

Illuminography:

a survey of the
pictorial language
of Hong Kong's neon signs

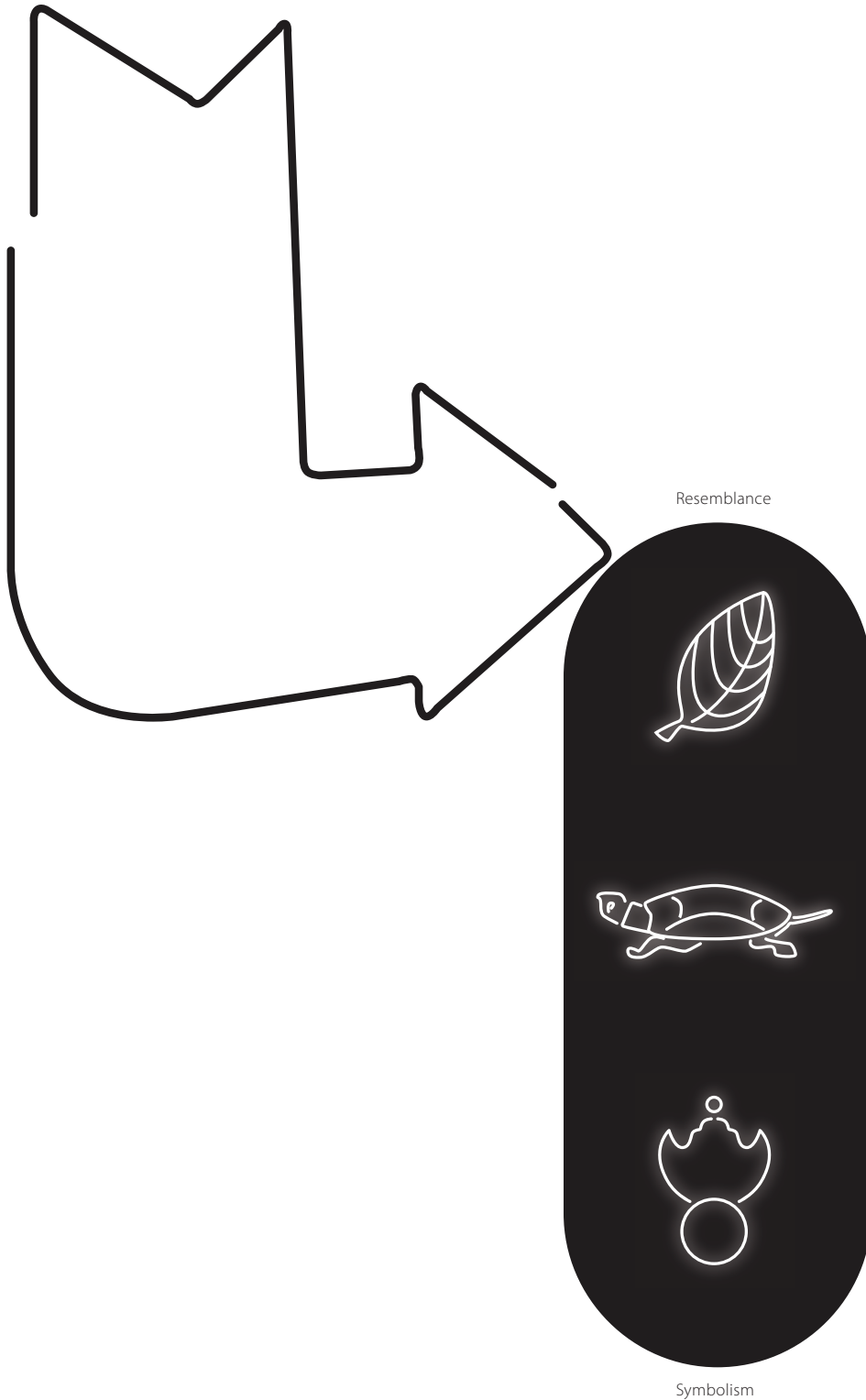
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This article draws from a larger archival project in which still existing neon signs in much of Hong Kong's Kowloon peninsula have been photographed and subsequently preserved in the context of their imminent disappearance from the streets. Following the implementation of stricter regulations on sign sizes, the rise of cheaper and energy efficient LED solutions and urban redevelopment, Hong Kong's neon signs have an uncertain future. This article examines graphic forms of a range of icons and symbols used on neon signs plus their meanings. As Hong Kong's spectacular neonscape is (and was) a symbol of prosperity and consumerism, individual signs, icons and symbols of another kind present their own narratives. This article considers the relationship between icons and the city that they have prided for decades; specifically, it looks at its unique eclecticism. It reveals how a seeming spectacle of hues, lights, and images presents a story about Hong Kong's bicultural heritage. Indeed, what it intends to highlight is that even though neon signage is a Western technology and although it was used quite specifically in the context of consumerism, Hong Kong's adaptation indicates an eclecticism that has maintained traditional Chinese symbolism.

Keywords

Hong Kong
neon signs
pictorial imagery
streetscape
symbolism



Resemblance

Symbolism

Hong Kong's urban life and space have taken shape in the context of a colonial beginning and postcolonial continuation of international trade and commerce. Momentous verticality, illuminated streets in reds, blues, greens, and yellows, and the title "city that never sleeps" (The Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2016) are symbols of a modern city: of Hong Kong. Because the manufacturing industry significantly expanded in the mid-20th century and much of Shanghai's entertainment industry moved down to Hong Kong as a result of the Chinese Communist Revolution, neon signs (which technology came from the West) emerged rapidly and invited, accommodated, and highlighted a new lifestyle that was particularly consumerist. In the United States, neon signs had become "symbol[s] of urban decay" as early as the 1940s, with mainly liquor stores and deteriorated motels continuing their usage (Ribbat, 2013, p. 21). In Hong Kong, however, neon signs have symbolized unprecedented consumerism until today. Yet they have seen their own decline in recent years due to stricter government regulations (Building Department, 2013), the rise of cost-efficient LED technology (Tang, 2014), and urban redevelopment.

From the mid-20th century until today, Hong Kong's neon landscape has comprised a wide range of signs that display significant vernacular graphic styles, including an array of icons and symbols that feature different indicative, informative, decorative, and symbolic means to communicating with a consuming public. In light of their now imminent disappearance, it is important to take stock of their distinct visual form – to survey their significant lettering but also their unique collection of pictorial imagery – and attempt to understand what they can tell about Hong Kong as a modern city that is in popular writing often referred to a place where 'East meets West'. In this article, we therefore present what we call an illuminography of the pictorial language on neon signs in urban Hong Kong. Illuminography involves (1) a survey of the illuminated images on display in urban spaces, (2) a visual analysis and subsequent cataloguing of such images, and most importantly, (3) a study of their meaning in a certain context. The article is drawn from a larger project on Hong Kong neon signs that has at its core a growing database of photo-documented signs as they are found in Hong Kong streets today. In the course of the project, we have already witnessed the disappearance of numerous recorded signs, proving the endeavor ever more relevant as it both ensures a certain photographic conservation of an important aspect of Hong Kong's changing urban visual culture, and it allows close analysis of individual signs, lettering, and pictorial imagery through the photo database.

What we intend to highlight in this article more specifically is that even though neon signage is a Western technology and although it was used quite specifically in the context of consumerism, Hong Kong's adaptation indicates a rather particular eclecticism that has maintained traditional Chinese symbolism. Up until today, a pot pourri of icons and symbols has

illuminated Hong Kong streets, and as we attempt to articulate their significance, the apparent spectacle of signs presents a diverse range of visual markers that are highly representative of Hong Kong's bicultural heritage: they involve images that range from old Chinese symbols to global signs of desire, and in their eclectic fashion they represent Hong Kong as a melting pot of tradition, colonial implication, and particular consumption.

The following survey of pictorial imagery on Hong Kong neon signs is divided into two parts: (1) a visual analysis of the variant icons and symbols displayed on neon signs, which both allows us to take stock of the diverse graphic forms the pictorial imagery utilizes and provides a base for (2) understanding the meanings of these symbols and icons and their graphic forms in the context of Hong Kong as a modern city. In our analysis we consider the pictorial imagery of Hong Kong's neon signs as vernacular graphic forms and as illuminated markers of a discourse in place. The place of such markers (the center of a city) – as Roland Barthes emphasized – beholds social activities chiefly of purchase and meeting (Barthes, 1986, p. 101). Pictorial imagery on neon signs forms part of such activities as it functions to visually communicate between people through illuminated graphic forms and specific spatial arrangement. In combination with phonetic or alphabetic scripts (in the Hong Kong context including also the Chinese pictorial script) that convey information about certain shops, products, and services advertised in streets, the symbols and/or icons on signs "contribute to the making of recognizable social meanings of a place" (Papen, 2015, p. 3). Ingo H. Warnke (2013, p. 160 in Papen, 2015, p. 3) calls this the material manifestation of "discourses in urban space that are also discourses about urban space." Yet, while the discursive construction of space in urban centers is, as Barthes argued, primarily driven by commercial signs, when truly following the language of context as we consider the diverse icons and symbols in Hong Kong streets, we find stories that not only 'speak' consumption but that 'speak' Hong Kong.

We refer to the pictorial imagery on signs either as symbols or icons. As elaborated extensively in semiotic scholarship (e.g. Crow, 2003; Nöth, 1995; Peirce, 1991), a pure instance of an icon does not exist because the relation between the icon and the object it resembles would have to be one of absolute identity, meaning that it would be 'noncommunicative' (Nöth, 1995, p. 122). In other words, icons always take on – to a certain extent – a mode of signifying or meaning making and also have symbolic qualities (Kenner, 2010, p. 7). The level at which pictorial images "resemble" or "symbolize" differs however, and in light of our argument about how in Hong Kong the pictorial language of neon signs illuminates the territory's bicultural heritage, we make a point in referring to different images as either icons or symbols. In support of our argument, while acknowledging the above-mentioned semiotic complexity, we refer to pictorial imagery on neon signs as icons or symbols depending on whether they involve direct

visual resemblances of the products or services offered by the respective businesses (icons), or whether they require more expansive explanation – interpretation – about what they stand for (symbols).¹ Finally, in this endeavor, we have excluded icons and symbols that are brand or company logos. Although logos often feature on neon signs, they require their own theoretical and visual elaboration and deserve an article of their own.

Icons and symbols, a categorization

We begin our analysis by categorizing the icons and symbols as found on Hong Kong's neon signs. Or, as Ian Noble and Russell Bestley describe it, we compile "a classification of similar things that have common characteristics or traits" (Noble and Bestley, 2016: p. 108). We do so by creating a system that will allow "a process of comparison to reveal patterns and connections that may not have been obvious [upon a] first encounter [with] the body of material being analyzed or organized" (Ibid). This initial organization of types and their classification purposes further visual and semiotic inquiry into, and contextual understanding through, the pictorial language of Hong Kong's neon signs.

As mentioned in the introduction, this article is drawn from a collection of photo-documented neon signs as recorded in Hong Kong streets. The documenting of signs started in the summer of 2015 and is a continuing project. To date, most neon signs in the Kowloon peninsula have been photographed from diverse angles: in close-ups and wider shots, in the daytime and at night.² For the purpose of this article we have gathered additional photographs of significant signs on display in other relevant (commercial) urban areas and "new towns"³, in support of certain classifications that we knew we could make but had insufficient data for should we have only kept to the current database. For example, the old neighborhood of Kowloon City (whose neon signs are yet to be documented in the archival project)

1. This means that, for example, a pictorial image of abstracted feet indicating a (foot) massage salon is referred to as "icon", while an image of an abstracted Eiffel Tower on the neon sign of a French restaurant is considered a symbol as it does not directly resemble the product on offer and instead makes reference to France (or Paris) through an image of France's most "emblematic" architectural structure.

2. In this article, we will not elaborate visual differences between night and daytime shots as we focus primarily on what is represented through icons or symbols in the context of Hong Kong.

3. Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region (SAR) that has urban, rural and, industrial areas, as well as a harbor. Yet, a large part of the Region consists of country and marine parks. In certain locations in what is called the New Territories – the largest area in the SAR which has historically been (and still is) mainly countryside and country park – new towns were developed from the 1970s to 1990s, to house Hong Kong's booming population. These new towns have an urban character.

is known specifically for its Southeast Asian restaurants. These restaurants feature a unique set of symbols that are mostly (but not only) found in this part of Hong Kong. When we added these newly made visual records from other commercial areas in Hong Kong, we had a pool of approximately 400 photographs of unique neon signs, almost half of which feature icons or symbols that are not brand or company logos.

Before we focus on the pictorial imagery, however, let us briefly describe the basic features of Hong Kong's neon signs and detail how pictorial imagery is displayed on or in these signs. There are different sign types. The most common signs are horizontal or vertical banners that extend into the streets: "projecting banners" (horizontal), "columnar projecting banners" (vertical), and "irregular projecting banners" (featuring non-rectangular shapes). Other common sign types are "shop front fascias" (horizontal) and "shop front columnar banners" (vertical), which are entirely attached to building façades (Tam, 2014). In the past even larger neon signs were found on top of low-rise buildings (which can be gathered from old Hong Kong street photos), yet as the city grew increasingly vertical, neon signs were made to fit the changing streetscape⁴, meaning that they came to be attached to higher-rising façades, together forming a patchwork of neon signs that extend into roads and streets from both sides (Tam, 2014).

In response to an argument Venturi et.al. made in their infamous book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1966), namely that the "architecture of styles and signs is antispatial; [that] it is an architecture of communication over space; [that] communication dominates space" (Venturi et.al., 1966, p. 8), one could argue that in the case of Hong Kong, although its signs are visually prominent (if not dominating), they also emphasize the architecture of the city in their verticality. That is, the spectacle of signs in Hong Kong streets affirms the spectacle of verticality of the city's architecture. It is, however, outside the scope of this article to further explore this relation between Hong Kong neon signs and the architectural form of the urban space in which they are displayed. Indeed, we keep to the visual significance of the signs themselves and more specifically their pictorial imagery.

On the above-mentioned sign types, symbols and icons are usually found at either the upper right corners or left corners, or in the middle of the banners (*figure 1a*), while some are instead found prominently featured entirely inside sign frames (*figure 1b*), which is also where icons and symbols are usually positioned on shop front fascias and columnar signs. Rarely are symbols or icons found at the bottom of banners, unless they are arrows indicating the direction in which shops can be found (namely, the ground floor at street level).⁵ Irregular projecting banners, in certain instances, present icons or symbols in their entirety, meaning that the frame of the

4. They were also largely aimed at pedestrian audiences rather than those using cars (Tam, 2014).

5. In the article, however, we have not included arrows as a category of icons on signs.

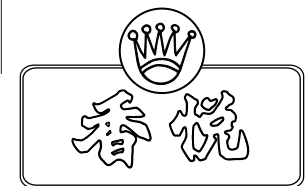
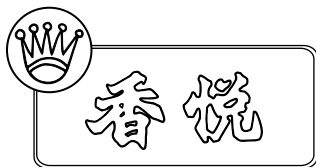


Figure 1a

Symbols and icons are often found at the upper right or left corners of banners, or in the middle.

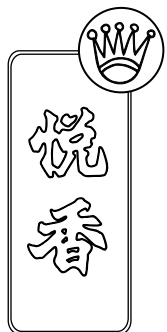


Figure 1b

Some symbols or icons are found prominently featured entirely inside sign frames.



Figure 1c

Irregular projecting banners may present icons or symbols in their entirety.



sign equals the shape of the image (*figure 1c*). There are other cases in which pictorial imagery is used (entirely or in part) as sign frames, usually either in the form of patterns of smaller icons or presenting larger symbols of which the shapes easily translate into sign frames, such as those of Roman columns (*figure 1d*). Finally, icons and symbols are also frequently applied in the backgrounds of neon signs (*figure 1e*). In those cases, they are used less straightforwardly as indicators of shops, venues, or products but mostly for decorative purposes.

In those signs where icons or symbols are featured prominently, lettering and pictorial imagery are similarly emphasized. The pictorial imagery either is positioned at the top of banners, takes up a prominent place inside sign frames, forms the outlines of irregular signs, or is otherwise used as sign frame. Lettering and pictorial imagery are balanced out between the actual icon and character sizes, their positioning in the signs, and their positioning in relation to each other. In those signs where icons are

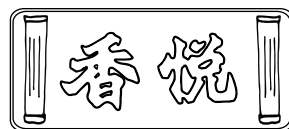


Figure 1d

There are other cases in which pictorial imagery is used (entirely or in part) as sign frames.



Figure 1e

Icons and symbols are also frequently used in the backgrounds of neon signs.

used predominantly as decoration, the lettering is more pronounced and icons are usually small in size, featuring in the background or as part of sign frames. In these instances, icons often feature in the form of patterns (e.g. wave shapes patterning the background or strips of mahjong tiles forming a sign's frame) or in combination with other icons (e.g. a visual whoosh of stars and strokes featuring beside emphasized lettering).

Prominently featured icons may be perceived more relevant when considering their meanings in relation to the shops, services, or products they indicate (i.e. they signify what is on offer and in so doing appeal to potential customers). Yet when understanding those icons that are used chiefly for decorative purposes in relation to the context of Hong Kong as a modern city, they are of equal importance no matter their minor position in the actual signs. Their featuring in the background helps to expand an understanding of the eclectic whole of pictorial imagery on Hong Kong neon signs. The smaller icons have therefore, without discrimination in priority, been taken up in our categorization. Icons and symbols are never only indicative or decorative, they serve both purposes, however to different degrees of emphasis. Ultimately, they are all intended to speak to a consuming public.

What we have omitted are "singulars": those icons or symbols that are entirely one of a kind. In other words, we have only considered icons or symbols of which there are three or more (i.e. if what an icon or symbol depicts matches that what two or more others depict: the same kind of object in visual form, in meaning, or both). Regardless, only a few odd ones have been eliminated in the process, as most occur plentifully in Hong Kong's neonscape and seem therefore to be following some kind of "illuminographic tradition".

Pictorial imagery on neon signs is used to visually communicate something about the businesses it represents: it advertises, emphasizes, decorates, and indicates. Or, as Venturi et.al. argue about neon signage in general, it is used "for commercial persuasion" (Venturi et.al., 1997, p. 9). In order to come to relevant categories of the imagery used on signs, we therefore first considered the kind of shops, services, and venues that display icons or symbols on their signs and came to three overarching business categories accordingly: commerce, food, and leisure. Three business types, however, did not fit any of these categories but feature, in light of our larger argument, some of the most relevant symbols. Let us elaborate. Neon signs (and neon signs with icons or symbols) belong to one of the following business types: bars, hotels, jewelers, karaoke bars, mahjong parlors, malls, massage salons, nightclubs, pawnshops, restaurants, saunas, shops, and snooker centers. Although this may suggest that most of them indicate businesses that offer leisure experiences, specifically at night, the actual neonscape is much more diverse. To better reflect this diversity, we expanded two of the business types – specifically "shops" and "restaurants" – by sub-categorizing

Leisure	Food	Commerce
Bars	Cha chaan tengs	Clothes shops
Hotels	Chinese restaurants	Electronic stores
Majong parlors	Hotpot restaurants	Malls
Massage salons	Noodle shops	
Nightclubs	Regional kitchens	Other
Saunas	Seafood restaurants	Chinese medicine shops
Snooker centers		Pawn shops
		Tea shops

Figure 2

Categories of shops and services that feature icons or symbols on their neon signs.

them under “food” and “commerce” (figure 2). Under “food”, we find cha chaan tengs (Hong Kong-style cafés), Chinese restaurants, dessert shops, hotpot restaurants, noodle shops, regional kitchens, and seafood restaurants. Further, under “commerce”, we find clothes shops, electronics stores, the earlier mentioned jewelers, and malls in general. The three shop types that do not belong to any of the three larger categories, namely Chinese medicine shops, pawnshops, and tea shops, we have kept separate.

The individual symbols and icons that feature on the businesses of the above-mentioned categories either resemble what is on offer or connote an atmosphere or symbolize something other than the products and services on offer. Figure 3 presents the icons per business category either on the “resemblance” or “symbolism” side. Some icons and symbols, however, cannot be placed on either side as they both resemble the shop, product, or venue and symbolize something other than the product. For instance, both the rooster and the dragon under “leisure” directly reference the names of the respective businesses while an additional layer of symbolism ought to be taken into account when considering their meanings.⁶ In the table, we have presented the different icon and symbol types per business types under the business categories. While seafood restaurants feature crab, fish, shell, and shrimp icons, we have considered these “similar” icons and have chosen only one of those to represent the type in the table. Further, also the visual form and styles of icons of the same kind may differ. Whilst most icons display a similar level of detail, presenting outlines of an object or food item with minimal extra detail (see figures 4-7 in the appendix), some businesses have gone beyond such simplicity by dedicating more space on their signboards and allowing highly detailed pictorial imagery. Creating such complex imagery in neon signs also demands more skilled handwork in the production, which in turn means that a business has invested an extra sum

6. We will further elaborate on such symbolism below.

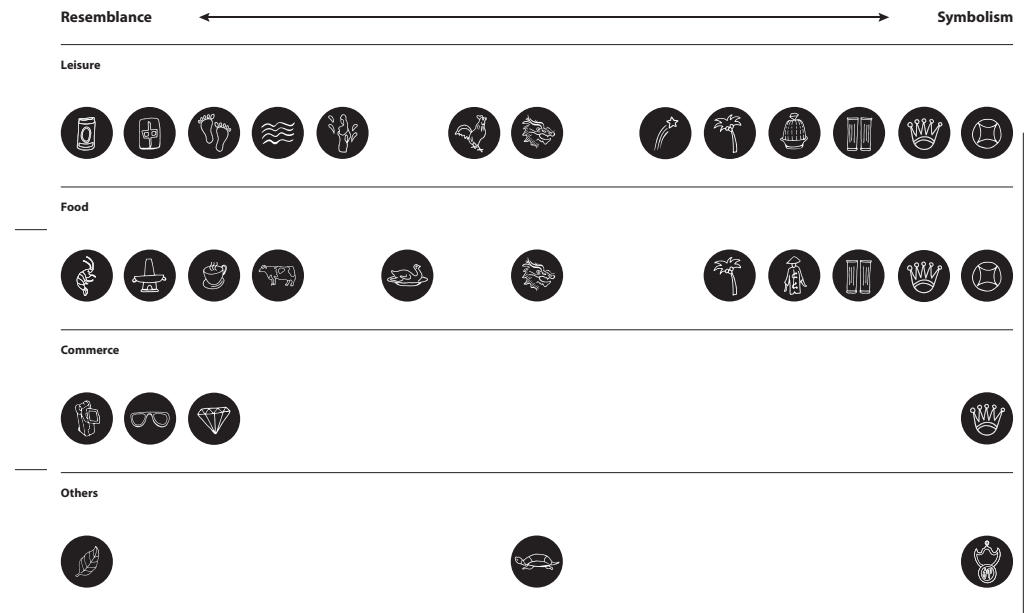


Figure 3

Icons and symbols per category, based on resemblance or symbolism.

in ordering such work. This extra investment involves an additional layer of communication as it seems to “persuade” the consuming public not merely with an icon but with a work of art that leaves an extra visual impression in support of brand awareness (see figures 8-9 in the appendix). In the table below, however, we have represented each icon type following its most common visual form, simply in outlines.

Leisure is not only the category that comprises the largest variety of icons and symbols, but also includes a significant range of pictorial images with diverse symbolic meanings. The businesses in this category sell experiences rather than products, which explains the use of symbols that signify certain spatial or location-based settings (roman columns, fountain, palm tree). For bars and clubs, the more universal (Western) choice for star symbols is equally explainable, in particular because such venues have historically had a large Western clientele. In the food category, approximately half of the pictorial imagery concerns icons that resemble the kinds of products on offer, specifically among the Chinese-style eateries such as seafood (shrimp, fish, crab), hotpot (an actual hotpot), and general Chinese restaurants (cooked chicken). In the commerce category (which is the smallest in terms of the quantity of signs in Hong Kong’s neonscape), most icons can be found on the resemblance side, since this category focuses primarily on the selling of commodities. Only one shop features a crown symbol on its façade; this shop not only sells clothes but also provides tailor services (to royal standard, as its symbol suggests). Finally, the uncategorizable business types and their icons and symbols involve significant examples of traditional Chinese symbolism and contribute to great effect to our argument about

how Hong Kong's neonscape tells stories not just about consumerism but about Hong Kong.

In the following two sections, we elaborate on specific types of icons and symbols as outlined in the table above. We do so from a socio-visual perspective, so as to not only take note of the graphic form of said imagery, but also to consider it in the context in which the symbols and icons came about: a moment of ever-growing consumerism that came to be adapted into an already existing local culture.

Resemblance in pictorial imagery

As has become apparent in the previous section, many neon signs present literal pictorial representations of what is offered by the respective shops, restaurants, or venues they illuminate. Yet regardless of their literal references, many of these icons also hold place-specific meaning. For example, the beer can icon that can be found on various nightclub signs indicates one type of alcoholic beverage served in nightclubs, yet it also references a significant local history (see figures 10-12). All nightclubs featuring beer cans feature the brand Blue Girl. Blue Girl is a German beer brand that was first introduced to the territory in the early 20th century, via Qingdao in Mainland China, after which it was acquired by the Jebson Group – a former shipping agency that was established in Hong Kong, in the late 19th century – which built up Blue Girl's position as 'leading premium beer brand' in Hong Kong (Blue Girl Beer, 2014). Regardless of its Western origin, it is precisely Hong Kong's history of trading that has adopted such a brand and made it its own.

The next icon in the leisure category is a mahjong tile as frequently displayed on signs of mahjong parlors – sometimes in abstracted tile shapes in red, green, and blue outlines alone (see figure 13) but usually with the inscriptions of the game's three dragon tiles (see figures 14-15). The dragon tiles are the game's higher scoring tiles, tiles that are most likely to contribute to a win. With the display of winning tiles, parlors not only indicate their venue, they emphasize a chance to win. Although icons usually portray inherent elements of universality and are not bound to a particular language (Horton, 2005, p. 158) and even though they resemble quite directly the objects they indicate (Peirce, 1991, p. 239), to truly comprehend what they resemble (and what they mean), shared experience is necessary, and this experience evolves at a level of socio-economic development (Sassoon and Gaur, 1997, p. 29).

The cooked chicken in the food category is an example that both directly represents the product on sale and signifies Chinese tradition, hence its position somewhere in the middle of the table. Myriad Chinese restau-

rants have icons of cooked chickens heading their neon signs (see figures 16-18). These chickens are usually their signature dishes. To signal "royal" quality, the chicken icon in Figure 17 is even featured with a crown (interestingly, even though Chinese emperors wore crowns, the shape of this crown resembles its Western variant)⁷; in Figure 18, glow lines similarly suggest that the chicken shines like gold. Glow lines such as these are often-used graphic elements on neon signs, specifically with regard to jewelry items, indicating their sparkling qualities. Such lines are also easy to make with neon tubes and can subsequently be made to flash to increase the spectacle of illumination.

Although icons of cooked chickens on signs are not particularly Chinese, the way in which they are presented indicates more than just a dish. Indeed, where in the Western context "whole" chickens are cooked and served headless and icons usually present them as such (legs up), they need their heads following Chinese tradition. While there exist many diverse Chinese gastronomical cultures (Swanson, 1996, p. 33) and while Hong Kong's Chinese restaurants also often refer back to local cuisines of certain regions in China, chickens are usually cooked and served as a whole. In Chinese culture, following Confucian ideology, wholeness is an important concept: it is a "necessary condition for family happiness" (Zhao, 2006, p. 33). This idea has been transferred into kitchens. There is a Chinese saying "hou tau hou mei" (好頭好尾) which literally translates to "good head, good tail" and means precisely this: desired completeness. As a result, chicken icons on neon signs are featured in the same way. Indeed, the icon is not only supposed to indicate that the restaurant sells cooked chickens; it is to signify its symbolic meaning. What is more, as Neon Sign Master Lau (interview, 2015) mentioned, the way in which the chicken icon is designed is also of particular importance. Its leg should point slightly downward because then "it looks most tasty".

Another traditional product that can be found on neon signs in the form of icons is 'gwai ling gou' (龜苓膏): turtle jelly (see figures 19-21). It is a traditional Chinese medicine but is often served as dessert. Its turtle icon is therefore categorized not under "food" but under "others" and positioned, like the chicken icon, somewhere in the middle. The sign as a whole can be understood as a kind of rebus reading "gwai ling gou" from top to bottom: (1) turtle: 'gwai'; (2) 苓: 'ling' (which is a Chinese herb also used in the jelly), and (3) 'gou': the jelly itself. When zooming in at the turtle's shield, an interesting relation can be found between the neon outlines and the detailed drawing in the background. Turtles used in 'gwai ling gou' are of a particular kind: they are called 'cuora trifasciata', but they also go by the name "golden coin turtle". Their shields have a distinctive hexagonal pattern with brighter yellow or golden colors on the outer sides of the hexagons and darker shades towards the centers. These hexagons are seen to resemble old Chi-

7. Crowns are frequently used on neon signs to represent businesses' royal allure. We will return to this in the next section.

nese coins, hence the name of the turtle.

The neon sign's background painting presents a shield with precisely such a pattern painted in detail (see figure 21). Yet, its neon outlines only resemble one coin (see figures 19-20). Partly due to technical limitations of neon technology which do not allow too much detail, the turtle's shield in neon outlines has the form of just one coin with a square hole in the middle. Besides resembling the turtle as turtle, the neon outlines indicate the turtle's symbolic meaning through the coin shape: prosperity. Indeed, coins are elements that are frequently used in more traditional Chinese decorations, as well as they feature in Hong Kong's neon landscape. While their usage in charms, tassels, and other forms of decoration dates back to far before Hong Kong's turn to consumption and establishment, they are a unique example of an ancient Chinese symbol that has been smoothly integrated into the visibility of Hong Kong's modern urban and commercial life. The 'gwai ling gou' sign also shows that like many other signs (figures 25-27, 40, 58-59) it is not only its nightglow that is important. By day its painted background is – albeit different – equally significant. In some instances neon sign backgrounds even reveal additional information about the products they indicate.

Chinese tea is another traditional product that finds its icons represented in Hong Kong's neon landscape – either in the form of a tealeaf (indicating a tea shop) (figures 22-23) or in the form of a drink (figures 24-27). Where the tealeaf icon signifies a product with a history that can be traced back much further than the history of the modern city of Hong Kong, the latter icon indicates a kind of tea that is a product specific to the territory's colonial history. The neon sign in Figure 24 features – as understood in the Hong Kong context – an icon for milk tea and one for iced lemon tea. The former – milk tea (displayed in figures 26 and 27) – is inspired by the British tradition of drinking black tea with milk and is the most famous drink served in 'cha chaan tengs', Hong Kong-style cafés. The glass on the right, judging from the way the lemon is positioned and seeing the red-and-white striped straw in the background (see figure 25), is officially an icon of a glass of coke. Yet, in Hong Kong and specifically in combination with the icon on the left, it must be meant to resemble iced lemon tea, the second most famous drink served in cha chaan tengs.

Besides the above-mentioned icons with symbolic or context-specific subtexts which directly indicate the products they "advertise", another range of icons can be found in Hong Kong's neonscape that may be taken as fairly universal (yet not entirely context-less). Figures 28-30 present a few examples: jewelers are often indicated with a diamond icon (figure 28), electronics shops may be indicated with icons of cameras or computers (figures 29-30). We could continue this list, but in view of our argument that Hong Kong – an urban region that is largely influenced by flows of money, goods, and people (a space of and for consumption) – features icons as well as symbols that are manifestations of a particular socio-cultural location, we

continue our elaboration in the following section where we consider some of the most significant symbols of the city's neonscape.

Symbolism in pictorial imagery

Let us begin this section with the most apparent symbol on display in Hong Kong's streets, that of the pawnshop (figures 31-39). The pawnshop is one of the three uncategorizable business types; however, it is best taken as a category in itself because its neon signs are the most widely featured. In the modern world, the domains of consumption and credit are inextricably connected (McCants, 2007, p. 213). Pawnshops allow a form of reversed consumption (consumer goods are exchanged for credit), so it is not surprising that in a city such as Hong Kong they are plentiful. Pawnbroking was practiced before colonization, specifically in the old market town of Yuen Long. The pawnshop in Hong Kong continues to be a popular means to cash.⁸

Chun Yuen Pawnshop's⁹ wooden sign (figure 31) – which indicated the shop long before the arrival of neon sign technology to Hong Kong – is one of the oldest and still existing examples of an icon resembling a hanging bat holding a coin. The wooden sign has a golden frame and a red background with golden lettering presenting the company name inside the shape of the bat and the word 'ngat' (押) – pawn – inside the coin. Its neon counterparts (figures 32-39) have similar outlines, lettering, and background colors; however they are illuminated – depending on the shop owner's preference and on which neon sign factory manufactured it – with green, yellow, or white frames and with white or red lettering. One pawnshop group always features the double character 'hei' (囍) in its signs (figure 32), which means double happiness (Williams, 2006, p. 265).¹⁰ It is formally agreed that no other pawnshop ever incorporates this character (information acquired in an interview with Neon Sign Master Lau, 2016). The hanging bat (蝠, 'fuk', in Chinese) signifies good fortune due to its homophonous resemblance with the word '福' (also 'fuk' in Cantonese), which translates to "good fortune" (Williams, 1977: 35). The coin, as described before, signifies prosperity (Williams, 2006, p. 94). Indeed, bats as well as coins are conventionally used in Chinese

8. Specifically in the 1950s, Hong Kong saw many immigrants arriving from Communist China and although the manufacturing industry was on the rise and jobs were increasingly available, people struggled to get by. Pawning belongings was an easy way to make ends meet. Yet, even today, pawning goods is still a preferred practice. Different from getting loans from banks, at the pawnshop small amounts of credit can be acquired in a matter of minutes. Indeed, in Hong Kong, the pawnshop survived. What is more, Oi Wah Pawnshop has recently entered the Hong Kong stock market, having started to give out mortgage loans (SCMP Editorial, 2013).

9. Chun Yuen Pawnshop was in business for an equal amount of years until right after WWII (Hong Kong Memory, 2012).

10. The character is an ideogram – a ligature of 喜 ('hei') – which translates to 'joy' and is a commonly used ornamental design element, often at weddings however it also generally indicates 'good fortune'.

decorations and motifs, and they frequently appear together in charms or tassels.

Although some pawnshop signs feature single lines in their frames (figure 33) and show in that respect closer resemblance with the old wooden signs, they usually feature traditional geometric frames (figures 34-36). Further, most pawnshop signs display a yellow ring at the top when lit (figures 37-38). In the pre-neon past, the signs were mounted with a metal ring to a bar that was, in turn, attached to the façades of buildings (figure 39). This way of mounting the sign simulates more directly the way in which bats hang. With the arrival of neon sign technology, however, the signs demanded sturdier mounting from the side but in their designs, the rings at the top remained.

Another signboard of significance in Hong Kong's neon landscape is that Kai Kee (雞記) Mahjong Parlor (a company founded in 1933). Kai means rooster; the Parlor chain has featured iconic roosters on its neon signs for decades (figures 40-42). 'Kai' (雞) is also the nickname of the Parlor's old boss, "Uncle Kai" (Neonsigns.hk, 2014). The story goes that the night before he bought a winning lottery ticket, he dreamt about the bird, which made him decide on the name of his parlor (Ibid). Kai Kee's rooster has through the years gained fame. Upon the closing down of its Kwun Tong location due to urban redevelopment, Hong Kong's new museum for visual culture, M+, acquired it for its preservation.

Besides the direct resemblance of the Parlor's name in the figure of the rooster, the animal plays a symbolic role in Chinese culture. In Mandarin, it has a homophonous resemblance to the word "favorable" while it is also one of the Chinese zodiac signs implying honesty and moral fortitude and signifying "fortune, luck, fidelity, protection as well as bossiness" (Sharp, 2000, p. 138-40). More importantly, the rooster's form and behavior symbolize the five Confucian virtues: benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity (Yao, 2000, p. 34). Its comb resembles the cap of the bureaucrat of the former imperial Chinese government (meaning civil culture or wisdom); its legs have spurs indicating the martial qualities (courage). Further, roosters (as well as chickens and pheasants) have the good habit of calling out to others when stumbling upon food (benevolence), and finally, the rooster is a "night-watcher" and does not lose track of time (fidelity) (Zhang, 2005, p. 613). In ancient China, people came to cultivate and monitor themselves by these virtues. In Confucianism, morality is based on family relationships, which feed through to the society as a whole (Yao, 2000, p. 33). Although Confucianism initially struggled with modernization and was set back by China's opening up to the world after the 19th-century Opium Wars, the ideology and its virtues have been carried through to modern life (Ibid, p. 245-49) and are continuously reproduced in social life. The illuminated roosters on Kai Kee's neon signs are mere examples of its graphic adaptation in commercial settings.

Western symbolism is also widely present in Hong Kong's neon landscape. The following symbols are largely informed by a Western tradition in which Classic and grandeur atmospheres of the Romans and the Greeks were celebrated. Roman columns on sauna signs are used when the business intends to make a reference of luxury. They do not necessarily – as may be presumed – resemble Roman bathhouses. Saunas in Hong Kong came to be indicated with outlines of columns, fountains, or larger ancient structures¹¹ (figures 43-48), for they expound luxury such as that of an emperor. The sign of a snooker hall in Tuen Mun, one of Hong Kong's new towns, also features Roman columns (figure 49). Snooker halls are perhaps not like hotels or saunas places expected to be luxurious. Yet, they are still venues that "sell" certain experiences. Even Tsui Wah teahouse, which is in essence a cha chaan teng like any other, presents Roman columns on one of its neon signs (figure 50). Rather, we should express that "especially" Tsui Wah presents Roman columns on one of its neon signs as it has historically been forward thinking in the development of its brand identity (Tsui Wah, 2015).¹²

Similar to the references of luxury through ancient structures, crown symbols are used to indicate mainly business types in the leisure category (figures 51-53). However, we have also come across two restaurants that featured them, one of which we addressed before (figure 17) and the other displays a crown symbol in reference to its name, "Prince" (figure 54). What is "consumed" in most of those venues indicated with crowns, columns, or fountains, is not just a good night's sleep, a game of mahjong, or a relaxing bath. A certain experience is bought into: an experience that relates not only to the product or service itself but also to what the sign signifies (Mathews, 2001, p. 288-89). This is what Gordon Matthews has labeled the "the cultural supermarket", where ideas and information "by which we live" (Ibid, p. 289) are consumed.

Finally, Hong Kong's neon landscape also beholds a range of symbols that indicates "foreign" places with a flair of exoticization – specifically symbols of restaurants offering Southeast Asian cuisine. A part of Southeast Asian restaurants tends to feature icons with human figures wearing "traditional" hats (figures 55-57): a Vietnamese restaurant has a symbol of a man

.....
11. These often also relate to the names of saunas (e.g. Noble Sauna, Empire Sauna, Venice Sauna).
.....

12. Tsui Wah started as a modest 'ice café' in the 1960s. An 'ice café' is a small family business – a cha chaan teng – that was able to serve cooled drinks as they had invested in a fridge, which was in those days not yet common for such local teahouses. Different from other cha chaan tengs, the teahouse evolved into an enterprise that is, since 2012, even listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange (Tsui Wah, 2015). Indeed, Tsui Wah claims to have lifted itself and the quality and identity of its cha chaan teng food and eating experience beyond that of an average Hong Kong teahouse. With now 20 outlets, the restaurant chain has, as per their website, purposefully invested in its interior design, differentiating itself further from other cha chaan tengs (Ibid). This approach, of course, matches the intended atmosphere of luxury that also the Roman columns on its neon sign expound.

figure wearing a Vietnamese hat (*figure 55*); a Cambodian restaurant presents a similar human figure wearing a similar triangular hat (*figure 56*); a Thai restaurant features a Thai farmer figure, also with hat (*figure 57*). Another part of Hong Kong's Southeast Asian restaurants is indicated (or decorated) with symbols as random as palm trees (*figures 58-60*). Like those sauna signs that try to buy into the idea of tropical beachy places (*figures 61-62*), such restaurant signs indicate a similar image but their display of palm trees over ancient columns really might also be understood in a more critical account of the experience of colonization and related hierarchizing of cultures.

In comparison to the neon signs of many Chinese restaurants that usually present signature dishes or significant ingredients, those restaurants serving foreign cuisines seem to merely display clichés. Between "emblematic" symbols of luxury and clichéd indicators of foreign places and foods, these examples again suggest that icons and symbols are never entirely one or the other. More generally, when understanding them in the context of Hong Kong as a modern city with a particular colonial history, these icons and symbols even have certain political implications as they add grandeur when referencing Western traditions (signifying columns that were once part of impressive structures of an even more impressive empire) while Southeast Asian references are merely made through palm trees or triangular hats. This relates to an issue much debated in Postcolonial Studies (e.g. Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978), an issue of hierarchy and generalization from the dominant perspective of the West onto the East.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we focused on what kind of icons and symbols can be found in Hong Kong's neon landscape, how they are presented, and what they can tell about Hong Kong's unique location as a territory that is both a symbol of prosperity and consumerism and a city of very particular eclecticism. We considered the pictorial language of neon signs visually and semiotically – as illuminated markers of a discourse in place – and found in the pot pourri of symbols and icons as illuminated in Hong Kong's urban landscape – a story not just about consumption but about Hong Kong's diverse circumstance. We also confirmed that each icon or symbol is not simply one or the other but exists somewhere on a spectrum, between resemblance and symbolism. Those shops, products, restaurants, and venues that connect to longer Chinese traditions are often indicated with traditional symbols, symbols that are not originally consumerist but have been adapted into the context of consumerism. Those restaurants and shops that may have their own (modern) histories but are not particularly significant in terms of Chinese traditions are indicated with – to a greater or lesser extent – "universal" icons (e.g. seafood icons, diamond icons) or "universal" symbols (e.g. palm

tree symbols, the Eiffel Tower symbol). Finally, those experiences that are foreign (saunas, snooker halls) and the kind of places that are expected to sell certain experiences (hotels, nightclubs) are indicated mainly with Western symbols of grandeur (e.g. columns and crowns).

The blend of icons and symbols on neon signs may at first glance appear disorderly diverse in its imagery: a spectacle of images representing a modern city that is in itself a symbol of consumerism and global trade. A closer look has helped to understand that the blend of signs is in fact highly context-specific, displaying different layers of resemblance (in some instances negotiated between neon outlines and their background images) and meaning (such as the chicken, turtle, or milk tea icons). The pictorial language of Hong Kong neon signs tells a story about Hong Kong as a place of eclectic coherence in apparent disorder. The images as presented on neon signs do not only indicate products and services; they indicate ideas, concepts, and information. They (and specifically their meanings) are items on display in Gordon Matthew's "cultural supermarket"; and even though they appear from a distance to be globally relevant, their correlation presents a story about Hong Kong.

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Figure 4: Icon seafood restaurant



Figure 5: Icon seafood restaurant



Figure 6: Icon seafood restaurant



Figure 7: Icon seafood restaurant

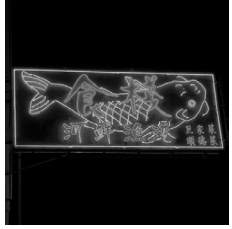


Figure 8: Icon seafood restaurant, more detail



Figure 9: Icon seafood restaurant, more detail



Figure 10: Blue Girl beer can icon on nightclub sign



Figure 11: Blue Girl beer can icon on nightclub sign



Figure 12: Blue Girl beer can icon on nightclub sign



Figure 13: Mahjong tiles on mahjong parlor sign



Figure 14: Mahjong tiles on mahjong parlor sign



Figure 15: Mahjong tiles on mahjong parlor sign



Figure 16: Chicken icon on Chinese restaurant sign



Figure 17: Chicken icon on Chinese restaurant sign, with crown

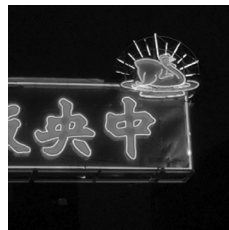


Figure 18: Chicken icon on Chinese restaurant sign, with glow



Figure 19: Turtle jelly sign



Figure 20: Turtle jelly sign at night



Figure 21: Turtle jelly sign, close up



Figure 22: Chinese tea shop sign



Figure 23: Chinese tea shop sign



Figure 24: Hot and cold drink icons on cha chaan teng sign



Figure 25: Cold drink icons on cha chaan teng sign



Figure 26: Milk tea icon on cha chaan teng sign



Figure 27: Milk tea icon on cha chaan teng sign



Figure 28: Diamond icon on jewelry shop



Figure 29: Electronics icons above entrance electronics mall



Figure 30: Electronics icons above entrance electronics store



Figure 31: Old sign Chun Yuen Pawnshop, Photo credit: Chong Fat

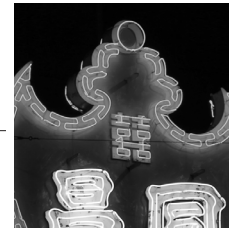


Figure 32: Pawnshop sign with the character 押



Figure 33: Pawnshop sign with simple outline



Figure 34: Pawnshop sign, geometric frame



Figure 35: Small pawnshop sign, geometric frame



Figure 36: Pawnshop sign, geometric frame

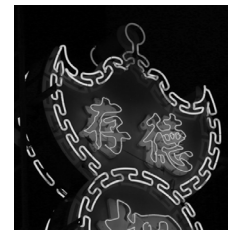


Figure 37: Yellow ring on pawnshop sign



Figure 38: Yellow ring on pawnshop sign



Figure 39: Pawnshop sign in Sheung Wan, 1910s, Source: Mr. Ko Tim-keung and Hong Kong Historical Postcards, Hong Kong Memory



Figure 40: Rooster on Kai Kee Mahjong Parlor sign



Figure 41: Rooster on Kai Kee Mahjong Parlor sign



Figure 42: Rooster on Kai Kee Mahjong Parlor sign

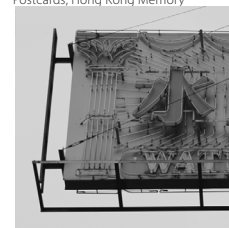


Figure 43: Column symbol on sauna sign

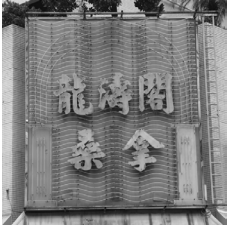


Figure 44: Column symbol on sauna sign



Figure 45: Column symbol on Yuppie Sauna sign



Figure 46: Roman column symbols on Venice Sauna sign



Figure 47: Various symbols on Noble Sauna sign



Figure 48: Fountain on Yuppie Sauna sign



Figure 49: Columns on chaan teng sign



Figure 50: Columns on chaan teng sign



Figure 51: Crown symbol on Club King sign



Figure 52: Crown symbol on nightclub sign



Figure 53: Crown symbol on Noble Sauna sign



Figure 54: Crown symbol on Prince Restaurant sign



Figure 55: Vietnamese figure on restaurant sign



Figure 56: Cambodian figure on restaurant sign



Figure 57: Thai farmer figure on restaurant sign



Figure 58: Palm tree on Southeast Asian restaurant sign



Figure 59: Palm tree on Indonesian restaurant sign



Figure 60: Palm tree on Thai restaurant sign

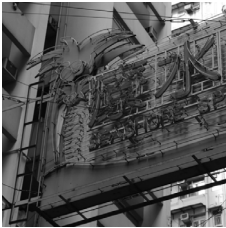


Figure 61: Palm tree on sauna sign



Figure 62: Palm tree on sauna sign

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