

Designing Contemporary China: National Design Identity at the Crossroads

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Abstract

China is an ancient civilization rapidly developing in a globalized post-modern context. The country now finds itself at a crossroads, with outside ideologies and forces of “Americanization” and “Westernization” competing against its cultural heritage and communist economic system to form a national design identity for contemporary China. This paper uses the rise of modern design in China, design examples from Hong Kong and Taiwan, the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, and Victoria & Albert Museum’s *China Design Now* exhibit to investigate questions of national identity as they pertain to design. It argues that, with the whole world watching China’s rise as a global economic power, the real challenge facing Chinese designers is how they can create a “new” image of China to present to the rest of the world, particularly the West, if they don’t wish to be stereotyped by images from the ancient past.

To discuss the potential impact of Western design and economic influences on the development of a contemporary national design identity, this paper first investigates the relationship between a designer’s ethnic background and creative work to search for a possible direction of development of a contemporary national design identity for China. It concludes that cultural factors do not play a key role in every design project undertaken by Chinese designers in the Greater China region, but rather that decision depends on the nature of the design job. However, the author recognizes the importance of studying the cultural artifacts of this great civilization, as well as the urgent need to establish design curricula with Chinese elements, in order to discover how to establish a modern international style with a contemporary Chinese touch – that is, its contemporary national design identity.

Keywords

China; National Design Identity; Globalization; Design and Culture; Chinese Design; Asian Design

China, one of the four ancient civilizations and today one of the largest countries in the world, has finally opened up to the rest of the world thanks to the Reform and Opening (gaige kaifang 改革開放) Policy the country instituted in 1978. Since then, the communist regime that controls the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has initiated tremendous changes in all walks of life, including the creative arts and design. Today, the government no longer condemns the “evil spirit” of commercial arts as Shou Zhi Wang (1989), a Chinese design history scholar once point out, and even embraces the important role that design plays in promoting vital business activities. This paper uses the rise of modern design in China along with work by designers in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, and Victoria & Albert Museum’s *China Design Now* exhibit to investigate questions of Chinese national design identity.

The designer's ethnic background and visual style in relation to national design identity

According to Woodham (1997), national identity is a conscious construction but is largely "myth" rather than an "accurate" inventory of distinguishing qualities. With a long and rich history of civilization to call upon, Chinese designers and students should have no difficulty finding unique qualities to represent China's national identity in their design work. However, the way in which these historical representations speak to younger generations, so eager to embrace the modern, globalized world, may present potential problems due to "the recrudescence of previously declining cultures, and even cultural resistance" (Knight, 2006, p. 4). As a relative newcomer to the world of design, China's design industry and professionals face the challenge of catching up to international standards. This paper argues that, with the whole world watching China's rise as a global economic power, the real challenge facing Chinese designers is how they can design a "new" image of China to present to the rest of the world, particularly the West.

To begin the discussion of China's national design identity, I will first examine the relationship between a designer's ethnic background and his or her creative work. After centuries of diaspora, it is now common to find designers of Chinese and Asian descent living throughout the world, often without much knowledge of the Chinese culture of their ancestors (Kim, Yang, & Lee, 2009). Having grown up under the increasing influence of Western values like individualism and consumerism since 1980, younger Chinese citizens do not necessarily share the ideological beliefs of previous generations, and it is now possible for young people to live in a Westernized society with little knowledge of traditional Chinese values and practices, much like people of Chinese ancestry growing up in diaspora communities. By examining the relationship between a designer's ethnic background and creative work, it may be possible to forecast the future development of China's national design identity.

In 2007, I published a conference paper investigating the relationship between a designer's ethnic background and creative work by conducting a case study of *Communication Arts*, one of the foremost graphic design trade journals in the United States and with a worldwide circulation (Wong, 2007). I traced award-winning work by designers with Chinese names over the ten-year period from 1997 to 2006 to try to discern whether or not the ethnic background of each designer is reflected in his/her published work, along with questions pertaining to the relationship between design and culture.

For that study, I borrowed Bari Kachru's concept of "three concentric circles" (quote from Bolton, 2000), developed to describe the spread of English language usage in the global context. I applied Kachru's concept to define "Chinese" in the contemporary international context, applying the "inner circle" label to locales where any Chinese dialect (such as Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanese) is the first spoken and written language; examples include China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. The outer circle would represent countries where a majority of the population uses a Chinese dialect as their first language, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. The extending circle, then, applies to countries where Chinese has the status of a "foreign language" and that have a visible ethnic community of Chinese origin. Examples of this extending circle are the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe.

A wide range of work by Hong Kong designers appeared in the *Communication Arts Design Annuals*, including corporate identity, book design, editorial design, self-promotion, and poster design pieces, and the submissions are a mixture of commercial and non-commercial work. Kan and Lau, Alan Chan, Tommy Li, Eric Chan, Michael Miller Yu, and Paul Lam are among the individual designers/art directors/design firms from Hong Kong whose work was published, while J. Walter Thompson and Token Workshop are two agency/design firms that appeared in the

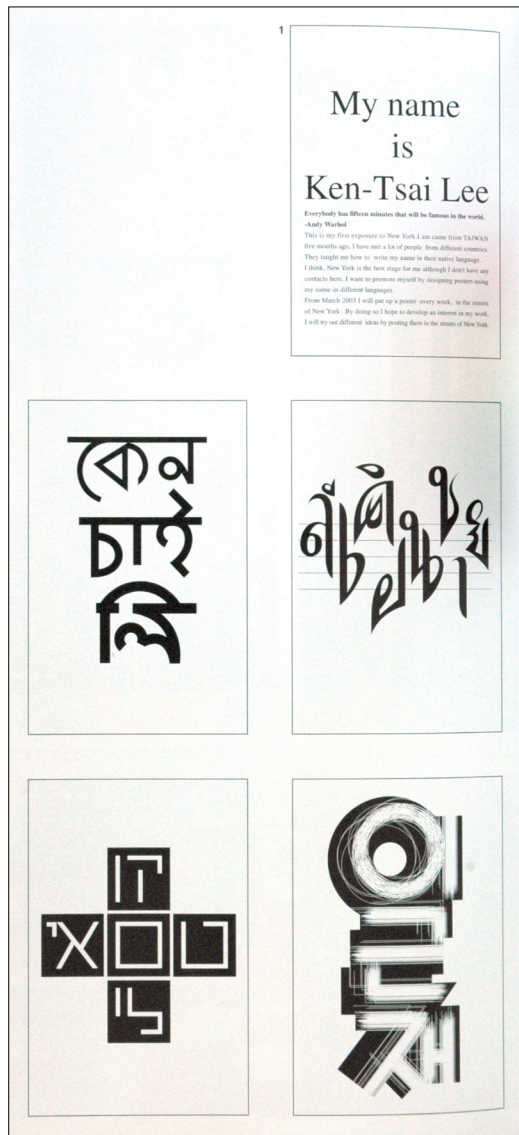


Figure 1: Self-promotion by Lee Ken-Tsai, Taiwan

Communication Arts Design Annual from 1997 to 2006.

Kan and Lau, Alan Chan, and Tommy Li are the three designers/art directors/design firms who received the most entries in the publication. Kan and Lau is the design firm of partners Kan Tai-keung and Freeman Lau, two of the most prestigious designers in Hong Kong. Although most of the Hong Kong designers whose works appear in the publication do have their own unique signature styles, not every piece included reflects that style due to the differing needs of the projects. By examining the submissions by Alan Chan Design and Kan & Lau Design, we can see that the lead designers, Alan Chan and Kan Tai-keung, separated their personal signature styles from the commercial work according to the nature of the projects.

Must a designer always include his or her own signature style and ethnic cultural elements in design? In the cases just mentioned, the designers obviously intended that the design solutions should first serve the nature of the project and the clients' needs, rather than the designers' own personal aesthetic interests. We can find similar design values in the work of Hong Kong designers; it is becoming rare to find so-called "authentic" and "exotic" cultural elements in their work.

A self-promotion piece by Lee Ken-Tsai of Taiwan, who has never been studied overseas, went to New York several years ago to study English and discovered himself while in the midst of the city's rich multi-cultural environment. This self-initiated project was, to a certain extent, a search for self-identity. Lee asked many friends that he met to write his name in their native languages, and then graphically combined the writing with photos he took in New York to create this self-promotion piece (figure 1).

Another interesting work, by designer Chun-Liang Leo Lin, is a poster created for the thematic poster show *Korean Image* held in Taiwan in 2001. Thematic poster shows in the Greater China region became very popular in the mid-1990s; this particular show invited designers from Taiwan and Korea to participate and create work based on the theme, Korea. Lin created this poster using the colours of the Korean flag and an image of a pair of shoes, resulting in a piece heavily embedded with cultural elements.

As for design in mainland China, pieces by designer Wang Xu appearing in *Communication Arts Design Annuals* are mainly his publication design pieces from the *Design Exchange Magazine* (figure 2) and *Master Designers* book series. Unlike Kan Tai-keung and Alan Chan, Wang does not consciously use Chinese elements in his work to establish a signature style. It is difficult to say whether he has taken this approach due to the nature of the work or because of his intent to construct an image of "modernism design" for the Chinese audience looking forward to a

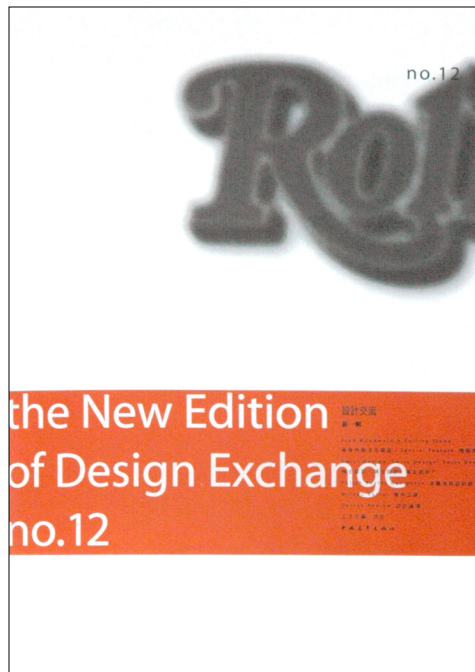


Figure 2: Design Exchange Magazine, designed by Wang Xu

Western lifestyle.

World design development is still dominated by European and North American countries, with Japanese designers also starting to play a major role in shaping the world's "modernism design" landscape. Designers from Asian countries with different cultural settings or from an Asian ethnic background have difficulty asserting their own cultural touches without rational justification for their choices. This is the observation that we can make from studying the pieces created in the "inner circle" Chinese countries.

In analyzing the work assembled from the "outer circle" countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, it is difficult to identify the "cultural design identity" of the individual countries. Singapore has the highest design standards in this region and designers from Singapore did pretty well, based on the number of submissions included in the *Annals*. In 2001, Singapore had four pieces of work selected; it had five pieces chosen in 2005.

What does "Chinese" or being "Chinese" mean in a contemporary global context? In the "extending circle" category, art directors/designers with Chinese names are

mainly from major cities such as New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles in the United States, and Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, Canada. After almost two centuries of diaspora, people of Chinese ancestry can be found in many parts of the world, and Chinese in North America are no longer restricted to a few vocations, such as railway laborer, mine worker, and laundry or grocery store owner. New generations of Chinese born outside China and with little or no knowledge of Chinese culture are, together with non-Chinese designers, creating a new landscape of "international Chinese."

The works by art directors or designers with Chinese names included in the *Annals* reveal no distinguishable differences in visual style. Like the examples found in the inner and outer circles, Chinese cultural elements are used when it is appropriate for the project. For example, Vivien Sung's design for Chronicle Books, titled *Five-fold Happiness*, appeared in *Annual 2003* and illustrates the application of design theory to the editorial design of Chinese objects. Chinese elements in this book are found in the contents and the cultural product for selling and consumption. Perhaps the meaning of "Chinese" in a contemporary global context may refer only to cultural products at the consumption level. Being "Chinese" might be only skin-deep.

Another example is a package design for a Chinese takeout food client in Minneapolis, USA, created by a non-Chinese designer, Jillian Frey. Because of the client's needs and the nature of the product, her design solution skips "obvious" Chinese elements, relying instead on different typefaces for the phrase "Asian to go" composed in a pattern. The only Chinese element that is used is the character Chin 陳, a Chinese surname. Although you do not see stereotypical Chinese elements in the pattern, you are left with the sense that the Asian world is full of variety and choices (figure 3).

We began our survey of the works from *Communication Arts* with the question: is there a relationship between a designer's ethnic background and his or her design work? Based on the examples discussed above, we can see that Chinese cultural factors do not play a key role in



Figure 3: Lee Ann Chin, Asian to go, designed by Jillian Frey, Minneapolis, USA

every design project that inner circle Chinese designers undertake; whether or not Chinese elements appear depends entirely on the nature of the project. Chinese elements might be used if they are suitable for the project needs, and their use is not exclusive to designers of Chinese descent, as seen in the work of Minneapolis designer Jillian Frey. And designs created for Chinese clients do not need to use Chinese elements solely.

Jillian Frey's example proves that a designer without any Chinese cultural background can be very successful using Chinese elements. Another success is Henry Steiner, who has been in Hong Kong since the early 1960s and is widely regarded as the father of Hong Kong graphic design (Wong, 2001). Steiner is well known for his "East meets West" style; his 1969 work for the *Hong Kong International Music Festival* demonstrated a new possibility for modern Chinese design after the 1930's Shanghai style.

In this poster, Steiner used a pair of pearls to represent Hong Kong, known as the "Orient of the East," as a set of earrings on ears posed as if a butterfly; together these two images are suggestive of the beautiful, delicate music of the East. This

visualization and conceptual approach to modern poster design may have been common at that time in the West, but it was groundbreaking work in the Eastern context. Steiner's achievement became a source of direction and inspiration for Hong Kong designers. What the designer did was simply search for creative direction within culture and everyday life, yet his design solution has a timeless quality that is still refreshing 40 years later.

If design naturally has a close relationship with culture and everyday life, is it difficult for designers and clients to keep cultural elements from appearing in works designed for the global market? The biggest challenge facing many young Chinese designers today is the necessity to catch up to international design standards to promote commercial interests and consumption, not to use design as a tool to improve the everyday lives of people. In order to achieve business objectives for marketing products globally, it is often necessary to produce creative works devoid of cultural elements and, often, without distinct characteristics.

For example, Xie Yong of China was a finalist in the British Council's International Young Design Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2006. The General Manager and Director of E-madesign Co., Ltd. in Beijing, Xie's goal, according to his statement, is to be a "one-stop design service market in China." His selected work clearly reflects his own definition of design as a "service" to the market, rather than any deeper contextual meanings of design to culture and society. On the contrary, a finalist from India, Ramesh Manickam, sees design as a service that should meet the "multifaceted requirements of the Indian market" (British Council, 2006).

Both this designer's statement and his selected work demonstrate the concept of meeting the needs of different segments of society. Manickam's work is an interesting contrast with that of Xie Yong, as the Chinese designer's product is not embedded with elements reflecting the culture and everyday life of his homeland. It is apparent that the young Chinese designer's approach is to promote commerce that is in sync with trends found in the developed Western countries, while the Indian designer's work reflects his consideration of the largely rural and agricultural lifestyle of the Indian population. Perhaps the Chinese designer is responding to globalization trends, trying to minimize the cultural flavor of his work so it will be accepted internationally; the Indian designer may have no such concern.

Questions of national identity in art and design

The very concept of identity is a fluid term, and China is undergoing rapid change and modernization in all aspects of life. But the question of national identity in art and design is not a new one; the debate between scholars and artists can be traced all the way back to the 1930s, when the 1937 publication by the first professional design organization in China, China Commercial Artists Association (Zhongguo Gongshang Meishu Zuoqia Xiehui 中國工商美術作家協會), lamented that the mainstream commercial arts (gongshang meishu 工商美術) in China at the time was full of "Western style" imitation work and questioned how ancient Chinese art and craft (gongyi 工藝) could adapt to the modern context (ZGMZX, 1937).

In response to this criticism in the 1930s, pioneer artist Lin Feng-mian (founder of China Academy of Art) advocated design using the best from both Western and Chinese cultures. To achieve this balance, he advocated four main ideas: 1) introduce Western Art; 2) review Chinese Art; 3) balance Chinese and Western Art; 4) rebirth of contemporary oriental art. The ancient civilization of China has been exposed continuously to Western art since it was first opened to foreign powers in the 19th century; the other three ideas, however, are the unfinished business of generations to come, making Lin Feng-mian's suggestions relevant to works being produced by Chinese designer's today (Wong, 2005).

In 2000, I published a conference paper called *Exploring Chinese Graphic Design theory and Pedagogy*, hoping to discover a generalized creative logic and visual system encoded with Chinese elements and Western design principles (Wong, 2000). Most of my examples were based on work from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau, with only a few pieces taken from China. In that study, I recognized six creative directions in the work found in the Greater China region, including: 1) Re-invention of Chinese typography; 2) Integration of bilingual typography; 3) Formulating the mixture of Eastern and Western images; 4) Rethinking Chinese calligraphy and Shiumo painting; 5) Inspiration from folk arts and popular arts from the past; and 6) Appropriation of contemporary everyday life objects.

Since 2000, the increasing scale and volume of works produced by mainland Chinese designers have opened up more potential creative directions for Chinese design; however, if a majority of young Chinese designers want to emulate the work of Western designers as seen in the international design annuals, what will the future of design in China look like? Before China instituted its Reform and Opening Policy in 1978, designers from Hong Kong and Taiwan, conscious of incorporating Chinese elements in their designs, were creating and shaping the contemporary Chinese design landscape. But there is every possibility that these values may not be shared by the younger generation of designers from China, and the number of professional designers in Hong Kong and Taiwan is small compared to mainland China.

With the new creative power of designers from mainland China joining Hong Kong and Taiwan designers, I was very optimistic that a new visual style with a Chinese touch could be established internationally (Wong, 2003); this could be at the surface, symbolic, or even abstract levels as found in the 1930s Shanghai-style works as well as works of Henry Steiner, Kan Tai-keung Wang Xu, Chen Shaohua, Jiang Hua and others. This new visual language using touches of Chinese culture may be the only way for Chinese design to be established internationally.

Designing a national identity for contemporary China

The past couple of years saw a plethora of amazing work produced by the young generation of designers born in the 1970s and 80s. The sheer volume of work produced has diversified and enriched the visual language. Some of them may use a Chinese touch when it is warranted; together, they are producing a new visual language of graphic design in China. Although these

young Chinese designers show great potential, they are causing the Chinese government some concern regarding the construction of a national identity through popular media (Wang 2002), including design. As Knight (2006) points out, "a prominent theme in the Chinese discourse on globalization is that China's culture must not be allowed to become 'Americanized' or 'Westernized,' for this would constitute a serious challenge to the integrity of the Chinese nation" (p. 19). China's leaders are cognizant of the important roles popular media, design, and globalization play in China's economy and culture, and have thus set up a ten-year plan to handle the transformation from a traditional economy to a knowledge economy. The country's stated ideological position, the establishment of "a socialist country with Chinese characteristics," makes it clear why China's leaders don't wish to see a "Western" design identity coming to represent China.

A perfect example is found in the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, an image of modern China carefully crafted by the country's leadership. The ceremony arguably was the product of design, a mixture of creative concept, branding, props, costuming, lighting, and so on. Carefully planned and crafted under the strict ideological guidelines handed down by China's leadership, the ceremony was executed by world-famous film director Zhang Yimong, with support from Hong Kong action director Chin Siutong. The stunning result was a movie-set constructed identity, with astounding visual effects aided by cutting-edge technology, massive choreographic coordination of thousands of performers, and props and costumes effectively reconstructed to present a glorified picture of the Chinese civilization's ancient heritage.

Scenes of the four ancient inventions, Confucius chanting, torches flying across the cityscape and breathtaking fireworks displays educated viewers worldwide about the knowledge and symbols of Chinese civilization. These constructions not only fit the perceptions of Western viewers who imagine the East to be quite mysterious, but also aroused the national pride of Chinese viewers. As Woodham (1997) reminded us, national identity is a conscious construction, and China will have no problem finding unique qualities to represent its national identity. However, with contact with the outside world an inevitable part of the process of globalization, the great Chinese civilizations can no longer stand still but must accept the fluid nature of cultures in the modern era.

If the extravagant 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony had a weakness, it was in the apparent lack of a modern, contemporary identity for the civilization, unlike the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, in which graphic designer Yusaku Kamekura shocked the world with his contemporary design absent any obvious national cultural symbol (Art Directors Club, n.b). Japanese design at that time had already found a way to develop a sophisticated contemporary national design identity. Although Kamekura's 1964 poster design did not borrow any iconic symbols, viewers could nonetheless feel the Eastern aesthetic from the composition. The Japanese experience of hybridizing East and West and old and new can provide a possible framework for China's national identity development; however, because of the vast ideological differences between the countries, China's leaders will not wish to see its culture or identity developing in an "Americanized" or "Westernized" direction. Nevertheless, after three decades of reforms and development, design in China is now at a cross-road reflecting the absence of long-term planning once advocated by Lin Feng-mian.

The *China Design Now* exhibit held at the Victoria and Albert Museum from March to July 2008 may have best summarized the landscape of design in China over the past three decades. This exhibit took a contemporary approach to explore "China's hopes and dreams – from the entrepreneurial spirit of individual designers, to society's aspirations at a moment of tremendous change, and the global ambitions of a nation" (Zhang and Parker, 2008, p. 19), displaying artifacts from graphic design, industrial design, architecture, fashion design, toy design, new media, branding, and so on. Rather than embracing stereotypical symbols and icons, as seen in

the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, this exhibit showed the intermingling of elements of traditional heritage, socialism, and global influences from the West with the creative energy of contemporary China that is barely known to the world. Due to its very nature, this landscape has been a chaotic one, causing the curators to acknowledge that, “[w]ithin a globalized post-modern context, China’s process of modernization – the overlapping of state and market, the co-existence of both formal and informal economics – has, however, broken free from classic paradigms of modernity, either capitalist or communist” (Zhang and Parker, 2008, p. 29). This chaotic context makes the construction of a national identity for contemporary China through creative media more challenging.

Possible future directions

To tackle the currently chaotic context for the construction of a national identity, I suggest that

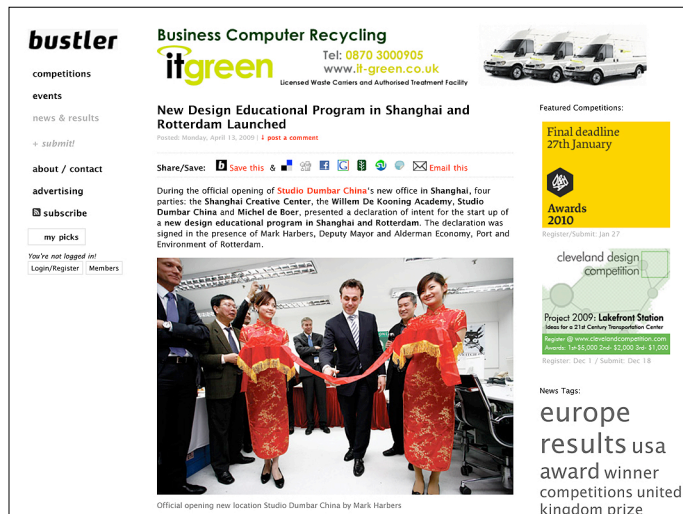


Figure 4: New design educational program in Shanghai and Rotterdam Launched, April 2009

current design education should play a great role in the future development direction of Chinese design. Since China implemented its Reform and Opening Policy in 1978, design schools have had no shortage of overseas experts and academic scholars to lend their suggestions. Design students in China are potentially a very valuable commodity for overseas design education institutions looking to recruit students from abroad. To a certain extent, design at the commerce and marketing levels is a skill that can be transferred without coding and cultural values. The introduction of overseas design education curricula and practice will certainly help Chinese designers and design students to catch up in the world design scene, like the latest design education program

announced in Shanghai in April 2009, a partnership with the world-renowned Studio Dunbar of Rotterdam (Bustler, 2009) (figure 4).

However, these joint-educational programs with overseas institutions do not necessarily understand the translation of cultural factors into design education in China. The issues confronting Chinese design education are enormous and require in-depth research into how to produce "design with Chinese characteristics" in the contemporary context. In a journal article published in 2001, two professors from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University proposed that China address the “endemic problems” for their future design education development without acknowledging the struggles of traditional arts and crafts heritage with the modern education system over several decades (Fung & Lo, 2001). I support this critique and look into the possibilities of developing a cross-cultural communication approach in teaching design, in which students are required to understand and apply their knowledge of at least two cultures to their designs, which is basically what Lin Feng-miang once proposed.

Today, people in China are not lacking information from the outside world and the Reform and Opening Policy will ensure that this influence from the West continues. The overarching question is how a balance can be struck between Chinese and Western art/design. These questions are not new and were debated as far back as the 1930s, when China was full of design and

designers imitating Western style. In the contemporary context, the definition of "Chinese touch" must remain fluid and inclusive, as proposed by film scholars Wang and Yeh (2005) in their studies of globalization and hybridization of Hollywood-produced Chinese film titles.

Conclusion

The past two decades have seen the explosive growth of business opportunities in design and design education, beginning with graphic design and progressing to Industrial Design, fashion design and, most recently, animation and new media. The boom is no longer restricted to the large urban centers like Shenzhen, Shanghai and Beijing, but is also spreading to inland cities (Xu, 2007; Zhang and Parker, 2008). Because of the publicity given the design professions by a wide variety of leisure magazines, along with mass media coverage of prominent, financially successful artists and designers, Chinese parents don't hesitate to support a child's interest in pursuing a career in design arts. Professor XU Ping of Central Academy of Fine Arts estimates that, in 2006, there were at least 1.1 million students enrolled in Design-related programs at university/college level in China, with another 2.7 million prospective students failing to gain entrance to those programs (Xu, 2007).

I believe design education in China needs to explore a pedagogy that includes teaching how to use cultural symbols in design in a global context. Students need to be educated on the importance of respecting their cultural heritage and learn how to incorporate their cultural symbols into their design output. I am confident that the desire among young Chinese to find a unique national design identity will only increase as they gain more opportunities and exposure to the outside world. It is in this process of searching that a contemporary national identity will most likely emerge. Finally, I would like to conclude this paper with by restating the urgency of creating design curricula with Chinese elements, or the future design identity of China will become even more challenging to develop.

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