

# The Development and Future of Hong Kong Typography

Amic G. Ho

**Abstract**—Language usage and typography in Hong Kong are unique, as can be seen clearly on the streets of the city. In contrast to many other parts of the world, where there is only one language, in Hong Kong many signs and billboards display two languages: Chinese and English. The language usage on signage, fonts and types used, and the designs in magazines and advertisements all demonstrate the unique features of Hong Kong typographic design, which reflect the multicultural nature of Hong Kong society. This study is the first step in investigating the nature and development of Hong Kong typography. The preliminary research explored how the historical development of Hong Kong is reflected in its unique typography. Following a review of historical development, a quantitative study was designed: Local Hong Kong participants were invited to provide input on what makes the Hong Kong typographic style unique. Their input was collected and analyzed. This provided us with information about the characteristic criteria and features of Hong Kong typography, as recognized by the local people. The most significant typographic designs in Hong Kong were then investigated and the influence of Chinese and other cultures on Hong Kong typography was assessed. The research results provide an indication to local designers on how they can strengthen local design outcomes and promote the values and culture of their mother town.

**Keywords**—Typography, Hong Kong, historical developments, multiple cultures.

## I. INTRODUCTION

HONG Kong has experienced extraordinary growth, starting as a small fishing village and growing to become the Asian metropolis that it is today. The unique characteristics of Hong Kong language usage and typography are easily recognizable, even on the streets of Hong Kong. Many signs and billboards display both Chinese and English. The language usage on signage, the fonts and types used, and the designs in magazines and advertisements all contribute to the uniqueness of typography in Hong Kong. Yet, what were the underlying factors that caused Hong Kong to embrace many cultures? What were the influences in Hong Kong's history on its typography? There is limited understanding of these questions from earlier studies on typographic design perspectives.

In this study, the first step in investigating the nature and development of Hong Kong typography, it was necessary to understand the extent of local citizens' knowledge about Hong Kong typography. These data provided us with the criteria and features of characteristic Hong Kong typography, as recognized by the local people. Subsequently, the historical typography was documented and analyzed. Finally, the influence of Chinese and other cultures on the typography was

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assessed and the most significant typographic designs were investigated. This paper documents content analysis research on the historical background of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong typographic designs selected by the citizens. The research team first conducted a preliminary exploration into how the historical development of Hong Kong is reflected in its unique typography. This established that Hong Kong has had a long typographic history and confirmed the need for further investigation into the criteria and features of Hong Kong typography. Following the review of historical development, input was collected from the local citizens about Hong Kong typography and was analyzed. The research results provide an indication to local designers on how to strengthen local design outcomes and promote the values and culture of their mother town.

## II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### *A. Origins in Chinese Heritage and the Influence of Westernization*

Hong Kong was a small, sleepy fishing village in Guangdong province in the southern part of China in the mid-19th century. Although it was ceded to Great Britain under a series of treaties in 1842, there was no explicit political prohibition of population mobility between the territories of China and Hong Kong [1]. Under British colonial rule, Hong Kong was established as a free trade port in southern China. Elements of multicultural and attitudes were imported under British rule [2]. However, Western and local cultures did not have many opportunities to meet each other in this early period. The majority of the Chinese population had little to no governmental influence in the early years [3]. Until the 1920s, Chinese traditions combined with Western influence to shape modern Chinese design styles. This development was similar to the case of Shanghai style in the 1920s and 1930s, where concepts from the West had a heavy influence on the design style [4]. The designs created in Hong Kong during this period were influenced by Britain and the Western concessions around Hong Kong, while the Greater China region, and the traditions of Chinese arts and crafts, remained in the background.

In the 1950s, Hong Kong underwent drastic changes. Many people migrated to Hong Kong from mainland China to escape from the Communist regime that gained power in 1949. In 1950, the colonial administration introduced border control decrees to halt the large influx of Chinese refugees. These Chinese refugees brought their knowledge, cultures, and wealth to Hong Kong. [5] The culture of the Shanghai period contributed richly to Hong Kong designs. The design cultures of both Shanghai and Hong Kong are rooted in Chinese traditions and emerged

from Western design concepts before World War II. However, the influence of Chinese modern design in Shanghai ceased during World War II, and after the Communist Revolution in 1949. The best of the Shanghainese designers' (among the Chinese refugees) creative design work were transferred to Hong Kong. This was largely graphic design for business purposes, which was seen as a symbol of the "Western lifestyle", encouraging the consumption of nonessential products. The Shanghai spirit of graphic design for business continued under the capitalist economic system and British colonial rule in Hong Kong after the war [6].

Imported talent brought high-quality creative production experience to Hong Kong in 1950. This experience and talent helped Hong Kong to catch up with the achievements of Shanghai. Hong Kong designers did not simply maintain the development begun in Shanghai but generated a new style based on Hong Kong's character. From the end of World War II until the 1960s, commercial graphic design (including typography) in Hong Kong developed steadily. Reference [7] argued that Hong Kong designers performed outstandingly in developing a modern Chinese design style. They laid down a rich foundation for the development that followed.

The growth of the Hong Kong economy after 1960 contributed substantially to the rapid development of graphic design in the city. This design was nourished not only by Chinese and British culture but also by worldwide culture [8]. The leading role of American companies and American design specialists working in Hong Kong was one of the significant forces that drove graphic design to reach worldwide standards. Local designers trained in China (including Guangzhou and Shanghai) had to gradually adapt their Chinese style to fit the worldwide commercial environment. This transition was a milestone in Hong Kong graphic design, including typography, because it introduced Western typographic design theories and principles into Chinese culture [9].

During the early 1960s, Henry Steiner was the most influential newcomer among the group of American designers. Steiner came to Hong Kong in 1961 after graduating from Yale University. He investigated new approaches to combining Chinese cultural symbols and Western-style handwriting script through his design work [10]. This work contributed to his success in establishing the principles of cross-cultural commercial graphic design and marked a momentous achievement in adapting the concepts of Western typographic design to the Hong Kong context.

Hong Kong design continued to develop by including Chinese elements in graphic design in a new manner, but communication between Taiwan and Hong Kong was not well established. Design in Taiwan was less developed than that in Hong Kong because of the repression of political control and restriction of personal freedom. Graphic design business in the mainland also was less developed and was under the tight ideological control of the Communist regime. The design of promotional materials, such as posters and publications for events, was a major graphic design activity. During the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, commercial graphic design work in China was prohibited.

Compared with the other Chinese regions nearby, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong developed a leading role in the new direction that graphic design took in the 1960s. Influenced by stronger political control and restricted personal freedoms, and the tight ideological control of the Chinese Communist Government, graphic design in the mainland developed very little [11].

After a period of relative social stability, improved livelihoods, and the accumulation of wealth resulting from economic growth, refugees established homes in Hong Kong and began to develop the city's identity [12]. Sociologists conducted social studies in the early 1970s and found that Hong Kong residents decided to stay because of the comparatively greater economic and development opportunities available [13]. Economic expansion and improved livelihoods began to form and consolidate the idea of home, identity, and indigenous culture for the people of Hong Kong. These expansions provided opportunities for the design industry to grow further. Magazines, packages, and other printed materials were designed and promoted in Hong Kong society. Under the bilingual language policy of the 1970s, the Chinese language was elevated to the status of co-official language along with English, further establishing bilingualism in Hong Kong [14].

#### *B. The Growth of Commercial Designs*

Following the foundations laid in the 1960s, by the 1980s Hong Kong had assumed a leading role in the region in commercial design. [15] In 1982, a group of Hong Kong designers were invited to participate in a competition in Taiwan. The outcome of the competition illustrated that Hong Kong graphics were relatively advanced, because there were fewer political constraints and they could more freely exchange ideas with other regions. Magazines and books were the predominant media that provided an effective platform for promoting Hong Kong typography.

In the 1980s, there was a growing awareness of a Hong Kong identity, because of several political issues and the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong from the British to the Chinese in 1997. At the same time, the application of Western design techniques and concepts was maturing. These factors led to two divergent design trends in Hong Kong: "the incorporation and exploration of traditional Chinese elements" and "local design work developed toward the expression of pure Western themes" [16].

During the mid-1980s, Hong Kong even assumed the role of enlightening the design modernization of mainland China. Some designers were invited to exhibit their work in mainland China. For example, the winning entries from the Hong Kong Designers' Association shows in 1986 and 1988 were exhibited in Guangzhou. [17] As a result of the relatively free and open creative environment, Hong Kong played a leading role by exporting their design experience to mainland China, leading to graphic design in mainland China and Taiwan that met international standards.

### C. The Leading Role in Greater China

The 1990s can be regarded as the peak period of the graphic and typographic design fields in Hong Kong. Some communication design organizations, such as the Graphic Design Association, were established and a wide range of poster and publication designers participated actively in major international poster design competitions. These achievements enriched the development of Hong Kong typographic design. Yet, few scholars at the time conducted research on the development of this field.

Since the handover of Hong Kong from Great Britain to the People's Republic of China in 1997, the Chinese language has gained increasing importance in official as well as informational domains [18]. Along with the historical developments in Hong Kong, language usage and design have also changed. However, the development of Hong Kong's typography depends heavily on its economy and commercial condition, and there has been insufficient planning for the training of graphic designers and typographic designers. It will not be easy for Hong Kong to maintain a leading role in the graphic design field.

This historical review provided information to the research team for analyzing historical influences on the features of Hong Kong typography.

### III. THE STUDY OF TYPOGRAPHY IN SIGNS

Semiology theory was used to decode the meaning embedded in typographic design in Hong Kong and thus understand the influence of Hong Kong's history on its typography. The concept of semiology was investigated by [19], who proposed that visual elements represent the world in a particular style. In other words, visual images (induced typography) create meaning and facilitate constructing imagination, and then develop the precision associated with the meaning. This precision is increasingly inclined to emphasize the image as the pivot of it. [20] Further consolidated the semiotic concept; he indicated that images not only contain signs but also convey meaning to the audience with their form and composition. Therefore, in this study, the concept of semiology was used to understand how the typography of Hong Kong represented the development of Hong Kong in a particular period with its corresponding style and presentation. For example, the font MTR-Song (Fig. 1) was designed in the 1970s specifically for the signage of the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway. It adopted the font design structure from the Kangxi Dictionary (a classic Chinese dictionary that was one of the foundations of Chinese literacy). This font was designed by a Hong Kong designer with both Chinese font structures and Western aesthetic concepts. This font reflects that the Hong Kong lifestyle was rooted in a rich Chinese heritage and modified by rigorous and strong work ethic. It delivered the message that the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway was an iconic urban symbol of Hong Kong in the 1970s.



Fig. 1 One of the signs in the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway [21]

### IV. PART I: QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Fifty local Hong Kong participants were invited to participate in this part of the study. Each of them was asked to collect 50 items of print material that they regarded as representative of Hong Kong typographic design. The materials collected were then categorized according to the period in which each of them was created and the nature of the printed material.

It was crucial to gain input from a wide spectrum of Hong Kong citizens, to understand how they identify the features of Hong Kong typography; consequently, generalization of research participation was essential. Participants with different educational backgrounds and ages were therefore recruited. The profile of the participants (shown in Fig. 2) was as follows:

- 10 of the participants were undergraduate design students;
- 10 of the participants were randomly recruited members of the working class, aged between 30 and 40 years;
- 10 of the participants were randomly recruited members of the working class, aged between 40 and 50 years;
- 10 of the participants were randomly recruited professionals aged between 30 and 40 years; and
- 10 of the participants were randomly recruited professionals aged between 40 and 50 years.

#### Profile of Research Participants

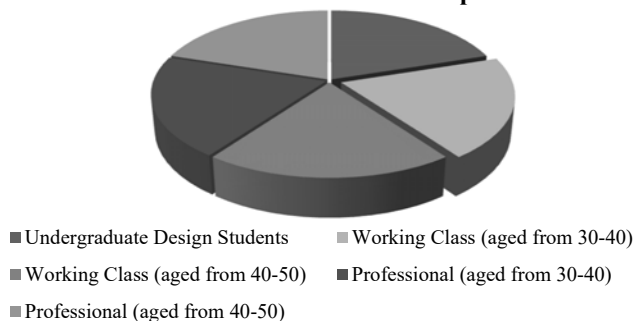


Fig. 2 Background information of the invited participants

#### A. Categorizing Collected Materials

A total of 2500 pieces of printed material were collected. The decade of creation and the nature of the printed material were

categorized as shown in Table I.

TABLE I  
CREATION PERIOD AND NATURE OF THE PRINTED MATERIAL

The created decades of the printed material	Amounts of the materials those created in the corresponding decades	The amount of the items at sub-categorized according to its nature	The nature of the sub- categorized items
Before 1900	2	2	Fork printing in temple
1910s	3	1	Signage
		2	Official government document
1920s	5	1	Signage
		2	Package
		3	Newspaper
1930s	6	2	Calendar
		3	Books
		3	Advertising
1940s	10	7	Book
		3	Newspaper
1950s	20	7	Advertising
		7	Book
1960s	200	6	Film poster
		53	Film poster
		30	Newspaper
		62	Advertising
1970s	142	55	Packages
		43	Magazine
		28	Advertising
1980s	870	50	Film poster
		21	Signage
		86	Signage
		79	Film poster
		384	Magazine
1990s	342	278	Advertising
		43	Packages
		68	Magazine
		43	Advertising
		187	Film poster
2010s	250	32	Signage
		12	packages
		80	Website and apps
		25	Event posters
		60	Magazine
		60	Advertising
		13	Film poster
		12	Signage

## V. PART II: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

To understand how the participants understand the message of Hong Kong typography through its visual presentation, a follow-up qualitative study was conducted. The same 50 people who participated in the quantitative research were invited to participate in a focus group interview. The questions asked in the interview were mainly open ended and the researchers invited the participants to answer freely. The open-ended questions were designed to encourage authentic responses rather than impose preconceived ideas. The participants were

asked questions about five selected materials, each of which was randomly selected from a different period of Hong Kong's development, as shown in Table II.

TABLE II  
RANDOMLY SELECTED MATERIALS FROM DIFFERENT PERIODS OF HONG KONG'S DEVELOPMENT

The created decades of the material	The nature of the sub- categorized items
Before 1900	Fork printing in temple
1910s	Signage
1920s	Newspaper
1930s	Advertising
1940s	Book
1950s	Film poster
1960s	Packages
1970s	Film poster
1980s	Advertising
1990s	Magazine
2000s	Packages
2010s	Website and apps

### Questions

- 1) In which period do you think this printed material was created?
- 2) Please tell me which visual element in this print material caused you to think about the Hong Kong style of the period you mentioned?
- 3) Why do you think this visual element illustrates the corresponding Hong Kong style?
- 4) Please choose three words from the following list that describe the message or feeling that was conveyed by material:
  - Traditional
  - Chinese heritage
  - British style
  - Economical
  - Political
  - Geographical
  - Cultural
  - Scenery
  - Contrast (between East and West, or ancient and modern)
  - Sports
  - Architecture
  - Technology
  - Heroism
  - Military
- 5) Please provide the reasons for your choice.

## VI. RESULTS

### A. The Most Representative Period of Hong Kong Typography Is the 1970s-1980s

The results show that the most recognizable Hong Kong typographic designs were generated in the 1970s and 1980s. Many iconic and symbolic typographic elements were adopted in these designs. Fonts featuring pop art were adopted in magazines and advertisements. Systematic Chinese fonts were generated on the basis of Western typographic design theories.

Influenced by Western typographic design trends, the readability and legibility principles of Chinese fonts were challenged in experimental ways.

*B. The Differences in Typography in Different Decades Were Recognized by the Participants*

Before the current study, there was little recognition of Hong Kong typography among local Hong Kong citizens and limited understanding of the development of Hong Kong typography. However, the collection selected by the participants clearly illustrates that the changes in typographic design in different periods in Hong Kong were recognized by the professionals in the study. These typographic designs presented the iconic features of the corresponding period through the printed media, type or typeface, and layouts. Bilingual language usage is not the only feature of Hong Kong typography. Although the participants, from different educational backgrounds and age groups, could not immediately identify the features of Hong Kong typography, they could identify the typographic designs that represent the characteristic Hong Kong style.

*C. The Features of the Typographic Designs in Different Decades Were Identified*

There is little understanding of the features of Hong Kong typography among general Hong Kong citizens. Few scholars have investigated the influence of Hong Kong typographic development on graphic design development in Asia. Few designers such as Henry Steiner are known by the public. The feedback of the participants reflected that the features of Hong Kong typography are obvious. Most of the participants could accurately match keywords with the message of the material as shown in Fig. 3.

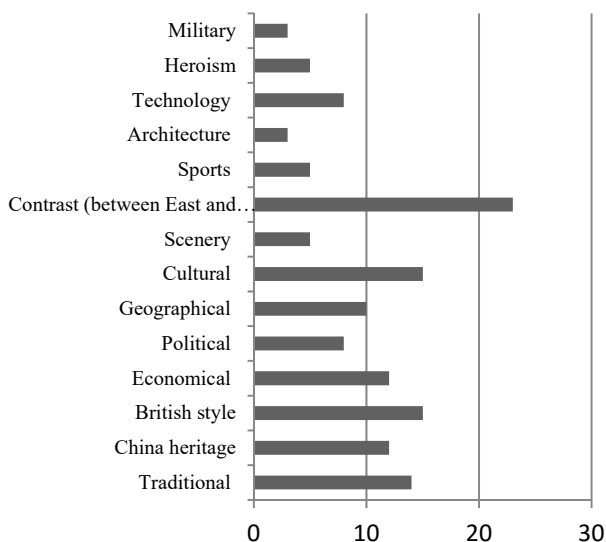


Fig. 3 Recognizable semiotic meanings in Hong Kong typography

VII. CONCLUSION

This project investigated the development and significant features of Hong Kong typography. This preliminary research provided an advanced picture from which to recognize how

Hong Kong typography has developed. Further research can focus on how Hong Kong typography represents the spirit of Hong Kong, and on the future of Hong Kong typography. The present study can inform the public about Hong Kong's unique typography, rooted in Chinese culture and influenced by the ongoing changes in Hong Kong society. This project was the starting point of an investigation into the features of Hong Kong typographic design elements. It also provided insights to local designers about Hong Kong culture that they can use effectively in their designs. For typographic and graphic designers, this research indicates how the historical development of a place influences its typography.

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Dr. Ho started his teaching career in 2006 and his pedagogy and design interests focus on typography and branding. His research interests include typography, emotion and design, and user experience in visual communication. He also explores the roles of emotion in design, as a touch point for designers to connect with target audiences and how emotion can intensively affect the designer to create and motivate users in the design experience. Dr. Ho served as a scientific board member of the International Conference on Affective and Pleasurable Design, AHFE; a member of the International Scientific Committee and Editorial Review Board in the **World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology** International Conference on Communication, Visual Arts and Design; a member of the editorial board of *Academic Research International* (journal); an associate editor of *Design Principles & Practices*; and a reviewer of several design journals such as the *International Journal of Design Research*, *International Journal of Food Design*, and *The Design Principles & Practices Journal Collection*. His research has been published in several academic journals, conference papers, and proceedings with a focus on emotion and design, typographic design, emotion in the design process, and users' experience. In 2015, Dr. Ho was appointed to the executive committee of the Chartered Society of Designers Hong Kong from the Greater Britain CSD headquarters to serve the design communities in the Hong Kong and China regions.