

# In Search of a New Graphic Design Frontier in China: Establishing the “Chinese-ness” of International Style

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**Abstract:** Chinese designers are becoming more visible and receiving a considerable number of international awards at poster shows, shaping a new visual frontier in Chinese graphic design. The author presents an overview of the current development of graphic design in China. In the early 1990's, the market environment had few opportunities for graphic designers to express their potential. As an alternative, many turned to thematic poster design to show their creative skills. Their success at international exhibitions encouraged many young Chinese to study design. This first generation was strongly influenced by Hong Kong designers. In the late 1970's, Hong Kong designers began to establish regional exchange activities with designers and design education institutes in China. Their work exerted a strong influence on students who otherwise did not have access to the latest design trends from the Western world. The graphic design work of Henry Steiner, an American who moved to Hong Kong in 1961, and Kan Tai-Keung and Alan Chan were of particular importance. These three designers were exponents of an “East/West” aesthetic that characterized Hong Kong design for the rest of the century. The author shows how this cross-cultural creative pattern was repeated in China. With the increasing flow of information and contacts via the Internet, Chinese designers have become more diversified in their development of a style that is often free of any association with “Chinese-ness.” The paper concludes with a description of how some Chinese designers are using international style to help them establish reputations, both locally and internationally, while striving to avoid clichés and stereotypical images imposed by the Western world. This paper discusses the issue of visual styles in contemporary graphic design in China.

*Keywords: Chinese graphic design, design history, Chinese-ness, internationalization, design identity*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, China has begun to recognize the value of commercial graphic design to its economy, and its designers have been trying their best to catch up in the world of quality graphic design. As a result of increasing contact with the outside world, Chinese designers learned about the merits and creative opportunities self-funded thematic posters had been providing European and Japanese poster arts organizations. The 1990's saw a profusion of thematic poster design invitational exhibitions in the region. This development marks a very important milestone in the contemporary history of graphic design in the Greater China region, which is comprised of the

People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. At the same time, Chinese designers are gaining visibility and receiving a considerable number of international awards at poster shows. These award-winners, i.e. Wang Xu, Wang Yuefei, Han Jiaying, and Chen Fang, are shaping a new visual frontier in Chinese graphic design. Their success at international events encouraged many students to study design in PRC. With the increasing flow of information and contacts via the Worldwide Web, Chinese designers have become more diverse in developing a style that is often free of "Chinese-ness." This paper reviews the development of graphic design styles in thematic poster design works by Chinese graphic designers, and their search for new visual styles.

## 2. The development of modern Chinese graphic design style

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 arts from its own culture, along with graphics and art styles borrowed from Japan and Europe [1]. The most well-know exiting example of Chinese modern design is found in the Shanghai style of the 1930's. At the time, Shanghai was China's most metropolitan city, and design works produced there during this period reflect foreign influences originating from the city's numerous foreign concession zones, through which the customs and products of other countries entered local life (figure 1).

Shanghai artists who trained in Japan or Europe were inspired directly or indirectly by Western design. They embraced the worldwide art and design trends, particular Art Deco and Cubism, integrating and experimenting with geometric patterns, ornamentation, bold colours and strong patterns [2]. Western art styles enriched the expressive vocabulary of composition and form in China's emerging modern design, and the new resources were artfully combined with elements form the region's own artistic productions. Thus, the output of Chinese modern design was quite distinctive, moving beyond what had been simply imported from the West. Scott Minick and Ping Jiao refer to the "masterful synthesis" of Chinese design works at this time [3].

Because of the heavy and quick influence of Western styles on Chinese graphic design, the development of Chinese graphic design identity is often thought to closely follow Western design theory, rather than having a separate design progression of its own. However, as Minick and Jiao document, the Chinese graphic and artistic traditions were also significant influences, and uniquely Chinese elements consistently appeared in combination with the imported Western elements. Thus, Minick and Jiao do not agree that Chinese design was simply imported from the West. Rather, they point out that "Chinese design traditionally emphasizes the absence of form in an attempt to stress the spiritual" and that "the concept of harmony" and the "yin and yang principle" lend balance and unity to works in this tradition" [4].



**Fig. 1: The cover of Shanghai Sketch, issue #76, comics magazine, first publish in 1928, Shanghai.**

Design principles are understood here as made up of fundamental design practices such as form, line, dot, size, shape, space and rhythm. Chinese graphic design style, defined in this study from the perspective of the present day, combines principles from both Western and Eastern traditions, some of whose roots may not even be decisively attributable to one or the other source. Thus, here I distinguish between basic principles of design and cultural content that can clearly be identified as Western or Eastern. For example, a pair of chopsticks, a Chinese character, or the yin-yang symbol are clearly Eastern in origin no matter where they are found. The hybrid of Western graphic design theory and Chinese cultural symbols, values and aesthetic directions form the foundations of Chinese graphic design as traced here. This hybridized visual style provides evidence of the relationship of design and its cultural context, which work hand-in-hand in response to change over time.

The Shanghai period represented both the beginning of a hybridized Chinese modern design and the best of this emerging form before the Second World War. Achievements in Shanghai were influential throughout the country and in subsequent periods of development after the war. However, after the Shanghai achievements of the 1930's, the development of Chinese modern design did not follow a direct and unbroken trajectory. Creative design work of the quality produced in Shanghai could not be sustained during the war, and after the Communists gained power in 1949, commercial graphic design was seen as a symbol of Western life and unnecessary consumer products [5]. However, the Shanghai spirit of commercial graphic design was able to continue under the capitalist economic system and British colonial rule in Hong Kong after the war.

The art and culture sectors in Hong Kong benefited from the influx of talent from PRC. From the period after the war through the 1960's, commercial graphic design developed at a steady pace. Newspaper advertising during this period illustrated the Hong Kong hybrid of elements from the Shanghai period [6] (figure 2). Turner argues that Hong Kong was able to maintain its modern Chinese design style until at least the 1960's. Because of the influence of American companies utilizing American design specialists from overseas, rather than local designers, Chinese designers previously trained in Shanghai and Guangzhou had to gradually alter their style to fit into the new commercial environment dominated by American companies and meet the standards set by American-trained designers [7].

Among the newly arrived American designers during the 1960's, Henry Steiner has been the most influential. A graduate of Yale who arrived in Hong Kong in 1961, Steiner had worked as a designer in Paris and New York. Unlike other foreign designers, he incorporated elements of the unique cultural environment of Hong Kong into his design and demonstrated new possibilities in incorporating Chinese cultural symbols and written characters into his otherwise Western-



Fig. 2: Newspaper advertisement—Pepsodent Toothpaste, March, 1949, Hong Kong



Fig. 3: Hong Kong International Music Festival, Poster by Henry Steiner, 1969.

style design works. He successfully established the principle of cross-cultural design, adapting the generally understood concepts of Western design into the Hong Kong and Chinese context (figure 3). This also opened up a new dimension of combined style, which had never been achieved in the Shanghai period. In doing this, Steiner frequently made use of Chinese cultural imagery to create a distinctive Chinese hybrid that inspired later Hong Kong designers.

### **3. The struggle between Eastern and Western forces in visual expressions**

The 1970's saw the initial development of local Hong Kong design education, and can also be considered the stage of struggle between the emerging hybridized Chinese graphic design style and Western style. The conception of government-funded design education and creativity was characterized by attempts to copy and imitate Western design. Starting around the mid-1970's, some local designers saw the weakness of the Western-dominated understanding of design in Hong Kong. They began to perceive a lack of individuality in their works as well as a failure to link the design principles they had learned with their daily life and challenges in the Hong Kong context. Among these local pioneers interpreting and exploring Eastern elements in their design work was Kan Tai-keung. A retrospective of his work published in 1999 reveals that Kan's early 1970's works were devoid of Chinese elements and simply followed Western style [8].

The late 1970's marked the beginning of exchange activities between Hong Kong designers and institutions outside the territory, including those from PRC and Japan. Since China had been cut off from the outside world for almost three decades, the visits of Hong Kong and overseas designers and organizations introduced a new perspective in design and updated mainland practitioners on the latest developments from around the world. Art and design educators and students, such as Wang Xu and Wang Yuefei, who later become graphic design pioneers in PRC, were greatly inspired.

In the mid-1980's, Hong Kong designers and their works began to receive exposure in China and Taiwan on a regular basis. Due to the emergence of a more relaxed political climate, Hong Kong designers were able to export some influences to these two locales through design and exhibition shows. Hong Kong was home to some outstanding locally trained designers, such as Kan Tai-keung and Alan Chan, with their identifiably Chinese visual styles that influenced both local designers and designers from PRC and Taiwan. In addition, Hong Kong had fewer trading restrictions and good numbers of multi-national corporations had set up their Asian regional headquarters there. Thus, graphic designers from Hong Kong enjoyed greater job opportunities and a leading position throughout the Greater China region during the 1980's.

By the late 1980's, the political situation in Taiwan had become more liberal. Designers and design organizations started to initiate thematic poster design exhibitions locally, and marketed the events as cultural activities. Such non-commercial events provided designers in Taiwan an opportunity to create works free from commercial restrictions governed by clients' preferences. When the thematic poster design trend spread to PRC, designers who had previously faced a lack of creative outlets were eager to demonstrate their graphic design ability. Within a short time after the mid-1990's, the thematic poster trend was in full swing within the region.

At the same time, designers from PRC also increased their exposure in international design circles dramatically, due to the inspiration of intra-regional poster shows and with the help of international poster exhibition information available on the Worldwide Web. Along with increasing contact with the outside world,

the overall graphic design standard in PRC was improving steadily. Visual expressions and styles within Chinese graphic design were diversified in the search for a new stylistic identity.

#### 4. Diversification of Chinese graphic design style

After the success of the first intra-regional design competition organized in China, Graphic Design in China '92, held in Shenzhen [9], the graphic design industry started to take off in the mid-1990's. With the establishment of Shenzhen Graphic Design Association in 1996, the first professional graphic design association in China, two significant intra-regional events were organized by the Association. The first one, Graphic Design in China '96, featured leading judges from Japan and Korea [10]. The competition attracted entries not only from PRC, but also from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. The event was an immediate success, attracting attention from all over the region to graphic design, and also helped this newly established Association build up its confidence to organize more events.

The second event was a thematic poster invitational exhibition with the theme "Communication." In this thematic poster exhibition, held in 1997, some designers explored symbols and icons from their own cultures or related the theme of their work to the emerging Western influence in China. Works by Wang Xu and Chen Shaohua interpreted communication between the Western world and Chinese culture. Wang Xu had been working in Hong Kong for about seven years, returning to Guangzhou to start his own design studio in 1995. He emphasized the use of white space and simplicity in his design, a strategy which soon made him one of the most influential PRC designers. By 1997, Wang had already received international attention for his works. One of his posters, "claw, valley, joint," received numerous international awards and multiple exposures in design annuals and magazines. Also notable is his work for the "Communication" poster design exhibition in 1997, depicting a Coca-Cola bottle in porcelain with a Chinese dragon in blue and green tones.

Wang's visual expression does not stop with giving modern interpretations to Chinese elements. Following the footsteps of other Chinese designers in Hong Kong, Wang has proven his design skills can be applied to Western subject matters, such as his cover and poster design for *Design Exchange Magazine* on various topics, and, more recently, his work on a poster tribute to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864 – 1901). His clean and simple style has earned him many admirers in PRC (figure 4). Younger designer like Jiang Hua and Pan Qing from Ningbo have been inspired by him a great deal. Jiang's early national award-winning work with the theme of reunification of Hong Kong (figure 5-6) was redone under Wang's direction. The new



Fig. 4: Homage to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Poster by Wang Xu, 2001.



Fig. 5: Reunification of Hong Kong, Poster by Jiao Hua, 1996 (original).



Fig. 6: Reunification of Hong Kong, Poster by Jiao Hua, 1999 (revised).

version eliminated the “unnecessary” elements and became a neat and tidy version of the original. Both Jiang and Pan continue to work towards this direction and produce works emphasizing an international style of clean graphics.

The two events organized by Shenzhen Graphic Design Association set an example for designers in other Chinese cities, and many regional thematic poster events, including Celebration of Reunification of Hong Kong with China in 1997, establishment of the Shanghai Graphic Design Association in 1998, Celebration of Reunification of Macau

with China, and the opening of Design Museum in Beijing in 1999, followed soon after. Among the designers who work in Shenzhen, Chen Shaohua, Han Jiaying, and Wang Yuefei are some of the most prominent. Chen Shaohua and Wang Yuefei are members of Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI), an international recognition of their professional statures. (Other AGI’s members from China and Hong Kong including Yu Bingnan, Kan Tai-keung, Freeman Lau, Henry Steiner, and Wang Xu). Chen’s works focus on commercial projects; his logo design for Beijing’s bid to host the 2008 Olympics has won him great fame and admiration (figure 7). In his works, Chinese elements are often traceable but occur with new graphic interpretations. On the other hand, Han and Wang treat Chinese elements as graphics and try to keep up with the world visual trends, such as deconstruction.

Shanghai International Poster Invitational Exhibition ’99, organized by the newly established Shanghai Graphic Designers Association, was another prominent event. The creative theme of this exhibition was “Interaction” [11]. Designers from Shanghai, including Shen Hoapeng (figure 8), Ma Dagan, Zhou Peng, and Jiang Qinggong produced works that attempted to expand the visual styles of Chinese graphic design. This show not only invited designers from the Greater China region, but also sought the participation of designers from around the world. Leading designers from Japan, Korea, Europe and the United States also participated in the exhibition by submitting their latest works. Compared to the previous exhibition held in Shenzhen, the overall standard of works from Chinese designers was improved drastically within a short period. Most importantly, this exhibition began to reestablish graphic design in Shanghai, helping the city begin to reclaim the role it once played as a cosmopolitan city in the 1930’s.

After all the intensive thematic poster exhibitions held from 1997 to 1999, the graphic design scene quieted down for about two years. In October 2001, another international poster exhibition, the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Poster Exhibition, was held in Ningbo, a city about 200km south of Shanghai. This poster show advertised the theme “Fusion,” and attracted nearly 2000 entries from over 40 countries (figure 9). The exhibition invited eight leading graphic designers, four from the Greater China region and four from overseas, to serve as judges on a panel. Designers from the Greater China region were Kan Tai-keung, Wang Xu, Chen Fang, and Han Jiaying. Overseas judges were Philippe Apeloig (France), James Victore (USA), Mitsuo Katsui (Japan), and Ahn Sang Soo (Korea)



Fig. 7: Visual identity for the bidding of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, by Chen Shaohua, 2001



Fig. 8: Interaction, thematic poster, by Shen Hoapeng, 1999.

[12]. This event received support from both commercial firms and the city government office, and marked the latest recognition of poster arts in China.

## 5. The future

Thematic poster design has provided opportunities for designers from PRC to demonstrate their creativity and potential to the world. Because of this trend, design students and young designers in China understand more about graphic design through the medium of posters. Because of China's previous isolation from the rest of the world, a large number of design education programs in Chinese universities are still built around a skill-based model. Poster design exhibitions introduce the importance of creative concept in design to young designers and students in China. This new way of thinking will definitely accelerate the overall development and standard of graphic design in China in the long term.

The contribution will be very important in the history of graphic design in Greater China. All poster exhibition events help Chinese designers accumulate quality works and receive international attention and feedback for their work. To summarize, we can see that designers from PRC, as well as from Hong Kong and Taiwan, are still struggling with different visual styles. On one hand, there are those in support of reconstructing the neo-Chinese graphic identity by using obvious traditional or contemporary Chinese elements. Designers including Kan Tai-keung, Alan Chan and Chen Shaohua are the leading proponents of this style. On the other hand, another group of designers, including Wang Xu, Wang Yeifei, Han Jiaying, and Chen Fang are hoping to explore new visual territories.

With the increase of information and contact with the outside world, a new generation of designers is sure to be strongly influenced by the world's cutting edge visual exploration magazines. Hong Kong-based magazines such as *IdN*, and *VQ* (figure 10) are just two of the possible future influences on graphic design in PRC. In addition, the impact and influences of graphic possibilities accessible through the Worldwide Web cannot be underestimated. It might be too early to define a new Chinese graphic design style at the present stage. Although individual designers have received international recognition, these accolades do not mean that overall design standards in PRC have been dramatically bolstered to international levels.

The effects of this design trend will certainly continue to impact the future of graphic design in the Greater China region. PRC has become a member of the World Trade Organization, and Beijing will host the Olympic Games in 2008. Commercial graphic design opportunities will certainly increase in the wake of these



Fig. 9: Fusion, thematic poster, by Wang Jian, 2002.



Fig. 10: VQ Magazine, cover of issue #3, first publish in August, 1998, by Tommy Li Design Workshop.

developments. The extent to which these kinds of poster design activities will further assist Chinese graphic designers to establish their own creative visual language remains to be seen.

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