

## Coffee Or Chinese Tea – the Trans-cultural Exploration of Contemporary Chinese Graphic Design in the 1980s and 1990s

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**Abstract** | In 1978, the Communist Party of China made major decisions resulting in what was known as “reform and opening up”, perhaps the most significant turning point in recent Chinese history. Before that, China pursued a strategy of isolationism, and the state control of imagery under Communism after 1948 led to a form of mass propaganda. After 1978, rapid expansion in China’s relative economic size became the norm. In this context, graphic design practitioners in China experienced a tremendous transformation in their experience and environment. Based on personal memory of the pioneers of contemporary Chinese graphic design, such as Wang Xu and Wang Yuefei, this paper will explore the development of graphic design in China from the 1980s to 1990s when the field experienced transformation from operating in a comparatively isolated circle in which graphic design learning resources from the West were provided exclusively to in-house designers in state-owned packaging companies to the emergence of professional graphic design practitioners and private design companies. With first hand material collected through interview, the paper will examine the trajectories of these early practitioners in the 1980s when the task of the in-house designers at the Guangdong Packaging Import and Export Corporation was to change the situation in which China’s export commodities were characterised by “first-class quality, second-class price and third-class packaging”, as well as their exploration in the 1990s. The proposed paper would not only be a record of these designers personal memories but also an exploration of the thinking behind, attempting to find out the challenges they confronted when applying the knowledge gained abroad to local context.

**Keywords:** reform and opening up, package design, professional value

On 7 December 1996, the second Graphic Design in China (GDC) exhibition was organised at the Shenzhen Science and Technology Museum. (Zhou 2015, 8) With great excitement, local designers, design students and practitioners in the printing industry, as well as those from other regions of China made the special trip to Shenzhen to participate in this event. (Wang Yuefei, WeChat message to author, July 6, 2021) During the exhibition, many of them were gathering together in the area where the Collection of Award Winning Works were displayed. (Wang Yuefei, WeChat message to author, July 6, 2021) Different from the first Graphic Design in China exhibition in 1992, the back cover of the 1996 collection of award winning works is an advertisement, imposing a question, "Would you like coffee or Chinese tea?" 'Figure. 1' In fact, there would also be no advertisement in the future GDC collections of award-winning works. Holding this journal in hand, Wang Yuefei, the organiser of the exhibition, stood in the crowd of visitors experiencing strong emotions. In an era when there were no electronic files, it took a lot of effort to collect all the information, take photographs of all the award winning works, create the layout and complete the design within a few days after the results of the competition came out. It was through efficient collaboration that his team completed the work. (Wang Yuefei, WeChat message to author, July 6, 2021)

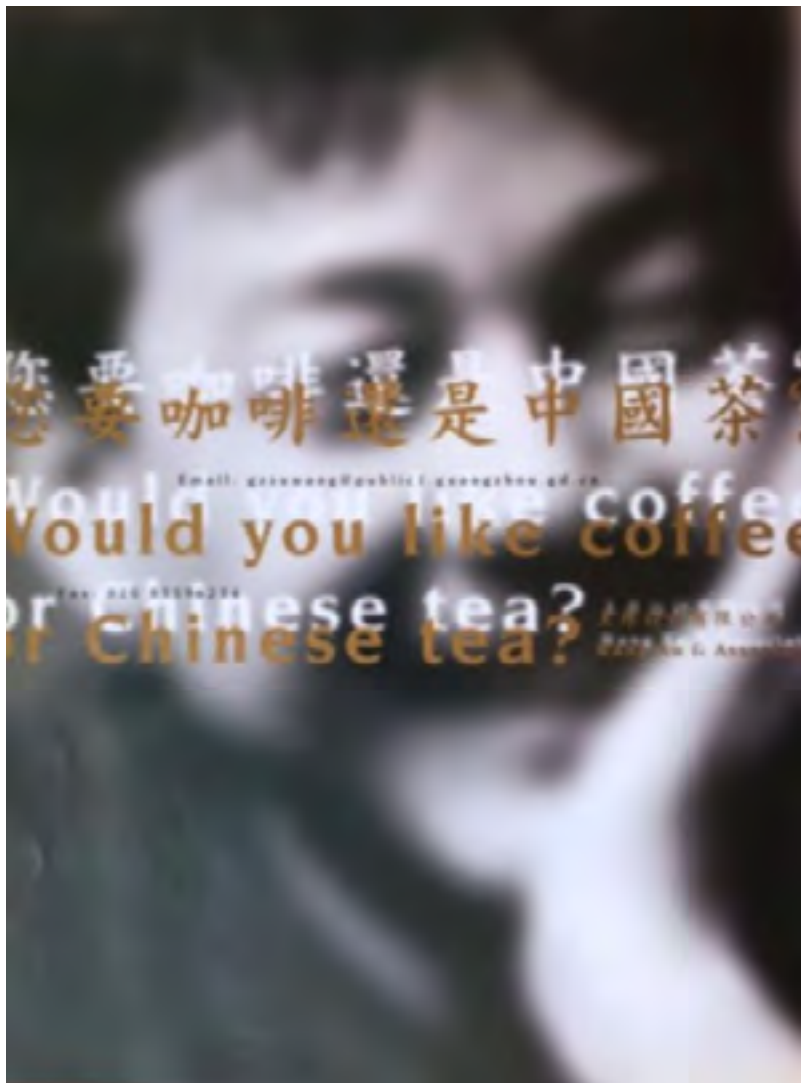


Figure 1. Wang Xu, "Would you like Coffee or Chinese Tea?", advertisement design on back cover of 1996 GDC Collection of Award Winning Works, 1996 (©Wang Xu)

What, then, was the idea and meaning behind this "accidentally appeared" advertisement? Does this imply the difference between the first and the second GDC exhibition? Why would the designer choose to impose such a question in a publication that would be presented in an exhibition on graphic design that would attract so many designers and arouse so much attention in China? To answer these questions, it is both important and necessary to analyse the advertisement on the back cover of the

"Would you like coffee or Chinese tea?" was created by Wang Xu as an advertisement for Wang Xu & Associates. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, May 20, 2021) A blurred portrait of Wang Xu, director of Wang Xu & Associates, one of the pioneering graphic designers in China was used as background. In the portrait, Wang Xu supported his cheek with his left hand and smiled happily. On top of the portrait, in the middle of the advertisement, there are three lines of big characters in dark brown and they are "Would you like coffee or Chinese tea?" in Chinese and English. The similar characters of white colour were superimposed under the dark brown ones like projection. At the end of the sentence, there was Wang Xu's company name presented in a similar way but of much smaller size. In between the lines of big characters, there is the email address and fax number of Wang Xu & Associates in black colour of even smaller size. According to Wang Xu's explanation, the dark brown represented coffee while white represented tea of light colour. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, May 20, 2021) Therefore, the characters of two different colours and a projection effect is a delicate visual presentation of the theme of the advertisement. Typeface is an important element in this advertisement. Bold Huakang Kaiti was chosen as Chinese typeface and the English typeface is ITC Novarese Bold. In an interview about the design of this advertisement, Wang Xu specifically mentioned the consideration behind the choice of the typefaces, explaining that at the time he already had the awareness of choosing a corresponding English font to match Chinese to create a harmonious effect. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, May 20, 2021)

This seems like the choice and thinking about the application of typeface in the creative process, while only through putting this design in the historical context, can we better understand why Wang Xu would have such idea.

## 1. Full Embrace of Western Design

More than 15 years ago, from 1977-1979 when Wang Xu was studying at Guangzhou Fine Art Academy, he had a strong feeling that the training of graphic design skills at his school was inadequate. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author March 1, 2018) After graduation, when he had arranged to work for the Guangdong Export Commodities Packaging Institute within the Guangdong Packaging Import and Export Corporation, he had to gain relevant knowledge of design practice to create packaging design that would complete in the international market through self-study. (Wang 2008) When describing the situation in the 1980s, Wang Xu remarked that, "we were surrounded by graphic design but had no awareness about what exactly design was... my task was to design export packages but there were no teaching materials at school. What should I do? Study or not to study? Use (these materials) or not? How to use (them)? These were pressing issues." (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, October 28, 2017) To enter into this profession as soon as possible, he paid special attention to the structure of Western lettering, as well as the colour, form and use of imagery.



Figure 2. Wang Xu, Heaven Temple, package design, 1982-1983 (© Wang Xu)

It is important to point out that Guangdong was one of the leading provinces in terms of exports, with GDP among the highest in China. (History of Reform and Opening in Guangdong Research group 2018, 24) It was also at the forefront of the implementation of the reform and opening up policy. (History of Reform and Opening in Guangdong Research group 2018, 24) The Guangdong Packaging Import and Export Corporation was in charge of the coordination and the overall planning of imports and exports in Guangdong province, including all the design work in this area; also, the designers in its Design Section were responsible for certain categories of export commodities according to a division of labour. (Su, 2018) This at first glance might look like a product of a planned economy, but at that time it was an advanced organisation with a very professional and comprehensive configuration - there was a large scale exhibition hall to display imported commodities by well-known brands in the form of supermarket shelves corresponding to all the export categories, including electrical appliances, clothing, children's toys, hardware, textiles and food. (Wang Yuefei interview with the author, in Shenzhen, October 24, 2017) There was also a reference room of international design magazines such as *Idea* (Japan), *Graphis* (Switzerland), *Communication* (United States) and *Package* (Japan), as well as annuals, such as *Art Directors' Annuals* (Art Director's Club of New York). (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, April 12, 2017)

In addition, as employees from Guangdong Packaging Import and Export Corporation, Wang Xu and his colleagues had the opportunity to attend the lectures by European and American designers organised by the company. This was very rare in China at the time. When describing his feeling about the lecture of Landor, a renowned packaging designer who is best remembered as a pioneer in the field of branding and use of consumer research, Wang Xu's colleague Wang Yuefei mentioned that "It was like a child watching a movie, totally overwhelmed". (Zcool 2018) Landor's lecture in Guangzhou in the early 1980s also inspired Wang Xu. After that, he began to concentrate on learning about European and American packaging design. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10,

2021) His redesign for Heaven Temple is a case in point. 'Figure 2' The emphasis on the brand represented by an eye-catching bold typeface in a large size, as well as a stable position for the brand name on each item is the visual representation of the "visual impact on the shelf", the professional vocabulary Wang Xu used as the key concept behind this design from the presentation of Walter Landor. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021) Westernisation, however, was not only his personal experience. The trend of learning from the West was dominant at that time, especially among the designers working for the import and export companies where to meet an international standard was a prerequisite for competition. 190

## 2. Choice between Coffee and Tea

In the autumn of 1986, Wang Xu was sent to Hong Kong to work for the Packaging Company under the Yuehai Group, the local branch of Guangdong Packaging Import and Export Corporation where big transformations had taken place in his life. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, October 24, 2017) First of all, in October 1986 when the Hong Kong office of Landor Associates opened, Landor visited the Hong Kong branch of Guangdong Packaging Import and Export Corporation with the requirement to meet the "graphic designer from mainland China". (Yumpu 2001, 4) Wang Xu finally got the opportunity to communicate with Landor whose presentation had a significant impact on his practice. For example, the redesign of packaging for Heaven Temple brand in 1982-1983. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, March 19, 2018) This, also was an opportunity for him to formally become connected with Landor.

It was also during this period that Wang Xu began to come in contact with international designers who explored the integration of Eastern and Western cultures through design practice. Soon after his arrival, Wang Xu began to try to approach Henry Steiner, an Austrian graphic designer based in Hong Kong, through the Hong Kong branch of the Japanese paper company Tai Tak Takeo Fine Paper Co., Ltd. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, October 24, 2021) Educated at Yale under the guidance of Paul Rand, Henry Steiner had a special interest in the application of Latin typefaces, as well as the combination of Western and Eastern culture in design. From 1964, when he established Steiner & Co. in Hong Kong, he created designs for many well-known brands with an international reputation, including IBM and HSBC. (Steiner & Co 2021) Meanwhile, he started research on bilingual design and published Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace. In December, 1986, at the Hong Kong Design Biennial, Wang Xu eventually had his first encounter with Henry Steiner together with Japanese book designer Kohei Sugiura. After viewing Wang Xu's work, Kohei Sugiura suggested: "You should look forward with one eye and look backwards with the other eye". (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, December 18, 2017) Kohei Sugiura's suggestion was brief; however, for Wang Xu, this was the sentence that woke him up from his keen worship of Western design and encouraged him to reflect on his journey and then prepare to make the transformation of starting to pay attention to local culture and draw inspiration from it for his design creations while learning from international designers.

In 1987, one year after his arrival in Hong Kong, he began to publish Design Exchange, a magazine introducing international graphic designers and their practice with the support from his company. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, October 18, 2017) As a beginner, he had to build up everything from zero through the new connections he had established, with designers such as Henry Steiner and Walter Landor. The process of editing the magazine became a process for him to learn design methods and expand his international network, which ran through the 1990s. (Wang Xu, email to author, April 13, 2018)

Meanwhile, Shenzhen, as a test site for China's reform and opening up policy, was experiencing rapid economic development in the decade from 1990 to 1999. The annual per capita wage in Shenzhen increased 4.7 times, from 4,340 CNY in 1990 to 20,714 CNY in 1999. (Zhang 2019, 66) The figures were much higher than those in the other economically developed cities in China. Many foreign-funded companies and new types of enterprises were established as an exploration of the new economic model brought by the policies of preferential treatment for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. Take for example, GRAFICOM, which was a joint venture in the Special Economic Zone run by Wang Yuefei, Wang Xu's former colleague at Guangdong Export Commodities Packaging Institute. (Wang 2001)



However, while the rapid development of the regional economy had brought business opportunities to the graphic design profession, Wang Xu, Wang Yuefei and the group of designers soon discovered that the public and society's understanding of the graphic design field was still very limited. For example, some of their design work that brought huge profits for the companies was not paid for because the definition and boundary of their work was not clear. When describing the situation, at the same time Wang Xu mentioned that "it was difficult. Even if you have particularly good professional skills, not many people would come to you, because the client didn't understand the quality of the design work..." (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021) In the 1990s, it was difficult to get procedural approvals for companies registered in the names of individual designers in China, although there were no clear legal regulations. At that time, there were no more than 5 companies named after individual designers, including Wang Xu's design company, Wang Xu & Associates. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021)

### 3. Conclusion

Under such circumstances, in 1996, Wang Xu, thought deeply when selecting the judges, because he was the person in charge of overseas liaison for the second Graphic Design in China exhibition, an event initiated and organised by a group of designers in Shenzhen. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021) This kind of thinking included Wang Xu and his designer colleagues' consideration of establishing industry standards for the graphic design profession, enhancing international exchanges and promoting public understanding of graphic design. Meanwhile, it was also a continuation of his own exploration of the problems he confronted in design practice.

Different from the first Graphic Design in China exhibition in 1992 when the judges invited were all Chinese except for Henry Steiner, the four judges of the 1996 exhibition are all international designers, among whom two are from Asia. (Zhou. 2015. 11) Ken Cato from Australia was a designer of international reputation and encompassed all facets of corporate and brand management and design. (Cato 2021) Michel Bouvet from Paris was a poster artist and a jury member in international biennials. (ESAD 2021) The two Asian designers were from Japan and Korea respectively. Among them, Keizo Matsui was a versatile designer and artist, whose worldwide design activities include corporate identity, poster design, signage, graphic design, packaging, exhibition design, product development, art and sculpture. (AGI 2021) He was also executive director of DDD Gallery in Osaka. (DDD 2021) Ahn Sang-Soo was a graphic designer, as well as a university professor "who speaks good English". (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021). As to the choice of the judges, Wang Xu emphasised in an interview that, "These two Asian judges are particularly important to China because they had to confront similar situations and similar problems, such as the problem of bilingual design." (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021)

Compared with the first graphic design exhibition in China in 1992 when "designers from Mainland China and Taiwan had an exchange opportunity which was unprecedented and profound", the 1996 GDC exhibition "was an international event, representing different regional cultures. The judges with expertise in different professional areas reviewed the entries from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan from different perspectives". (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021)

Due to Wang Xu's contribution and support to 1996 GDC exhibition, the organisers of the event decided to reserve the back cover of the Collection of Award Winning Works to publish the advertisement of Wang Xu's company. (Wang Xu, WeChat message to author, July 10, 2021) In the advertisement, Wang Xu chose his own portrait as background, to proudly represent the fact that his company was one of the few named after an individual in China. On the back cover, he was smiling with an open attitude, raising his question, or it could be understood as him, in full confidence, offering the customer a choice "Would you like Coffee or Chinese tea?".

This seemingly simple question actually reflected that in the ten years from the 1980s <sup>192</sup> to the 1990s, an era when design resources were extremely scarce, designers represented by Wang Xu and his colleagues had been going through the process of fully accepting Western design. At the beginning when their understanding about design still remained at the visual level as a method to generate foreign exchange for international trade, but gradually they began to have reflective thinking and paying attention to the local culture and examining the design from a cultural perspective. This profound transformation was gradually realised among a group of pioneering Chinese graphic designers through continuous practice under different economic forms with the deepening of China's reform and opening up, as well as through communication with the international designers who have in-depth thinking about cross-cultural issues such as Henry Steiner and Kohei Sugiura.

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