

The Unpublished Chinese Edition of *Die neue Typographie* and the Legacy of Jan Tschichold in China

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The Unpublished Chinese Edition of *Die neue Typographie*

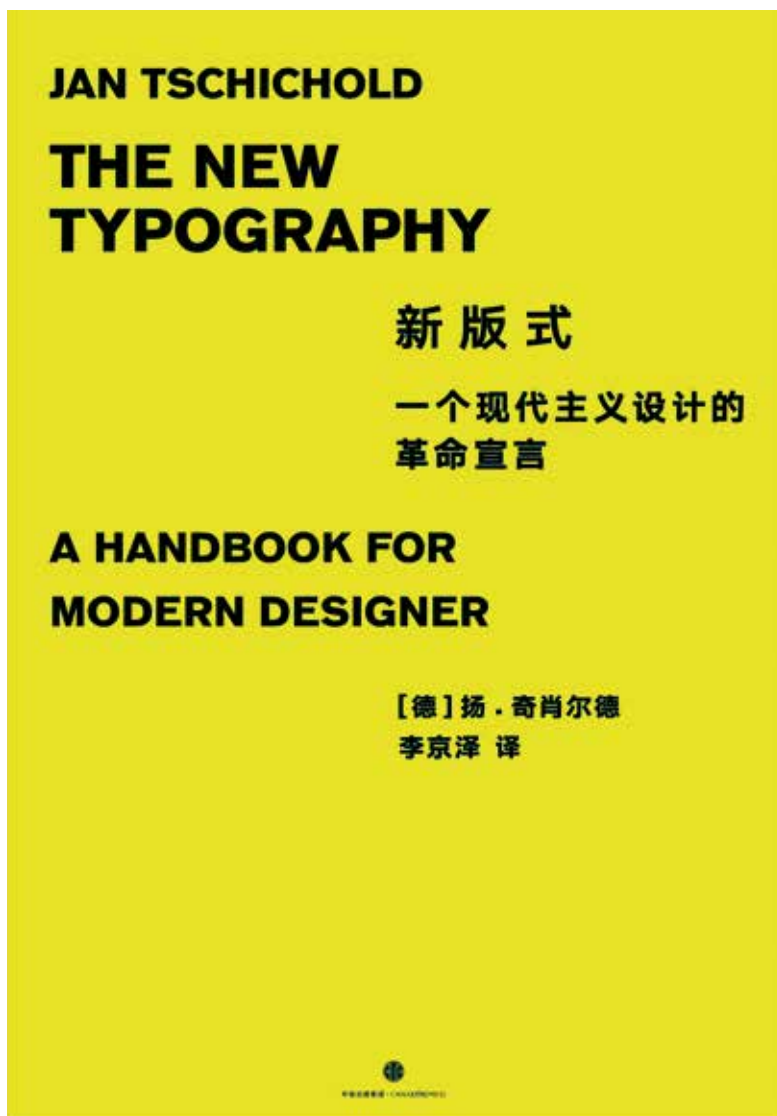
In the summer of 2015, Jiang Hua, a teacher at the Design School of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, enthusiastically accepted to review and design the Chinese version of *Die neue Typographie*. At that time, China Youth Publishing House (CYP) had purchased the copyright of the Chinese edition of the book. Jiang Hua's colleague Zhou Bo, also a teacher at the CAFA Design School and a design historian, was responsible for a series of modern design books that would be published by CYP, including *Die neue Typographie*. Dissatisfied with the quality of the translation, Zhou Bo approached Jiang Hua, a renowned graphic designer and design researcher with a particular interest in the comparative study of Chinese and modern international typography. When he first accepted the commission, Jiang Hua was not aware how difficult the job would be. He soon realised the challenge ahead. First, the book was professional – and the revision of technical terms took time. Second, the book was published nearly 100 years ago. As a masterpiece of design, *Die neue Typographie* had been revised and reprinted several times, and there were several versions in different languages, such as English and German. All this increased the difficulty of translation. At the same time, he also had to consider the layout design of the Chinese version. For such a classic design work, that took the layout as a demonstration, it was not enough to only consider the text, the layout style of the original book also had to be restored. Since the number of Chinese and English words could not be the same, this meant that the layout would be completely changed. In Jiang Hua's viewpoint:

In Jan Tschichold's book, the content is the form, and the form is the content. His design will have to be revised due to translation, which will present great difficulties. The matching of Chinese fonts and Latin characters is a complex design problem in itself.¹

He completed the preliminary design of the cover and inside pages. The cover was completely redesigned, but with a nod to Jan Tschichold. (fig. 143) He tried to keep inner pages in the same style as the original edition. The design of this book was exceedingly difficult and time-consuming. By the time he completed the revision a year later in 2016, however, the copyright had expired.

Although the Chinese version of *Die neue Typographie* was not published according to the plan, the revision and design work became an opportunity for Jiang Hua to understand this book in depth, twenty years since

¹ Jiang and Wang 2023a.



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fig. 143

Jiang Hua, cover design for the Chinese edition of *Die neue Typographie*, 2016.

he first knew the designer and the publication. Around 1995, when he was doing research on the history of graphic design at the Graphic Design Department in the School of Design, Wuxi University of Light Industry (now Jiangnan University School of Design), Jan Tschichold and his design methodology were covered in some courses. At that time, Jiang Hua realised the importance of Tschichold as “an early Modernist designer who cannot be bypassed”.²

In the 1990s, graphic design practice started to present an active picture in major cities in China, especially after the “Southern Tour Speeches” delivered by Deng Xiaoping, who emphasised that the policy of reform and opening up should be continuously implemented.³ The Chinese economic reform, also known domestically as “reform and opening-up” refers to a variety of economic reforms termed “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and “socialist market economy” in the People’s Republic of China, that began in the late 20th century. The important contents in the early stage of reform included the emergence of individual and private economy in the urban and rural areas. In addition to the reforms that allowed and encouraged a privately-owned and privately-run economy, China also comprehensively promoted opening up to the outside world.⁴ In the field of graphic design, the private economy promoted the emergence of individual designer studios. Graphic designers were confronting an exciting but chaotic situation. On the one hand, well-known designers had the luxury of choosing to cooperate with the major state-owned, as well as privately-owned companies; on the other hand, some of their work that brought huge profit to the company did not get paid, since the definition and boundary of their work were not clear. Therefore, there were initiatives for Chinese graphic designers to gather, hold exhibitions and establish designers’ associations to promote the government and the public’s understanding of graphic design at a social level.

Chinese designers at the time were concerned with the prevailing design trends rather than design history. In terms of type design, they were influenced by the American graphic designer David Carson whose work was characterised by “dirty” types adhering to none of the standard practices of typography.⁵ It was only after entering the 21st century that Chinese graphic designers began to pay more attention to international modern design theory. Increasingly, Chinese designers and design students turned their attention to the birthplace of modern design, as well as important designers who transformed the field. However, unlike Josef Müller-Brockmann’s *Grid Systems in Graphic Design* (the Chinese version was published by Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House in 2016) and *Typographie. Ein Gestaltungslehrbuch* (Typography. A Manual of Design) by Emil Ruder (the Chinese version was published by CITIC Publishing Group in 2017), *Die neue Typographie* did not have a Chinese version. Therefore, the audience at large and professional designers in China knew very little about it. Two articles on Tschichold by the American design historian Richard B. Doubleday – Jan Tschichold’s *Typographische Gestaltung: A Reference Manual for Modernist Design and Jan Tschichold*

at Penguin Books: A Resurgence of Classical Book Design were published in *Zhuangshi*, the school journal of the Academy of Arts &

² Jiang and Wang 2023b.

³ Deng 1993: 370–371.

⁴ BBC 2018.

⁵ Design is History n.d.

Design, Tsinghua University, on May 2012 and August 2013 respectively. Although *Zhuangshi* is one of the leading academic design journals in China, the audience of the journal is limited.

Historical Connections

However, although China's graphic design industry began and developed late, in fact, as early as the period of the Republic of China (1912–1949), there was already a group of Chinese artists and designers who went abroad to study. The concept of modern graphic design was applied to the covers of Chinese books and periodicals at the time. For example, the books and magazines cover by Qian Juntao and Chen Zhifo show the impact of modern typography. After the founding of New China (1949), Yu Bingnan, then an undergraduate student from the Printing Art Department, Luxun Academy of Fine Art, was sent to the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig in East Germany to study book design in the 1960s. He brought a selection of Tschichold's original works to the Central Academy of Arts & Crafts (currently the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University) where he taught after returning to China. Among these books, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze über Fragen der Gestalt des Buches und der Typographie* (The Form of the Book. Selected Essays on Questions of Book Design and Typography) still in the library of the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University. Under the influence of modern graphic design in Germany, Yu Bingnan compiled "Formal Laws of Layout Design", the teaching plan for the Layout Design course in the Graphic Design Department at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in 1981.

At present, the younger generation of students from the Visual Communication Department of the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, can still learn about Tschichold through the typography design class taught by Yu Bingnan's student Zhao Jian, a professor from the Visual Communication Design Department. **(fig. 144)** Interacting with students during the teaching process and sharing their successes and failures in implementing the classic design principles in Tschichold's book helped Zhao Jian recognise his blind spots while enriching his knowledge of space and typography, as well as the grammar and context behind these abstract structures. At the same time, he was looking for the inner connection between calligraphy, traditional Chinese culture and the typography design advocated by Jan Tschichold. His book *Fan shi ge ming: Zhongguo xian dai shu ji she ji de fa duan, 1862–1937* (The Beginning of Chinese Modern Book Design Paradigm, 1862–1937), published in 2011, explored how Chinese designers changed their books, from traditional thread-bound to international paperbacks, creating the concepts and style according to aesthetic needs in China during the period of social change and transition from 1862 to 1937. The cover of the book is his homage to and contemporary interpretation of *La Jeunesse* published in 1915. **(fig. 145)** Meanwhile, this book also reflects his understanding of the inner spirit behind the classic design rules of Modernist designers including Tschichold, through more than twenty years of teaching and practice, as well as the exploration to apply them in the current local context.

In the Chinese typography course at CAFA, Tschichold and his publications also proved to be important research objects. A dozen modern typography designers were studied in the course, including Wolfgang Weingart, John Maeda and Lu Xun.⁶ In the course, Jiang Hua established a correlation between his research on Tschichold

6 Lu Xun is a pioneer of early Chinese text design and book design.



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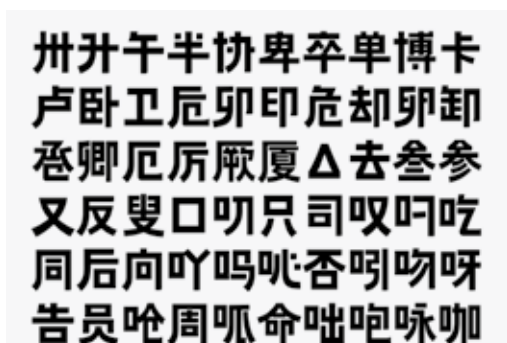
fig. 144 Undergraduate student works created for Typography Design Basic Training course under the guidance of Zhao Jian, Visual Communication Department, The Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, 2008–2009. Clockwise: Chen Meng, Guo Hongguan, Chen Meng, Yan Chaoran.

fig. 145 Zhao Jian, *The Beginning of Chinese Modern Book Design Paradigm, 1862–1937*, 2011.



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fig. 146 Jiang Hua, *Radical Patterns: The Birth of Chinese Modern Typography* Exhibition (Beijing, CAFA Art Museum, 17 March – 10 April 2015), poster design, 2015.



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fig. 147 Jiang Hua, *Yibingshou*, typeface design, produced by Tsanger, 2023.

and his research on modern Chinese calligraphy with an awareness that in early Modernist book design in China in the 1930s, some designers and design works have certain relationship with early Modernism. In his viewpoint, Jan Tschichold's practice has significant meaning because:

On the surface, this [*The New Typography*] is a pamphlet that attempts to influence and transform society through specific operational design norms. It also reminds us that design has always been associated with the desire to innovate. The content and form of typography, as a way to spread beauty, transform the world, and establish norms and standards, needs to be pursued by every generation of designers and students.

The above-mentioned course, which Jiang Hua has been teaching, aims to creatively rediscover the most fundamental law of Chinese typography design, instead of directly following the Western methodology. In his view, the logic of Western typography is based on Latin characters and the “font-typesetting” system is quite straightforward compared to the sophisticated Chinese typography based on Chinese characters with numerous transformations. “Give me twenty-six soldiers of lead and I will conquer the world” is a sentence he frequently quoted to explain the different systems between Western and Chinese typography. For him, Chinese characters are a “meta-design” text system, therefore not only the object of design but also the source of design methods; the characters make it impossible to simply transplant the Western model directly.

Methodology Inspired by Jan Tschichold's Theory and Practice

What kind of creative paradigm should Chinese typography design have? How can an original design knowledge be developed from Chinese culture? How can a concise, radical and solid learning path be built? These are the questions Jiang Hua constantly thinks about in his teaching practice.⁷ As the most basic issue of visual communication design, the discussion about type design would also directly lead to the issue of design methods in the Chinese context. This kind of thinking about tradition and the present coincides with Jiang Hua's understanding of Tschichold's practice and theory. In his viewpoint, the experience and form may become outdated, but the deep logic and theory behind the method Tschichold took when facing his own design problems at that time may be the eternal. Therefore, it is not contradictory that Tschichold later turned into a traditionalist, which reveals the unchanging key logic under the ever-changing forms.

Jiang Hua's thinking on this issue is accompanied by his research on modern Meishuzi and ancient Chinese characters. Meishuzi is a practical and artistic font – in a narrow sense, it also means “Modern artistic characters”. It began to appear at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and was formed in a context of rapid development of industry, commerce and the publishing and printing industries, while at the same time strongly influenced by Western Modernist thought and design styles.⁸ Jiang Hua aims to return to the origin of these characters to innovate the development of

Chinese type design. **(fig. 146)** His teaching experiments try to consider characters as one of the ontological

⁷ CAFA 2023.

⁸ Cao and Li 2022.

issues of design, not just the elements of type design, and explore their related “valuable and possible other dimensions”.⁹ “Chinese Characters as a Method” is one of the courses Jiang Hua has taught at CAFA. The activities arranged during the course include inscription visits and practices related to Meishuzi. Inscription visit has always been an important means of Chinese cultural inheritance. A notable recent example is Lu Xun, who in his early years visited inscriptions, making copies and collecting rubbings for several years, through which he gained a deep understanding of traditional Chinese culture. This helped him explore a creative way to combine local Chinese culture and Western design method in his early 20th century book design. Inspired by Lu Xun’s creative trajectory, Jiang Hua also organises inscription visits for his students. In addition to observing classic Chinese calligraphy, another important purpose is to allow students to experience the relationship between Chinese characters and the context in which they exist. For example, a trip to the Forbidden City would help students understand why the calligraphy on the plaques hanging at the gate of the palace is huge, so as to help them understand how the weight of characters, which is particularly important in typeface design, is presented in ancient Chinese calligraphy. In addition, the inscription is also a technique of reproduction, while stone and wood are the media of communication. From the perspective of typeface design, the tools and materials – namely stone and the carving knife – have simply evolved into computers and vector software. Designers need to understand how to preserve the flexibility of writing in the most concise form.

These characteristics of Chinese type design are reflected in the creation of Meishuzi, which is considered the beginning of modern Chinese character design.¹⁰ As a modern typeface of Chinese style, Meishuzi is a continuity of the Chinese writing tradition with a design logic from the printing era. By analysing the contribution of Meishuzi to the construction of modern Chinese type design, Jiang Hua tried to rethink the unique progress of modern Chinese type design and its modernity with the idea to put Meishuzi into the dialogue of international typography.¹¹ This is reflected in the diverse international background of the participants involved in his projects, including Ahn Sang-soo, a leading South Korean type designer; Terayama Yusaku, a Japanese designer whose research covers visual semiotics and visual information design; as well as Wang Min, previous dean of the CAFA Design School (2003–2016) and the founder of the CAFA Typeface Research Center. Wang Min was Jiang Hua’s PhD supervisor and was previously Art Director and Design Manager at Adobe (1990–1998). He is an active promoter of Chinese type design research and a key figure who brought Latin typeface design education into China. Wang Min’s type design is also deeply influenced by Tschichold. Since he migrated to the United States in 1985, whether during his studies at Yale under the guidance of Paul Rand or his work in Silicon Valley, his design has often been related to Tschichold. When talking about applying the methodology from *Die neue Typographie* in practice, Wang Min stated that asymmetrical text design was difficult to achieve at the time. After the emergence of computer typesetting, the feasibility of the typography advocated by Tschichold improved. In the late 1980s and early

1990s, using the computer, Wang Min made many attempts that broke the previous rules. This influence

⁹ Jiang and Wang 2023a.

¹⁰ Jiang 2009.

¹¹ CAFA 2023.

was reflected on the great importance put on typography at the CAFA Design School, where a series of books on the topic were translated and introduced to students, including *Typography Today* (1980) by Helmut Schmid (the Chinese version was published by Shanghai People's Fine Arts in 2017) and Ruder's *Typographie*. Besides, a tour exhibition of Wolfgang Weingart's work was launched at the CAFA Museum in 2017. The research on Western designers from early Modernism to post-World War II provides a context for research on Tschichold.

Meanwhile, Jiang Hua's research and development into type design has led to an in-depth cooperation with the Tsanger Font Foundry. At present, they plan to launch the typeface Yibingshou, an innovative new Heiti.¹² **(fig. 147)** In doing so, they are trying to make the 2023 project productive. Different from other Heiti fonts, Yibingshou is not a modification of an existing typeface, but a modern interpretation based on the Clerical script, that was popular in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), as well as its presentation by Yi Bingshou, a calligrapher in the Qing Dynasty (1636–1911). Therefore, this is not a simple retro, but an innovation with the essence of previous art and the current perception of typography. Its feature is that it is more in line with the technical beauty of Chinese character writing itself, and it is also suitable for the screen. For Jiang Hua, immersing himself in tradition, gaining insight into the relationship between past and current life, and digging out the real contemporaneity from tradition are the methodology to “grow” the contemporariness of Chinese typography design. This is the key idea he gained from studying the spirit of Tschichold's publications for years.

12 Heiti is a sans serif typeface for Chinese characters created in the 1930s. It was influenced by Western sans serifs. Li 2011: 38.

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