

## **The Golden Phoenix Wok: A Visual Survey of the Evocative Essence of Chinese Restaurant Signage Designs in Southeast Asian Chinatowns.**

Based on a research conducted in 2015 which analyzed how design elements found in San Francisco's Chinatown restaurant signage contributed to their gastronomic identities, this visual research of outdoor signage is a continuation on five Southeast Asia Chinatowns: Singapore (Singapore), Manila (Philippines), Vientiane (Laos), Penang (Malaysia), and Bangkok (Thailand). A total of 86 restaurants are analyzed where three sets of framework: i) interactions between elements on the signage; ii) characteristics of elements on the signage; and iii) interactions of elements and their characteristics on the signage are triangulated to answer the research question, "What are the evocative essences of design elements in a Chinatown restaurant signage could contribute to its impressions?" The signage surveyed suggest four major essences that evoke uniquely Chinese elements: i) persistent and overwhelming applications of Chinese characters and other supportive foreign languages; ii) cultural significance and universal application of red color; and iii) graphical elements with cultural representations that are attributive to Chinese pattern designs, calligraphic characters, and architectural elements.

**Shorter description:** A study that analyzes eighty-six restaurants in five Southeast Asian Chinatowns for design elements that contribute to their impressions.

**Keywords:** signage, graphic design, Chinatown, Asian, Asia, interactions of elements, gastronomy, identity, branding, evocative essence, visual, communication, design.

### **Biography**

Dr. Yeoh is the head of the Graphic Design program at Indiana University Southeast in New Albany, Indiana. In addition, he has continued to serve as the coordinator of promotion for the Fine Arts Department. He was a keynote speaker at the Typography Day 2013 conference in 2013 held at the Department of Design (DoD), Indian Institute of Technology in Guwahati, India. His design direction was adopted by the Susan G. Komen campaign for the 2013 Komen Greater NYC Race for the Cure in New York City. He has actively participated in several international exhibitions such as the International Art & Design Exhibition, Konya Selcuk University, Turkey in 2016, Beijing Design Week 2015 & 2016 and International Invitational Poster Exhibition at Galeri Isik Tesvikiye, Istanbul, Turkey in 2015 just to name a few recent ones. He regards traveling as part of learning and continues to do so when he possibly can. He maintains his personal website at yeoh.com.

### **Introduction**

There are various reasons for the existence of Chinatown but to many of its citizens, Chinatown is not just a place of dwelling and productivity, but also a place of cultural significance (Kwong, 1996). Today's Chinatowns are mostly tourist attractions with the promise of authentic Chinese cuisine, cultural

experiences and even some bargains. It is a dynamic immigrant enclave that constantly changes. The persistence of ethnicity and race, both as important facets of cultural identity and as triggers for economic vitality, has led to reconceptualization. As cities grow, the built environment becomes more complex and so do people's need for information to navigate and use their surroundings more effectively. The needs for systematically planned, visually unifying signage become even more important. An outdoor signage is a restaurant's business card, a piece of advertisement board that makes its first impression from afar. A successful signage will have an impact on the type of customer who will enter, what they will order, how long they will stay, how much money they are willing to part with and most importantly, whether they will return as repeat customer. Perhaps, more crucial is that Chinatowns were once a demarcated area where the incorporation of Chinese immigrants into a foreign society outside of China, are formed. Segregated ethnic communities in the urban environment where these Chinatowns are located will stand the test of time as cities continue to evolve.

As noted by Weightman (1985), despite massacres, expulsions, forced assimilation, nationalization which is actually a form of de-alienation, Chinatowns have always been able to adapt and was able to perpetuate itself. Delving into the developments that led to the Chinese diaspora in the five selected Southeast Asian Chinatowns provides a historical sense in understanding how these communities are formed outside of China. These five Chinatowns each have their own unique characteristics and have undergone long development in the countries that host them. As such, local and Chinese cultures have intermixed and co-existed. A primary research was conducted in San Francisco's Chinatown in 2015. In addition to the current five Chinatowns from Southeast Asia, four more cities will be added for the North American survey, followed by the final five in Western Europe.

## **Background of selected Chinatowns**

### **George Town, Penang, Malaysia**

Penang is an island-state off the northwestern Malaysian peninsula where the capitol city, George Town is located and it was listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. That effectively makes it one of the very few Chinatowns in the world to be located in the UNESCO World Heritage Site. Founded by the British in 1786, Penang was originally part of the Malay sultanate of Kedah. As a British Straits Settlement in 1826 and Crown Colony in 1867, a large number of Chinese migrant coolies flocked to the island due to the encouragement from British colonial power after they signed the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 from the Opium War with Imperial China (Purcell, 1965). The Chinese diaspora to the Malay Peninsula could be historically traced to the period of the Melaka Sultanate before the Portuguese conquest in 1511 which ended the Islamic sultanate. Melaka had had ties with the Ming Dynasty during the era of Zheng He expeditions from 1405 – 1433 (Reid, 1993, pp. 205 – 206) During the Dutch occupation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they encouraged Chinese trade and settlement (Purcell, 1967). When the English settled in the island of Penang, due to its strategic location at the opening of the Straits of Malacca, Penang, along with Melaka and Singapore became a crown colony. Penang's Chinatown is divided into Old Chinatown and

New Chinatown of George Town. A total of nine (n=9) restaurants were surveyed along Lebuh Carnavon, Lebuh Chulia, Lebuh Campbell, Lebuh Cintra, and Jalan Sri Bahari.

### **Binondo, Manila, Philippines**

Labeled as the oldest Chinatown in the world with over 400 years of history, the founding of Chinatown in Binondo, Manila was the product of the Spanish colonial policy towards the Chinese population as a way to prevent too much wealth from flowing into their hands. Evidently, the Philippine Chinese have occupied a crucial economic position. By placing residential limitations to live in a limited special district, the settlement built by the Spaniards was also about their mission to catholicize the Chinese population. If they refused, they were faced with execution and when the Chinese revolted in 1603 and in 1639, more than 20,000 were massacred (Go, 1972, p. 385). The Spanish-American War of 1898 resulted in the U.S. acquisition of territories in the western Pacific and Latin America including the Philippines.

Consequently, the Chinese Exclusion Act which was a race-based discriminatory practice, drawn up for California in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was also imposed in the newly acquired territory of the Philippines (Weightman, 1985). Today, Binondo, created by the Spanish for Chinese settlement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is a Chinatown district in Manila. A total of seventeen (n=17) restaurants are surveyed along Ongpin Road, which in addition to Chinese many authentic Chinese cuisine in town, is also a place for herbal stores and groceries. It is also an area full of landmarks, relics, and ancient practices of cultural and historical significance.

### **Chinatown, Singapore**

The British administrator Thomas Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819 and Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 but out of concern that the majority of Chinese population would tip the balance of power, Singapore was removed from the Federation to become a sovereign country (Ma, et al., 2003). Singapore is a vibrant city-state with a multi-racial population of 5.4 million with the Chinese ethnic group at 74%, followed by the Malays at 13% and the Indians at 9.1% of the population (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2013). Unlike the other, Singapore's Chinatowns is well connected and is accessible by MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) and its Chinatown is highly concentrated. As a result, it boasts the most number of signage collected out of the entire survey. Altogether, a total of forty (n=40) restaurants are documented along Smith Street, Temple Street and Upper Cross Street. Unlike many descriptions used in Chinese to describe "Chinatown," Singapore's version, "牛车水" (Pinyin: *Niúchē shuǐ*) translates as "bullock water-cart." A personal conversation at a visitor's center revealed that the name is due to the fact that Chinatown's water supply was transported by animal-driven carts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Sanjiang Cheng, Vientiane, Laos**

According to Chinatownology.com (n.d.), Vientiane Chinatown is considered to be in the area along Rue Chao Anou intersecting with Rue Samsenthai. The country's economic boom has attracted the country's neighbors with China leading the way with a cumulative investment in excess of \$5.1 billion, edging out

Thailand and Vietnam (Pasick, Jan 30, 2014). Many businessmen settled in the Chinese enclave just outside the city on *Sanjiang Cheng* (Three Rivers City) which is three kilometers west of downtown on Rue Samsenthai/Souphanouvong Avenue toward the airport. Since there is not enough Chinese restaurants to be documented in the Rue Chao Anou area, the focus is shifted to *Sanjiang Cheng*, where a higher concentration of restaurants with fifteen (n=15) restaurants are recorded. The neighborhood has transitioned into a recreation of modern China transplanted onto Laos, without any vestiges of a Chinatown's historical past. Most glaringly, twelve out of thirteen restaurants display their names only in Chinese and Khmer, with only one restaurant using only English. China is pouring more than just money into Laos. As many of the new businesses are established by new immigrants from mainland China, they form a new layer of Chinese migrants outnumbering the earlier migrants (Vientiane Chinatown, n.d.).

### **Yaowarat, Bangkok, Thailand**

The construct of the Chinese identity is a complex understanding through the contexts of citizenship, assimilation, and identity formation (Chiang, 2010). In countries like Thailand, the ethnic Chinese have been extensively assimilated where they have taken local names, embraced local religion and ceased to exist as distinctively separate communities (Ma, et al., p. 98). With the assimilation, Chinatown in Bangkok can be viewed as an alien community and without renouncing all things Chinese, Yaowarat, the Chinatown in Bangkok, is a unique district that runs along Yaowarat Road from Odeon Circle. There is a ceremonial Chinese gate which unmistakably marks the entrance in Chinatown. Yaowarat Road itself is lined with many gold shops with Chinese restaurants peppered along the street. The survey was conducted along Song Wat Road, Phat Sai, Plaeng Nam Road, Thanon Songsawat, and the main Yaowarat Road and nine (n=9) restaurants are documented for the research.

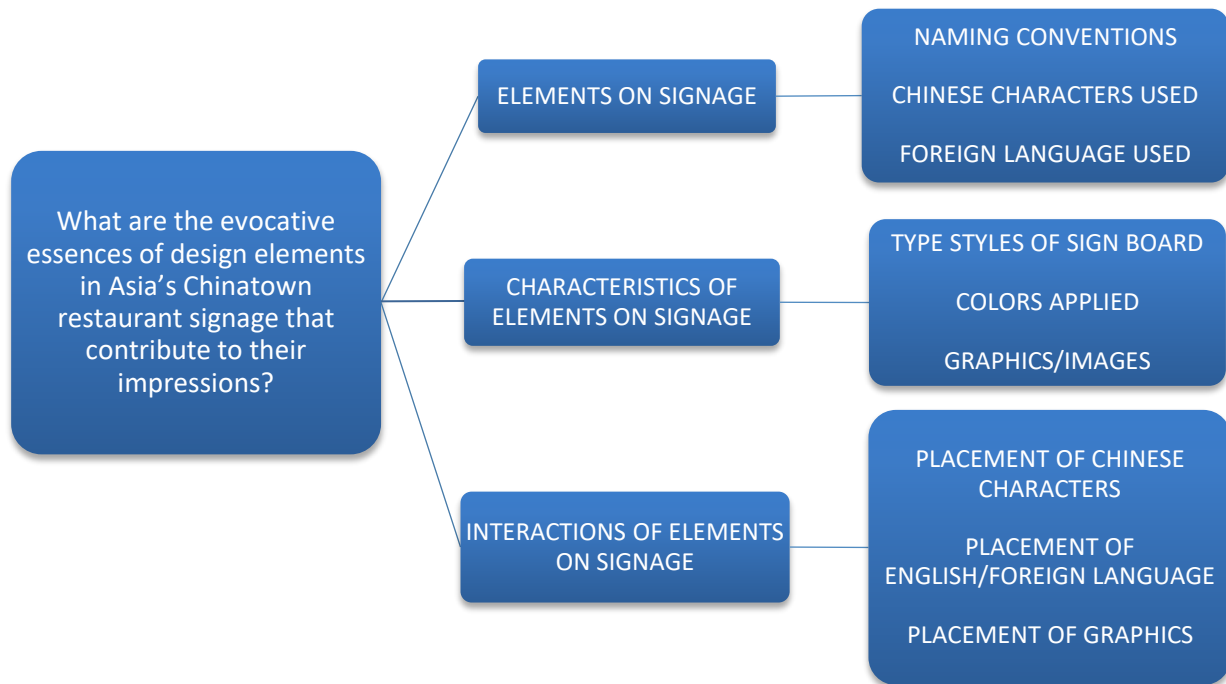
## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

In the summer of 2016, from early June to mid of July, the following cities: Penang, Malaysia; Manila, Philippines, Vientiane, Laos; Bangkok, Thailand; and Singapore, Singapore were visited for the study. With the purpose of research to explore the visual representations found on outdoor Chinese restaurant signage in Chinatowns in Southeast Asia, North America, and Western Europe, the research seeks to suggest how the differences and commonalities can contribute to the gastronomic identity of Chinese restaurants. The framework is based on the original research framework with modifications to accommodate nuances as the research diversifies. It is still based on John Bower's (1999) interaction theory of elements of design with three basic components of elements, characteristics, and interactions (refer to graph 1).

The three frameworks are: i) interactions between elements on the signage; ii) the characteristics of elements on the signage and iii) the interactions of elements on the signage. Data collected are used to answer the research question of "What are the evocative essences of design elements in a Chinatown restaurant signage that contribute to its impressions?" The question in the original research question

remains the same but the city of “San Francisco” is now switched to “Asia” to accommodate the changed destinations. It now reads: “What are the evocative essences of design elements in Asia’s Chinatown restaurant signage that contribute to their impressions?” Under “Elements on Signage,” “foreign language” was once the section reserved for “English Alphabets Used.” In the revised framework, “Foreign language used” refers now to both English and other non-Chinese characters used on the signage such as Bahasa Malaysia for Penang, Thai for Bangkok, and Khmer for Vientiane. A new category for coding names associated with restaurant naming conventions, “Native” is added where a restaurant’s name features only Chinese characters and/or a foreign language (English included).

The types of eatery included in the survey are Chinese restaurants that sell vegetarian, dim sum, dessert, cafes, bakery, seafood or in various combinations. The restaurants’ names for inclusion are either in Chinese only, English only, foreign language, or in combinations. Along with note-taking, photo documentation was used to record the visual landscape of the five cities using a DSLR (digital single-lens reflect) camera with a zoom lens, with a 32 gigabyte SDHC flash card.



Graph 1. The signage analysis framework based on the theory that all visual forms interdependently interact with three basic components: elements, characteristics, and interactions.

## Theoretical framework

### Elements on signage: Naming conventions

Restaurants names identified in the research are classified into six naming conventions:

- i) Descriptive. For a signage to be considered “descriptive,” a restaurant must include an English-based name and a description for the nature of a restaurant’s business such as Eight Treasures Vegetarian (a restaurant in Singapore’s Chinatown).
- ii) Location. Restaurants that are named by its physical location on the street it is located or fictitious or imaginary location such as “Heaven,” for example, fall under this category.
- iii) Founder. The name can be applied to an actual, imaginary, or physiologically descriptive nature of a supposed founder, cook, chef, or owner of a restaurant.
- iv) Generic. Restaurants that use initials, coined names, or generic-sounding names fall under this category.
- v) Native. In the case when only one language is native to the place origin, is used on the signage, the restaurant will be categorized as “native.”
- vi) Transliterated restaurant names are based on the Romanized Chinese names such as “Chuan Kee Chinese Fast Food” (a restaurant in Binondo, Manila).

### Elements on signage: Chinese, English and other foreign language typestyles

Categorization of type styles needed to is based on classifications from Linotype: i) Old style/Traditional serif or Old style/Traditional sans serif; ii) Calligraphic; iii) Freestyle/Handwriting; and iv) Modern/Stylistic. Refer to table 1 for samples of Chinese characters, English letterforms, and Khmer scripts. Note that the identified styles in the table are for visual reference only. For coding purposes, all Chinese characters, English letterforms and any foreign language font will share the same categorical references as defined by Linotype. Furthermore, old style/traditional type styles codified from the signage must display traits that are deemed structured, formal and traditional while calligraphic styles are commonly associate with hand lettering styles found in testimonials but is also one that lacks structure. Freestyle/Handwriting is about type styles that exhibit a casual yet playful but somewhat structured freehand style. Modern/stylistic is definable as fonts that are stylistically decorative. Old style/Traditional sans serif is identified as fonts that do not have the small projecting features called “serifs” at the end of strokes. Typefaces such as Helvetica, Arial, Avant Garde, just to name a few are samples of English letterforms that are serif-based while fonts such as Times Roman, Garamond, Caslon and so forth are some samples of sans serif fonts.

Samples of scripts in traditional Chinese characters from linotype.com		English letterforms from linotype.com		Fonts from selapa.net/khmerfonts/
Old style/ Traditional (Structured, formal)	金 龍 鐵 鍋	Old style/ Traditional sans serif	The Golden Dragon Wok	ពុម្ពអក្សរខ្មែរ
	金 龍 鐵 鍋	Old style/ Traditional serif	The Golden Dragon Wok	ពុម្ពអក្សរខ្មែរ

Calligraphic (as if written by hand, lack structure)	金龍鐵鍋	Calligraphic	THE GOLDEN DRAGON WOK	ធម្មតាភ្នំខ្មែរ
	金龍鐵鍋		<i>The Golden Dragon Wok</i>	ព្រះបាទស្រីសុរិយោវរ្ម័ន
Freestyle/ Handwriting (Casual, playful yet structured)	金龍鐵鍋	Freestyle/ Hand-writing	<i>The Golden Dragon Wok</i>	ធម្មតាភ្នំខ្មែរ
	金龍鐵鍋		<i>The Golden Dragon Wok</i>	ព្រះបាទស្រីសុរិយោវរ្ម័ន
Modern/ Stylistic (Structured playfulness)	金龍鐵鍋	Modern/ Stylistic	<b>The Golden Dragon Wok</b>	ធម្មតាភ្នំខ្មែរ
	金龍鐵鍋		THE GOLDEN DRAGON WOK	ព្រះបាទស្រីសុរិយោវរ្ម័ន

Table 1: Samples of type styles derived from linotype.com for categorization for Chinese characters, English and Khmer fonts.

**Characteristics of elements on signage: Type of sign board, colors, and graphics/images**

Information about colors applied to the type styles, graphical elements such as logos, images, or contact information, address, descriptions of the type of restaurant (if any), and background color(s) are regarded as “characteristics” of elements. There are three types of sign board identified in the primary research conducted in San Francisco: pedestrian, store and awning sign boards (refer to image 1) and they are the basis for identifying and classifying the type of signage for this study. It has been observed that there is a lack of consistent applications of all three types of signage for every restaurant in all the five cities. As the research is expanded to accommodate more Chinatowns, data collected is only based on store signage for consistency and to reduce the number of variables.

All restaurants surveyed must have at least a main store sign boards that professionally-crafted and must be positioned above street levels. When dimensional letters are used which require them to be mounted or attached to a surface, the color of the surface will be categorically treated as “background” for the analysis of colors used. Logos or graphics of sponsors are left out as they are irrelevant to the study. When there are realistic image used, the predominant values of the hues are used to indicate a dominant color for analysis purposes.



Image 1: The three common types of sign boards: pedestrian, store and awning/canopy sign boards.

### **Interactions of elements on signage: Placement of Chinese, foreign language and graphics**

According to Bowers (1999), categorically, all visual form is comprised of three basic components: elements, characteristics, and interactions. The Chinese characters, English, foreign scripts, as well as any graphical element on the surface of the signage become the content for analysis. Elements that possess different characteristics such as colors, size, shape and volumes interact to influence each other. Direction is about where the elements are placed on the signage as they can create a sense of direction in reading the signage. A negative (or empty) space affects the flow of information as it is affected by the placement of elements on its surface or space. Signage is characterized by visual content (image, text and graphics) and its principal feature is to enable consumers to easily identify the location as well as the nature of the business. Signage, as a necessary tool in environmental graphic design (EGD) is concerned with providing a clear, functional and attractive wayfinding.

Typically, a signage focuses on merchandising, marketing, or advertising its message directly by prioritizing the name of a company plus other secondary or tertiary elements such as logos or contact information. Through the use of signs and symbols to communicate a message to an audience, usually for the purpose of marketing or some kind of advocacy, EGD is tied to the idea of “branding.” Thanks to the late Canadian designer, Paul Arthur, words such as ‘signage,’ and ‘wayfinding’ are common in the graphic design vocabulary today (Calori & Vanden-Eynden, 2015). The environmental graphics is significantly different compared to print-based designs where in a built environment, communication is channeled through an oversized outdoor board which must stand the test of time and environmental factors.

## **FINDINGS**

Altogether, signage information from 86 restaurants from five Chinatowns located in Singapore (n=40), Malaysia, Philippines (n=15), Laos (n=13), Malaysia (n=9) and Thailand (n=9) were collected. In the



following, the three sections of the signage analysis framework will be discussed, starting with elements of signage, followed by characteristics of elements on signage and finally, interactions of elements on signage.

## ELEMENTS ON SIGNAGE

### Naming conventions

The Chinese attach great importance to their names and surnames as these are often influenced by politics, religion, nationality, culture, social status and special interests (Ning & Ning, 2000). The expression of admiration for food takes many forms and as evident from table 2, the naming convention of transliterating restaurant names is the majority of choice. The name of a restaurant is akin to the name of a person where many traits can be built. Most of the names exude a positive idea, diligence, promise and some even exude traditional Chinese moral values. Three Chinatowns, with Penang leading the way at 77.7%, followed by Bangkok at 55.5% and Manila at 46.6%, are all recorded with transliterated names. As such, these restaurants preserve a local dialectical food culture by adhering to the group’s spoken dialect and the signage accurately captures just that. Restaurants that are transliterated using locally preserved dialects without resorting to *Hanyu pinyin* preserve a unique dialectical culture that is facing strong globalized influence of China’s endorsed Romanization system. More of this are discussed in Elements on signage: Chinese characters used.

Naming conventions on signage	Singapore n=40	Manila n=15	Vientiane n=13	Penang n=9	Bangkok n=9
Descriptive	30%	26.6%	0%	0%	22.2 %
Location	15%	0%	38.5%	22.2%	0%
Founder	5%	6.6%	0%	0%	11.1%
Generic	0%	6.6%	53.8%	0%	0%
Native	27.5%	13.3%	7.7%	0%	11.1%
Transliterated	22.5%	46.6%	0%	77.7%	55.5%

Table 2: Naming conventions on signage in the five Chinatowns in Southeast Asia.

### Naming convention: Descriptive

Thirty percent or twelve (n=12) restaurants in Singapore formed the highest number under the descriptive naming convention. An interesting trade name for a restaurant, “Secret Recipe Stewed Soup Restaurant” in Singapore proclaims a secretive formula in their name. However, proclaiming that a restaurant’s food contains secret ingredients is truly a marketing tactic. McDonald’s Big Macs boast “special sauce” while Coca Cola’s long guarded “secret formula” have always been intriguing. “Frog Meat Fish Head” is literally a restaurant name presented on a sign in English in Singapore. Its Chinese name, “美蛙鱼头” (Pinyin: *Měi wā yú tóu*) is as direct but with the word “美” added to the front, translating

the name as “Beautiful Frog Fish Head.” Heavenly and meteorologically descriptive examples can be found in 風波莊 (Pinyin: *Fēngbō zhuāng*).

### **Naming convention: Location**

Location-based naming convention can be derived from an imaginary location or more functionally, by the name of street in which a restaurant is located such as Cintra Food Corner on Lebu Cintra (Cintra Lane) in Penang, Malaysia. It is also interesting to find “China Restaurant” in Singapore. Geographically, the entire country of China, a country almost 13,300 times its size is represented on a restaurant signage. A restaurant conveniently named “Chinatown Seafood” can be found in Singapore’s Chinatown as well. Names that make references provinces such as Sichuan, Hunan, Yunnan and cities in China such as Chengdu are also common. Almost 40% of the 13 restaurants surveyed in Vientiane are classified under location. This should come as no surprise as Laos has seen a strong investment from China. These restaurants, predominantly found in the *Sanjiang Cheng* in Vientiane boasts many northeastern dishes. Location is the roots to one’s source of origin. More pragmatically, the restaurant’s reference to location suggests the type of food they serve and will likely attract a more targeted patron for that matter.

### **Naming convention: Founder**

With names like “Fatty Boss Restaurant & Bar” in Singapore and “Jim Jim Restaurant” in Bangkok, not only is the former referring to the physical traits of either a real person or an imaginary persona, they are rather playful in comparison to other naming conventions. Repeating one’s name twice reminds us of how pandas are being named at zoos. While this is a remote connection, pandas have always been presented as ambassadors for China’s diplomacy connection in reaching out to other nations. While the name is neutral or denoting ideas or aspirations that meet the needs of the times, they are catchy and memorable. By linking the human’s physiology, names under this convention is anthropomorphizing in nature and this makes the name easy for their patrons to connect with.

### **Naming convention: Generic**

Restaurants in Vientiane, rank the highest under this naming convention. With names like 老字号干锅 which translates as “Known Place Dry Claypot,” with the keyword “老” (old) to suggest tried-and-true, or something we are accustomed to. However, when a generic word, “old” is combined with the name of an ancient city in China to form “Old Chengdu Sichuan Chinese Restaurant” in Singapore and another restaurant in Vientiane, represented only in Chinese and Khmer fonts, translated as “Old Place Sichuan Restaurant” (老地方川菜馆 Pinyin: *Lǎo dìfāng chuāncài guǎn*), they seem to suggest a place we are familiar with. While 如家饭店 (Pinyin: *Rújiā Fàndiàn*) is generic, the English translation is literally “Just like home’s restaurant” which evokes a sense of familial connection by making references to home

cooking. Although the names are generic and neutral which may seem lacking creativity, they are simple in form and heart-warming.

### **Naming convention: Native**

Under the “native” naming convention, restaurants included must use only one dominant language on their signage. With almost 28 percent and 14 percent of restaurants surveyed in Singapore and Manila, a combined thirteen (n=13) restaurants for both cities, the needs to have more than one language on the signage is not of a major concern. A restaurant in Singapore known only by its three Chinese characters, “老东北” (Pinyin: *Lǎo dōngběi*), meaning Old Dongbei, geographical refers to a region which corresponds with the term Manchuria in the English language. Equally confusing is the name for “Sin Ma Claypot Live Frog” (金馬砂鍋活田雞) restaurant in Singapore in which the first and second words, “Sin” and “Ma” are references to Singapore and Malaysia. With almost thirty percent of restaurants in Singapore choosing to display their restaurants in one language only despite the more common English usage in daily lives, it suggests the importance of the Chinese language as a source in establishing a unique identity in a multicultural environment, such as Singapore and Malaysia’s.

### **Naming convention: Transliterated**

The two major transliteration systems are the increasingly obsolete Wade-Giles and the more common *Hanyu pinyin*, which is the official Romanization system for the Chinese language used in mainland China, Malaysia, and Singapore. Even if one does not read or speak Chinese, transliteration allows one to attempt to read and pronounce the name, even when he/she does not understand the language. While many words have standard spelling when transliterated, proper nouns often end up being spelled differently. For example, one will find that Sichuan can be spelled several ways, with Szechuan and Szechwan being a few common spellings. *Sin Nam Huat, Wen Chang, Tai Tong, Sun Yoon Kee, Goh Swee Kee, Foong Wei Heong*, just to name a few examples from the Chinatown in Penang. Unique to Penang and Bangkok, the transliterated names are based on local Chinese dialectical pronunciations. An example is the entire transliterated name for *Hong Kee Wan Thun Mee* in which *Hong Kee*, while the name of the restaurant, “Wan Thun Mee” means “wonton noodle.” This is a restaurant that literally transliterates without having to rely on a foreign language to describe the nature of its business. Meanwhile in Singapore, the transliterated names are Mandarin-based, *Chao Tian Men*, if directly translated into English, is a more heavenly appropriate “Imperial Heaven’s Gate.” Both names show that the Chinese characters carry semantic information due to the characters while English letterforms only aid in pronunciations.

### **Elements on Signage: Chinese characters used**

The debate on traditional and simplified Chinese characters is a long-running issue. Taiwan is officially known as the Republic of China and they use traditional Chinese while mainland China devised a new set

of simplified characters. It was a result of a major script reform carried out by the People's Republic of China between 1955 and 1964 to simplify the shape of Chinese characters (Bökset, 2006). With approximate 50,000 Chinese characters in existence, only between three and four thousand are in regular use. While many sources cite different information, it has been estimated that some 7,000 characters were simplified. The official writing system is called "simplified characters" (简体字). The term traditional Chinese is a distinction known outside of Taiwan as its government officially refers to traditional characters as 正體字 (Pinyin: *zhèngtǐzì*) or in English, "standard characters," as a slap to mainland China.

While there are no prohibition of traditional characters in mainland China, traditional characters can evoke nostalgia or a sense of tradition due to its long historical existence. The use of traditional Chinese by overseas Chinese occurred during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, long before the introduction of simplified characters. However, simplified Chinese characters can now be found in all the five Chinatowns surveyed. Although traditional Chinese characters are more complex to write but are more semantically accurate in the meaning they represent. According to Ivan Vartanian, an author, editor and book producer based in Japan, Kanji (or Chinese characters used in Japanese) conveys meaning with greater immediacy than their letterform counterparts. Chinese characters are totally devoid of meaning to a foreigner but they may identify with its graphical form (Vartanian, 2003). As such, the Chinese character's graphical element contains significance due to its graphical form and Chinese characters can carry meaning on a multitude of levels, from semantic to graphical representations.

Due to the ramifications of both writing systems, unexpected inconsistencies where concurrently, both the traditional and simplified Chinese characters are found on the same signage. An example of the violation of Chinese character convention is found for a restaurant named Goh Swee Kee in Penang. The first character, 'Goh,' written as "吳" in traditional Chinese on its store signage is written in simplified Chinese "吴" on the pedestrian signage, with the rest of the vertically stacked Chinese characters in traditional Chinese (image 3, far left). It is conventionally unacceptable to do so. If it is deemed acceptable to mix both the traditional and simplified, then problems that rarely surface such as homographs (words that are spelled alike but are different in meaning) is now a common contradiction between the traditional and simplified characters. For example, the traditional character for "face", 面 is also used to mean "noodle" in simplified Chinese (as opposed to 麵 used in traditional Chinese which adds the "wheat" 麥 character to the radical). Refer to images 2 and 3 for comparison. If one writes to "eat noodle" in simplified Chinese, it literally means "eat face" in traditional Chinese characters.



Image 2: The difference between simplified Chinese character for a restaurant in Manila (top) and the same character for noodle, written in traditional character for a restaurant in Singapore (below).



Image 3: Inconsistent mixing of traditional and simplified Chinese characters at a restaurant in Penang, Malaysia.

Out of the total eighty-six (n=86) restaurants surveyed, eighty one (n=81) restaurants feature Chinese characters in both traditional and simplified forms. At 49.4 percent, simplified characters are almost equal to the traditional characters (table 3 for more details). Widely practiced outside of mainland China in Malaysia and Singapore, simplified Chinese characters are becoming more prevalent as China reaches out to the world. It is not surprising that the newly developed *Sanjiang Cheng* in Vientiane that all the twelve (n=12) restaurants, with the exception of one, using simplified Chinese characters on their signage.

Traditional vs Simplified Chinese characters	Out of total that included Chinese characters	Traditional	Percentage	Simplified	
Singapore	40 out of 40	16	40%	24	60%
Manila	13 out of 15	10	76.9%	3	23.1%
Vientiane	12 out of 13	0	0%	12	100%
Penang	8 out of 9	8	100%	0	0%
Bangkok	8 out of 9	7	87.5%	1	12.5%
TOTAL	81	41	50.6%	40	49.4%

Table 3: Comparison between the usage of traditional and simplified Chinese characters in the five Chinatowns surveyed. Note that the total number of each city reflected the number of restaurants that excluded Chinese characters on their signage.

With China’s investment in Vientiane, simplified Chinese characters have become increasingly common. The traditional Chinese characters have a long history which can denote formality, nostalgia and a sense of tradition versus the recent introduction and adoption of simplified characters. The preservation of a community’s local heritage and identity take precedence, especially if Chinatown is now known as tourist attractions, especially Manila’s Chinatown in Binondo, with 400 years of historical existence.

**Elements on Signage: Foreign language used**

Restaurant names are visually emphasized in size in a combination of two or more languages: Chinese and English in Singapore and Malay, English and Chinese in Malaysia. The Malay word for restaurant, “Restoran,” is a borrowed English word which in turn, comes from Latin. Likewise, Chinatown signage in Thailand and Laos incorporate their national languages with Chinese accordingly. Due to the high concentration of ethnic Chinese in Penang, the dialectical transliteration of English takes on an interesting phenomenon. This is partly because Chinese migrant workers from southern China did not form a homogenous group because they were from different provinces. In addition to the different food and eating habits, they also spoke distinctively different dialects (Hutton, 2010). Most of the first influx of Chinese into Malaya are from Southeastern Chinese province of Fujian but in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the 19th century, the Cantonese who are mostly from Guangdong and Hakka from the Hainan Provinces of China arrived. These communities established themselves in the trades with the Cantonese as tailors, carpenters, goldsmiths and ironmongers while the Hainanese established food businesses, particularly the chicken rice (Chinatown of George Town, n.d.).

This is not a phenomenon that is unique to Malaysia alone as another example found is *Tak Po Hong Kong Dim Sum* in Singapore where the transliterated name, *Tak Po* (德宝) is uniquely Cantonese as opposed to “*dé bǎo*” in Mandarin. Visually, these languages are physically different in appearance but transliteration provides some recognition and cohesion when more than one language is applied on a

signage. *Sing Tia Sua Restaurant* (新潮山餐館) in Bangkok, Thailand is transliterated from Teochew, a dialect predominant in the Chinese community in Bangkok. This is due to the fact that 95 percent of the Chinese in Thailand are drawn from Chao Shan (southern China) dating back to 1782 under the reign of King Taksin, a half Teochew, half Thai monarch (Burusatanaphand, 2001). Similarly, *Hua Seng Hong Chinese Restaurant* is another transliterated example found in Bangkok's Chinatown.

In the context of bilingualism or multilingualism, the co-existence with a primary language in a host land where the Chinese language is deemed foreign, transliteration, is a helpful linguistic tool. First, it is important to differentiate between transliteration and translation. Transliteration focuses on pronunciation than meaning. However, transliteration is not perfect. An example is a restaurant, *Sin Ma Claypot Live Frog*. The Chinese character for Sin could also be transliterated as "Xin." Sin is the English word which means an immoral act. A restaurant in Bangkok, *Hainanese Chicken Rice* descriptively sells exactly what it says on its banner store signage but to an English-speaking patron who reads *Chew Kee Eating House* in Singapore may not realize that the restaurant sells Hainanese Chicken Rice as it is only described in Chinese on the store signage. English letterforms are language-specific in serving the needs for its speakers. As such, the very same letterform can mean one thing but when used for another language, a different meaning is represented. The same English letterforms that spells "chicken rice" requires a different sets of alphabets to spell *nasi ayam*, which means "chicken rice" in Malay. In juggling between presenting a bilingual signage, information gets short-changed or in an extreme case, misinterpreted.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF ELEMENTS ON SIGNAGE

### Type styles on sign board

Words are "symbols of emotions" (White, 2002, p. 105) which suggests that choice of a font for matching letterforms styles can influence our perception of what is being verbally presented on the signage. According to Robson (2009), fonts with thicker strokes are more masculine and rounded curves are meatier. However, Chinatowns in Singapore, Vientiane, Penang, and Bangkok prefer the old style/traditional sans serif and serif letterforms on their signage whereas Penang and Manila prefer modern/stylistic instead. In Vientiane's *Sanjiang Cheng* where there are new Chinese restaurants, freestyle/handwriting styles are the popular choice. Unifying the different elements is a challenge but stylistically, there are similarities between stylization of the Chinese characters and non-Chinese fonts (as shown in table 6). An important step in applying styles to characters and letterforms is to realize that although each Chinese character and English font is different, the key to consistency in the design is the application of same matching font classifications for the different languages. A side by side comparison in table 4 reveals that the *SimHei* typeface bears a close resemblance to *Arial*, *Lily UPC* and *Dangrek*. The *Song Ti* typeface with its thinner horizontal lines and thicker vertical strokes is similar to the *Times New Roman* typeface. Likewise, the *Kodchiang UPC* and *Battambang* also bear resemblance to their Chinese

and English counterparts. Note that these fonts are not meant as recommendations but rather, they serve as a visual analysis for comparative purposes.

Classification	Name of Chinese typefaces	English letterforms	Thai fonts (from Linotype.com)	Khmer fonts (from seripa.com)
Old style/ Traditional sans serif	黑体 SimHei	Arial	ประเทศไทย Lily UPC	មនុស្សទាំងអ Dangrek
Old style/ Traditional serif	宋體 Song Ti	Times New Roman	ประเทศไทย Kodchiang UPC	មនុស្សទាំងអ Battambang

Table 4: Consistent type styles in two different classifications of old style/traditional sans serif and serif for Chinese, English, Thai, and Khmer letterforms.

English, Thai, and Khmer fonts on signage	Singapore (n=31)	Manila (n=15)	Vientiane (n=13)	Penang (n=9)	Bangkok (n=9)
Old style/Traditional sans serif	64.5%	33.3%	46.2%	66.6%	11.1%
Old style/Traditional serif	16.1%	6.6%	30.8%	11.1%	55.5%
Calligraphic	9.7%	0%	7.7%	0%	0%
Freestyle/Handwriting	3.2%	13.3%	15.4%	11.1%	0%
Modern/Stylistic	6.5%	46.7%	0%	11.1%	33.3%

Table 5: Summary of the choice of English, Thai, and Khmer fonts on signage.

Chinese character styles on signage	Singapore (n=40)	Manila (n=13)	Vientiane (n=12)	Penang (n=8)	Bangkok (n=8)
Old style/Traditional	17.5%	46.6%	16.6%	25%	50%
Calligraphic	60%	20%	8.3%	62.5%	50%
Freestyle/Handwriting	12.5%	20%	66.6%	0%	0%
Modern/Stylistic	10%	6.6%	8.3%	12.5%	0%

Table 6: Summary of the choice of Chinese character styles on signage.

It is worth mentioning that some letterforms are more legible than other due to differences in the design of the letterform itself. With the availability of type styles in light, heavy, wide, extra bold, italic and so forth, the choice can be overwhelming and the real reasons of the eventual signage are subjective and undeterminable due to many factors beyond the scope of this study.

### Colors applied

Colors are intrinsic hues with a practical application. Given the prevalence of color with its abilities to



carry specific meanings, color is not just about preference or aesthetics as it can also visually communicate specific information. How meanings are derived from color are grounded in two basic sources: learned associations that develop from repeated pairings of colors with certain experiences, concepts or products, and biologically-based inclinations to respond to particular colors in a particular situation (Elliot & Maier, 2007). When colors and letterforms are combined in a given space, several attributes that make them readable must be taken into considerations. First and foremost is the color of the background. According to the Outdoor Advertising Association of America (OAAA), there are fifteen color combinations for lettering tested for readability at a distance (Winter, Sep 30, 2016). Since white and red are popular colors for backgrounds in this survey, there are four possible combinations: red on white, white on red, yellow on red, and red on yellow. As it is the case with wear and tear, signage with white background tend to turn yellowish after an extended period of time.

If attaining readability is a priority in dealing with the communicative nature of letterforms, a number of important factors such as the position, direction, and space of the elements on the signage, must be considered. Although there is a variety of ways for using colors, there is a cross-cultural pattern of similarity in color preferences with the majority of the red color being the most used colors across all elements on the signage. Through the consistent repeated usage of the color red, it can be hypothesized that the strong associative nature of the auspicious red color is tied to multiple associations of the colors from festivities, cultural inculcations and repeated associations. Other popular hues are warm colors such as yellow and orange, commonly used on signage for background, letterforms and for graphical elements.

A majority of the signage surveyed show a jarring difference in the choice of Chinese and its foreign type styles. Luckily, when the visual for a product or service shares a high number of relevant attributes, it contributes to a higher incidence of relevancy (Miniard, et al., 1991; McQuarrie and Mick 1992). One 'tool' that can be utilized is colors to unify the different elements. For *Lan Zhou La Mien* based in Manila (image 2), both the Chinese characters and English letterforms project a visually unified look due to the unifying factors of color. This is further enhanced by outlining of the fonts and consistent colors for the Chinese characters and English letterforms despite the calligraphic Chinese characters and old style/traditional sans serif English. The use of gold-accented color is popular in Bangkok's Chinatown, perhaps to suggest grandness. Neutral colors such as white is popular for background while black has been extensively used to outline both Chinese and English letterforms.

## **Graphics/Images**

According to a recommendation associated with common design features that can enhance Chinatown's character for the city of Portland, Oregon, the reinforcement of the identity of Chinatown under guideline A5-1-3 (River District Design Guidelines, 2008, p.23) recommends the using of ornate signs that enhance the ethnic character of the District. The Portland Development Commission also recommends deep awnings that are both fixed/retractable, Chinese signage that protrude beyond building faces, bilingual

signage in English and Chinese on storefront surfaces (p. B-10, n.d.). Although the Philippines is generally associated with Catholicism, there is evidence of Chinese heritage and traditional Chinese institutions in Manila Chinatown. One key landmark to signal one's arrival at Chinatown is the Chinese Goodwill gate and another immediate distinction is the street signs that are sometimes decorated with dragons with bilingual and sometimes trilingual road signs in Filipino, English and traditional Chinese.

Research has shown that advertisements that utilize symbolic visuals can communicate more complex meanings concerning the advertised product (Featherstone 1991; Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1990; McCracken 1986). Similarly, Mitchell and Olson (1981) found that belief levels related to a product can be significantly raised, in addition to belief, attitude and purchase intentions of the targeted audience. Everything about an outdoor signage is a process of careful selection, planning and creation-- from its dimensions, design, production and implementation. A flat work, signage can be best viewed satisfactorily only from a limited number of angles which makes the design for inclusion of any graphical elements that much more important. One benefit of photographic signage is that an advertiser's message can be presented to a captive audience where realistic images was used as stimulus to hold the audience's attention. With the advancement of printing technology, restaurant owners entice their patrons by displaying photographic images from their menu onto their signage, effectively turning the signage into a pseudo-menu.

Another effective tool used is a variety of shapes that range from circular to cubical to organic to form what look like logos of restaurants (image 5). Stylistically, the claim that utilization of symbolic visuals can communicate meanings are supported and documented for a restaurant in Bangkok, Koon Kuang. Their signage features Thai fonts that mimic Chinese calligraphic brush strokes (refer to image 4) on their sign board. The evocative essence of things Chinese are further reinforced by the geometrical pattern found in Chinese designs, used as borders to outline the restaurant's signage. The same pattern is found for a dessert restaurant selling the bird's nest soup (image 7). A restaurant in Vientiane sports a simplified and stylized graphical element that mimics the scenic Yunnan (image 5, third from left). Given the context of place where these restaurants are situated, these graphical elements exude an immediate suggestion of elements that are uniquely Chinese.



Image 4: Koon Kuang in Bangkok's Chinatown featured two store sign boards in which an English version is stacked above a Thai font at the bottom. The Thai font mimics Chinese calligraphic brush strokes with Chinese geometrical patterns that also found use in chinaware (right).



Image 5: Samples of logos from Singapore, Philippines, Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia.

### **Interactions of elements on signage: The placement of Chinese characters**

In western societies, readership requires one to read from left to right and top to bottom. Because Chinese characters can also be read from right to left and top to bottom, stacking of Chinese characters vertically, especially for a pedestrian signage seems like a wise design decision for its space-saving features. Chinese characters can be arranged vertically due to their similarly blockish shapes. Unlike English letterforms which can be difficult to read when aligned vertically, Chinese characters are still readable for long and short phrases.

Although a restaurant's name is important, how well the name is visually presented so as to attract patrons is what environmental graphics is all about. Space plays an important factor in aiding how the information flows on a signage. The orientation of a signage can restrict or enhance the amount of information by allowing information to be presented horizontally or vertically. We have the options to print in portrait (vertical) or landscape (horizontal) and it is the exact orientation that dictates the amount of space for information to be displayed. Vertically-aligned Chinese characters are seen on many pedestrian signage to take full advantage of its vertical orientation (image 6).



Image 6: The flexibility of the Chinese characters allow them to be stacked from top to bottom. When placed horizontally, these signage follow the western tradition of reading from left to right. The characters are also readable if placed from right to left.

### **The placement of English/foreign language**

In positioning elements in a given space, compositional understanding of how space works become important. This is when how one language is imposed or juxtaposed next to each other. It is a question of prioritizing, which means emphasizing the importance of one element over another. In doing so, one element is relegated to a subordinate level. A hierarchical order functions by drawing our attention to the most prominent feature which explains that the placement of a dominant element becomes important to create a strong focal point. This is easily facilitated by high contrast or unusual shapes immediately attract the eye (Evans & Thomas, 2013). For the horizontally-oriented store signage, be it English or other non-English fonts, the task to achieve design unity is a matter of deciding which element will be dominant on the signage so as to create a focal point. A majority of the restaurant names are centrally positioned for

balance. The Chinese characters are logograms and are blockish in appearance and when combined with English, the physical differences in the two inherently different forms create many opportunities as well as challenges. The English words are variable in width and if stacked on top of each other (refer to image 7), in an effort to save space or to mimic the orientation of their Chinese counterparts, would render the message rendered in the English letterforms hard to read. This is especially true if the word is lengthy and stylized that the legibility of the letterform is affected (image 7, 1<sup>st</sup> from the left). The English letterforms appear odd and out of place, not to mention issues of legibility. The English letterforms are created to be displayed horizontally, not vertically. In general, successful combinations are rare. A more acceptable form of balance is by placing the English letterforms either at the top or at the bottom and of the signage, especially when the space is a narrow pedestrian signage. However, this creates a new issue as the size of the letterform becomes reduced. However, if the priority is the Chinese language, this should only help to resolve and not mitigate the issue further.

It was interesting to observe that although the national language of Malaysia, *Bahasa Malaysia*, when used on signage, is always placed above other languages, centrally or to the top left. However, due to its reduced size, the *Bahasa Malaysia* has been designated more or less as a description (such as *restoran* for “restaurant,” refer to image 7, 2<sup>nd</sup> from left). In this case, a hierarchical position of the word *restoran*, lording over the rest is achieved but as shown, size does matter in this case. However, in a crowded space, this can be seen as a compromise to accommodate three languages on one signage.



Singapore



Malaysia



Manila



Bangkok

Image 7: Vertically-stacked Chinese characters and English alphabets in various Chinatowns.

In addition to store and pedestrian signage, restaurants in Singapore's Chinatown rely on awnings to extend their physical space. Reminiscent of European bistros, these awnings provide extra seating areas for their patrons and restaurant names are also being advertised on them, further engaging patrons and informing them of what to expect before they even step inside the restaurant. Materially, awnings are made from fabric pulled over a metal framework whereas a canopy is a more permanent overhang that is supported from the front of a building. (Robson, 2011). Both will shield the restaurant from weather and provide a convenient area for signage that runs perpendicular to the façade of any restaurant. These canopies also have an added benefit whereby the fringes also offer opportunities for stores to repeat the name of the restaurant (image 8).

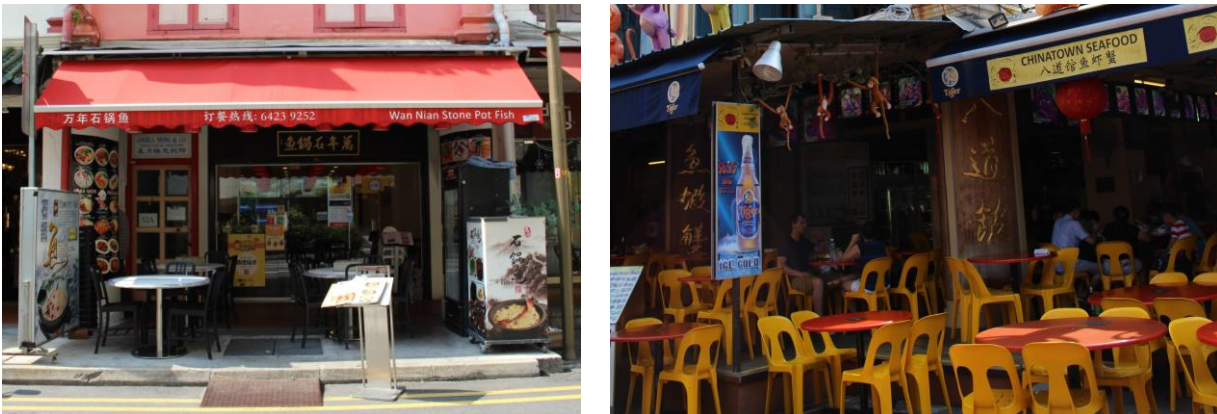


Image 8: Many restaurants in Singapore rely on awning signage as an extension of their restaurant.

### Placement of graphics

Playfulness in confronting signage design is a refreshing approach in a visually-driven environment. The act of designing is another term for composition which suggests the act of organizing. Just as a composition is not merely a haphazard collection of words, so too is a composition where functionality is concerned. Taking advantage of Chinese characters as logograms, a stand-alone dimensional Chinese character of 辣 (Pinyin: *Là*), meaning “spicy” was constructed and placed next to a restaurant entrance in Vientiane's *Sanjiang Cheng* for a restaurant that is known by “老地方川菜馆 (Pinyin: *Lǎo Dìfāng chuān Càiguǎn*). The Chinese character, rendered in a suggestive red color, literally implying the associative hot, peppery flavor. It is placed away on far right of the restaurant's name, turning the character into a unique logo. Co-incidentally, the same iconic logogram is also be found on a restaurant signage in Manila (refer to image 9).



Image 9: A stand-alone dimensional Chinese character of 辣 (Pinyin: *Là*), meaning “spicy” in Vientiane and a similar logo in Manila (far right).

Architectural elements, as noticed in San Francisco, can also be found in the Chinatowns of Manila, Singapore, and Bangkok. These gateways constructed as an entrance into a designated area of Chinatown is an architectural element that borrowed design elements such as the curvy and pointy roof structure (image 10). The features are used as one of the elements to evoke the essence of a Chinatown.



Gateway in Binondo, Manila.



A restaurant in Manila that uses an architectural element as part of the signage.



Gateway to a shopping complex in Singapore in Chinatown.



A restaurant in Singapore embellishes their signage with architectural elements constructed out of bamboos.

Image 10: Images showing two gateways in Manila and Singapore and the restaurants that borrowed architectural elements from the distinctively Chinese roof structural design.

Underlying the physicality of the signage is an underpinning structure that consists of space and elements for any composition to take place. The essence of signage as a communication tool is clarity, which can only be evoked if the elements are well distributed. In assessing that, these signage possess a visual distribution of elements that favor a balanced composition, relying on an imaginary central vertical or horizontal axis. The symmetrically balanced distribution on both sides of the central axis presents a sense of equilibrium. In order to be considered symmetrically-balanced, the distribution of components must be visually equally distributed on both the left and right sides and in the rule is violated, an asymmetrical balance is evoked. This is a rarity and is not observed in the signage surveyed.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study intends to span across three geographical hemispheres: North America, Asia, and Europe, in an effort to discover similar and different elements to suggest necessary visual representations found only in Chinese restaurants. It also seeks to find any discernible influences of foreign elements to suggest how design fosters a social significance in contributing to the gastronomic identity of Chinese restaurants. Due to the limitation of funds associated with traveling, the study is limited to only five Chinatowns in Southeast Asia despite other Chinatowns in the countries surveyed such as Luang Prabang in Laos as well as Melaka and Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia.

The outcome of this research is by no means comprehensive, but an attempt to visually analyze to understand the nuances and universality to suggest the evocative essences of what can be describable as Chinatowns. The visual survey is based on what is observable on outdoor signage only. The real choice for design of a sign board is influenced by many factors beyond this study. Although efforts were taken to consider the different nuances of multiple Chinatowns, mainly due to basing the framework from the primary research conducted in San Francisco, the scope of study for future research must be further narrowed down. The research has become too broad to cover under one sweeping study to cover a region. The included topic such as the long-standing issues between traditional and simplified Chinese alone can spill into linguistic, social and political studies and implications. In general, the three-prong research framework is overly generic and assumptive.

### **Implications**

In this day and age, consistency in the overall application of design from the choice of type styles, colors and applications across will ensure a consistent styling for a wide variety of media applications. Regardless of the myriad of signage adorning storefronts of restaurants, at the heart of the signage is an interplay of the relationships between form and content. Signage with Chinese characters, when combined with foreign letters, form a unique bilingual and sometimes trilingual synergistic combinations that reach out to a larger audience. Through commerce, Chinatown signage is a visual manifestation of



overseas Chinese's gastronomic cultural representation. In today's branding effort for a restaurateur, signage may seem like one of the unlikely priority especially now with many apps rating restaurants from the quality of food, to service, location as well as prices. However, a physical signage is here to stay for three obvious reasons: i) Physical signs need not depend on mobile device and battery to operate; ii) Despite our heavy dependency on mobile devices for information, signage has an advantage of size in a physical environment with literally, a colossal opportunity to draw vital customers from close and far away; and iii) Often a new customer's only clue about what the restaurant before he/she decides to walk through the front door of a restaurant is only based on verbal opinions from reviews in apps. Therefore, the façade of the restaurant where a signage is located, becomes an immediate visual form of communicational contact. When lighted at night, signage helps to ensure visibility in navigating an unfamiliar surroundings.

We are constantly exposed to different pictographic images and typographic information. In deciphering the evocative essence of what forms the visual identity of Chinese restaurants in Chinatowns which can be influenced by personality, nationality, culture, social status, and special interests, a coordinated, integrated signage with specific visual descriptions would be difficult to recommend. However, observably, these surveyed signage display four major components that make them uniquely Chinese: i) persistent and overwhelming applications of Chinese characters and other supportive foreign languages; ii) cultural significance and universal application of red color; and iii) graphical elements with cultural representations that are attributive to Chinese pattern designs, calligraphic characters, and architectural elements. The various signage in these Chinatowns are capable of being the markers of identity mainly because an area is designated to demarcate a unique identity that is foreign to the larger environment that it is part of.

## **Conclusions**

How the message is understood depends largely rooted in the textual and visual descriptions of what is composed on the signage. Signage, as part of a larger branding effort, can aid visual researchers and policy makers in understanding local culinary signage is unique to their own regions. As such, cities with Chinatown can seek to preserve the unique gastronomic culture of Chinatowns as one of the cities tourist attractions. As a medium for communication, signage is not just merely a decorative notice board, it is capable to influence the effectiveness of the message and that means bringing patrons into the restaurant which is a signage's existential purpose. This uniquely overseas Chinese gastronomic culture is likely to continue for many decades to come. Through the presence of Chinese restaurants where signage is part of many branding "tools" needed to run a successful business, a small population of overseas Chinese who live outside of China will uphold a business where food is associated with its identity.

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