

# TYP@G|@P#Y |)@`/~ 2012

## Typography in Publication Design

### Typographic Culture of Hong Kong

Mariko Takagi, Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University, m-takagi@hkbu.edu.hk

**Abstract:** Does a special and unique typographic culture exist in Hong Kong? And if yes, how is the Hong Kong typographic culture distinguishable from other Asian cultures as China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, etc.? Who are the leading typographers and what are their missions? How to promote and develop the “typographic culture of Hong Kong” in future not only within the local context, but internationally? This research on “typographic culture in Hong Kong” does not only aim to analyse the current situation but shows ways of creating awareness of the Hong Kong typographic identity and culture in the future. The long-term significance of this project is to promote the international acceptance of Hong Kong (designer/artist) in the field of graphic design and typography in particular.

*Key words: Hong Kong, typography, Chinese complex characters, typographic design, visual culture, phenomenology*

#### 1. Hong Kong - a melting pot

Hong Kong is one of the most modern cities in Asia. For many tourists it is one of the most popular and attractive shopping paradises. All the famous international brands are available in this city - from the European and American to the Japanese luxury labels. The other side of the coin is that Hong Kong's super malls look similar to any other super malls of the world. One side effect of the advancing globalization is the process of unifying and the loss of individual visual identity of all these “international” spots. But not only the outer appearance is getting standardised, the range of products as well. The term “international design” or even “global design” should not be synonymous with the loss of individuality. These two terms should name the concept of a “design style that is universally accepted”. In fact, such current high quality design created in Hong Kong is not easy to find. In the last decade cities like Tokyo, Berlin, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Barcelona became more and more famous for their innovative designers and their creations. These places are very attractive for international art and design students, young creative designers, design-agencies; these are the best address for design business. Even

from the economic perspective the discipline of design starts to be accepted as a market player with high growth expectations in the near future. These days design is recognised as an important marketing tool and symbol for quality in the international market. Not only product design but also corporate design is one important part of the business strategy to create and strengthen the own brand identity to sustain in the modern society. Hong Kong is an international place - a melting pot for eastern and western culture. The multicultural mixture is strongly visible in the field of graphic design, especially in the case of typographic design. Most of the written language in this city is presented bilingually, Chinese and English. The typography (the visual graphical order of written information) of Hong Kong is rich in cultural diversity. In addition to the usage of traditional Chinese characters, English is visualised by Latin letters in almost every area of public life. But there are more than "British" or "American" foreign cultural influences as well. Especially Japanese typographic influence is obviously widespread and popular. Japanese products, movies and books are common and as easy to consume in Hong Kong as any other international products. But what is about the individual, the so-called Hong Kong style of typography? This research project aims to analyse the current typographic culture of Hong Kong.

Hideshi Hamaguchi (Director of Strategy, ZIBA Design, USA) mentioned in his talk at BODW (Business of Design Week) in Hong Kong in November 2010 the special chance of Hong Kong and its unique position as a place that combines the tradition of Chinese culture with the influence of Europe. Hamaguchi pointed out, that if innovation, design and culture can be balanced, "Hong Kong is the best spot for innovation". As a melting pot of many international influences and inspiration combined with the Chinese tradition and culture, Hong Kong has a great chance of being a design spot in the future. But the current situation shows no clear recognition of a self-confident design culture in Hong Kong. The objective of this research project focuses on typographic design aspects. Especially in the case of typography (as the graphical interpretation of language) Hong Kong has, related to its internationality, a great chance to develop a special position. The project started with an analysis of the current statues of typography in Hong Kong: Who is actively working as a graphic designer with a focus on typography? Who is the "first generation" and how about the "newcomers" of these days?

## **2. Typography**

The conditions given in Hong Kong for developing and exploring an individual style of typographic design are very good, and it is based on a special constellation: Cantonese as

the spoken language visualised by the writing system based on the traditional complex Chinese characters. (The complex Chinese characters are only used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan officially at this time. The combination of Cantonese and complex Chinese characters is unique.)<sup>1</sup> Last but not least this is combined with English as visualised in Latin alphabets. This initial situation is unique and perfect for creating an individual perception of the Hong Kong visual culture. All inspiration gained from different international places (Hong Kong people as widely travelled “globetrotters”), combined with the local (Chinese) culture and the still remaining British influence are elements of an unique style, which waits to be discovered.

## 2.1 The writing system

The sinologist Wolfgang Bauer (Bauer, 1991) and the linguist Harald Haarmann (Haarmann, 1991) are not the only scholars who declared the Chinese (complex) characters as the longest uninterrupted and continuous system in the world. (Chinese complex characters are not representing the oldest writing system, but at least, the longest tradition.) This long continuous tradition leads sometimes to perpetuate of stereotypes, which shows an Eurocentric position on the discussion about writing systems. The perception of Chinese characters still keeps the image of “mysterious and inconvenient logograms” among Western scholars. This position is observable at Frederick Bodmer’s (philologist) book “The Loom of Language” from 1944 and 55 years later in Prof. Christian Stetter’s (linguist) work “Schrift und Sprache” as well. Now, more than 10 years after Stetter’s publication, neither the knowledge about the Chinese writing system has increased, nor have the stereotypes been overcome. What has changed dramatically is the necessity of accepting this comprehensive writing system emerged for Western companies to be able to trade with China and in order to maintain their status as global market players.

## 2.2 Chinese characters are not only pictograms and logograms

The Chinese character set globally represents one of the most complex systems in use. The huge sum of all existing Chinese characters is named with 60,000 up to 80,000. Till the end of the secondary school, Chinese students learn 3,000 to 4,500 characters.<sup>2</sup> The research

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<sup>1</sup> Simplified Chinese was introduced in the People’s Republic of China in 1956 in order to reduce illiteracy. Some scholars issue a warning that the establishment of the simplified characters can be seen as an interruption of the long continuing tradition of the Chinese writing system. Other scholars, as Susanne Zippel, see an improvement in case of learnability of the characters and recognises this as an approach towards an international communication.

<sup>2</sup> <http://life.mingpao.com/cfm/reports3.cfm?File=20071022/rptaa03b/gza1.txt>

“Hong Kong, Mainland China & Taiwan: Chinese Character Frequency - A Trans-Regional, Diachronic Survey” by the Hong Kong Chinese University has shown that during the 1980<sup>th</sup> and 1990<sup>th</sup>, between 4,600 and 4,900 characters have been used in daily life, in general publications (excluding specialised literature), news, media, official documents and education.<sup>3</sup>

The traditional classification “liùshū (六書)”, which can be translated with “Six Writings”, divides the enormous amount of characters into six principles, by analysing the structure and composition of a character. This principle is based on an almost 1,900 years old book, called “Shuowen Jiezi (說文解字, Shuo wén jie zi)” written by the Chinese scholar Xu Shen (許慎, Xu Shèn), during the Han Dynasty (25-220) and *published* in year 121. Xu Shen introduces six methodologies used for creating Chinese characters and verifies it with 9,353 characters, which were in use during the Han Dynasty. (e.g. (Haarmann, 1991), (Kotoh, 2004))

The six categories differ from each other by their evolution, the act of deriving their usage and the level of simplification. The *basic modules* are formed in the categories: pictogram (象形 xiàng xíng, “form imitation”) and ideogram (指事 zhǐ shì, “indication”). Elements of these *basic modules* are combined together to “ideogrammatic compounds (會意 huì yì, “joined meaning”)” and “radical phonetic (形聲 xíng shēng, “form and sound”)”. The fundamental idea of this group can be described with composing. It shows methods of multiplying the number of characters. On top, they allow to visualize abstract ideas. The third group is based on the development of characters through the use: “derivative cognate (轉注 zhuǎn zhù, “reciprocal meaning”)” and “Rebus (假借 jiǎ jiè, “borrowing; making use of”)”.

The system of “Six Writings” is still a guiding line in Chinese (and Japanese) dictionaries and in education. It supports the comprehension of the idea and structure of Chinese characters. The six principles will be briefly introduced below.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Lexis/chifreq/>

### 2.2.1 Pictogram

The category of pictograms (象形 xiàng xíng, “form imitation”) represents the oldest form of characters and dates back to oracle bones from the twelfth century BCE.<sup>4</sup> Pictograms are simplified graphical illustrations of objects. Poertner describes them as “rough sketches of things which they represent”. This characteristic makes them to be “the most elementary part of the Chinese characters”. (Poertner, 2002) The “archaic form” (Frutiger, 1991) of the originally visualised object is still recognizable, despite the stylization and systematization during the thousands of years the characters are in use. Pictographic characters shall not be mixed up with “pictures” as they have their defined phonetic and semantic. (Voss, 2003)

Roughly 600 Chinese characters are defined as pictograms. Based on their attributes, as they “picture a small part of the concrete reality” the possibilities of this category are strongly limited.

### 2.2.2 Ideogram

An ideogram (指事 zhǐ shì, “indication”) is a *symbol* which expresses a simple and abstract idea through an iconic form, including iconic modification of pictographic characters. The systematic of this principle will be descriptively visualised by two examples. (E.g. (Robinson, 2004), (Poertner, 2002))

- Low numerals: The numerals one, two and three are visualised by the appropriate number of their horizontal strokes.
- Directions: the characters for above and below are almost mirrored using the horizontal stroke as the axis.

Robinson describes ideograms as a “logical shape”. (Robinson, 2004)

### 2.2.3 Ideogrammatic compound

As mentioned before “ideogrammatic compounds (會意 huì yì, “joined meaning”)” are a way of combining two or more pictograms and/or ideograms together in a composition of a new character. An ideogrammatic compound “rather represents an idea, not a picture”. (Robinson, 2004) “Associations and logical coherences” can be formulated with this method. (Fazzioli, 2003) Each element contained in one compound contributes to the meaning of the entire character/idea.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.kinkido.net/Chinese/resume-kanji.html>, 2011. 12. 05.

Essentially, there are two methods. First of all, the repetition of one character to intensify the meaning. Secondly, the combination of two different characters, a multiplication of ideas that leads to a new association and a new meaning. (Zippel, 2010)

#### 2.2.4 Radical Phonetic

All of the three previous principles still show a strong connection between *visual and meaning*. In case of “Radical phonetic (形聲 xíng shēng, “form and sound”)” the radicals (the components) united in one character take over *one of two tasks*. One is the *phonetic information*. The second is the *semantic layer*. (Schmidt, 1995) The number of characters build on the principle of radical phonetic are numerically superior and said to make more than 90% of the whole Chinese character set. (Robinson, 2004)

#### 2.2.5 Derivative Cognate

The characters of the principle “derivative cognate (轉注 zhuàn zhù, “reciprocal meaning”)” reflects the changes within the spoken language. Despite the original meaning, a second related meaning / association is *attached* to the character. The original and the new usage of a character often refer to similar meanings and same etymological root, but with different pronunciation. (Zippel 2010) In some cases of “derivative cognate”, the original meaning disappears in favour of the new meaning.

#### 2.2.6 Rebus

In case of the principle called “Rebus (假借 jiǎjiè, “borrowing; making use of”)” the phonetic of the original character is decisive. Based on the homophonous (same phonetic, different semantic) or near-homophonous feature, a character is “borrowed” from one word to another. This “exchange” is only based on the phonetic similarity and ignores the semantic level. (Voss, 2003) According to Fazzioli, in most of the cases the etymological background of rebus characters can hardly be proved. The “shift” is a matter of a developing language. The “borrowed character” loses its original meaning in exchange to the new. In most of the cases the “original meaning” receives a new character. (Zippel, 2010)

### 2.3 Word spacing and alignment

The simplest Chinese character is based on one horizontal stroke, the character for the number *one*. The most complex character, based on 64 strokes stands for: Yatter. From the simplest to the most complicated character, all characters are based on the formal principle of a square. Or, to be more distinguished, all characters are at least placed in an

imaginative square. In the Chinese writing system no space is kept between two words. Only punctuation marks (as comma and full stop) create a space to the following group of characters. Therefore a line set in Chinese characters appears comparably dark and intense.



Figure.1 One character with 64 strokes.

The direction of a text can be arranged vertically (from top to bottom (characters) and from right to left (lines)) or horizontally (from left to right (characters) and from top to bottom (lines)). The vertical line setting has a longer tradition and goes back to the inscription in oracle bones from the twelfth century BCE. (Haruta Yukari, 2009)

Nowadays the direction of a text gives a hint about the content. Horizontal line setting is used for (official) correspondence, scientific-oriented publications and bilingual text (English and Chinese). The vertical lines appear in textbooks, publications in the discipline of humanities and last but not least calligraphy. Nevertheless this differentiation reflects a tendency and not a strict rule. In magazines and newspaper design, both systems are mixed in one publication, mostly even on one spread.

### 3 Typography made in Hong Kong

#### 3.1 Related work in analysing the visual culture of Hong Kong

Publications introducing Hong Kong designers are comparably rare - focusing on the local typography scene is even vanishingly rare.<sup>5</sup> Michael Miller Yu (余奉祖), being a graphic

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<sup>5</sup> Compared to the poor number of publication about Hong Kong designers in general, there is an enormous amount of books introducing Japanese designers. On the other hand, designers from China (mainland) are *discovered* as the upcoming trendsetters in national and international books and magazines. (E.g. (Dogpress Studio, 2010), (Museum fuer Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2006) or recent publication by German publisher Taschen and Kehrer, just to mention a few.) In these publications, Hong Kong designers are mentioned as well. The few editions focusing on the Hong Kong design culture are not specified to graphic design, especially not to typographic design.

designer himself, published one article called “The evolvement and power of Hong Kong Design” (香港設計的演變和力量).<sup>6</sup> The article talks about the design environment in Hong Kong as a whole, including advertising, product design and interior design. Summarising the history of the local design starting in the 1960<sup>th</sup>, the author divides the designers into four groups, according to the decade of starting their career. (1st generation: 1960s to 1970s, 2nd: 1970s to 1980s, 3rd: 1990s, 4th: 2000s)

According to Yu’s article, the first and the second generation developed the foundation of the local design and were making the discipline of design in Hong Kong to be recognised internationally (Kan Tai-Keung & Henry Steiner). Alan Chan (2nd generation) was, as described by Yu, the one who established the definition of “Hong Kong Design”.

After the great efforts of the first two generations, developing and establishing a design business in Hong Kong was getting easier. At the same time, the style of design changed from a rather *Chinese traditional* towards a more *international and simple style*. With this fashion, the Asian and the local influence fade away.

Yu talks about the recognition Hong Kong designers received through various awards in international competitions. But despite this success, the author points out his embarrassments in comparing Hong Kong design to Western or even Chinese design culture.

While the number of names of graphic designers mentioned in this article is proportionally rather huge, Yu does not specify his observation on movements in the discipline of graphic design, not to mention typography.

### **3.2 Three generations of graphic and typographic designers creating typographic works**

For the ongoing research project “Typographic Culture in Hong Kong”, we focused on Hong Kong designers and artists who contributed works of typography. Starting with the 1960<sup>th</sup>, we divided the designers into three groups. The first group includes designers who started their career in Hong Kong during the 1960s till 1980s, e.g. Henry Steiner and Alan Chan. The second group (1990s till 2000s) is represented by Eric Chan, Benny Au and many more. Finally, the third group represents young designers or even soon-to-be designers, who

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<sup>6</sup> This article is posted on many websites and blogs (Hong Kong, China (mainland) and Taiwan), mostly in Chinese. To find detailed information about the year of publishing and the first release was not possible until this time.

graduated after 2008 or are even still studying at the time of progress of this research project.

This research project does not aim to show as much typographic works created in Hong Kong as possible. At the same time it does not pursue the objective of completeness. It focuses on analysing the tendencies of designers of these three generations, their exploration of typography and the indication of their cultural background in combination with international/global inspiration. Designers of the first generation (in the context of this work) as well as the second generation are (internationally) well known. Talking about Hong Kong typography, it is impossible not to show their work. At the same time, the third generation of young designers (some of them still in their early 20<sup>th</sup>) will be presented together with the (old) masters.

This paper and the presentation during the conference will focus on one aspect, one topic within this research project.

### **3.3. East meets West in Typographic Design**

Yu mentioned it in one sentence in his article: "What makes Hong Kong designers unique compared to designers in mainland, is their international viewpoints and training."

As described above, Hong Kong is a melting pot. Fashion, products, or just call it all kinds of trends and influences, arriving from Western countries as well as from Asian neighbours, immediately after their formation.

In the typographic work of all above defined generations, at some point the involvement with the diversity of the Eastern identity (or even mentality) and the Western influence (and/or inspiration) will be discussed. The following will show different ways of merging diverse cultural influences into one typographic work.

#### **3.3.1 Henry Steiner**

Henry Steiner was born in Vienna and studied with Paul Rand at Sorbonne and Yale. In the year 1961 Steiner emigrated from Austria to Hong Kong and founded 1964 his design consultancy firm, Steiner & Co. One of his most famous projects was the corporate design of the leading bank in Hong Kong, HSBC and their bank notes design in 1975. Henry Steiner is still actively participating at conferences and design business.

One cyclic element in Steiner's work is the incorporating of Chinese characters and symbols with Western elements and letters. His design highly influenced the cross-cultural-design development and image of Hong Kong.

For the cover of an annual report, 1989, Steiner merged the Chinese character for "10" and the English term "ten" together in one image. For the Chinese character, Steiner chose calligraphy with a strong dynamic stroke. The Chinese character replaces the "t" of the English term. The lowercases "en" are set in Bodoni (a Didone) close to the stem of the Chinese character. The calligraphic element and the western typeface stand in a strong contrast to each other. The *energetic* and *emotional* brush stroke faces the *rational* and *cool* appearance of the typeface and creates a strong contrast within the layout. A rotated square divided into three colours holds the image of the three elements together. The colour scheme of the background is held in a calm and traditional Asian atmosphere. The remaining information on the cover, set in white colour, is placed on the top of the layout. The attention of the reader is clearly centred on the bilingual "ten". Steiner's Poster design for Morisawa, two years later, shows the same design method. Again Chinese characters replace a Latin letter. The "T" is visualised by the character ten and the uppercase E, by the numeric character "three". And again, Steiner uses the calligraphic stroke for the Chinese elements and a type font for the alphabets. But other than before the choice of Geralde and the usage of capital letters reduces the strong contrast between the western and the eastern characters. In this layout, the four elements appear more as *team players* and not *competitors*, as each character has his own space in this symmetrical setting. The strong contrast originates in the black background and the white shining characters, while the name of the company merges with the background.

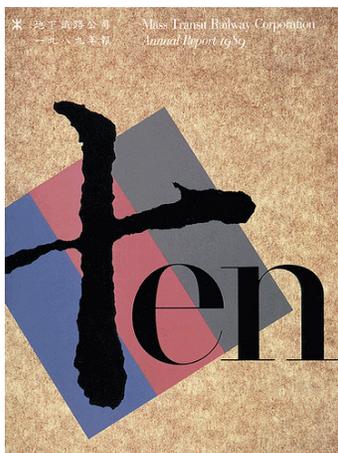


Figure.2 Annual report design for the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 1989.

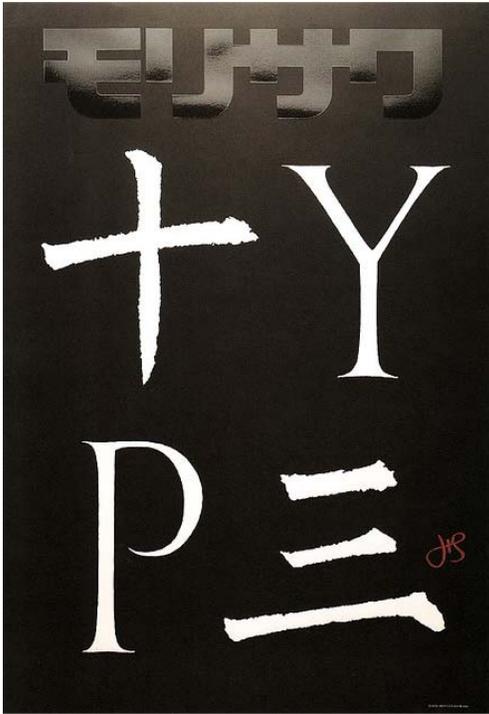


Figure.3 Poster design for the Japanese typesetting company Morisawa, 1991.

### 3.3.2 Eric Chan

After graduating from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and The Institute of Art & Design in 1981, Chan has been working as a graphic designer with a major focus in corporate design consultancy. In 1991, he founded Eric Chan Design Co. Ltd. His company is specialized in the development of corporate and brand identity. Chan was a committee member of the Hong Kong Designers Association in 2002 to 2008 and is currently the Vice Chairman of this organization.

The typographic poster design of Eric Chan shows a separation between Eastern and Western typography. In his work "Sing for Gough", Eric Chan includes colour cloths (in one colour scheme) into the landscape of a Hong Kong street. The hanged cloths are nothing special in this city, as many city residents dry their clothes in this way. But by giving them one colour scheme and by putting them into a special order, the cloths are transformed into a Chinese letter. This work of Eric Chan shows his personal affinity to the urban life in Hong Kong.



Figure.4 & 5 “Sing for Gough”, poster design, Eric Chan, 2007.

For the poster design, developed for the paper distributor Antalis, Eric Chan designed several Latin typefaces, each of them introduced on one poster visualising a slogan. While the project “Sing for Gough” is strongly connected to the Hong Kong culture, the poster series for Antalis is held in English. No Chinese element is included. The Latin letters designed by Eric Chan show a playful attempt in a purely decorative manner. It seems that Chan is using the alien letters and language without feeling any boundaries or limitations. To put it in other words: it is the freedom from any responsibility regarding tradition and culture. In this sense the two poster series show a high contrast, on the visual as well as on the semantic level.



Figure.6 Poster design for Antalis, Eric Chan.

### 3.3.3 Adonian Chan

Adonian Chan was born 1986 in Hong Kong. He graduated from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2009, with BA (Hons) in visual communication design. Working at Trilingua, a Hong Kong based multi-disciplinary design studio dedicated in brand identity, print design, package design, environmental design and interactive design.

1+1 “a cross strait four regions artistic exchange project” (2011):

Trilingua Design was invited as a participant for the “1+1” Artist exchange project organized by Hong Kong Art Centre, Taiwan Kuandu Museum of Fine Art and Shen Zhen He Xiang Ning Art Museum. In the project each artist had to collaborate with another artist from a different region. The design concept evolved from the idea of the unexpected mixture, the clashes of collaboration. The team of Adonian Chan designed a set of unique characters, which derive from merging a Chinese character with a Latin letter. These bilingual letters were assigned to the participating artists. The inspiration came from the combination of chemical elements.

The described compound characters reflect a perfect harmony of two different writing systems. In this design, the Latin letter, set in an italic serif typeface, takes over the part of the dynamic element, while the Chinese Kaishu font appears rather light and rational at the same time. The body text in the informative area of this leaflet combines two reading directions, the vertical for the Chinese and the horizontal for the English. These changes within one layout create a rhythmical appearance of the text area and stress the diversity of these two systems.





Figure.7 1+1 “a cross strait four regions artistic exchange project”, Leaflet design, Adonian Chan, 2011.

### 3.3.4 Tim Tse

Tim Tse is a graduate of Hong Kong Polytechnic University, BA (Hons) in Design, visual communication in 2009.

In his work, Tim Tse shows a playful attempt of an involvement with his own generation. “The new lexicology of Post-80’s Generation” shows the designer’s collection of commonly used expressions of his generation in a candy-archive. The terms are from different context of everyday life and reflect the mentality of the young generation in Hong Kong. Beside the definition of Putonghua (Mandarin), he shows social critical observations as e.g. the working hours of an average person.

The package of the candies shows a clear and calm design, while the choice of typeface is orientated at the design used for dictionary. The Chinese characters and the italic serif font create a harmonious image, which turns out to be an ironic way of dealing with a not always convenient lifestyle.



Figure.8 The new lexicology of Post-80’s Generation.

#### 4. Conclusions

The given few examples show the different perceptions between the three generations of Hong Kong designers on the one hand and the personal attempts of the individual designers on the other hand. While Henry Steiner uses brush stroke typefaces for visualising Chinese characters to stress the Asian visual identity and the contrast between the two cultures, the third generation rather treat the two writing systems equally. Eric Chan is not a *special case*, as he completely separates Chinese content from Western topics. Other designers of his generation do the same. In bilingual design, they divide the space according to the language. Eastern and Western elements stop competing in one layout (Henry Steiner) but they stop communicating as well. Another observation of the second group shows that the Latin alphabet is rather used in a decorative way. The third generation unifies East and West, by finding a visual solution to show the two elements together in a *natural harmony*.

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