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## Migrations and Expression of Transnational Design in a Globalized World

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**Abstract**— This study examines two case studies by final-year students at York University, Toronto, Canada. These students are both of Chinese descent, with parents who migrated from Hong Kong to Canada at different times. The first case study is a language learning kit designed by a student born in Canada and whose parents migrated in the 1970s. She speaks little Cantonese, and this project reflects her experiences learning the language. The second case study is a research and book design project on design elements of Chinese restaurants in North America. This student, who migrated with her parents in the 1980s, has a better command of Chinese. With greater knowledge of Chinese cultures and language, this project can be viewed as a search for Chinese identity in a Western context through a very common sight for the student: Chinese restaurants. This paper argues that these two cases represent different degrees of investigation of transnational visual design languages, created by the students in an unplanned way. Further discussion will center on questions dealing with the contemporary reception of Chinese cultural elements in the context of a globalized world, and inquire as to whether its visual expression forms can become an international design style in the future. This study contributes to the emergence of transnational design in the global context, a topic that is currently underdeveloped in world design education.

**Keywords:** Globalization, transnational design, communication design, Chinese diaspora, Hong Kong

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In response to the anticipated resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong by the People's Republic of China in July 1997, the numbers of Hong Kong residents emigrating had increased steadily since the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984. Canada, Australia and the United States were the three most popular destinations. Ronald Skeldon (1994)[1] compiled a table with statistics from various sources showing numbers of immigrants to these three countries from 1960 to 1992 whose place of previous residence was Hong Kong (p. 28). Among these three countries, Canada was the most popular destination, with the data showing that 38,841 Hong Kong people moved to Canada, 16,741 moved to the United States, and 15,656 moved to Australia in 1992. A report published by Citizenship

and Immigration Canada (1999)[2] indicates that immigrants from Hong Kong ranked first in 1995 and 1996, with 31,746 and 29,966, respectively (p.12). By 1997, 240,000 to 300,000 Hong Kong residents held Canadian citizenship and about 110,000 of Hong Kong's business class had settled in Canada (Jim, 2007, p. 333)[3].

Migrations of Hong Kong residents to Canada have a long history, and the issue of 1997 pushed the influx to its height. According to the statistics collected in 2001, Chinese languages are the third most common mother tongue regularly spoken at home. Among these Chinese-speaking people, 44% were born in Hong Kong ("Chinese Canadian," 2011)[4]. The Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking community is prominent in major cities in Canada and Hong Kong's popular culture and media are very influential. With these strong influences, the Canadian-born (1970s and 1980s) children of Hong Kong immigrants are familiar with the unique culture of contemporary Hong Kong and Chinese cultures.

This paper used the migration of Hong Kong residents to Canada as a backdrop to investigate the perceptions of graphic design students of Chinese descent—with parents who migrated from Hong Kong to the country at different times—in contemporary Chinese cultures. This paper's purpose is not only to respond to migrations as a unique Hong Kong phenomenon because of the 1997 issues, but also to consider migrations as a globalization phenomenon. The knowledge and understanding of the culture of the country of ancestry demonstrated by the generation born (or who relocated when they were very young) in the resident country is expected to differ from that of their parents, since they lack first-person experience. Their perceptions of Chinese cultures will not be the same as their parents or people living in Hong Kong.

This paper examined the creative works of two final-year graphic design students who studied in the York/Sheridan Program of Design, York University, Toronto, Canada, produced during the 2010/2011 academic year. It argues that the students' work represents an unplanned new form of transnational visual design that required cultural knowledge from both cultures. Rather than using the overused term "East meets West," this study proposes the term "transnationalization" to define the process undertaken by the students as the establishment of a visual language extended across national boundaries: East and West. Such visuals and icons represent a universal language embedded with and reflected in

the creators' own personal and cultural experiences and interests.

## 2. GLOBALIZATION AND MIGRATION

Globalization is one of today's hottest buzzwords. Stuart Hall (1995)[5] reminds us that this phenomenon is not new and can be traced back through the long history of Western imperialism. Following this Western imperialism, many people from non-Western countries experienced different degrees of colonization over the past few centuries. Anthony Giddens (1990)[6] sees globalization as the consequence of modernity, in which European nations employed their military and economic power to conquer and rule tribal societies and "inferior" countries, thus gaining raw materials and securing new markets. Because of its historical origins, first Europeans and later Americans dominated globalization.

How has cultural globalization occurred in the contemporary context? The well-established anthropologist Harumi Befu (2003)[7] sketched out the two routes that cultural globalization has taken, based on the Japanese example. The first route is through "sojourner[s] – emigrants, students, businessmen, and others" who leave their homelands and settle somewhere else. This circle of native carriers creates a network of global ethnoscapas, "as individuals necessarily take their culture with them." The second route is "the non-sojourner route, through which cultural products spread abroad without native carriers." Befu explains how "culture carried abroad by sojourners is then taken up by locals," and "human dispersal is itself part of the globalization process, and the two processes are intricately intertwined, rather than empirically separate and distant."

Befu (2003) [7] provides us another model for understanding the spread of cultural products outside of American and European influence. Globalization is "an outcome of capitalism in the modern period." Cultural products, often considered additional consumer commodities, are marketed and promoted like any other products. To study the global flow of cultural products, Befu (2003) [7] reminds us that in "non-diasporic cultural globalization it is important to distinguish between the 'structural and institutional' and the 'agency' levels of discourse." "Structural and institutional" levels of discourse refer to "government regulations" and "a certain level of economic well-being and lifestyle, including middle-class aspiration and the availability of sufficient disposable income to enjoy imported cultural products." Arjun Appadurai (1990) [8] identifies his five famous flows of structural and institutional factors: ethnoscapas, technoscapas, finanscapas, mediascapas and ideoscapas. All these aspects, Befu (2003) [7] points out, "constitute the structural backdrop for agents to act out their volition, the two are interconnected and influence each other in the realm of cultural globalization."

Within these theoretical considerations, we can recognize that immigrants from Hong Kong who have settled in Canada have a close relationship to the contemporary flow of globalization. Hong Kong residents who chose to migrate to Canada, bringing their knowledge, experience and lifestyles to a new country, can be considered sojourners. After a while, they became settlers and residents who continued some of their experiences and possibly passed them on to the next generation. This next generation would grow up with cultural influences from both their parents and the society of the country that their parents adopted.

In this paper, I view that students with this dual background play a role in creating another direction of communication within globalization or internationalization. Students of migrants, conscious of preserving their own cultural heritage, are acting as agents interpreting the "other culture" in a way that they and their peers will understand, possibly unconsciously. This paper sees this as a potential new direction for design education studies, to further the understanding of cross-cultural communication and find new languages in transnational communication.

## 3. CROSS-CULTURAL AND TRANSNATIONAL DESIGN

Since the rise of the so-called global economy, globalization has become a household word. The process of "globalization" or "internationalization" has traditionally operated in one direction, from the developed countries to the developing countries. Only in the last decade have we begun to see this one-way communication begin to change in North America and Western Europe. Asian cultures (e.g. Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese) are becoming more visible through various channels ranging from restaurants to movies, partly carried out by migrations.

North Americans today find themselves living in an increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse society. In response to this explosive growth in diversity, communication and creative industries must become more sensitive to their target audiences. Henry Steiner and Ken Haas's (1995)[9] book *Cross-cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace* is one of the earliest graphic design books to address the topic of cross-cultural issues in visual communication.

With North American societies becoming increasingly diverse, images and representations of ethnic minorities are appearing in all venues, especially in big cities such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Vancouver and Toronto. In a culturally diverse environment, the communication and creative industries must become more sensitive to their target audiences. In the visual communication field, the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) began a "cross-cultural design" thread on their website a couple of years ago. Thread topics range

from increasing graphic designers' cultural awareness to the pedagogical issues involved in teaching cross-cultural design.

In their book, Steiner and Haas outlined tools and methods used in creating "cross-cultural design" for visual messages by mixing and integrating contents and elements from different cultures. The creative directions of cross-cultural design, as shown by Henry Steiner in his book, include iconography, typography, symbolism, ideography, and split image.

Henry Steiner graduated from Art and Architecture School of Yale University with an MFA in Graphic Design in 1957. He worked in Paris and New York on various graphic design jobs before arriving in Hong Kong in 1961 and setting up his company, Graphic Communication Limited, in 1964. Steiner is the first designer based in Hong Kong to receive international attention and recognition (Steiner, 1992, p. 45-50)[9], and is known in Hong Kong as the "Father of Graphic Design". In his book, Steiner shared his more than three decades of experience working in Hong Kong, a society founded upon traditional Chinese heritage and yet never short of external influence from overseas, including British, European, American, and Japanese.

#### 4. CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND TORONTO

Canada has a strong tradition of embracing cultural diversity, with two official languages (English and French) and special preserved regions all over the country honouring the culture of the First Nation Aborigines. Toronto is renowned for its cultural diversity, with the 2001 Census reporting that 64 first languages are spoken in the city. This diversity provides a perfect environment to study the needs of cross-cultural design. In addition, York University boasts an ethnically diverse campus and design program, and the University's policy is to honor and encourage diversity through events, including its "celebrate diversity" campaign. A four-day event, Multicultural Week, is held annually in the first week of February, and every year about 60 different student associations, ranging from the Aboriginal Students Association, the Sri-Lankan Student Alliance to the Russian Students Federation, participate in the event. This event is an enduring symbol of York's celebration of multiculturalism.

Within the environment of York University, the Bachelor Honours Degree in Design (BDes Hons) program, offered jointly by York's Department of Design and Sheridan College's School of Animation, attracts and accommodates students of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Aware of the student body's cultural diversity, and that of the university and the city, course directors in the BDes Hons program are careful to facilitate students with different cultural interests by providing options in course projects.

This paper examines two case studies focused on the works of final-year design students. The students are both of Chinese descent, with parents

who migrated from Hong Kong to Canada at different times. They completed these projects for a two-semester course, Design Workshop, in which each student was required to propose, research and complete a project for a given theme: migration. The theme was mandatory for all students across the whole cohort; however, the meaning of migration was subject to each student's interpretation and was not restricted to its literal meaning. The project required students to investigate the meanings and parameter for the given word within a group of three to four members. In the second stage, each student had to continue to identify and explore a specific area or focus of interest among the research that was conducted in the previous stage with the group members. Then, each student needed to submit her research and design proposal for the final design.

#### 5. TWO CASE STUDIES

##### 5.1. First case study

The first case study is a language learning kit designed by a student born in Canada and whose parents migrated in the 1970s. Yvonne Ho speaks little Cantonese, and this project reflects her experiences learning the language. Because of her ethnic background, as the first generation born in Canada to parents who migrated from Hong Kong, she wanted to research and design a learning kit for users with a background similar to hers, as well as her friends who have little knowledge of Chinese cultures. Her project is entitled "Glottovitalis", a made-up word combining two words: the first part comes from "glotto-chronology", "glotto" in her definition as "speech or tongue". "Vitalis" comes from "vitalize", to "give strength and energy to". Together, the project title means "the revitalization of 'tongue'" (Ho, 2011, p. 2)[10], "a system that utilizes sensory and modular educational aids" to endangered spoken languages around the world, and particularly those dialects in China that are dying because of the country's strong unified common language policy,

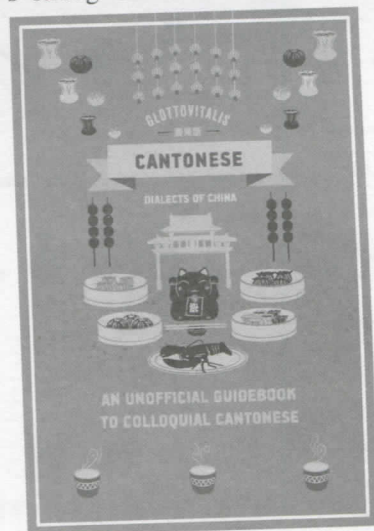


Figure 1: Glottovitalis: guidebook. By Yvonne Ho.

Putonghua.

Within the project scope, Yvonne wanted to develop a system that “promotes and brings awareness to the diversity and history of Chinese dialects” (Ho, 2011)[10] with the objective to “engage, raise awareness, educate, and make accessibility/ tangibility” for users. Her main creative direction for the design of this language learning kit was not based on any formal linguistics Romanization system, but rather a visual-based system connecting sound and illustration to help users memorize the language. The making of the sound is based on English, since the target users are young native English speakers like the designer herself.

Yvonne Ho’s language learning kit consists of five items: 1) a foldout map; 2) a kit container; 3) an unofficial guidebook; 4) a visual phrasebook; and 5) pay-it-forward postcards. The foldout map serves as an informational poster displaying the different dialects spoken in China. The kit container packs the other four items together to make up a learning kit. This is the basic design and package of each dialect, and together this can be expanded into kits for learning other dialects, such as Hakka, Hokien, and Shanghaiese, with the same system design. A different color is used for each dialect set.

The unofficial guidebook provides information on history, culture and customs to facilitate the learner’s understanding of the dialect. To design the cover of the guidebook, Yvonne used icons commonly found in the particular province where the dialect is spoken. In the case of Cantonese, she used Dim Sum, food, a teacup, a Japanese cat and lanterns to construct an identity for the dialect (figure 1). For the designer, the choice of these objects was not random, but based on the fact that similar objects in similar contexts can be found in Chinese provinces that speak different dialects. For example, in the context of Hokien, the Goddess of Mazu may replace the Japanese cat. Although the student was unable to produce a cover design for each dialect, she carefully considered the selection of the objects. The objects that she chose are easy to understand and to herself

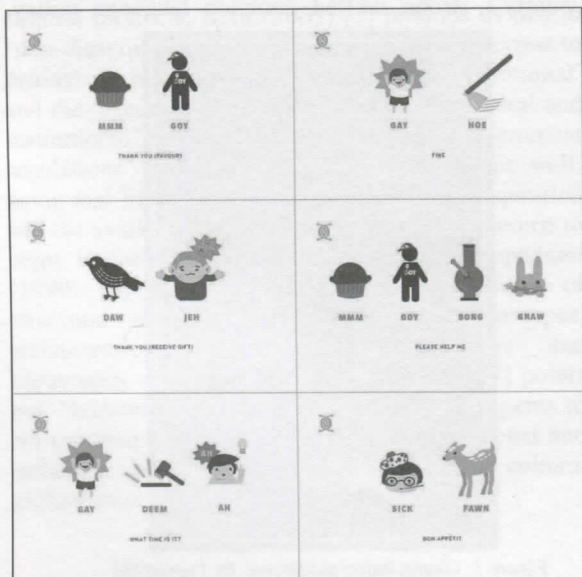


Figure 2: Glottovitalis: visual phrasebook. By Yvonne Ho.

and the language kit’s intended users.

The most important part of this project is the design of the visual phrasebook. Since the student intended to explore an unconventional approach to language learning, she did not adopt the traditional linguistic approach with Romanized words. Instead, she invented a new system herself, “using English homonyms paired with a visual icon or illustration to create a directory of tones and sounds. It experiments with memory recall using visual stimulus, such that the visual directory helps the user remember the phrase more quickly” (Ho, 2011)[9]. Yvonne noted that this visual-based learning method is not meant to replace the standard Romanization method, but rather to offer a fun, different approach to language learning.

Indeed, Yvonne is speaking on behalf of her own experiences learning Chinese. Having grown up in Toronto speaking English as her first language, her communications in Chinese with her parents and within the Chinese community are minimal. She did attend Cantonese classes when she was young, so she was able to understand the dialect, but with very little speaking skills and almost no reading ability. Being a visual learner and native English speaker, using English homonyms paired with a visual is second nature to her. What Yvonne did is respond to her own cultural experience, an attempt to find ways to make cross-cultural communication and learning easier for herself and for her peers.

In this prototype of a Cantonese learning kit, the student produced a series of icons to form a directory of tones and sounds for a visual phrasebook (figure 2). The object itself suggests a tone or sound, helping the learner memorize the sound of a new language with which she is unfamiliar. The object sometimes refers to the name of the object itself (noun), such as “pie” with a picture of a pie, “daw” with a daw, and “gong” with a gong. In other cases, objects refer to the action (verb) being taken, such as “gnaw” with a rabbit biting a carrot, or description (adjective), such as “sick” showing a child with an ice pack and thermometer inside his month. In some cases, the learning aid is just an association of sound, such as “ah” showing a boy with a hand up and a light bulb next to it. The design of this visual directory does not

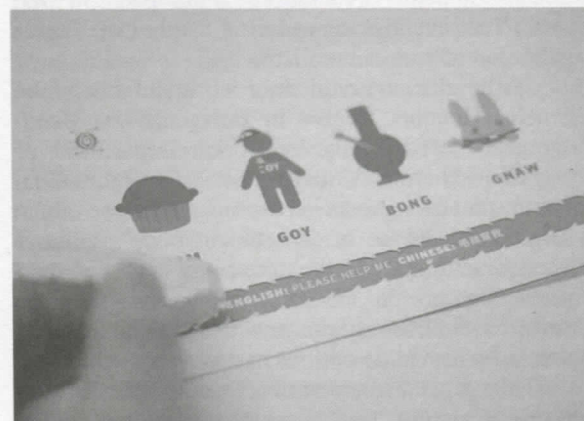


Figure 3: Glottovitalis: pay-it-forward postcards. By Yvonne Ho.

appear to follow any particular system or logic. The icon accompanying the Romanized word with tone and sound suggestions is up to the interpretation of the learners, which helps them to memorize a simple phrase.

For this prototype, Yvonne developed 12 flash card designs with icons accompanying the Romanized word for the reading in Cantonese, and a complete sentence in English to explain the meaning of the phrase. For simple expressions of gratitude, such as Thank You (receive gift)—which in Cantonese is “Daw Jeh”—the designer used the icon “daw” and a boy with his hands up to represent the sound of “jeh”. For the phrase, Thank You (favor)—which in Cantonese is “MMM Goy”—Yvonne placed a cup case with the Romanized word “MMM” underneath and a man icon with the word “boy” on top, but the letter “b” was crossed out and replaced by the letter “G”. Perhaps at first glance, it is difficult to understand how the icons relate to the Romanized words. Nevertheless, it is an interesting and interactive way to discover their relationship. In this package, pay-it-forward postcards are given away. The postcard features a design of the meaning of the icon hidden beneath a ripcord that is peeled away to enhance the fun and interactive learning experience (figure 3).

During the design process, Yvonne also asked her native English-speaking classmates to sound out the Romanized phrases for her to test the workability of the visual phrasebook. Although the scale of the test was small and very random, the student’s intention to present the message and learning process in a transnational way is the most interesting achievement of this project. Rather than rely on overused icons associated with Chinese cultures, Yvonne chose instead to consider, as a native speaker of English, how a language learner would think visually with the associated tones and sounds. Unlike any work using the cross-cultural design approach, such as those by Henry Steiner, Yvonne’s design position was experimental and her solutions may not work out in the real world. However, this approach

has great potential in the teaching environment of North America, where students may have little knowledge of other cultures but be interested in learning more about them. Yvonne’s project is one possible approach in teaching cross-cultural communication design. The position of thinking and seeing from the user’s perspective as a native English speaker is important. The designer’s ethnic background and experiences as a native English speaker allows the design solutions to seem friendly and less “foreign” to the target users.

This paper is not going to judge whether Yvonne’s design is successful or not. Rather, it sees this project as demonstrating a potential direction of creative strategy that made the links between two cultures work in a practical way. In the globalized world that we are now living in, cultural authenticity and originality are no longer important. The future of design communication is about exploring ways of transnational communication representing universal visual languages.

**5.2. Second case study**

The second case study is a research and book design project on design elements of Chinese restaurants in North America. This student, Janice Ma, who migrated with her parents from Hong Kong in the 1980s when she was very young, has a better command of Chinese. With greater knowledge of Chinese cultures and language, her project can be viewed as a search for Chinese identity in a Western context through a very common sight for the student: Chinese restaurants.

Food is a heavily culturally coded element. Although she grew up in Toronto, Chinese cuisine is Janice’s main everyday diet. Her parents make Chinese food at home every day and usually go to Chinese or Asian restaurants when eating out. Seeing Chinese cuisine becoming a common sight in Toronto and throughout Canada and the United States, Janice wanted to investigate how visual communication elements such as menus and other ingredients

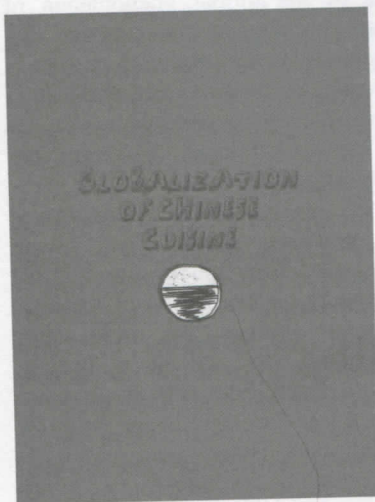


Figure 4: Globalization of Chinese Cuisine. By Janice Ma.



Figure 5: Themes of Chinese Restaurants' signage. Drawing by Janice Ma.

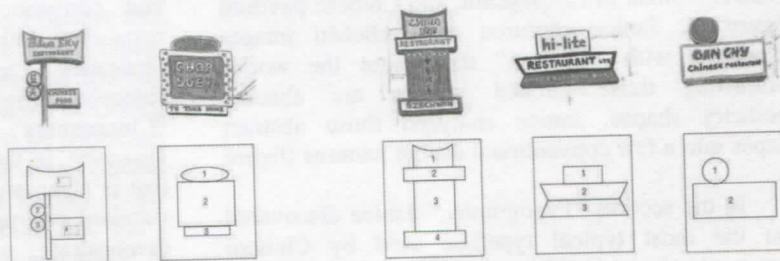


Figure 6: Abstraction design of Chinese Restaurants' signage. Drawing by Janice Ma.

differed from the Greater China region.

She started with research into the history of how Chinese cuisine traveled to the rest of the world. Not surprisingly, Chinese cuisine migrated along with Chinese people who fled poverty and hunger and began settling throughout the world beginning approximately in the 1800s. After centuries of diaspora, Chinese people are now living all over the world via migrations in different periods, and Chinese cuisine has become a truly global food. However, this globalized cuisine has transnational elements embedded in it according to country, since the authenticity of the cuisine has been altered according to the needs and tastes of the local people in different times, as well as the availability of Chinese food ingredients. Titled *Globalization of Chinese Cuisine*, Janice Ma's project is indeed a study of the process of transnationalization with food (figure 4).

After initial research on the history and development of Chinese cuisine internationally, Janice looked into visual images available on the Internet that are associated with the keywords, Chinese restaurant. She learned that this is a popular theme, with numerous amateur photographers contributing photos taken of Chinese restaurants in their neighbourhoods, from every corner of the world. For the next stage of her project, Janice collected photos taken around the world. Based on all the photos she collected from the Internet, the student studied the visual representations of the restaurant signs. Together with other research materials that she gathered, such as on menu design, fast food, recipes, and so on, Janice made her research and study into a book to document her findings and analysis.

After a short introduction, she opened her book with an analysis of "Restaurant signs", followed by sections titled: "Menu dictionary", "Setting", "Recipes" and "Reference". In the "Restaurant signs" section, she analyzes different visual elements used in Chinese restaurant signs around the world, breaking down those elements into different categories: Colours, Typeface, Special details, Themes & abstraction, Geometry shapes, and Intensive simplify approach. These then receive subcategories, such as two aspects of "Themes & abstraction": Concept and Components. Then, under the section "Concept", Janice analyzed signage design with elements borrowed from traditional Chinese figurative and cultural elements. Those images include familiar icons such as dragon, Chinese lantern, rice bowl, a Chinese woman in Cheongsam, and Chinese pavilion (figure 5). Janice captured most clichéd images associated with "Chinese" throughout the world; contrasting those clichéd images are abstract geometry shapes. Janice analyzed those abstract shapes into a few conventional design patterns (figure 6).

In the section "Typography," Janice discovered that the most typical typeface used by Chinese restaurants in the West is possibly a typeface

designed by Cleveland Type Foundry in 1883. The

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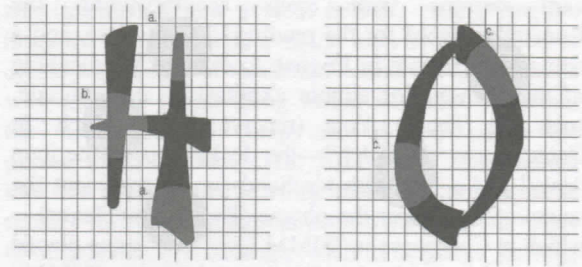


Figure 7: The most typical typeface used by Chinese restaurants in the West. Compiled by Janice Ma.

name of the typeface varies, but all names are distinctively Chinese, including "Mandarin", "Bamboo Type", and Choy Suey" (figure 7). For the naming convention, the student categorized Chinese restaurant names into "Places" (such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Peking), "Last names" (such as Lee's, Ho's, Lo's), "Names" (such as FuYao, Kim Long, Rudy), "Foods" (such as Noodle King, Lychee, Eggroll), and "Other" (such as Fortune, Golden Chopsticks, Friendship). Again, these two sections are also replete with examples of cliché elements representing "Chinese".

Those cliché elements used around the world may also be found in some Chinese restaurants in the Greater China region, including elements that are unique to the non-Asian context, such as the Chinese takeout box, and unique recipes that originated outside the region. Chinese cuisine around the world now has its own unique identities, such as American Chinese cuisine with the original dish Chop Suey, and Indian Chinese cuisine with Manchurian Chicken. What Janice presented in her book on Chinese restaurants may not seem right to readers in the East; however, this book collects and makes very interesting analysis of the global phenomenon of Chinese restaurants. This project demonstrated that the concept of authenticity is not important in today's internationalized world. To facilitate communication and understanding when crossing national boundaries, it is important to know what kinds of images and identity the non-Chinese audience receives.

Unlike Yvonne's project, Janice traced typical and conventional elements adapted by Chinese restaurants rather than building up her own "visual dictionary" representing contemporary Chinese. Janice's project also appears to show more "Chineseness" compared to Yvonne's project. However, in terms of design, both take an approach that is clean and neat, a visual style in line with the standard international style. These two case studies demonstrate two possible directions in which transnational design represents a universal design

language that can be developed in the future. The design must first be about achieving the international design style look, then the ability to communicate across different cultures.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Both case studies discussed in this paper are in hybrid form, which is also the most important trait of transnational design. Edgar Wickberg (2007)[11], scholar of modern Chinese history, points out, "global Chinese themselves seem to feel an obligation to find Chineseness in themselves and translate it to their children" (p. 178), and for global Chinese, it is about how to present themselves as "acceptably Chinese—both to Chinese already present and to the general local society". (p.178) Yvonne's and Janice's parents passed Chineseness on to them in an unplanned way, and they continue their journey to present themselves as acceptable citizens of a globalized city and residents of the global world. As Wickberg observes of the new generation of migrants, "rather than just 'cultural maintenance' as a way of keeping open options to return or be transnational, there is now also cultural identity manipulation" (p.179). Through their projects, Yvonne and Janice passed on cultural information to make Chinese acceptable to themselves and non-Chinese in the global world.

In his article, Wickberg (2007) [11] provided us with insights on the relationship between Chinese migrants and performing Chineseness, based on perspectives from Vancouver and from modern Chinese history. We don't yet know enough about how cultural identity manipulation is represented in visual communication. Yvonne's and Janice's work made such a connection with visual work that they created for a school project. Their creative approaches and solutions would not be the same without their unique migration and cultural backgrounds.

As North America—particularly its major cities—becomes more multicultural, Wickberg questioned what it would mean for the definitions and determinations of Chineseness if multi-culturalism continues. The definition of Chineseness may become universalized, and the concept of Chineseness may be subject to "appropriation and modification by people with no Chinese background" (p. 192). As seen from Janice's work on Chinese restaurants, Chineseness in this context is already being re-interpreted with a new variant of Chinese culture, a hybrid one. I believe that, with multicultural sharing continuing in global cities, Wickberg's vision of "a new and influential shaping force" for "new perspectives in the history of Global Chineseness and its performances" will be important for the development and education of transnational design. In this paper, I used two case studies of my students' work to illustrate this area's potential. Yet, I look forward to seeing more research and study of this aspect of design in the future.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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