



IN THE WORDS OF

FANG
CHEN

Born in 1959, Wuhan, China
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QUESTION: You grew up during the cultural revolution. Did this experience affect your decision to become a graphic designer? Did memories of that time influence your work?

In China, before and during the Cultural Revolution, art training at universities was focused on “pure arts”, i.e., oil painting, traditional Chinese painting, printmaking, sculpture and drawing, etc. Design training and design practice were relegated to a lower rung of arts due to the state-controlled economy, following the former USSR’s model. Commercial art had no place under such centrally controlled economy system. After the Cultural Revolution, the situation in China has been dramatically changed. The government pursued the open-door policy and promoted market force, foreign trade and economic investment. This reform also brought graphic design to China. Art schools started restructuring the art curriculum. The teaching emphasis has been shifted to today’s design training.

I was fortunately enrolled into college as a graphic design student in early 1980s when only about five percent of high school graduates could go to colleges. Art graduate students were even fewer at that time. In 1988 I passed the national and school’s examinations and gained acceptance to the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. I was one of three graduate students (the other two majored in oil painting and Chinese painting respectively) enrolled in this Academy that year and we highly valued this opportunity for graduate study. Since then I went through major transformations and development in China’s graphic design and graphic education. I belong to the first generation of Chinese graphic designers after the Culture Revolution and indeed the Culture Revolution taught me how much I appreciated the learning opportunity.

There was an English professor particularly commented on my poster *Victory* and said this work could only come from the hand of a Chinese designer. He was implying that only a person who had gone through an experience such as the Cultural Revolution and endured countless pains and disasters in national history could have the deeper understanding of suffering and belief. I think this could be the answer to you.

QUESTION: Which designers or artists have influenced your work?

There are a lot of designers and artists who have influenced my work. First all, I was born and raised in China, a country with long history and rich cultural heritage that influenced my work profoundly. In addition, peripheral influences such as poets, writers and musicians had great impact on me. For example, the music from a modern Chinese folk musician Hua Yen Jun, nicknamed Ah Bing, struck me deeply. Ah Bing originally was a dirt-poor Taoist, and later he became a panhandler and a blind street performer in Wuxi City of China. His tune of “Moon Reflected in the Second Pond,” was a reflection of the philosophical beliefs espoused in Taoism. It was based on a calm, reflective and mystic view of the world. It was steeped in the beauty and tranquility of nature and demonstrated a lofty oriental aesthetic realm. The well-known Japanese conductor, Seiji Ozawa, of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, commented that Ah Bing’s music could best be appreciated by kneeling while listening. Not unless the listeners put themselves in such prostrating position could they fully appreciate the greatness of his music. I do hope that poster design could reach such a state. I have always believed that a good designer should be able to express complicated and profound meanings in a simple way and a good artwork should make people think.

QUESTION: The futility of armed conflict and the recognition of the common connections among people and between people and their planet are recurring themes in your work. Would you describe yourself as a Humanist? Or would you describe your work as Humanistic? Your question is based on the five posters you chose. I hope my work is not limited to that. In fact I feel that humanistic themes or elements are very important for nearly all the artwork. In my designs, I try to explore the concept that the inner pursuit of human nature produces common aesthetic values, which have gone beyond superficial appearances and could reflect deeper internal emotions existing within each of us.

QUESTION: Your work always seems to be deeply personal, and you have avoided commercial design work. Do you think it possible for a designer to reconcile the differences between personal and commercial work?

At first, I would like to say that I did some commercial designs and I never avoided them intentionally. But since graduation from college, I have been teaching graphic design in universities rather than working as a graphic

designer. Teaching is my commitment and my career; my focus has been on research and teaching and on how to lead students to apprehend design philosophy and methodologies. As a graphic design educator, I feel that a good designer does not have to be a good teacher, but a good graphic design teacher should be a qualified and experienced designer. So I feel it is important to do research and my primary research area is poster design.

For some people, the poster design nowadays is more like a personal “art” rather than “design,” but we should not underestimate the influence that poster design has on other design fields. French designer Pierre Bernard once said, “The poster is the prime field for experimenting with visual language.” I agree with Bernard. And I have found that it is great rewarding to me, and beneficial to students, to introduce aspects of my own research into the classroom. Some of students’ works even won prizes internationally. Also, their winning works are not limited to the poster design category; some projects won medals in the package and typography categories as well. Based on this I think that personal and commercial work should not be contradicted, because it comes from some common design principals to some extent. Poster designing for me is not only a commercial pursuit, but also a philosophical endeavor.

QUESTION: Your work has been exhibited internationally, and you have travelled extensively. In the process, you have met designers from all over the world. How has this reinforced your passion for design? Or has it? Poster design represents one of the most difficult challenges and requirements for creativity in graphic design. International exchange in graphic design is most common through poster exhibition/competition, biennial, triennial, etc. Posters are wonderful media for graphic designers to share ideas. While participating in exhibitions in different venues and meeting designers from the entire world, it is very revealing to see distinct ideas that come from different culture backgrounds. I believe continuing to participate and exchange is essential to stay current and abreast of changes in the industry. Just as I mentioned before: If the Olympic contest aims to constantly challenge the limits of human physical ability; the goal of international poster competitions is to ultimately challenge the maximum of human intelligence, creation and imagination in the visual communications field. I personally feel that the significance of a good international poster exhibition is often beyond the area of poster design.

QUESTION: Does the language of design transcend linguistic or nationalistic barriers? For years, I have been researching the strength and power of the image as a “universal language” in poster design. And I have found that posters with appropriate imagery as the main visual element reach a much broader audience regardless of language and culture differences because they are less specific—leaving room for the audience to fill in the meanings based on their own contexts and experiences. It’s well known that images appeared earlier than words in prehistoric communication. Today, it’s said, “a picture is worth of thousand words.” This is true, especially as the world moves closer to

McLuhan’s global village. As new technology and media allow ease of international communication, design issues become a shared, worldwide experience. In the global village, the emphasis on this is more important. Your audience and clientele are no longer just local. For example, the Sydney Opera House was designed by a Danish architect, and the song of the 1988 Seoul Olympics “Hand in Hand” was composed by an Italian musician. Obviously, these works transcend national borders.

QUESTION: How can graphic design encourage social change? A good graphic design, just like a successful piece of music, an artwork, a movie, or a book can affect changes in a reader’s emotion and attitude. It inevitably has direct or indirect bearing on social change.

QUESTION: How do you choose which causes you support? If I feel something, I say it with visual language. My work is from my personal experience, belief and understanding.

QUESTION: Do you think the traditional poster has a future, or is graphic design headed in a new direction? Yes, time and culture dictate graphic design’s direction. Graphic design is definitely evolving, as are time and culture. In the prehistoric times people used fire and earth’s pigments. During the Bronze Age they had new tools. Paper and printing were the new technologies in the Middle Ages. Technology is evolving, so is art. In our current situation, the Internet changes the look of printed communication. The Internet changes the way we shop, the way we look for information, and the way we behave. The new medium affects the way of communication. Perhaps the Internet will take the place of wall/street for the poster in near future, and the traditional poster may fall out of favor. However, I believe the poster will survive no matter how the media changes. Since the focus of poster design—exploring the most effective way to convey information—is still primary to visual communication design.

