

## Dong Lin: Twenty Principles for the National Flag Design

**Abstract:** *The function and property of flag indicate the reasons for deciding the principles of the national flag design.*

*The main functions of flag are ID, signal, symbolic and psychological functions. They require that flag is douce, proportionate, simple and unique; easy to see from a distance and remembered easily.*

*The national flag is a tool for displaying a national logo. The property of tool requires that flag is drawn and used as easily as possible. The national flag also is a national garment. The property of garment requires that not only flag indicate a national status, but also enhance the value of appearance, namely the sense of beauty and the sense of art.*

*When the silk flag was invented, it has completed the transformation from a material object to an abstract (symbolizing) object; from a complex object to a simple object. Based on the above analysis, we sum up these twenty principles: 1. Douce; 2. Proportional; 3. Unique; 4. Sample; 5. Clear; 6. Abstract; 7. Symbolic; 8. Subjective; 9. Central; 10. Symmetrical; 11. Balanced; 12. Harmonious; 13. Integrated; 14. Contrasting; 15. Cantabile; 16. Handsome; 17. Smooth; 18. Relaxing; 19. Pleasing; 20. Light.*

### Introduction

I put forward 35 principles for good flag design in 2006 in my book “How the Design of the National Flag Affects a National Destiny”, which expanded from the national flag section of “Powers’ Constellation”<sup>[1]</sup>.

NAVA defines five principles for designing a good flag: (1) Keep it simple; (2) Use meaningful symbolism; (3) Use 2 – 3 basic colours; (4) No lettering or seals; (5) Be distinctive or be relative.

So far these five rules are extensively recognized in the field of vexillology for good flag design. We do further research on the forefathers’ foundation, make them more systematic and perfect, which would have significant guidance meaning for designing the national flag.

Based on the analysis of the function and property of flag as well as 193 countries’ flags, more than 60 national flags (including navy and king flag) have been illustrated to demonstrate how they have breached one or a few clauses of these twenty principles; the author also points out the design defects of six national flags and made two drafts for them.

## The Reason for Setting up Twenty Principles

To find out the reason to have these twenty principles for the national flag design, we must start from analysing the function, property and the developing history of a flag.

The main function of a flag is: 1. ID function; 2. Signal function; 3. Symbolic function; 4. Appeal function; 5. Psychological function; 6. Contrast function.

ID function requires that flag is unique, distinguishable, and remembered easily. The signal function requires that flag is easy to be seen from a distance even in bad weather. The symbolic function requires that flag has authentic symbolic meaning with peoples' feelings, which connects the country's history and the background of culture, even the ideology of the political power. The appeal function requires that flag encourages people's morale so that they can unite around it to reach a special purpose. Psychological function requires that flag looks pleasing, cantabile, graceful and contrastive so as to reach a psychological balance and enjoyment. The contrasting function requires that flag is vivid, tidy, and uniform and standardized so that it can set off a kind of festival or protocol atmosphere.

The property of the national flag indicates that it is a tool for displaying a national logo. As characters, being a tool to record language, should be easy to be distinguished, read, written and remembered; similarly flag should be easy to be distinguished, drawn, and remembered as well as used, theoretically speaking, the simplest, the best. Arabic figures and Latin alphabet are so popular because they are the simplest symbols to record mathematics and language. The inventive history of the character and mathematical symbol reveals such a trend and law - from complexity to simplification.

The national flag also is a national garment. Garment is not only to resist cold weather but also to decorate human body; especially when the design of the modern garments comes into fashion, which makes its aesthetic value become more important. Furthermore a modern, simple garment has more value of appearance than an ancient, complex garment. Flag also is a kind of art, and it should embody the value of viewing and admiring, namely the sense of beauty and the sense of art. It is big mistake if you believe that only complex pattern and fine brush

work can show art value for flag design. Flag should be easy to be drawn and easy to be seen from a distance, so any complex pattern and fine brush work can increase the difficulty to distinguish it and produce it.

The history of flag is as long as characters. Originally people tied an animal head or a tiger tail to the top of a pole as a flag. When Chinese invented the silk flag, a revolutionary transformation of flag had taken place, which completed the transformation from three dimensions to two dimensions; from a heavy object to a light object; from a complex object to a simple object; and from a kind of language of material object to a kind of language of colour or graphic. It has the same far-reaching meaning as when the Phoenicians invented Phoenician alphabet which completed the revolutionary transformation from hieroglyph to alphabet writing. After the silk flag was invented, people had to design a flag on a piece of cloth via colour and pattern. Similarly the inventive history of the silk flag reveals the same trend and law - from complexity to simplification. Today we forcibly carry out any complex design, which doubtlessly is a kind of the historic counter march.

## Twenty Principles for the National Flag Design

### 1 Serious

The national flag hangs at an official or a diplomatic site; which shape should embody douce and serious atmosphere such as a rectangle (landscape only). So designer should avoid using a triangle like Nepal's or swallow-tailed like Swedish King and Queen Flag.



*Nepal*



*Swedish King and Queen Flag*

### 2 Proportionate

Among all rectangles, the Golden Rectangle (nearly 13:8, for example Swedish flag, 8:5) has the most pleasing appearance. It should be used

at most cases, but best for a horizontal tricolour. The proportion of 3:2 is best for a vertical tricolour; the proportion of 2:1 is best for the union Jack. The extortionate length appears dragging like Qatar's. The square flag lack of flapping effect in the wind like Vatican's, it is best for a president flag. Two important principles for proportion are that the maximum's proportion is 2:1; the minimum's proportion is 3:2.

*Qatar**Vatican*

### 3 Unique

The ID function is the most important function of flag. If a flag has the same layout and proportion it is difficult to discern its status. Therefore designer should avoid copying layout with the exact proportion like Romania's and Chad's. In the world, you can make twin flag but you cannot make twin countries. To keep unique also requires No copy layout; No similar pattern layout; No borrowing layout.

*Romania**Chad*

### 4 Simple

The national flag not only is frequently used by government but also by people. Children need to easily draw and remember it; fans need to easily draw it on face or on body. Those need to keep it simple. A simple flag also benefits for the low cost and the quick producing.

The simplicity means the simple colour and the simple pattern. The simple colour doesn't mean to use single colour like Libya's, single colour can not form contrast effect. Using two colours Minimum, but no more than three colours like Mauritius's. Using simple colour cannot

use repetitive colour like Uganda's, the repetitive colour is unmeaning. To keep colour simple also requires that No letters; No overlap pattern; No letters and pattern combined; No irrelevant patterns; No irregular patterns set.



*Libya*



*Mauritius*



*Uganda*

## 5 Clear

The flag which hang in the air have both height and distance from a viewer, therefore you cannot use fine brush work such as a seal like Mexico's, an emblem should be seen in a closed place; Cannot use fine brush work such as a painting like China flag in Dynasty Qing (1888—1912), because flag is not a painting in the gallery; Cannot use fine brush work such as a lace like Turkmenistan's, because flag is not a piece of rug . To keep clear also requires No photocopy from nature; No small pattern; No blurred pattern; No light colour for both pattern and background.



*Mexico*



*China (1888-1912)*



*Turkmenistan*

## 6 Abstract

Using abstract pattern not only is easy to distinguish, but also make it have symbolic meaning and look slim and graceful. Therefore you cannot use a person like Belize's, since a person cannot stand in the air; Cannot use an animal like Bhutan's, because there is no zoo in the air; Cannot use a plant like Lebanon's, because no soil and water to supply plant in the air. To keep abstract also requires that No architecture; No water; No territory.

*Belize**Bhutan**Lebanon*

## 7 Symbolical

The meaningful symbol can enhance the sense of loving motherland. Authentic colour should be from nature. Therefore you cannot use red represent the sea like Canada's, 'the Red Sea' doesn't have red water; Cannot use exaggerative shape like Turkey's, because the width of an actual crescent cannot exceed the half-moon; Cannot use unmeaning symbol like Vanuatu's, a pig teeth is not a meaningful symbol. To keep symbolical also requires that No pattern destroy another flag symbolizing meaning.

*Canada**Turkey**Vanuatu*

## 8 Subjective

Most countries use one or a few patterns on the flag. It is important to highlight pattern as a subject. Using a well-rounded body rather than a thin line like Morocco's, a thin line embody a skeleton effect; Using one colour for pattern background rather than more colours like Portugal's, a foot spans two or three camps is unstable; Using pale for field and dark for pattern rather than the reverse like Laos', since white circle on deep field has an effect that the sun is like a hole. To keep Subjective also requires that No small pattern; No more than one pattern unless in set; No more than one colour in the field; No more than one layer colour for pattern background.

*Morocco**Portugal**Laos*

## 9 Central

In the most case, the pattern should be put at the central position, this not only makes pattern appear symmetric and balanced, but also makes the subject prominent. A pattern, especially a material pattern always appear some weight on vision, so if you must put a pattern either hoist or fly, put it at hoist, where bear the weight is better than at fly. Therefore you cannot put a pattern in the right-top corner like Rwanda's; Cannot put a pattern in the right-bottom corner like Zambia's unless the canton has had a pattern like New Zealand; Cannot put a pattern in the left-bottom corner like Nauru's, because there is not a place like canton where you can take a net by head rope. To keep central also requires that No pattern in the left-top corner like Liechtenstein's unless it has been used as a canton's pattern like Tonga's.

*Rwanda**Zambia**Nauru*

## 10 Symmetric

Symmetry can produce the sense of beauty, because people need the psychological balance of geometry. A triangle at the hoist like Sudan's is as the general epaulette on the right, where is the general epaulette on the left? The flag of South Africa is like a lying funnel. The St Patrick Cross of the Union Jack is unsymmetrical like Britain's, an eyebrow is at the underside of the St Partrick Cross and another is at upside of the St Patrick Cross, which shows an angry face on the flag.

*Sudan**South Africa**Britain*

## 11 Balanced

The equality also is beauty. The equality embodies two aspects: one is equal size, another is horizontal level. The unequal stripe size brings people a kind of unbalance psychological state like Colombia's. A leaning triangle like Bosnia and Herzegovina's is unbalanced, because it stands with an angle. Leaning Tower of Pisa is not more beautiful than Eiffel Tower, because it imprints a kind of unbalanced psychological state. Horizontalness also is beauty, but a slope line is not, like Seychelles'.

*Colombia**Bosnia and Herzegovina**Seychelles*

## 12 Harmonious

Harmony can produce the sense of beauty. It is harmonious if the button of a yellow jacket is suntan; it is harmonious that a set of furniture is with same colour; it is harmonious that all buildings in a small district are with the same colour and the same style. There are three ways for a flag to be harmonious: harmonious colour set; harmonious patterns, it includes size and shape; harmonious area between pattern and background. Red, blue and white is a harmonious colour set rather than a black, light blue and yellow set like Bahamas'. It is inharmonious if the Crux combines with a bird like Papua New Guinea's, because between them there are not similar connections. It is inharmonious if a set pattern stays in canton area but the whole stripe as its background like Singapore's, because the background area is too big.

*Bahamas**Papua New Guinea**Singapore*

### 13 Integrated

Beyond suspicion, integrity is beauty. On the flag of Angola there is a half gear and a billhook, this pattern might imitate the hammer and sickle of Soviet Union flag in 1917 so as to symbolize the union of workers and peasants as well as soldiers. A sickle has a natural half circle, but a half gear is not integrated. To array a half circle via stars doesn't mean that the sun has just risen up at skyline like Venezuela's. For keeping the integrity of a cross, you cannot use a pattern to destroy another pattern like Australia's (1831—1854), because the white stars on a dark cross look like holes.

*Angola**Venezuela**Australia 1831 - 1854*

### 14 Contrasting

Generally speaking, a flag at least should use a light colour, because it can form the sharp contrast effect. It is big mistake that bicolour or tricolour uses all dark colours like Afghanistan's and Azerbaijan's. Black, and red and green are all deep colours that make flag look dim. A basic principle to design flag is that dark must be alongside pale.

*Afghanistan**Azerbaijan*

### 15 Flowing

Common saying: running river never stale. The stripe on the flag is like a river, if a stripe is blocked, that can form a kind of psychological

block like Central Africa's, if the stripes pass from edge to edge, then we feel it is easy and smooth. A tortoise looks bad because it is always overcautious, but an eagle impresses as stretchable. The St. Andrews cross reaches the four corners rather than the cross on the Russian Naval Flag (1710—1712). A border also can block the sense of liquidity like Grenada's. A border is good for defence or keeping prisoner, but no good for exchange and movement.



*Central Africa*



*Russian Naval Flag 1710 -  
1712*



*Grenada*

## 16 Handsome

When a fat person wears small coat, we say that it is unhandsome. It is also unhandsome if designer uses extortionate fimbriation, though fimbriation has a function to separate dark colours, but it conveys to people niggardliness like Botswana's. The white fimbriation makes the black stripe narrower and unequal with two blue stripes. Extortionately using stripe not only looks like as niggardliness, but also like congesting like Zimbabwe's.



*Botswana*



*Zimbabwe*

## 17 Smooth

Human body is smooth made by God. Smooth is just beauty. A saw tooth line looks like saw and teeth like Bahrain's; it can impress deeply, but has no pleasure. An undulate line is smooth like Kiribati's, but it is curve line. We need a flat road to drive rather than a pitted road. An island border is naturally formed and cannot be with a smooth, geometry shape like Cyprus', because regularity is also beauty.

*Bahrain**Kiribati**Cyprus*

## 18 Relax

The national flag is mostly used in the peace period, even a war flag is also unnecessary to put a gun or a knife like Sri Lanka's, which doesn't make sense for the appealing purpose. Most people like cat as a pet rather than a hedgehog, because a hedgehog makes people nervous like Marshall Islands', but a cat relaxes. Fewer architects design a building with rhombus in its cross section, because a rhombus has at least two acute angles, which make people nervous like Brazil's. To relax also requires No sharp acute angle; No slope line; No knotted line.

*Sri Lanka**Marshall Islands**Brazil*

## 19 Pleasing

The national flag should make people happy rather than depressed; therefore you cannot design a flag that produces an oppressive psychological effect like Latvia's, the middle stripe is overly narrow as a press forge machine, nobody likes to taste the sapor to be squeezed. We see a Y shape as a funnel like Vanuatu's, if liquid go through a slender funnel, it is not unstuffy and also takes time, which may cause our psychological depression.

*Latvia**Vanuatu*

## 20 Light

The flag is a piece of cloth that can wave in the wind. It should appear

slim and graceful, for design, light colour should be used rather than deep colour such as the dark field like Bangladesh's, because the dark colour field can make flag feel heavy. For a horizontal flag, the correct colour order is pale at the top and dark at the bottom rather than the contrary like Malawi's. An arsyvarsy order of colour can make the flag look heavy. For a vertical flag, the correct colour order is pale at the fly and dark at the hoist rather than the contrary like Malta's, because the place to prop up weight is at the hoist but not at the fly, anyway, for balance reason you can put a dark stripe at the top like Holland's or a dark strip at the fly like France. To keep light also requires No dark for field and pale for pattern; No three dimensions; No border; No material object.



*Bangladesh*



*Malawi*



*Malta*

## Correction for Six Nations' Flag According to Twenty Principles

### 1 America

#### 1.1 Design defect

- A star represents a state, that causes the flag of USA frequently to change its layout.
- The stars look too crowded
- Compare the height of a strip - 1000 units, the diameter of each star - 800 units is too small

#### 1.2 Correction

- Give up the idea that a star represents a state
- Reduce 50 stars into 32 stars,
- Or reduce 50 stars into 23 stars and increase the diameter of each star's circle to 1000 units or 1300 units



*America*



*32 Stars Draft*



*23 Stars Draft*

## 2 Germany

### 2.1 Design defect

- At a horizontal tricolour, the correct order from dark to pale should be from bottom to top

### 2.2 Correction

- Reverse the flag
- Or using order as black, red and white from bottom to top



*Germany*



*Draft*



*Draft II*

## 3 Britain

### 3.1 Design defect

- The St. Patrick's cross is broken
- The St. Patrick's cross' asymmetry

### 3.2 Correction

- Join the St. Patrick's crosses together
- Or make the St Patrick's crosses symmetrical



*Britain*



*Draft I*



*Draft II*

## 4 Australia

### 4.1 Design defect

- Use of two patterns on a flag
- The angles of the stars are too sharp
- Similar to New Zealand flag

### 4.2 Correction

- Keep union star only
- Or keep the Crux only and change the seven angles into the five angles

*Australia**Draft**Draft II*

## 5 India

### 5.1 Design defect

- Use of a seal in tricolour

### 5.2 Correction

- Take the seal off
- or use the seal only

*India**Draft I (in 1933)**Draft II*

## 6 Mexico

### 6.1 Design defect

- Use of a seal in a tricolour

### 6.2 Correction

- Take the seal off and exchange the position of red and green
- Or change vertical tricolour to horizontal tricolour

*Mexico**Draft I**Draft II*

## Conclusion

A good flag design should use golden rectangle; Use unique layout; Use two or three colours; Minimally use one light colour; The best colour

set is red, blue and white; Use authentic symbolic meaning; No any pattern for bicolour and tricolour; the pattern should be dark, clear, abstract, single and full size, and should be put in the centre or canton of a flag; the length of canton is at least one third of flag, but no more than one half of flag. The pattern looks symmetric, balanced, smooth, integrated and harmonious. Flag can impress as on cantabile, contrastive, relax, pleasing and slim and graceful.



### Bibliography:

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2. Most national flags quote from 'FOTW' website- <http://flagspot.net/flags/> authors are Željko Heimer and so on.

### About the author



**Lin Dong** (British), born in China. B.A of Chinese language and literature of Mudanjiang Teachers College in 1982, Postgraduate Diploma in Economics of London University in 2004, was a lecturer at University of Dalian, because of some paper published involved political standpoint in 1987, lost a chance to become as a professor in 1992, then left university in 1993, played a role as a lawyer in UK for a few years, now a professional writer who is building up a small press in London.

Had engaged in the theoretical research of reform of Chinese characters after middle school, had made a set of schemes with independent system for simplifying Chinese characters, had published papers and articles of linguistics, philology, economics, demography and eugenics, invited to read papers at international conferences and to give lectures overseas, had published a geopolitics monograph in German "Powers' constellation" in 1999. A reasoning novel, a geopolitics monograph and two monographs of vexillology will be published soon.

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