

# The Chameleon and the Pearl of the Orient

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Hong Kong's design culture has traditionally been discussed in terms of "East meets West," a cliché which served to neutralize the impact of colonization in its various forms. This idea of Hong Kong culture as the meeting place between two monolithic cultures is a common stereotype that continues to be used in contemporary criticism, journalism, and tourism promotion. This paper analyzes the work of Henry Steiner, a key figure in the development of modern graphic design in Hong Kong. Over the past thirty years, Steiner's designs have provided a public image for some of Hong Kong's most powerful corporations, and his "cross-cultural" design theories have provided a model for many other designers. His cross-cultural designs carefully maintain the difference between "Eastern" and "Western" culture, subtly reinforcing the hierarchies of Hong Kong's colonial situation. The design work and theories of Steiner analyzed in this paper reflect a popular representation of the Colony that lasted from the 1960s until at least the 1990s, and continues to endure in contemporary tourism promotion.

Steiner studied art and design in New York before he arrived in Hong Kong in 1961 to work on *The Asia Magazine*. In 1964, he opened his own design firm and, from the mid-1960s, his clients have included some of Hong Kong's leading corporations. Thus, for a long time, his work performed the role of aestheticizing the core of Hong Kong's institutional power structure. Steiner is not interested in fast-moving consumer design or fashion, preferring more stable projects involving corporate imaging, branding, and logos.<sup>1</sup> It is no coincidence that his major local clients are the core colonial enterprises—the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Hutchison Whampoa, Jardine Matheson, Lane Crawford, and Hongkong Land—all of which were established in the nineteenth century by British traders or entrepreneurs. By the 1960s, these corporations were the Colony's most powerful. Steiner's other major clients have included American multinationals such as the Hilton Hotel Group and IBM. He is not only one of the most influential and well-respected designers in Hong Kong, but has won numerous international awards for his work over the past forty years. While his designs have been both commercially successful and innovative within the Hong Kong design scene, the following is an analysis of the broader cultural implications of his work and theories.

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1 D. J. Huppatz, Interview with Henry Steiner (September 14, 2001, unpublished).

Steiner's arrival and subsequent impact on Hong Kong design is recalled by Ken Haas in Steiner's and Haas's co-authored book *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*:

It was only a few years ago that the full scope of Henry's "cross-cultural" contribution became apparent to me; that his was not just a case of a world-class talent who had settled in Asia for the challenge of pioneering then virgin territory.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than an odd anachronism, the clichéd colonial metaphor of Asia as virgin territory ripe for all kinds of colonization sets the tone of Steiner's and Haas's book—all the more surprising since the book was published in 1995. Rather than being a pioneer of modern design *per se*, as Haas seems to suggest, Steiner's position was that of a pioneer of a particular type of international modernism, closely aligned with a new kind of corporate capitalism in Asia.

Steiner's and Haas's book explains the key theories of Steiner's "cross cultural" design work completed in Hong Kong over the past thirty years and also, with its inclusion of a range of other designers' work, suggests how his theories might apply in a broader global context. For Steiner, cross-cultural design involves overcoming cultural boundaries in the service of communication. In his words, cross-cultural designers:

must strive to transmit one set of messages within the medium of a foreign tradition without losing the meaning and attitude of the original concept. Designers venturing into the global marketplace need to be as *sensitive* to cultural conventions as they are *uninhibited* in finding new ways to *exploit* them.<sup>3</sup>

Within this colonial framework of the "sensitive" yet "uninhibited" cultural "exploitation" that Steiner proposes, the appropriation of indigenous symbols and materials becomes the primary task of the (presumably American or European) cross-cultural designer. As with the exploitation of minerals, labor, or other sources of local wealth by economic colonialism, the cross-cultural designer has a wealth of local culture from which to extract and appropriate visual imagery.

The colonial position of Steiner's cross-cultural designer is made clearer when considered in the light of Edward Said's well-known book, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. While Said's Orient is primarily the Middle East, his theories can be applied equally to an Asian context. Said describes Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>4</sup> In order to manage and regulate the Orient in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western colonial powers needed a system of representation that created a structural relationship of domination in which the West maintained power over the Orient. For Said, one of the most important distinctions between East and West

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2 Henry Steiner and Ken Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), vii.

3 *Ibid.*, ix (italics mine).

4 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 3.

is imaginative, and the consistent repetition of the same Oriental stereotypes results in a differentiation that is intimately linked to colonial power:

...from its earliest modern history to the present, Orientalism as a form of thought for dealing with the foreign has typically shown the altogether regrettable tendency of any knowledge based on such hard-and-fast distinctions as “East” and “West”; to channel thought into a West or an East compartment. Because this tendency is right at the center of Orientalist theory, practice and values found in the West, the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific fact.<sup>5</sup>

With their emphasis on maintaining cultural difference, design theories such as Steiner’s are part of the continuing Orientalist discourse that supports colonialism, while his design work is a concrete manifestation of this tendency to repeat and reinforce distinctions between East and West. In design terms, Hong Kong is represented by Steiner’s co-author Haas as “virgin territory,” a variation of the popular cliché of Hong Kong as the “Pearl of the Orient,” waiting passively to be appropriated and “exploited” by Western designers.

Far from being a “virgin territory” even in design terms, Hong Kong in the 1960s already was infused with a Chinese modern design aesthetic developed in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. Design critic Wendy Siuyi Wong refers to the unpublished thesis of Matthew Turner, arguing that:

Hong Kong was able to maintain its modern Chinese design style until at least the 1960s, through the contributions of both mainland and Hong Kong designers. He [Turner] attributes a rapid fading of Hong Kong modern design style after 1960 to the influx of American companies and to government assistance for American design specialists, rather than local designers. Local Chinese designers previously trained in Guangzhou and Shanghai had to gradually alter their style to fit into the new commercial environment dominated by American companies, and to meet the standard set by American-trained designers.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Turner argues that Hong Kong’s modern design culture prior to the Second World War went into decline with the increased American presence in Hong Kong and in Asia in general in the aftermath of the Korean War. “By the 1960s,” he argues, “the designs and designers of the early modern period of Hong Kong had begun to disappear as American markets and styles came to predominate.”<sup>7</sup> In this light, Steiner’s cross-cultural design represented a new international (that is, specifically American) design

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5 Ibid., 46.

6 Wendy Siuyi Wong, “Detachment and Unification: A Chinese Graphic Design History in Greater China Since 1979,” *Design Issues* 17:4 (Autumn 2001). She refers to Matthew Turner’s unpublished thesis, *Ersatz Design: Interactions Between Chinese and Western Design in Hong Kong, 1950s–1960s* (London: Royal College of Art, 1993).

7 Matthew Turner, *Made in Hong Kong: A History of Export Design in Hong Kong 1900–1960* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, Hong Kong Museum of History, 1988), 15.

modernism closely aligned to colonial and multinational corporations. In the 1960s, Hong Kong was “virgin territory” for a new form of global capitalism that required consistent visual symbols across national borders, as well as a touch of local aesthetic “flavor” for differentiation between regions.

This image of Hong Kong as “virgin territory” should be seen in the context of the Hollywood depictions of the city from the 1950s and ‘60s, exemplified by the films *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* (Henry King, 1955) and *The World of Suzie Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960). Both are romanticized adaptations of popular novels that feature idyllic shots of the Colony, and both feature an American male lead (played in both films by William Holden) who has taken up the colonial mantle from the ruins of European colonialism in Asia.<sup>8</sup> *The World of Suzie Wong*, in particular, helped forge a pervasive image of Hong Kong in the Western popular imagination. Filmed primarily for an American audience, the film is a romantic narrative in which the cosmopolitan American Robert Lomax (with whom the audience identifies) falls in love with a local prostitute, Suzie Wong (played by Nancy Kwan). This is another version of the “Pearl of the Orient” metaphor because Hong Kong is represented as a location that offers easily available Oriental women to the American lead in a nonthreatening fulfillment of male desire. As it traces the romance between American architect-turned-artist Lomax and poor Chinese prostitute Wong, the Orient is feminized in the film the same way as it is in Haas’s quotation—passive and available for the active American protagonist. The film also helped shape popular perception of Hong Kong in the 1960s as the “safe” Orient, filled with submissive natives, where Westerners could enjoy exoticism in an idealized location with all the comfortable trappings of British colonial life.<sup>9</sup>

While *Suzie Wong* provides a colonial context in which Steiner’s early work could be situated, his theories provide an insight into the close relationship between design and colonial corporations; be they British, American, or European. In *Cross-Cultural Design*, Steiner uses the metaphor of a chameleon to describe his approach to design:

Chameleons reflect local colour, but retain their form. Ideally, designers are representative of their own culture yet adaptive to new surroundings. The goal is to achieve a harmonious juxtaposition; more of an interaction than a synthesis.<sup>10</sup>

For him, the designer operates in a similar way to a chameleon, using an aesthetic process to blend foreign interests into the local context. But in addition to the chameleon function, design also functions to differentiate foreign from local companies by creating distinguishing marks of ownership.

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8 It’s interesting that both novels featured an English hero, but their movie versions featured an American hero.

9 For a more detailed analysis of these two films, see Gina Marchetti, “White Knights in Hong Kong: Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing and The World of Suzie Wong” in her book *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 109–124; and *Before and After Suzie: Hong Kong in Western Film and Literature*, Thomas Y.T. Luk and James P. Rice, eds. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002).

10 Henry Steiner and Ken Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*, 9.

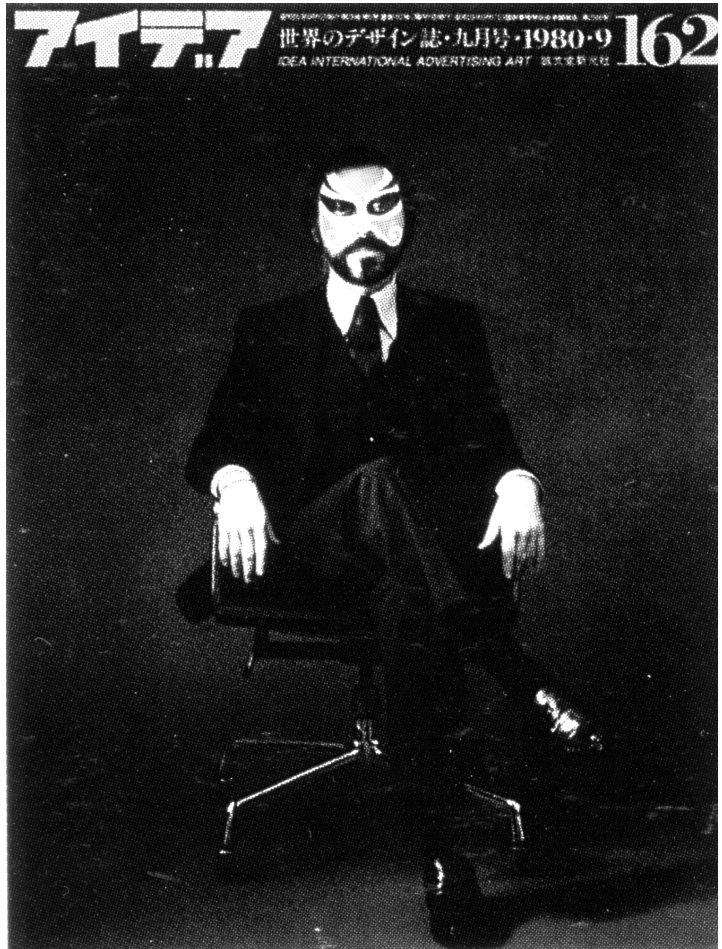


Figure 1  
*IDEA*, No. 162, 1980.  
All images reproduced by permission of  
Henry Steiner.

Steiner's designs illustrate this chameleon idea. His cover design for *IDEA* Magazine (no. 162) of 1980, for example, features a photograph of Steiner himself seated, wearing a dark business suit against a black background, his face painted in the red and white design of a traditional Cantonese opera mask. In his chameleon pose, Steiner is performing "Chineseness" in an effort to create a cross-cultural design. Beyond the obvious humor of the image, the ideologies of racial and cultural difference are carefully maintained; his cross-cultural approach to design involves applying the surface image of a local (Chinese) culture to international (Western) business. Steiner's image of the chameleon also serves as a metaphor for international corporate capitalism, a "masking" of complex socio-economic processes behind local color.

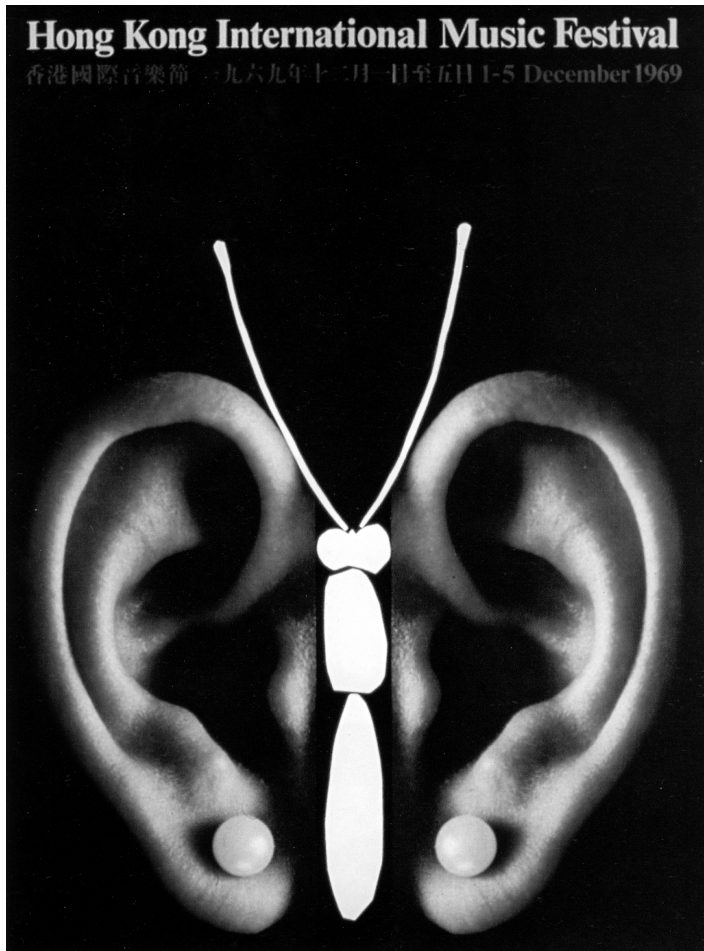


Figure 2  
*Hong Kong International Music Festival*  
poster, 1969.

Steiner's approach to cross-cultural design often draws upon already existing mythologies about Hong Kong. The representation of Hong Kong as the "Pearl of the Orient" appears in his design work several times. His *Hong Kong International Music Festival* poster (1969), for example, features two photos, each of an ear with a pearl earring, brought together with a drawn butterfly body in the middle so the ears form the butterfly's wings. The particular local reference Steiner adds is the pearl. Hong Kong features in this colonial metaphor as an exotic Oriental jewel, waiting passively to be appropriated.

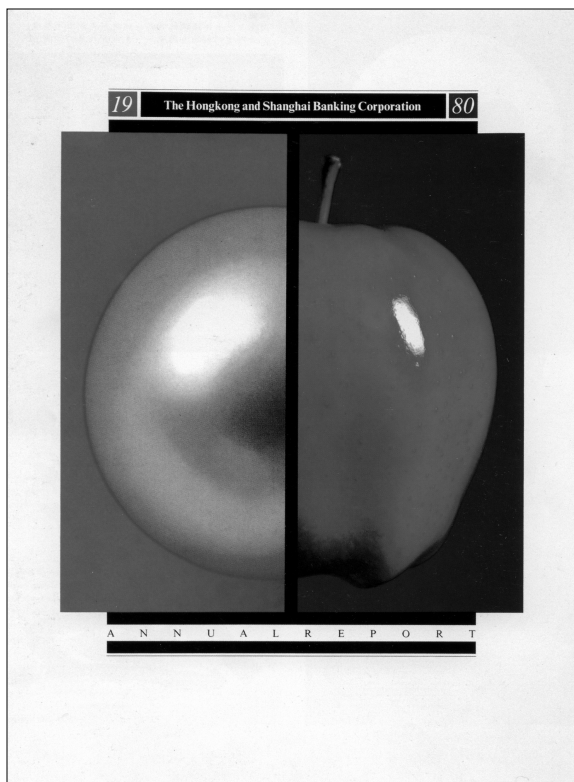


Figure 3  
*HSBC Annual Report cover, 1980.*

Steiner reused the “Pearl of the Orient” idea in his design for the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) 1980 annual report. The report’s cover featured a split image: a photograph of half a pearl next to a photograph of half an apple. In this design, Steiner plays on clichés—the “Pearl of the Orient” (Hong Kong) meets the “Big Apple” (New York). In this case, Hong Kong as the British Empire’s “pearl” of the Orient has shifted to become the “pearl” of multinational capitalism. The annual report celebrated both the HSBC takeover of the New York-based Marine Midlands Banks, Inc. and the one-hundredth anniversary of the establishment of their New York office. HSBC is a former colonial bank founded in 1865 to fund the China trade, and has since functioned as the central bank in Hong Kong. It proved to be a successful colonial enterprise, continuing to grow in the Twentieth Century, particularly after the Second World War. The expansion into new markets in the 1980s, including the establishment of the Hongkong Bank of Canada and the Hongkong Bank of Australia, in addition to the American takeover, further emphasized the Bank’s shift from an Asian-based colonial bank to a dispersed global bank. The Bank itself perhaps is the “pearl” of Steiner’s image, generating wealth for its controlling interests in London.



Figure 4  
HSBC Annual Report inside pages, 1980.

Another page in Steiner's 1980 HSBC report features a split image, half Cantonese opera character, half Statue of Liberty, while other pages feature similar juxtapositions of iconic Hong Kong scenes next to New York City ones. The representations of traditional Chinese culture next to those of New York culture display a kind of tourist image of multinational capitalism. The "masking" of the British colonial bank behind a Cantonese opera mask represents the more problematic side of Steiner's chameleon project in that it illustrates how colonial corporations adopt a local identity through graphic design. The two myths he utilizes in this image are those of a Hong Kong symbolized by traditional Chinese culture and a New York symbolized by liberty and multiculturalism. However, there are two repressed subtexts within these narratives: the first is Hong Kong as an already hybrid and vibrant modern culture; and the second is the fact that "for all the time Ellis Island processed would-be immigrants—from 1892 until 1938—Chinese people were excluded from America."<sup>11</sup> The use of Chinese iconography for a British colonial bank thus becomes doubly ironic as the Statue of Liberty represents the exclusion of Chinese in America, while the traditional mask represents a Chinese culture of the past—not of modern cosmopolitan Hong Kong.

11 Gregory B. Lee, *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 221.



While comfortable juxtaposing stereotypical images of “East” and “West,” Steiner is adamantly opposed to the idea of a hybrid culture, as is evident when he writes:

The individual character of the elements should be retained, each maintaining its own identity while also commenting on and enriching the other, like the balance of Yin and Yang.

*Combination, mixture, blending—these are useless concepts as they will result in a kind of mud.* Street stalls in Hong Kong serve an understandably unique beverage called “Yin-yang,” a combination of tea and coffee. It tastes as you would imagine: the worst characteristics of both are enhanced.<sup>12</sup>

In his work, with its emphasis on difference, Steiner is focused on defining cultures and then on carefully keeping them apart. In the 1960s, this emphasis seemed to coincide with a new type of colonialism in which former British companies sought to maintain their hold on power, while newer American companies sought to establish themselves in Hong Kong (and in Asia in general). While it may appear subtle, this type of colonization is remarkably similar to earlier colonial divisions between colonizers and natives.

Maintaining distinct divisions between cultures masks the complexity of Hong Kong’s post-war culture, but more than this, Rey Chow argues that:

Whenever the oppressed, the native, the subaltern, and so forth are used to represent the point of “authenticity” for our critical discourse, they become at the same time the place of myth-making and an escape from the impure nature of political realities.<sup>13</sup>

Chow provides a poignant critique of Steiner’s position in two ways. First, her native finds a parallel in Steiner’s mythical depiction of the Chinese other and its equation with tradition; and, second, her notion of the “impure nature of political realities” is in direct contrast to his emphasis on purity. In his search for local “authenticity,” Steiner’s “pure” specimens of ethnicity are museum caricatures rather than the images of a modern Chinese city with an “impure” culture. Any search for the “authentic natives” is bound to fail, Chow argues, since, “What is unique to Hong Kong... is precisely an in-betweenness and an awareness of impure origins, of origins as impure.”<sup>14</sup> The inhabitants of Chow’s Hong Kong are the creators and consumers of “yin-yang,” the tea-coffee drink Steiner criticizes, consuming it, as Steiner fails to acknowledge, because they like the taste!

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12 Henry Steiner and Ken Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*, 9.

13 Rey Chow, “Where Have All the Natives Gone” *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 44.

14 Rey Chow, “Between Colonizers: Hong Kong Post-Colonial Self-Writing in the 1990s,” *Diaspora* 2:2 (Fall 1992): 157.

In addition to his design practice, Steiner offers a theoretical model for cross-cultural representation in which he elaborates his mimetic theory. For Steiner, there are three stages in the process of producing a cross-cultural design, which equate to a dialectical operation with a final synthesizing stage: quotation, mimicry, and transformation. Of the final stage, he writes: "In this stage, influence has been assimilated and the once foreign becomes personal and natural."<sup>15</sup> He argues that this stage is crucial:

The simplest way to suggest a foreign ambience is to borrow an exotic image. To qualify as a true cross-cultural design, however, it is necessary for an image to be *transformed* in some way; to be appropriated and redefined.<sup>16</sup>

Steiner's chameleon methodology involves first appropriating local culture, and then recontextualizing it within a Euro-American context.

While his theory advocates an assimilation of local cultures into a global, cross-cultural design, Steiner is careful to keep the two cultures apart: on the one hand, Euro-American international modernism, and on the other, "native" culture. The use of split imagery is the most direct instance of this dialectical method:

A dialectical technique, the split image is the most basic way of juxtaposing visual elements in order to achieve a synthesis. A new icon results from the combination of disparate elements. It can be perceived as a metaphor of the synergy resulting from the meeting of two cultures.<sup>17</sup>

While supposedly forming a new icon, Steiner always is careful to maintain the distance or difference between "East" and "West" in his designs, each with its stereotypical characteristics: the East is equated with the traditional, the emotional, the feminine, "craft" tools, tranquility, spirituality, and harmony; the West with the modern, the rational, the masculine, high technology, dynamism, and flux. In Steiner's Hong Kong, the meeting of these two cultures and their respective attributes is infinite: they remain separate and do not blend.

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15 Henry Steiner and Ken Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*, 2.

16 *Ibid.*, 10.

17 *Ibid.*, 36.



Figure 5  
*IDEA*, No.226, 1991.

Steiner's cover design for *IDEA* No. 226 (1991) features an image split diagonally, half Chinese geomancer's compass and half computer disk. The background of the image, likewise split diagonally, comprises a wind pattern (represented by clouds) and a wave pattern, referring to Feng Shui (literally "wind-water"). In this image, Steiner's dialectical method illustrates the meeting of the mystical, spiritual East and the rational, technologically-advanced West. Each culture is defined by way of opposition or in contradiction to the other. This suggests, first, that each has an infinite, unchanging essence (the traditional, spiritual East, the progressive, modern West) and, second, that these essences cannot be mixed. Steiner's East-West mythology thus disallows the possibility of a Western spiritual mysticism or an Eastern progressive modernism (such as "Shanghai modernism" of the 1920s and '30s, for example).

Such visual imagery perpetuates the idea of Hong Kong as a meeting place between two cultures. This meeting of two cultures assumes two distinct homogenous sets of values, practices, and histories—the East as unchanging, traditional, and exotic: the West as progressive, modern, and universal. In terms of Steiner's theory of cross-cultural design, Asia is presented as an atemporal source of ancient tradition, a source of exotic inspiration that can be packaged for Western consumption. Centuries of cultural exchange and interaction are suppressed as difference is reinforced and co-opted into a colonial sense of order in which Chinese culture always is frozen in the past, while Western culture is dynamic and progressive. The constant repetition of Chinese culture as eternally traditional erases not only contemporary Hong Kong culture, but also the modernism of the Communist mainland. As Cold War imagery, Steiner's Hong

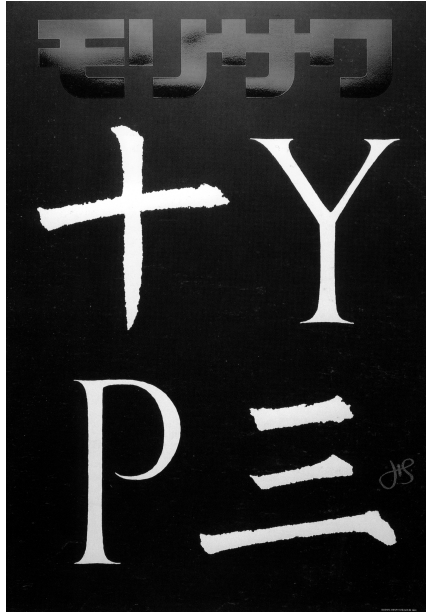


Figure 6  
Type poster for Morisawa Typesetting  
Company, 1991.

Kong is the meeting place where the safe, traditional China meets the capitalist West, while the contemporary state of China and its modern design culture disappears.

Turner offers an alternative version of Hong Kong culture. In a catalogue essay from the exhibition “Hong Kong Sixties,” he argues that the 1960s were “the first time a population of émigrés, traders, refugees, and expatriates came to define themselves as Hong Kong people.”<sup>18</sup> Turner argues that the decade was a turning point because of the threat posed by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which resulted in the colonial government reshaping Hong Kong into an image of a modern consumer city in order to avoid a local communist uprising. However, Turner adds that the modern popular culture that developed in this period was a mix of:

British culture, from functional design to Swinging Sixties (particularly after the Beatles’ visit); Shanghainese cosmopolitan style; the Americanisation of lifestyles brought about by trade as well as anti-communist propaganda, communism—itsself a westernising form of modernisation; and the influence of Nationalist images of modernity, inherited from China and broadcast from Taiwan.<sup>19</sup>

This reading challenges the simple “East meets West” figuration so often applied to Hong Kong culture, even today.

Continuing his “East meets West” dialectical method, Steiner’s poster for the (Japanese) Morisawa Typesetting Company (1991) features the word “TYPE” in white letters on a black background. The Chinese character for ten (*shi*) is used for the “T,” while the character for three (*san*) is used for “E.” Steiner explains:

18 Matthew Turner, *Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre Press, 1994), unpaginated.

19 Ibid.

The white letters are debossed to suggest the stone engraving common to both systems. The Roman letters are from the book *Il Perfetto Scrittore* by Giovanni Gresci (Rome, 1570). The Chinese characters are from a Tang dynasty inscription by Liu Kung Chuan (841 AD) in the "Forest of Steles," Xian. The signature is coloured and positioned in the manner of a Chinese seal.<sup>20</sup>

On Steiner's meshing of the two typographic traditions in the TYPE poster, Haas writes of the designer's "uncanny ability to juxtapose the magisterial tradition of Roman typography against the sensuous curves, bold strokes, and delicate teardrops of Chinese script..."<sup>21</sup> Again, Haas's reading falls easily into clichés about the East and the West, although this time his analysis also falls into gendered stereotypes, with the East associated with feminine curves and the West with the hard authority of Roman script. This is a further reiteration of the "Suzie Wong syndrome," whereby the Orient and the West are gendered and structured as unequal complements. Again, following Steiner's cross-cultural thesis, the two cultures are brought together in the same image, but simultaneously held apart with no possibility of mixture.

Steiner's images solidify a certain historicist thinking that regulates Chinese culture to a series of anachronisms, with the aloof abstraction of Western modern design providing the frame in which they appear. So long as it remains exotic, traditional, and safe, this version of the Orient offers no threats to British colonialism or to American corporate capitalism. Despite the development of Hong Kong's vibrant modern culture in the period between the 1950s and the 1990s, this East meets West theme continued to inform many cultural and critical practices. In Steiner's cross-cultural designs, the complex processes of colonization disappear as Hong Kong remains the eternal meeting place of East and West. By masking the unequal relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, his cross-cultural theory reinscribes the colonial hierarchy symbolically. Both the local and the traditional become assimilated into this colonial design logic that does not allow for the possibility of an autonomous Hong Kong culture, hybrid or otherwise. With an emphasis on cultural purity and authentic ethnicity, Steiner's cross-cultural theory provides an overlap between British colonialism and a newer type of colonialism emerging in the 1960s in the form of American-led global capitalism.

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20 Henry Steiner, and Ken Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*, 20.

21 *Ibid.*, vii.