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Contemporary Design in China: The Road to Modernity and Commercialization

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Introduction

“China's rising! The sleeping dragon is waking up!” It is common to see these kinds of headlines in the Western media about the recent development of People's Republic of China. In the foreseeable future, China is expected to become one of the world's biggest economic players. There is growing interest in the West about China's economic boom. The government, private sector and individuals are now revisiting “Design” (or Sheji in Chinese) and beginning to recognize its importance in marketing promotion, rather than just as an ideological promotion for Communism.

The rapid economic development of China in the past two decades has transformed commercial design for promoting consumption in the country. Design is no longer viewed as the evil it was once considered to be.

The ensuing expansion of design activities and design programs has been phenomenal. China is a craft rich country with a long-standing tradition in arts and crafts. Traditionally, arts and crafts were at the core of Chinese cultural heritage, and many influences on modern Chinese design had been passed down through centuries of artistic production. Chinese modernism came to entail a blend of traditional fine and folk art from its own culture, along with art styles borrowed from Japan and Europe.

Definition of “Sheji” (design) in Chinese context

The term “design” (as a noun) in English does not have a natural equivalent or a directly translatable term in most Asian languages including Chinese. The definition of “design” is an ongoing process where various scholars have been contributing in the discussion and debate about what is the meaning of design throughout decades. Here I have no attempt to provide a set of definite meanings of design in Chinese context, but begin with the inquiry of such term in non-Western context. To begin the investigation of modern design in Chinese context, it is impossible not to take both Chinese and Western cultures into account as it is a city rooted in Chinese culture and strongly influenced by Western culture. I started the investigation with a look at the definition of design in both contexts. “Design” is one of the few words in English that impossible to give a



definite and static definition (i.e. see Margolin, 2002; Walker, 1989). According to the dictionary, the *American Heritage Dictionary* for instance, offers us the definition as “to formulate a plan for” in the usage as a verb, and “a drawing or sketch” or “the purposeful of detailed plan for construction or manufacture” in the usage as a noun. The dictionary version of definition can only provided a mechanical explanation of what a word means in brief and in the larger context.

It is a common consent that design is everywhere and design is part of the daily life in most industrial societies.

The word of “design” referring to different professional disciplines such as graphic design, industrial design, fashion design, interior design and so on. To conduct the professional activities of design, Margolin (2002) interprets that, “as a demonstrative form of problem solving,” which “may provide new and valid compromise solutions” (p. 3). Design historian, John Walker (1989), acknowledges the complexity and problems in defining the word/concept of “Design” because of the process in involved in design, in his book entitled *Design History and the History of Design*.

Clive Dilnot (2003) offers his take on the process of design, as a “design with a small ‘d,’ design as a verb, an activity” which “occurs everywhere” (p. 18). He differentiates Design, with a capital ‘D,’ is a much more self-conscious process. Indeed, at best, that is what Design is, it’s the process of becoming self-conscious about making, shaping and forming. All things, be they products, institutions, or systems, are configured, that is they are formed. Design in this sense, our sense, is the process whereby the form of things is put on the table as it were, where configuration is examined, self-critically and often reinvented. This is design’s great virtue. This is what it offers business and what it promises society (p. 18-19).

Like most of the discussion on the definitions of design and its activities existing in the English literatures on design history and design studies, Dilnot representing the Euro-centric point-of-view of how “Design” or “design” defined in the Western context. Precisely, because of the major problem of indefinable nature of word/concept of design as identified in the Western context, it is impossible to apply and adopt what is existing and understood without any alternation in a non-Western cultural context.

Here, I challenge the notion of “self-conscious process” and “the process whereby the form of things is put” as Dilnot points out are not necessary identical in every societies and cultures of the world (also see Ghose, 1989/1995). To investigate what is “design” in the context of a Chinese society, it is a must to consider the social and cultural formation of the subject matter. To conduct my argument, I have no intention to adopt or distinguish the difference of my definition of design of this paper with a capital “D” or a small “d” as Dilnot proposed. It is simply because Chinese language does not contain the concept of the “capital” or “small” letter in the writing. Thus, I should begin with investigation of word and concept of design in Chinese context.

Modern design is considered a Western import in China. The “term ‘design’ does not have a natural equivalent or a directly translatable term in most Asian languages” as point out by Rajeshwari Ghose (1990, p.



3) on the studies of the design and development in South and Southeast Asia. China is a craft rich country with a long history of art and craft tradition or the “gongyi” tradition in Chinese. “Gong” means to “a form of productions and techniques” and “yi” means to “a kind of art skills. Together “gongyi” as a term refers to wider range of ancient handicrafts as well as the semi-machine made handicrafts in modern manufacturing context based on the traditional handicrafts. The term “gongyi” was incorporated in the early education system for the training on handicraft skills by the late Qing government in 1903. The extension of this term, “gongyi meishu” was borrowed from the Japanese kanji in the late 1920s as a reference to the applied arts (Yuan, 2003). Also, the equivalent word of design, “sheji” that commonly used in Greater China region today was believed adapted from Japanese, “sekkei,” as a translation of “design” in English during that period. Like the word “design” in English, “sheji” can be used as a verb or noun. “She” means “strikes, establish, set up,” and “ji” means calculate, plan, scheme.”

Apart from the above terms, *gongshang meishu* (commercial arts in English) was also commonly used as a reference to the equivalent word of design in a disciplinary sense. The first professional design organization in China, Zhonggong Gongshang Meishu Zuoqia Xiehui (China Commercial Artists Association) was established in spring 1934 in Shanghai (Yuan, 2003). The association aimed at promoting commerce and business in China (ZGMZX, 1937). The establishment of this professional body marked the early development of “modern design” in China, and the transition of ancient *gongyi* activities to a modern profession, commercial art/design.

In the catalogue of the show organized by the Association, one of their members criticizes the mainstream *gongshang meishu* in China at that time was full of “Western style” imitation work, and there was a lack of studies of how ancient *gongyi* can adapt to the modern context (ZGMZX, 1937). From the comments by this early pioneer, we can see the word and concept of “design” in modern China did not stop as the terminology of profession and activity, but rather, as a signifier that reflect the national identity. The examples of work influenced by this advocate can be easily found in the 1930s Shanghai.

The contemporary design development in China in the past three decades had a strong link with the evolution of design in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Due to near three decades of isolation of China with the rest of the world, the terms in Chinese equivalent to the word “design” in English is still unresolved after almost a century of development. Such as even in today’s education system in China, the Central Government adopted “yishu sheji” (or Design Arts in English) as an official title of programs in design. However, in Hong Kong, the term “tsit-gai” (*sheji* in Cantonese) has been commonly used since the 1970s. Regardless of the common equivalent terminology of “design” in Chinese language, this study would like to take *sheji*, the most common equivalent term to design in English, used in the contemporary context in the Hong Kong to design. Like the term itself, it is a hybrid term influenced by the Western concept imported indirectly from Japan. This paper considers design in Chinese context, whether it is in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Macau, as a modern profession with the “original” hybridised style resulted from the “East meets West” paradigm established in the 1930s Shanghai. The term “design,” like the problem of defining the meaning of design in English language, the Chinese equivalent *sheji* is also very difficult to define as it signified many meanings at the cultural



level. The studies from the cultural aspects on Chinese design are seriously under developed. To begin such studies, here I begin with the inquiry of how modern design education evolved in China.

The formative years of modern design education in China

China is one of the four ancient civilizations and over its 5000 years has developed a proud tradition of history and heritage. The four ancient inventions of China - compass, gunpowder, paper and printing - belong to the glory of the old Chinese civilization. However, the inward looking policy implemented by the Ming Dynasty in the early 1400s made China suffer greatly in self-isolation for centuries. The proud kingdom was forced open by the Western powers in the mid-1800s, suffering through a century of foreign invasions, civil unrest and wars. During this period, after centuries as a leading civilization, the ancient Chinese culture finally encountered the newly evolved advanced Western technology. So began a new era of Chinese interaction between tradition and modernity. The impact of the modernity that foreign powers brought to China was very important in the context of contemporary Chinese history. It is impossible to begin the inquiry of the future development of design education in China at the macro level in relation to the changing political and economical milieu, without first taking a brief look at this important historical background.

Many Chinese scholars of art and design education and history will argue that China has a long tradition of modern graphic design equivalent arts and craft work (see Yuan, 2003; Wang, 1995) or the work of “gongyi”.

Indeed we can easily find ancient graphic work samples, such as the yin-yang and I Ching symbols created in ancient times are the classic examples. Minick and Ping (1990) claim those examples are the creation of balance “within the discipline of Chinese design” and “is deeply rooted in the Confucian conception of the artist-scholar” (p. 11). They point out the “Confucian tradition defined artistic excellence through the mastery of poetry, music, calligraphy and painting” and so “[I]t is also a key by which the Chinese designer develops a broad interdisciplinary understanding of the design process and is able to form a strong and unifying link between concept and creation” (p. 12).

What Minick and Ping said may make a perfect sense in today’s understanding of design education. However, to the late Qing government, during the turn of the 20th century, the modern design brought by the Western powers was about advanced technology and technical skills training. The term “gongyi” no longer refers exclusively to wide range of ancient arts and folk handicrafts but also to the semi-machine made handicrafts in a modern manufacturing context based on the traditional handicrafts. This term was first incorporated in the early education system for the training on handicraft skills by the late Qing government in 1903. The extension of this term, “gongyi meishu” was borrowed from the Japanese kanji in the late 1920s as a reference to the applied arts (Yuan, 2003).

During that period, the Japanese arts and crafts education model influenced the early gongyi education in late Qing period (Yuan, 2003). With the success of economic and modernization reforms in Japan, the late Qing government found the Japanese model had more relevance to its culture than the Western one. The skills and drawing based vocational gongyi education was slowly picked up in the early 1900s. At the same time, there



was heated debate about whether the training of arts and craft should be the enhancement of individual tastes or a practical skill based subject as was already started among Chinese educators. However, with the urgent needs for industrialized development, the skill-based training was in high demand.

During the early 1900s, the commonly used terms were *gongyi meishu jiaoyu* or *meishu jiaoyu* (arts and craft education). Other terms such as *satyong meishu jiaoyu* (applied art education) and *tuan jiaoyu* (pattern education) were generally used during the Republican period (1911-49). “Tu” means diagram, chart, picture and portrait and can refer to intention, plan and purpose. “An” means a physical object of a narrow long table, bench or a legal record. “Tuan” (pattern) was a phrase that used in Japan to refer to design and the Chinese borrowed it for use in a similar context. In the 1920s, Japanese education had a great influence in China in many disciplines (Ding, 2001) including art and design. Students were sent to Japan to learn and study.

Among the overseas Chinese students, the early art and design educator – CHEN Zhifat was the first graduate from Japan specialized in *gongyi tuan*. Chen gave a clearer definition of *tuan* as a drawing and plan for the purpose of producing of artefacts (Yuan, 2003). This general definition of *tuan* indicated a modern approach of design education in China, and the potential of its practical implications. During this period, all the above terms were used interchangeably to refer to modern design that we understand it today. Apart from the major influence of Japan, new modern Chinese art and design school often used a mixed pedagogy from other Western countries such as Germany, United Kingdom, France and America (Yuan, 2003).

In April 1918, the first government funded art school with a design (*tuan*) department, National Beijing Arts School, was established under the advocacy of CAI Yuanpei, an important educational reformer in the history of China. Later the school was renamed the National Beijing Specialized Art School and put under the directorship of a newly returned French educated artist LIN Fengmian (CAFA, 2004). Lin was an important modern Chinese artist with a painting style integrated Western flavours and Chinese spirit. He advocated a revival Chinese art through a process of understanding Western art, researching Chinese traditional art, and then balancing Chinese and Western art to create the new Chinese art with a contemporary touch. His voice was not alone. Examples of the practice of both Chinese and Western theory can be found in the commercial work in the industry during this period. From the comments of this early pioneer, we can see the word and concept of “design” in modern China did not stop at the terminology of profession and activity, but rather, as a signifier that reflects the national identity.

According to the studies by design education scholar YUAN Xiyang (2003), the formative years of arts and design education during the Republican period suffered from the restriction of a weak social and economic environment, unstable political climate, poor social status of *gongyi meishu* and inadequate education funding.

Although from the year 1911 to 1927 had a small boom of both government and privately funded arts and design schools in Shanghai and other cities, most of them were short lived and suffered from a lack of qualified teachers. Students were in general lacking interests in research and study of arts and design theories.



And the influence of the traditional Confucian teaching and practices continued to have an effect on the society and individuals. Yuan's observations are evidence of the failure of early Chinese modern education reform where reformers call for the "cultural task of molding a 'modern' Chinese 'person'" (Borevskaya, 2001). The promotion of "Chinese learning as the essence and Western learning for its usefulness" (Zhong and Hayhoe, 2001) a slogan originating in the late Qing dynasty was never successful. Similarly, LIN Fengmin and many pioneers advocated a new direction of Chinese arts and design movement and education, one integrating the best essence of Western and Chinese arts in the 1930s. Unfortunately, all the new developments were disrupted because of the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945. The development during the Republican period was the first example of the tear between tradition, modernity and commercialization in the history of design education in China.

The great expansion and the immense confusion in the new era

The formative years of modern design education in the Chinese language played a very important role in the history of modern design and education in China. The early art and design education during the Republican period was more than just finding a way to teach a modern profession to an ancient civilization, but was the process of modernization and progress required time. The Second World War was followed by three years of civil war with the Chinese Communist Party, and led to the end of the Republican period headed by the National Party. The National Party was defeated and fled to Taiwan. Under the communist regime, arts and design education faced a brand new direction and an ideology opposing capitalism. As locally trained scholar, WANG Shouzhi (1995) emphasizes, design activity under the communists before the introduction of the Open Door policy in 1979, was mostly to service party propaganda. In the period between 1950s through to 1970s, China was isolated from the outside world, except for a short diplomatic relationship with Soviet Union from the early to mid-1950s.

Under the new communist government, all aspects of Chinese society including education were ruled under a system of centralized administration. By the time the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, it had twelve arts and design schools nation wide. Like all other disciplines in education, the arts and design schools were reorganized and developed centrally copying the Soviet model. Former National Beijing Arts School was restructured with other art schools and became the Central Academy of Fine Arts operated directly under the Central government. The other two major institutes, The Central Academy of Arts and Design in Beijing and China Academy of Arts in Huangzhou were also restructured and renamed during this period (Yuan, 2003). All arts and design schools were under the tight control of the government and pedagogy was skills based after the Soviet model (Lin, 2000). During this isolation period, the Soviet model was the only direct influence from the outside world. Some scholars argue that China's experience "was not a matter of simply copying the Soviet Union without any critical reflection" (Ding, 2001, p. 173). However, without creative freedom and a market driven economy, the arts and design education suffered greatly together with the whole nation.

When the nation opened up again to the world in 1978, China was lagging behind the industrialized world in all aspects and the nation was desperate to know what had happened to the outside world. Shortly after the



announcement of the Open Door policy, some arts and design institutions started to interact with overseas organizations with activities such as Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts inviting international designers and educators to give lectures to its students. Hong Kong graphic designers, Kan Tai-keung gave his lecture in 1978 (Wang, 1999), Walter Landor from the United States (Anderson, 1998) and Wucius Wong delivered theirs in 1979 (Yuan, 2003). Among them, American-trained Chinese educator, Wong introduced his two design textbooks at his lecture, *Principles of Two-Dimensional Design* and *Principles of Three-Dimensional Design*. This had a strong impact on the design foundation curriculum reform in China at that time. Within a short period, textbooks on fundamental Bauhaus design principles were introduced indirectly from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan and published widely throughout the country (Yuan, 2003).

According to the survey by Yuan (2003), in the beginning of 1980, China had about 2,100 students majoring in arts and design subjects with approximately 750 specialized teachers. The academy was virtually without any updated teaching materials and any information from the outside world. Guided by DENG Xiaoping, education reform was on the way to the new direction of facing “modernization, the world, and the future” (Ding, 2001, p. 174). The cultural exchanges and publishing of overseas design textbooks were evidence of the “conscious effort to both nationalize and internationalize Chinese education” (Ding, 2001, p. 172) under the new era of economic system reform. Ding (2001) points out, “[d]uring this period educators were very active in researching foreign education systems” (p. 177) and their effort contributed greatly to the first major education reform document announced by the Central government in May 1985. This policy document gave higher education institutions greater autonomy over academic planning and administration.

The 1980s can be considered a decade of China’s effort to catching up with the rest of the world. It was a period of learning what they had missed, and searching overseas for appropriate models to reference the new modernization reform. This decade marked a very important nurturing era for a new generation of designers, who later on generated a wave of attention from both national and international audiences. Prominent designers such as WANG Xu, CHEN Fang, CHEN Shaohua, and HAN Jiaoying who became known to the international design sphere in the 1990s, all received their education locally during that period of time. From 1981 to 1987, the expansion of arts and design education was rapid. In 1989 there were about 1,100 arts students and 686 design students graduating in that year alone (Yuan, 2003). Students majoring arts and design were at least four times more than the numbers in the early 1980s. The 1990s marked the emergence of the modern Chinese graphic design. Like the Republican period Chinese design, the new Chinese graphic design merged traditional Chinese design principles with Western sensibilities, making it a perfect match for the global economy that China was entering. However, due to the lack of understanding of the contemporary value of design education among young students and traditional arts schools, the numbers of design graduates failed to meet the emerging commercial needs for the market economy reform.

In 1993, the launch of another important Central educational policy, “Outline for the Reform and Development of China’s Education” finally gave greater autonomy to universities and colleges. Zhong and Hayhoe (2001) summarized this policy as one that “urged universities and colleges to establish mechanisms of self-regulation and responsibility” and gave them rights to “govern themselves under their charter and organize



teaching activities and student admission; to control registration and internal discipline; to issue diplomas and certificates; to hire faculty members and other staff and reward or punish them; to manage and spend funds allocated to the institute; to reject any individual or organization's illegal interface into teaching and learning activities in the institution; and to enjoy all other rights granted by law" (p. 276). This policy contributed a major force of waves of educational reform among the academia, starting in the mid-1990s and including the discipline of arts and design.

Armed with the new Central policy, now arts and design schools and departments within the university have the autonomy needed to develop according to the market needs. With the academics finally caught up with the emerging commercial demands of economic development in the mid-1990s, the expansion in design education was done at an extraordinary speed. Among the many newly emerged schools and programmes, Wuxi University of Light Industry (later became part of Southern Yangtze University) established the first School of Design in 1995 (Yuan, 2003). In the same year, a new department of design was set up at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the number of students enrolled soon surpassed other departments. The term on the various graphic design related subjects was officially named as "yishu sheji" (or Design Arts in English) nation wide in that year. By 1998, it has about 270 design related academic programmes established all over the nation. Since then, design programmes at various levels continue to expand rapidly.

The *Design Online China* website, lists 119 industrial design programmes offered by universities and colleges prior to 2000. In 2001, 30 more new industrial design programmes were added (NIC, 2004). Industrial design programme was the hottest area of study emerging in late 1990s after the boom in graphic design programmes in the mid-1990s. As Yuan (2003) critiques in his studies, the rapid expansion of design education created a lot of problems such as lack of quality assurance in the programmes, teaching quality, facilities and even overlap of the same programmes within the same institutions. The landscape of arts and design education in China at present is full of confusion and chaos.

The Open Door policy of the market economy reform and commercialization although gave a much clearer concept of what design is to the society as compared to the past, the design educational reform in China is still yet to be defined. The core issue is still on the interaction between modernization and tradition as LIN Fengmin and other educational reformers from the Republican period once pointed out. The current development of design education is another example of a new rip between tradition and modernity with the similar problems that were experienced in the past.

The road to modernity and commercialization

The ensuing expansion of design activities and design programmes, first graphic design and then industrial design, has been phenomenal. Discussions on the future directions of design education and functions of design in China are heated. For example, LIN Jiayang (2000), former Dean of the School of Design at the Wuxi University of Light Industry, advocated the change from the outdated Soviet skill-based curriculum model. Since then, the curriculum on graphic design has improved, as evidenced by the various textbooks available in the market. The design education reforms came in many forms including hiring "foreign experts"



to lead or as visiting professors. For example, Shantou University, with the strong financial support of LEE Ka Shing, the rich businessman in Hong Kong, was able to hire experienced international experts to lead the changes in the university's Cheung Kong School of Art and Design. Among major reforms, the school was restructured from the previous Fine Arts Department in January 2004 under the deanship of Kan Tai-keung, the internationally renowned Hong Kong designer. Also, locally trained scholar WANG Shouzhi, associate professor at the Art Center College of Design, was appointed as the Associate Dean. WANG Min, a graduate of China Academy of Arts in 1982, holding a Masters degree from Yale University in 1988 as well as with extensive working experience in the United States for Adobe and other big clients, was hired as a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts recently.

In fact, in the past fifteen years, China has had no shortage of professor trained abroad or academic exchanges with overseas institutions. While this has benefits, it also has drawbacks. Very often, foreign academic scholars are happy to offer their insights after their brief encounter with China. In the First Doctoral Education in Design Conference held in 1998, former Chair of the School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University recommended China to offer design degrees at the doctoral level (Clark, 1998). In fact, China already had a doctoral program established in 1984 at the Central Academy of Arts and Design. Fung and Lo (2001) proposed China address the "endemic problems" for their future design education development without acknowledging the struggles of traditional arts and crafts heritage with the modern education system throughout decades. Indeed the issues of design education that China is confronting are enormous and require well-rounded contextual in-depth research.

The Academy of Arts and Design at the Tsinghua University (formerly The Central Academy of Arts and Design) initiated the studies of the Chinese arts and crafts tradition about 15 years ago. There is a strong call for studies of traditional craft into the modern application of design so as to develop the national identity of Chinese design (see Yuan, 2003; Jiang, 2003). Actually back to 1993, in the First Industry Design Meeting in China, Matthew Turner (1993), design historian who once taught in Hong Kong, suggests "imitation is not necessarily a 'stage' on the road to originality" (p. 20). He reminds us that identity "is produced through a combination of the distinctions we draw between ourselves and others, and others draw between themselves and us" (p. 21). Precisely, there is problem, as quite a large gap exists between the concepts of "imitation" and "originality" in modern design among designers and educators in China, as I observed.

Most of the Western friends that I encounter expect to see a match of their concept of "Chinese-ness" from Chinese design and contemporary everyday life. Academics such as Clive Dilnot (2003) call for "the invention and development of an authentically modern Chinese culture" (p. 16) in China. But what is his definition of authentic modern Chinese? Most of Chinese designers that I know, are not interested to cater to the "Chinese" taste of Westerners. They are driven by a desire to live the same material life enjoyed in most Western countries. Where will be the meeting point of these two perceptions if there is any? The question of the future directions of modern design in China will be positioned on the modern self-image of China to its people, the consciousness of preservation of cultural heritage and the cultural understanding of the Western world about contemporary China.



The future

After China had been cut off from the outside world for almost three decades, the 1970s and 1980s marked the emerging exchange of activities between the designers and institutions of Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and Japan. Art and design educators and students, such as WANG Xu and WANG Yuefei, who later become graphic design pioneers in China in the 1990s, were greatly inspired. WANG Xu had been working in Hong Kong for about seven years, returning to Guangzhou to start his own design studio in 1995. His simple approach to design and international awards made him one of the most admired local graphic designers by many young designers and students. He has inspired younger designers like JIANG Hua and PAN Qing from Ningbo a great deal. Jiang and Pan are the founders of a key international poster design event in China, Ningbo International Poster Biennial.

Non-commercial thematic poster design events were one of the trends that led the society to pay attention to the value of design. Most of the events established international graphic designers as jurors and participants for exhibitions; through those events, a new generation of young designers gained exposure to the world's best designs. Although locally trained graphic designers found increased business opportunities with the economy's expansion, a larger number of designers still found themselves lacking opportunities to exercise their artistic and creative flair. With the propaganda poster design tradition, young Chinese designers quickly picked up the modern visual language in this semi-art form. Within a short period, beginning in the mid to late 1990s, graphic designers from China dramatically increased their exposure in international design circles.

In addition, professional graphic design associations were also rapidly formed, with Shenzhen Graphic Design Association, established in China in 1995, being the first of its kind. Their mandate is to promote design quality and public interest in graphic design, as well as the status of graphic designers. Shanghai Graphic Designers Association, established in 1998, was the second professional group to be formed. Today there are seven graphic design associations listed as full professional members in the Icofrada website, in which China has the most associations listed.

The presence of award-winning Chinese designers in international design circles is evidence of their understanding of the modern language of design, especially on graphic design. Young designers want to create work like that seen in the international design annuals and magazines. Elite design is the assimilation of clean and simple "western" design, and the gap between this modern (western-style) design and locally preferred daily design is huge. The price tag of "good" graphic design is high and thus affordable to only a small group of people, and the polarization phenomenon in "taste" is extreme. It is easy to find cheap look-a-like versions of KFC or Starbucks signs for local corner stores. The general design acceptance level of the public is still far behind that of the elite university and college-trained designers.

In the past two decades, contemporary graphic design in China has already made great strides toward modernity and commercialization, although it still has a long way to go. With rapid economic development and the disappearance of historical cultural heritage, there is not much optimism that the landscape of



emerging contemporary Chinese design will be a unique one, such as the Shanghai style in the 1930s. It is urgent that Chinese designers establish their own creative design language in the future.

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