

Graphic designers as cultural innovators: Case studies of Henry Steiner and KAN Tai Keung

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Abstract

It is common to see graphic design copies of foreign models or other Chinese designers. These designers are apathetic toward the work and neglect its ongoing challenges, including the need for constant innovation. In contrast, there are masters who use Chinese culture in creative ways and achieve outstanding reputations all over the world. The reasons design masters choose Chinese culture as a theme for their graphic work and the unique ways in which they symbolise cultural resources and knowledge are explored and explained in this study. This study also illustrates how traditional culture can become a potential innovative strategy by applying a systematic and culture-based methodology. The case studies presented concern the first generation of graphic designers in Hong Kong: Henry Steiner and KAN Tai Keung. The preliminary results of the two case studies show very positive outcomes for cultural interpretation becoming a new innovative stream of graphic design.

Keywords: Innovation, design masters, culture interpretation, graphic design

It is common to see Chinese graphic designs that are copied directly or indirectly from foreign designers or other Chinese designers. However, some successful designers use their culture resources in creative ways and establish unique identities through their graphic work. One of the main problems facing Chinese designers and design educators is that they seem to treat the cultural heritage of China as a marginalised resource and ignore that many internationally successful designers have strong identities of their own, as evidenced by their design work or research methods (Jian, Jie, & Taikeung, 2005). Understanding their own cultural origins and directly or indirectly using their cultural heritage in design is an essential quality of these internationally established designers (Lu, Etzkowitz, Lu, & Etzkowitz, 2008; Xu, Smith, Bower, & Chew, 2004).

As these graphic design masters always create successful artwork, winning them excellent reputations within the design community, they are also recognised by customers who realise the commercial value of their work in the marketplace. Hence, the way they interpret Chinese culture in graphic design can be instructive and meaningful to others. Graphic works can be empowered by traditional culture-based design, which is the hypothesis of this research. The reasons the masters choose Chinese culture as a theme for their designs, and the effective ways in which they symbolise their cultural materials, are explored. However, although the design masters are successful at finding inspiration for their design work, it can be difficult

for them to

explain how their design processes are explicitly formulated, given that their ways of working are characterised by independent styles that can be surprisingly simple or sophisticated to others. As mentioned in Summatavet (2005) study, informants, artists and bearers play different roles, making it impossible for a designer and a researcher to think alike.

This study puts forward a series of related issues from the designer's point of view. By deeply engaging designers through interviews and analysis, supported by careful studies of their backgrounds and the progression of their professional careers, something of value is revealed. The wisdom or style of the designers is then presented and generalised as understandable knowledge that can help others in their design studies or practice. The objective of this study is to develop a framework that is intended to showcase how traditional culture may become an innovative strategy. The cultural inspiration and design philosophy of the master designers skilled in cultural interpretation can provide a good lesson for young designers.

Designers as innovators of culture

Finding previous innovation

In his book *Diffusion of Innovations*, the American communication theorist and sociologist Rogers (1962) proposed a theory that attempted to explain how and why new ideas and technologies spread. Initially, in people's minds, 'innovation' existed only in science, chemistry, biology and physics for the purpose of making discoveries. However, in the 1980s, technology-based innovation began to play a greater role, as MIT professor Utterback (1994) mentioned in *Mastering the Dynamics of Innovation*. Many studies have shown that technological innovation can have a positive effect and improve the competitiveness of enterprises (Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Guan & Ma, 2003). Nevertheless, Garcia and Calantone (2002) argued that innovation differed from invention in that it provided economic value and spread beyond the discoverer. Although they still rely on technical or scientific innovation, innovative business models can create new markets and allow companies to devise and exploit new opportunities within existing markets (Amit & Zott, 2012). Closer to design, Heskett (2002) proposed that utilitarian dimensions involved function and performance, and equally importantly that dimensions involved signs, identities and emotions – in other words, meaning.

Designers as innovators of meaning

The most important statement on innovation in the design literature was probably made by Verganti (2009), who insisted that its two major forms were radical and incremental innovation. Verganti used different case studies to demonstrate the implications of design-driven innovation in technology and design (Figure 1), such as that found in comparative game development companies such as Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo.

As Verganti's work was essentially based on the Italian design of the nineties, rather than the general point of view of the world, it was hardly applicable outside of that context, and the scope of its innovation was limited in its explanatory power. The emergence of innovative methods in different times and fields has enriched researchers' thinking to a great extent. However, there remains no clear answer to graphic design innovation, and some concepts in

graphic design cannot be explained in terms of science, technology, business models or new meanings.

Therefore, how graphic designers innovate and become inspired is further explained and explored in this study. These doubts and blank areas have evoked the curiosity of the researchers who wonder whether cultural interpretation could be a new stream of innovation in design.

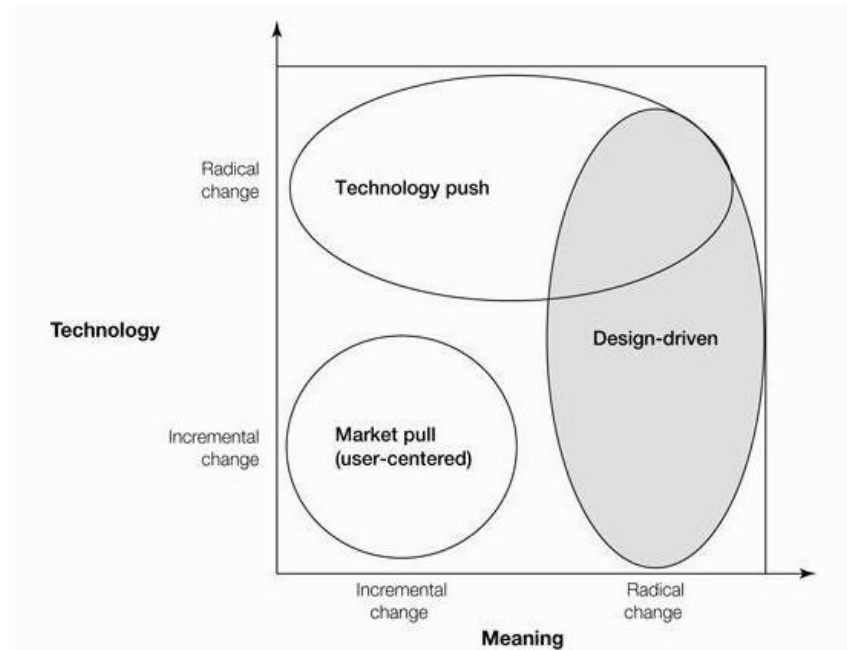


Figure 1 Technical innovation and meanings

Contemporary method of innovation

Culture is an important part of design innovation. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) stated that design was a knowledge- and skill-intensive creative activity. Creativity is understood to take place at the intersection of individuals and culture or symbols within the social sphere. Part of Linder (2014) thesis on the social, material and cultural environment located in design work showed an interaction between design activities and their social and cultural backgrounds. Specifically, in graphic design, the goal of the graphic designer is to produce clear communication (Frascara, 1988). In other words, based on the preceding statements, cultural background is conducive to a better expression of graphic design work.

The designer's role in culture-based innovation

Two main references focusing on the transformation of traditional culture in creative ways come from Xin (2006) and Summatavet (2005). Xin's goal was to develop a method that could be applied to Chinese product design and development. With his rich design and education

experience, Xin insisted that it was not easy for a designer who had not majored in cultural history or related cultural research to integrate fantastic cultural elements into design.

Kart Summatavet is a jewellery designer whose work can be found in both private collections and museums. With the disappearance of the traditional costume, dependence on museum collections has become the norm. However, fieldwork as an ethnographic method has given Kart as an artist the opportunity and confidence to follow new paths in her work. The knowledge she has obtained in the field has triggered a deeper interest in the bearers of tradition. She has pursued ethnographical and anthropological disciplines in her research. According to Lévi-Strauss (2008), ‘the aim of [the] ethnologist is to try to put himself/herself in the place of the people from another culture, to understand the essence and the rhythm of their aspirations, to comprehend an epoch or culture as a meaningful whole’. Summatavet (2005) used a chart (Figure 2) to show how she as a designer studied and applied the cultural essence of a traditional folklore artist.

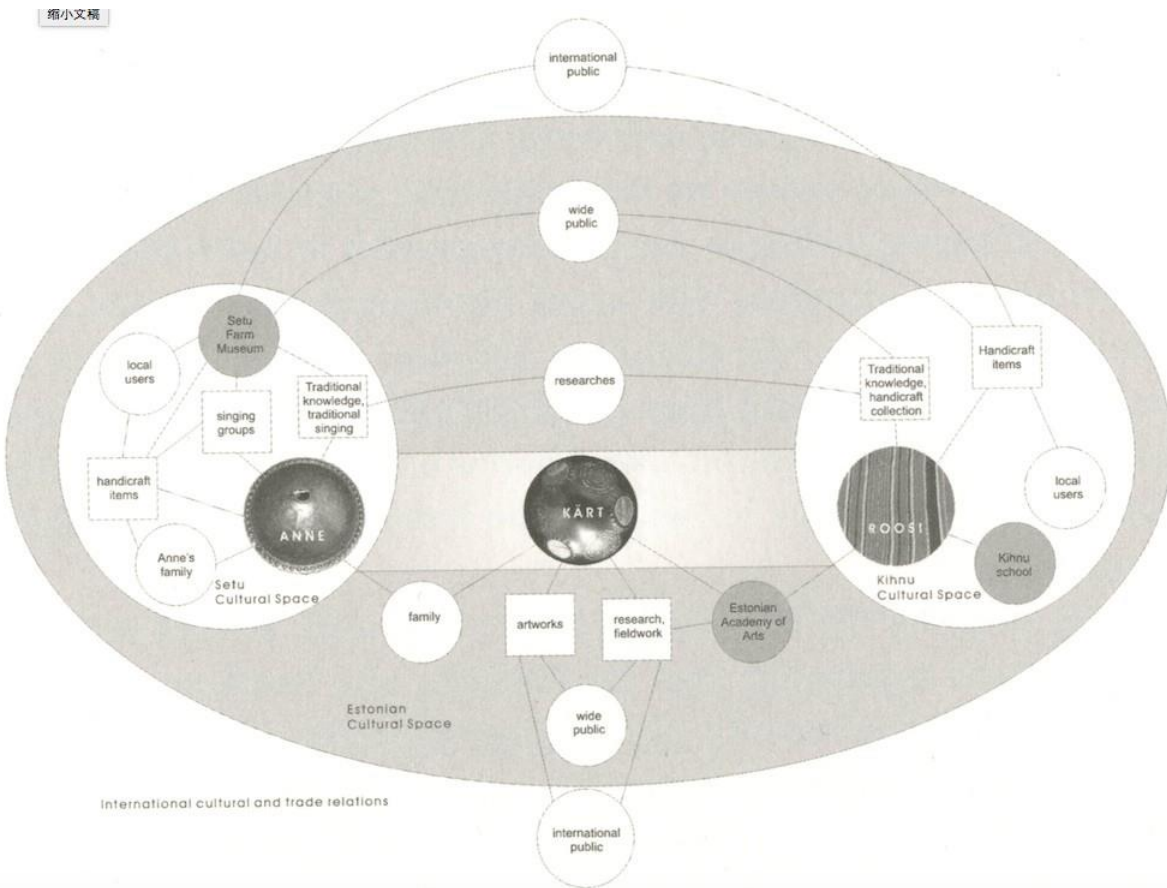


Figure 2 The bearers of tradition and user groups (Summatavet, 2005)

The theoretical framework: The designer as an interpreter of culture

Designers are important to the study of culture-based innovation, and the design masters were interviewed and learned from in this study. These masters were superbly professional, and their design methods and inspiration were more significant than those of the average designer.

An inexperienced designer may simply follow the basic rules of design to meet his or her customers' needs without achieving any unique goals. However, it is difficult to study and explore the design philosophy hidden in successful design work without a deep understanding of the designer. Hence, the researcher plays the role of an informant, using theoretical methods to transfer knowledge from different aspects of successful designers (Summatavet, 2005). From the designer's point of view, putting forward a series of research-related issues (**Error! Reference source not found.**), for instance, can determine whether traditional culture can be used as an important element to strengthen the visual power of a work. Whether designers can use visual language to express how they derive inspiration from tradition depends on how they weigh the relationship between tradition and modernity or new technology. It is the main objective of this study to understand the details of the design masters' work in addition to their ways of thinking to learn how they have made breakthroughs in their evolution from tradition to modernity.

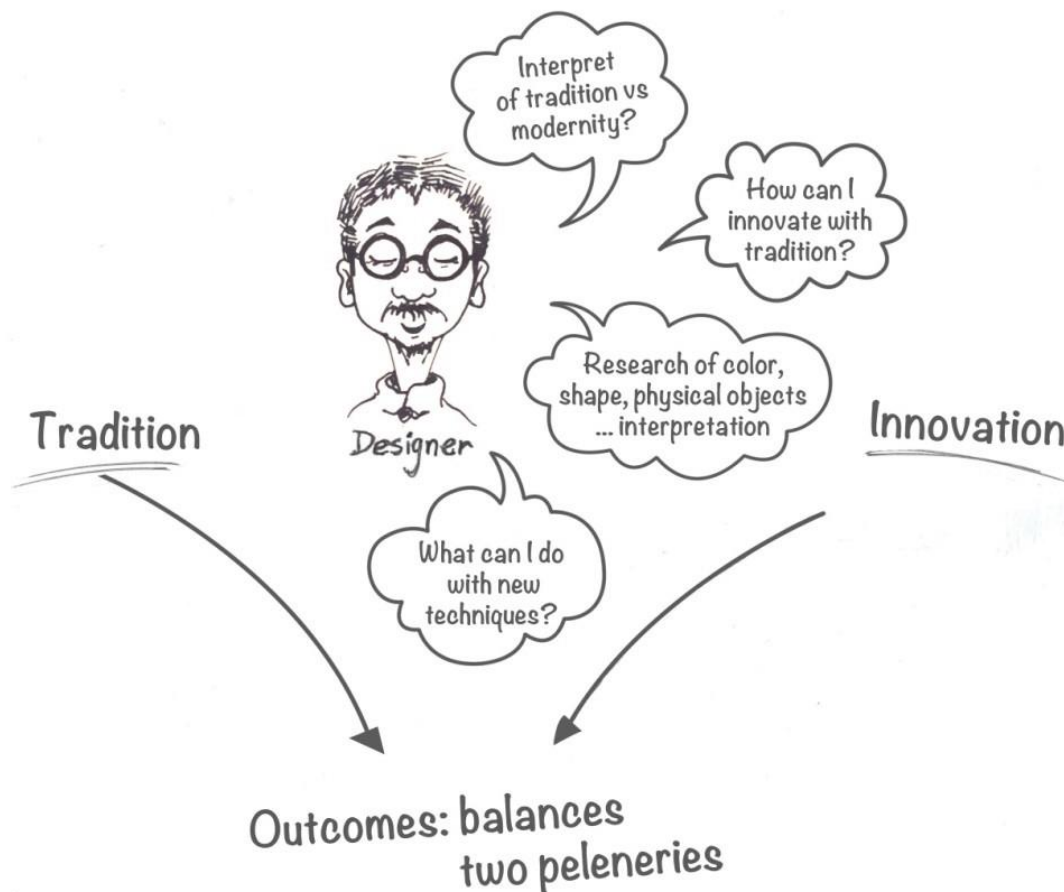


Figure 3 Theoretical framework of the case study

Methodology

Research methods

Elite interviewing was the main method used to collect data for this study. Most of the literature on elite interviewing has come from the social sciences. The best-known studies have dealt with lawyers (Smigel, 1958), businessmen and politicians (Jackall, 1988; Robinson, 1960). In design, elite interviews have been a typical component of studies mapping problem-solving techniques (Dorst, 2015). Meanwhile, to understand designers, it has been important to capture the physical and visual things within their working environments through photographs. The photographs of Henry Steiner's collections of souvenirs and memorabilia have proved to be important to understanding how he thinks about the culture of China (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Displays in the office of Henry Steiner and his poster

Interviewing was not the only approach used to understand the design masters. The collection and analysis of secondary materials was equally important to this study. One characteristic of the elites is that they produce an abundance of secondary material that can be gathered during the preparation phase. They write books and columns for newspapers, give interviews and have typically been studied before (Mykkänen, 2001). The elites know their value, and this is something the researcher must think about when preparing for interviews (Kincaid & Bright, 1957; Searing, 1994; Zuckerman, 1972).

After collecting the data, the main method of sorting and coding took the physical form of a data box (Figure 5). All of the data from every interview were placed into a big semi-transparent box, which was divided into sections to decompose it. The upper left corner was reserved for clips from artwork and secondary materials, and the lower left side was used for photographs. The right side contained the interviews, and various memoranda written by the researcher were set forth below them.

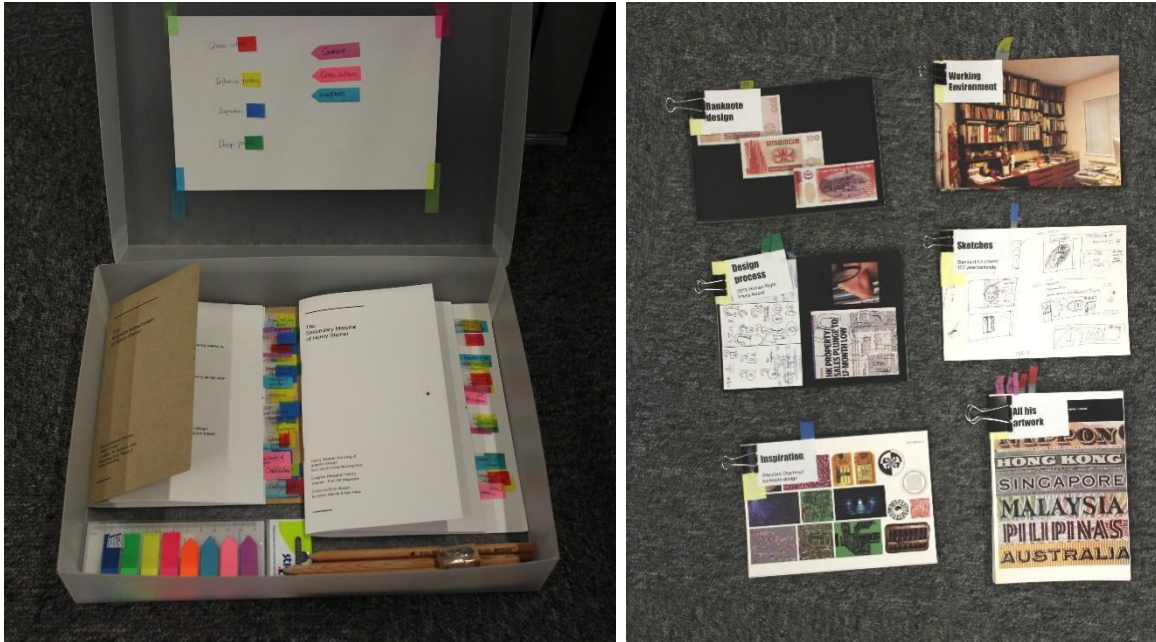


Figure 5 Data box design

The guidelines used for this box comprised colourful flags and numbers (Figure 6). Following the initial analysis, codes were generally divided into two groups: design philosophy and factors in design work. The codes grounded in the requisite data were proposed by Glaser and Strauss (2009).

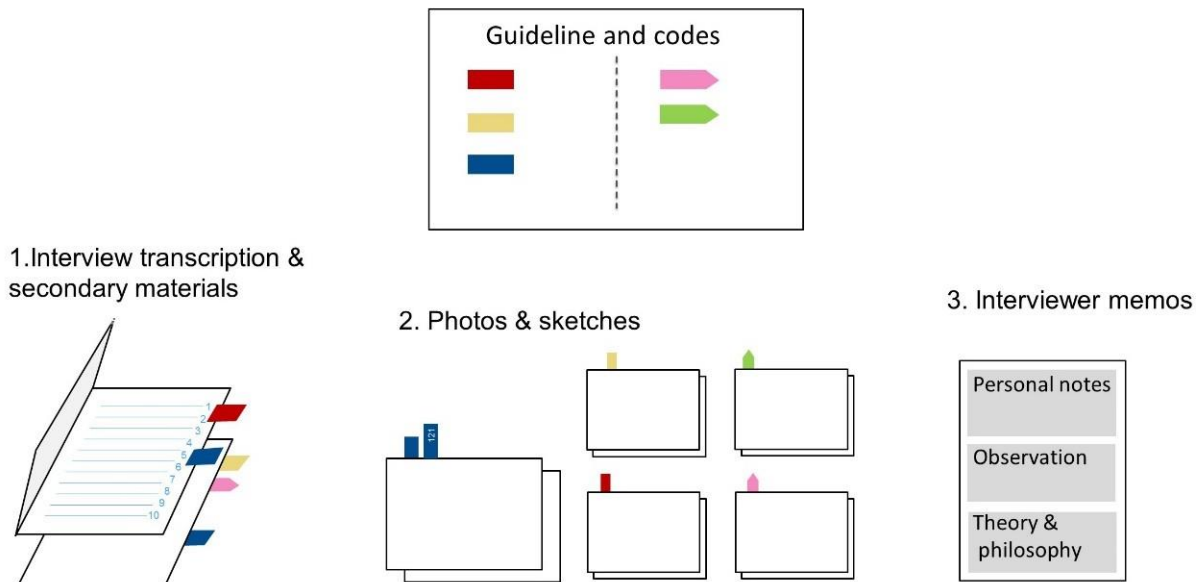


Figure 6 Data box of Henry Steiner

This study had several inbuilt validity checks to verify the selected interviewees and the interview questions and answers. Most importantly, this study used several means of data collection and analysis, known formally as triangulation (Denzin, 1978). This is a powerful methodology that helps validate data through cross-validation from two or more sources (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Analytic induction

Designers from different parts of China were listed based on an initial analysis. Pilot studies were then conducted in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Each study, as shown in Figure 7, included interviews with the designers together with a comparison and analysis after two or three interviews had been conducted. Pursuant to the analytic induction method proposed by Koskinen, Battarbee, and Mattelmeaki (2003), constant comparisons were made through a small group of cases, coming from interviews with five design masters in Hong Kong.

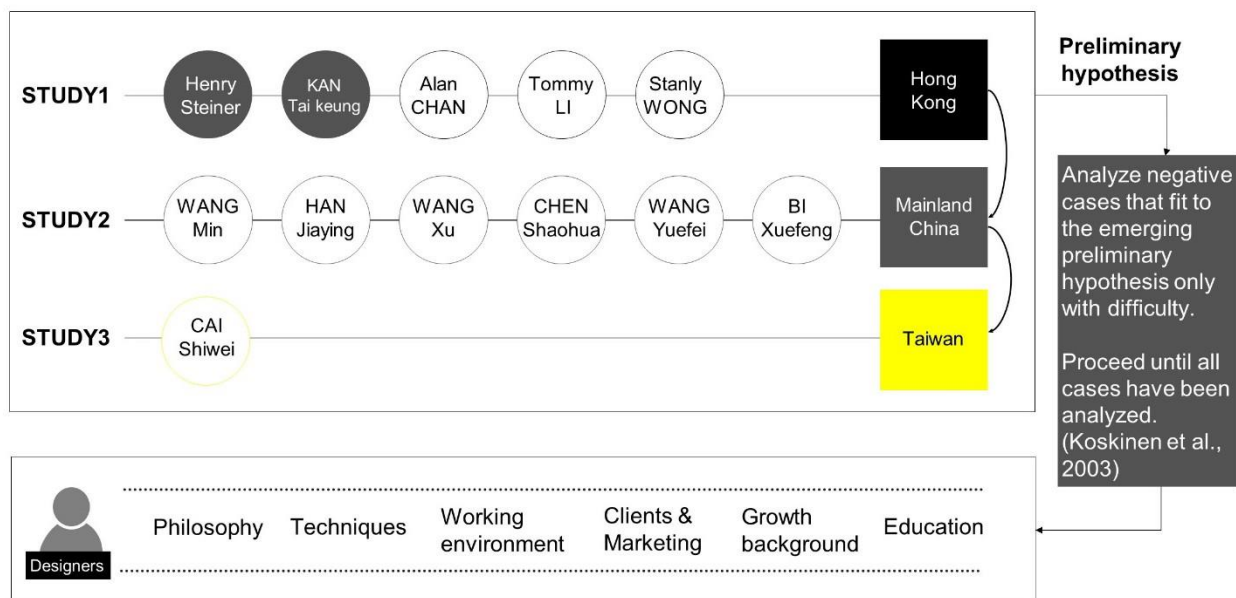


Figure 7 Complete study plan

Following the hypothesis, i.e., that there would be no correlation between a designer's cultural interpretations in different regions, the analysis was based on comparisons between Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan. Comparing the results from the Hong Kong designers, as shown in Figure 7, was the first step towards testing the initial hypotheses in mainland China and Taiwan, respectively. The initial research addressed the relevance of the position and method of the designer's cultural interpretation in one place and the constant comparison between the differences of the designers. If more negative cases were found in testing the preliminary hypothesis, to avoid future ineffective efforts and subjective concepts, an additional hypothesis based on the first two critical interviews, with Henry Steiner and Professor KAN, were tested. If not all of the respondents regarded cultural elements as their most important inspiration, the cultural interpretation of the creative design related to the location of the designer, some external

factors, teacher relations, design philosophy, customer and marketing needs, educational level or growth background became additional hypotheses, and the researchers combined the results of the two assumptions in the outcome of this study.

Guiding assumption

Exploring how famous Chinese graphic designers interpreted Chinese culture and used it in their work, and determining what explained their innovativeness, were the focuses of this study. Based on a literature review and an initial analysis of the designers in Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan, several of the guiding assumptions are listed as follows.

- Culture could be a significant inspiration to arouse a designer's innovation.
- There was no direct relationship between a design master's method of cultural interpretation and his or her location.
- Their design philosophy, teacher relationship, growth background and working environment influenced the master designers' way of innovating.

Case study 1 - Henry Steiner

Background analysis and his design concept

Henry Steiner was known as the king of graphic design in Hong Kong, and his work could be seen everywhere. It stared at the public from billboards, banks and other buildings, and even lurked in their pockets. Steiner was born into a middle-class Austrian Jewish family in 1934, and after years of study and work in New York settled in Hong Kong for nearly 60 years. His long and stable career in Hong Kong allowed him to establish his design philosophy as part of the first generation of Hong Kong graphic designers. Based on what he learned from Paul Rand and his long professional experience, Steiner represented the view of cross-cultural design. In the book *Cross-cultural design: Communicating in the global marketplace* (Haas & Steiner, 1995), Steiner received a detailed elaboration. He insisted that most people did not know their culture because they were used to thinking of oxygen, evolution or gravity when it came to discussing the foundation of survival. 'Culture is our environment; it is the "natural" way of thinking and acting, as a fish in the water', he said. According to his book, combining the designer's perceptions with the target audience's understanding of life's fundamental issues (time, religion, family relationships, gender, technology, politics and economics) could present an exciting combination of effects and differ greatly.

Through his interview, it was easy to understand not only his views on Hong Kong, but also his views on the places he had stayed before coming to Hong Kong, especially in terms of their customs and designs. During the time he studied in Paris, for example, he developed a much more European sensibility that influenced the body of his work. At the time, London, New York and San Francisco were well developed in terms of the design business; however, those places were not considered special enough to settle in and develop a design career. Again, it seemed Steiner was looking for a career and a life with contrast.

The formation of his design philosophy: Contrast

Steiner's design strategy of 'contrast' could be seen in his posters, branding and banknote designs. It was one of the things he learned from Paul Rand. The strategy was especially strong in the early days of his designs, and he subsequently made many comparisons, including quite a few for Asia magazine, wherein he would present something Western and something Eastern, contrasting them with each other. On the surface, it appeared that Steiner simply put Western and Eastern design together. However, as he used a classic concept and an approach that people had not tired of, we put it up for close examination from a philosophical and technological point of view. When a design is cross-cultural, it is important to remember that it is not a question of right or wrong, or better or worse. The goal is to achieve a harmonious concatenation, with more interaction than synthesis. Each element should be preserved, as this maintains an object's original identity while enriching it through another's, like balancing yin and yang. The underlying core idea resembles Taoism, but it is different from the ideas of Professor KAN and other designers. Steiner said he did not view it as a mixture or a blending; he wanted to preserve the integrity and independence of each cultural element. According to him, contrast was not only reflected in cultural differences, but also manifested in forms of expression, concepts and so on. As his banknote design in **Error! Reference source not found.** shows, this was a basic view Steiner held, and reflected what he meant by contrast. Designers can become artists by saying and showing people something that they know and something that they do not know.



Figure 8 Henry Steiner's banknote design, which shows 'contrast'

Case study 2 – KAN Tai Keung

Background analysis

Professor KAN Tai Keung was proficient in traditional Chinese culture and philosophy, given that he was born in mainland China and learned about Chinese art from his family. In addition, he had two teachers, WANG Wuxie and LV Shoukun (the former of whom had an overseas education), who taught him more advanced graphic design. His work had influenced at least two generations of Chinese graphic designers. Furthermore, his artwork had been recognised all over the world, and as he travelled the world, more and more new design concepts came to him, including some from Western culture. Hence, in addition to achieving an international standard, his work contained rich Chinese philosophical connotations, which resonated with the Chinese and distinguished him from foreign designers. KAN insisted that a culture without philosophical thought was like a person without a spine, and could not stand up and face the world. Although he mentioned during his interview that it was not necessary to interpret Chinese culture in design by using Chinese objects, the artistic style and representative design elements frequently used in his artwork suggested his addiction to Chinese culture and philosophy.



Figure 9 Collections in KAN Tai Keung's office

KAN Tai Keung's previous experience as a tailor unconsciously motivated him to use a ruler as a visual language tool, and learning Chinese ink painting from childhood contributed to his frequent use of four other elements: red dots, water, ink marks and tools in ink painting (Figure 10). Compared with Henry Steiner, who settled in Hong Kong for nearly 60 years, the Western part of Kan's artwork could not be totally replaced by Eastern culture.



Figure 10 KAN Tai Keung's artwork with frequently used cultural elements

The relationship between design philosophy and Chinese culture





In Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are three of the main philosophies. Every educated Chinese person has been taught on the basis of these three ideas. If the basic idea of in-depth understanding is lacking, and people pass through the concept of design as if fishing in the air, their efforts will be futile in the end. Buddhist thought has spread from the western to eastern regions. Buddhist philosophy is the epiphany of life. All the world is illusory, pain and happiness, which comprise the mystery of feelings. If we can see that 'the form itself is emptiness; [and] emptiness itself is formed' truth, we can look beyond life and death to 'great freedom' (Rāhula, 1974). In KAN's work, 'free' pattern paper was a kind of paper with Chinese cultural significance, which he created for Nippon Paper House. The philosophy of Buddha's 'great freedom' comprised the origin of this work. In Chinese art paper, the use of handmade paper edges and bamboo texture constitutes the landscape of natural artistic conceptions that reveal the Chinese light-heartedness and a calm attitude.

Taoism is the master of the universe. Life is divided into yin and yang, representing all of the derivatives of life and growth in nature. All people and things are symbiotic and go with the flow to obtain harmony between heaven and earth (Weber & Gerth, 1953). In the relationship between man and nature, there is a fundamental difference between Eastern and Western philosophy. In the West, especially since the Renaissance, humans have been regarded as the masters and even controllers of nature, resulting in the rise of the industrial revolution and a variety of outstanding scientific and technological inventions. In the East, however, humans have often been viewed as a part of nature, continually seeking to reconcile with it. To KAN, we were a Western-dominated and highly competitive consumer society, often lacking in comfort and the Oriental philosophy instilled by the peaceful and quiet mind to make up for this deficiency. KAN wanted his designs to give the public a feeling of stability. The three philosophies (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) have many commonalities, yet each is a unique system of thought. Their ideas have far-reaching implications for every Chinese person. Therefore, as a Chinese designer, KAN's works were inevitably influenced by these philosophical ideas, trying to show the attitudes of the Chinese people towards life (靳埭强, 2004).

Emerging hypothesis

The definition of design in this study was inspired by the design masters. It can be called culture-based innovation from the perspective of the designers' cultural cognition, cultural interpretation of design work and external influencing factors (Table 1), such as exotic growth experiences and different cultural backgrounds. All of these elements have been more or less ascribed as important by people such as Steiner, who credits them for his international recognition. Alternatively, traditional Chinese philosophy, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism or the concept of harmony between man and nature have had a great effect on KAN's harmonious design ideas, which are full of Chinese flavour. The unique philosophical ideas underpinning his work in the design field are unique. Together, the case studies of Steiner and Kan represent the breakthrough in graphic design innovation.

Table 1 Summary of the two design masters

| | Henry Steiner | KAN Tai Keung |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Education level | BA: Science fiction, Hunter College MA: Graphic design, Yale University | Middle school Design night school from age 25 |
| Growth Background | A middle class Jewish family | Born into an artistic family |
| Design Philosophy | Contrast, cross-cultural | Harmony (Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism) |
| Teacher Relationship | Paul Rand | WANG Wuxie, ZHONG Peizheng, LV Shoukun |
| Working environment |   |   |

The interviews with Steiner and KAN were very productive. Both men played crucial roles in the world of graphic design, representing the first generation of world-famous graphic designers in Hong Kong. The interviews were carried out in their offices. The experiences gained and the visual information collected from their work spaces gave the researcher great inspiration and the energy to conduct a deeper analysis of their thinking and design approaches to graphic design within their cultural understanding. The data collected from these interviews, their lectures, and the secondary materials were sorted into boxes to prepare for constant comparisons (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). This provided further inspiration to promote the primary hypothesis, i.e., the factors affecting innovation in graphic design. The preliminary interviews led to some emerging hypotheses.

- Design masters have their own unique design philosophies that persist for many years; however, in the actual design of a project, other factors may be given primary consideration, such as the needs of the customers or the market.
- A designer's educational experience and growth background form the foundation of the design philosophy that is hidden in his or her artwork. The working environment, collections, relationships or personalities all have reference value for studying how designers are inspired.
- Culture is a situation-specific source of a designer's innovation, and its role is located in and built on by the nature of the work.

The data collected from the two masters' interviews were based on their decades of working and communication experience. However, marketing trends or customer needs cannot be ignored in some real projects. Sometimes, these factors must be considered and given the primary position in graphic design projects.

Discussion and Conclusion

Contributions

The contributions of this study are not easily evaluated, as every designer acts independently and has different thoughts and aesthetic standards. It is impossible to say whether the framework of this study could be applied to help all designers; however, it may affect or provide some inspiration for new designers. Innovation, as the embodiment of design concepts, enables a designer to express his or her internal thoughts to the external world and attract more customers for the sake of enlarging the effect. The new stream of cultural innovation explores a blind field, where customers find it hard to know the reasons why they are moved by art and gain resonance from it. In terms of design, it helps to draw a clear map for designers to know how they gain inspiration, and why the master designers' innovative work wins them excellent reputations all over the world. For society, the categories of innovation are continuously updated and their scope is further expanded.

Future study

The next stages of this research will involve a focused approach to further define the constructs of innovation, the meaning of culture and the tension between tradition and innovation for the design masters. All of the designers who will be interviewed have been listed before, based on the initial analysis of secondary material. The interviewees will be further identified when their interviews are conducted. Case studies will involve interviews with these experts, visiting their studios and becoming more familiar with the design concepts in Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan. In addition, more interviews will be carried out with masters such as Steiner to consolidate the findings and develop more substantial thoughts based on analysis of the data collected. This information will be instrumental to further developing the proposed framework and defining how the masters of graphic design interpret the Chinese culture, what format the designers' philosophies take and what explains their ability to innovate. Conducting structured interviews will allow the researchers to ask specific questions related to this study, the definition of culture in design and the strategies for interpreting Chinese culture in design.

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Author Biography

TIAN Yao

TIAN Yao, Yolanda was born in northern China. After graduating from the Academy of Arts in Nationality University in Beijing, she worked as an E-zine designer in China Film Press based on her major graphic design at the time when the interactive magazine had just begun to emerge in China. Then she got her Master degree on Multimedia and Entertainment Technology in the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2014. During the time in PolyU, her interest and passion for researching design thinking process was ignited through several projects

on interactive design, user experience, as well as business management. After one-year working in Sino United Publishing (Holdings) Limited in HK, she came back to PolyU, as a PhD student.

During the PhD study, her research topic is 'How masters in graphic design interpret Chinese Culture?' This research topic directly addresses the issue of lacking of innovation of graphic works among Chinese designers, and emphasizes on the importance of cultural factors in the design process by the application of a systematic and culture based innovation methodology (Jian et al., 2005).

Ippo KOSKINEN

Ippo Koskinen specialised in design research, where his main interests have been in mobile multimedia, social interaction, and methodology. Usually interested in emerging ideas, his work concentrates on the avant-garde end of technology and methodology. He is professor, an experienced teacher, project leader, and thesis supervisor especially at MA/MSc and doctoral levels. He also functions as an editor, his most recent book was well-received "Design Research through Practice," published by Morgan Kaufmann. He has published well over 100 papers, conference papers and books.

His main areas of expertise are:

- Research methods especially qualitative, empathic, and constructive
- Consumer studies especially studies of design when it enters everyday life
- Mobile multimedia especially visual means of communication
- Information technology especially co-experience and proactive technology

In addition, he has studied formal organisations, design in urban space, education and sustainability, and world design. Lately his writing has been mainly critical.