



Title	Love-hate Relationship with National Identity and Global Influences : A Brief Review of Design Education in the Sinophone Region
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Citation	The Journal of the Asian Conference of Design History and Theory. 2017, 2, p. 141-152
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/90905">https://doi.org/10.18910/90905</a>
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The Second Asian Conference of Design History and Theory  
—Design Education beyond Boundaries—  
ACDHT 2017 TOKYO 1-2 September 2017  
Tsuda University

Love-hate Relationship with National Identity  
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A Brief Review of Design Education  
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## Abstract

“Modern” design histories in the Sinophone context began developing in the late nineteenth century through the cultural translation of Western cultures. The term “design” itself has raised intricate questions that are currently under investigation, reflecting an interest in cultural translation of design and transnational studies within postcolonial studies. In this background, the author articulates the complexity of “national” identity and global influences in the development of design education from the 1950s onward in the Sinophone region, which includes the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. Taking historical and transnational perspectives, this paper reviews what design educators in the region have struggled to learn from the “foreign barbarians” while establishing a “national” identity for political and pragmatic purposes as well as cultural and ethnic security needs. In the context of Sinophone design education, this paper aims to reveal the conflicting love-hate relationship between the notion of nationalism and the condition of Sinophone modernity. The author concludes this paper by illuminating conflicts and contradictions that arise in attitudes toward such embodiment in order to underline the role of design education in the construction of national design identities, our understanding of Sinophone modernity, and the cultural translation of design.

*Keywords: Nationalism, national design identity, colonial modernity, design education, Sinophone modernity*

## Introduction

“Modern” design histories in the Sinophone context began developing in the late nineteenth century through the cultural translation of Western cultures. The term “design” itself has raised intricate questions that are currently under investigation, reflecting an interest in cultural translation of design and transnational studies within postcolonial studies. Questions on topics such as the modernization of China in modern history, debates about modernity in China (Valentine, 2006) and colonial modernity in East Asia (Barlow, 2012) pose a fundamental, conceptual framework for grand narration and inquiry. Design education provides excellent material for the inquiry of such questions. Due to a lack of space in my presentation for a full inquiry, I am borrowing a straightforward definition for “modernization” from the Oxford Dictionary—“the process of adapting something to modern needs or habits” (Modernization, n.d.)—to question the pragmatic and emotional complexity of design education history under the influence of Western cultural translation in the Sinophone speaking region.

This paper argues that the development of design education in the region is a process of choosing between national identity and global influences for the modern needs of the country building. As the smallest player in the region, Macao is regrettably omitted from this investigation due to its short design education history, and its near invisibility in research publications. Greatly influenced by Hong Kong, Macao’s first post-secondary design education program started in 1993, and I hope that this paper will peak the interest of Macanese educators to establish a history of the city’s design education for the future.

Within this limitation, my paper debates that the three locales that comprise the Sinophone region in East Asia—China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—experienced different love-hate relationships with national identity and global influence in their design education histories in a period stretching from the Second World War and until today. Despite a shared cultural heritage, the three places took divergent development paths. In China, political campaigns between the 1950s and the 1970s meant that design education repeated itself. As for Hong Kong, the government employed a strategy of encouraging people to forget their past memories to keep the colony going, and working hard for the future. In Taiwan, the Sinophone region’s only democracy, the construction of a national identity in design education is determinedly emerging, and has become a global conversation tool.

Design cultures scholar Javier Gaimeno-Martinez cites a quote on national identity from geographer Jan Penrose: “the concept of nation is the product of three elements: a distinctive group of people, the territory which they occupy, and the bonding over time (of historical experience) which melds people and land” (Penrose, 1995, p. 406, cited in Gaimeno-Martinez, 2016, p. 15). This paper testifies to three national identities by reviewing a brief history of design education, which represents different experiences of Sinophone modernity for transnational studies and cultural translation.

## The circle game of design education: China

In the ancient Chinese context, *gongyi* (工藝) is the general term equivalent to the word “design” in English. Design scholars in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) refer to a “design” heritage that dates to the Neolithic Yangshao culture, around 5000 to 3000 B.C., while hesitating to accept the foisted Western definition of design in the Chinese context. However, the government can’t deny that modern design genres entered the Chinese context with the introduction of Western technology and practices between 1839 and 1911. Hong Kong design scholars Kwok and So (2007) acknowledge that the birth of Chinese modern design history dates to 1842, the year when the Qing Court signed the Treaty of Nanking with the British Empire after it defeated China in the First Opium War (1839-1842).

The Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895)—the reforms carried out by the Qing Court with the principles of *zhongti xiyong* (中體西用 Chinese learning for fundamental principles and Western learning for practical applications)—has always served as the guiding proposition for China’s modernization. Education for and practices of Western arts, crafts, technical training, and modern manufacturing industries has continuously flowed into China since 1842. In 1864, for example, the Tushanwan Art and Craft Center was established in the outskirts of Shanghai to provide vocational training in Western art and craft to children at the orphanage (Pan, 2008).

Despite the efforts of pioneer artists and intellectuals, general people found Chinese traditional art and craft less desirable than Western products in the early twentieth century. Feng Zikai (豐子愷 1898-1975), an important artist and essayist in the Republican period (1912-1949), advocated for the aesthetic values of traditional handicrafts (工藝實用品與美感) and voiced his discontent over mass-produced imitation products during the 1920s (Feng, 1926). Similarly, Lei Guiyuan (雷圭元 1906-1988), one of the three most important early modern designers in China’s design history, also wrote of Chinese designers imitating Western art and craft and the associated disinterest in studying the national style and content in industrial and commercial arts in China (Lei, 1937).

In this new phase of Chinese modernity between 1912 and 1949, the New Culture Movement (新文化運動) with intellectuals calling for the ideology of new nationalism; the concept of a nation and national identity was emerging in China. The Movement’s impetus derived from desires of national self-strengthening based on the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the period. For its followers, it represented traditional national salvation, democracy, and science, and could be considered as a self-defined modernity within the Chinese context for the first time.

Mao Zedong’s (毛澤東 1893-1976) famous 1942 speech, *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*, set the tone and developmental direction for the nation’s creative media and education after the Chinese Communist Party gained control of the country in 1949. The speech stated that all arts should serve the working class and promote the advancement of socialism and the Party. This background and China’s close diplomatic relationship with Soviet Union meant that the Soviet skill-based curriculum and the political ideology of Marxism-Leninism

and Maoism shaped the art and craft education in the PRC. In resisting against Western ideologies, handicraft (手工藝), traditional gongyi (傳統工藝) and folk gongyi (民間工藝) became the three key foundations of *yishu sheji* (藝術設計 art and design) education in the newly established People's Republic of China.

Between 1949 and 1963, the Chinese government opened thirty-three art education units and seven art academies. Among them emerged three key institutions that were directly administered by the central government: China Central Academy of Fine Arts (中央美術學院 1950), Central Academy of Arts and Design (中央工藝美術學院 1956, now under Tsinghua University 清華大學), and Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art (浙江美術學院 1958, now the China Academy of Art 中國美術學院). In tandem with other arts academies, these three institutions led the development of design education for the service of the working class, with the political goal of advancing folk decorative art (民間裝飾藝術) and national art (民族藝術). Except for Soviet arts, commercial work deemed Western art and design to be evil. In contrast, *gongyi meishu* (工藝美術) was viewed as handicraft and as an applied art throughout this period until the reevaluation of design education after 1979 (Tsinghua University, 2010).

In March 1998, the Ministry of Education officially adopted the term *yishu sheji* (藝術設計) as the replacement term for *gongyi meishu*. This adaptation implied the abandonment of the pro-socialism and pro-tradition approach for design education. It also represented a search for new possible directions in modern design education for a nation that started all over again with basic definitions of design in the 1980s. Between 1995 and 2005, design education in China experienced a rapid expansion. By 2004, China had more than 30 specialized art academies and the government had established more than 600 *yishu sheji* programs (Tsinghua University, 2010). One statistic indicates that about 1.1 million students were studying design or enrolled in a design related program in 2007 (Xu, 2009). With such a rapid expansion, the standard for design education was criticized for a lack of quality assurance in programs, inferior teaching quality, and poor facilities as well as an overlap of programming within the same institutions (Yuan, 2003).

Moreover, in the era of globalization, Chinese youth and designers have gradually encountered American and Japanese contemporary cultures, including hip-hop culture and the idea of being “cool.” The designers of the generation from the 1980s believed in the cultivation of Chinese national design identity, as reflected in a poster designed by Chen Shaohua (陳紹華 b. 1954) for *Graphic Design in China* (平面設計在中國) design competition in 1992 [fig. 1]. Unlike the previous generation, contemporary young



Fig.1 *Graphic Design in China*. Designer: Chen Shaohua, 1992.

designers have ventured to break away from the expectation of upholding national identity in their works. The Chinese government does not, however, allow its culture to become Americanized, Westernized or Japanized, and its officials consider the Chinese design identity as a symbol of the nation. For cultural security reasons, China instills nationalism in all aspects of culture and design education.

The government's efforts to develop design professions that uphold Chinese national identity have motivated designers and design students to redefine the contemporary Chinese design identity in their work at school as well as through nationwide design competitions and events. Research findings by Tsinghua University scholars recognize the importance of establishing a vernacular design style as part of national design identity for effective two-way communication with the global design community (Tsinghua University, 2010). While we can observe a yearning for China's own national design identity, some Chinese design educators have developed joint programs or other forms of engagement with foreign design institutions and educators to attract students and to stand out from the competition. For example, the College of Design and Innovation of Tongji University in Shanghai began collaborating with Aalto University in Finland and the resulting cooperation led in 2010 to the establishment of the Tongji-Aalto Design Factory as well as the Tongji University Sino-Finnish Center. The College is also proud of its International Advisory Board that consists of renowned designers and educators from all over the world, including Nigel Cross, Ezio Manzini, Ken Friedman, Richard Buchanan, Don Norman, and Kun-Pyo Lee.

On another occasion in 2011, the Hangzhou City Government contributed about 55 million euros towards the purchase of German Torsten Brohan's collections of 7,010 pieces of early European modern design work, including classic pieces from the Bauhaus—a German art school that played an important role in design education history of the world. With the collection, the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou set up the Bauhaus Institute in May 2011 with city government support (China Academy of Art, 2016). Over 300 pieces from the collection were displayed at the newly built China International Design Museum (中國國際設計博物館) in 2014 for design education purposes (Design for Enlightenment, 2014). City officials and the academy justified allocating their public funding to this purchase for the study of Bauhaus' contribution to the enlightenment and the formation of modern design and modern lifestyle.

Although Lin Fengmian (林風眠 1900-1991), pioneer artist and the first president of the China Academy of Art, advocated in the 1930s for the necessity of balancing Chinese and Western art for the rebirth of contemporary oriental art, Western design, once introduced to China in the early twentieth century, was ironically abandoned under the national political ideology guideline. This purchase of Bauhaus work is, however, reflecting the value of Western design in a recent context despite a thirst for the continued development of a Chinese national design identity. Or, maybe it is still too much of a political taboo at this stage to engage in historical and critical investigations of modern design development between 1949 and 1990 for the benefit of design education in China.



## Forget the past and work hard for the future: Hong Kong

Compared to China's struggle to develop its own modern design and design education, the British colony of Hong Kong faced fewer challenges in the development of its design identity. Despite its shared heritage with mainland China, Hong Kong saw the growing bonds of people living in the colony and sharing common experiences over time, particularly since the end of the Second World War. With changes in the political regime in mainland China, migrants came to build a new life in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong colonial government adopted a *laissez faire* policy with little interference over the population's lifestyle choices. It encouraged newcomers to leave their pasts behind in the mainland and work hard for their future in Hong Kong. Here, the government created policies to promote the development of a Western lifestyle and education in a subtle way.

In terms of art and design education, Hong Kong was always an alternative place for artists who received their training in mainland China to make their living. Before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1837-1945), art activities and education were not professionalized. For example, we can find only limited examples of private art academies run by Chinese artists that provided both Western and Chinese art training during this period: the Hong Kong Fine Arts School (香港美術學校, 1928), the Hong Kong International Academy of Fine Arts (香港萬國函授美術專科學院, 1932), and the Kowloon Academy of Fine Arts (九龍美專, 1937) (Lai, 2015). As some of these academies engaged with renowned artists from the mainland or those who were educated overseas, Hong Kong was a place with freedom of creative expression and a refuge from the political pressure of the mainland.

After the Second World War, Hong Kong once again provided shelter from the civil war between 1946 and 1949 for both pro-Nationalist and pro-Communist artists. Following the establishment of the PRC in late 1949, some artists remained in Hong Kong and ran private fine art academies. Among the prominent institutions was the Hong Kong Academy of Fine Arts (香港美術專科學校), which was founded in 1952 by Chan Hoi Ying (陳海鷹 1918-2010), a renowned artist of the period (Lai, 2015). To establish a private education institution in the colony, proprietors were required to register with the government. This can be considered as a colonial government strategy to monitor the nature of the academies and to prevent pro-communist activities. In the post-war era, however, the government became more committed to setting up its own public art and design education at the post-secondary level; it recognized graduates from public institutions but not from privately owned academies.

With such an official policy, students obviously chose to study at public institutes. In 1951, the Grantham College of Education, a training institute for teachers, was the earliest public academy to offer fine art courses. Six years later, New Asia College (later the Chinese University of Hong Kong after merging with Chung Chi College and United College in 1963) started a two-year fine arts specialized training program, which became a four-year program in 1959. Hong Kong University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong were the only two universities to offer part-time study opportunities; art and design programs at certificate and diploma levels as extramural studies began in 1956 and 1965 respectively. Graduates of these



Fig.2 Design 74, poster design, Hong Kong Polytechnic. Designer unknown. 1974.

courses and programs had no difficulties in breaking away from Chinese traditions and searching for a new language that reflected their own life experiences in Hong Kong where the East and the West meet.

As for specialized design training institutions, Hong Kong Technical College (now the Hong Kong Polytechnic University) was established in 1955 and started offering a three-year full-time higher diploma program in industrial design in 1968 under its Department of Industrial and Commercial Design (renamed the Swire School of Design in 1981). It is safe to say that students in the 1960s had a strong preference for Western style design. The posters designed by students for their graduation show between 1971 and 1974 [fig. 2], for example, reflect the world design styles of the time. Indeed, students found it more crucial to master Western style design as a hireable skill,

though graduation catalogues from this period contained Chinese design style.

One of the most influential design educators in the 1970s was the chief lecturer at Hong Kong Polytechnic, Wucius Wong (王無邪b. 1936). His two books were first published in English and later became available in Chinese and for PRC readers after a visit of Hong Kong design educators and designers to the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in late 1978. This visit not only updated local instructors and students on latest designs outside China, but also re-introduced Bauhaus design approaches to the PRC design education through Wong's two books: *Principles of two-dimensional design* and *Principles of three-dimensional design* (Wong, 2001).

With the expansion of design education in the 1990s, we can observe a surge in the proclivity for establishing associations and connections with international design education bodies and professional design communities. Victor Chung-wing Lo (羅仲榮b. 1950) —a businessman, an alumnus of the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology, and a key member of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University since 2004—has played a crucial role in promoting design industry and education of Hong Kong abroad. With a design education history of about 60 years, Hong Kong does not necessarily cling to what it has learnt. Under its new status as a Special Administrative Region of the PRC since 1997, the design education of Hong Kong must continue to conduct the strategy of forgetting the past, the British colonial history, and working hard for the future on constructing its Chinese colonial identity of being a frontier of the global design education network to mainland China.

### Construction and education of national design identity: Taiwan

Historically known as Formosa to the West, Taiwan has a colourful colonial history with various nations and groups of people: colonizers from Spain (1626-1642) and the Netherlands (1642-1662) were followed by initial migrations of Minnan and Hakka ethnic groups from

China, the Qing Court (1683-1895), Japanese occupation (1895-1945), and the retreat of the Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party of China) to Taiwan after 1945. This eclectic mix, along with the aboriginal tribes who have inhabited these islands for millennia, formed a complicated racial and cultural setting for Taiwan. To understand the love-hate relationship between foreign influence over and vernacular cultures of Taiwan from a design education perspective, we have to grasp Taiwan as a “nation” of the islands with conflict and negotiation within its local identity.

The majority of Taiwanese design historians would agree that the Japanese colonial government played an important role in introducing modern design and education to the islands. Japanese officials developed the modern design education system in Taiwan by relying on its own experiences in adapting design education from the West, such as the Bauhaus Art School. This introduction of modern design education, for example, resulted in the establishment of the School of Industrial Instruction (工業講習所, now known as National Taipei University of Technology 國立臺北科技大學, Taipei Tech) in 1912 as one of the earliest programs of industrial design. Apart from setting up vocational training and educational institutes in Taiwan, the Japanese government provided opportunities to study in Japan for native Taiwanese, including Yen Shui-long (顏水龍 1903-1997), an essential figure in the history of the Taiwanese art and craft movement. He studied at the Western Painting Division of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1922, and returned to Taiwan in 1929. He was influenced by Yanagi Soetsu (1889-1961), a Japanese philosopher and founder of *mingei* (folk craft) movement in the late 1920s and 1930s. Yen also drew inspiration from and engaged with the vernacular elements of Taiwanese art, craft, and design, including those of indigenous tribes.

After 1945 when the KMT became the new ruler of the islands, Yen and other art and design educators who received training during the colonial period, continued to advocate for vernacular Taiwanese style in design and the possibilities that existed for economic growth through industrial development. Yen taught at a few post-secondary level art and craft institutes throughout his life and spread his influence by promoting Taiwan art and craft identity and style. With the increasing pressures caused by Taiwan’s role in the Cold War, the KMT government sought and received American aid starting in 1951. It ranged from financial assistance to design education with the goal of boosting Taiwan’s economic growth. Key American designers of the period, including industrial designer Russell Wright (1904-1976) visited Taiwan in 1955. During his second visit in 1958, Wright suggested that the government should establish design education degree programs at the university level. Another advisor, Alfred B. Girardy (1916-2004), an industrial design consultant, recommended courses based on the Bauhaus fundamental design principles to the National College of Arts (國立臺灣藝術專科學校), today’s National Taiwan University of Arts (國立臺灣藝術大學) in 1961 (Lai, 2013).

Apart from American advisers, designers and educators from former colonizer Japan stepped in to advance the development of Taiwanese design education. Shinji Koike (1901-1981), and Michitaka Yoshioka (1924-1995), Kaoru Otamaru (b. 1921), and Mutsuo Okabayashi (b. 1931) were, for example, instructors for summer design workshops directed at local designers and educators between 1963 and 1965. German industrial designer Jörg Glasenapp (1933-1990) similarly conducted summer workshops in 1967 and 1968. These types of work-



Fig.3 Homepage of Museum of Hakka Innovation Industry for New Taipei City [<http://www.hakka-industries.ntpc.gov.tw/>] 2008.

Graduate level degrees at the Masters level were introduced and culminated in the launch of a doctoral degree program in 2000 at the Industrial Design Department, National Cheng Kung University. Popular research topics at the graduate level include Hakka and aboriginal elements for design and the development of the cultural industry of Taiwan. With a growing public interest in the revival of forgotten Taiwanese vernacular identities, including indigenous cultures and the Minnan and Hakka ethnic heritages, government and private organizations started providing strong support for a revival movement. Designers are also eager to explore vernacular identity and to incorporate such vernacular Taiwanese symbols from local history and quotidian experiences into their design objects [fig. 3]. This design trend is highly visible in the current context of Taiwan. While its future is unclear, design education in Taiwan is certainly heading towards an integration of its post-war experience into the passion of local designers for constructing a national design identity for Taiwan for the global marketplace.

## Conclusion

This paper identified the Sinophone region's different paths and experiences in the development of design education in the constructions of national identity, and the love-hate relationship with global influence. In this brief review of the three cases, we can recognize an abundance of conflicts and contradictions in the case of China due to the direction of its politically and ideologically driven design education and its ethnic security need for nationalism. Although the government is cautious about "negative" influences from the outside, the deep affection between expatriate design educators and local design institutions, as well as their connections with schools in the West, is prevalent.

Now part of the PRC, Hong Kong people are striking for survival at the local level against the failing "one country two systems" agreement promised by the Beijing government. With declining liberty and growing dissatisfaction with the pro-Beijing SAR Hong Kong government, people and establishments in Hong Kong have no choice but to continue to adopt the

shops received praise from locals for contributing to the foundation for modern design education in Taiwan (Lai, 2013). With the end of the *mei yuan* (美援), which literally means aid from the United States, in 1965, the economy of Taiwan finally took off. Its manufacturing industry flourished in the late 1960s, but the promotion of design education quieted down. It was not until the late 1980s that manufacturers finally realized the importance of design and design education for their success in the global marketplace (Wong, 2005).

In the 1990s, design education experienced a rapid expansion: more institutes started offering design related degree programs.

policy of forgetting the past and working hard for the future with no hope.

Among the three places reviewed in this paper, the design education in Taiwan may be the most promising as the only place with democracy where individual freedom of speech and thoughts can be guaranteed as design education evolves. Taiwan has then unsurprisingly engaged in the construction of its own Taiwanese national identity in order not only to disassociate itself from PRC but also to communicate globally.

These three case studies reflect the development of modernity itself with the concept of national identity. Although China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have a shared heritage, they have experienced different growth rates with their physical, geographic separation after 1945 and undergone different paths in the formation of their national identities (Gaimeno-Martinez, 2016). In the conflux of shared and varying factors in their development of design education systems, these three locales can shed light on the necessity of further nuanced distinctions among individual entities in the Sinophone region in order to facilitate transnational and Sinophone modernity studies. Certainly, future research on Macao's design education will contribute to our understanding of design education in the region.

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#### Author Biography

##### WENDY SIUYI WONG

Dr. Wendy S Wong is a full professor in the Department of Design at the York University, Toronto, Canada. She has taught in Hong Kong, the United States and Australia. She has established an international reputation as an expert in Chinese graphic design history and Chinese comic art history. She is the author of *Hong Kong Comics: A History of Manhua*, published by Princeton Architectural Press (2002), four books for Chinese readers, and numerous articles in academic and trade journals. Dr. Wong was a visiting scholar at Harvard University from 1999 to 2000, and the 2000 Lubalin Curatorial Fellow at the Cooper Union School of Art, New York, USA. In 2009 and 2010, she was a visiting research fellow at the Department of Design History, Royal College of Art, and she served as a scholar-in-residence at the Kyoto International Manga Museum. She is a contributor to the *Phaidon Archive of Graphic Design* (2012), *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Design* (2015), and acts as a regional editor of the Greater China region for the *Encyclopedia of Asian Design* to be published by the Bloomsbury Publishing. She also served as an Editorial Board member of the *Journal of Design History*.