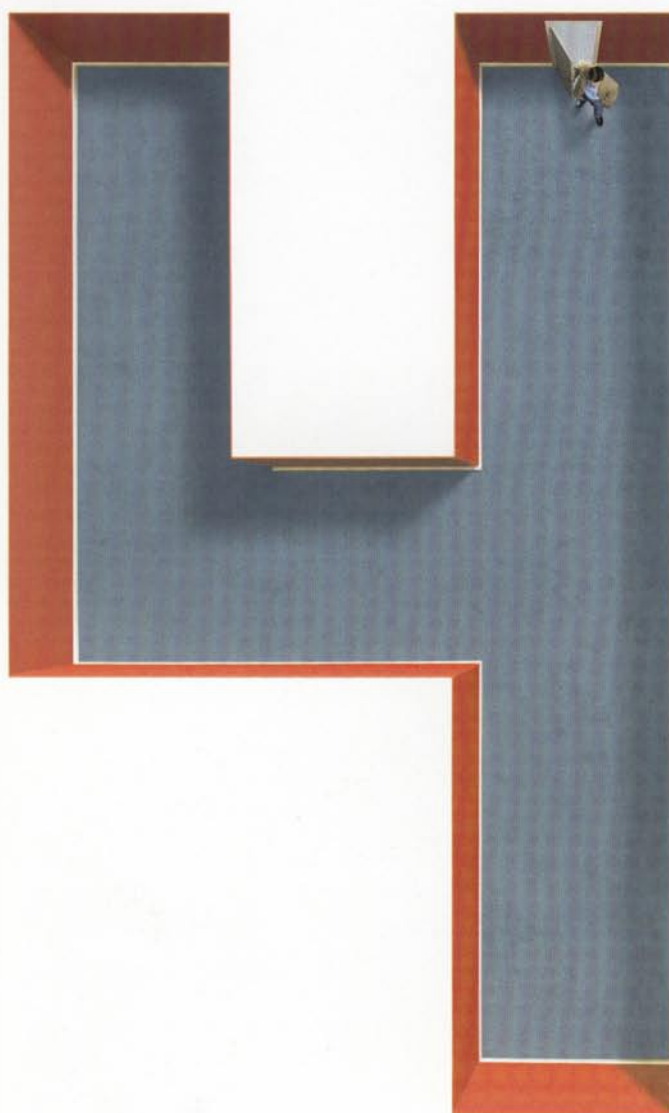


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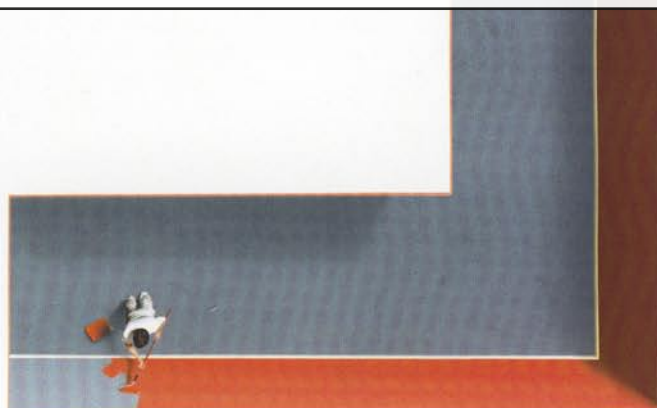


No Sleeping Dragon

The dawn of graphic design in China

Robert L. Peters, FGDC

This in-depth 14 page feature describes the emergence of the graphic design profession in China. Peters has been a foreign feature contributor for Communication Arts magazine since 1995 and has previously written on design and design events in Russia, Portugal, Uruguay, Australia, Korea, Japan, and Brazil.



March/April 2004

Eight Dollars

www.commarts.com

No Sleeping Dragon

by Robert L. Peters, FGDC

The dawn of graphic design in China

"Pessimists study Russian. Optimists pick up English. Realists learn Chinese." I recall this tongue-in-cheek counsel for language study from my high school days in Germany in the early 1970s. At the time, three superpowers held the world in relative balance. The Soviet Union was building ballistic missiles, the U.S.A. was embroiled in the Vietnam War, and in the world's most populous nation, Chairman Mao was orchestrating the "Chinese Cultural Revolution."

Three short decades later it seems much has changed and that advice to optimists and realists could well be interchangeable.

Today, the People's Republic of China (mainland China) is by every measure a giant. Its population of nearly 1.3 billion citizens is five times that of the U.S.A., and more than a fifth of all humans. Covering nearly 9.5 million square kilometers (3.7 million square miles, slightly larger than the U.S.A.), its massive, resource-rich and varied terrain ranges from the world's highest mountains (Mount Everest in the Himalayas) to vast deserts (like the Gobi) to fertile plains—its diverse climates vary from subarctic in the north to tropical in the south. The third largest country on the planet by landmass, it can now claim the world's second largest economy with its GDP of \$5.7 trillion (2002). With one of the world's greatest civilizations, China outpaced the rest of the world for thousands of years. Chinese inventions included paper, printing, gunpowder, porcelain, silk and the compass, to name just a few. In 2003, China became the third nation to send a human into space, a matter of great national pride.

During the past hundred years, China has experienced profound changes as it struggled through a transformation from a weak and defeated feudalistic society, distanced from the outside world, to a powerful and modern state with great global influence. Along with the remarkable social, industrial and economic boom now taking place, graphic design is emerging as an exciting, new and vigorous profession.

Ancient Chinese History

You can't understand today's China without some sense of how it evolved. To begin, one must look back more than 3,000 years to the Bronze Age, when the roots of Chinese traditional class and social structure took hold. During the Yin-Shang and Zhou dynasties (1766 B.C.–256 B.C.) priests, military leaders and administrators emerged as a ruling elite, intent on giving form to a well-ordered societal framework. Confucius (551 B.C.–448 B.C.) and other philosophers of the time con-

tributed doctrine aimed at providing harmony in thought and conduct, stressing virtue and natural order, love for humanity, ancestor worship and reverence for parents. New ideas and new philosophies proliferated, including Taoism (which would later influence Zen Buddhism) and legalism (featuring iron-fisted rule and suppression of dissent). As the class structures became legitimized, mutual societal obligations were defined, growing to become the "traditional" Chinese principles of ethics, morals, politics and statesmanship.

China became a unified empire under the Qin dynasty (221 B.C.–206 B.C.) at the dawn of the Iron Age. During this time much of the Great Wall was being constructed through the linking together of old packed-earth defensive walls. Rulers of ensuing dynasties acted as protectors of the country's cultural traditions, building elaborate palaces to demonstrate their own fitness to rule, providing patronage support for written expression and visual artists and promoting drama amongst remote residents not literate in Chinese language.

Chinese imperial social order was a classical hierarchy that persisted effectively for more than 2,000 years. The emperor and his attendants were in the top strata. Below him were the imperial bureaucracy and elite scholar officials who administered the state and imposed authority and control—when necessary, by means of the army and imperial police. The next layer down consisted of farmers, soldiers, merchants and artisans. Chinese social order was patrilineal and patriarchal, a trait still evident today in spite of attempts to make modern Chinese society less male-centric.

The Legacy of Han

Over 90% of today's Chinese are of Han ethnicity, tracing their origins to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), when citizens of the north, central and southern plains and basins of eastern China began to identify themselves as a coherent group. Part of what it meant to be Han was to distinguish themselves from the "barbarians" along their periphery—the



1. Design jury, Hangzhou. 2. Beijing opera performance at Poster Biennial. 3. McDonald's advert on rickshaw, Suzhou. 4. Olympic pride, Beijing. 5. Tiananmen Gate, Beijing. 6. The 88-story Jin Mao Tower dwarfs Chairman Mao's "big-character calligraphy," Shanghai. 7. Volunteer interpreter "Queenie," Hangzhou. 8. ICOGRADA board members on the Great Wall. 9. Delicious longan fruit. 10. View of The Humble Administrator's Garden, Suzhou. 11. Design students (some also in Navy training), Wuxi. 12. Xu Zhengting shows off his poster at China Academy of Art's faculty/grad exhibit, Hangzhou. 13. Cultural Revolution memorabilia is now found mostly in antique stores. 14. Ironic souvenirs—state owned "Chunghwa" brand cigarettes and the ubiquitous Coca-Cola—what would the Chairman think?

nomads and herding peoples of the high, dry, colder regions. The Han dynasty was a period of great unity for China, at that time the largest and already the most populous country in the world (60 million people). Shared values evolved along Confucian ideals, a common written language furthered understanding and harmony, and the efficient administrative model that emerged became the quintessential form for Chinese bureaucracy. A settled agricultural system centered on growing grains such as wheat, millet and rice. Over the ensuing centuries, the Han peoples expanded their land base through agricultural colonization of fertile adjacent territories. The strategic combination of sending farming families into new areas in concert with powerful military units proved remarkably effective.

Chaos, Abundance & Aggressors

Following the Han dynasty, China plunged into 350 years of chaos, disunity and internal wars (concurrent with the Dark Ages in Europe). During this time, “barbarians” moved into the north and assimilated themselves into Chinese society, while the ethnic Hans kept moving south. The Sui dynasty (589–618) had a northern power base and reunified the country. The Tang dynasty (618–907) extended China’s boundaries through Siberia in the north, Korea in the east, Vietnam in the south, and a corridor of control along the Silk Road well into modern-day Afghanistan. The Song dynasty (960–1279) introduced remarkably efficient agricultural technology (still used by rice farmers in the Chinese interior today) and is noted for the invention of the printing press. The Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) was a government of occupation by the Mongols, followed by the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) during which time China began to turn inward for the first time in its history. The (masonry) Great Wall that we know today was fortified during this period, the political capital moved to Beijing and the Forbidden City was built. In the mid-sixteenth century, Portugal took control of the territory of Macau and thereafter rivalry among seafaring western colonial powers began to impact China directly.

The Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was Manchurian, marked by a government even more conservative and inflexible than that of the Ming. Neo-Confucian scholars of the Qing era saw China as the center of the universe and entrenched a self-satisfied orthodoxy in which innovation or the adoption of foreign ideas was tantamount to heresy. By 1800 there were over 300 million Chinese, and a scarcity of land combined with little industry or trade resulted in a surplus of labor and widespread rural discontent.

Following the Chinese loss in the first Opium War (China’s ban of the lucrative opium trade was financially damaging to British merchants, triggering the conflict), Hong Kong became a British dependency in the 1840s. Internally, the Qing dynasty

was weakening fast as civil unrest, famines, peasant uprisings and the emergence of apocalyptic cults beset the country. Loss of the second Opium War in 1860 (to France and Britain this time) resulted in more damaging treaties that further eroded China’s autonomy and partitioned its dwindling resources. Corruption ran rampant and anti-foreign sentiment grew into violence. During the remainder of the nineteenth century, China’s sovereignty saw intrusion by expansionist Russia, Britain, France, Germany and the U.S.A., and by 1900, China was a sovereign state on paper alone. Some 90 Chinese ports were under foreign control, foreign gunboats patrolled China’s rivers and western nations dominated Chinese trade.

Revolt and Republic

The Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911 with the outbreak of the Republican revolution. Failure of reform from the top had convinced many Chinese that sweeping away the old order was the only answer, and civil war was the result. Emerging from the chaos, the Nationalist Party (as the Republicans were referred to) competed with military warlords and faced a myriad of factional forces within, as well as the external threat of Japanese occupation, before consolidating power.

The ensuing period was marked by student activism and increasing polarization between right and left régimes. Social turmoil became entrenched and armed peasant insurrections, supported by the fledgling Chinese Communist Party, met with brutal massacres and retaliation by the Nationalists. Japan invaded China proper in 1937, quickly occupying the major coastal cities and subjecting the Chinese to ruthless atrocities. By the end of World War II in 1945, some 20 million Chinese had died at the hands of the Japanese.

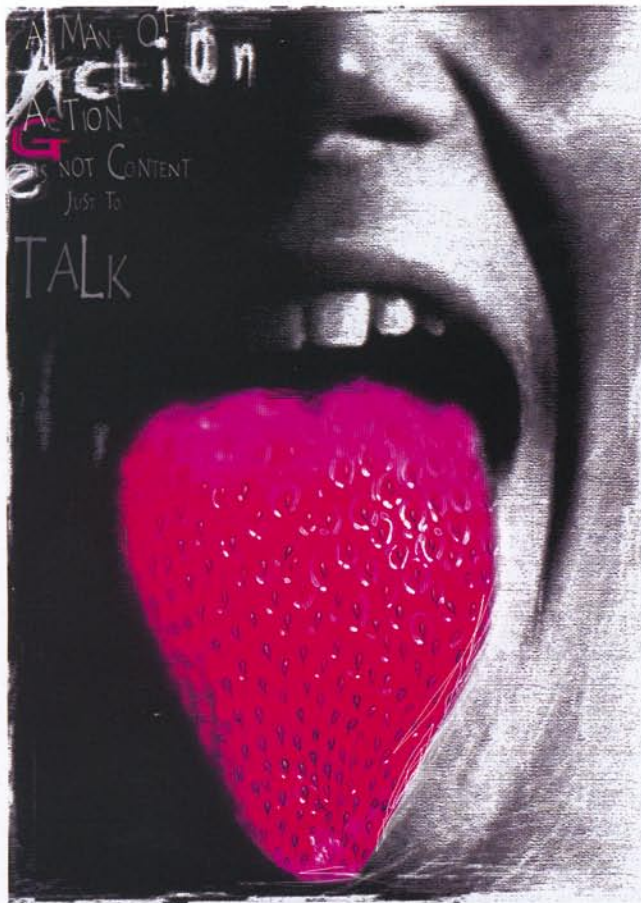
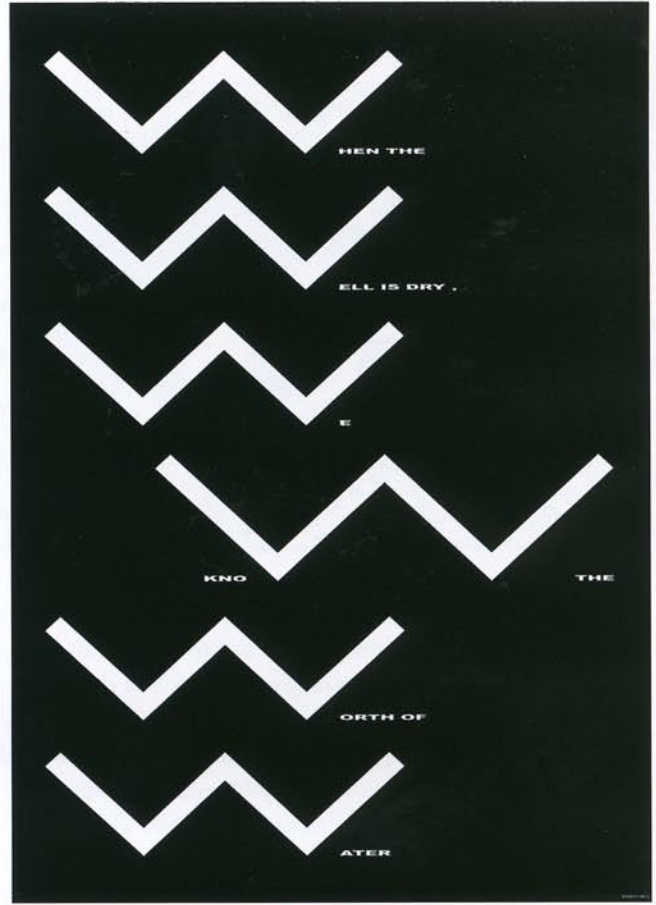
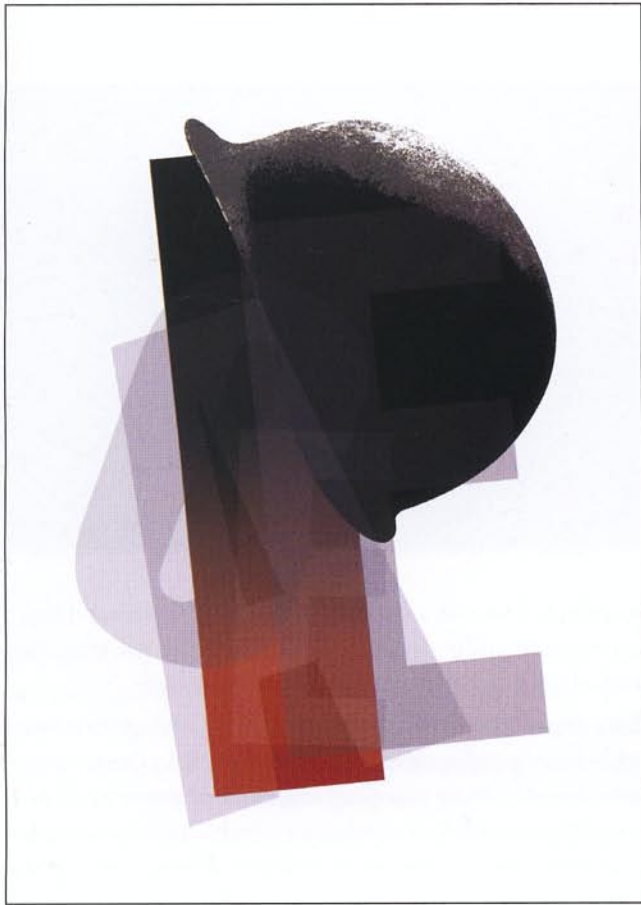
The Nationalist government of Republican China had been ineffective in its attempts to fight the Japanese (the Communists employed the guerrilla tactics they had learned during the civil war with considerably greater effect). In contrast to the Communists, the Nationalists were disorganized and corrupt. Their response to huge debts at the end of the war was to print more money, leading to hyperinflation and further national instability. Clashes between the Nationalists and the Communists’ “Red Army” resumed, and by October 1949 the Nationalists fled to the island of Taiwan (taking with them China’s financial coffers as well as the country’s most significant national historical treasures). Mao Tse-tung, a peasant revolutionary who had become leader of the Communists, proclaimed the creation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Right: **Peace poster.** Wang Yuefei (Shenzhen), designer.

Save Water poster. Han Xu (Hangzhou), designer.

Action Age poster. Zhao Chen Yin (Hangzhou), designer.

Kan Tai-keung Design Show poster. Han Xu (Hangzhou), designer.



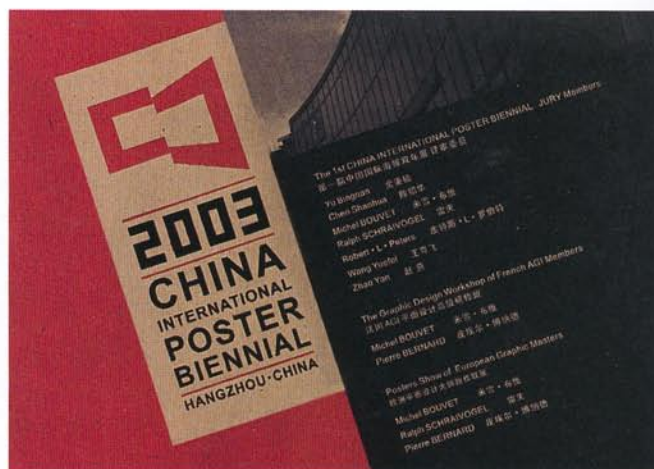


Power to the People

With an impoverished country and a massive population to feed, care for and employ, the new government of the PRC faced formidable challenges. It tackled the task with focus and discipline, embarking on an efficient program of national integration and consolidation. Sweeping reforms sought to redress the imbalances of China's imperial past and imbue the people with the values of collectivism and communalism. Dramatic changes transformed the social hierarchy. Poor peasants and revolutionary fighters were suddenly held in esteem, while rich landlords and educated elites faced punishment and demotion.

During the 1950s, China's transition to Socialism entailed a series of "Five Year Plans" designed to achieve industrialization, collectivization of agriculture and political centralization. Banking, industry and trade were all nationalized, resulting in the virtual abolishment of private enterprise. Bettering the lot of the masses was the focus, and leveraging the strength of numbers became a leitmotiv. As Chairman Mao expressed in 1958, "A decisive factor is our population...more people means a greater ferment of ideas, more enthusiasm and more energy. Never before have the masses of the people been so inspired!" Idealism ran high, and the charismatic Chairman Mao quickly became an iconic figure held in great esteem by the people (not unlike the Chinese emperors of old).

By 1960, a unified China found itself free of war, occupation and strife—a condition not known for over a century. All vestiges of former imperialism were eliminated except for the British-run colony of Hong Kong, the Portuguese colony of Macau and the U.S.A.'s sphere of influence in Taiwan (home to exiled Nationalists who still declared themselves to be the legitimate government of The Republic of China). Beginning in 1966, Mao's rigid reinforcement of radical Communist doctrine took the form of the "Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution" intent on entrenching Socialism, and supported by the militant Red Guards of the Chinese Communist youth



movement. This was a dark period for intellectuals and the creative community, as it meant subordinating self-expression in all of the arts to the needs of the class struggle.

Mao's death in 1976 effectively ended the Cultural Revolution and led to a purging of radical elements within the government. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping consolidated power and his new government began to reopen coastal regions to international trade and investment, stimulate industry, restore private enterprise and property and reintroduce wage incentives to increase productivity. Today he is widely credited as the architect of China's remarkable transition to a market economy and opening up to the outside world—while at the same time holding the powerful Chinese military in tight control.

Challenge and Change

In 1989, the millions-strong student protests known as the Tiananmen Democracy Movement triggered in martial law, hundreds of deaths, political turmoil and dismissals, as well as the entrance of Jiang Zemin to national political leadership. Zemin continued cautiously with his predecessors' economic reforms throughout the 1990s. His most lasting contribution was the "Three Represents" theory he added to the canon of "Communism With Chinese Characteristics" by allowing capitalists and entrepreneurs to join the Communist Party—significant changes which have driven China's current modernization.

Two-thousand three saw China's first intergenerational transfer of power in 23 years. Endorsed by the National People's Congress, China's supreme leaders are now president Hu Jintao and prime minister Wen Jiabao, both "young" 60-year-olds who are already recultivating the government's image as the populist advocate of the working person. This leadership change was touted in the West as "the first orderly succession since the founding of China in 1949," though the reality is somewhat more complex. Jiang Zemin retains much power through his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, effectively giving him control over China's massive military.

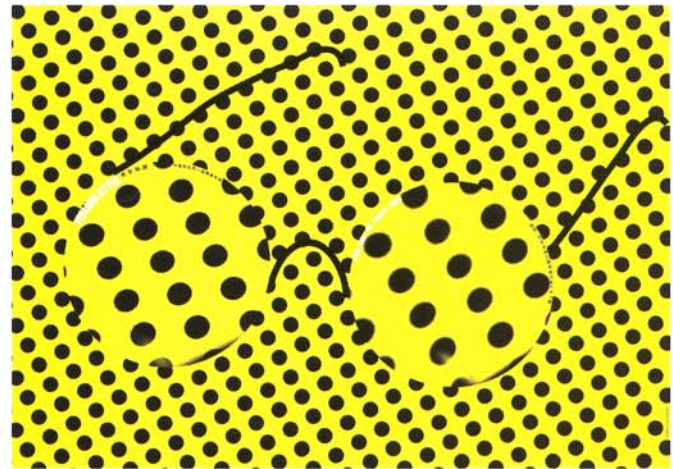


China Today

The quality of life and the health of the Chinese people has increased dramatically under Communism and, following nearly a century of turmoil and suppression, the future looks bright. Average life expectancy has increased to 72 years (up from 49 in 1949), the national birth rate has slowed to 0.6% and literacy is at 86% of adults above 15. A brighter future promises improved healthcare, enhanced municipal services and more opportunities for private housing.

China's new leadership seems serious about bringing further improvements to citizens' lives. "Serving the people" and "governing for the people's benefit" are Hu Jintao's new watchwords. After a young graphic designer was beaten to death in jail following a routine arrest for not carrying proper ID, the event's extensive reporting on the Internet brought swift action from the new government to punish the officials responsible and abolish the twenty-year-old vagrancy regulation that permitted the arbitrary detention of those without papers. The SARS crisis was another defining moment for this new and untested administration, which has decidedly moved towards greater openness. And now citizens in almost a million rural villages have the right to vote by secret ballot for mayoral and committee candidates.

China's transition to a market economy holds great promise, but as with all dramatic change, there is a price to pay and turmoil for many. The state sector has already shrunk to a third of the entire economy. The cradle-to-grave employment previously offered to government workers came with a social security blanket, but as the private sector becomes the dominant employer, a majority of the population is without the coverage it once had. A transient labor pool estimated at over 100 million has emerged among peasants seeking prosperity in towns and cities—a new underclass lacking basic social services. Increasing disparity in income levels may become a significant social problem, and a raft of environmental issues (mostly resulting from the massive population) await sustain-



able solutions—among them, air pollution, water pollution and deforestation. When I questioned colleagues about China's occupation of Tibet, the response was ambivalent—clearly China's opportune emergence on the world stage is of greater concern than past offenses.

A Cult of Opacity

Secretive Chinese imperial governments maintained control over the people for thousands of years by limiting their access to information. Some would say that their Communist successors turned opacity into a cult, with government departments refusing to divulge information to the public and also to each other. As recently as fifteen years ago, secrecy laws were entrenched with regulations that allow any information not covered by law to remain *neibu* or internal.

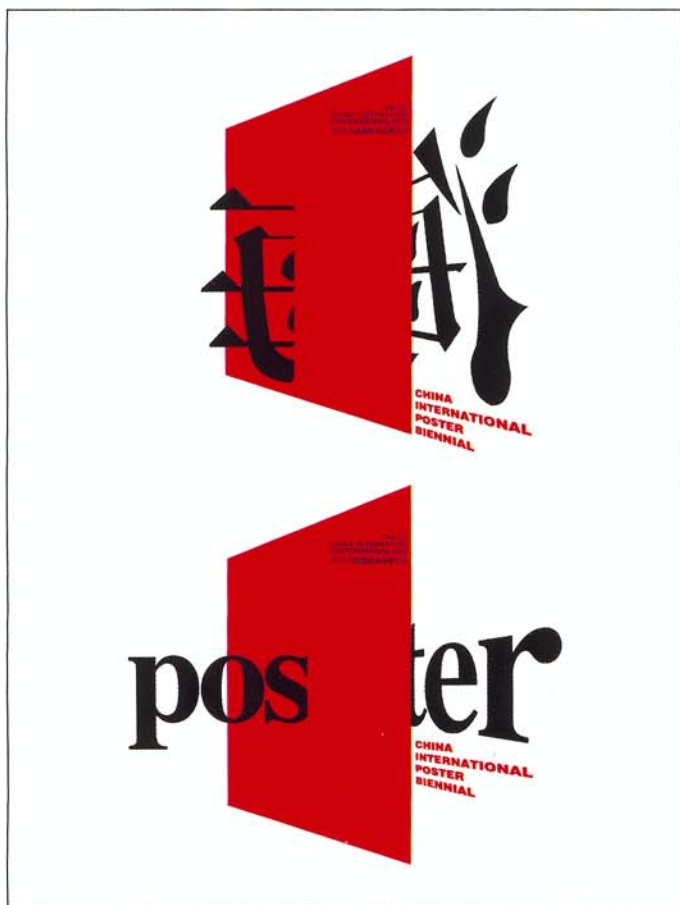
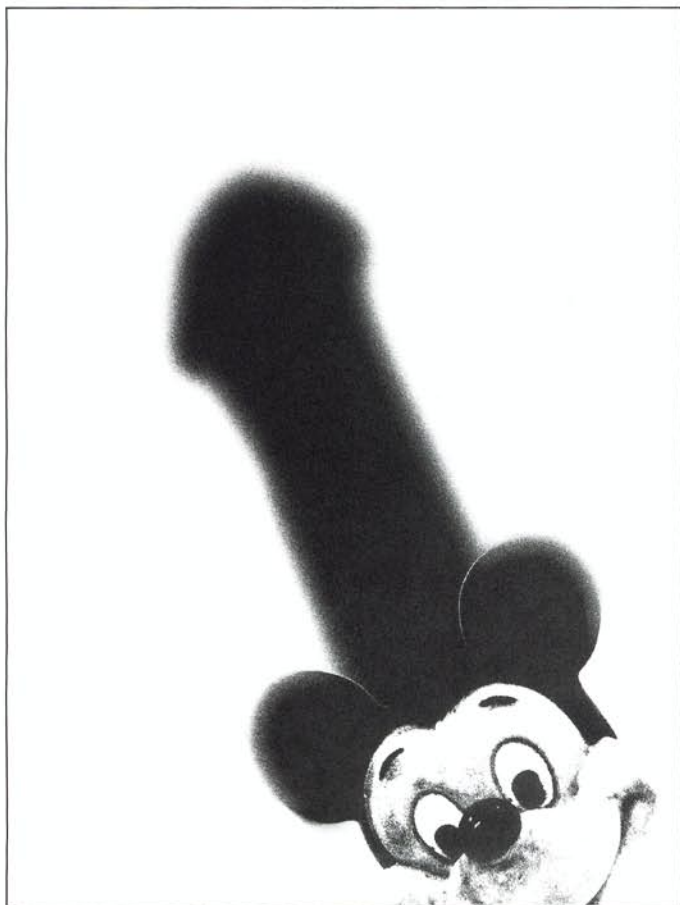
Secrecy slows effective decision-making within government. Now demands for change are growing, both externally and internally. Without public scrutiny of government finances, waste and misappropriation of funds by officials has been easy, and new trade opportunities have contributed to growing corruption. In order to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), China had to make public many of its internal rules relating to trade and investment. The SARS epidemic prompted an open debate about citizens' "right to know." In response, a new freedom of information act is now being prepared that will supposedly make secrecy the exception and will empower citizens to oblige governments to reveal what information they have. Following millennia of secrecy, this makes China's move towards openness and transparency of major historical significance—not least, to the fields of information design and visual communication.

Left: **Poster** (Chinese Panda morphs into Mickey Mouse). Ma Degang (Shanghai), designer.

2003 China International Poster Biennial booklet cover. China Academy of Art Design School (Hangzhou), design.

This page: **X-Power poster.** Zhao Chen Yin (Hangzhou), designer.

Feeling Style poster. Yuan Youmin (Hangzhou), designer.



In the past decade, the Chinese press has evolved into a complex, modern and diverse medium. Independent media usually reflect the official party line and practice self-censorship. Privately-owned portals supply many of China's 60 million Internet users with their daily Web update, and countless Internet forums have sprung up. While today's information freedom could not even have been imagined a decade ago, sophisticated electronic filtering technology does allow the Chinese government to censor articles it deems to be "sensitive."

Trade, Turtles, Tycoons

The move to a free market economy is on everyone's mind. Wherever I went, people talked about the importance of China's recent accession to the WTO and the role that design could play in China's resulting emergence on the world scene. Luo Ping expresses the view of many designers: "China's designing industry has played an important role in the impetus to the development of the social economy. With the WTO, China became an important part of the whole world market... We should realize that the new era is full of opportunities for the designing industry and Chinese designers should be ready to shoulder heavy responsibilities."

Foreign-educated Chinese are returning by the thousands, to help "realize the great rejuvenation of our nation" as president Hu Jintao recently stated. He was addressing 4,000 returning Chinese (who have studied and worked abroad) at a special reception in Beijing's Great Hall of the People. The Chinese nickname for those now returning by the thousands is "turtles," referring to the return of turtles to the beach where they were born. Returnees see China as a land of boundless opportunity, a remarkable transformation from the perception held only a few decades ago when they were part of a brain drain.

Business tycoons are another new phenomena, a direct result of the formal decision to admit entrepreneurs into the Communist Party. Nowhere are these flashy new millionaires more in evidence than in Shanghai's glittering nightclubs and restaurants—the official Xinhua press agency reports more than 200,000 private businesses in that city alone. Private enterprises are increasingly being recognized (though still unofficially) as significant engines of growth and now number more than two million nationwide.

Coca-Colanization, Disneyfication, McDonaldization

Li Qiang is a Beijing artist selling paintings of McDonald's icons for as much as \$4,000 each. A recent show of his at the Qin Gallery included ten works featuring the burger-culture effigy and other paintings combining Disney cartoon characters with impressions from revolutionary China. Li (who never eats at McDonald's) refers to his paintings as statements of

China's changing culture, a bellwether of the growing resistance against crass commercialism and imposition of domineering foreign culture through globalization.

American brands like McDonald's, Burger King and KFC enjoyed the success of novelty appeal in the 1990s, though a growing backlash is now evident against the "expensive fast food that makes you fat and leaves you hungry"—a predictable reaction in a country with as rich and varied a culinary tradition as China's. Concern about western cultural imperialism (through branding, for example) and its hegemonic effect in the world today is a topic much in the minds of Chinese artists and designers. They now see the forces of globalization as the greatest threat to China's distinctive cultural heritage and vernacular. While the U.S.A. is admired for its individual freedoms and opportunities, it's misprized for the moral decay evident in its cultural exports, its capitalistic greed and consumerism, and its realpolitik arrogance and interference in other nations' affairs.

Cultural Counterbalance

Culture encompasses language, traditions, morals, laws and the art of a community. Understanding culture is imperative and a prerequisite for effective communication (this seems to be better understood in China than in many other places). Kan Tai-keung, a "famous" designer born in Guangzhou but living in Hong Kong since the 1950s says, "Research and study of our own traditional culture is the key to establishing a significant graphic design style, thus enabling us to take part in world design activity and make a worthwhile contemporary contribution." [See January/February 1999 for a feature on Kan & Lau Associates.]

China has a vast cultural heritage from which its graphic designers can draw. The Chinese cultural palette includes the country's thousands of years of recorded history, its ancient ethics and religions (Confucian and Taoist schools of thought and contributions to Buddhism), the rich ideographic language, China's literate traditions and its expressive visual arts. The latter offers a palette of riotous color and an intrinsic understanding of harmony (between point, line, surface, textures) that informs use of contrast, symmetry, rhythm and equilibrium. Differentiating much of Chinese culture is sensitivity to nature and a spiritual counterbalance in sharp con-

Left: Untitled poster about cultural imperialism. Deng Hui Hua (Hangzhou), designer.

Fashion and Culture poster: "The girdle stays of eighteenth-century Europe disfigured women, just as the Chinese binding of women's feet." Zeng Chao (Hangzhou), designer.

China International Poster Biennial identity. Peng Zongwei (Hangzhou), designer.

Communication poster. Chen Shaohua (Shenzhen), designer.



trast to the tactical intellectualism of European science and western rationalism.

The Nature of Yin and Yang

Taoist philosophy proposes that man return to a simple, unsophisticated life and place himself in an amicable environment. The retreat from the troublesome world allows exclusive contemplation and innermost reflection that can bring man into harmony with Nature. Taoism stressed the importance of overall equilibrium achieved by following the principle of complementary duality of yin and yang, dark and light, soft and hard, void and mass, smooth and rough—to an infinite degree.

Differences between Western and Chinese art and design are directly attributable to differences in cultural backgrounds. A comparison of Western gardens with the classical Chinese garden is an instructive study in contrasts. In the West, our fascination with “changing nature” dominates. The Renaissance underscored the idea that man is nature’s master and its great gardens were usually based on formal arrangements and grid-based layouts into which plants and natural elements were then integrated. Geometrically straight lines dominate—they represent the most efficient, shortest distance between two points and thereby the most direct means.

In China, humankind is seen as an integral part of nature. You won’t find a straight line in a Chinese garden, because there are no straight lines in nature. Curved lines are considered the epitome of beauty because only curved lines can reflect the irregularities of nature. Chinese gardens are designed to fit in with nature rather than to impose upon it and they form idealized microcosms of the concentrated essence of Chinese wisdom and culture—through the basic elements of earth, rocks, water, vegetation, creatures and buildings with literary allusions.

Nature is a source of inspiration for many Chinese designers. Hon Bing-wah says of his posters, “I often include ideograms, patterns and motifs which are derived from nature or Chinese classical philosophy, but merged with international visual language. Above all, an anthropocentric approach is used to echo public resonance through the visual language.” Typical of the many Chinese graphic designers who also count themselves as artists, he notes: “In painting, nature is my master, from which

I try to depict different aspects and textures, such as clouds, mountains, waterfalls, rivers and the like. Maybe it is the subliminal desire of a busy urban dweller, seeking a peace of mind that can only be found in nature.”

A Matter of Language

Central to China’s cultural identity is its written language, the language of the Han people. Standardized for over 2,000 years, today’s written form is a common denominator that ties together the far-flung peoples of northern, central and southern China. Since earliest times, the ability to write poetry was the mark of an educated man; in the past 50 years, concerted effort has been invested to simplify the traditional Chinese characters (using fewer strokes) as part of the government’s goal of increasing literacy levels. Pinyin was introduced as a system for transliterating Chinese into the Latin alphabet in 1958, and has since become the official method for romanization.

Putonghua (known to Westerners as Mandarin) has been China’s official spoken language since 1956, and is used by an estimated 70% of the population today. Mandarin represents the dialects of the Beijing region, though six other Chinese dialect groups are spoken, primarily in southern and south-eastern China. These dialects include Wu (Shanghai-Jiangsu-Zhejiang area); Yue, also known as Cantonese (Hong Kong and Guangzhou region); and Kejia/Hakka (southern Fujian, Taiwan).

China’s 100 million minority people (defined as non-Han) belong to 55 distinct “nationalities.” Many have their own spoken languages, including Mongolian, Tibetan, Miao (Hmong), Yi, Uygur and Kazakh. Minorities are encouraged to maintain and promote their ethnolinguistic heritage and unique traditions, and the government supports the development of written scripts (using pinyin) for languages that have not had a written form.

Calligraphy—Writ Large

Written Chinese communicates concepts through ideographs and pictographs, with each character functioning simultaneously as word and image. This fuses concept with expression, the semantic with the iconic, providing a remarkably rich and beautiful visual language of stunning complexity, unparalleled by anything in the West. The formal brushwork, energy,



rhythm, composition, texture and sensuous lines of Chinese calligraphic art provide an engaging and sensory experience for viewers—even to those (such as myself) for whom most of the ideographs and semantics are meaningless.

Although considered the most prestigious art form in earlier eras, the expressive use of calligraphy was promoted among Chinese citizens by Mao's "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom" movement in the 1950s, becoming a dominant form of propaganda with which to express political messages. The legacy is the "big-character calligraphy" seen everywhere on Chinese buildings, billboards and banners today. In looking at contemporary work done by graphic designers in China, it's evident how the rich visual heritage and the formal aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy provide an almost limitless source for inspiration and expressive experimentation.

A Tale of Two Cities

The most powerful and influential cities today are Beijing in the north and Shanghai, located near the Yangtze River in the east of China. Hong Kong, the former bridge between east and west before reverting to Chinese control in 1997, is now seeing its former influence migrate to Shanghai (a matter of no small concern for the citizens of the former British colony). The mainland has chosen to minimize its interference with the Hong Kong region's capitalist practices and economic strength and has adopted the policy phrase "one nation, two systems."

Beijing is China's bustling capital and its cultural, economic and communications center. An urban metropolis of thirteen million, traffic jams clog the city's five ring roads (soon to be six), and neighborhoods echo with the sound of construction. Tiananmen Square remains the political heart of the country, surrounded by the office towers of China's biggest multinational corporations. Seven-hundred thousand private vehicles have replaced the donkey carts that plodded along the thoroughfares only twenty years ago. China's leading universities are located here, close neighbors to the dot-com millionaires who are bringing the country into the wired world from the Haidian District high-tech corridor. Abandoned factories are being converted into SoHo-esque artist colonies, and Internet cafés and new theaters are everywhere.

Shanghai is China's economic engine and most populous urban center with a population of seventeen million. It's Asia's most dynamic metropolis, China's largest industrial and commercial city,

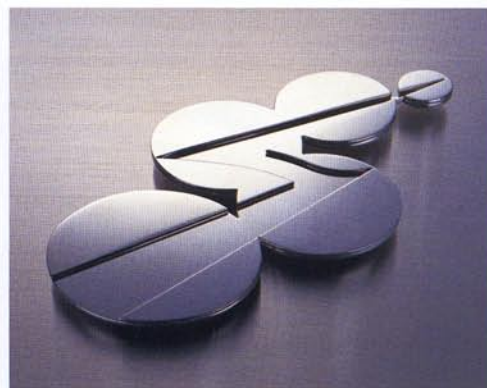
Left: **White dolphin mascot** for celebration of Hong Kong's reunification with China. Hon Bing-wah (Hong Kong), designer.

Paint packaging. Han Yun Chun (Dalian), designer.

Herbal tea packaging. Yanjun Art & Design Studio (Shi Jia Zhuang), design firm.

This page: **Taiwan Image poster: Family.** Yu Bingnan (Beijing), designer.

Fashion and Culture poster: "In ancient Europe, a woman who committed adultery had to sew a red letter onto her clothing—the red letter 'A' was not adornment, it was culture." Han Xu (Hangzhou), designer.



and the mainland's leading port. "Welcome to the world's last boomtown" reads the first line of an article on the city's irrational exuberance and extravagant opulence. Industrious, driven and confident, money literally courses through Shanghai. A city of tremendous contrasts (between old and new, rich and poor) and with a diverse architectural heritage (ancient Chinese temples and pavilions, classic European buildings from times of Western decadence), its pace of change is staggering. Whole neighborhoods have been bulldozed in a race to make money and its spiked skyline reflects the more than 1,000 skyscrapers (30 stories or greater in height) erected in each of the past 3 years. Soon to be added is the world's tallest building, the 95-story Shanghai World Financial Center.

Graphic Design—New Beginnings

These are exciting times for the new profession of graphic design in China. Already among the highest-paid professionals in the country, designers find themselves at a unique point in history—fueled by burgeoning trade opportunities, empowered by new-found openness and the advent of China's information age, and with an open sea of opportunity stretching out before them. Without a generation of mentors to follow, today's designers are indeed charting a new course. While some follow the International Style, others are genuinely interested in exploring Chinese vernacular and developing a unique indigenous voice through their work. As the profession begins to define itself, it will be interesting to observe distinctions between design as an art form of personal expression and design as the applied art of a design discipline.

The field of identity design and branding is particularly active, and is a major source of designers' work today. Astute business executives recognize that domestic enterprises are often at a disadvantage in how they project their corporate identities and their product and service brands. Globalization brings with it the need to compete with sophisticated offshore brands, and Chinese companies must now play according to "the rules of the new game."

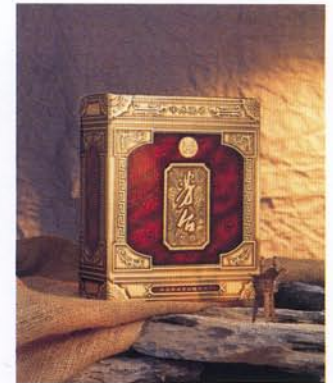
The design profession is going through a groundswell of organization, and designers are beginning to share information with each other (a new concept, it seems). Formally constituted associations have already begun in Shanghai, Beijing,

Nanjing, Shanxi and Suzhou. Designers from established associations in Hong Kong and Taiwan have been helpful in seeding and nurturing these new groups, and ICOGRADA is playing a supportive role in fostering professional development and contributing to the emerging standards of practice.

Hundreds of design schools across China are already graduating tens of thousands of young designers annually. Venerable art institutions that focused on the fine arts in the past are now expanding their applied and "propaganda arts" areas, and new schools and programs are starting up at a rapid rate. As might be expected, there is a shortage of qualified professors and instructors. Design magazines are springing up as well, offering a voice to Chinese designers and showing work from the international design community. Prominent titles include *Package & Design* published in Guangzhou, *Art & Design* from Beijing, and *Hi-Graphic* put out by the Shanghai Graphic Designers Association.

Graphic design in Hong Kong has a separate history from the mainland; essentially, it has existed for a generation longer. The 1960s saw the first institutions including commercial art in their curriculums and brought early practitioners such as Henry Steiner and Wucius Wong to the city, setting benchmarks for the emerging profession. In the 1970s, rapid economic growth spurred opportunities and the Hong Kong Graphic Design Association was formed to promote design consciousness and standards in the territory. Hong Kong became an international finance center in the 1980s and this fueled the growth of the local design force. Hong Kong's design practitioners recognized early on the role model that they could play for their colleagues on the mainland and on the island of Taiwan, and they are revered for their acumen, experience and the quality of their work.

Throughout the events I've been involved with in China, I've been impressed with the support given to graphic design by state and local governments, as well as by civic committees (a scenario that designers in many Western countries can only envy). The level of insight that some government officials seem to have regarding design's role in shaping society and acting as a tool for wealth creation is impressive. For example, the vice secretary of the Ningbo Municipal Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Xu Funing, states: "Design pro-



motes growth in economy. This is a commonly accepted fact. Design makes our life blazing with color and provides us with diversified choices. This is also the inevitable trend of development of a civilized society...we will shine with extraordinary vitality. And the culture or industry of design will constitute the crucial part of this vitality."

Advertising—the Impersonal Media

Advertising was a controlled state enterprise until ten years ago, resulting in a vacuum that is now being filled. A battle for the "new consumers" has emerged as advertising agencies fight for a share of the much-coveted Chinese market. Massive billboards line highways and city streets, promoting the new phenomena of real estate, the ubiquitous cell-phone (China is years ahead of North America in its cellular networks) and Western-style consumer products and services. Most of the adverts imitate what is seen in typical American consumer advertising of the 1990s—formulaic use of stock "lifestyle" photography, svelte fashion models in revealing outfits, shiny automobiles with upscale occupants, speed-blurred shots of tech-toys clutched by suited executives and saturated imagery of the latest objects of desire—of course, use of flashy drop-shadowed typography spelling out promise-filled slogans (often in nonsensical, malapropistic English) is everywhere as well. As China's emerging middle class moves into its acquisition cycle, this all appears as the predictable (and to many, disheartening) detritus of a new-consumer feeding frenzy.

Poster Power

Posters reflect the viewpoints of contemporary Chinese graphic designers and provide an insight into the mass culture of the PRC as it makes its transition into a new era. Poster exhibitions give designers the opportunity to see their work in print, to learn from others, and to experiment. As the introduction of the 1st China International Poster Biennial in Hangzhou states: "Information and communication are the basis for worldwide independent living, whether in trade, cultural or social spheres. The graphic designer's task is to provide the right answer to visual communication problems of every kind in every sector of society..."

Kan Tai-keung provides a Hong Kong perspective on biennials and exhibitions: "In the mid 1990s, a group of (main-

land) Chinese designers appeared and were awarded in various international competitions. Design associations in China then began to organize international poster exhibitions...the aim of international poster exhibitions is to offer us an opportunity to think, and to help search for new directions."

Some question the legitimacy of the work done by Chinese graphic designers for poster exhibitions, and write off the efforts as nothing more than experimental work and self-serving expression. No doubt there is truth to this view, as the client community is still quite unsophisticated regarding market-driven strategy, resulting in briefs and assignments well below the level of rigor and interest of designers' pent-up talents. Freeman Lau feels that posters designed for the purpose of exhibition fill an important need: "...this is the voice of designers expressing their views on global issues...reminding (other) designers that we should take care about the world, and that design should not only enhance the aesthetics, but also the quality of life. In fact, many designers have been inspired by these highly liberal posters and develop their own visual language for the other more commercial projects, enriching the variety of social culture."

Xie Hui poses the question, "Why do we do graphic (design), even if it has no client demands or economic interest?" and then answers, "Creating an idea and an impressive expression is absolutely essential...Nowadays, graphic design more and more tends to be a kind of contemporary visual art rather than a propagandist media. This will inevitably influence the advertising campaign deeply and carry on the responsibility of mutual communication of the cultures and the commonality of art and design."

Left: **Identity for 2008 Olympics.** Chen Shaohua (Shenzhen), designer.

X-Book catalog. Mark X International Poster Show (Wuxi).

Shanghai Public Transportation identity. Hon Bing-wah (Hong Kong), designer.

This page: **Identity for art and stationery firm.** Rito Design & Associates (Shenzhen), design firm.

Greatwall Wines identity. Hon Bing-wah (Hong Kong), designer.

Liquor packaging. Chen Xiao Ming (Shenzhen), designer.

Intellectual Property Conundrums

The development of Chinese culture (like other established cultures) owes a great deal to the communal sharing of creativity and innovation, to the seamless transfer of “best practice” from one generation to the next and to the copying of good ideas. The time-honored way for a budding apprentice to learn is to copy the expert work of the master, thereby developing the requisite insights, skills, techniques and abilities to be able to progress to a higher level.

For the most part, the issue of copying and the rights of the creator is viewed differently in China (and other Asian countries) than in the West. It's the difference between sharing and hoarding, or between collective rights and the rights of the individual. The need to constantly create anew is viewed by many as wasteful and selfish (an understandable posture in a heavy populace that has had to develop communal processes in order to survive). This variance in philosophical premise lies behind the reason that China is not a signatory to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, for example, and it carries through into contemporary trade negotiations and treaties. Many view the “rich world's” penchant for controlling intellectual property as driven by the same greed that fuels the capitalistic, consumer-based societies.

At dinner one night, a high-ranking government official expressed to me his concerns regarding the West's “arrogant” position on intellectual property control and patent laws: “It's the rich world's attempt to monopolize ideas, and to prevent countries like China from experiencing economic opportunities. Art is the common cultural property of humanity and therefore should be appreciated by all. Intellect stems from and informs the human condition, so good ideas should be shared for common good.” There's a valid argument to be made that good ideas *should* be copied, and that only bad ideas should be protected.

The Scapegoat Dragon

Today, the rich world's scapegoat of choice is China. Americans bemoan their own record trade deficit, complain of unfair Chinese competition and talk of jobs being stolen and loss of global market share to Chinese firms. Japan faults China for its own manufacturing malaise and deflation. And, China-bashing is prevalent among European politicians and corporate executives who call for protectionist measures and complain of China's cheap-currency policy of pegging the Chinese yuan against the U.S. dollar.

A look at the numbers tells the true story. Compared to the U.S.A.'s trade balance deficit of over \$530 billion, China has a positive surplus of \$20 billion. China's trade growth has been significant in the past five years. Chinese imports have increased almost 300% since 1998, while exports have

grown by more than 230%. In the past 25 years, Gross Domestic Product has more than quadrupled in China.

Chinese money actually helps prop up the U.S.A.'s economy, as the Chinese central bank purchases huge amounts of American Treasury bonds and mortgage securities (\$250 billion in the past year). The yuan is indeed somewhat undervalued, and China does have a significant pool of surplus labor that has held wages down for the past decade (one of the reasons for WalMart's “always low prices”). Could it be that the complaints of today's “rich” countries stem from an unwillingness to accept responsibility for their own economic faults, or perhaps from envy at seeing China finally have its own day in the sun?

Chinese Renaissance

The Chinese dragon of old was a divine mythical creature that brought with it ultimate abundance, prosperity and good fortune. Many are comparing the awakening of China's “sleeping dragon” to the Renaissance in Europe or the Meiji Restoration in Japan. Can China regain its former glory as one of earth's leading civilizations? Will Chinese culture withstand the onslaught of globalization? Will the taste for newfound openness and social reform continue to grow? The nation finds itself at a critical point today—emerging from a century of weakness, turmoil and oppression; growing as a prosperous and pluralistic society and charting its way to becoming a modern democratic state. In service of this transformation, the Chinese graphic design profession (with its innate power to further understanding) is sure to prosper. **CA**

Editor's note: Robert L. Peters has participated in a wide range of design events in China during the past few years; as a guest presenter at the Business of Design Week, 2002 (Hong Kong), the opening of the Red Cross International Poster Exhibition of China (Beijing), and the LOGO2002 International Festival (Shanghai); as a lecturer at the ICOGRADA Design Perspective Seminar on Innovalue and Branding (Taipei); as honorary director of the 2003 “Mark X” International Poster Show (Wuxi); and as a member of the international juries and a presenter for the Suzhou Image International Poster Exhibition (Suzhou) and the 1st China International Poster Biennial and Forum, 2003 (Hangzhou). He would like to express thanks to the organizers of these events and to the designers who contributed their work for this article. Special thanks to Yu Bingnan, Huang Li, Zhao Yan and Hon Bing-wah for the introductions they made on his behalf, and for their assistance and support.

Right: **Suzhou Image poster** (Chinese books). Xu Jian (Hangzhou), designer.

Trojan Horse poster (about cultural imperialism of globalized brands). Han Xu (Hangzhou), designer.

X-Power Poster, Typography/Xylography. Wu Jianjun (Wuxi), designer.

X-Power Poster, Point of Intersection. Zhao Yan (Hangzhou), designer.

