

**How did the import of Western graphic design concepts
change design in mainland China after 1979?**

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Introduction

Graphic design in mainland China has a different history of progression from the linear development of graphic design in the West. There are several notable dividing lines in this process, the first being the Communist Party's acquisition of power on the mainland in 1949, followed by the Open Door Policy in 1979, and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Before 1949, the beginnings of commercial design were already present in Shanghai at the turn of the century, represented by the calendar poster, which was very popular at the time as an elaborate imitation of Western forms of advertising. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1949, with its planned economy and social and cultural isolation from the rest of the world, commercial design was virtually invisible in mainland China until the implementation of the Open Door Policy in 1979. In its place are propaganda posters, which are political tools centrally planned by government departments and appear to the public eye in the form of eye-catching graphics and influential messaging. The year 1979 was a very important turning point, when the Open Door Policy was officially introduced. With the development of openness on an economic and cultural level, the graphic design industry in mainland China was again exposed to and quickly re-embraced Western design concepts through active exchanges with Hong Kong graphic design. In the 20th century, the evolution of graphic design in mainland China can be simplified into three stages, a process of learning and imitating Western design, rejecting it, and eventually actively embracing it. Afterwards, in the two decades after China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, the economic and social integration brought about by globalisation saw Chinese designers begin to face foreign audiences in addition to a single domestic market. In the meantime, the growth of local Chinese brands and the strengthening of national

aesthetic confidence brought about an increasing number of design works with Chinese characteristics. For example, “Guo Chao”, a design style that has become very popular on the mainland in recent years, literally means ‘national tide’. This term “refers to domestic brands and consumer trends that embody Chinese culture, incorporate trendy elements and meet the needs of the times” (宗祖盼, & 刘欣雨, 2022, p. 56). This dissertation will analyse the import of Western design concepts after 1979 in mainland China and consider how Chinese designers developed a bicultural audience through print design.

Divided into three chapters, this dissertation traces the trajectory of graphic design changes due in large part to the influence of Western design concepts in China. The analysis will include the historical, political and social changes affecting the industry, as well as how audiences have shifted with the ideological demands on graphic design to align with the diverse social and political contexts in communist China. Finally, it will explore how Chinese graphic designers have reached out to a bicultural audience in the context of globalisation.

There are also subtle differences in the understanding of graphic design in the Chinese and Western contexts. In the West, the art of graphic design has been evolving since the American designer William Addison Dwiggins coined the term 'graphic design' in 1922 (McDonagh et al., 2019, p. 65). From its beginnings as printed communication, Jessica Helfand (2001, as cited in McDonagh et al., 2019, p. 65) has expanded the definition of graphic design to include the art of visualising ideas. In China, by contrast, although calendar posters from the Shanghai period marked the beginnings of graphic

design, they were more often understood to be works executed by artists and illustrators than designers. Wong (2011, p. 379) explains that in the Chinese phrase, "Gong Yi", "Gong refers to skills and technique, and "Yi" to art, aesthetics and philosophy. A precursor to the term design, the term "Gong Yi" has been used for a longer period of time on the mainland, but the lexical meaning is more oriented towards craftsmanship and technology. "She ji" is thought to have been used under Japanese influence in recent decades (Wong, 2005, p. 3), and was adapted from the Japanese word Sekkei as a translation of the English word "design". "Like the word "design" in English, "She ji" can be used as a verb or noun. "She" means "strikes, establish, set up," and "ji" means calculate, plan, scheme." (Wong, 2005, p. 3). In the traditional definition, "She ji" is a verb, which means to set up a scheme. It is therefore evident that although the concept of design in mainland China was influenced by Western culture and began to take shape, there is a difference in conception from its origins to the West. In the evolution of the term from craft to design, it is easy to understand that in the traditional Chinese context, design is more concerned with execution, as a way of making. In contrast, graphic design in Western culture is primarily concerned with visual communication, focusing on the way of thinking.

While graphic design holds different values in Eastern and Western cultures, the influence of globalization on all aspects of culture and art, has meant that visual communication lies at the core of graphic design, which is now fully accepted by Chinese graphic designers. This shift started late but was completed very quickly. Only with the implementation of the Open Door Policy in 1979 did modernist design gain significant traction and become a recognized and unrestricted field of interest and study in China (Hsiao & White, 2015, p. 177), and this was almost simultaneous with the

social transformation of the same period. When it comes to the development of graphic design in mainland China, social, economic and political changes are factors that have to be noted, and these three aspects can be considered to vary with the proximity to Western culture. As an example, there is a very distinct contrast between a pair of poster designs in mainland China before 1979, the monthly calendar poster and the propaganda poster. Owing to its status as a foreign settlement and developed commercial economy (Laing, 2004, p. 3), Shanghai already had sophisticated commercial designs as early as the 1920s, the most notable of which were the calendar posters. The most popular themes are beautiful women, women in traditional Chinese dress, with traditional architecture in the background, and 'fashionable women in contemporary domestic interiors, stylish beauties in gardens' (Laing, 2004, p. 3), with the advertised product usually at the bottom or edge of the poster, sometimes with a purchase message to promote the product. Laing (2004, p. 4) comments that the Chinese advertisement calendar poster¹ was a modification of Western advertising methods tailored to suit the preferences of the Chinese audience. However, the procession of this Chinese calendar poster, which emerged almost simultaneously with Western advertising posters, was disrupted by the war. After the Communist Party of China began its rule in the mainland, "art must be subservient to politics" (Laing, 2004, p. 223), while the market economy was replaced by a planned economy and Western culture was seen as a hostile force. The propaganda posters produced during this period became a distinctive product that was completely different from commercial design and traditional art. The posters of the Cultural Revolution reached a peak of political significance in terms of both style and content. With its bold, bright colours and

¹ advertising calendar poster, Yuefenpai in Chinese. See definition: <https://www.brown.edu/academics/east-asia-resources/chinese-calendar-advertisement-1920s>

simplified, stylised characters, “The style of the Cultural Revolution posters is a fusion of Western and Soviet realism.” (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 789). In general, both phases occurred before the Open Door policy of mainland China in 1979, and both were separate from the traditional Chinese art style, with calendar posters following American calendar posters (Laing, 2004, p. 4), while propaganda posters during the Cultural Revolution were a study of the Soviet-style. It can be seen that political and economic changes brought about social changes, and the difference in the acceptance of Western culture caused a strong contrast between the two posters in terms of style and content.

The influence of Hong Kong on mainland China after 1979 is further evidence that visual communication is closely linked to cultural and economic exchange. As Wong (2001, p. 60) comments, Hong Kong's graphic design has played a significant role in the history of Chinese graphic design. Inheriting the commercial spirit of Shanghai, Hong Kong continued to maintain a close exchange with Western culture under the capitalist economic system and British colonial rule and was greatly influenced by American firms and designers. The direct contact between Western design principles and Chinese culture in Hong Kong (Wong, 2001, pp. 52-53) resulted in a style that combined traditional Chinese elements with Western graphic design, represented by Kan Tai-keung (Wong, 2001, p. 55). But these would not affect the closed mainland China until 1979. Following the implementation of the open-door policy, Hong Kong became the leading foreign investor in the mainland in the 1980s, “accounting for three quarters of foreign direct investment” (Park, 1993, p. 54). On the other hand, the influence of Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture on the mainland was enormous. Gold (1993, p. 907) indicates that popular culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan was

gaining a significant portion of the market and loyalty from mainland consumers. These have laid a solid economic and cultural foundation for Hong Kong graphic design to be admired and studied in the mainland, and this period is an important transition for China to begin to re-embrace Western design concepts and step into the pursuit of international design standards.

The accession of China to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 marked a significant milestone for the graphic design industry in mainland China, signalling a new phase within the context of globalization. China's entry into the WTO was regarded as a fresh wave of economic and societal openness to the world (Xinping, 2001, p. 23), fostering the free movement of capital and goods on a global scale while facilitating closer cultural exchanges between China and the West. Hung et al. (2012, p. 121) comment that China's accession to the WTO has triggered widespread and fundamental changes in China's advertising industry, spanning a once “heavily regulated institutional environment, advertising practices and agency strategies”. However, as globalisation becomes unstoppable, Chinese graphic designers are also faced with a delicate balance between traditionalism and modernisation, which has led to the evolution of a distinctively Chinese design style for two reasons. Firstly, even when dealing with globally standardized products or advertisements, consumers modify and reinterpret their meaning through their own historical, socio-cultural, and symbolic perspectives. This process allows them to adapt the global appeal to their local culture and way of life (Hannerz 1996; Miller 1996, as cited in Hung et al. 2012. p. 122). Furthermore, young people, also called Generation Z, who grew up in the Internet era, have contributed to a clear bicultural orientation. This allows them to respond well to advertisements with a global cultural identity, but still have a strong preference for

traditional values and ideologies (Hung et al., 2012, p. 131). In general, Chinese graphic designers are no longer facing a monocultural audience, but a more complex bicultural one. Internationalism and traditionalism are no longer two opposing sides but are themes that designers have had to balance in recent years.

In the evolution of graphic design history, in addition to macro social and cultural backgrounds, variations in the target audience also have had a significant impact on graphic design itself, like visual language, style and content chosen for design as a result of the changing audience. As an example, comparing the 1920s Shanghai calendar posters with the 1960s propaganda posters during the Cultural Revolution, it shows evidently that the target audiences were very different. More specifically, some clues point to the possible bicultural background of the consumers of the calendar posters, "Some calendars were bilingual, with names of companies written in Chinese, or Japanese, or Russian, or English, or French."(Laing, 2004, p. 3). In the context of the Cultural Revolution, propaganda posters served as powerful political tools with the objective of suppressing individual identity and compelling people to embrace a higher ideological cause (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 783). As a result, the design of these posters eschewed any pursuit of personal expression by the designers or elements of promotional advertising, becoming evident through the formulaic characters and imagery employed in the posters. After the implementation of the Open Door policy, the focus of graphic design in mainland China shifted from political to economic demands, with commercial design appealing to modern consumers. With the further development of the economy and the accelerated internationalisation and globalisation of mainland China, the graphic design audience of the last twenty years has become a younger, more educated and westernised group, and has also included a foreign

audience brought in by the growth of commodity exports. These changes in the audience have brought different requirements and visual communication methods to graphic design.

Chapter 1

First contact and another isolation:

Communication with West

In the early stages of graphic design development in mainland China, two distinct phases can be identified to illustrate the contrasting influence of communication with the West on visual language. The first phase showcases the emergence of Chinese graphic design in Shanghai, which was then the most westernized city in the early 20th century, epitomized by the proliferation of calendar posters. In stark contrast, the second phase witnessed the production of propaganda posters as a unidirectional political tool under strict government control of creative activities until 1979. The calendar posters exhibit a decorative and commercial character, setting them apart from the political and educational nature of propaganda posters. The reasons behind this stark difference are multifaceted, but a significant factor is the restriction on external communication due to policy changes. The calendar posters can be regarded as visual expressions of a positive dialogue between modern Chinese and Western design, while propaganda posters neglect the fundamental principle of design as visual communication, instead serving as a medium for one-way information dissemination. Although these two phases share a close timeline and cultural roots, their contrasting attitudes toward Western cultural exchange result in completely different visual outcomes.

The calendar poster was a visual manifestation of modern China's active dialogue with Western design

The calendar posters produced in early 20th century Shanghai can be regarded as the genesis of contemporary commercial design history in China. Shanghai, one of the most developed and cosmopolitan cities in China at that time, became a centre for the introduction and adoption of western style in various social aspects. Laing (2004) states in his book *Selling Happiness*, “By the 1880s, Shanghai was China’s foremost center of financial, trade, and industry”. In this scenario, the emergence of an embryonic of graphic design in the city was to be anticipated. Laing also mentions three more specific conditions for this, first is the westernization of Shanghai. Since the Nanjing Treaty in 1842, Shanghai has been one of the five trading cities, with British, American and French nationals establishing residences around the city. After the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, foreigners were allowed to build factories in China's treaty ports. Due to its convenient coastal location, Shanghai quickly became a Western settlement, with the architectural complex and lifestyle changing the city as the Western population grew. The second reason is the prosperity of the printing industry. Many printing industries that were scattered in southern China had moved to Shanghai. The introduction of lithography was also a huge technological advancement for the printing industry at the time, leading to cheaper mass-produced print products such as magazines, novels, and posters. The third reason is the large population of artists. After the Taiping Rebellion, a large number of artists flocked to the commercial centre of the city and found success through a different approach to commercial creation than traditional painting and calligraphy (Laing, 2004, p. 2). As the centre of internationalisation and commercialisation in early 20th century China, Shanghai became a Westernised and modernised city, and it seemed inevitable that the germ of Chinese graphic design would emerge here.

The advertising calendar poster is the most important form of visual advertising in China among many others in Shanghai at the beginning of the last century (Laing, 2004, p. 3). It has a Chinese name, Yuefenpai. The calendar poster was a popularly accepted advertising medium through an adaptation from Western advertising and modified with Chinese taste (Laing, 2004, p. 4). The colour lithography gave it a cheaper and more accessible character, as well as a more relaxed and modern theme than traditional paintings. It is understandable in this situation that they were quickly accepted by Chinese wealthy consumers in the beginning and became popular at all levels of society even outside mainland China including Hongkong, used more for decorating rooms than for their function as calendars. "Picture calendars find almost universal favor and are often sold, even after the calendars have outlived their period of usefulness." (Don Patterson, cited in Laing, 2004, p. 4). Their decorativeness was exploited by businesses as promotional gifts or sold on the roadside. The emergence of the calendar poster resulted from a convergence of commercial sophistication and technological progress. However, its capacity to challenge the longstanding dominance of traditional Chinese aesthetics, deeply ingrained over millennia, cannot be discussed without acknowledging the pivotal role of the May Fourth Movement, initiated on 4 May 1919, known as the New Culture Movement. Amidst a politically and socio-culturally conservative environment, students and intellectuals fervently advocated for modernization and westernization during this period. This included an initiative for a new realism in literature and the visual arts ("Painting Academies and Western Influence," 2001, p. 20). This movement brought more foreign exchange and a broader perspective to the whole of China at the time.

Figure 1: Xie Zhiguang (1900–1976), *Two Girls Holding Spools of Thread*, advertisement poster for Central Agency, 1930s, 75 × 50 cm. Collection of Agnès Tabah, Washington, D.C. As cited in Laing, 2004, p. 195.



FIGURE 8.16. Xie Zhiguang (1900–1976), *Two Girls Holding Spools of Thread*, advertisement poster for Central Agency, 1930s, 71 × 50 cm. Collection of Agnès Tabah, Washington, D.C.

Note. This poster can be seen as a typical example of the results of the combination of Western and Chinese in the calendar posters of the time in Shanghai. Although the women in the centre of the image are dressed in Chinese folk costumes, the buildings behind them have Chinese windows and western floors and fences. The English and Chinese names of the company in the upper part of the image have elaborate line designs that echo the contemporary geometric background around them.

Propaganda posters mark a rejection of the dialogue with the West.

The post-1949 propaganda posters, which were strictly required by the Communist Party of China to educate the public and convey messages of political ideas, were a

medium for designers or artists to export political messages to society (partly influenced by a Soviet style), as the communist party required. At that time, the primary purpose of all artworks, including posters, changed from decorative to a more sophisticated political and educational one. This request, which is not common for the arts, was advocated by Mao Zedong at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art. He made it very clear that art must clearly convey the ideas and goals of communism and spread a political and social message (Laing, 2004, p. 223). Artists and designers were governed by the All-China Art Workers Association, and the subject matter was strictly limited. Although Shanghai was still the site of most poster production at this stage, the audience changed from the educated classes to a much wider society at large. During this particular period, all education in the social sciences, including design and aesthetics, ceased in 1952 until Chinese universities re-introduced these courses after 1979 (Kang, 1980, as cited in Tse et al, 1989).

However, the propaganda posters differed from traditional Chinese art in terms of their format and the medium used, as traditional Chinese art usually employed brush and ink with woodcut illustrations. The Westernized appearance of the posters can be attributed to two factors. First, most modern illustrators and designers in China prior to the communist takeover were trained in Western styles as commercial artists. Furthermore, after 1949, many Chinese art academy students were taught by Soviet artists who practised socialist realism, which was widely adopted throughout the communist world (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 789). Second, although propaganda posters abandoned traditional Chinese aesthetics, this was mainly motivated by political imperatives, not by aesthetic or economic needs. The leader of the time, Mao Zedong, advocated for young people to destroy the Four Olds, which are old customs, old habits, old culture

and old thinking (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 781). In this environment, although the audience for the propaganda posters was limited to the mainland Chinese population, traditional Chinese art was abandoned in favour of the more westernised Soviet style.

Even more catastrophically, during the decade of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, all groups of artists or literary creators were greatly impacted and harmed, “According to Mao, artists and intellectuals could not be revolutionaries because of their devotion to individual rather than collective expression. Their art and ideas should be criticized and often destroyed by workers and revolutionaries” (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 786). During the Cultural Revolution, leading scholars and artists, who had previously played crucial roles in the New Culture Movement, were unjustly labeled as "class enemies" (Wang, 2021, p. 127), alongside former landlords, counterrevolutionaries, and Rightists. They endured degrading treatment, subjected to house arrest, publicly humiliated with dunce caps, and forced to endure gruelling accusation sessions (Laing, 2004, p. 232). This period not only witnessed the destruction of artworks and suppression of artists, but it also resulted in a stifling of aesthetic creativity, severely impacting the nation's innate response to beauty. The repercussions of the Cultural Revolution on the history of Chinese art and design were immeasurable and far-reaching, leaving a profound and lasting stigma.

The alternation of the above two stages of development gave Chinese graphic design a different pace of progress from that of the West. It must be mentioned, however, that in its early years, it was influenced by a greater degree of Western culture. In the beginning, the calendar posters were aimed at educated, relatively well-off city dwellers

who lived in Shanghai, the most westernised city in China at the time. Therefore, it can be said that the audience for Shanghai's calendar posters was already bicultural on some level. The posters of that period, as illustrated in Figure 2 below, include sophisticated and feminine images of women, and the backgrounds are often leisurely and for aesthetic purposes only, accompanied by pictures of products, as well as stylish slogans and calligraphy company names. In contrast, under the Communist Party of China, the propaganda posters were more instrumentalised, primarily to promote communist ideology and to shape public attitudes and behaviour. As can be seen in Figure 3, the main textual message has been changed from the company name to a political ideological slogan, and the font has been changed from dashing handwriting to sans-serif black, not to mention the fact that the figures are depicted in poses that are not intended for beauty but for the political campaign. In Figure 4, the letters in the lower left corner are Chinese phoneticized, and the simple phrase demands the morality of the masses in their daily lives. The contrasting styles of the calendar posters and propaganda posters exemplify the Western cultural assimilation and economy system's multifaceted influences on Chinese graphic design. The full acceptance of the Western cultural and economic system in Shanghai makes the calendar posters both commercial and at the same time elegant and harmonious in the Chinese context. Propaganda posters, on the other hand, because of their political nature, serving a political agenda, have become symbols of a nation's historical struggle with design and aesthetic interpretation.

Figure 2: Xie Zhiguang (1900–1976), *Nude Smoking in Bed*, advertisement for My Dear cigarettes. After *Manhua shenghuo 1* (1934), back cover. As cited in Laing, 2004, p. 159.



Figure 3: Thoroughly Revolutionize the Battlefronts of Ideas and Culture (*Shanghai Revolutionary Publishing Group, 1970*). As cited in Powell and Wong, 1997, p. 786.

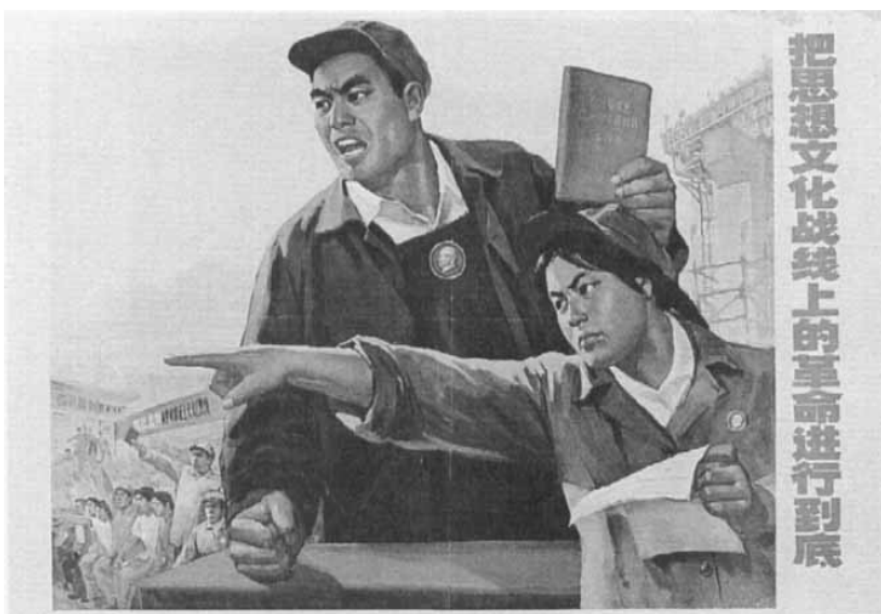


Figure 4: 'Culture, courtesy, greening, beautification' 1982. As cited in Landsberger, 1995, p. 107.



Chapter 2

Heralds in Hongkong:

Communication with Modern design

Openness of the dialogue again

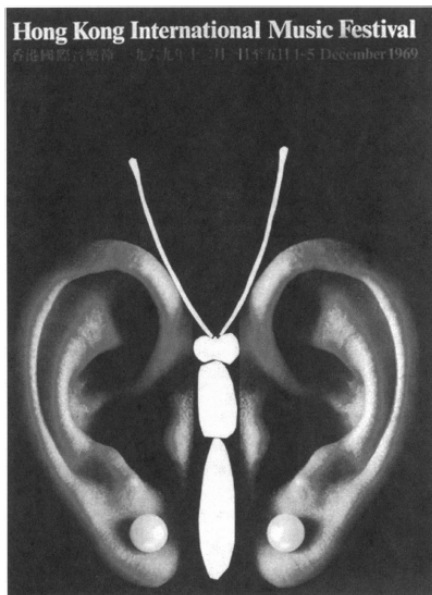
The Open Door Policy in 1979 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping was an extremely important milestone for contemporary China at all levels of industry and society. It is China's new development strategy of intensive growth, which involves adapting and disseminating foreign technology. The term "foreign technology" is not limited to equipment and machinery, but also encompasses knowledge, management abilities, and contemporary social practices and concept (Sung, 2009, p. 1). Moreover, this policy had a profound impact on graphic design in mainland China in direct and indirect ways. first is the introduction of new design styles and techniques from the West through Hong Kong. As the first region in Greater China to be exposed to the most developed Western design and international business activities, Hong Kong played a leading role in the re-introduction of modern design concepts to mainland China (Wong, 2001, p. 57). The second is that this policy was a direct result of the re-establishment of social science departments in Chinese universities, and it was from this time that design education began to expand and keep pace with the modern world of art and design education (Kang, 1980, as cited in Tse et al., 1989). Finally, the rapid economic growth also brought about a tremendous increase in demand for design services. Take Shenzhen, one of the Special Economic Zones as an example, businesses and organisations began to invest in marketing and advertising, consequently, designers

gained more experience and built their skills, and the development of the Chinese design industry was greatly stimulated.

Hong Kong played a major role in fostering and building connections with graphic design practices in mainland China with Western design ideology. Tracing the history of graphic design in Hong Kong shows that it is impossible to separate commercial graphic design from the strength of economic development. Turner (1989, p. 80) argues that the history of design appears to be written by those who hold economic power, as the winners are said to write history. Turner uses the example of Japan to emphasise the importance of economic development in the study of the history of graphic design. "Japan, for example, was not equipped with a history of design (or with a workable system of management) until her emergence as an economic superpower made such a history inevitable." (Turner, 1989, p. 80). Hong Kong, on the other hand, continued the commercial spirit of Shanghai from the industrial aspect, and most of the local designers in the early 20th century had a solid art education in Shanghai or Guangzhou. But under the impact of American companies and designers, and the subsequent weakness of the new generation's art education, local designers had to turn to more Western design concepts and methods, using a more universal visual language. Being a British colony and an important trading partner of mainland China, Hong Kong's status as a trading port gave it a more integrated cultural background (Turner, 1989, p. 89). In the 1980s, Hong Kong designers developed two distinct schools of design, one with a purely Western expression and the other with a distinctive style that incorporated Chinese elements within a modern graphic design concept (Wong, 2001, p. 60).

Wong (2001) suggests that there are two individuals who have played a very significant influence in the integration of Chinese aesthetics and Western design concepts in Hong Kong design. Henry Steiner, who arrived in Hong Kong in 1961 after graduating from Yale, showcased the potential for merging Chinese cultural symbols and texts with Western designs by implementing two crucial design principles he had learned: prioritizing the concept and utilizing contrast to bring dynamism to the design. He introduced the foundations of cross-cultural design in Hong Kong, effectively adapting Western design concepts to the local Chinese context (p. 53). In the 1970s, local design education in Hong Kong began with the introduction of fundamental Bauhaus design principles. A significant figure in Hong Kong's design education was Wucius Wong, an educator in the area from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. He brought a Western influence to design theory education in the region, and his books were widely read among young Hong Kong designers. As a result, a new generation of emerging designers from Hong Kong was highly influenced by Western design sensibilities and values (p. 55). Thanks to the inspiration of these two, Hong Kong designers have a Western design philosophy and also have an eye for localised and distinctive elements.

Figure 5: Hong Kong International Music Festival, Cultural Poster, 1969, Henry Steiner. As cited in Wong, 2001, p. 54.



With the introduction of the Open Door Policy, Hong Kong became a gateway for designers from mainland China to embrace Western design, after having developed a sophisticated design style of its own that was noticed throughout the Greater China region. This visual communication between East and West was mainly through the influence of designers, exhibitions and events exchanges and publications. First, during the early 1990s, prominent graphic designers from Taiwan and mainland China largely followed the design style of Kan Tai-keung and Alan Chan, who were considered masters of Chinese graphic design within Greater China design circles. Kan, especially, actively promoted his work in both Taiwan and China and was frequently invited to participate in exhibitions, judge competitions, give lectures, and donate his works to institutions (Wong, 2001, p. 60). Secondly, design organizations in Hong Kong have always been influential in promoting and supporting the growth of the design industry, and have organized local design award competitions and kept connections with

international design groups. In mainland China, the establishment of graphic design associations began with the Shenzhen Graphic Design Association in 1996, which was the first of its kind. Being near Hong Kong, Shenzhen's design work has been some of the most advanced in mainland China since 1979 (Wong, 2001, p. 63). The third aspect: Before the 1990s, mainland designers had to rely on magazines and other publications imported from Hong Kong to stay updated with the latest trends in graphic design. However, as the political climate in mainland China became more relaxed, there was an increase in the publishing of international graphic design books and local graphic design magazines, and the printing industry has grown rapidly, especially in Shenzhen and the southern coastal region, thanks in part to Hong Kong's investment and expertise (Wong, 2001, p. 68).

Figure 6: Poster design by Hong Kong designer Kan Tai-keung



Figure 7: Poster design by Hong Kong designer Alan Chen



There are three reasons why Hong Kong's graphic design has had a huge impact on mainland China. Firstly, Hong Kong was one of the first places in China to be exposed to Western design practices and technologies, thanks to its status as a British colony. As a result, Hong Kong's graphic designers had a head start in terms of experience and expertise in using Western design tools and techniques. This gave them a distinct advantage over mainland designers when it came to creating high-quality, professional-looking designs. Secondly, Hong Kong's graphic designers had access to a larger and more diverse market than those on the mainland. As a major international trade and finance centre Hong Kong had a more developed economy and a larger consumer market, which enabled its designers to gain more experience in creating designs for a variety of different products and services. This exposure helped them to develop a more versatile and adaptable design style. Thirdly, Hong Kong's graphic designers had greater freedom of expression than those on the mainland. During the early years of

China's Open Door Policy, censorship was still relatively strict on the mainland and designers were not able to express themselves freely. In contrast, Hong Kong, as a semi-autonomous region, had greater freedom of expression and a more open society, which allowed designers to experiment and push the boundaries of their work. This led to the development of a more innovative and dynamic design style in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong as a purveyor of Western design concepts, and its neighbour Shenzhen, a city founded to learn from Hong Kong, has become a pioneer in graphic design in mainland China. Shenzhen's development in this field can also be seen as a microcosm of mainland China, studying Hong Kong, but not identical to it. One of the factors is that Shenzhen's designers' have a different art education and audience from that of Hong Kong. Hong Kong's graphic design audience had a more explicitly Western-educated cultural background, while the audience and clientele of early Shenzhen designers had a more complex and diverse educational and demographic profile. Hong Kong developed two distinct styles, purely Western and neo-Chinese. For example, the famous Hong Kong designer Kan Tai-keung, whose iconic style incorporates Chinese elements like ink strokes into his design works, has been an active presence from the early exchanges to now with mainland institutions and events. In contrast, the preference of Mainland designers for neo-Chinese styles is conspicuous from the early exchanges. Mainland Chinese designers tend to include Chinese elements in exhibitions of theme posters where there is no explicit requirement for the poster to have a Chinese theme (Wong, 2001, p. 65), which is further evidence of the almost subconscious role that traditional Chinese artistic aesthetics have played in the re-engagement of Chinese designers with modern design standards.

Chapter 3

Recovery the Roots:

Communication with Tradition

After mainland China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, like many other industries, graphic design, especially commercial graphic design, has become more industrialised and economic over the past 20 years as the economy has grown rapidly. Companies and factories in a free economy have created a huge demand for commercial design, such as common commercial design, branding, packaging and print advertising, etc. As Wong (2001, p. 71) predicted, the large number of active designers has also brought about a more solid development of the industry as a whole. However, one of the most controversial issues in the development of graphic design in mainland China is imitation. This problem can be seen not only in graphic design, but also in product design and architectural design, and has given mainland Chinese creative practices an extremely unfavourable reputation. But with China's accession to the WTO and the increasingly evident weight given to intellectual property protection laws, an original design is increasingly sought after by designers and the general public alike. A second phenomenon of general concern is the spontaneous behaviour of Chinese designers towards the Chineseization of modern graphic design. Wong (2001) notes, "The thematic poster exhibitions organised by associations within Greater China often centred on themes related to Chinese identity, and when the stated theme was not clearly related to Chineseness, participants often would include Chinese elements or interpretations in their works"(p. 65). The popularity of Chinese design style in recent years is evidence that this localised design has received a positive response from the public and the market. There are two possible reasons for this phenomenon, one is that

Chinese elements are easily understood and accepted by audiences with relevant cultural backgrounds. Secondly, designers have an intrinsic preference and desire to create, a self-identification with cultural identity and a drive for national pride. With global localisation no longer a new topic today, and with the influence of both creative practices leaning towards traditional art for inspiration and a strong sense of cultural identity in mainland China, it is understandable that Chinese style design has become a new trend.

In an era where the appreciation for original design has grown, there is inherent value in reflecting on the historical and cultural factors that contributed to the prevalence of imitation in the past. Ishino (2008) points out that Chinese artists have had apprenticeships since ancient times. As mentioned before, 'Gong Yi' in Chinese society was more about technique (Wong, 2011, p. 377), while beauty came naturally with adept skills. In ancient times, in order to learn a craft, apprenticeship was necessary. Even in an environment with less public education, literacy required a master to lead the learning process. In this context, a master was not the role of a teacher in modern schooling, but a more respectful half-teacher and half-father. Not only that, but the predecessors of the designers in ancient China, the craftsmen, also placed great importance on experience, and in this context, the importance of inheritance greatly outweighed that of innovation. In China, from ancient times to the present day, imitation of the masters has been a necessary step for the apprentice; for example, the traditional ink painting of branches is very clearly and explicitly defined, and modern connoisseurs can determine the different ages of the painting by the different methods of painting. Ishino (2008) states, "... Imitating a great master's style and work is a long-standing learning tradition.". In ancient China, the act of plagiarism did not seem to

exist. In modern times, however, Chinese designers have gradually become more aware of copyright after the transformation of the Chinese market, a process that inevitably takes time. In the early days, Chinese designers were asked by clients and even employers to imitate. This situation, after rapid economic development, has changed significantly for the better. There are several factors contributing to the shift towards valuing originality. Firstly, improved government policies concerning copyright and advertising regulation have played a significant role. These policies provide better protection for intellectual property rights, encouraging creators to invest in original design without the fear of exploitation or infringement. Secondly, the influence of Western cultural attitudes has permeated society, instilling a greater appreciation for the unique and innovative. As societies become economically prosperous, individuals have more resources and opportunities for self-expression and cultural production. This abundance of resources fosters a diverse and dynamic aesthetic landscape, enabling people to explore various styles and materials. Furthermore, as basic needs are met, individuals have the luxury of dedicating time and energy to matters of aesthetics and self-expression, contributing to the growing importance placed on originality.

Global localization is evident in China through the rise of neo-Chinese design and the recent trend known as "Guo Chao" or national tide. This integration of Chinese elements into Western design concepts is not new, as seen in various periods of China's graphic development. Such as the 1920s calendar posters in Shanghai, the propaganda posters of the 1960s when cultural control was tight, and even the exhibition posters of the 1990s when Western design was re-opened and fully studied. Moreover, localisation is not limited to China, according to Hung et al. (2012, p. 122), consumers adapt global products and advertising using their own perspectives to fit local cultural

patterns. Global localisation recognises the importance of meeting local market needs and is a balanced model that blends traditionalism and modernity. In a country with a long history of tradition and culture such as China, and driven by a sense of national cultural identity shared by designers and audiences, design with Chinese characteristics is almost a necessity.

Additionally, the "Guo Chao" is now very popular among young people in China. Generation Z in particular, born after 2000, grew up in a period of unprecedented speedy development in China. The internet has also given them a broader perspective and a vast amount of information, and the boundaries between Eastern and Western cultures are no longer clear to this generation. Guo Chao has gained traction among young people for several reasons. It embodies cultural pride and national identity by reinterpreting traditional Chinese elements in a modern design aesthetic. This resonates with youth seeking to connect with their heritage and express their identity in a contemporary context. Guo Chao aligns with China's growing cultural confidence, showcasing the nation's rich heritage and reflecting its expanding global influence. By fusing tradition with innovation, Guo Chao offers a unique visual language that allows young people to express individuality while embracing their cultural roots. The influence of social media and digital platforms further amplifies Guo Chao's popularity, with influencers and online communities contributing to its trendiness and aspirational appeal. In summary, Guo Chao's appeal lies in its ability to evoke cultural pride, showcase confidence, provide a platform for self-expression, and merge tradition with modernity in visually captivating ways.

As the economy develops and more products made in China are exported, Chinese design is becoming more visible to international consumers. However, there are two types of design abroad, one being the more international design style of Xiaomi for example, which has almost no obvious elements of Chinese design and is based on universal visual language. This has indeed been met with a more positive response in Europe and the US. On the other hand, popular among mainland Chinese consumers for its pure and extremely distinctive Chinese style, Huaxizi has suffered a setback in recent years in the trend for Chinese brands to go abroad. Even in Japan, a country that partially shares the same roots of oriental aesthetics, it has not received the expected response. These two examples show to some extent that Western audiences have very strict and systematic aesthetic views and that it is difficult to reach an audience with a solid Western education and cultural background if one simply flaunts Chinese characteristics. Purely Chinese visual elements are difficult for consumers without a bicultural background to understand and appreciate. Chinese graphic designers, therefore, need to take into account the different cultural backgrounds of the world in the choice of their own complex and sophisticated cultural and visual language. In the context of globalisation, having a Chinese flavour may be a distinctive advantage in the marketplace, but careful consideration of the universal visual language and the proportion of Chinese elements in the image would be a wiser design solution.

Figure 8: The poster of Xiaomi



Figure 9: The poster of Huaxizi



The emphasis on national identity in design has led to a shift towards incorporating elements that reflect Chinese culture and values, resulting in a distinctive visual

aesthetic. Furthermore, increased access to the internet has allowed designers to explore a wider range of design influences, facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and enabling the fusion of global trends with local sensibilities. This has led to a dynamic and diverse design landscape that embraces both Chinese traditions and international influences, shaping a unique design language that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Going back to the evolution of design styles in mainland China, there has always been a clear preference for Chinese elements by designers and audiences, where there is a choice. There may be two factors to this, firstly from art education at school and also from society's identification with its own cultural identity. Wong (2011, pp. 388-390) states that since the 2000s, the growth of design education in China created a high demand for related books. Textbook authors in China tend to concentrate on art and crafts that go back 5,000 years, considering China's long and rich heritage as a civilization. While scholars in Hong Kong and Taiwan rely on Western theories or Japanese research techniques to explore design history, Chinese scholars are inclined to use classic Chinese texts for their philosophical studies. Furthermore, the growth of the internet has given designers and design students more access to resources. In this circumstance, there is also a trend in mainland Chinese design of Chinoiserie, or the national trend, which puts traditional Chinese visual elements into the context of modern society, modernising and rejuvenating them and giving them a more youth-friendly quality and scene. Moreover, it could be argued that young generations in the domestic audiences are no longer educated in a purely Chinese or oriental way, the internet and global information technology have fundamentally changed young people's horizons and they already have a western, or modern, way of thinking, and simply showing the beauty of traditional Chinese culture is no longer appealing to young

people at this time. Even in mainland China, pure traditional art is seen as outdated by a younger generation of designers and audiences. A sheer west design without a sense of cultural identity also seems not attractive enough to them, especially for those youths who were born after 2000 and growing up in a background of globalization. Apart from the factor of society, “Design is one of the very important elements in shaping contemporary national identity, and the Chinese government understands that very well.” (Wong, 2011, p. 390), which is predictable. The revival of traditional Chinese aesthetics through more contemporary design approaches has become a popular trend without obstacles.

Figure 10: New Year gift box

<https://www.zcool.com.cn/work/ZNDA4ODY4Njg=.html>



Figure 11: Brand of tea <https://www.zcool.com.cn/work/ZNDY2MDc2ODA=.html>



Conclusion

The core definition of graphic design is visual communication, but the messages it conveys cannot be divorced from the aesthetic consensus of the societies that produce these designs, nor from the cultural awareness of those societies. And in the framework of globalisation, it is essential to communicate socially, culturally, historically and economically relevant to different groups in order to make the message and scope of visual communication more accurate. The development of graphic design in mainland China has ebbed and flowed with its relationship with the West at all levels. The first of the three stages described above was before the Open Door Policy of 1979. The beginnings of contemporary graphic design emerged at the turn of the century in Shanghai, where the most westernisation and modernisation city in China at that time, and Calendar posters compared to propaganda posters, arose during the closed phase of the Cultural Revolution, which completely rejected all Western consciousness systems and aesthetics. The second stage was the development of a distinctive new Chinese design style in Hong Kong, which was actively introduced to mainland China, which had only undergone social reform, without losing its Chinese character but with a skilled use of Western design concepts, of which Shenzhen was one of the first cities to be influenced. The third phase, the globalisation phase following China's accession to the WTO, coupled with the rise of the internet and the growing background of cultural confidence paved the way for the popularity of distinctive Chinese design that blended traditional and modern aesthetics.

Western graphic design has a rich history of development and has been marked by influential design movements that have shaped the global design landscape. Its

dominance in areas such as branding and advertising has positioned it as a powerful force in shaping visual communication worldwide. While the development of graphic design in mainland China has faced unique challenges and undergone periods of isolation, it is unlikely to have completely diverged from universal visual principles or developed an entirely independent aesthetic system. Despite cultural differences, communication and exchange can bridge the gap between Chinese and Western design, fostering mutual understanding. For graphic design in mainland China to thrive, it must continue to embrace creative freedom and promote equal appreciation of diverse cultures as integral components of visual communication.

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