineseness'" (p. 120). Under the hegemony of sinocentrism, it is impossible for Hong Kong to claim or foster the antiquity cultural China identity because of the lack of ethnicity supplies, its geographic location and political past. These lowbrow, tricolor-striped tarpaulin and graffiti made by a mad, uneducated "artist" seem to speak for Hong Kong as its identity, which is located in the margins and continues to be insignificant after 1997's "15 minutes of fame" was over.

The insignificance imaginary boundary: the Chineseness of the ROC Taiwan

Compared to Hong Kong, the national identity issues of Taiwan are even more complicated. The little island has a multiple colonial history, with rule by Dutch, Spanish, Qing Chinese, Japanese, and Republic of China from 1624 to present. Comparative Literature Professor Shu-mei Shih (2003) pessimistically points out the "impossible" about Taiwan. In her own words, she argues it is "because Taiwan is always already written out of mainstream Western discourse due to its insignificance" (p. 144). Taiwan's situation is "similar to that of Hong Kong, which became a significant object of study only when the lightning flash of history accidentally shone upon it" (ibid), referring to the threats Taiwan is facing with the rise of China. She urges, "[t]o put Taiwan on the map, so to speak, necessitates the deployment of Western-centric critical idioms, be it globalization, postmodernity, post-coloniality, or what have you, so that Taiwan as such becomes legible" (p. 145).

It is not difficult to imagine the identity crisis and anxiety that people in this little island are facing daily from geographic tensions with China and international political isolation. In response to the island's quest for identity, the graphic design community launched the thematic poster show series *Taiwan Image* back in 1992 (Wong 2001). In the *Taiwan Image* poster series, designers explored indigenous imagery of the island as a visualization strategy to construct its national design identity. While similar creative strategies can be found among the

HKIPT award-winning posters, designer Lee Ken-tsai took a different approach apart from Taiwanese vernacular inspiration and embraced the global world. His poster series, entitled "My name is Lee Ken-tsai" (figure 3), was selected in the 2007 HKIPT (HKIPT 2007).

Figure 3. Title: My name is Lee Ken-tsai, designed by Lee Ken-tsai, Finalist, Ideology Category, 2007 HKIPT.

He created this series of posters while living in New York City chasing his dream and new experiences (Lee 2005). The multicultural environment inspired him to design a series of typographic posters with his name in different languages. Then, he put individual posters up in different locations in New York City, and used it as the background for the final design in his poster series. In this series of works, Lee expressed that he wants to have his "15 minutes of fame," once said by Andy Warhol, by having his name visible in different languages throughout New York City so that the whole world will know him. Obviously, this is an intentional plan of self-initiated "globalization" that can be seen as an insanely indulgent act of identity quest. Such a radical move may be necessary for Taiwan to break away from the "difficult question of identity vis-à-vis China" (Shih 2003, p. 147).

Following the changed political climate in Taiwan in the mid-1980s, the presidential election in 1995 marked an important turning point for "Taiwanese cultural sensibilities" (Shih 2003, p. 146), and the concept and identity of "Taiwanren" (Taiwanese) pushed further under ex-president Chen Shui-bian. Here, Lee—a native-born Taiwanese whose education and experience were all gained within the island, with little firsthand exposure to the international world farther away from Asia—represents the courage to take a step forward from the recov-

ery of Taiwanese cultural sensibilities. The designer made himself instantly multilingual, symbolizing engagement with the global communities. Lee's previous work also frequently sought inspiration from the antiquity cultural China sources and vernacular elements of Taiwan, but with stimulation from a new environment, Lee transplanted himself into a new dimension. For Shih (2003), globalization is the survival strategy for Taiwan to enter a brave new world of New Taiwanese ethnicity. However, breaking the imaginary boundary of sinocentrism and superficial China cultural link may be less challenging than continuing to be viewed as insignificant by the West.

4. Closing remarks

From the above poster examples, the author consciously selected those works with ideological qualities to argue the existence of three different themes of Chineseness—PRC Chineseness, SAR Chineseness, and ROC Chineseness—to demonstrate the problems with viewing Chineseness as a single ethnic entity. Referencing the critical discourse by Rey Chow (1998), this study concludes that such constructions of visual expression of cultural China ethnicity cannot escape mythification within the existing binary system. Although the examples chosen here are not reinforcing the exotic eyes of the West on cultural China, they do not have enough power to de-mythify perceptions of Chineseness in the West and even among Chinese.

This paper selected samples of posters either aimed at an international audience or attempting to construct an international self. The PRC Chineseness by Fang Chen, the "Victory" poster perorated against the official preference of Chineseness of the government, but welcomed by the West for its subtle ideological reference to China's restrictive political regime. The SAR Chineseness by Stanley Wong seized the vernacular identity for international approval but is actually careless about fitting into orthodox sinocentrism. The ROC Chineseness by Lee Ken-tsai could not wait to construct its own new Taiwanren identity.

While Chow (1998) called Chineseness a theoretical problem, other scholars such as Chun (1996) and Cheung (2011) questioned whether Chineseness is even important. Ien Ang (1998) also situated her discourse around the essentiality of Chineseness and opened up directions of hybridized identity. Along the proposal of hybridization theory, Raka Shome (2009) also suggests internationalizing cultural studies to respond to today's globalized world. To close this paper's discussion, with all these examples here, I suggest rethinking the expression of Chineseness within a globalized world and encourage further investigation on the hybridization issues on national ethnicity. In an increasingly internationalizing world, it is simply impossible to have a fixed and pure ethnic identity, particularly of Chineseness.

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