Gwen Yun Rong Phoo and YuHsin Hsu in conversation with Death Of Typography

What Type of Singapore?

In Judith Butler's account, identities are not expressions predetermined by material inheritance, but contingent possibilities built, enforced and reinforced through the repeated performance of socially regulated acts.

To this day, Singapore's national identity remains an increasingly fluid and unsettled question. What it means to be "Singaporean" has continuously evolved alongside changing demographics, generational shifts, and immigration policy amendments. In a society shaped by multiple cultural and linguistic influences, a young Singaporean type design collective dives into this ambiguity by integrating design practice and research with public discourse and community education.
To take a closer look at how type design contributes to the construction and reconstruction of local identity, I invited performing arts critic YuHsin Hsu (YHH) to join me in conversation with Qiu Wen Lee (QW), Sylvia Low (SL) and Yen Wee (YW), the founders of Death of Typography (DOT).



The interview begins with Gwen Yun Rong Phoo.

Given Singapore's postcolonial condition and multicultural landscape, when a typeface rooted in Singaporean culture enters an international design discourse that has historically been shaped by Euro- and Latin-centred traditions, how do you determine what makes a type distinctly "Singaporean"?

QW
A question type designers in Singapore often ask is: how can I make something that's uniquely Singaporean? However, before answering this question, we need to first address what 'Singaporean' is, which is tough because we don't have our own language or script. We have such deep colonial roots that we use Latin and speak in English today.

But slowly, as I developed my practice and as DOT started, we realised that what is uniquely Singaporean is simply type, or typography, that happens in Singapore. That's the conclusion we've arrived at as a collective. What we believe is, if you are a Singaporean who champions local things and makes types locally and culturally, what you produce is distinctly Singaporean.

Still, that doesn't mean the visual characteristics of a typeface matter less than the act and process of producing the type. It's true that a lot of the visual characteristics of what we produce are very Eurocentric and Latin-based because we are designing Latin. But I think the subject matter matters more than the visual characteristics. Nevertheless, subject matter informs visual characteristics, and vice versa. It's a chicken-and-egg situation.

SL
Initially, this was a question we often asked ourselves. Over time, however, we began to question the need to define what constitutes something distinctly Singaporean. We came to realise that establishing such a definition is not necessarily our priority. Instead, what we seek to champion is the visibility of Singaporean designers and their work. For us, the act of creating and making space for local typographic practices within the broader design landscape is itself a form of Singaporean type design.

Rather than focusing on how we might distinguish ourselves as Singaporean type designers or identify what makes our work uniquely Singaporean, we are more interested in demonstrating that local designers can contribute to typography and establish themselves in the industry.

YW
It is natural for Singaporean designers to ask themselves this question, as it is one that designers across the world have asked themselves. Since Singapore is a postcolonial country, when we were young designers, we felt that we did not have such a mature cultural context to draw from. We realised, though, that even if our cultural context is not as established as those of other countries, instead of trying to uncover a secret Singaporean identity, the simple answer is to look at the Singaporean designers around us, see what we have in common, and champion what they are doing now.

Do you see typography contributing to the strengthening, or even cultivation, of a shared identity? Or, have you found that the process of collectively researching, designing, and producing "Singaporean" typefaces has led you to rethink what it means to be Singaporean?





QW
Definitely, yes. Typography does contribute to the strengthening or cultivation of a shared identity. It's as simple as asking: what does it mean to have a shared identity?

The idea of collectively researching, designing and producing a typeface, or even just looking at the project itself, leads me to rethink what it takes to be a Singaporean. It's very easy to pick out visual cues, but researching into them and building upon the layers of meaning that we produce through type makes you look closer at our identity. The idea that you can infuse identity into type also allows you to introduce different nuances into type design.

For instance, when producing our own typeface, Robusta, we never really understood *kopi* [1] culture as strongly until we started researching its history and discovering its Hainanese roots. Since then, we've learnt to appreciate *kopi* culture a lot more. We bring these stories to our audience through events and launches, and they would often come back to us saying, "Oh, yes, we didn't really know this about *kopi* culture!" I think doing so also helps us to promote Singapore's culture in a different way.

[1] Traditional Southeast Asian coffee, typically referring to locally brewed Nanyang-style coffee served in hawker centers and kopitiams (traditional coffee shops)

When your practice emerges from a particular local context, how do you navigate the ways your work may be framed as reflecting or representing Singaporean culture when it reaches international audiences?

SL
We conducted our workshop for an international crowd when we attended the Association Typographique Internationale (ATypI) 2025 in Copenhagen. In our opinion, anyone can create typography, but to relate it a bit more to them, we got everyone to draw inspiration from their own vernacular type. Vernacular type was something we started off being very interested in, so we asked the participants from different countries to share their national history and culture, and how their vernacular type reflects that background. In response, we initiated activities inspired by their countries' histories and vernacular types. That's how we try to make our workshops more international.

YW
We hold on to opportunities where the designer gets to explain the cultural contexts behind their typeface for their projects to be represented fairly and understood as intended. When presenting our type projects, we also want our work to be understood as we envision it. Though there may be a need to provide additional context around some of the cultural nuances of Singapore, we try to stay true to ourselves.

QW
Our workshop in Copenhagen was called 'Rojak'. *Rojak* is a Southeast Asian dish that combines a diverse mix of ingredients. As we hosted the workshop, we realised that if you want to bring a culture-based practice into an international space, you have to consider bringing in the various cultures of the audience, so that everyone can relate to it while having a different interpretation of your practice.

SL
We break down types to make sure that anyone can create their own type. We do this in a very tactile and modular format through hands-on activities. When we host the workshop in Singapore, we encourage people to create the Latin alphabet from A to Z, because English is the common language. However, on this occasion, because it was an international setting, we allowed the participants to create using their own languages. We realised that our activities were also modular enough that you could technically use them in other languages, even Chinese, Russian, and so on.

YW
The conference in Copenhagen also introduced us to many international designers who share so much common ground with us. Though we speak different languages and come from different cultural contexts, it's still easy for people of different nationalities to participate in a creative activity because the craft of design — and the act of creating — are universal.



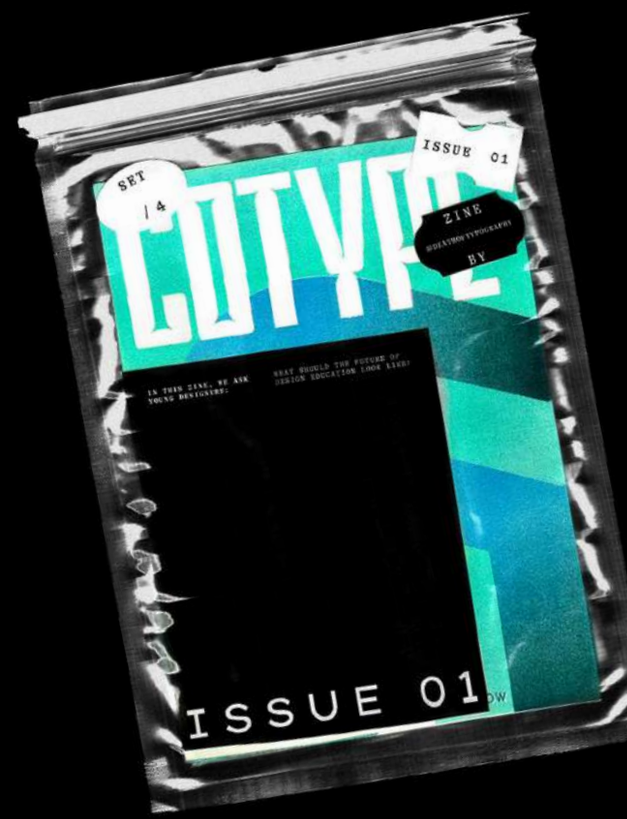
QW
I don't think you can ever divorce cultural, political and linguistic identities from one another, because type is language. If you are designing the language people speak, you are, in a sense, designing how people behave. When we went to ATypI 2025, there were people from different cultures who designed in the same script, but their stances on the language differed widely based on their backgrounds. The same script can still be designed through very different perspectives, depending on how the designers' cultural, political and linguistic backgrounds shape their practices.


ISSUE 01
ISSUE 01
ZINE
SET
/ 4




ISSUE 01
ZINE
SET
/ 4
ISSUE 01




SET
/ 4
ISSUE 01
ZINE
ISSUE 01

The interview continues with YuHsin Hsu.

Do you think typography could function as a common space where different cultural and linguistic identities meet and exchange? How does this idea resonate with your practice at DOT?

SL
For now, typography does carry a bigger weight in creating common spaces for us. Besides the foundry, we also organise community events and outreach, where typography serves as a common platform to bring like-minded people together.

For example, in 'Type and Tapas', we invited everyone — designers, non-designers, even the general public who were remotely interested in learning more about typography — to join and share their design experiences over food and drinks. We want to create spaces where people can connect, where anyone with any level of interest or background in type can explore it together.

A lot of people have given us feedback that they had always been very interested in typography, but never knew they could reignite that spark until they came to the event and saw a lot of other people doing the same. Type, to us, is like any form of art and expression. It brings people together by providing a medium to express and creatively challenge themselves. That's where typography sits very strongly with us.

Before founding DOT, who did you imagine as the primary audience for your work? Has this understanding of your audience changed since then, and if so, who do you find yourself speaking to today?

SL
We actually started with the pure intention of championing local typefaces. Back in design school, the three of us were creating typefaces that seemed to go nowhere, so we primarily wanted a place to show that there are good typefaces in Singapore that aren't created by overseas designers. We thought that our audience would only be locals who wanted to use our fonts.

Surprisingly, international designers started using our fonts because they wanted to champion local designers when working on projects about Singapore. That's where we unexpectedly found an international audience who appreciated using our typefaces. Another big part of our audience right now includes emerging local young designers and students who perhaps never thought they'd have a voice in type design. We definitely did not expect to enter the realm of education when we started DOT, but it opened an exciting new path that we continue to build on.

YW
For us, what makes us unique is that we create fonts that are specific to Singaporean context, inspired by Singaporean culture.

Nonetheless, we want to highlight that there are quite a few typographic practices in Singapore, such as local design studios, that design Singaporean typefaces within an international framework. For example, Practice Theory in Singapore designed the font Practice Sans for their own agency brand. The inspiration for Practice Sans came from their desire for a workhorse font, something that could be used universally for their own branding. It's not inherently a 'Singapore-style' font, nor is it meant for a Singapore-specific context, but it remains a Singaporean font because it was crafted by Singaporean designers.

QW
The magic of making fonts is that a font always has a story in itself. But the way people use it adds even more to that story. That story doesn't have to be restricted to a Singaporean story. You can give the font a new life that the designer never envisioned by using it in another context. That's the beauty of typefaces and the space we operate in.

Looking ahead, what would you suggest to designers working within culturally specific contexts? Are there aspects of current design systems and principles that you think need to be reconsidered in order to move towards a more culturally diverse and inclusive design future?

YW
I'll share a personal story about my work outside of DOT. I used to work as a designer in an advertising agency. While I was working on a big rebranding project for an internationally used Chinese F&B brand, we worked with a Canadian design agency on how to rebrand this huge brand identity that serves both Chinese- and English-speaking consumers.

One of the things that I struggled with was how they hugely misinterpreted the principles of Chinese calligraphy, resulting in a Chinese font whose claimed calligraphic nature was obviously absent to native speakers.

When designing for international audiences and working with multilingual fonts, international designers need to bring in a more nuanced perspective and ask themselves: do you have the voices in your design process that allow you to make good decisions that align with what native speakers need and experience?

QW
When we were students learning about type design, it was always from a very Eurocentric point of view. We learnt about letterpress and printing history, and it was always about the *Gutenberg Bible* and how Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable type system, despite the fact that the *Diamond Sutra* in China and *Jikji* in Korea were both printed centuries earlier.

YHH DOT

We later had a class called Issues in Visual Communication, which trained us how to look at art and design from a decolonised perspective. That really changed our way of thinking. Now, I think it's important for designers, especially Singaporeans, to view design through an Asian and international lens. Despite our British colonial history, not everything should be seen from a Eurocentric point of view.

SL

In summary, we think there is a need for the design industry and education to gain a lot more breadth and recognition. We've learnt a lot from Asian history, which has influenced how we frame and think about art. The same can be said for type. Designers and design educators should become more conscious of what they are sharing and what it means to be inclusive.

In general, engaging in these conversations as designers opens your mind beyond what you are used to. It requires thinking outside the box, because design is not always about the systems and principles themselves. What we are trying to champion goes beyond design systems. It's about how you continuously educate yourself as a designer.

QW

Nevertheless, there is a lot of optimism in the type design world now. Everyone is moving towards multilingualism. It's no longer enough to design in one language only. Type Together recently published Futura 100, which supports various languages and local nuances. They are bringing together global designers to share ideas within a unified system. That's the power of globalisation. It is the accessibility to different cultures that fosters exchange and development.

