

An Analysis of Post-modernism in Contemporary Taiwanese Book Design

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Abstract: In recent years, book design has become a professional discipline in Taiwan, thereby coming under increasingly sophisticated scrutiny. Relative to other fields of design, however, the discipline lacks depth in the coverage received through seminars, heavyweight publications, or academic journals. Furthermore, what literature is available leans toward the practical and the technical; the visual culture inherent in book design — as commonly discussed throughout the extensive canon in Japan and China — remains unexplored in Taiwan.

Within this context, the methodologies employed in this visual culture are described through an analysis of an edition of Taiwanese poet Hsia Yü's *Pink Noise*, reflecting on the value and significance of postmodernism in contemporary Taiwanese book design.

Key words: *postmodern, book design, Hsia Yü*

1. Introduction

The book is the repository of culture. Through a process of abstraction, book design transforms the written word into a visual medium, so that the act of reading becomes a necessarily individual activity, and text becomes an object of self-interpretation, as symbolized in the post-modern claim that “the author is dead.” The design of a book – and its mode of presentation – represents the reader's first contact with the object; the form itself has the function of conveying a message and a meaning. This message received by the reader is more than simply a statement in language: book design exploits all the senses, creating an enlarged space in which meaning can be reinterpreted. The process has become a conceptual process, understanding that its purpose is not simply to create a package, or to beautify the content within, but rather that the act presents further opportunities for stating an intellectual position.

2. The Development of Book Design in Taiwan

2.1 Japanese Occupation (1895-1945)

In mainland China, the modern era of book design began to flourish in the 1930s, during the emergence of a literary movement represented by Lu Xun (魯迅), Tao Qing-yuan (陶慶元), Qian Jun-tao (錢君匋) and others. At this time, the opposite side of the Taiwan Strait was under Japanese colonial rule, where Western influence in

modern art could be seen in two seminal exhibitions, Taiten¹ and Futen²; and in the Japanese government's dispatching of students to the Bauhaus in the 1920s. An example of the gradual emergence of a modern style of book design can be seen on the cover of 《蕨の道》.



The impact of colonial rule can be seen in the work of Japanese author Nishikawa Mitsuru (西川滿) and his close friend, the Taiwan-born³ painter Tateishi Tetsuomi (立石鐵臣), among others. Their contribution and influence can be seen in the combination of fine art and literature produced in works such as Matsu, 《美麗島民話集》 and 《美麗島頌歌》, all published between 1934 and 1941. Under the influence of local folklore and customs, and working class and urban lifestyle, a large number of these design elements were adopted in Taiwan; which engendered a distinctive and interesting visual vocabulary peculiar to the island.

2.2 Post-war/ Martial Law Era (1949-1986)

In the political climate created by the post-war nationalist (KMT) government, numerous symbols were banned throughout the visual arts. Political pressure necessitated a shift in the way in which books were designed, leading to a style that leaned towards social realism. Woodblock printing was seen as an established “community activity” with a social nature; accordingly, and for a brief period of transition, the practice figured in book design, from which a localized industry was established. Moreover, the use of many colours became taboo, leading to the adoption of so-called “safe” combinations; so that red, white and blue consistently emerge as selections on covers dating from this period.



In addition to this modernist style of woodblock printing, classical Chinese painting and calligraphy were employed extensively in cover artwork. Meanwhile, under the increasingly popular influence of American culture, the doctrine of abstraction was also incorporated into Taiwanese book design, augmenting the increasingly varied methods of production and presentation being explored at the time.

Most importantly, internal and external typefaces were changing, and book design was beginning to be approached with the idea of an overarching concept in mind.

2.3 Modern Democratic Era (1987-1999)

After the end of martial law, publishing bans were lifted and the content of books was no longer censored. Literature of any classification found the space and freedom to develop visually. In 1994, vol. 99 of *Wen-hsun*

¹ The 1927 Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition commonly referred to as “Taiten”, modeled on the Japanese Imperial Art Exhibition (“Teiten”).

² The 1938 exhibition originally organized by the Board of Education was taken over by the Office of the Governor-General and renamed the Taiwan Governor’s Art Exhibition, commonly referred to as “Futen”.

³ During the 50-year period of colonial rule, second-generation Japanese were often referred to as “wan-shang” (literally, “Taiwan born”) or “second world” persons.

was given over to the topic of *The Cover: Point by Point*. Throughout this special edition of *Wen-hsun*, many articles refer to the relationship between a book cover and market sales (Table1), from which we may infer that during this period of modernism, book design was falling within the sphere of mass consumer culture. Books could become brands or products; design could focus attention on packaging, and on enhancing the book as a visual medium.

Table 1. A summary of articles presented in *Wen-hsun* vol.99

Title	Summary	Author
Creating a brand that narrates content: the character and function of the book cover	The book cover not only must not only present the topic or content of the book clearly, but must also persuade the reader to investigate the contents.	Zhou Yun-ru (周韻如)
Book covers and the sales market	The principle function of cover design is to convey the message of a book. However, a book will only sell well if the content is good enough; the cover is primarily an aid to indicating the contents.	Lin Xun-min (林訓民)
The abilities and other qualities of the cover designer	The book designer with life experience, and a wide knowledge of art and culture, can improve our understanding of cover design and its modes of presentation.	Wang Xing-gong (王行恭)
A discussion of changing face of Taiwanese cover design	The conscientious cover designer should not only satisfy his own creative urge, but also fully understand the content of what he is designing.	Wang Shi-chao (王士朝)
Understanding the design studio	Running a studio is a commercial art practice, constrained by the client's brief, and must strike a balance between commercial and artistic considerations.	Huang Qiu-ju (黃秋菊)

2.4 2000 - Present

The rise of Internet-driven, electronic forms of literary production in the 21st century have offered a new set of tools for the writer, while equally impacting upon the habits of the reader; this has significantly affected the publishing environment in Taiwan. In the context of this literary and cultural phenomenon – where “everybody can be an author” – the format of the book is becoming increasingly varied, with numerous publishers vying for the attention of readers (consumers) in ever more ingenious ways. During this period, production technology and the use of computer hardware and software applications have ceased to be of practical concern, so that how one approaches the process of the production of the book is now the focus of its design. In this way, the book is no longer seen as simply a repository of text, but also as a symbolic expression of personal taste, and a sign of popular culture, from which the aesthetic concept of upgrading, improving or adding-value into the design of a book originates.

3. Socio-cultural Associations in Taiwanese Book Design

In *The Genius of Nishikawa Mitsuru and his Influence on Taiwanese-style Book Binding*, Wang (2007) makes the following observations:

“In Mitsuru's design work, we see a choice of Taiwanese folk symbols that captures the essence of the target culture, and also establishes a boundary against which localized Japanese culture is matched. His success lies in seeing book design as a means to transmit a sign, his ability to connect this to a distinctively Taiwanese subject matter just at a time when cultural awareness in society was at a low point, a clever use of variation, a curious

nature that attained previously unparalleled heights of innovation, and a successful mastery of the interpretation of those signs.”

In using this narrative style of exposition, Wang's account of growth and transition progressively draws out the question of psychological identification, asking whether “the work of Nishikawa Mitsuru is at the boundary of Taiwanese consciousness or the boundary of a different culture” (that is, whether or not Mitsuru views Taiwan from the perspective of “the other”). Furthermore and importantly, Wang discusses Mitsuru's use of symbols throughout his work in book design, and offers us a symbolic interpretation of his oeuvre that finds one asking if Taiwanese book design already exhibited a “narrative purpose” during this colonial period. It is my contention that the key point of Wang's study lies not in the importance of symbols employed in book design, but in framing discussion of Taiwanese book design within a colonial context, and emphasising that creation itself is a matter of both cultural observation and practice.

Wang concludes that in “looking back, we see that Taiwanese book design ... ground to a halt in 1945, in the body of work of one Japanese/ Taiwanese man (or one Taiwanese/ Japanese man); incapable of further progress”. Perhaps with respect to contemporary Taiwanese book design, in which marketing and sales-ranking figures so highly, it is possible to understand this belief in the absence of any further breakthrough.

4. Hsia Yü's Pink Noise

Does Taiwanese book design really begin and end only in the work of Nishikawa Mitsuru, incapable of progression?

In 2008, *Pink Noise* – a self-published collection from post-modern poet Hsia Yü – subverted readers' received notion of “the poem”. Bound in transparent, celluloid pages, and making use of computer software to translate between lines of Chinese and English, meaning in *Pink Noise* is rendered open to interpretation. More still, visual interpretation is extended by the overlapping pages, lending a violent, visual quality to its typeface. The poet herself has said: “This is a book without an end; for this reason, it is also a book that knows when to stop”. Hsia Yü deconstructs poetry and attempts to create an open format for her text, displaying an original approach to book design, while also remaining strongly ambivalent toward the way in which the reader interprets his own feeling toward her work.



In design terms, *Pink Noise* is notable for the poet's attempt to subvert text not only through a unique method of translation, but also for the manner in which a reader's experience of the script is disrupted visually, by noise. Xie Jia-ying (謝佳穎) (2006) argues that post-modern socio-cultural modes of thought are represented by the following elements: (1) the subversion of modernity; (2) the prevalence of games; (3) the rise of mass media; (4) pop culture; and (5) consumerism. Among these factors, Xie explains the era of games as follows: “A characteristic of the post-modern game is to be against form; despite its being itself, already, a “form game”. The post-modern game is against the norm and against constraint; its priority is to seek freedom. And in the

nature of games in post-modern society, there is also a “centralising” of language games and sign games; post-modernism attempts to destroy the borderlines marking out a territory, so that the noble and graceful in literature stands alongside its populist brethren. Distinctions between literature, philosophy and art begin to collapse; this mixing of disciplines engenders a reciprocal permeation, fusion and assimilation”.

With respect to form in the design of *Pink Noise*, we see that Hsia Yü is presenting a kind of extemporaneous socio-cultural work, reflecting the noise inherent in the act of interpretation, the looping effect of machine translation, and the subversion of traditional or “proper” modes of presentation. This type of creativity is rare in the Taiwanese publishing industry. For the most part, books of a conceptual nature are published independently, and at the author's personal expense. This indicates that there is still room for progress at the commercial end of the market for book design, where Hsia's work can serve as a model. Here is a route by which contemporary Taiwanese book design will be able to escape from the shadow of former styles and forms, allowing the reader to participate in the game, and ushering in a new space within which post-modern thought can take a foothold.

5. References

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