

The Chameleon and the Pearl of the Orient

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Hong Kong's design culture has traditionally been discussed in terms of "East meets West", a cliché which served to neutralise the impact of colonisation in its various forms. This idea of a Hong Kong design culture operating between two cultures has been around at least since the 1960s and continues to be used in contemporary criticism. This paper analyses the work of Henry Steiner, a key figure in the development of modern graphic design in Hong Kong. Over the past thirty years, Steiner's designs have provided a public image for some of Hong Kong's most powerful corporations, and his "cross-cultural" design theories have provided a model for many other designers. With their stereotypical imagery, his "cross-cultural" designs carefully maintain difference between "Eastern" and "Western" culture, reinforcing the hierarchies of Hong Kong's colonial situation.

Steiner studied art and design in New York before he arrived in Hong Kong in 1961 to work on *The Asia Magazine*. In 1964 founded his own design firm and from the mid-1960s, his clients have included some of Hong Kong's leading corporations: thus for a long time his work occupied the position of aestheticising the core of Hong Kong's institutional power structure. Steiner is not interested in fast-moving consumer design or fashion, preferring more stable projects involving corporate imaging, branding and logos.¹ It is no coincidence that Steiner's major local clients comprise the core colonial enterprises – the Hongkong Bank, Hutchison Whampoa, Jardine Matheson, Lane Crawford and Hongkong Land – all of which were established in the 19th century by British traders or entrepreneurs. By the 1960s these corporations were the colony's most powerful. Steiner's other major clients have included American multinationals such as the Hilton hotel group and IBM.

Steiner's 1995 book Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace attempts to illustrate key theories of Steiner's "cross cultural" design work completed in Hong Kong over the past thirty years and also, with its inclusion of a range of other designers' work, suggests how Steiner's cross-cultural theories might apply in a broader global context. For Steiner, cross-cultural design involves

overcoming cultural boundaries in the service of communication. In his words, cross-cultural designers:

must strive to transmit one set of messages within the medium of a foreign tradition without losing the meaning and attitude of the original concept. Designers venturing into the global marketplace need to be as *sensitive* to cultural conventions as they are *uninhibited* in finding new ways to *exploit* them.²

Within this neo-colonial framework of the “sensitive” yet “uninhibited” cultural “exploitation” that Steiner proposes, the appropriation of indigenous symbols and materials becomes the primary task of the cross-cultural designer. Like the exploitation of minerals, labour or other sources of local wealth by economic colonialism, the “cross-cultural” designer has a wealth of native culture from which to extract and appropriate.

In Cross-Cultural Design, Steiner uses the metaphor of a chameleon to describe his approach to design:

Chameleons reflect local colour but retain their form. Ideally, designers are representative of their own culture yet adaptive to new surroundings. The goal is to achieve a harmonious juxtaposition; more of an interaction than a synthesis.³

SLIDE ONE: *Idea*, No. 162, 1980.

Steiner’s designs illustrate this idea. His cover design for *IDEA* magazine (no. 162) of 1980, for example, features a photograph of a seated Steiner wearing a dark business suit against a black background, his face painted in the red and white design of a traditional Cantonese opera mask. In his chameleon posturing, Steiner is “performing” Chineseness in an effort to create a cross-cultural design. Beyond the obvious humour of the image, the ideology of racial and cultural difference are carefully maintained; his “cross-cultural” approach to design involves applying the surface image of a foreign culture to that of an international business. Steiner’s image of the chameleon also serves as a metaphor for international corporate capitalism, a “masking” of complex socio-economic processes behind local colour.

SLIDE TWO: *Hong Kong International Music Festival* poster, 1969.

Steiner's approach to "cross-cultural" design relies largely on already existing mythologies about Hong Kong. The representation of Hong Kong as the "Pearl of the Orient" appears in his design work several times. His *Hong Kong International Music Festival* poster (1969) features two photos, each of an ear with a pearl earring, brought together with a drawn butterfly body in the middle so the ears make up the butterfly's wings. Hong Kong features in this colonial metaphor as a exotic Oriental jewel, waiting passively to be taken.

SLIDE THREE: *HSBC Annual Report*, cover, 1980.

Steiner recycled the "Pearl of the Orient" idea for his Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) annual report of 1980 with a split image: half of a photograph of a pearl next to half of a photograph of an apple. In this design, Steiner plays on clichés – the "Pearl of the Orient" (Hong Kong) meets the "Big Apple" (New York). Hong Kong as the British Empire's "pearl" of the Orient has shifted to become the "pearl" of multinational capitalism. The annual report celebrated both the HSBC takeover of the New York-based Marine Midlands Banks, Inc as well as the one hundred year anniversary of their New York office's establishment. The HSBC is a former colonial bank that was founded in 1865 to fund the China trade and has since functioned as the central bank in Hong Kong. It proved to be a successful colonial enterprise, continuing to grow in the 20th century, particularly after the Second World War. The expansion into new markets in the 1980s which included the establishment of the Hongkong Bank of Canada and the Hongkong Bank of Australia, further emphasised the bank's shift from an Asian-based bank to a dispersed global bank. The Bank itself is perhaps the "Pearl" of Steiner's image, generating wealth for its controlling interests in London.

SLIDE FOUR: *HSBC Annual Report*, inside pages, 1980.

Another page in Steiner's 1980 HSBC report features a split image, half Cantonese opera character, half Statue of Liberty, while other pages feature similar

juxtapositions of iconic Hong Kong scenes next to New York ones. Again the easy clichés of traditional Chinese culture next to the clichés of New York culture display a kind of tourist image of multinational capitalism. The “masking” of the British colonial bank behind a Cantonese opera mask represents the more problematic side of Steiner’s chameleon project in that it illustrates how colonial corporations adopt a local identity through graphic designs such as Steiner’s. The two myths he does use are those of a Hong Kong comprising traditional Chinese culture and a New York symbolising liberty and multiculturalism. There are two repressed subtexts within these narratives: the first is Hong Kong as an already hybrid and vibrant modern culture; and the second is the fact that “for all the time Ellis Island processed would-be immigrants – from 1892 till 1938 – Chinese people were excluded from America.”⁴ The use of Chinese iconography for a British colonial bank thus becomes doubly ironic as the Statue of Liberty represents the exclusion of Chinese in America while the traditional mask represents a Chinese culture of the past, not of modern cosmopolitan Hong Kong.

While happy enough to juxtapose stereotypical images of “East” and “West” Steiner is adamantly opposed to the idea of a hybrid culture, as is evident when he writes:

The individual character of the elements should be retained, each maintaining its own identity while also commenting on and enriching the other, like the balance of Yin and Yang.

Combination, mixture, blending – these are useless concepts as they will result in a kind of mud. Street stalls in Hong Kong serve an understandably unique beverage called “Yin-yang,” a combination of tea and coffee. It tastes as you would imagine: the worst characteristics of both are enhanced.⁵

Steiner’s work, with its emphasis on difference, is focused on carefully defining cultures then on keeping them apart. In the 1960s, this emphasis seemed to coincide with a new type of colonialism in which former British companies were seeking to maintain their hold while newer American companies were seeking to establish themselves in Hong Kong (and in Asia in general). While it may appear subtle, this type of colonisation is remarkably similar to earlier colonial divisions between colonisers and natives.

On this point, Rey Chow, in her essay “Where Have All the Natives Gone?”, argues:

whenever the oppressed, the native, the subaltern, and so forth are used to represent the point of ‘authenticity’ for our critical discourse, they become at the same time the place of myth-making and an escape from the impure nature of political realities.⁶

Chow provides a poignant critique of Steiner’s position in two ways. Firstly, her native finds a parallel in Steiner’s mythical depiction of the Chinese other and its equation with tradition; and secondly, her notion of the ‘impure nature of political realities’ is in direct contrast to his obsession with purity. In his search for local “authenticity”, Steiner’s “pure” specimens of ethnicity are museum caricatures rather than the images of a modern Chinese city with an “impure” culture.

As well as the practice of his design, Steiner offers a theoretical model for “cross-cultural” representation in which he elaborates his mimetic theory. For Steiner there are three stages in the process of producing a cross-cultural design, which equate to a dialectical operation with a final synthesising stage: quotation, mimicry and transformation. Of the final stage, he writes: “In this stage, influence has been assimilated and the once foreign becomes personal and natural.”⁷ This stage is crucial, he argues:

The simplest way to suggest a foreign ambience is to borrow an exotic image. To qualify as a true cross-cultural design, however, it is necessary for an image to be *transformed* in some way; to be appropriated and redefined.⁸

His chameleon methodology involves firstly appropriating local culture and then recontextualising it within a Euro-American context.

While his theory advocates an assimilation of local cultures into a global “cross-cultural” design, Steiner is careful to keep the two cultures separate: on the one hand, Euro-American international modernism, on the other, “native” culture. The use of split imagery is the most direct use of Steiner’s dialectical method. However, the dialectic never reaches the stage of synthesis, the two cultures carefully held apart.

SLIDE FIVE: *Type*, poster for Morisawa typesetting company, 1991.

As an illustration of his dialectical method, Steiner's poster design for the (Japanese) Morisawa typesetting company (1991) features the word "TYPE" in white letters on a black background. The Chinese character for ten (*shi*) is used for the "T" while the character for three (*san*) is used for "E". Again, following his cross-cultural thesis, the two cultures are brought together in the same image but simultaneously held apart.

SLIDE SIX: *Idea*, no. 226, 1991.

Steiner's cover design for *IDEA* no. 226 (1991) features an image split diagonally, half Chinese geomancer's compass and half computer disk. The background of the image, likewise split diagonally, comprises a wind pattern (represented by clouds) and a wave pattern, referring to Feng Shui (literally "wind-water"). In this image, Steiner's dialectical method illustrates the meeting of the mystical, spiritual East and the rational, technologically-advanced West. Each culture is defined by way of opposition or in contradiction to the other. This suggests, firstly, that each has an infinite, unchanging essence (the traditional spiritual East, the progressive modern West) and, secondly, that these essences cannot be mixed. Steiner's East-West mythology disallows the possibility of a Western spiritual mysticism or an Eastern progressive modernism (such as Shanghai Modernism of the 1920s and 30s, for example).

Steiner's design perpetuates the idea of Hong Kong as a meeting place between two cultures. The meeting of two cultures assumes two distinct homogenous sets of values, practices and histories – the East as unchanging, traditional and exotic; the West as progressive, modern and universal. In terms of Steiner's theory of cross-cultural design, Asia is presented as an atemporal source of ancient tradition, a source of exotic inspiration that can be packaged for Western consumption. Centuries of cultural exchange and interaction are ignored as difference is reinforced and co-opted into a colonial sense of order.

SLIDE SEVEN: *Hong Kong Telephone Directory of Business Numbers*, 1978.

Steiner's cover of the 1978 Hong Kong Telephone Directory of Business Numbers, for example, featured a still life of "old Chinese" business accoutrements arranged on a wooden desk: an abacus, two bamboo brushes, a chop and red ink, old Chinese coins with a square shape punched in the middle, a pair of old-fashioned gold-rimmed spectacles and a gold pocket-watch. Steiner's aestheticization of everyday objects in this design was an attempt to create a local culture. By 1978, this quaint nineteenth century version of Chinese culture was well and truly a museum exhibit, if indeed it ever existed.

Steiner's images solidify a certain historicist thinking that regulates Chinese culture to a series of anachronisms, with the aloof abstraction of Western modern design providing the frame in which they appear. In his "cross-cultural" designs, the local and the traditional both become assimilated into a colonial design logic. Steiner's designs and his "cross-cultural" theory comprise a particular strain within international design closely aligned to capitalism. The need to reinforce authentic ethnicity and the emphasis on maintaining cultural purity reveal a design logic that closely parallels colonialism and its contemporary manifestation, neo-colonialism. Steiner's Orient offers no threats to Euro-American corporate capitalism so long as it remains exotic, traditional and safe. Steiner's designs operate as a cultural "policing", a rigid segmentation that attempts to create a homogeneous anachronistic Chinese culture, while at the same time regulating the relationship between colonizers and colonized, and between East and West. His vision of Hong Kong as the endless meeting place of East and West has helped mask the complex processes of colonialism and the seamless shift to multinational neo-colonialism.

1 Interview with D.J. Huppertz, Hong Kong, 14/09/02.

2 Steiner, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1995, p.ix, italics mine.

3 Steiner, op.cit., p.9

4 Lee, Gregory B., *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and its Others*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1996, p.221.

5 Steiner, op. cit, p.9

6 Chow, in Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, p.134-5.

7 Steiner, op.cit., p.2

8 Steiner, p.10