

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER – BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN
TWO UNIQUE CULTURAL APPROACHES TO DESIGN EDUCATION

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Problem in Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
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As China is opening its doors to the world and getting more involved in the global market, it is facing great challenges and competition with other countries and cultures. In order to make Chinese graphic design industry more competitive and help Chinese businesses and industries have better success in the global market, I believed Chinese college-level design educators and students should learn more from advanced American graphic design processes and marketing methods to achieve a better understanding of Western design culture and make communication more successful. At the same time, I believed American college-level graphic design educators and students should become aware of strengths and weaknesses that exist in their own design education and learn from Chinese formal tradition.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Coming from a Chinese culture and art background, I have been studying communication design at an American graduate school for the past three years. After observing and experiencing these two different education systems from different cultural backgrounds, I have learned that both of them have successful advantages and distinctions, yet both have some disadvantages as well.

On one hand, influenced by the country's long history, Chinese artists pursue perfection in their art, which is reflected by the excellent craftsmanship. Many Chinese artists learned art by studying masterpieces from history. In order to achieve details and excellent craftsmanship, they spend tremendous time and patience in practicing their craft. Most of their learning experience is based on repeating the same practice many times to enhance craftsmanship and refine details.

In China, graphic design is still strongly attached to fine arts and influenced by the traditional apprenticeship, an approach to learning that involves students copying or emulating their mentors. Chinese graphic design educators and students put a great emphasis on decoration and hand skills, creating visually compelling design work with decorative details rather than putting emphasis on creative ideas and individual thinking.

However, I believed Chinese educators and students needed to learn that a great concept is the key to making communication design successful. I have learned from my experience in the United States that graphic design is about designers creating visual messages so that clients reach audiences and make those particular audiences

respond. I believed that Chinese educators and students also needed to know that successful graphic design requires using the creative process to solve problems. This key issue has been taught and applied in most American design schools and design firms for years and is the most significant difference between each country's approaches to graphic design education.

On the other hand, culturally the United States has a short history and has grown up quickly in comparison to China and has achieved great success in a relatively short period of time. This short and successful history has influenced America's way of thinking, acting and creating. Americans live in a faster-paced lifestyle. Individuality and efficiency are among the important qualities that lead to success.

Most American graphic design higher-educational programs place greater emphasis on how to generate unique concepts and strong messages very quickly instead of focusing on hand skills and graphic decoration. American design educators prefer spending time on having students practice creative methods that generate more ideas than repeating hand skills and refining technique. As a result, I believed both American educators and students showed weakness in their work by not knowing of or caring enough about refining their craftsmanship. They needed to know that great concepts do not always make successful design if the concepts lack a visually compelling appearance and good craftsmanship.

I believed from my education in China that American design educators could learn from their Chinese colleagues how to respect and teach by studying design history and copying successful design. I also believed that American design educators should

strengthen their students' hand skills and craftsmanship and avoid relying on computer technology or following new technology blindly.

Current Situation in Graphic Design Education in China

“Both authors are of the opinion that design education in China focuses on presentation skills rather than problem-solving concepts. Chinese design educators place noticeably greater emphasis on the product rather than on the process of designing the products.”¹

According to my personal experience, in most Chinese colleges, conceptual methodology and critical thinking has not been taught or emphasized in graphic design education. The creative problem-solving process in design has almost been ignored. “It appears that design is envisaged only as an art form, clearly separated from its commercial, human and cultural applications.” (Alex Fung Shung-Yu and Alice Lo Choi Yuet-Ngor, “Design Education in China: New Proposals to Address Endemic Problems,” *Journal of Art and Design Education* (U.K.), vol. 20, no. 2, May 2001, pp. 171-9[database on-line], accessed February 22, 2003.) After years of extremely strict training, I have seen students with a strong sense of aesthetics and decorative hand skills are encouraged to produce “beautiful” graphic design work. During the working process, students spend a great amount of time doing visual research and copying. In the worse cases, concept as the foundation for graphic design and clarity of a message are considered second or almost ignored.

¹Alex Fung Shung-Yu and Alice Lo Choi Yuet-Ngor, “Design Education in China: New Proposals to Address Endemic Problems,” *Journal of Art and Design Education* (U.K.), vol. 20, no. 2, May 2001, pp. 171-9 [database on-line], accessed February 22, 2003.

I believed that lacking conceptual critical thinking and creative design methodologies, most Chinese students were only able to produce design work with little or no conceptual function. Graphic design in China was often not much more than decoration. Chinese graphic designers were not aware of their role as a bridge for connecting clients and target audiences and as message-makers, which differentiates designers from fine artists.

I believed that if a person was not engaging in the process of design including creative thinking and design decision making that this person was not designing effectively.

The weakness in the graphic design abilities of Chinese students is a result of various problems existing in Chinese graphic design education. The main problem was that graphic design education in China currently was still a part of fine arts and crafts. The methods of teaching design had been deeply influenced by the traditional Chinese apprenticeship from workshops and studios that focused more on the product than the message. The Chinese learning process started from copying the masters' work from history, trying to recreate and refine every detail exactly like the original work. The coordination of eye and hand seemed to be more important, and the final product and presentation had always been the most important part of Chinese graphic design. Concept had never been an important issue to be discussed in the learning process.

My personal experience as a student in China was that most of my professors only showed formal examples of good and/or successful designs (most of them foreign), but rarely they discussed why this work was conceptually and strategically strong. We were encouraged to mimic these directions and styles, which led us to believe that

graphic design was all about appealing to people's attention by creating "an interesting look" instead of creating a concept that carries a strong message. Other than explaining some general aesthetic formal issues, professors never explained more about the conceptual function or process that we could use to achieve these successful designs. Without understanding the conceptual function, design process or marketing strategy behind the examples, we simply copied these visual styles and added our own visual content.

In most design critiques in China, focus was again placed on aesthetic issues rather than the creative process or clarification of the message. This resulted in students learning nothing other than how to recreate "beautiful" styles that had been approved and appreciated by a particular professor. This method was exactly like the old method of the Chinese apprenticeship. Unfortunately, instead of developing effective design messages through the creative process, a decorative style was what most Chinese graphic design educators expected from their students, upon which grades were determined.

In many cases, without intention, Chinese graphic design educators were misleading their students regarding how to produce successful designs for communicating messages effectively. Students learned from their teachers the same way these teachers were taught by their teachers. They were simply following tradition. It is my opinion, however, that communication design in general should be separated from traditional fine arts, especially crafts. The current teaching methods in Chinese graphic design education needs to be changed, but some of the traditional skills, craftsmanship and processes should be maintained.

I believed that if future graphic design education in China did not begin focusing on teaching creative problem-solving process, the education of new graphic designers would become meaningless in a global economy. Students must learn how to start from the beginning of the problem and explore creative methods to get to the final stage and the best solutions for communicating problems. To change the current situation in Chinese graphic design education, I proposed to bring American creative methodologies and innovations to Chinese design educators while maintaining the valuable parts of Chinese craftsmanship and tradition. I believed the best way to improve upon their historical approach to teaching was to introduce conceptual thinking and the creative process to foundation Chinese graphic design education. Teaching Chinese design educators and their students of the importance of conceptual methods for problem solving were crucial for the future of Chinese graphic design.

Current Situation in Graphic Design Education in the United States

In the United States, though graphic design education is much more advanced than in most other countries, it is facing another big challenge — graphic design is relying more and more on new technology and is straying away from a person's creative abilities including beautiful hand skills. To American design students and many educators, new technology, especially computer technology, has already started to negatively affect creative thinking. Technology seems to be the only resource for learning information. Many students are trying to learn creativity from software and let the computer software replace their brain for creative decision-making. Technology is taking more and more control over design. Real creative methods and aesthetics in graphic design are being gradually replaced with software.

When graphic design students in the US rely too much on computers, they may not realize that software will eventually take the place of the creative process and traditional art making. Some American design students even believe that computers can “design” and make good “decisions” for them. I believed that the computer has brought great advantages to the graphic design profession, but it also has brought many problems. Software can never replace a human’s brain for creativity or making decisions. In other words, software does not have the ability to judge aesthetics and creativity, and it can never take the place of the design problem-solving process. Computers are tools. I do not believe there will ever be a “Creative” key and a “Decision” key set on the keyboard that will show me all kinds of ideas and designs that are the best solutions for me.

My personal experience with American graphic design education has taught me that graphic design wasn’t all about working on computers — design was so much more than that, and no one could become a good graphic designer without knowledge of formal issues and aesthetics of design and drawing along with learning how to think, conceptualize and write. Compared with Chinese students who spend at least three to four years on intensive hand skill and craftsmanship training before enrolling in college, American graphic design educators and students must also put more emphasis on basic hand skills and formal design aesthetics. In addition, more emphasis should be placed on learning traditional and historical design as well as new technological skills. From my personal perspective, I thought it was important to teach graphic design students to know, to respect and to learn from design history and traditions. This knowledge was necessary to strengthen designers’ hand skills and the creative process

and avoid relying too much on computer technology. It was important to learn technology, but never to let it lead the creative process.

Significance of the Study

As China is opening its doors to the world and getting more and more involved in the global market, it is facing great challenges and competition with other countries and cultures. In order to make the Chinese graphic design industry become more competitive and help Chinese businesses and industries have better success in the global market, I believed we needed to learn more from others, especially advanced American graphic design processes and marketing methods. Steps need to be taken toward a better understanding of Western design culture and make communication more successful. At the same time, I believed American graphic design educators and students should become aware of strengths and weaknesses that exist in their own design education and learn from Chinese formal tradition. If Chinese and American graphic design programs learned from and made comparisons with each other, it would greatly improve each country's educational curriculum. Differences and similarities would be identified first, so that improvements could take place in each country. Though my beliefs were based on my personal experiences and perspectives, I thought that my study and research would have great significance and importance to both Chinese and American graphic design education.

Statement of the Problem with Research Questions

My problem-in-lieu of thesis focused on what college-level Chinese graphic design educators and students needed to learn from American graphic design education, and what American college-level graphic design education could learn from

Chinese graphic design education. This research was based on my personal experience of both cultures.

My study and research questions had two parts. One aimed at Chinese graphic design education, and the other aimed at American graphic design education.

I created a series of bilingual posters. One side of each poster was in Chinese with a target audience of Chinese graphic design educators and students. This particular side was designed to introduce the conceptual thinking methodologies and creative processes from American graphic design education to China. The other side of each poster was in English with the target audience being American graphic design educators and students. This particular side was designed to introduce the way that Chinese graphic design students learned from historical traditions, hand skills and craftsmanship. My goal was to introduce both cultures to the missing parts of their approaches, to help one understand the other, and to create opportunities for both cultures to learn from each other. In other words, I tried to build a bridge between American graphic design education and Chinese graphic design education, enhancing the communication between both cultures and education systems. I addressed the following questions in my study and research:

1. How effective could a series of bilingual posters illustrating Chinese and American graphic design education be at influencing change in each country's approach to graphic design education?

2. How feasible and practical would this format of bilingual posters be in communicating my bi-cultural messages?

3. What were other ways I could have expressed my beliefs and conveyed my message to the target audience?

Methodology

I tried to let more people read my messages and thoughts. I received feedback mostly from American graphic design educators and students. I looked for more exposure for the posters through a traveling show to various design schools and educational institutes in China as well as in the United States. I believed the more responses I got from both sides of my audience, the more I would know about whether my message and concepts had been communicated clearly and directly to my target audiences through these posters. Also, I believed I would learn that my efforts on the study and my research could encourage people to make a difference.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope of my study and research was limited to the college-level communication design education in the United States and China based on my personal observation and experience. My focus on the American side was limited to how to strengthen students' hand skills and avoid relying too much on computer software, and my focus on the Chinese side was limited to how to teach students creative methodologies. These two focuses were just a small part of graphic design education. My personal study experience was also limited to a few middle- to large-scale public schools/colleges in both China and the United States. I had no experience in other types of schools or educational institutes, such as private schools, community colleges and so on; thus, I thought both of the schools where I had been studying and doing

research could only represent a certain part of general Chinese and American college-level graphic design education.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A More Extensive Discussion

I have just watched a new movie *Lost in Translation*. It is a comedy based on two Americans' experience while staying in Tokyo, Japan, for a short business trip. The first American, a young lady who just graduated from college with a philosophy degree, comes to Tokyo with her new husband. The second American, who is a famous movie star in his late 40's and is struggling with his family relationships, comes to Tokyo to shoot a Japanese beer commercial. In the movie, they both feel lost in their respective life transitions, just like they feel lost in a new city and in a new culture. I, as a Chinese individual, had the same awkward and confused feelings as these characters did when I first arrived in the United States and became submerged in the American culture. In the movie, I see that the Americans have these feelings when they face the unfamiliar Asian culture.

According to L. Robert Kohls, Director of Training and Development for the International Communication Agency at Princeton University and the author of *Survival kit for overseas living*, culture is "an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society. Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does and makes — it is a system of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and

transmitted from generation to generation;”¹ Therefore, cultural differences include language, religion, history, morality, custom and, most importantly, thinking. At the same time, these elements interact, connect and correspond to one another.

Communications directly reflect thinking. Communication design/graphic design is one of the various communications in the human society. It is about designers creating visual messages for clients to reach audiences and to make the particular audiences respond. Communication design/graphic design cannot simply ignore the influences caused by cultural differences. In fact, communication design/graphic design in different countries is deeply attached to their cultures. Furthermore, cultural differences have a great impact on design education, which is forwarded and transmitted to the future generations.

In my opinion, cultural differences illustrate the difference, the distinctness and the contrasts in design; they, however, do not illustrate quality, either better or worse. Cultural differences between Chinese design education and American design education provide a valuable opportunity for both to cultivate each other’s advantages, to discover each other’s distinctions and to understand and compensate for each other’s disadvantages. Looking at the other culture, one knows what to learn; looking at one’s own culture, one knows what to cherish.

As I stated in Chapter I, my personal experience in the United States and in China fortified my belief that hand skills and craftsmanship are emphasized at the Chinese college-level design education, while conceptual thinking and creative design

¹“Exploring Cultural Differences.” *Study Abroad Handbook, 2003-04*, Princeton University. Available from <http://www.princeton.edu/~sap/handbook/chapter-9.html>. Internet; accessed March 10, 2004.

process are emphasized at the American college-level design education. Hand skills and craftsmanship are undoubtedly the first steps toward art and design, while conceptual thinking and creative design process are definitely the keys to a successful design. None of these talents can be depreciated in college-level design education. Instead of being exclusive from each other, the American design education and Chinese design education could be mutually beneficial.

About a year ago when I was a teaching assistant for Drawing I in the core program at the School of Visual Arts at the University of North Texas, I had a student in the class who could barely draw a shape as required. She seemed unworried about her hand skills and told me that she would be a photography major, so she would not need any drawing skills. Although this student is not a design major, her thinking is common among students in design major. To American design students, mastering a computer mouse and software seem much easier and timesaving than mastering traditional hand-drawing and hand-painting techniques. After all, if a computer can help quickly to draw perfect lines and circles, to render graphics with millions of colors, patterns and special effects that might have cost many days of traditional hand-drawing, and to reproduce images, then all a designer needs is a computer, not a pencil. The questions to explore, then, are how can design students benefit from practicing traditional hand skills and how can traditional Chinese craftsmanship be beneficial and applicable in design study?

I believe the hand is human's best tool for creation. Hands are controlled directly by brains. Strong hand skills help artists and designers to express what they see and what they think on visible media, so that the art can be appreciated by others. Computers can be one of the many tools used by hand. Like all other tools, computers

are just another extension of the human's hand in the creative process. It is certainly a more advanced and complicated technological tool, but it still cannot catch the sparks of creative thinking in the mind as freely or as accurately as the hand. In addition, hand drawings are always more personal and show more emotions, just as signatures are used most commonly to represent individual identities.

Computerized graphics, on the other hand, after they are being processed, translated, interpreted by the computer technology, look sterilized. A great deal of originality and personal "touches" that bear meaningful information to artists and designers has been lost during the computerized "translation" process. Therefore, even though computer technology has brought us a great deal of convenience and has offered more possibilities, it still has lots of limitations and still lacks when it is compared to human hand. In other words, a computer is still far away from being a perfect tool in the creative process, and it cannot replace the subtleties and the fine-touches of the human hand. In my opinion, hand skills and their practices are necessary to designers and artists, and especially important to beginners.

Finally, American design educators and students need to know that computer technology, like all other technologies, can never replace the creativity of the human brain. Computers and software can only perform pre-programmed tasks, like collecting numerous data and information, then processing these data quickly through complicated calculating procedures, and finally presenting an accurate output. It is the human being who controls the computer and instructs it to do these tasks. "The plain fact is that humans have a unique, biological rooted, intangible mental life which in some limited respects can be simulated by a machine but can never be duplicated.

Machines cannot feel and, just as important, cannot understand” and “artificial intelligence does not and cannot lead to a meaning-making, understanding, and feeling creature, which is what a human being is.”¹

My understanding of traditional Chinese craftsmanship has two meanings on different levels. Traditional Chinese craftsmanship requires beautiful hand skills, understanding and appreciation on different media and materials, making appropriate choices for purposes, and excellent execution. The deeper meaning of traditional Chinese craftsmanship to me is the spirit of pursuing perfection. When being applied to design, it means to refine every detail of the design. As I stated in Chapter I, America’s short and successful history has influenced its way of thinking, acting and creating. Americans live in a fast-paced lifestyle. To be successful is to be efficient but not necessarily perfect, as typified by the American fast-food culture. In contrast, fine European- and Asian-style gourmet restaurants are attracting more and more people. In the design world, a lot of successful contemporary design works from Germany, Holland and Japan have already shown the ultimate spirit of the pursuit of perfection and the refinement of details together with the application of advanced technologies. I believe that American design educators and students could be more competitive in a global culture and could gain more appreciation for their design if they would pay more attention to their design craftsmanship and refine more details on their design, instead of just blindly following advanced computer technologies.

¹Neil, Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1993), 112-13.

A friend of mine got her art and design education from a Chinese college, and then she came to an American design school. She now has been working in the United States as a designer for years, but she still cannot forget the shock when she first realized that not too many design students in her school knew the hand-skills of drawing; and then later how impressed she was when she realized that the students were instead encouraged to be “free thinkers” by their professors.

Could Chinese design educators and students learn how to generate creative ideas and unique concepts from their American colleagues? Could individual thinking even be taught at schools? I believe, as I stated in Chapter I, that the main problem of the college-level design education in China is that design education is still part of a fine arts and crafts education and that the methods of teaching design is deeply influenced by the traditional Chinese apprenticeship. Also, as shared by other Chinese individuals, the entire Chinese social practice and strict controls imposed by political, historical and ethical influences are other reasons that Chinese design educators have restrained students.

After viewing my show, another Chinese friend of mine who has been studying and working in the U.S. information technology field for years, responded to me that he saw the same “different attitude” in information technology as the one that existed between American and Chinese design education. Chinese education in general focuses more on basic skills training, but neglects students’ creativity and individuality. In contrast, American design education, in general, encourages students’ potential creativity and respects students’ individuality.

A famous quote is: “One can count the seeds in an apple, but no one can count the apples in a seed.” Only when Chinese design educators start to learn from their American colleagues and teach students the creative process of problem-solving, encourage the application of this process during the entire design education and encourage students to develop individual thinking and to incorporate unique innovations to their design could future Chinese designers become competitive and Chinese design become widely acceptable in the global culture. In the meantime, Chinese design educators still need to maintain the valuable Chinese craftsmanship and carry forward the time-honored tradition. To achieve these changes in the current Chinese design education, however, will require tremendous amounts of time, effort and collaboration by both the educators and the students.

Historical Review of the Work of Others that Relates to My Study

According to my personal understanding, graphic design has always been a part of fine arts or production in China until the middle of the 20th century. From the 1940s through 1980s, Chinese graphic design was mostly about political posters with extremely strong political messages, aimed at educating the public. But since the early 1980s when China began to open its doors to the world and started a series of political, economical and cultural transformations, most Chinese people began to witness graphic design from other western countries and from Japan for business and commercial purposes. It has been only twenty years to this date. Only a few Chinese and American designers and scholars had received chances to visit or to study abroad. Based on my research, some Chinese and American design educators are very interested in sharing experiences and integrating the advantages of the other’s teaching philosophy with their

own. They also are interested in design programs that can provide students the opportunities to study the other culture. But the only formal research on this particular topic I have seen is *Design Education in China: New Proposals to address Endemic Problems* by Alex Fung Shung-Yu and Alice Lo Choi Yuet-Ngor. However, this research was only about design education in China from a western point of view. It does not mention what American design education could learn from Chinese design education. Following is the abstract:

“This paper is concerned with identifying the problems that pervade design education and the practice of design in China so that a way forward can be proposed to make improvements that will enable the Chinese design industry to become more competitive after entry into the World Trade Organization. The authors gathered data from their own experiences and observations in situ, as well as surveys they commissioned. They found that there are numerous endemic, fundamental problems in the practice of design education across the whole education sector. Fortunately, many Chinese design educators and managers of design companies are cognizant of these problems and are motivated to institute changes, even though they are unsure of what these changes should be or how they should be implemented. The authors conclude by making their own recommendations for effecting improvements in design education and professional development.”¹

¹Alex Fung Shung-Yu and Alice Lo Choi Yuet-Ngor, “Design Education in China: New Proposals to Address Endemic Problems,” *Journal of Art and Design Education* (U.K.), vol. 20, no. 2, May 2001, pp. 171-9 [database on-line], accessed February 22, 2003.

Related Research in the Area of My Inquiry

As I mentioned, graphic design has been a special part of fine arts in China for centuries, and Chinese design education has been deeply influenced by the traditional Chinese apprenticeship from workshops and studios. Therefore, I did studies on the traditional Chinese methods of teaching fine arts and the apprenticeship from traditional craft workshops and studios. Most of these studies came from my own experience during the learning of drawing, painting, illustration, graphic design, ceramics, sculpture, Chinese painting and calligraphy while I was in China.

How My Study Refines and Extends What Is Not Known

Most Chinese design educators and students will not have a chance to go to a design school in the United States or to study American design education. Meanwhile, most American design educators and students might never get to learn about Chinese design education even when there are strong interests from both sides. My personal experiences have given me the possibility to provide an opportunity for both sides to exchange experiences, to obtain an understanding of each other and to acquire valuable knowledge from each other. I believe that my study will expand the horizons and increase the understanding of both American and Chinese design educators and students, enhance the communication between two very different cultures, and promote further a mutually beneficial development.

Summary

In conclusion, the comparison between Chinese and American design education is a relatively new research field. It is like virgin soil waiting to be seeded, cultivated and

harvested. It will involve much time, energy and effort on both sides to initiate changes. I hope to see the beginning of the process in the near future.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION OF THE WORK

Methodology in Detail

Since the audience of my research is targeted to the American and Chinese college design educators and students, the ideal locations for the show that exhibits my research would be design schools and institutions, with open academic environment, in both countries. Unlike art galleries, an open academic environment provides a learning atmosphere to the general public and makes direct connections to educators and students; and, unlike museums, the open academic environment provides a casual and informal surrounding for educators and students to browse the display. In the United States, the lightwell at the Art Building on the University of North Texas (UNT) campus was chosen to be the initial location.

The UNT lightwell is located at the center of the first floor in the Art building, between the two main hallways and occupies almost the entire center space of the three-floor building. It is the main thoroughfare for the majority of the students and faculty who walk through the Art building everyday. It is widely noticeable and accessible, and provides the maximum exposure to the public for the show.

After conducting some research, I decided to create a three-dimensional installation with the major media being paper and illustration on this site. There are several reasons for this decision. First, this lightwell functions as a main hallway and a lobby for people to walk through, either on their way to classes or exit the building. An installation that creates a strong three-dimensional environment and is located in the

center of the lightwell can attract people and get their attention more easily than, for example, just some graphics posted on some flat wall.

Second, the lightwell offers a huge vertical space about fifty feet high from the floor to the ceiling in this lightwell, which posts a big challenge to showcase two-dimensional graphic design, which is often showcased best in a comparatively smaller space. The challenge was then to find a solution on how to effectively use the majority of the given space to convey the most information, and on how to make the message communicated across more clearly and stronger. A three-dimensional installation seems to be the appropriate format to solve the space and the scale problem. Third, a three-dimensional installation with an open, easily accessible, space can give the audience a strong visual impact and thus entice the audience to participate and to interact with the display pieces.

In order to propagate my messages about the sharing and learning from each other between the Chinese and the American design educators and students, I like to have more future opportunities to showcase my work in American design schools and educational institutes, as well as in Chinese design schools and educational institutes. With this in mind, I created a series of bilingual posters targeted to these two groups. For the Americans, the posters are designed to introduce the methods of learning in which the Chinese graphic design students emphasize historical traditions, hand skills and craftsmanship. For the Chinese, the posters are designed to introduce the methods of individualized conceptual thinking and the processes of creative problem-solving in which the American graphic design education has heavy emphasis. My goal is to highlight the deficiency of both cultures' design education approaches, then to help both to

understand each other's proficiency, and finally to create opportunities for both cultures to learn from each other. I believe this bilingual format allows my messages to be communicated very clearly and directly to my audience.

For the design of the posters, I choose the concepts, graphics, colors, and visual styles very carefully such that they can be easily understood, accepted and responded to by the particular culture while still can be understood by the other. For the American culture, these concepts, graphics, colors, and visual styles include silkscreen style, psychedelic colors, photo rendering, etc. For the Chinese culture, these include Chinese painting style, images of the historical icons like the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, traditional type and calligraphy.

I received feedback from viewers including mostly American graphic design educators and students and a few Chinese designers either by gathering answers from the questionnaire that I designed for the show or by personal conversations. The more responses I get from the audience tell more about whether or not my messages have been communicated effectively. Beyond that, I also wanted to know if my efforts on the study and research could encourage other people to start making some gradual changes.

The Criteria Developed to Evaluate My Work

In Chapter I, based on my statement of problem, I addressed three research questions as follow, which would be the criteria to evaluate the show:

1. How effective can a series of bilingual posters illustrating Chinese and American graphic design education be at influencing changes in each country's approach to graphic design education?

2. How feasible and practical will this format of bilingual posters be in communicating across my bi-cultural messages to the target audience?

3. What are the other ways that I can express my beliefs and convey my messages to the target audience?

With these three questions in mind, I designed a questionnaire for my audience to gather feedbacks. I addressed the following questions that are related to my study and research in the questionnaire:

1. Does this show raise your interest to know more about Chinese Design and its focus on developing strong hand skills and craftsmanship, or to know more about American Design and its focus on creative methods for solving complex business problems?

2. After viewing the exhibition, has the message been clearly communicated, which is that eastern Chinese and western American approaches to graphic design education can be shared and learned from each other? Please give your reason(s) in brief.

3. Has this series of bilingual posters effectively communicated its message to Chinese and American audiences?

4. Has this exhibit installation, including the ceiling, the floor and the freestanding posters, been an effective form to attract your attention and to deliver the message? What part of the installation do you feel most interesting? Why? What part of the installation do you feel least interesting? Why?

5. Evaluating your own graphic design knowledge and experience, what would

you be most interested in learning from the Chinese graphic design, and what would you be most interested in learning from the American graphic design?

The Creation of the Body of Work

This show includes an installation that has three parts: the ceiling, the floor, and the freestanding posters. Though each part has a different graphic language, together they create an enveloping visual environment that surrounds the audience and captivates them in the special experience (figure 1 and 2).



Figure 1: A complete view from the left side



Figure 2: A complete view from the top

At the ceiling, one row of 16 white panels and one row of 16 black panels string across each other at right-angle ten feet above ground. The center of the crossing hangs a paper sculpture of Yin Yang. All panels are made of paper of size 20x20 inches. Each panel is attached to two wood dowels, one at top and one at bottom, by four small paper straps. The panels then are attached onto the two metal wire tracks by the top wood dowels (figure 3).

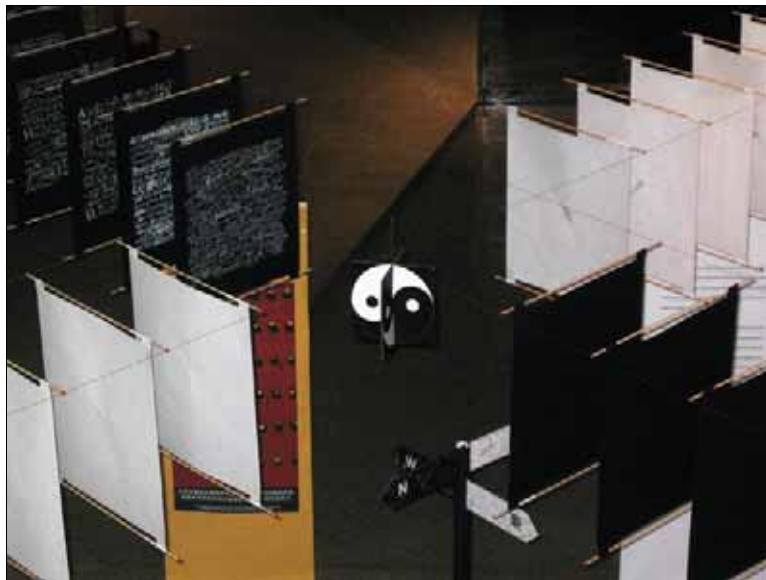


Figure 3: Center part of the ceiling

The white panels symbolize Chinese design education. They show how Chinese students practice the five basic strokes in Chinese calligraphy: *dian*, *heng*, *shu*, *pie*, *na*. Almost every Chinese artist practices such strokes when they first learn how to write with brush and ink. They practice many times to enhance this traditional hand-skill and to pursue the perfect shapes. The clean white space and the repetition of the red square shapes in the design imply great patience, craftsmanship, strictness, and restraint; all typical characteristics that are involved in the Chinese traditional learning process (figure 4 and 5).

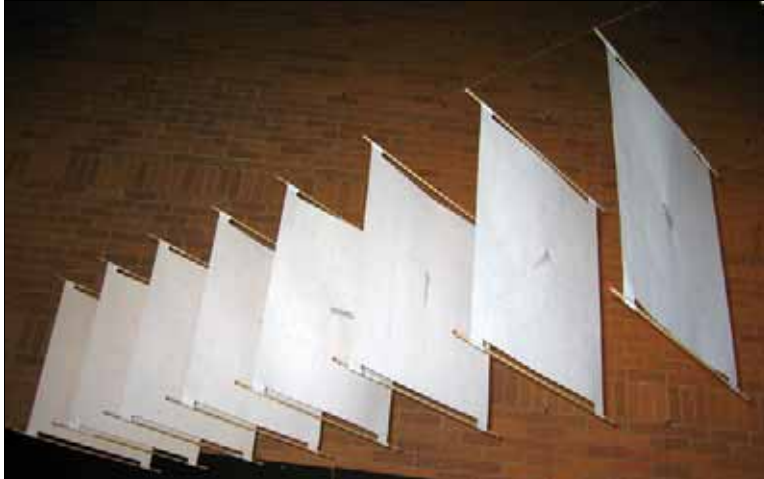


Figure 4: White panels on the ceiling



Figure 5: Detailed view of the white panels

The black panels symbolize the American design education. They show the creative design methodologies and problem-solving processes that I have learned in the UNT class *ART 2084 Graphic Design I*, taught by Jack Sprague. The panels contain mind maps, vertical listings, alphabetical listings, thumbnails of letter marks, symbols, logotypes, etc. The series of practice pieces shows that the American graphic design educators have put great emphasis on conceptual thinking and creative methodologies in graphic design education. The loose lines, free illustration style, disordered layers,

and the uneven edges also imply the freethinking, individuality, and the neglect of refinement involved in the American learning style (figure 6 and 7).



Figure 6: Black panels on the ceiling



Figure 7: Detailed view of the black panels

The paper sculpture Yin Yang that hangs six inches down from the center crossing of the panels is of size 10x10 inches, and is a symbol that has been recognized and accepted globally to symbolize harmony and balance. In here, it

represents western American culture and eastern Chinese culture can be learned and merged to form a perfect harmony and balance with each other (figure 8).



Figure 8: The paper sculpture of Yin Yang

The floor of the installation consists of two pieces, a map and a road sign. The map is painted on nine pieces of white wood-fiber boards of size 4x4 feet each, put together forming a giant 12x12 feet square shape. This giant map depicts a maze in the form of a brain and in color of black and white only. The maze has two entrances, one on each side of the map. One entrance is written in English and the other in Chinese. When walking into this maze, the participant is actually walking into inside of a brain and is trying to find the best solution; which is exactly how conceptual thinking functions in a graphic designer's mind (figure 9 and 10).

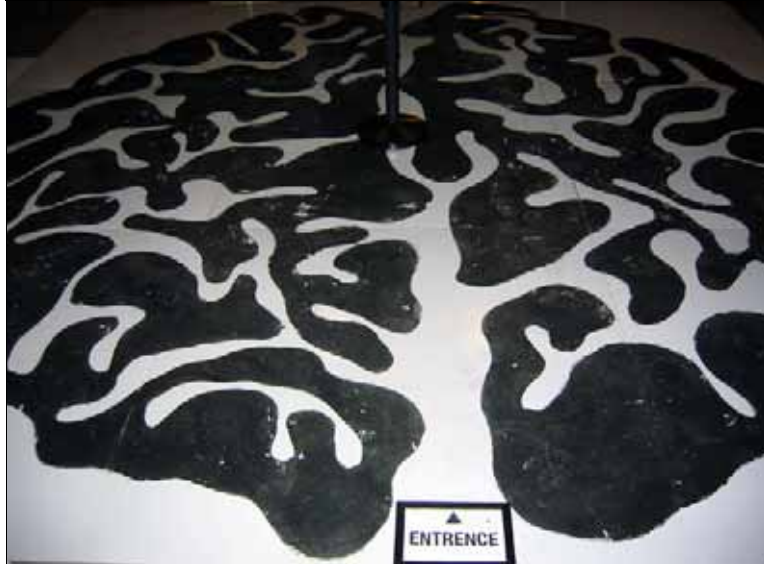


Figure 9: The English sign of the entrance



Figure 10: The Chinese sign of the entrance

When arriving to the center of the maze, the participant sees a black and white road sign that stands about six feet tall. It shows many different “directions” such as West, East, History, Future, Design, Decoration, etc., in both English and Chinese graffiti styles (figure 11).

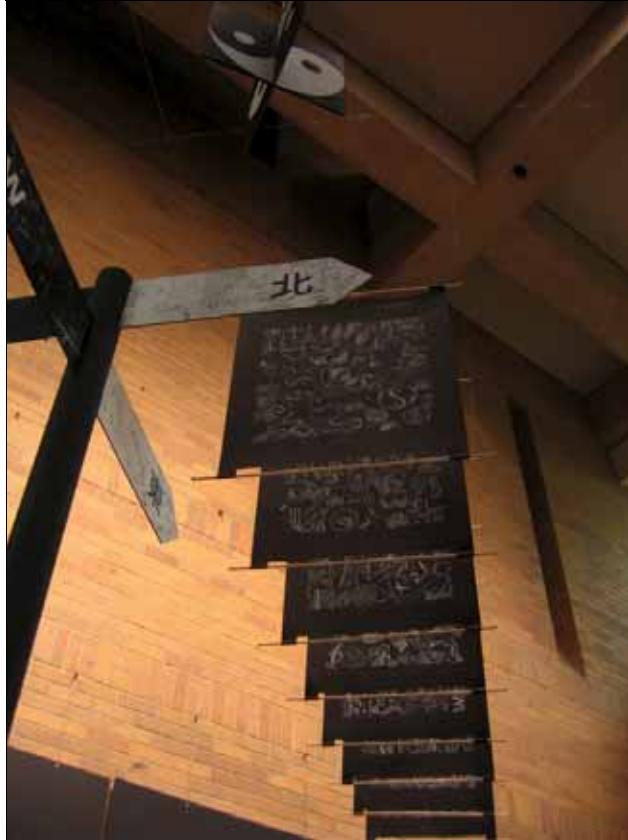


Figure 11: The road sign for the map

The ceiling and floor display of the installation do not convey any particular message. They were designed intentionally to create an environment that gives the audience a different visual experience, and to provide a surrounding that the audience can get involved and can be interacted physically. The display also shows my self-expression and my personal experience of cultural differences while being in a new western society.

The third part of the installation consists of ten freestanding posters and four text panels that surround the map on the floor. All the posters and text panels are two-feet wide and six-feet tall. They were hung vertically on metal stands and are raised about one foot above the floor (figure 12 and 13).



Figure 12: View of some panels from the left side



Figure 13: View of some panels from the front

The four text panels write about the introduction to the show and the explanations on the installation, in both English and Chinese. For the English text, I choose the bold and condensed Helvetica as the typeface. The printing of the san-serif fonts with a perfectly justified alignment creates clean and sharp black text that is set against the pure white background to increase legibility. In between the English text lines, the Chinese translation is written by hand, in a cursive writing style, with a blue-ink ballpoint pen on a fine tip. Cross-outs, scratches, loose ink droplets, and other marks of hand-editing are intentionally added within the Chinese text. The purpose is to create two strong contrasts between the two different languages — first of the Roman letters of the English text against the Chinese block-shaped characters; and second the cursive personal handwritings with the fine strokes of Chinese text against the perfectly formed cold and bold printing of the English text. Finally, the text panels also implicitly imply that the research and the show themselves are done in an academic environment where learning is a process that will always involve mistakes, corrections, and changes (figures 14, 15).

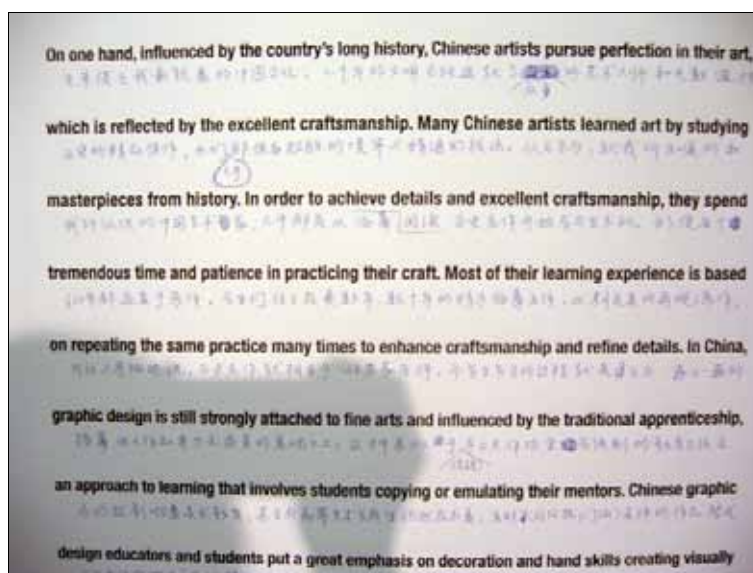


Figure 14: Detailed view of the text panel

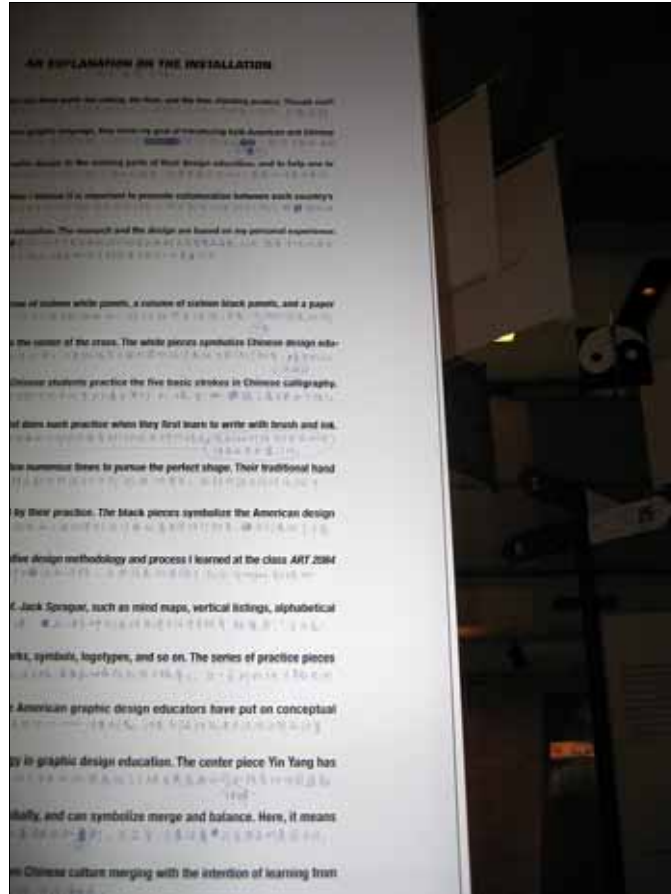


Figure 15: View of a text panel from afar

Besides the text panels, there are also ten freestanding posters that surround the map on the floor. Four of these posters facing outward from the map are targeted toward the American design educators and students. They introduce the way on how Chinese design students learn from historical traditions, hand skills and craftsmanship. Also, the posters are designed to have the familiar motifs and visual styles that the American audience can relate to and be accepted easily. Finally, since the posters face outward, this position implies openness and liberty, two of the main characteristics that represent the American culture.

The first of these four posters shows a hand and fingers coated with various textures such as dots, lines and strokes. The message in English reads: “American design educators and students need only look at Chinese design to understand the importance of hand skills and craftsmanship.” The composition of the hand dominating half the space on top with fingers pointing to the bottom implies that a hand has great power, and strong hand-skills make the design more creative. The application of pure and strong psychedelic colors, bright yellow on the background, and black, red, magenta for the hand, gives the graphic more visual impact (figure 16).



Figure 16: First of four posters targeted for Americans

The second of the four posters illustrates a trashcan with many traditional design tools being thrown in, such as brushes, a triangle, a T-square, a French curve, etc. The message reads: “American graphic design educators cannot ignore that the computer is gradually taking the place of the creative process and the traditional art making.” The image looks like a loose charcoal drawing sketch that can be easily found at any drawing studio (figure 17).

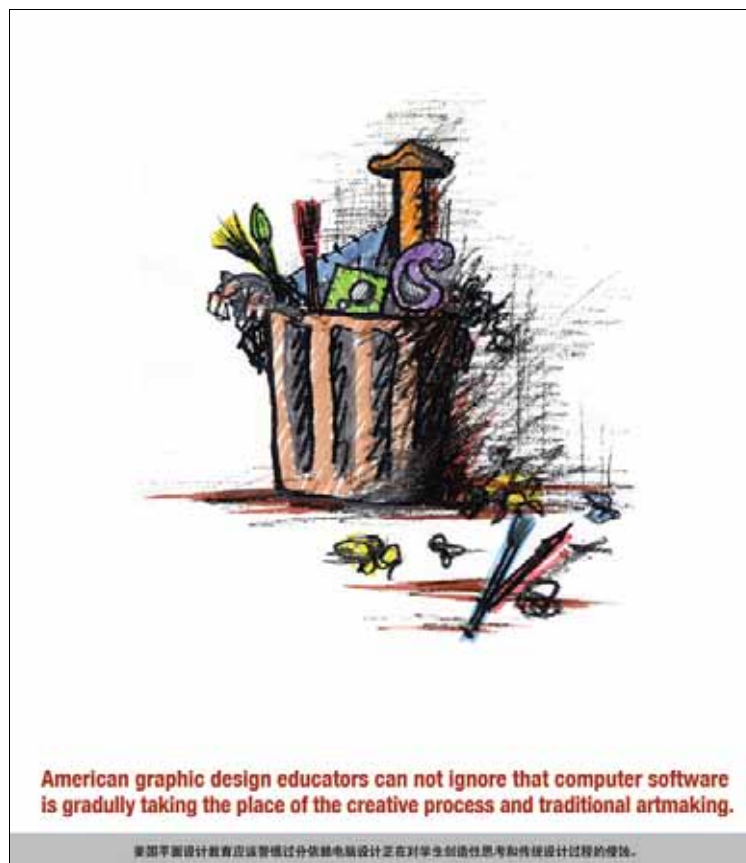


Figure 17: Second of four posters targeted for Americans

The third poster depicts an arm being bound by electrical wires and the hand is holding a computer mouse. The message reads: “Computer software will never replace the human brain for creative decision-making.” The traditional silkscreen style is applied to the graphic to increase the visual impact. Finally, this poster is done in the

perspective view, with simple but strong colors and black outlines which transforms the design to be visually impressive (figure 18).



Figure 18: Third of four posters targeted for Americans

The last of the four posters is a photo collage that shows an unrealistic situation at an antique auction. A regular triangle is framed and displayed with precious antiques such as an ancient Chinese porcelain vase and a plate of china blue. Below the antiques, a small note says that it has been sold for three hundred dollars. The mes-

sage reads: “American graphic designers, like their Chinese colleagues, should respect and carry forward the effective traditional skills with media and tools”(figure 19).



Figure 19: Fourth of four posters targeted for Americans

The remaining six posters face inward toward the map on the floor. These posters target the Chinese design educators and students by introducing the conceptual thinking methodologies and the creative problem-solving processes taught in the American design education. Motifs and visual styles applied on these six posters all carry an extremely strong sense of Chinese culture. In addition, the position of facing inward implies that the posters portray a sense of restraint and introspection, typical characteristics of traditional Chinese way of thinking.

The first of these six posters illustrates a big red door from the Forbidden City in Beijing, and is printed in the traditional Chinese woodblock printmaking style. The door

has golden decorations that symbolize imperial power, dignity, mystery, history and tradition. The red and gold colors applied to the graphic represent China as a nation, as those are the colors of the Chinese national flag. The English translation of the message reads: "If future graphic design education in China does not focus on teaching creative problem-solving process, the education of new graphic designers will become meaningless in a global economy"(figure 20).



Figure 20: First of six posters targeted for Chinese

The second of the six posters shows a strong hand holding a pair of pliers that is cutting a barbed wire that wraps around a human brain. The English translation of the

message reads: “The current Chinese methods of teaching design are influenced by the traditional apprenticeship and have restrained the students’ creative thinking.” Interestingly, the inspiration for this poster came from an old Chinese political poster designed for the Communist party (figure 21).

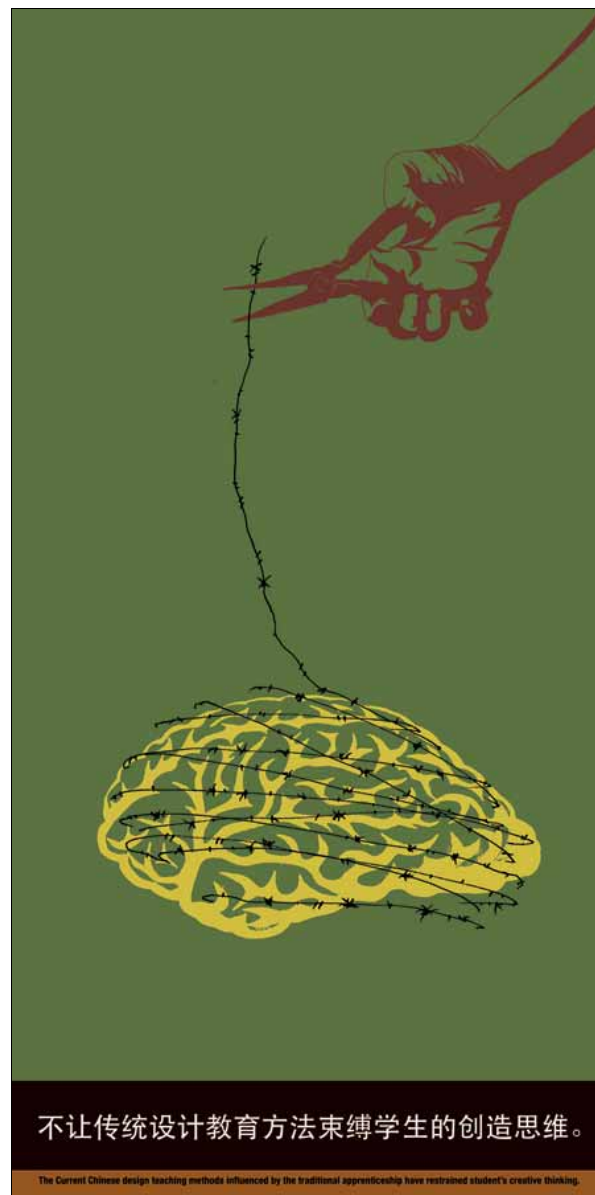


Figure 21: Second of six posters targeted for Chinese

The third and fourth posters are designed based on Chinese characters. One is *si*, and the other is *xiang*. Both characters means “think.”

The character *si* is made up of two other Chinese characters. The first one on the top is *tian*, which means “farmland”, and the second one at the bottom is *xin* means “heart.” On the third poster, the character *si* is depicted pictorially at the top part, in which the character *tian* is replaced by a Chinese painting of a farmer sowing seeds at a rice farm during the rainy spring season. The English translation of the message reads: “Chinese design students must learn how to start from the beginning of the problem, and explore creative methods to get to the final stage and get the best solutions for communicating problems.” Finally, the color and texture of traditional rice paper and calligraphy are applied to the design (figure 22).



Figure 22: Third of six posters targeted for Chinese

The character *xiang* is also made up of other Chinese characters, in this case three individual characters, and it is designed onto the fourth poster. The first individual

character is *mu* that means “vision.” This “vision” is depicted pictorially by one of the creative design methodologies, a mind map in Chinese. The English translation of the message on the poster reads: “Chinese graphic designers should realize that conceptual critical thinking and creative design methodologies are essential to produce outstanding design work”(figure 23).



Figure 23: Fourth of six posters targeted for Chinese

The fifth poster illustrates a scene of a person walking on the Great Wall, as seen through a gate that looks like a keyhole. A great deal of black color is applied to the background that contrasts to the shape of the gate as the figure/ground theory of gestalt. The English translation of the message reads: “While maintaining the valuable tradition, Chinese design educators need to change the current teaching methods by bringing in American conceptual thinking and the creative methodologies”(figure 24).

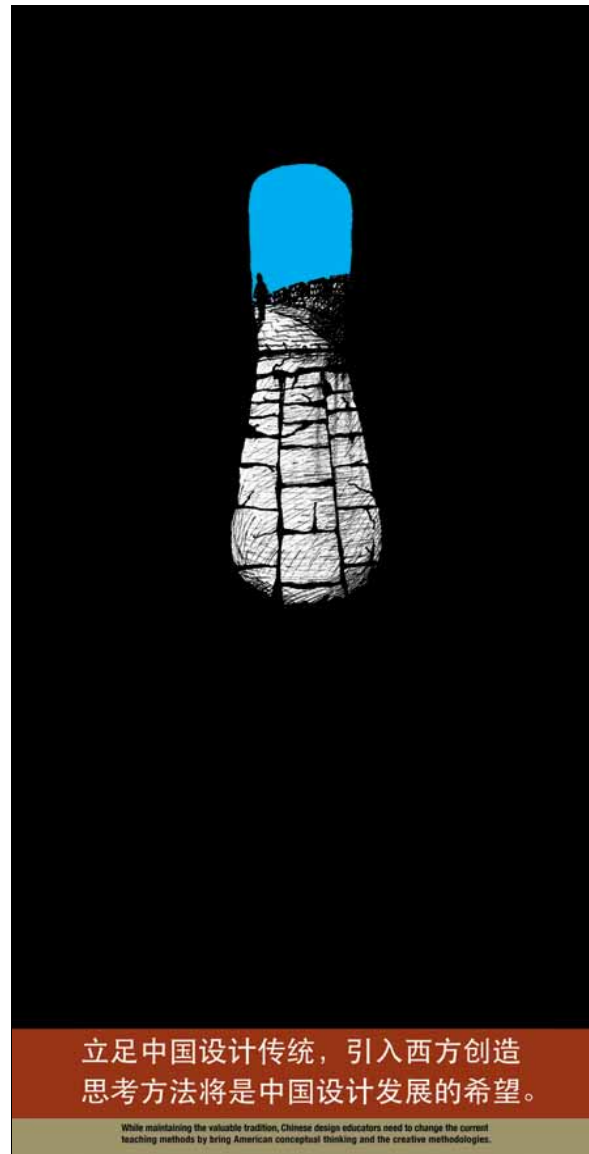


Figure 24: Fifth of six posters targeted for Chinese

The last one of the six posters is another photo collage. It is composed of many black and white images from typical everyday life in China, such as numerous identical apartments, bicycles, groceries, etc. The message here is that in a country with the largest population in the world, individuality can be easily ignored. Also on the poster, a traditional Chinese red seal showing a fingerprint is printed at the center, covering parts of the black and white images described above. This fingerprint image also looks like a brain. The message here is that the seal and the fingerprint are both personal identities,

symbolizing individuality and individual thinking. The English translation of the message reads: “What Chinese designers could learn from their American colleagues is — individuality, one of the most important qualities that can lead to success.” Finally, the placement of the red seal, and its color contrasting to the black and white background, draws the focus onto the center of the poster. The message here is that the seal (individuality) in the center should be more important than the scattered black and white images (conformity) at the background (figure 25).

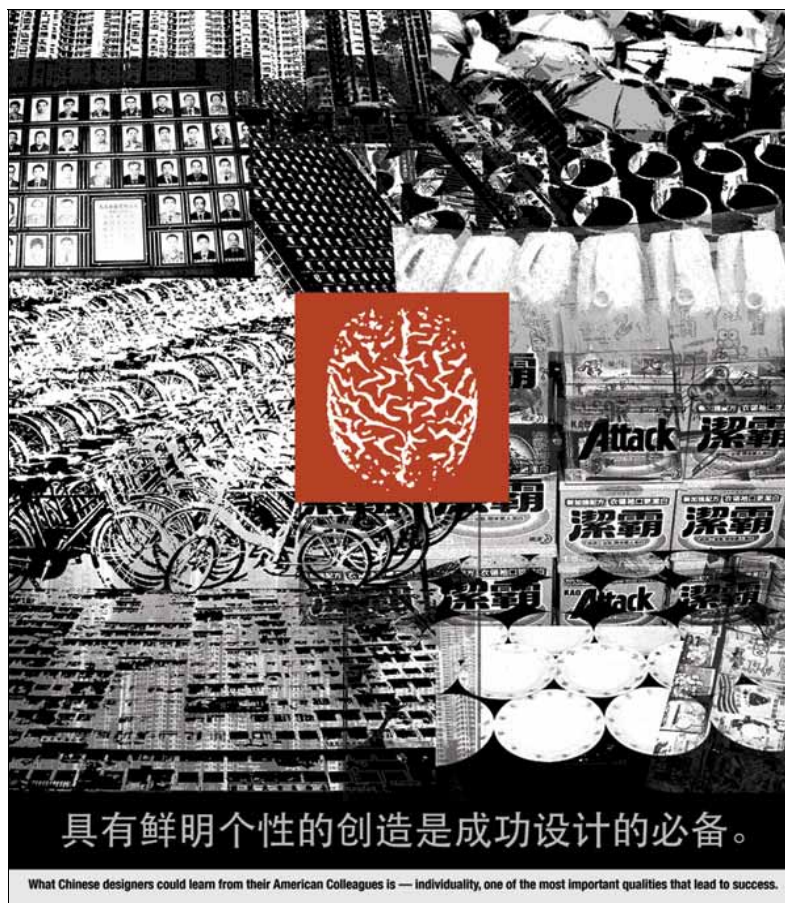


Figure 25: Sixth of six posters targeted for Chinese

I encountered many problems during the design development process. It was not difficult for me to decide that an installation would be the most effective form of display to fill the space requirements at the lightwell. But I also had to consider how to design

an interactive, three-dimensional, installation with two-dimensional graphics, while having to maintain all the information and to deliver my messages clearly and effectively to the audiences. It was a huge challenge. Most people are used to seeing graphic design work being displayed on a wall or on smaller scale media like illustration boards and pedestals. I started my research at the library, and soon discovered that one solution to the challenge could be found in a typical intersecting study area that included knowledge from interior design, exhibition/display design, signage and space design, outdoor-graphic design, information structure design, understanding mixed media and so on. My three-dimensional experience in ceramics and sculpture installation enabled me to imagine the installation and draw different views of its 3-D model on paper. These drawings helped me to communicate and to share my ideas with other people. Information hierarchy, sizes, scales, colors and materials are all the key issues that need to be resolved in order to transfer the information from paper to finished design and transform the 2-D graphics into appropriate elements within my 3-D installation.

Another challenge I experienced during the design process was writing the bilingual messages for the posters. It turned out to be much more difficult than I expected. I tried to copy from famous quotations in both English and Chinese languages. Sometimes I found an English quote suitable for a poster targeting the Chinese audience, and sometimes I found a Chinese quote suitable for targeting the American audience. However, because of the cultural differences, both of the written languages and visual languages (graphics) have different connotations and denotations. When translating the quotes, they were either not delivering the original messages, or not corresponding to the particular graphics. I had several discussions with both

American students and Chinese students, trying to solve the problem. Finally, my professor suggested that since the show had strong educational purposes, and the exhibiting location would be in an academic environment with an audience of educators and students, the bilingual messages on the posters should be clear and direct. So instead of famous quotations, explicitly written messages should be used. This particular problem-solving process gave me a better understanding of the cultural differences and the different approaches to solving a problem.

Overall, I believe this show has been successful. My bilingual messages were effectively delivered to the targeted audiences, and they responded. The 3-D installation incorporated the traditional 2-D graphic design effectively, and the installation was thought to be interesting and acceptable by most of the audience. Now, I look for more opportunities to exhibit the show at different schools and institutions, especially in China. I would like to gather feedbacks from native Chinese design educators and students, such that I can compare and contrast the input and opinions from the two different cultures.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The complete comparison between the American and Chinese college-level graphic design education is a new topic that requires a great deal of time to cover it comprehensively. In my research, I chose only the most significant aspects of each culture and compare them for educational purposes. I believe that Chinese design educators should learn from their American colleagues on how to teach their students the creative processes of problem-solving, to encourage their students to develop individualized thinking, and to incorporate unique innovations to their design. I also believe that the American design educators should learn from their Chinese colleagues on how to learn and respect design history, to strengthen their students' hand-skills and craftsmanship, and to teach their students never to rely completely and exclusively on computer technologies to create their designs. Both the Chinese and American educators, in my opinion, can benefit from sharing and learning each other's unique experience. Communications, comprehensions, and incorporations together is the ultimate bridge that can be built between these two unique cultures, which hopefully will unify the two different approaches to design education.

Conclusions and Evaluation

Doing this project overall has been a challenging, rewarding, and unforgettable learning experience for me. I hope my research has also provided valuable information to the Chinese and American design educators and students who are interested in learning from the other culture.

From the feedback that I have received from my audience consisting of mostly American design educators and students, the show has successfully triggered their interests for the American and Chinese design education, and as well as the American and Chinese culture. My messages were delivered effectively through the three-dimensional installation, especially with all the bilingual posters. Many audiences were impressed by the installation as the displaying format, which integrated the two-dimensional graphic design work with the three-dimensional space and created a special interactive environment to get the audiences involved.

However, there are still many issues about the show that will require further considerations and improvements for future exhibits. First, the physical material selections, executions and constructions need to be improved to allow a faster and more efficient installation. Second, the overall information structure should have been arranged with more hierarchy to allow a better flow of information within the installation. Third, more considerations need to be placed on the scale and proportion, with regard to the relationship between the installation and audiences, and with regard to the installation and the exhibition space.

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