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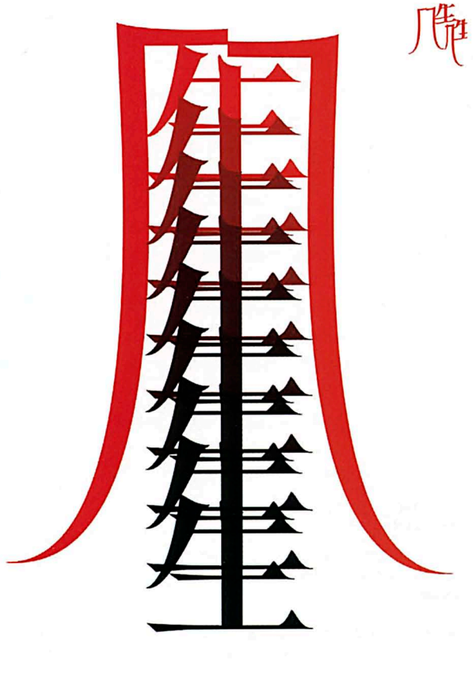
1.Helvetica metal type (with Manfred Schulz). Film still from Helvetica courtesy of Gary Hustwit.

2.Paris, Cité Internationale des Arts. Bi Yuefeng, 2005. Courtesy of Poster Collection, Müseum für Gestaltung Zürich.

3.Neun Leben. Chen Guojin, 2004. Courtesy of Poster Collection, Müseum für Gestaltung Zürich.



WRITING IN PICTURES:

An Introduction to Typography in China

By Lorna Mansley

■ Since Spring, culture sections of the Western media have been a-flurry with news of an unusual celebration: 2007 marks the 50th anniversary of the typeface Helvetica, and with lavish festivities to herald it, the study of typography has been hurled into the limelight of the arts media and the broadsheets too. Merrymaking has included exhibitions and parties - cakes, balloons, the whole shebang, and the icing on top, a feature-length documentary film, Helvetica, directed by Gary Hustwit. Why so much fuss over a typeface?

There is arguably reason for celebration in the success of Helvetica. Since its launch in 1957 it has proved a ubiquitous hit with designers and audiences a-like. Here in China, we read it on road signs. It is on clothes labels, logos (Microsoft, 3M, American Airlines to name but a few), on packaging and in newspapers. All around the world, this no-nonsense, unassuming typeface goes about its work quietly informing, persuading, selling and entertaining.

One of Hustwit's reasons for making his directorial debut with such an off-the-wall topic was to illuminate the talents and unsung successes of type designers. The twenty-first century has brought us untold amounts of information. We are constantly bombarded with printed, digital and hand-written text, the aesthetic value of which is often secondary to its content. Or so it seems. However, there are always faces behind typefaces, and always reasons behind the design and production of any given font. What should not be underestimated when looking at text is the designer or artist's rarely accidental choice of type.

Typography, the visualisation of written ideas, is an emotive tool of communication. The typographer uses hierarchic systems of typefaces, styles, size, colour and positioning to convey the meaning of text, whilst also forming an emotional connection with the audience. Through exposure to culture-specific design, we develop aesthetic sensibilities towards typography, enabling us to make our own judgements as to its effects. Would you take seriously a newspaper set in ***Comic Sans?*** Would you print your wedding invitations in **Impact?** Do "help!" and **"HELP!"** have the same connotations? Different typefaces and

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styles in our own language can clearly tug at our emotional reflexes, but in a written language as different as Chinese? It is unlikely that we perceive the differences between 好 and **好** in the same way as a Chinese audience would. So how do we react to the written Chinese around us?

For centuries, Chinese characters have been regarded as abstract imagery to foreign viewers. We have stencilled them back-to-front on upholstery, tattooed them incorrectly onto our bodies and framed them on our walls, indifferent to their definitions. Strangely, there is logic behind this ignorance; in a way, Chinese characters miss out the middleman in communication. There is no phonetic connection between

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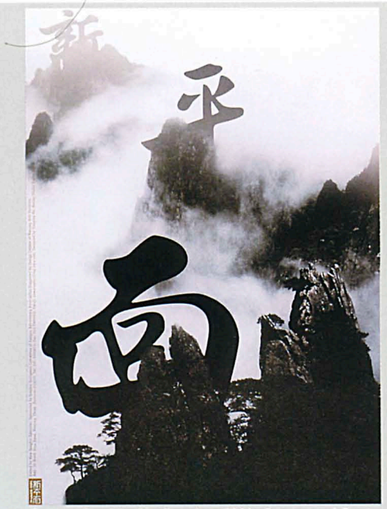
1.United Nations - Hong Kong Monument: the Historical Clash. Gu Wenda, 1997. Courtesy of the artist.

2.We are fortunate animals. Gu Wenda, 2007. Photo taken by Julie Magura. Courtesy of Gu Wenda.

3.Square Word Calligraphy Classroom. Xu Bing, 1994-1996. Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.



● New Graphic. He Jianping, 2003. Courtesy of Poster Collection, Müseum für Gestaltung Zürich.

them and the reader. In the expressive realm of typography, the ideographic form of each character has an advantage over the Roman alphabet. Eva Lüdi Kong writes in 'Typo China' Poster Collection , "Each character represents a pictorial statement. Essentially, it is to be read as an object we look at and name at the same time; it virtually IS the object." What better a typographic element!

It is for this reason that in modern Chinese poster design, we see typography as an unlimited source for striking designs. Typography and illustration merge into a visual language recognisable by a large proportion of the audience. In the growing number of national and international poster competitions we can see an increasing interest in the potential uses of typography.

For poster design, however, it is unnecessary to design the entire typeface. Designers can be as creative as they wish. But most new typefaces are not conceived from nothing, they build on older versions and are developed until regularised variations on the original are achieved. In terms of quantity, the task of Chinese type designers is arguably more difficult than that of designers of Latin typefaces, who on average design 100-200 characters per font, as opposed to the tens of thousands of individual characters needed for a typical Chinese font. The designer's role is to come up with a concept and to create around 100 characters, which production artists then use to generate the remainder of the set. In this way, around 8000 characters can be produced per month. A slow process.

The quintessentially Chinese art of calligraphy still looms large over the topic of modern Chinese typography and remains an inspiration for the thousands of possibilities for today's typeface designs. Simultaneously inaccessible and graphically compelling to the untrained eye, calligraphy is something of a mystery to foreigners. August's exhibition to commemorate 80 years of the People's Liberation Army at the Shanghai Art Museum highlighted how calligraphy can be aesthetically emotive without the viewer's comprehension. Written in the hands of a hundred veterans of the PLA, the calligraphy was in some cases professionally scribed, sometimes in the shaky cursive script of now-old men. The hall seemed to be filled with the voices of these soldiers, a rallying cheer harking back to the days of the Liberation. There was no English explanation; illiterate viewers relied on the personality of the writing alone to grasp an emotional connection.

The artist Gu Wenda began drawing on this idea of illiteracy as a liberating visual experience in the 1980s when he began inventing, in effect, his own language; ideograms similar to authentic Chinese characters, but devoid of any meaning. The concept came to him when looking at, as opposed to reading, ancient Chinese characters. He has since worked on various nationality-orientated projects incorporating these characters, and adding fake versions of Latin, Arabic and Hindi scripts to his repertoire. This concept, linked with the controversial use of human hair from around the world, conveys strong interests in national and personal identity, and how written language is intertwined in both.

Xu Bing is another artist to have experienced life as an immigrant in the US. He too has an appreciation for the conceptual possibilities of written foreign languages. In the 1990's, Xu developed 'square calligraphy', a writing style for the English language with the appearance of Chinese characters; Roman letters used as building blocks like Chinese radicals, constructing words not read from left to right, but in the fashion of ideograms. English-speakers approach the work thinking it is Chinese, Chinese - speakers expect to be able to read it but can't, both parties are momentarily confused. Xu continues to work on linguistic projects, now developing

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1.Book from the Ground. Xu Bing, 2006. Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.

2.Untitled - Hong Kong. Tsang Kin Wah, 2004. Courtesy of MoCA, Shanghai.

3.Love Typeface. Sasson Kung, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

ENJOY DINNER BEAUTIFUL GIRL VERY HAPPY OURS FRIEND

throughout an ever-globalising Asia), he suggests, is the double set of linguistic and aesthetic codes of the audience. Differences between the two languages must be overcome to produce balanced typographic results. While Chinese uses up 20-30% less space than Roman script, and is uniformly written and spaced without the ups and downs of Roman text, there is also inconsistency in what is considered apt for certain styles of text. Some similarity, or at least harmony, between typefaces of the two languages must be found before they can sit comfortably together. What is required is education and exposure to good design.

a common visual language using icons in place of words.

A younger generation of Chinese graphic designers now draws inspiration from their experiences of life abroad to create bi-lingual textual designs and typefaces. Sasson Kung, a Taiwanese designer who studied in the Netherlands, warrants attention through his Love Typeface, a typeface designed for bi-lingual online flirting that often splits up the radicals of Chinese characters, but remains readable in both English and Chinese.

Hong Kong artist, Tsang Kin Wah's Pattern Series also uses typographic arrangements to explicitly investigate questions of mixed identity and visual language. He creates a kind of optical-illusion-cum-play-on-words using foul language in Chinese and English, beautifully arranged to imitate the chinoiserie wallpaper designs of the nineteenth century British arts and crafts movement. He writes that text, like imagery, is a visual sign, but one that has a clearer, less disputable message. By working his text into images, the audience's confusion on looking closer is not dissimilar to that experienced when faced with Gu's 'fake' Chinese and the 'Ching-lish' characters of Xu and Kung.

Keith Tam, communication designer and lecturer at Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Design, deals with bi-lingual typography on a more useable level. The challenge of appropriately setting bi-lingual type (in places like Hong Kong and

The future of Chinese typography could be bright. There are practical difficulties in its development - typefaces are difficult to translate into digital form, complex characters often becoming illegible in the limited space of digital screens, and as mentioned above, the creation of Chinese fonts is a slow process - but the creativity and sophistication of Chinese designers is growing. At present, universities in China offer typography only as part of their visual communication curriculum, something that ought to be reconsidered if the art is to mature to its full potential. all