

Henry Steiner has come a long way from tracing Mickey Mouse ears to dreaming up animals on Hong Kong banknotes and designing some of the corporate world's best-serving emblems. Having cemented the identities of giant firms on the world stage, he now wants to brand China.

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MAKING A MARQUE

Being on the outside is not necessarily a bad thing. As Austrian-born, New York-bred, Hong Kong-based graphic designer Henry Steiner knows well, the unaccustomed can often reveal obvious but remarkable aspects of culture so often taken for granted. "There's nothing mysterious about it," he says. "A fish doesn't think about water."

Not that all foreigners are blessed with Steiner's innovative instinct or curiosity about the seemingly mundane. Off the top of their heads, few would point to the beauty of the Chinese term for marble, for instance, or the name given to owls. "What a wonderful juxtaposition," Steiner exclaims about the literal description "cloud stone". As for the "cat-faced eagle" that is the nocturnal bird, he says appreciatively, "That's poetry."

THE ART OF CORPORATE DEFINITION

More than four decades after moving to Hong Kong, the man behind symbols identifying HSBC, the Hong Kong Jockey Club and Jardine Fleming says that although comfortably acculturated, he still possesses a broad perspective. Constant travel as well as a continued demand for his work have helped keep the blinkers at bay: the latest of Steiner's Standard Chartered banknotes were released last year.

"I've gained more respect for Chinese civilisation," Steiner adds, referring to his evolving relationship with his adopted home. He then segues into a fascination for *ukiyo-e* (Japanese woodblock prints), and veers into a sidetrack about a recent trip to Dongguan. "Looking at the art on the cave walls, I could see the origins of so much I thought was Japanese. I realised that the tragedy of China is that it's inventive but it doesn't profit from its inventions."

"NOBODY HAS EVER DIED FROM BAD GRAPHIC DESIGN."

Which is something that can't be said about Steiner — despite his contention that clients receive free of charge ideas fundamental to logos commissioned. "I've put things into them I wasn't paid to do," he says, explaining that more goes into designs than is immediately evident. "I've worked at making them easy to maintain and easy to apply with a minimum number of problems. I've anticipated what would happen if you put them against white, black or broken backgrounds, if you wanted to make them three dimensional, or if you wanted to reproduce them in black and white."

The ultimate arbiter of success, however, is longevity, as is evident in the case of HSBC's two-decade-old red-and-white hexagon insignia. "It's still going strong," Steiner says. "In fact, you couldn't get rid of it because it's such a simple, cast-iron visual idea."

Selling what he describes as "the art of corporate defi



dition", Steiner may have strong views about how to establish and maintain a public identity, but he is surprisingly humble when it comes to his craft. "Nobody has ever died from bad graphic design," he says straight-faced. "A real profession is one in which people can be hurt [by what you do]: if a doctor is incompetent a patient will die, and architects' mistakes [cause buildings to] collapse."

The difference between good graphic design and bad is never one of life and death, he stresses, although thoughtful work obviously has benefits. "A strong company can still function with a less than competent design; equally, you can have a very good design for a weak company and that won't save them." But, although he didn't create HSBC's success, he says he helped people recognise and remember it with a design as uncomplicated as it is monolithic. "The hexagon is based on their flag, which is a variation of the Cross of St Andrew. It's dead simple."

Not so Steiner's designs for Standard Chartered. Created within the parameters laid out by the Hong Kong Monetary Authority — and complex enough to give counterfeiters a run for their money — his banknotes employ the Chinese elements earth, fire, water and wood, with diamond and cracked-ice patterns as well as Chinese mythological creatures and scenes of Hong Kong starting from 1850. "If something is historical then it can't become obsolete," says Steiner. "If you say this is 1930, it's not going to change."

CATCHING THE NEXT WAVE

Stasis is not a discernable part of Steiner's life and work. Born in Vienna, he escaped Nazi persecution by fleeing with his parents to the US. Although a young child then, he still remembers his mother, a seamstress, flitting from one government office to another to arrange their departure. "She had to go out quite a bit, to find a sponsor in America and so on, and she would just give me some paper and a pencil and say: 'Sit down and draw.'"

Although dismissive of Disney's entrée into Hong

Kong, Steiner recalls his excitement at learning to recreate its popular mascot. "A cousin taught me to draw Mickey Mouse by tracing circles around plates and glasses: one size for the ears and a saucer for the face. I thought that was a big deal."

His talent stood him in good stead when he entered Hunter College in New York City and studied fine art with painter Robert Motherwell. Then there was postgraduate work at Yale University, where he came under graphic designer Paul Rand, whose IBM symbol he proffers as something "that's been stronger than the company itself".

A stint at an advertising agency as art director, a Fulbright scholarship that took him to Paris for two years, and freelance work at a new periodical, the now defunct *Asia Magazine*, preceded his decision in 1961 to move to Hong Kong with the publication. "A friend said, 'Go for nine months and ask for US\$1,000 a month,' which was a lot of money at the time. Soon, the Hilton hotel had him create its corporate identity, and in 1964, he set up Steiner & Co. "I became an expert in publication design, hotel design, mall signage design [Ocean Terminal] and annual reports," Steiner says wryly, noting that one big job instantly conferred specialist status.

Although now in his 70s, and with an enviable portfolio of work (some of which lives in his wallet), Steiner has little need for more expert badges. But he is not content to miss this century's biggest story: China. "Hong Kong doesn't have any brands; we dropped the ball consistently on that, but China will have to have brands to survive: she can't go along producing branded goods for other people."

Saying he is well positioned to define mainland companies on the world stage, Steiner adds, "I've created several successful international brands and I can help [the Chinese] shape something that will be better lasting than the hit-and-miss approach right now."

Enjoyment obviously is an important factor late in his career. "There's nothing I can think of that would be more fun than catching the next wave in China." ▲



Some well-known logos designed by Steiner (from left to right): the Hong Kong Jockey Club, Citic Pacific, Lane Crawford and HSBC