

A sign of the times?

GIVING STOREFRONTS A MORE DISTINCTIVE LOOK

Lu Feiran

The city of Shanghai wants to see more creativity in shop signage, and that's good news for signboard designer and painter Zhao Duo.

The Shanghai People's Congress recently adopted a new regulation that said municipal authorities should encourage more artistry and personalization in shop signage, even if they still retain the mandate to give guidance on the shape, color and fonts of signs.

The new regulation comes into effect in December. Zhao is excited by it.

"Signboards are vital to the appearance of a street as well as a city," he said. "They represent the creativity and inclusiveness of a city. Besides, a well-designed sign can make people's eyes light up and attract them into a shop."

In his 10 years of work, Zhao's creativity has often been stifled by enforced conformity in commercial complexes.

"For example, when designing a shopfront in a complex, you may find that they already had very unified design for everything, so that you don't have much room to play with," Zhao said. "When the stores on your left and on your right have the same front styles, your choices can be quite limited."

Zhao himself is a master of fonts. He is good at creating a distinctive atmosphere for a shop by using different styles of fonts on various materials, such as wood or metal.

Sometimes, the simplest of fonts can produce surprising effects.

A fine example is Ollienollie takeaway café on Fumin Road

in Jing'an District.

When people see the flourished black letters on the bluish-gray signboard of the shop, they might mistake it for a florist or a fashion clothing store, but Ollienollie actually serves coffee with Chinese-style pancakes, a somewhat unusual menu combination.

The contrast between signage and shop's business attracted large customer traffic. It was already a popular spot for locals to have breakfast, but then young people from all over the city came to take photos of the signage and share them online.

"The shopfront is quite low-pitched in an artistic way," said a frequent patron of Ollienollie. "And it blends well with the general vibe of Fumin Road, which is home to many fancy bars and shops."

Individualized, well-designed shopfronts can become Internet hits in a city where unimaginative, uniform signage with little design still dominates. Some efforts have been made to make such uniform signage more distinctive.

On Taiyuan Road in Xuhui District, for example, shop brands are all carved on marble signboards; on Huanghe Road in Huangpu District, many restaurants share one long, brown signboard.

Unified signage probably was encouraged after a 2018 incident, when a signboard on Nanjing Road E. fell off during a typhoon, killing three and injured six. The original purpose of signboard management was for security's sake, but somehow the management went too far.

An extreme case occurred

on Changde Road in Jing'an District in 2019, when stores there were required to use black-and-white signage — white brands printed on black boards. With white flowers planted on the roadsides, locals said the entire street "felt like a graveyard." The design was soon modified.

Yao Yao, a photographer that who has focused on signage in Shanghai for years, said signboards with the same texture and similar design don't feel "natural."

"I majored in sociology," Yao said, "so I pay attention to how entities use or interact with

public spaces. I don't think it's natural for a shoe-repair store, a flower shop and a noodle restaurant to share the same style of signage."

Yao said she believes that signboards bear a city's memory. She has long been trying to capture on film old shop signs doomed to disappear for one reason or another.

"Shanghai is a very fast-developing city," she said. "What's here today may be gone tomorrow. I always feel gratified if I manage to snap a photo of an interesting sign that I later found was gone."

Her work is often like a

treasure hunt. She has discovered decade-old signage that came to light only during demolition. In a sense, it is bygone creativity buried under layers of paint or newer signs.

"These are precious memories of our city," she said. "I hope that we will create more memories for the future — and may they last longer."

Zhao agrees.

"A freer environment will encourage designers and painters to be creative in their work," he said. "That will render better experiences for people out on the streets."

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▲ Zhao Duo works in his studio Huaihai Signs. — Yao Yao