

CHINATOWN VERNACULAR

唐人街平面設計

*A Visual Analysis of Commercial Signage in
Philadelphia's Chinatown*

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Introduction
Page 4

COMPOSITION
PAGE 16

SYMBOLS

PAGE 38

TYPOGRAPHY
PAGE 46

COLOR
PAGE 66

Conclusion
Page 76

Intro

Before I knew what vernacular design was or paid any attention to signs, I was trying to answer the elusive question “What Does Chinese American Design Look Like?” I thought I would find my answers by looking at the history of Chinese American graphic designers, but I quickly found that ethnicity doesn’t automatically translate into work. Many of the Chinese American designers I looked at trained in elite design schools, thus the visual characteristics of their work were a culmination of the principles taught in those institutions rather than an inherent “Chinese-Americaness.” I realized that my search for a purely Chinese American visual language would have to take place outside designers and design institutions. Eventually, I found myself observing how commercial signage in Chinatowns, despite looking very different from the design I was taught at MICA, effectively communicated to broad audiences and created an enduring style that served Asian owned businesses. Yet, there was little published research on this subject. My frustrations for the lack of consideration or respect given to these signs — and vernacular design as a whole — led to the creation of this book.



What is Vernacular Graphic Design?

Vernacular graphic design refers to design practices created by nondesigners that exist outside institutional settings - institutions such as art schools or design agencies. Vernacular design traditions are tied to specific geographic areas and communities, prioritizing local materials and practicality over lofty design theories or pretension. As a result of existing outside institutional design canons, vernacular design can sometimes defy accepted rules of "good design" and perceptions of "good taste", constructing a wholly original set of design principles and aesthetics. Consequently, ~~because of these same reasons, the vernacular is commonly seen as unworthy of appreciation, as it's perceived by both designers and nondesigners as "tacky" or "ugly."~~ Despite this elitism, graphic designers can't help but be drawn to the vernacular. Countless type designers have created typefaces inspired by parking tickets and house numbers, documentaries exist that archive the craft and skill behind sign painters, and a myriad of blogs are dedicated to cataloging ghost signs and vintage ephemera. However, when most designers look to vernacular design, they ~~limit the possibilities by only using it to evoke feelings of nostalgia and familiarity.~~ They superficially appropriate the aesthetic qualities of vernacular

design without recognizing the cultural, material, and historical context. Many graphic designers also approach vernacular design as an opportunity to "improve" or "redesign" it — with the assumption that the design practices they emerged from are inherently better than whatever they are riffing on. So ~~while designers have no issues appropriating vernacular design, instances where they try to understand the context are rarer.~~

Modernism is Entrenched in Design Education & Institutions

To understand the lack of consideration for vernacular design is to understand what style is universally accepted and taught in design institutions. For this, we turn to modernism. Known as the International Style or Swiss Style, modernist graphic design is characterized by rigid grid structures, restraint of expression and color, san-serif typefaces, white space, and abstraction. Originating in the Netherlands and Germany during the twenties and popularized during the mid-century due to the legacy of Bauhaus teachings, modernism has become the language of consumerism and corporate branding, entrenched in design school curriculums, and the default style of slick new startups and apps. Once a radical ~~ideology that~~

embraced technology and promoted abstinence from senseless ornamentation, modernist principles have become the ubiquitous style of how “good” designers design - to the point that it is perceived as the only legitimate design ideology that exists. This creates a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy. When graphic designers are educated in modernist principles and only exposed to modernist work, only more modernist graphic design can be produced. Thus, when only modernist graphic design is produced and studied, it is perceived as the only legitimate and accepted approach to graphic design. Within this narrow-minded environment, vernacular design, which exists for local and practical needs and whose aesthetics contradict modernist principles, gets lost in the background.

Modernism is White

Reacting to the rise of Art Nouveau, a decorative art and design movement formed in Vienna which spread globally, modernist architect Adolf Loos published an essay entitled “Ornaments and Crime.” In his essay, Loos criticizes the prevalence of unnecessary ornamentation and promotes a radical aesthetic purism, proclaiming that “the revolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from utilitarian objects.” More offensively, he equates those who tattoo their bodies as immoral within “modern” society.

“The child is amoral. To our eyes, the Papuan is too. The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. He is not a criminal. But when a modern man kills someone and eats him he is either a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his paddle, in short everything he can lay his hands on. He is not a criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate... if someone who is tattooed dies at liberty, it means he has died a few years before committing a murder.”

The rejection of non-white design practices is directly linked to the rejection of non-white cultures and non-white communities. The backbone of Adolf Loos’s argument is the unchallenged notion of the West’s cultural superiority. Here he dehumanizes “The Papuan” by describing them as childlike and uncivilized, their cultural inclination for ornamentation is not only aesthetically displeasing but backward and “morally degenerate.” Thus, he perceives that Western men who participate in these traditions as also inherently immoral. Loos’s essay, which would go on to influence the Bauhaus design studio and the ideology of modernist architecture, draws attention to the inherently Eurocentric nature of modernism. Confining “good graphic design” to white space and geometric sans-serif typefaces not only limits the creativity of designers but reinforces the historic narrative that the terms “good design” and “European” or “Western” are interchangeable.



Okay. Why Signs?

At their most basic premise, signs are physical forms that spatially navigate viewers. In a commercial context, signs are opportunities for businesses to advertise their name, services, location, and contact information. While this may seem like a simple task, the physicality of signs presents several challenges for signmakers. Signmakers must navigate cost efficiency, fabrication of materials - and in the case of signmakers working in Chinatown - multiple languages and cultural symbols. Unlike institutional design and designers, signs and signmakers are solely concerned with communicating to viewers within the immediate vicinity. Due to their precise locality, studying commercial signage in Chinatown can provide interesting insights into the cultural and stylistic values of those communities.

The purpose of this book is to present the visual principles behind commercial signage located in Philadelphia's Chinatown and to reinterpret signs and awnings as vernacular design medium that reflect the aesthetic sensibilities and pragmatic design application of its community. I chose to focus on Philadelphia's Chinatown because it is geographically the closest major Chinatown, but also because it is the Chinatown I grew up visiting and the one I'm most familiar with.



Types of Signs

Channel Letters

Signs composed of 3-dimensional letters, usually fabricated from metal or plastic, that are mounted to sign panels. Channel letter signs are commonly backlit with LED lights for visibility at night.



Awnings

A sheet of canvas or other material stretched on a frame and used to keep the sun or rain off a storefront.



Light Box Sign

An electrically-lighted sign that contains the mechanism(s) to encapsulate, suspend, protect and display a discrete sheet of backlit film which embodies a print image.



Swing Signs

As the name suggests, swing signs are acrylic or metal signs that are designed to externally hang on the side of a building.



Banners

Banners are signs that are commercially printed on heavy vinyl fabric-like material, usually secured with metal grommets for hanging.



Common Materials

Plastic

Specifically acrylic or plexiglass, plastic is easy to fabricate, physically durable, lightweight, versatile—and most importantly—cheap. Plastic is also used as a fabric on awnings.



Metal

Commonly aluminum, which naturally doesn't rust, metal is one of the most durable sign-making material. Other metals are used to contain lightbox signs and channel letter signs.



Vinyl

Machine cut vinyl letters and illustrations can be seen on all types of signs, such as awnings, lightbox signs, and banners. Commonly used for printed banners.

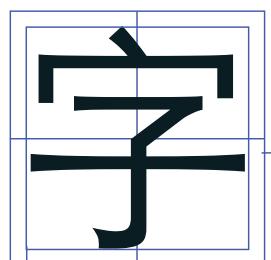


CHINESE CHARACTERS

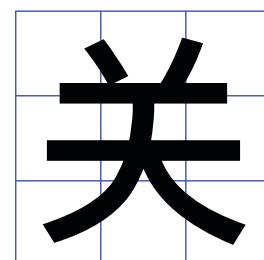
The Basics

Chinese, or “hànzì” (漢字) which means “han character”, are logograms developed for the writing of Chinese. Unlike an alphabet, a character-based writing system associates each logogram with an entire sound and thus may be compared in some aspects to a syllabary. The complexities and nuances of Chinese typography could fill an entire book, but to provide context for signs in Chinatown, here is a very, very basic guide to Chinese characters. To understand the design decisions behind signs and awnings in Chinatown, one must have a basic understanding of how Chinese characters are structured and typically used.

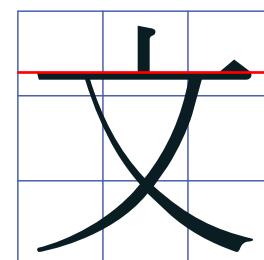
GENERAL STRUCTURE



字身框
Type box, which allocates the space between characters.

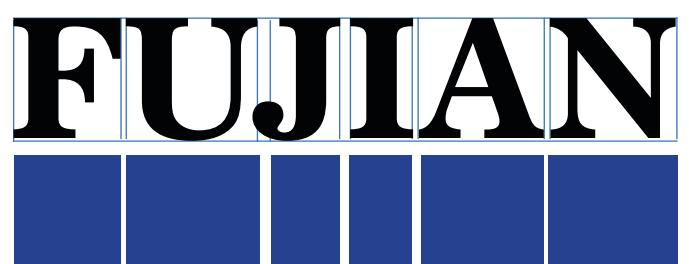


中宫
Middle palace, or the middle space in a 9x9 grid, is where the strokes of the characters concentrate and connect. This concept of the “Nine Palaces” comes from the principles of traditional Chinese calligraphy.

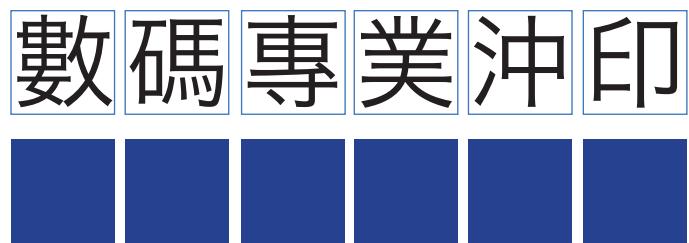


Due to optical illusion, sometimes Chinese type designers place the center of gravity slightly higher than the real center in order to make the character look balanced and feel lighter.

Unlike Latin glyphs, which are shaped irregularly and take up inconsistent spacing, Chinese characters are standardized to consistently use a square space (although there are exceptions to every rule).

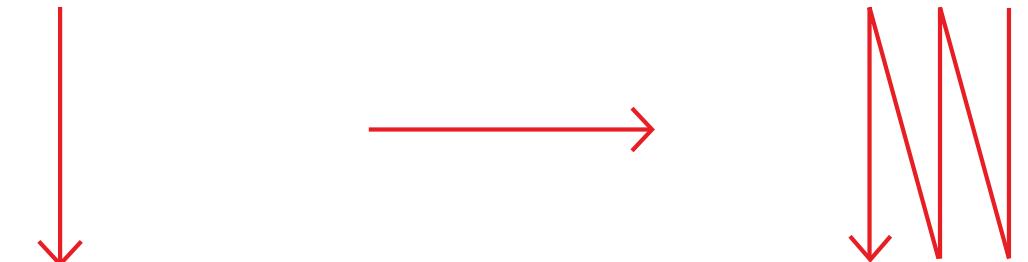


When looking at the word “FUJIAN”, notice how much space the “I” takes up in comparison to the “A”.



Whereas in this line of Chinese characters, each character fits inside a standard box space.

HOW CHINESE IS READ



Chinese can be read from top to bottom. In terms of signage, this is particularly useful for vertically shaped signs.

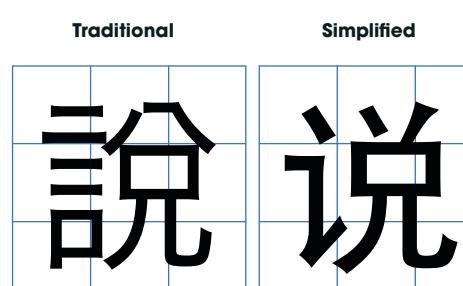
Conforming to standards of English, Chinese is now mostly read in lines, from left to right.

Traditionally, Chinese was read from top to bottom, right to left. This layout is used in many books. However, signs in Chinatowns are rarely arranged this way.

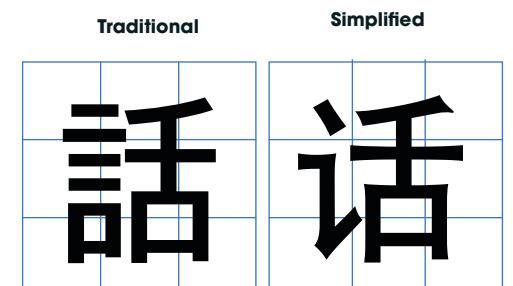
TRADITIONAL AND SIMPLIFIED CHINESE

Traditional Chinese was originally the standard in all Chinese-speaking regions. Characters evolved and simplified in writing throughout history, which naturally happened due to convenience. But during the Cultural Revolution, the People’s Republic of China introduced and enforced the use of simplified Chinese with the hopes that it would help improve China’s literacy rates. Today, simplified Chinese is officially used in mainland China and Singapore, whereas traditional Chinese is used in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Since most Chinatowns around the world were established before the Cultural Revolution (including Philly’s Chinatown), virtually all their signage use Traditional Chinese.

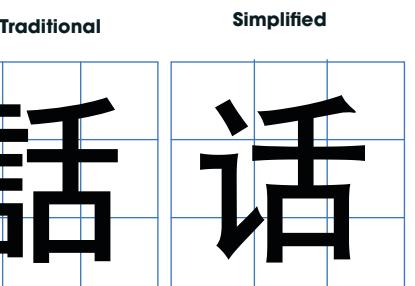
Traditional



Simplified

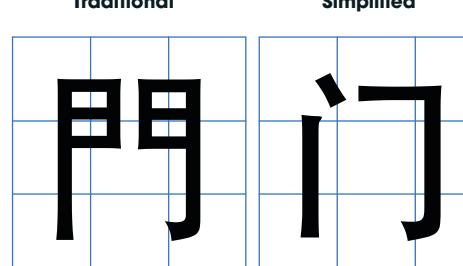


Traditional

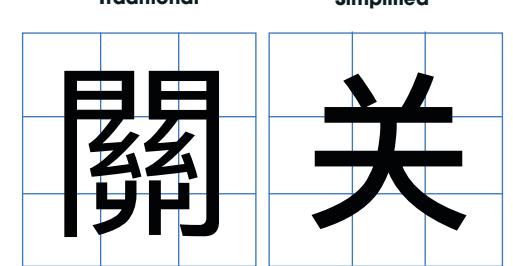


Simplified

Traditional



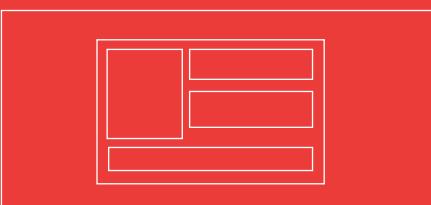
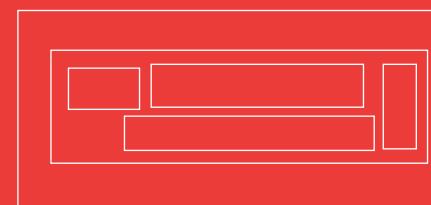
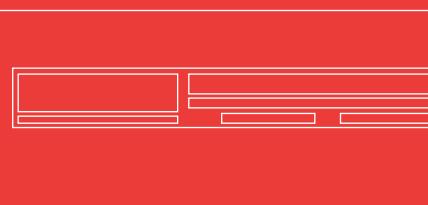
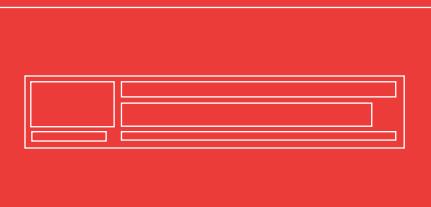
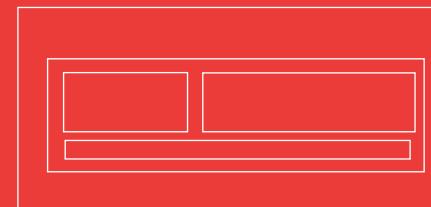
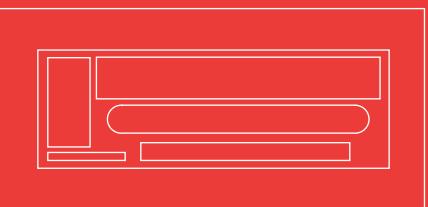
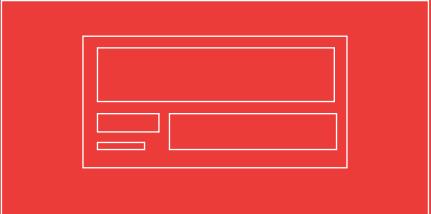
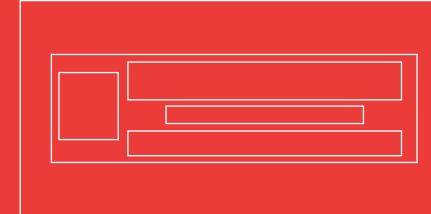
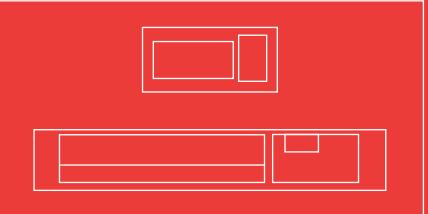
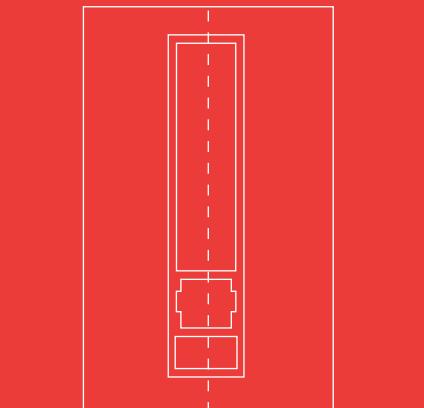
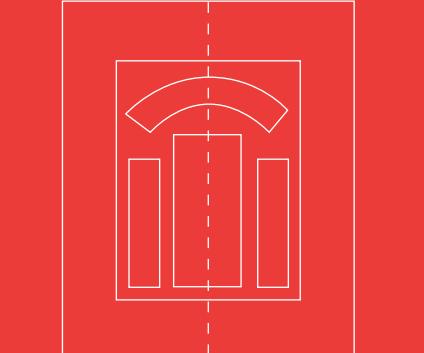
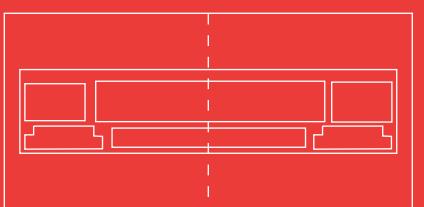
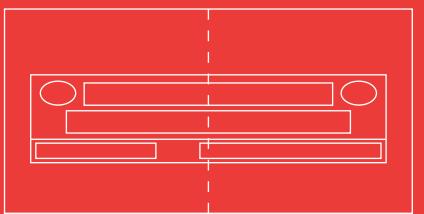
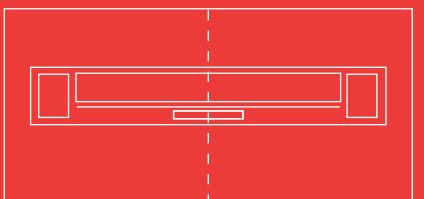
Simplified



COMPOSITION

SYMMETRY

Symmetry is naturally pleasing to the eye and promotes a sense of balance. Awnings and signs sometimes repeat information or symbols in order to maintain a symmetrical composition.



STACKING COMPOSITIONS

The content of signs are visually stacked to create an organized flow of information for viewers

郭樂俱英群



bb.Q
CHICKEN



朝茶 纯粹为你
TSAOCAA

麻辣香鍋

29-8385



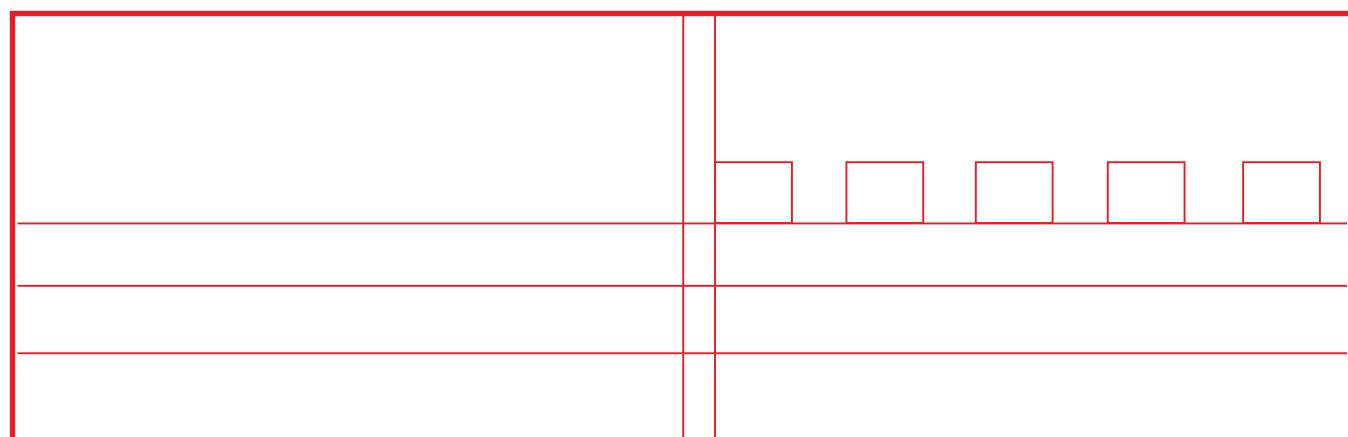
From observing how Chinese and English words visually align, it's obvious that each individual sign and awning contains its own individual grid structure.

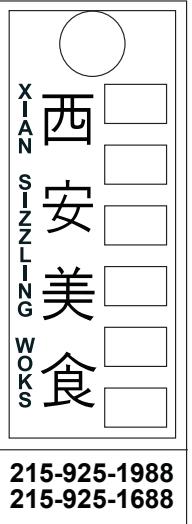


Some awnings stack the two languages in the same section
(Such as "Apollo Glass Window & Sign Inc.").



While other awnings purposely separate Chinese and English.
(Such as "North Art Gilding" and "Hong Kong Bakery").





In this vertical lightbox sign for XIAN SIZZLING WOKS, the English text is stacked and centered in order to both physically fit inside the sign and visually mimick the way the Chinese characters are stacked.



With few exceptions, almost all the signs I encountered contained both English and Chinese. Signs in Chinatown face the unique task of communicating to both Chinese and English speakers, with their composition and type treatments reflecting this duality.



This awning for MONG KOK STATION Bakery uses an ingenious solution to the bilingual problem by placing Chinese characters inside the counter of the "O's" of the English name. This demonstrates a very literal take on combining Chinese and English.

MONG KOK STATION



In this plastic sign for a photography business, blocked headers are used to establish hierarchy, and coded colors are used to visually separate English and Chinese (with English type printed in red while Chinese characters are printed in blue).



COMPOSITION AND CONTENT

Hierarchy wise, there is no distinct pattern to whether Chinese or English are given preferred treatment, it truly varies from sign to sign.

Almost all signs display the same information: Business Name (in both English and Chinese), Address, and Phone Number. Placement of this information form common design conventions, such as placing phone number and address at bottom.



Although not always the case, the majority of signs follow this hierarchical order of content. Business names typically combine name and function which is an efficient strategy of communication to passing viewers.



BUSINESS NAME IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

SERVICES OFFERED

ADDRESS

PHONE NUMBER

Business Naming Conventions

Owner and Family Names

Ken's Seafood Restaurant
M Kee Restaurant
Jiang's Hair Salon
Chiu's Kitchen
Cheung's Jewelry

Regions

Canto House
Mong Kok Station Bakery
Jade Harbour Restaurant
North Art Gilding
ShangHai 1
Saigon Therapy Salon
Tai Lake Seafood Restaurant

Nouns

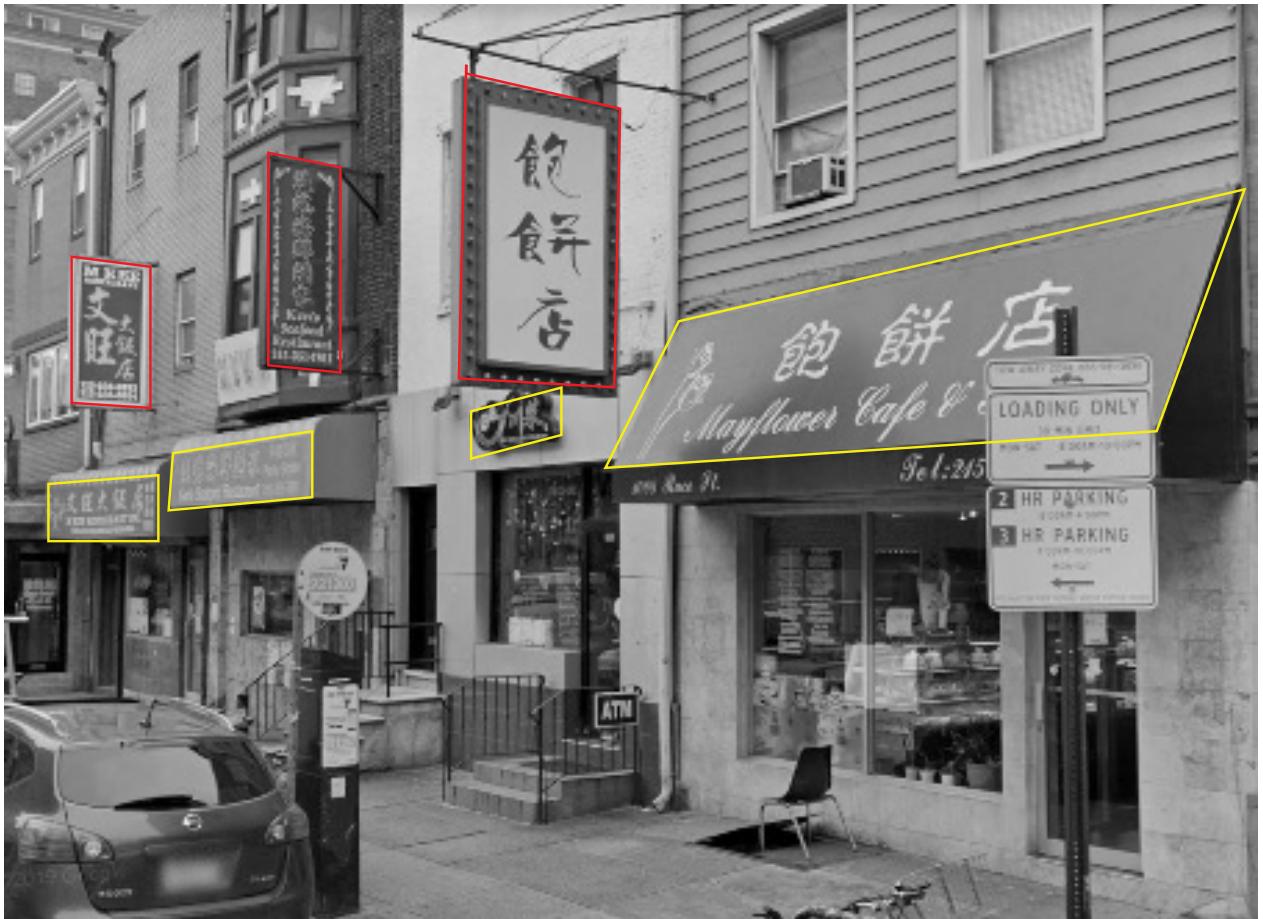
Mayflower Cafe & Bakery
Sunshine Furniture & Lighting

Blunt (no frills)

Grocery Market
bb.q chicken

Observing Signs in a Dimensional Space.

Signs in Chinatown need to communicate to both pedestrians and drivers. As a result, most businesses have at least two signs (usually a lightbox sign and an awning) - one directed at the sidewalk and the other at the street across. Signs have the unique characteristic as a form of graphic design that exists in a 3 dimensional space.



Awnings utilize all surfaces as opportunities to display content, as seen in the example above.

In a visually saturated environment like a city, signs must use bold colors and typography to stand out. This accounts for the lack of space in signs, as white space is both economically and visually wasteful.

饭庄

奥巴马健保申请中心
— Obamacare Enrollment Center —
Independence Blue Cross UnitedHealthcare Aetna

东北区 恒发超市 即将开业!

现开始招聘各部门员工
有意请电：215-917-9864 Bonnie
NOW HIRING
Please call : 215-917-9864 Bonnie

NG

PERMIUM
REALTY GROUP

盛發地產

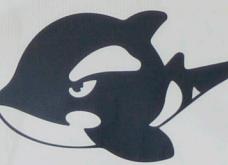
128 N. 10th Street, 2nd FL
215-238-8868

第一貸款

TOP CITY MORTGAG

128 N. 10th st. 20
Tel:215-238-8868

Coming Soon



网宝网咖
Wanyoo Cyber Cafe

↑ 恒发超市楼上 优惠活动敬请期待...

盛發地產

Aurora
HOME CARE & HOSPICE
BRINGING LOVE HOME

奧羅娜家庭健康護理公司
(215)960-5302 (215)354-4444

任何大型及不透明的购物袋, 请不要自行带入超市
以免引起不必要的误会。多谢合作。
In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, please DO NOT bring
Any Large and opaque bags to our supermarket.
Thanks for your cooperation.

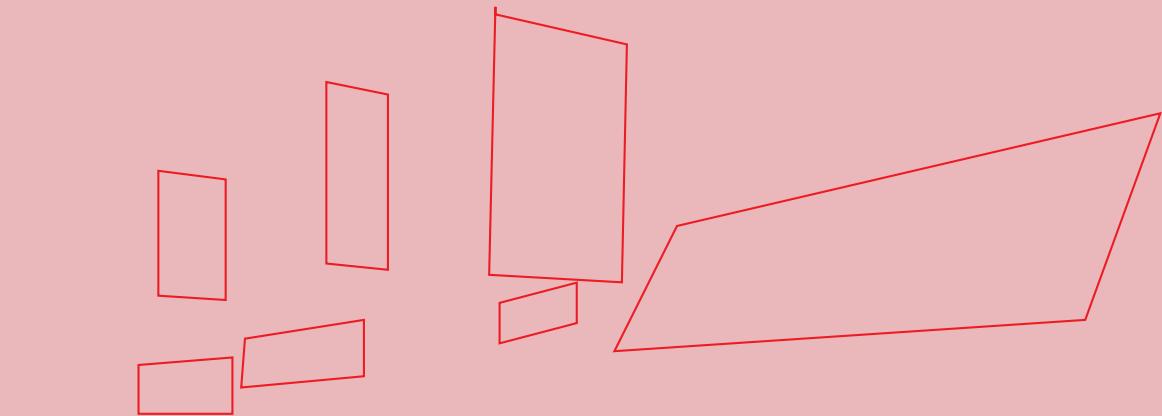
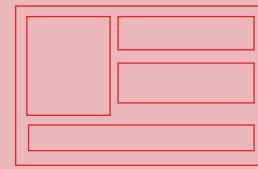
根据法律, 本超市有權搜查任何可疑的购物袋
一切偷盜行爲, 本超市將依法報警處理。
By law, we have right to check any suspicious shopping bag.
We will call police for any theft action.

In Conclusion...

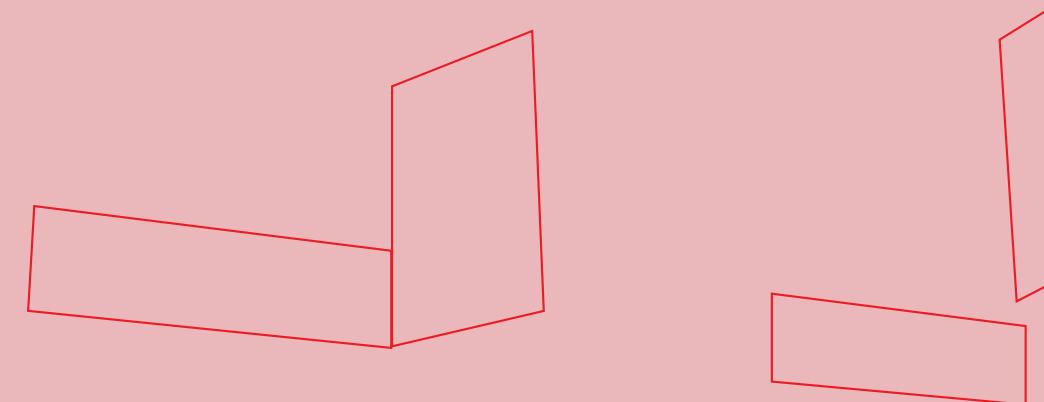


For commonly ignored examples of graphic design, signs in Chinatown use sophisticated compositions, grids, and inventive visual strategies to effectively communicate to both English and Chinese speakers.

MONG KOK STATION



Signs also face the unique characteristic of existing in a 3 dimensional space. They fight the visual clutter of an urban landscape by embracing bold design styles and utilize multiple surfaces to display content.



SYMBOLS

S Y M B O L S

符號

CHILIS 辣椒

Chili peppers appear in the place of character strokes to emphasize spiciness of a restaurant's food.



Nan Yang Asian Cuisine Xi'an Sizzling Works.



Shiao Lan Kung Chinese Restaurant

FISH 魚

Fish are common icons for seafood restaurants and have the additional connotation of monetary savings in Chinese culture.



Jade Harbour Restaurant



Chiu's Kitchen



Canto House

好
good

旺
prosperous

BOWL OF NOODLES 碗麵

The classic bowl of noodles, usually with a character with positive connotations placed on the bowl.

DUCKS & CHICKENS 鴨和雞



bb.q chicken



Sin Kee Duck House



Sang Kee Peking Duck House

S Y M B O L S

符號

CHILIS 辣椒

Chili peppers appear in the place of character strokes to emphasize spiciness of a restaurant's food.



Nan Yang Asian Cuisine Xi'an Sizzling Works.



Shiao Lan Kung Chinese Restaurant

FISH 魚

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Chiu's Kitchen



Canto House

好
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旺
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BOWL OF NOODLES 碗麵

The classic bowl of noodles, usually with a character with positive connotations placed on the bowl.

DUCKS & CHICKENS 鴨和雞



bb.q chicken



Sin Kee Duck House



Sang Kee Peking Duck House

M KEE RESTAURANT

文旺大飯店

text



M Kee Restaurant

TING WONG RESTAURANT



Ting Wong Restaurant



This emblem, seen on the awning, is composed of a laurel reef, and 3 coins.



Ting (sky)
Wong (prosperous)

SALON 美髮

All salons have some variation of beautiful man or woman with flowing hair (usually cut in a 1980s style).



Jiang's Hair Salon



Top Cut Salon



Mainstream Hairstyle



Jiang's Hair Salon



雜貨店

GROCERY STORE

Grocery stores use icons of produce and poultry to display their diverse selection.

S & D Market

Grocery Market

41

HEALTH & MEDICINAL SERVICES



醫療服務



Acupuncture

Yiu-Man Ko, D.M.D

Icons are used to communicate different medical services provided by businesses

Designer Eyes

Arch Pharmacy

HERBS 草本植物

Icons for a herbal store, which include antlers and ginger root with flower.



Win Far

BAKERY 麵包店

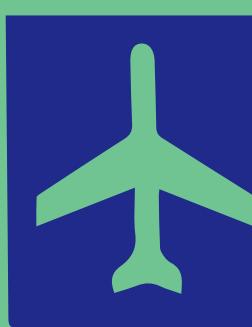


Mayflower Cafe & Bakery

TRAVEL 旅遊

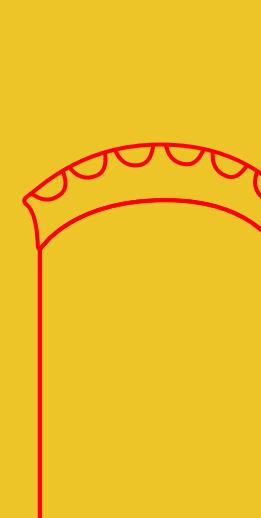
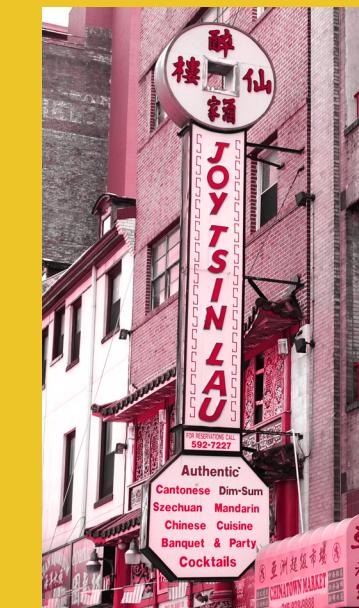


All Star Travel

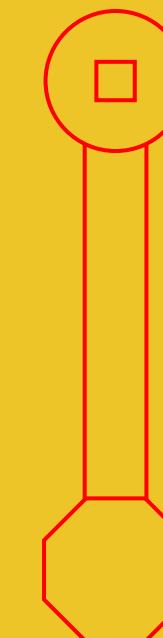


Airport Shuttle

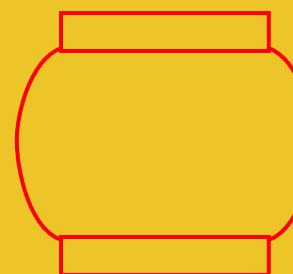
OUTSIDE OF FLAT IMAGES, ICONS CAN ALSO APPEAR IN THE PHYSICAL FORM OF SIGNS.



Crown.

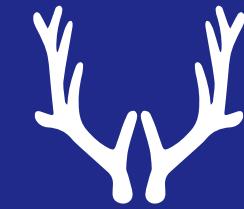


Money.



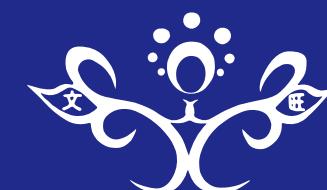
Lantern.

In Conclusion...



GIVEN THE BILINGUAL NEEDS OF CHINATOWN COMMERCIAL SIGNAGE, IMAGERY AND ICONS OFFER A FORM OF COMMUNICATION THAT TRANSCENDS LANGUAGE.

CERTAIN ICONS AND CHARACTERS ALSO HAVE CULTURAL MEANINGS AND CONNOTATIONS SPECIFIC TO CHINESE CULTURE WHICH WOULD BE UNDERSTOOD BY CHINESE AND CHINESE-AMERICAN VIEWERS.



TYPOGRAPHY



ENGLISH TYPEFACES

Treatments and Format



Footlight Pro Bold

Nan Yang

ITC Avant Garde Gothic Pro

ASIAN CUISINE



Century 725 Std Black

**Jin Wei
RESTAURANT**



Clarendon

LONG LIFE CHINESE



HEBDEN INCISED

NORTH ART GILDING

Arial Black

GILDING FOR STATUE

**VIETNAM
PALACE**

Restaurant

**EYES
DESIGNER**

215-925-9830



Choc

HIPPOt



Commercial Script

Mayflower Cafe

**EgyptianEF Extended
Brush Script M7**

**Arial Black
Arial Condensed**

**PF Fusion Sans Pro
Arial Black
Franklin Medium**

Arial
Helvetica
Times New Roman
Cooper Black
Brush Script MT

Clarendon
Windsor
Avant Garde
ßauhaus
PF Fusion

Many of the typefaces I attributed are ones that usually come with design software
(such as Microsoft Word or Adobe Suite programs). This observation makes me  believe most signmakers prefer using readily available default typefaces.

Some other popular typefaces.

VERTICAL

LAYOUTS

CONTRACTED

ENGLISH

TYPOGRAPHIC

CONVENTIONS

DUE TO

INLEGIBILITY

CHOP SUEY

Named after the quintessential Chinese American dish, Chop Suey typefaces are ethnic typefaces that express “Asian-ness” and orientalism. Their strokes crudely mimick the brushstroke of Chinese calligraphy and are commonly found on takeout boxes and karate logos. Although rightfully deemed offensive by designers and Asian Americans, Chop Suey typefaces were integral to how early Chinese and Chinese American immigrants marketed their businesses and play an important role in the visual culture of Chinese-American-ness. Nowadays chop suey style typefaces are less prevalent, but some examples can still be found in Chinatowns.



CHEUNG'S SIO LUM PAI
HUNG GAR KUNG FU
ACADEMY

A really interesting and rare example of a handpainted sign, which is quite uncommon in modern Chinatowns.

TYPEFACES



DIVERGING SLIGHTLY FROM THE WORLD OF SIGNS, CHINATOWN'S FIRE DEPARTMENT USES HAND-PAINTED CHOP SURE WORDS ON MURALS, SIGNS, AND THE FIRETRUCK ITSELF.



**AROUND 50% OF
THE SIGNS AND
AWNINGS I ANALYZED
CONTAINED DISTORTED
TYPOGRAPHY.**

**M KEE RESTAURANT INC.
TEL:215-238-8883 215-238-8884**

**GREAT WALL SEAFOOD MARKET
FOUR SEASONS SEAFOOD LLC.**

F	T	215-982-1997
A	E	
X	L	
:	:	
9	5	
2	9	
8	2	
1	1	
3	0	
9	2	
3	7	
		1012 CHERRY ST., 2nd FL.
		215 - 629 - 2288
		ACUPUNCTURE

**THE COMMONPLACE OF STRETCHED
TYPOGRAPHY
IN SIGNS EMERGED FROM AN
ECONOMIC USE OF SPACE. UNLIKE OTHER DESIGN MEDIUMS,
SIGNAGE AND AWNINGS HAVE
LIMITED PHYSICAL RESTRAINTS THAT COMMAND
LOUD TYPE IN (RELATIVELY) SMALL SPACES.**

體

Chinese Font Classifications

體

Kai Ti [楷体]—“Regular script”

Kai Ti fonts mimics basic brush script lettering, but is constructed with structured parameters and maintains an upright structure.

好朋友老人活動中心

Song Ti (宋体) — “Serif”

Originating from the Song Dynasty, Song Ti fonts are characterized by straight horizontal strokes, wider vertical strokes, and flourishes.

量飯湯麵館

Fang Song Ti (仿宋体) — “Immitation song”

Fang Song Ti fonts are a hybrid of Hei Ti and Song Ti. They are composed of flourishes and contrasting line weights, but adhere to a rigid geometric structure.

西安美食

Hei Ti (黑体) — “Gothic/San-Serif”

Loosley translates to “san-serif”, Hei Ti fonts are rigidly geometric and lack flourishes.

萬寶商場

Xing Shu Ti (行書體) — “running script”

Xing Shu Ti translates to “running script” refers to a font style that mimics dripping ink originating from calligraphy.

玻璃鋁門公司

Mei Shu Ti (美術體) - “Display font”

Mei Shu Ti roughly translates to “artistic.” They are highly stylized font faces that might range from silly to historical to novelty.

光達日用品



Pairing English and Chinese Font Styles.



San-Serif Typefaces with Hei Ti

NEW WORLD LAUDROMAT 新世界洗衣店

Both the English and Chinese characters are set in a bold, gothic, low-to-the-ground style.



Display Typefaces with Mei Shu Ti

FASHION HANBOK 時尚 韓服

The English and Chinese font styles, which look like they were made for each other, are both decorative and characterized by rounded edges and dramatic contrasts in stroke weights.



Due to the diversity of Chinese font styles, there are a million ways to pair Chinese and English font styles

★ Scripts, Scripts and a Condensed San-Serif

In this amazing lightbox sign for Sang Kee Peking Duck House, the English business name is set in a script, while the English subheader is set in a slightly condensed sans-serif typeface. The Chinese character is set in a running script style, perhaps to match the loose script style of the English typeface.



Helvetica and Unidentified Script Font



ARCH PHARMACY 費城華埠大藥房

An example of pairing contrasting styles. English is set in a bold and rigid san-serif typeface, while the Chinese characters are set in a loose and classic calligraphy style.

In Conclusion...

Typographic treatments in signs reflect the practical and economic use of physical space. This leads to practices, such as such as distorting and vertically stacking type, that contradict modernist principles of typography.

Signmakers in Chinatown *use a myriad of decorative typefaces, which reflect what typefaces are readily available* and the aesthetic tastes of business owners. **Signmakers have the added challenge of balancing and pairing English typefaces with Chinese font styles.**

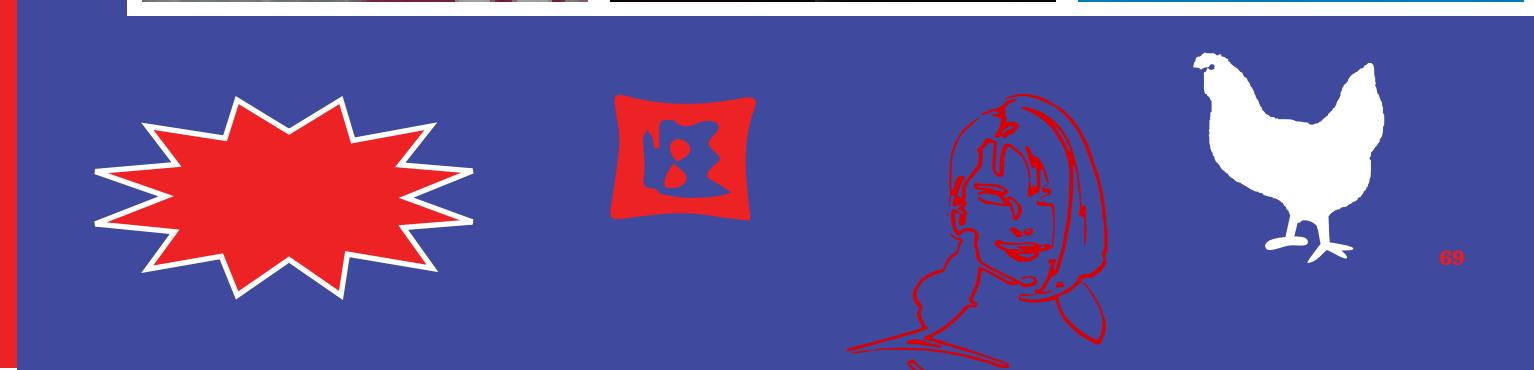
COLOR



Red & Yellow



Red White and Blue



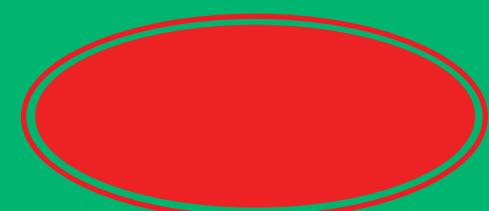


Red and Green



中大

銀泉



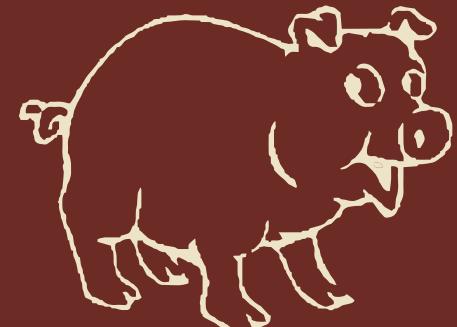
ONG GANG BAKERY INC.



MAROON & BEIGE

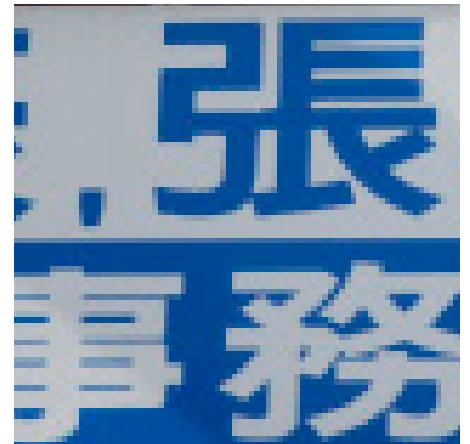


Sweet House





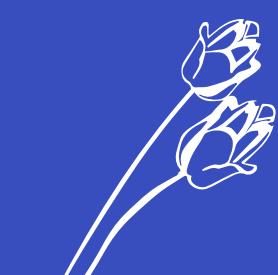
White and Blue



WHITE AND
PURPLE

Shang Mai I

Black and White



In Conclusion...

Just like the other formal elements discussed in this book, color choice is determined by material availability, legibility, and practicality.

In Conclusion...



Living in suburban Delaware, my family would dedicate entire Sundays to visit Philly's Chinatown. As a kid, I thought these trips were a waste of time, but as I became older I realized that my experiences there - watching my father order from dim sum carts, getting egg tarts and boba tea at the local bakery, helping my mom pick out cabbage at the same grocery store we've been going to for 10 years - were rare opportunities for me to reconnect with Chinese culture. So when I tried searching for a purely Chinese American visual culture, it seemed inevitable that I would stumble back into Chinatown.

Signs are designed cultural objects whose visual qualities reflect the visual instincts of their communities. Signmakers in Chinatown must navigate multiple languages and cultural symbols with sophisticated grid structures and inventive visual solutions — breaking modernist conventions in the process. The success of signs is the ultimate proof that there is something inherently human about design. It is not a skill only available to an exclusive few in an institutional setting but something everyone can do, and do well. Most of all, I hope that by analyzing and celebrating Chinatown's commercial signs, this book encourages both designers and non-designers to rethink their perceptions of minority and vernacular design traditions and expand their expectations of what graphic design can look like.



Sources and Inspirational Readings

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Paul Shaw
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"It's Chinatown"
99pi, Episode 319
(August, 14 2018)

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Cooper Union (1993)

“Imagine a sushi bar adorned in Helvetica, and it may not seem as authentic or as appetizing.”

—Rumsery Taylor,
“The Mystery Font that Took Over New York.”
(NYT, November 21, 2018)

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Spring 2020