Exploring Chinese graphic design theory and pedagogy

Wendy Siuyi Wong PhD
Department of Communication Studies
Hong Kong Baptist University

Abstract

Chinese graphic design theory may be considered largely undeveloped due to its relatively short history. This paper takes the first step in the direction of developing a unified pedagogy of Chinese graphic design theory based on the conjunctive cultural framework of the Greater China region of Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau. Thus, this paper concentrates on the studies of generalisation of common graphic design creative, logic and visual systems encoded with both traditional and modern Chinese elements found in the works by designers in the Greater China region. The theoretical exploration of these designs covers the direction of re-invention of Chinese typography, integration of the bilingual typography, formulising the mixture of Eastern and Western images, rethinking Chinese calligraphy and Shuimo painting, inspiration of folk arts and popular arts from the past, and appropriation of contemporary everyday life objects. This paper aims at enhancing the understanding of Chinese graphic design theory in the region as well as in the international design sphere.

Introduction

The history of the development of design education in the universities of the different locales of the Greater China region is various due to the distinct political and social progression of each locale in the past. Design in this region is a relatively new discipline compared to fine art and has a relatively late development compared to the West. Study of how to conduct design education in response to the unique Chinese cultural environment is not fully explored by design academics in the region (Jian, 1995; Lin, 2000). The Greater China region shares a common cultural heritage, although they have been ruled under different political regimes. This paper takes the potentially controversial position that the education of Chinese design theory should be studied as one unified whole rather than individual studies of separate entities with their shared cultural background and heritage.

This paper takes the first step in the direction of developing a unified pedagogy of Chinese graphic design theory based on this conjunctive cultural framework. Thus, the paper concentrates on the studies of generations of common graphic design creative logics and visual systems in works encoded with both traditional and modern Chinese elements found in Greater China, rather than the discussion of ideological and intra-regional cultural differences. The paper focuses specifically on graphic design, examining commercial visual communication works rather than communist party propaganda. Through the process of exploring and generating the Chinese graphic design theory, drawing from examples of graphic design works from the different periods within the region, a basic framework for Chinese graphic design pedagogy will be constructed. This paper is aimed at enhancing the understanding of Chinese graphic design theory in the region and in the international design sphere.

Background

Due to the relatively short history of design in the Greater China region, contemporary Chinese design theory and history are considered simply not to exist at this stage. With the current increasing levels of graphic design activities and expansion within the region, especially in Mainland China, the problem of lack of established graphic design theory in university design education becomes critical (Yi, 1995). A large number of design education programs in the universities of Mainland China are still building on a skill-based model and cannot catch up with the emerging needs of the society and industry in the present day (Zhang, 1995; Lin, 2000). The graphic design activities in Mainland China are only catching up in the past two decades and the graphic design environment is still immature.

Both Hong Kong and Taiwan have experience in adopting Western design theory into education in the university. However, the design of these two locales has suffered from a lack of internationally recognized cultural expression styles. Hong Kong does have locally trained designers such as Kan Tai-keung and Alan Chan with their identifiably Chinese visual styles, who have played an influential role with both local designers and designers from Mainland China and Taiwan. But the general discussion of the design education problem in design theory in response to the unique cultural environment has long been neglected by the design academic leaders in Hong Kong.

When approaching the investigation of Chinese graphic design theory for design education at the university level, it is important to consider the shared cultural background in the different locales within the region (Yi, 1995) because this cultural heritage often becomes the main visual expression adopted by the designers in the contemporary context. Traditionally, arts and crafts were at the core of Chinese cultural heritage, and many of the influences that made their way into modern Chinese design have been carried through centuries of artistic production (Turner, 1995).

This paper does not attempt to distinguish the difference between basic Chinese design principles and Western ones, or to establish a unilateral direction of influence of West-East or East-West. In exploring contemporary Chinese graphic design theory, it may be less important to establish a single direction of influence in terms of fundamental design principles, as Minick and Jiao (1990), and Turner (1995) have pointed out, because basic elements such as balance, use of bright colors, and diagonal composition have been appreciated in many traditions in many historical periods. Design principles are understood here as made up of fundamental design practices such as form, line, dot, size, shape, space and balance (Berger, 1989). It could even be claimed that these principles have existed in any form of art in any country in any period, and design influence has flowed in the opposite direction, from China through Japan and into the West during the formation of Art Nouveau and Art Deco style (Minick & Jiao, 1990).

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 clearly attributable to one or the other source. Thus, here I distinguish between basic principles of design and cultural elements of content that can more clearly be seen as Western or Eastern. For example, an image of chopsticks, a Chinese character, or the yin-yang symbol is clearly Eastern derived no matter where they are found. The investigation examines the distinctive creative patterns that have integrated Western design theories into the Chinese context.

Exploring Chinese graphic design theory
Generating from the present existing graphic design works produced within the different locales throughout the past three decades, some creative logic and system integrating the unique Chinese culture can be seen. This logic and system can not only be seen as a unified Chinese graphic design theory for contemporary graphic design teaching at the university level within the Greater China region, but also can be used as a creative thinking framework for designers in the industry.

Re-invention of Chinese typography
The impact of the Western influence of typography in Chinese written characters can be traced back to the Shanghai period in the 1920s and 1930s. Starting from that period, Chinese artists explored different modern styles such as Art Deco and Cubism, combining them into Chinese written characters in publications or advertising (Minick & Jiao, 1990). This period established the fundamental understanding of typographic design in China. However, after the Shanghai achievements of the 1920s and 1930s, the path of development for Chinese modern design did not follow a direct and unbroken trajectory. The development of Chinese typography was able to continue under the capitalist economic system in Hong Kong and Taiwan after the war (Wong, 2000a).

From the works of these two locales, we can generate some key design theoretical directions in typography from the perspective of the function of displaying. A first direction can be seen in works using the contrast of different fonts with calligraphic brush strokes. Examples can be found in one of the early works by Henry Steiner (HK) in 1964 for Asia Magazine House ad under the title of 'Old/New,' and works by Kan Tai-keung (HK) for the 'Graphic design Course by Studio II' in 1977, and the 'One Art Group Show' in 1983.

A second direction can be seen in the 'type with meanings' method using the ideographic nature of Chinese written language in design. Examples can be traced back to 1977 in works by Choi Kai-yan (HK) for the Baptist Press in 1977 and the exhibition poster for his Chinese typographic works in 1979. Steiner also has set up a classic example in the history of Chinese graphic design in the work for Amoy Peanut Oil packaging. He replaced part of the component of a Chinese word 'oil' into a real picture of peanuts. The message of the word stands out clearly for the Chinese reading audience as 'peanut oil.' This approach of making use of the characteristics of Chinese written language is proved as a possible designing theory that can still be seen in today's context in examples such as the recent work by Stanley Wong (HK) in the thematic poster of 'People.'

A third direction can be seen in works using type to compose a message while making use of the block system characteristic of Chinese written language, and creating a visual work with new meaning (see Wong, 2000b). Examples can be see in the work by Stanley Wong (HK) for the theme of 'New Era' and Alan Chan's (HK) works for 'Tategumi Yokogumi Morisawa Quarterly' in 1998 and the theme of 'People.' These works demonstrate the fundamental design nature in a Chinese language environment.

A fourth and final direction can be seen in the decomposition and combination of components and elements in Chinese written characters. Works demonstrating this technique include the work by Freeman Lau (HK) for the thematic poster on Chinese written language in 1994, in which he adapts one of the traditional methods in Chinese calligraphy art into a series of new version Chinese written characters. Another example is the work by Ye Guosong (TW), which shows how the abstract block system of Chinese written language can break into separated surfaces. Both examples show the potential of manipulation of basic elements in Chinese written characters.

Integration of bilingual typography

Due to the increasing international contact with the English world and the historical background of Hong Kong being ruled by a British colonial government, Hong Kong is the first locale in the region to integrate both English and Chinese languages into its design (Wong, 2000a). In response to this unique 'East meets West' cultural environment, Henry Steiner (HK) is one of the first designers of Hong Kong to combine the usage of both languages into a logotype design. His work designed for Jade Creations in 1972 uses the Chinese character for 'Jade' to form the final 'E' in the company name. Thus, the Chinese reader can read the name in both English and Chinese. This innovative combined use of written languages can be seen in Steiner's work from the early 1970s forward, including in some work produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This design method of using a Chinese character to replace a letter in an English word is frequently picked up by other designers in the region.

One of the works by Alan Chan demonstrates a slightly different approach in this bilingual typography technique, using the English 'I' superimposed on one of the strokes of the Chinese written character of 'I.' Thus, reading of both languages converts the same word equally. Another similar example is by a group of students in Mainland China: it takes a step further by constructing the English name of Hong Kong into a familiar 'Double Happiness' symbol for the poster design for the 'Celebration of Reunification of Hong Kong with China' in 1997. Other recent examples, such as the self-identity logotype designed by Zhou Pang (CN), show that the concept of bilingual typography has also been acquired by Mainland China. This proves that the direction of integration of bilingual typography is already established and is being employed by designers in different locales within the region.

Formularising the mixture of Eastern and Western images

The principle of contrast by using juxtaposition of Eastern and Western images is one of the key methods to express creative design concepts. Works presented in this direction demonstrate an understanding of designers from the region on the two basic universal design principles, 'the primacy of concept' and the use of contrasts to 'give life' to a design (Steiner & Hass, 1995, p. 2). American designer, Steiner (HK) in 1964 produced a house ad for Asia Magazine by using two pictures to contrast old and new, and traditional and westernised images of Asian women. In his poster for the Hong Kong International Music Festival in 1969, Steiner uses various symbols in combination to bring out the overall idea of enjoyment during the music festival. This technique of displaying contrast brings Hong Kong design with Chinese elements closer to the international design style of the times, something that had not yet been accomplished by locally trained designers at that time (Wong, 2000c).

Other examples by Steiner, which demonstrates the formula of contrasting East-West themes, can be seen in his poster design work for the First Asia/Pacific Design Conference Australia in 1988. This poster depicts a black-and-white female figure in an old dress gazing into a mirror from which a full-color postmodern female figure gazes back. The visual provides a thought-provoking, highly contrasted image that is easily understood. This example illustrates how to make use of the familiar icons both from the past as well as the present to produce a message that can be decoded easily.

The example of work by Alan Chan (HK), 'Hong Kong East West' in 1995, also shows the formula of mixing East-West elements. The next example is by a mainland designer, Wang Xu (CN). In this poster, with the theme of communication, he uses a Coca-Cola bottle in porcelain version with a Chinese dragon in blue and green tones to illustrate the American culture in China. All the examples discussed in this section can achieve the main basic design principle to convey a concept and give a denotated message to the audience to interpret. Although the formula of mixing East-West images seems direct, the solutions in response to design problems can be unlimited because of the rich range of cultural differences.

Rethinking Chinese calligraphy and Shuimo painting

The Chinese brush works as expressed in calligraphy and Shuimo (Chinese watercolor) painting create a very strong identity for Chinese graphic design. The pioneer designer in interpreting and exploring these elements in graphic design works is Kan Tai-keung (HK). In one of his poster designs for 'One Art Group Show' in 1979, the subject matter of Chinese art suggested the convenient visual solution of employing Chinese calligraphy in the main visual of the work. As a practitioner of modern Chinese Shuimo painting, Kan Tai-keung continued to develop his style along this direction and later on this style became his renowned personal signature, well known to the international design scene.
The maturity of Ken's style by using Chinese painting elements can be seen in the late 1980s in such works as the poster design for 'Exhibition of 13 Hong Kong Famous Artists at Nagoya' in 1989, and the cover design for Idea magazine in 1993. His Chinese brush stroke expression, with the display of Chinese high art objects on a white background style, is influential within the region. However, sometimes his works also suffer from likeness and imitation by other designers. For example, the poster design by Alan Chan (CN) for his 'One out of Ten for Alan Chan Design' exhibition in 1996 shows a likeness to Ken's work. The work of a Taiwan designer, Lee Ken-tsai (TW), for the cover of 'Taiwan Graphic Design Association Publication' in 1997 also reflects the influence of Ken's style.

This visualisation style of using Chinese art heritage is also employed by some Mainland China designers. However, with the rapid development in the mainland, design works using this visual style are becoming diversified (Wong, 2000a). Two poster designs by Shen Haopeng (CN), reflect an alternative way to interpret Chinese brush strokes and painting into design works. These works illustrate that using unique Chinese elements is still full of potential and ready to be explored in teaching.

Inspiration of folk arts and popular arts from the past

With their countless supply, Chinese folk arts and popular arts from the past are commonly used visual expressions within the region. In 1978, Kan incorporated traditional Chinese folk arts and popular arts items into his cover design work for the HKDA Show 1978 catalogue. This cover consists of four icons representing each of the four letters H-K-D-A. The 'H' is represented by a hand covered with palm reading symbols and instructions; 'K' is represented by a traditional goldfish kite; 'D' is represented by an ancient drum; and 'A' is represented by an abacus. This approach gave exposure and a new context of interpretation to traditional Chinese elements (Wong 2000c).

Examples along this direction include work by Freeman Lau (HK) in 1985 for the 10th Festival of Asian Arts. He adapts the concept of tangram, the ancient Chinese game, to represent the diverse nature of the festival preformed by representatives of different Asian countries. Subject matters such as ancient Chinese printing drawing, religious wood prints, puppet art, opera art, Chinese erotic art drawing, paper cut, and folk toys are all used by various designers in the region. Although traditional Chinese folk arts and popular arts have very rich contents and resources to provide inspiration for designers and students, they need to pay attention to how to adapt the selected elements in an appropriate way rather than just employing a direct borrowing of an object from the past. Combining a contemporary form and life to the work with the touch of Chinese cultural identity will be the most challenging task in the designing process.

Appropriation of contemporary everyday life objects

Creative theory often teaches learners to be observant about every small detail around them because ideas and concepts are everywhere in your daily life. Design and culture have an inseparable relationship in Greater China. All locales within the region share a culture, but due to the differences between ideology, political system, and life style, intra-region cultural differences are present. Although such differences exist, the aspect of everyday life is still applicable to the construction of a unified design theory for the region.

The works from different locales using contemporary everyday life objects reflect the life of each place. Examples such as poster design works by Kan Tai-keung (HK) for 'Hong Kong Martial Arts Film' in 1980, 'Constipation: poster for the 4As Creative Awards Book' in 1995 by Sandy Choi, and the cover design by Stanley Wong for 'Hong Kong Poster League' in 2000 reflect the unique intra-regional cultural identity of Hong Kong.

This direction of the appropriation of contemporary city life into the design work is still not often picked up by Mainland China designers. The teaching of this designing theory may be more difficult to convey because of its ever-changing nature. But its creative logic may be a key direction for future development.

Conclusion

The directions of graphic design theories examined above only cover part of the obvious cultural elements in design in response to the unique environment of the Greater China region. The studies here are necessarily brief and generalised due to the limited space allowed here. Directions such as the use of traditional Chinese symbols, political symbols and nostalgic styles are not yet covered. It also lacks a discussion of how Chinese graphic designers respond to the trend of globalisation and international design trends in their works, and the issues of using humor and handling taboo subject matter such as sex and political opposition. Here, I am not trying to construct the visual stylistic identity of Chinese graphic design, but simply to attempt to generate some feasible design theories in teaching graphic design within the context of culture in the region. I have also suggested some potential artifacts as teaching materials that can be used and expanded in design education at the university level. It is hoped that the design directions suggested here can be further explored and examined in the future.

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Biographical note

Wendy Siuyi Wong PhD MA is Assistant Professor of Digital Graphic Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University. She has published articles in journals, including *Journal of Design History* (2000), *Mass Communication and Society* (2000), *Journal of Visual Literacy* (2000), and *International Journal of Comic Arts* (2000). She is author of two visual communication histories for Chinese readers: *Advertising, Culture, and Everyday Life I: Hong Kong Newspaper Advertisements, 1945-1970* (1999) and (co-authored) *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong Comics* (1999). Principle areas of research interest are on design and culture, visual studies and history of graphic design, typography, web page design, comics, and rhetorical critiques on advertising imagery. Research topics include: Chinese graphic design history and studies in Greater China, visual analysis of Chinese Web pages, Hong Kong history of comics, Hong Kong advertising images, and social change and ideological development in Public Service Announcements in Hong Kong.

Wendy Siuyi Wong PhD
Assistant Professor of Digital Graphic Communication
224 Waterloo Road, Kowloon Tong
Hong Kong
Email: wsywong@yahoo.com