

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Malaysia
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BEB-1

Hong Kong is Watching

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

For the last eight years, Hong Kong has been my inevitable reintroduction to Southeast Asia. With few exceptions, charter flights to Southeast Asia make this British-administered territory their destination. Commercial flights bound for Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok or Jakarta often stop in Hong Kong as well. So far, my onward connections have never quite dovetailed. Thus, time after time, I've been forced to spend my first culture-shocked, jet-lagged days in Asia amongst the bustling populace of the most crowded real estate on earth.

Recently, however, I decided to extend my usual involuntary sojourn in the territory to explore the local state of the arts, in particular, the Hong Kong advertising scene. My introduction came in the form of a pressure-sensitive sticker (figure 1) which confronted me upon my arrival at Kai Tak airport. I soon found these stickers, and larger posters, plastered all over the city: in subways, on buildings, and occasionally, even on cars. Only when I finally ventured down to the tourist-choked Tsimshatsui district and the "Star" Ferry, towards the end of my stay, did I discover an English version of the sticker, and thus, a partial explanation for this citywide campaign. In the meantime, I learned quite a bit about the peculiarities and problems of advertising and designing for the Hong Kong market.



Figure 1

Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. His current interest is advertising and graphic design.

Advertising is a much maligned field. Books and articles like Vance Packard's The Hidden Persuaders have helped to create a popular perception of advertising agencies as purveyors of the intangible: mood, atmosphere, innuendo and suggestion. Raising product (or service) awareness in the consumer is only a small part of the game. Of greater importance is the creation of a perceived differentiation between our brand and the competition's, even when ingredients are identical: our aspirin has more of that special aspirin quality than other leading brands.

Yet, advertising executives insist, not surprisingly, that indeed, sales do decline when advertising is reduced. "Here, just look at these statistics." The industry continues to grow, seducing ever greater numbers of designers, illustrators, and writers into its ranks.

There are some 490 advertising agencies listed in the Hong Kong phone directory. They range from tiny one-room pasteup shops squeezed in-



Figure 2

to the back alleys of Kowloon and Hong Kong Central, to well-appointed offices in the upper strata skyscrapers of Wanchai and Causeway Bay. Numerous international agencies have regional offices in Hong Kong, and a number of regional magazines (Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiaweek) have their headquarters here.

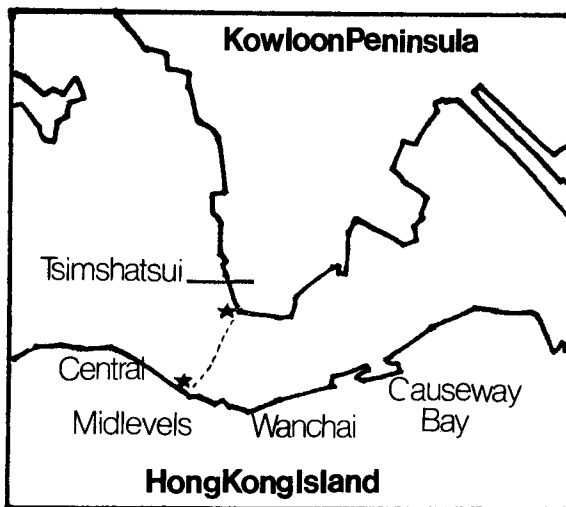


Figure 3

Hong Kong's excellent international communication facilities and continuing importance as an East Asian entrepot and manufacturing center are probably some of the factors which have attracted internationally oriented agencies and publications. There are other reasons which make the territory fertile ground for the local advertising

media. Hong Kong is small and physically isolated: 404 square miles of territory are bounded on the north by China and elsewhere by the sea. The population (4.3 million) is fairly homo-

genous - over 90% Cantonese speaking Chinese - and dense - average population density is 10,000 per square mile and as high as 209,000 per square mile on Kowloon. Hong Kong residents are net consumers of foodstuffs and other necessities: over 80% of these items must be imported into the territory. Average expendable income is high by Asian standards (wages average US\$ 80-204 monthly. Food and rent consume about 65% of this), giving the Hong Kong resident some access to the plethora of luxury goods available in the territory. Finally, Hong Kong has a well established internal communications media. The advertiser buying airtime or print space can be assured of a consumption oriented audience with fairly consistent cultural premises.



figure 4

Huge disparities in individual incomes and differences in education (English versus Chinese) mar this idyllic picture. But compare this scenario to the situation in Singapore, the other Asian Chinese-majority city/nation. Singapore advertisers must contend with four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Only 75% of the populace is Chinese, and these speak a multitude of dialects. The remaining 25% consist of Malays and smaller numbers of multi-lingual Indians, Eurasians and a scattering of Europeans.

Thus, relative audience consistency and accessibility are the advantages of the Hong Kong advertising milieu. Convincing that audience of the real or imagined efficacy of one product over another, or persuading the client of the suitability of one approach over another is another matter, complicated by the peculiarities of Chinese culture.



figure 5

During my weeklong stay in Hong Kong I discussed the problems encountered by the local advertising industry with art and creative directors at five agencies and design studios (art directors are usually subordinate to creative directors in the advertising agency hierarchy): Nick Jesse and Andy Li of Nick Jesse Design Associates; Peter Cooke of Pat Printer Associates; Henry Steiner of Graphic Communication Limited; Frank Constantini of Young and Rubicam and Nick Fairhead of Ted Bates. I also spoke with Morgan Chua and Frank Tam, art director and assistant art director, respectively, of the Far Eastern Economic Review.

The sampling is admittedly tiny and heavily Caucasian. This is not so much indicative of my own predilection for English-speaking interviewees as it is reflective of the considerable influence exerted by Westerners in the Hong Kong advertising industry. Although the majority of agencies are Chinese owned and operated and deal exclusively with the voluminous Chinese language trade, Western-run agencies have picked up some of the territory's most prestigious accounts. Pat Printer Associates has the Golden Harvest Films account (this firm distributes the popular Bruce Lee kung-fu films and is the major competition for the venerable Shaw Brothers Films organisation). Henry Steiner designed the Asiaweek logo and now art directs all the covers. He also has the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation account. All of these designers, despite problems of culture, language, and education appear to be reaching their audience,

My first visit was with Nick Jesse Design Associates. Jesse is a British expatriate who worked as an art director and designer at a number of agencies in the United Kingdom, Australia and Hong Kong before finally opening up his own design studio in Hong Kong Central two years ago. His "Associates" consists of Andy Li, a Hong Kong-born Chinese whose sympathies appear to be with Western art and design. This Chinese-Western association - a sort of dual art directorship - proved to be a recurring feature in the firms I visited where there were Chinese and English language accounts.

Both Li and Jesse agreed that symmetrical design is considered very important by most of their clients. Symmetry is essential to the Chinese Taoist-Buddhist tradition, indicating balance and "complementary opposition" (as in the Yin-Yang, figure 6). Asymmetrical logos and layouts are thought to disturb this harmony, and thus the client.

Designs indicating imbalance also receive a negative interpretation. A teeter-totter logo Jesse designed for a

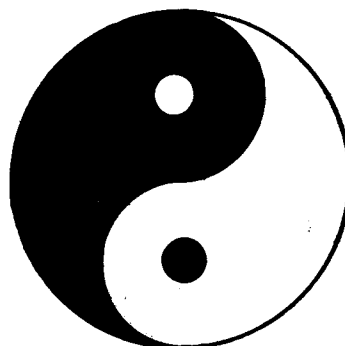


Figure 6

children's play product (sketch, figure 7) was rejected by the client because it suggested "declining profits." Similarly, a point down triangle logo (figure 7) was deemed unacceptable because it indicated instability and thus unprofitability. A fast food business card with a die-cut "bite" taken out of the corner (figure 7) also got the thumbs down. The client thought that the die-cut might not be interpreted as a bite out of his product but rather, out of his profits.

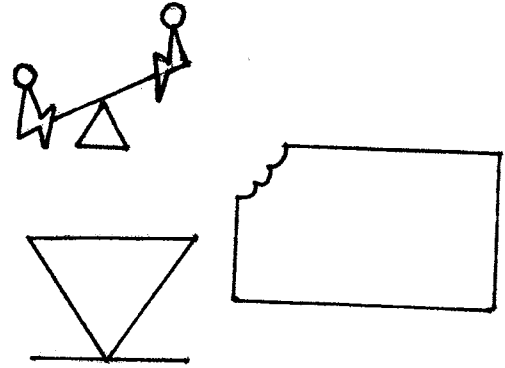


figure 7

Color choice is another critical factor in Chinese-audience advertising and design. Blue and white are usually rejected out of hand for most product or service advertising because of their traditional funereal significance (funeral notices are printed in blue and white). Black is also a funereal color and is thus a bad choice for, say, an annual report cover. Pure white is even worse for it can connote evil.

Nevertheless, these color combinations do serve admirably in some contexts. An Urban Services Department poster urging Hong Kong residents to "Kill Rats" (figure 8), was printed in

black and white. The Chinese characters and the rat graphic were printed in blue - appropriate symbolism in this case.



The auspicious colors are red, gold, and yellow. Separately, together, or in combination with black and white (where the latter two lose their inauspicious significance), they always elicit a positive response from the client. Of the three, red has the most traditional significance. Red is the festive hue, the color of firecrackers and ang pau (money packets given as gifts during the New Year). Shrines are painted red, eggs are dyed red, red and pink ribbons are tied on wedding cars, and signature idiograms are stamped in red ink (one Chinese agency went so far as to use pink stock and red ink for the annual report of a successful finance company - an unthinkable choice in the West where "in the red" has quite a different meaning).

figure 8

Unless clients are heavily westernized, said Jesse and Li, they tend to rely on these traditional color formulae in their dealings with agencies. This can prove a bit trying on the sensibilities of a Western-trained art director with a very different set of "correct" design values and color perceptions.

These sentiments were echoed by Peter Cooke, Frank Constantini and Nick Fairhead, expatriate art directors all. Their criticisms, however, were directed more at support services than tradition. They bewailed the lack of proper (read: Western) materials, the quality of color separations, and the standards of local typesetting and the print industry.

Morgan Chua and Frank Tam had fewer complaints here, perhaps because they have experienced little else. Chua, a Singapore citizen, has worked for the Review for nine years as resident cartoonist and art director. Tam has lived in Hong Kong all his life. They appear to have little difficulty working within the constraints of Chinese tradition. Although Review covers and graphics are hardly conservative, they rarely offend traditional Chinese design conventions.

Henry Steiner, an internationally known designer, had some harsh words for Chinese convention. Steiner has worked in Hong Kong for twenty years. His firm, Graphic Communication Limited is an ultra-modern design studio in the best high-tech tradition, ensconced in the relative peace of the Mid-levels, high above the hubbub of Hong Kong Central.

Steiner claims that most Hong Kong Chinese clients prefer traditionally auspicious colors and designs because of an innate cultural conservatism. In his experience, Chinese society applauds convention and abhors innovation. The individual who fulfills his societal role gets the accolades; the rebel is ignored or ostracized.

He illustrated this point with a wave to the Hong Kong skyline, below. Architectural variety is not one of the territory's outstanding qualities. Most structures tend to be slight variations on the rectangular box theme. Differentiating a building from one's neighbour is apparently not a pressing need; Following precedent is. Thus: more boxes.

Under such conditions one might expect an innovative designer to languish without clients. This is not the case. Henry Steiner has built a global reputation producing graphics that rival the best in Europe, North America, and Japan. He claims that his clients give him a freer hand than



Figure 9

lesser known designers. Nonetheless, it must have taken years of balancing innovation with local design preferences to reach his present exalted state.

Tradition and conservatism proved to be the bane of other organizations that I encountered while in Hong Kong, notably the Red Cross. One afternoon, while walking the streets of Hong Kong Central in search of sketching motifs, I noticed a striking poster display at a Red Cross Blood Donation Center urging passersby to, "Save Life and Feel Good." Inquiries at the Center regarding the origins of the design eventually brought me to the desk of Valerie Hofer at Red Cross Headquarters.

The poster, she said, was the result of a Rotary Club sponsored competition held a few years back. Designs were submitted by students and professional designers and judged by a panel of Rotarians and Red Cross representatives. Winning entries were printed at Red Cross expense.

The entries were judged on their effectiveness in communicating blood donation in an eye-catching yet attractive manner.

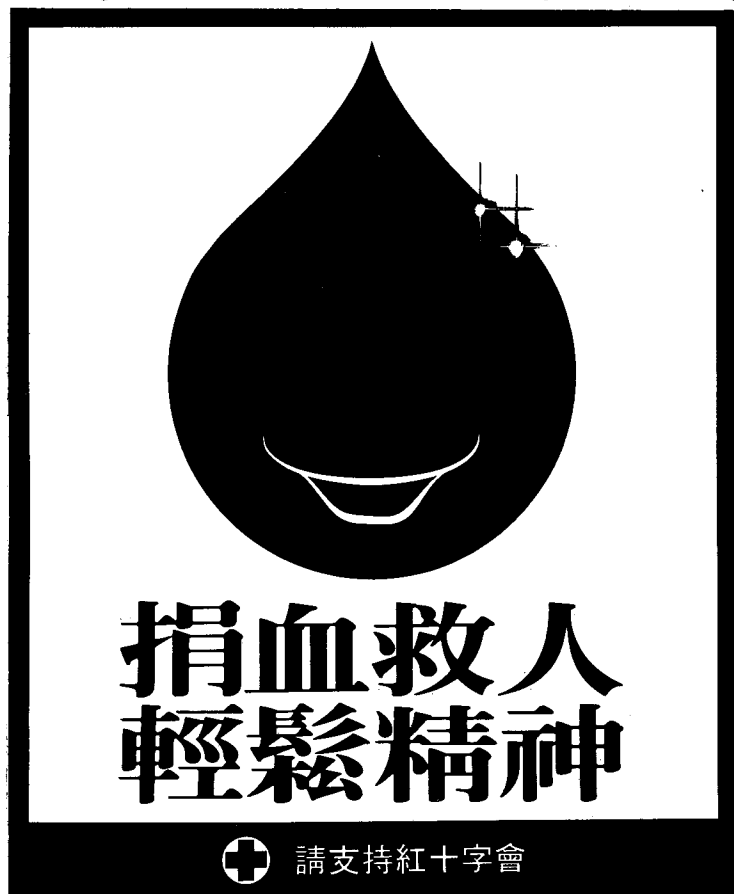
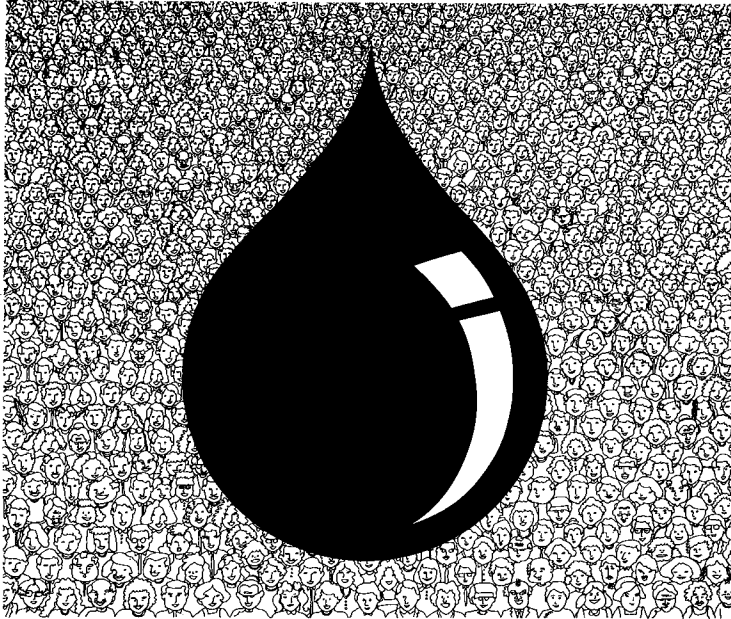


Figure 10

Numerous entries which would have turned heads (blood-dripping faucets, bloody tourniquets) were rejected because of this final criterion. Pleasing, positive designs were essential in this campaign because of the Chinese aversion to blood donations, a result of filio piety beliefs and traditional medical practices.

According to Hofer the Chinese believe that blood is bequeathed by one's ancestors and is in finite supply. In the local version of humeric pathology, blood is one of the four humors (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile). It is not to be given away lightly to strangers.

Although blood donations did go up after the implementation of the poster campaign, resistance remained strong in the over-30 age group, where tradi-



**A little goes a long way
Save Life, Give Blood.**



Support the Red Cross

figure 11

Don't Rubbish Your City !" This is an appropriate headline for the accusing eyes graphic. The Chinese version of the campaign is somewhat different: "Throw All Rubbish Away. Make This Place Clean. Be Happy" (an approximate translation only). Here there is no reference to the We Are Watching You concept. I was unable to get an explanation of the logic behind these different campaign appeals. Perhaps for the Chinese speaking populace the eyes make

their point without the necessity of verbal support.

HongKong



**is Watching
Don't Rubbish Your City!**

tional beliefs hold the greatest sway. Most donors (87%) remained in the 18-30 age group, which has received an education that emphasizes Western-style good Samaritanism and civic duty.

After my discussion with Ms. Hofer I renewed my investigation of a media campaign that attempted to exploit this fledgling civic consciousness. The small sticker I had noticed upon entering Hong Kong turned out to be part of a territory-wide cleanup campaign implemented October 25th of this year by the Department of Urban Services.

The campaign appears to have been conceived in English, though my enquiries at Urban Services were unable to confirm this. The English version of the poster/sticker reads thus: "Hong Kong is Watching.

As to the effectiveness of the campaign, Hsu Kwok-ziang of Urban Services wrote me on the 5th of December:

figure 12

亂拋垃圾



人見人憎



地方清潔安居樂業

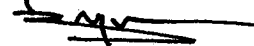
I am afraid it will be very difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of one poster in promoting the cleanliness of the city. However, I must say that the success of such a campaign not only depends on publicity alone but also on law enforcement actions.

So much for the power of visual communication. There are, of course, numerous forms of non-verbal expression. Design and color are only two of the techniques available to the Hong Kong advertising industry. There are yet subtler methods. As a final note, I'm enclosing this article from the December 4th Far Eastern Economic Review. It illustrates just how far Hong Kong communicators will go to get their message across.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Despite protestations that it does not wish to drive up the cost of land in Hongkong, the government has taken an unusual step to maximise its gains for the 13,000-sq. m. site next to Connaught Centre in the Central district, slated for a new office and shopping complex. The site's original lot number was 8553. This has now been changed to 8668. The number eight (*bat*) is lucky since it rhymes with *fat*, Cantonese for prosperity. Six in Cantonese is *lok*, close to the pronunciation of happiness. The new number thus becomes "prosperity, double happiness, prosperity," which should greatly enhance its value in the eyes of Chinese buyers.

Sincerely,



Bryn Barnard

List of Illustrations

1. Pressure sensitive label; Department of Urban Services; Hong Kong
2. Spot illustration advertising sightseeing in Hong Kong; BEB; ink.
3. Map of Hong Kong and Kowloon; BEB
4. Sketch. Images from three different parts of the Central district are combined in one drawing; BEB; ink on paper.
5. Sketch. "Star" Ferry life preserver and Hong Kong Central district skyline; BEB; pencil on bristol board.
6. Yin-yang diagram; BEB
7. Sketches; BEB after sketches by Nick Jesse, Hong Kong.
8. Poster; Department of Urban Services, Hong Kong.
9. Photograph; Central district from Victoria Peak; Hong Kong Tourist Association
10. Poster; Red Cross, Hong Kong; original is printed in red and black.
11. Poster; Red Cross, Hong Kong; original is printed in red and black
12. Poster; Department of Urban Services, Hong Kong; original is printed in black and white with four-color photograph.

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