Tracing the Philosophy of Design in the Midst of the Cold War: Cases in the Sinophone Region

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Abstract

George Orwell, the English author of *Animal Farm* (1945), coined the term "cold war" in the post-Second World War period to describe the foreseeable condition of the two main geopolitical ideological divisions—the capitalists' world and communists' world. In the geographical context of the Sinophone region, four locales were on the frontier of the new political ideological contests in the East: the newly established communist regime of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the British capitalist crown colony of Hong Kong, the former Japanese colony of Taiwan under the rule of the retreated dictatorial mainland government, the Republic of China (ROC), and Macao, the centuries-old Portuguese colony. In this paper, I argue that related forms of design activity taking place during the 1950s and the 1960s means that it is the best historical period in which to investigate the emergence of four new and different cultural identities splitting from a common shared heritage in the region. These divergences led to the PRC's imposition of the "One China" identity over Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao and the current uncompromising resistance to authoritarianism by the latter locales.

In tracing the variances in the philosophy of design in the midst of the Cold War (1947–91), I refer to design as a variety of creative works ranging from arts and crafts to mass machine manufacturing for quotidian consumption. The study's focus is the foundational concerns of design through a discussion of geopolitical design ideologies. The paper is organized into four main analytical sections representing the four locales—the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao—and disentangles the emergence of the four national design identities. In each section, I will examine the different conditions of design trends and artifacts produced at a time when design was often embedded with political goals and missions.

Keywords: *Cold War, Design ideologies, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao*

Introduction

The current United States-China tariff battle that unfolded around early 2018 has triggered the interest of scholars and the general public in a faded term—the Cold War. George Orwell (1903–50) introduced this term in 1945 in his essay, entitled "You and the Atomic Bomb." The phrase was quickly adapted globally to describe the political tensions between the US and the Soviet Union (USSR) that endured from the mid-1940s to early 1991. These two nations represented the main global geopolitical ideological divisions during that period—the capitalists' world and communists' world (Orwell, 1945).

In this paper, I argue that two key decades of the Cold War period—1950s and the 1960s—are the best historical period in which to investigate the emergence of four new and different design identities amidst the geopolitical context in the Sinophone region: People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) and Macao. These identities

contribute to our understanding of the current underlying political tensions between these four locales as ongoing battlegrounds between the PRC's authoritarianism that fuels the imposition of the "One China" identity versus the democratic liberal front of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao in the current United States-China tariff battle—the "new Cold War" (Fong, 2019). By tracing the variances in the philosophy of design during this period, this paper deconstructs geopolitical design ideologies to disentangle the four national design identities in the Sinophone region through a variety of creative works ranging from arts and crafts to mass machine manufacturing for quotidian consumption.

A brief background of the emergence of four new Sinophone design ideologies in the 1950s and the 1960s

Within the historiographical discourse of Chinese civilization and heritages, scholar Fei-ling Wang (2017) views the concept of "China Order" or *tianxia* (天下 all under heaven) as giving the mandate of political unification as the highest rule in Chinese political history. Thus, the concept of tianxia explains why both the PRC and the ROC governments clasped onto the ideological value of a "unified" nation, or the One China concept, after the end of the second phase of the Chinese Civil War (1927–37 and 1946–49). This concept was also the backbone of the PRC government's push to resume its sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macao in 1997 and 1999 respectively as well as its determination to push on with its "unification" with Taiwan.

Here, I argue that the PRC is exercising authoritarian power and disrespecting the reality that the three other locales in question existed separately under colonial rule from the communist regime for over a century. These four places were ruled under four different and distinct governments with different political ideologies, economic systems and social development experiences. To trace the formation of these individualities, the following sections will investigate the emergence of four new Sinophone design philosophies in light of the Cold War ideology used in the 1950s and the 1960s. I will use various design artifacts to reveal the confrontations between the two political ideologies of the period—capitalism and communism. In defining ideology, I use the *Oxford Dictionary*, which classifies it as "a system of ideas and ideals" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.), but I also consider Gary Bowden's (2004) interpretation of the term as a system of values and beliefs reflecting and governing the society where it is situated.

Design under the Communist Regime of the People's Republic of China

The communist regime of the People's Republic of China came to power on 1 October 1949, after it defeated the Kuomintang (KMT)—the Nationalist Party of China—in the Chinese Civil War. The communist regime ruled mainland China as a one-party state under the Communist Party of China (CCP), which was formed in 1921. The USSR and the CCP had close diplomatic and political relations before and after its establishment until the Sino-Soviet Split (1956–66). Since its formation, the Party was never short of political campaigns to build up Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as the CCP's guiding political ideologies, such as Yan'an Rectification Movement (1941–45), the Three-Anti/Five-Anti Campaigns (1951–52), Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–59), Great Leap Forward (1958–60), and the Create Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In this environment, all societal activities—from economic planning to education—were designed to serve politics and the working class as well as to promote the advancement of CCP-approved ideologies. The arts and crafts sector were not exempt from this agenda. Artistic talent was not valued, and artists could only produce approved items.

Mao's famous May 1942 speech, *The Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (在

延安文藝座談會上的講話), advocated for "reforming old art and innovating new art," and adapting new Chinese socialist identities in all creative fields. The 1930s Shanghai style, which had capitalist mandates that were recognized by historians internationally, was deemed as evil for the masses and its use was forbidden. Instead of using *sheji* or Design, the term that is commonly used in contemporary PRC and in the region, *gongyi meishu* (工藝美術), *tuan ke* (圖案科), *qinggong ye* (輕工業), *zhuanghuang* (裝潢) and *shiyong meishu* (實用美術) were CCP-approved equivalents (Tsui, 2016). Under the new national political ideology, for example, famous *yuefenpai* (calendar posters or advertisement posters) artists and CCP regime supporters, including Jin Meisheng (1902–89), Li Mubai (1913–91) and Xin Liliang (1913–?), took the change in stride and adjusted themselves and their artistic outputs to serve the new country after the PRC's formation in 1945.

Talented artists with experience earned from working in the 'old' mediums of yuefenpai and *nianhua* (年畫 New Year prints) began creating *xuanchuan hua* (宣傳畫 propaganda posters) (Zhou, 2012) to promote the country's new politics ideals. Shortly after the PRC's creation, the CCP constructed new nationwide infrastructure to control all creative fields. Xuanchuan hua artists, for example, were no longer allowed to draw beautiful young Westernized women as they used to do in the 1930s. Rather, their high-level realistic painting skills could only be used to depict plain women attired in Soviet-style working class outfits. The background of works in this medium also shifted from commercial consumption scenes that showcased a wide range of products to various types of farming and heavy industrial scenes (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Works by Jin Meisheng. (Left) Calendar poster, Shanghai, 1930s ; (Right) The vegetables are green, the cucumbers plumb, the yield is abundant, 1959.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, the PRC became a collectivist society of planned markets where individuals were assigned to a work unit. We can see this change in propaganda posters from the 1960s when artists' names were removed from production credits and replaced by an artist's work unit or revolutionary committee. In doing so, the creative philosophy of individual artists was eliminated, replaced by the political ideology of the nation. *Zhongxuabu* (中宣部) or the Publicity Department took over the publishing sector as a whole, and publishing houses, bookstores, printing mills and distribution agents were now under the CCP's absolute political ideological control (Gu, 2012).

Another important design equivalent sector—handicrafts and crafts—was also now state-controlled and was integrated more fully into the planned market economy. For example, the private kilns of Jingdezhen, which had been producing porcelain for over a millennium, were converted into state-owned manufacturing units. Their outputs also changed. Instead of producing upmarket porcelain products like tea sets and flower vases, experienced artists were tasked to make basic quotidian objects like bathroom ceramic wares and building materials.

Branded consumer products did exist, but choices were very limited. Bicycles were the key mode of transport in this period and there were several brands available; the top three were *Feige pai* (飛鴿牌 Flying Pigeon), *Fenghuang pai* (鳳凰牌 Phoenix) and *Yongjiu pai* (永久 Forever). During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the CCP deemed the brand mark design of Youngjiu pai as "reactionary." The revolutionary theme and visual style of these products are witnesses to how political ideologies shaped the national design identity of communist China. All of these products are in clear contrast to those produced in KMT-controlled ROC and the British crown colony of Hong Kong during the same period.

Taiwan during the era of the Nationalist Party of China's dictatorial rule
When the CCP defeated the KMT in the Chinese Civil War, the latter retreated to the Taiwan islands, territory formerly occupied by Imperial Japan between 1895 and 1945. Under the authoritarian rule of KMT Director-General Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), for whom a key aspiration was retaking sovereign control over the mainland from the CCP, both newcomers and inhabitants whose families had lived in the islands for generations suffered from overt political and cultural suppression in support of Chiang's anti-communist ideology. Martial law was imposed on 19 May 1949 to control the intense political atmosphere that the KMT had created; the law lasted for almost 40 years until 15 July 1987. With economic pressures connected to a significant population increase—individuals who escaped from the mainland after 1945—the government accepted financial aid (*mei yuan* 美緩) from the United States between 1951 and 1965. It came in the form of daily necessities like cotton and flour as well as raw materials for manufacturing needs. During the Cold War period, the ROC was at the forefront with Western allies in resisting communism's expansion.

In the 1950s, the government used mei yuan to launch an economic and industrialization plan based on existing craft and related business establishments that were developed during the Japanese colonial era. For example, the Taiwanese handicrafts industry provided a solid foundation for industrial manufacturing development. In the 1950s, with the rich bamboo and natural wicker materials available in the islands, together with skillful Japanese-trained craftsmen and artists, the government successfully launched Taiwan into the wicker furniture export market. Yanagi Soetsu (1889–1961), the founder of *mingei,* the Japanese folk-art movement popular in the late 1920s and 1930s, mentored the key figure in this industry, locally-born artist Yen Shui-long (1903–97) (Figure 2). He made a significant contribution to the establishment of the Taiwan handicrafts industry in the 1950s and the 1960s (Kikuchi, 2007).

Figure 2: Yen Shui-long in handicraft workshop, 1952.
(Source: https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20161230001372-260115?chdtv)

During this period, foreign craft designers and design experts were also part of the United States' assistance strategy for Taiwan. Industrial designer Russel Wright, craft designer Ramy Alexander and costume designer Joset Walker visited Taiwan in 1955 to offer their advice to the government and to industry on how to develop handicrafts for export. The Committee of Handicrafts Production and Promotion (1947), the National Handicraft Promotion Center (1957), and the Nantou County Craft Research Class (1954), now known as the National Taiwan Craft Research & Development Institute, were formed in the post-war era (Yang, 2010). Manufacturing methods and technologies improved and the handicraft industry evolved until it reached a peak between 1972 and 1987. Taiwan had an international reputation as the "gift and premium kingdom" in the late 1980s when it produced a wide range of wicker-based items for both local and international markets.

Compared to the "design" philosophy that existed in the PRC during the 1950s and the 1960s, Taiwan situation was much more pragmatic—negotiating political ideologies, between authoritarianism and free capitalist practices, for a middle ground that provided steady economic growth for the islands. Chiang Ching-kuo (1910–88), the son and the successor of Director-General Chiang, is credited with transforming the country in the 1970s through industrialization opportunities that advanced the economy and improved the livelihood opportunities of the average Taiwanese. These circumstances climaxed in democratic political reform in the late 1980s. Today, Taiwan is considered to be a self-ruled, fully democratic state with de facto independence, despite PRC reunification desires for a united China.

The Frontier of the Free World in the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong

Soon after Imperial Japan announced its surrender to end the Second World War on 15 August 1945, Britain resumed its rule over Hong Kong. The population of the crown colony was about 750,000, but drastically increased to 2,013,000 by 1951 (Hong Kong Population History, 2001). Hong Kong used to be a place of sojourn; people could travel freely between the colony and mainland China until 15 May 1951 (Tong, 2016). A significant proportion of the population was refugees from mainland China, which created urgent social and economic pressures on the colonial government. The outbreak of the Korean War (1950–53), coupled with the Cold War,

meant that Hong Kong became the frontier of the free world with its neighbour, Red China.

Despite increasing population pressures in the early 1950s and in the following decades, the colonial government continued to nurture a laissez-faire economic system and entrepôt coupled with trade policies that allowed capitalism and individual freedoms to flourish. With little control over the political ideology and limited democratic rights, residents focused on securing their livelihoods—securing stable shelter, work opportunities, education for children and medical support. Among the newcomers, entrepreneurs and skilled and unskilled labour forces were key in providing the conditions for the first wave of industrialization in Hong Kong. Taking the example of the traditional crafts sector, the rattan industry was one of the first to modernize to meet the export demands of American buyers.

Similar to the development occurring in Taiwan, the traditional handicraft industry provided a fundamental base for mass production manufacturing in Hong Kong in the first two decades after 1945. Rattan products such as furniture and laundry baskets were two popular categories for export during this period. The Kowloon Rattan Ware Co. (est. 1925) was the leading company to produce iconic products (Figure 3) such as the Canton Chair (or Hong Kong Chair), the Hong Kong Club Chair, Peacock Chair, Mushroom Table and western wine glass-inspired tableware series for the American market. Inspired by American cartoon characters, a popular animal-shaped laundry basket series was made possible thanks to Guangdong Foshan Shiwan's ceramic figurine (佛山西灣陶瓷公仔) artisans' traditional making methods. The rattan industry comprised between 10 to 15 per cent of Hong Kong's total exports by 1954 (Turner, 1993).

Figure 3: Rattan Chair Attributed to Kowloon Rattan Ware Co., 1950s.
(Source: https://stories.mplus.org.hk/en/blog/from-the-collection-rattan-chair-by-kowloon-rattan-ware-co/)

Parallel to the rattan industry, the foundation for the colony's plastics manufacturing industry was established in the 1950s, built on low-end miscellaneous plastic housewares, decorative items and toys. For example, plastic flowers became one of the largest export items by the late 1950s until the demand from overseas buyers faded out a few years later. Iconic products included the high-quality plastic flowers manufactured by Cheung Kong Plastics Company, which was owned by Li Ka-Shing; the "King of the Plastic Flowers" later became a

Hong Kong tycoon and was the 28th richest person in the world in 2019. Hong Kong design historian Matthew Turner (1993) acknowledges Li as the designer who came up with the idea to produce realistic vinyl flowers in Hong Kong. Design work that appeared throughout the development of the rattan and plastics industries in the 1950s and the 1960s reflected Hongkongers' focus on meeting quotidian livelihood needs as a strategy to combat communism, similar to the Taiwanese situation, rather than engaging communist political ideologies as was happening in the PRC at the time. Although the 1967 leftist riots in Hong Kong between the CCP's pro-Communists supporters and the colonial government challenged the social order for a short period of time, the development of design and its role in Hong Kong's industrialization were at the forefront against communist ideology after 1949 in the post-war period.

Portuguese Macao under Red China's Influence

Macao was the first locale in the Greater China region where Europeans settled. Ming China formally agreed in 1573 to land leases that permitted the Portuguese to live and trade here, and Macao officially became a colony of Portugal in 1887. It enjoyed its prime time as a European and Chinese business hub before Hong Kong became a British crown colony in the 1840s. Since then, Macao has remained a small player in a small area; 172,000 people called the approximately 30 square kilometres home in 1945. Similar to Hong Kong, Macao received an influx of refugees from mainland China in the post-war period that provided the working force for the colony's industrial development. However, the economy did not mature in the 1950s and the 1960s in the same way it had in Hong Kong, due primarily to a weak colonial government and poor foundations for a modern manufacturing industry.

In the 1930s and 1940s, match and firecracker making as well as incense production were the top three traditional handicraft industries in Macao (Figure 4). Their packaging, designed with traditional Chinese themes, contributed to Macao's design history. Among these industries, the largest was match making, employing 4,900 workers or 30 percent of the work force in 1931. This industry also played a key role in world exports. Mainland China was one of the biggest markets for matches produced in Macao before 1951. With the outbreak of the Korean War and the US trade embargo on the PRC in the 1950s, Macao's matchmakers failed to secure new markets and the industry was never able to recover.

Figure 4: Package design of Safety Match, Macao, 1928.

Macao's population remained small, making it difficult to compete with Hong Kong in industrialization development (Choi, 2011). The Portuguese colonial government was also much less efficient than the British next door in Hong Kong. During the 1950s and the 1960s, Portugal also suffered from its own political instability at home and was not able to pay full attention to governing its colonies, including Macao. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution that started on the

mainland in 1966, local pro-Communist Chinese in Macao confronted the colonial government. The so-called 12-3 incident, a riot that occurred on 3 December 1966, resulted in deaths and causalities from battles with police. To end the incident, the Portuguese Governor agreed to sign statements of apology for the loss to the local Chinese community and the PRC government. This incident is one of the most obvious hostilities between holders of capitalist and communist ideologies during the Cold War in Macao.

Overall, design and industrial development in Macao was almost non-existent during the period under examination. In general, professional design practices were limited as clients preferred to commission Hong Kong-based designers, who had a reputation for quality work. The three traditional handicraft industries—match and firework making and incense production—finally vanished in the 1980s, and tourism and gambling are all that remain. I would like to note that it was not until 1993 that Macao Polytechnic Institute launched the first post-secondary design education program in Macao.

Closing remarks

In this paper, I reviewed the related forms of design activity that took place during the 1950s and the 1960s in the Sinophone region. I showcased the four different types of practices and philosophies in place and their roles under different governments. In my examination, I hope that I have demonstrated the key developments of the four new and different design and cultural identities that emerged during the Cold War period. It was during this time that we see the constitution of different political ideologies, which lay the foundations for resistance against the CCP's imposition of its "One China" identity on non-PRC citizens; Hong Kong is a strong case for this. The legacy can be seen in recent civil movements, such as the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement as well as the ongoing protests that began in early June 2019 related to Hong Kong's anti-extradition law. Now, in the midst of the so-called "new Cold War" between the United States and the PRC alongside the anti-extradition fight launched by Hongkongers, it is important to document and articulate the significant cultural differences between citizens of non-PRC locales and the PRC within the Sinophone region in the battle between liberalism and authoritarianism. These two different political ideologies are on opposing sides in this latest form of a Cold War. This is also a confrontation between the liberal world and Red China over different ideology values, including democracy and human rights.

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