

A Century of Hong Kong Design

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The beginning

The 1830s was an era of booming trade for China. The most popular imports were cotton, woollen products and clocks and watches. Although the Qing court issued an edict banning the import of opium in any form in as early as 1800, the banned substance was still ranked among the most sought-after imports. Tea, silk, porcelain ware and silverware were among the most demanded Chinese exports, which were praised by their Western customers for its practical value and their *chinoiserie*, a French term signifying “Chinese-esque” which was very much in vogue in the West at the time.

The Macartney Embassy, also called the Macartney Mission, reached China in 1793 to engage in the virtually futile endeavour of persuading the Qing court to ease restrictions on trade between Great Britain and China. In their frustration, British manufacturers undermined the venture by saying that “Chinese are incapable of appreciating quality Western goods.” In *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), the author Owen Jones goes as far to describing Chinese design as “totally unimaginative” and “and all their works are accordingly wanting in the highest grace of art”.¹ Hong Kong workers, he goes on to comment, “are capable of producing acceptable work, if, however, ‘copies are made of designs furnished from abroad’.”²

Hong Kong, nevertheless, had been an important trading port since it was proclaimed a British crown colony in 1842, assuming a role that grew in importance as the colony evolved from a regional port into a business hub since the Communist regime came to power in 1949. The increasing flow of southward-bound Mainland migrants, among them many entrepreneurs, businessmen and craftsmen from Shanghai, coupled with its strategic geographical position at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, made the free port of Hong Kong a magnet for international businesses. With an enormous demand for Hong Kong exports to satisfy, British businesses enjoyed an edge over their competition in conducting trade with the colony. Indeed, being responsive to market changes and cheap to produce had been the signatures of early Hong Kong design.

¹ Editor’s note: Owen Jones as quoted in Matthew Turner, *Made in Hong Kong, A History of Export Design in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1988), p.15.

² Editor’s note: quoted from *ibid.* However, the source of the quote “copies are made of designs furnished from abroad” is not apparent from Turner’s text.

Traditions of the Pearl River Delta and the Shanghai trend factor (1900–1930s)

Whether it was the 18th century ceramics of Foshan, the 19th century wood-carving of Guangdong or the 20th century silverware of Hong Kong, designs from the Pearl River Delta region are easily recognized by their distinct traditional style and effective strategies that responded quickly to market changes. A cradle of a culture indigenous to the south of China as well as an open trade gateway to the West since the Qing dynasty, the region has long been converging ideas of East and West while nurturing natives who are well adapted to different cultures, capable of thinking out of the box, flexible and ready to grab new opportunities.

The forefathers of Hong Kong Design – Wang Hing Manufactory Company, Leung So Kee, Kwong Sang Hong, Kowloon Rattan Ware Co. Ltd – were all craftsmen from the Pearl River Delta region who made their names designing and packaging silverware, umbrellas, cosmetics and wicker furniture. They, together with hundreds of other small-scale factories followed a tried-and-true production model adopted in much of China throughout the century – mass produced goods with finishing touches added by labourers and design strategies catering for the export market. As foreign products were being brought into Hong Kong, early factories became a melting pot of exports that integrated international designs and elevated them to fine *chinoiserie*.

Matthew Turner's research in 1993³ also brought to light unknown anecdotes on the forefathers of Hong Kong design. The Kwan family, a story of genealogy meets the history of Hong Kong graphic design, is a case in point. Moving to Hong Kong in 1845, Kwan Chuk-lam, a portrait artist and Guangdong native, was the marquee name in the art market. His descendant Kwan Wai-nung was dubbed as the “King of Calendar Art”⁴, his advertising posters were so popular that they almost monopolized the local poster and printing markets. Kwan junior was also responsible for introducing chromolithography to China as well as founding the Asian Lithographic Printing Press, which designed commercial posters for A-list clients such as Kwong Sang Hong.

In 1930s, Shanghainese manufacturers and their designers joined the influx of Mainland migrants to Hong Kong, bringing with them of an air of metropolitan chic to Hong Kong fashion and graphic designs. Among them was Cheung Yat-luen, the successor to the “King of Calendar Art” accolade. His son Cheung Yat-man was the

³ Editor's note: Matthew Turner's PhD thesis submitted to the Royal College of Art, London, titled “Ersatz Design: Interactions between Chinese and Western Design in Hong Kong: 1950s-1960s”, 1993.

⁴ Pairing product poster images with the 12 months of the year, calendar posters were widely used as a publicity tool in early days.

first local designer to make the style switch from East to West, his efforts commended by the one of the first Hong Kong design awards.⁵

The decade between the 1930s when Shanghai companies branched out to Hong Kong and the fall of the city to the Japanese saw many Shanghai artists and designers flee south to the colony. The second wave of migration sparked by the Civil War in the early 20th century left another trail of influence in Hong Kong design which, in the process, also absorbed influences from Art Deco from Europe. In addition to graphic design, Shanghai also injected a new element into Hong Kong fashion and home designs – a Chinese modern sensibility that reflects the fine taste of metropolitan life.

From “Made in Great Britain” to “Made in Hong Kong” (1930s to 1960s)

Unlike those of the British or Japanese, Hong Kong industries did not make a gradual, step-by-step crossover from heavy to light consumer good nor from local market to overseas export. In ways similar to Singapore and Taiwan, Hong Kong skipped over several traditional development phases and gained leverage to transform itself into a manufacture centre of export goods in early 20th century.

The Ottawa Agreements providing for mutual tariff concessions among Britain and other Commonwealth Dominions and territories was signed in 1932. Despite giving a boost to British exports, it emerged that Hong Kong manufacturers were possibly the only beneficiaries of the sizable tariff-free zone. Alarmed that their consumers were shunning locally made goods for cheap Hong Kong imports, British manufacturers cried unfair competition.

The Hong Kong manufacturing industry lost no time to extend its arm to reach Malaysia, Indian and some of the African countries. These regions, together with Britain and Southeast Asia, made up the market for Hong Kong products. Until the 1960s, Hong Kong had been exporting consumer goods such as plastic toys and enamel ware with the “Empire Made” mark.

The Ottawa Agreements also gave birth to the first generation of Hong Kong design pioneers, among them Fan Chai, director of I Feng Enamelling Company, and Cheng Ho, designer and director of the Union Metal Works Ltd. Both men had made significant contributions to expanding to new markets in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. In fact, quite a few products showcased at the commercially successful exhibitions organized by the Chinese Manufacturers Association of Hong Kong had

⁵ Editor’s note: Probably referring to Cheung’s champion in commemorative stamp design an international postage stamp design contest in 1985. The design was subsequently published as “Postage Stamp Centenary”, 4 May 1962.

been the brainchildren of Fan Chai, while Cheng was the mastermind behind the design workshop and design school he founded in Kowloon Tong.

The industrial revolution in Hong Kong reached its completion in as early as the 1930s, some two decades earlier than generally established. The word *design* had already entered the vernaculars of advertising, marketing, manufacturing and production as well as fashion and interior designs. Following declaration of independence by a succession of colonies from the 1960s onwards, the “Empire Made” mark used locally was gradually phased out by one of “Made in Hong Kong”

In the 1950s, the trade embargo sparked by the Korean War rather unexpectedly fuelled a post-war boom in the Hong Kong manufacturing industry that had lasted for decades. The seamless integration of labour-intensive production line, export-oriented strategy and market-oriented design process was further driven by the surge in the industrial use of plastic and the continued growth of the textile sector. Sadly, the quality of design was compromised as the local industry was clamouring to meet the demands of the new US market and heeding to the production requirements set out by their buyers. Further hampered by a lack of nurturing talent, the industry entered a phase of copycat designs, infamously equating the tag of “Made in Hong Kong” with cheap imitations. Gone was the exquisite Chinese-esque design that took the world by storm.

In the 1960s, the Federation of Hong Kong Industries endeavoured to shift the focus and mindset of business from China and Asia to the West while actively promoting Hong Kong as a modern, Westernized economy to the rest of the world. Among the notable names in Hong Kong design were foreign recruits hired by the Federation, including Henry Steiner, Ken Shimasaki, Dale Keller and Marshall Corazza.

The effects of China’s Reform and Opening-up Policies (1970s to 1990s)

Named one of Asia’s Four Little Dragons, Hong Kong enjoyed soaring export sales in garments, toys, plastic products, jewellery and clocks and watches in the 1970s. After decades of absence from world stage, the People’s Republic of China became a member of the United Nations in the early 1970s and the time had come for Hong Kong to assume the instrumental role of a bridge of trade between the Mainland and the rest of the world, ushering in a new era of development for Hong Kong economy.

During prosperous times of the 1970s, Western-style Hong Kong design scored success in business and as a mode of conducting business. However, the achievements of Japanese design impelled local designers to start exploring the roles of Chinese

traditions in contemporary designs. Kan Tai-keung was among the local acts that revamped the look of contemporary Chinese design by incorporating techniques of Chinese ink painting into Western-style compositions; Alan Chan was acclaimed for experimenting with folk art and melding elements of East and West in his designs. Their explorations offered inspiration and paved the way for the 1980s generation of design graduates such as Freeman Lau and Tommy Li.

As the standard of living in the West increased, so did the demand for quality from their customers. Traditional industries in Hong Kong, sensing the trend, began to adopt a new mode of business that focuses on high-quality and high value-added production. In the 1970s and 1980s, garments, toys, electronic products and clocks and watches made in Hong Kong were a mainstay in the international market. Since the policies of reform and opening up was first implemented by the Chinese government in 1979, a brand new mode of cooperation between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta region began to emerge, which consolidated the foundation for Hong Kong industry to stride into the 1990s.

As China opened its door to the world, pressure was also lifted from Hong Kong manufacturers to develop high-end products and original brand names. Capitalizing on the cheap land and labour available in the South China region, coupled with the increasingly booming entrepôt trade in the Guangdong province, Hong Kong once again took up an instrumental role in Chinese trade. Boasting an export-oriented economy well complemented by design strategies that continuously responded to emerging market needs, the manufacturing industry of the Pearl River Delta Region that had been running on a model of mass production supplemented by hand finishing also enjoyed a rebound.

The 1980s and 1990s are best characterized as the watershed decades of economic transitions in Hong Kong. Responding to the Mainland's shifting from a planned socialist economy to a free market economy, Hong Kong factories moved north while value-added services continued to be provided in Hong Kong, thereby creating the two pillar industries in Hong Kong – finance and logistics – and an economic bond that was further cemented since the transfer of sovereignty in 1997. And with these new opportunities came new challenges for local manufacturers and designers.

Major developments since the dawn of New Millennium: From OEM to OBM

The new millennium paints a vastly different picture. Over the last decade, Hong Kong designers have rediscovered their own cultural identity and awakened the public to appreciate the Chinese products and toys, posters, fashion and other design

disciplines of the past century in a new light. More often than not, attempts to explore a Hong Kong identity evoke nostalgic connections with early Hong Kong designs, many of which have sadly been lost and obscured over time. To our young designers, the bridge connecting the past with the present is broken and therefore barricaded. Instead, refusing to settle for an established style, the over 1,000 graduates from the dozen or so art and design institutes delve even deeper for things to please the discerning eye of their local and global patrons.

Design long been regarded in Hong Kong not only as a significant economic contributor, but also playing an instrumental role in spearheading the creative industry in the region and even at a national level. Locally, products of Hong Kong design have exerted an influence on consumer culture and urban environment so profound that they seep into the day-to-day life of people and bring about changes. On a national level, Hong Kong design is especially noted for its lasting contribution to regional developments (such as in the Pearl River Delta region) within the grander scheme of the development of manufacturing sector and modernization of trade on the Mainland. And finally, thanks to the varied nature of Hong Kong exports – toys, fashion and jewellery to name but a few – local designers and design brands are now a force on the international design scene to be reckoned with.

Hong Kong manufacturers have come a long way since the days of OEM, or original equipment manufacturer. The 21st century saw many manufacturers take the three-step leap from OEM to ODM (or original design manufacturer), to OBM (or original brand manufacturer). The industry has come to realize that Hong Kong design should not be positioned to compete in price; instead, Hong Kong industries are stepping up competitiveness by creating a strong brand identity and reputation adopting ODM and OBM strategies, a trend that best summarized by renowned local jewellery designer Lo Kai-yin:

If history has any lesson, it is that the more any product becomes a commodity, the more pressure there is on profit margins and the more brand values decline. In order to take the industry to the next level, we really need to encourage designers, manufacturers and the market to invest in the creative aspect... Hong Kong and China has had financial success to correspond with its rich history. What it needs next are high style brands and a few big stars.⁶

All in all, Hong Kong design has freed itself from the principles and restraints of

⁶ *Hong Kong Design Series 6: Jewellery for Life*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 2008), p.12. (Text in Chinese)

pragmatism to embrace a variety of styles, and in doing so, opens the window to a world of design and its many facets and characteristics. Embarking on a search for their cultural roots, Hong Kong designers have inadvertently struck a nostalgic nerve for designs of yesterday, spawning the birth of such brands as the lifestyle chain G.O.D. and the clothing and home accessories chain Shanghai Tang. In combating blows dealt by SARS and the more recent financial crisis and economic downturn, the Hong Kong SAR government has been seeking to improve its domestic environment for business with the goals of attracting investment and promoting the exchange of talent and ideas towards building more “Made in Hong Kong” brands and injecting fresh elements into the local economy. An impending question remains: Amid all the talk of building creative industries, what noise can be expected of our artists to make?

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