

Exploration of Modern Visual Design Thinking in Chinese Traditional Culture

Taking the Image Design of *Shan Hai Ching* Monsters as an Example

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Abstract—Based on the analysis of the cultural attribute of Chinese traditional culture and the situation of symbols in the context of modern communication, this article extracts the information with an example of monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* and puts forward three kinds of the symbol using design thinking, to explore how to extract and convert the necessary information in the traditional culture from different dimensions, following visual expressions through design techniques under digital media terminals.

Keywords: *traditional culture, communication, visual design thinking, Shan Hai Ching*

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese traditional culture has the characteristics of historic, rich and dynamic [1], and the inheritance and promotion of Chinese traditional culture is of great period significance. Culture itself constitutes the internal attribute of intangible cultural heritage. If the design form is the external drive of cultural inheritance, the content is the internal drive of cultural inheritance. The inheritance of culture lies in how to spread, while the visual communication of content is accomplished by relying on symbols.

II. CHINESE TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN MODERN CONTEXT

A. Status of Chinese traditional culture

China is in a period of transition from a traditional society to a modern society. It needs both traditional culture as the starting point of modern culture, and the need to develop culture beyond traditional innovation. Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed in *Xi Jinping - the Governance of China* that China's outstanding traditional culture has become the gene of the Chinese nation, rooted in the Chinese people's hearts, and subtly affecting the Chinese people's thinking and behavior.

When we face how to treat traditional culture, we usually face the following propositions [2]. One is traditionalism. When modernism is found to have more problems than tradition, it is advocated to return to tradition. The other is modernism, which believes that modernity is better than tradition, and the deepening of social problems originates from

traditional culture, while negating traditional culture Positive meaning. These two ideas are prone to fall into cultural nihilism or cultural revivalism.

Therefore, in modern society, the third proposition is "take the essence and remove the dregs", that is, develop in inheritance, actively seek positive factors from traditional culture, and transform them in a creative way to meet the needs of modernization. In modern society, modernity has its advantage of discourse priority. The value exertion of traditional culture in the contemporary era should use the advantages of both to superimpose each other. The advantage of traditional culture lies in the outstanding spiritual activities of human beings and their activity products, and the advantage of modern society lies in the role of technological civilizations and capital civilizations.

B. Spreading characteristics of the modern culture

In the modern media environment, cultural communication presents the following characteristics. First, the content of communication is more personalized and refined, and the information transmitted is more tailored to the personalized needs of different groups. When people acquire information, they emphasize more on the communication and interaction between subjective and objective information.

Second, the transmission speed and efficiency are higher. In the era of fragmented information, it is an important means of information communication that information processing into a way that can be quickly accepted and understood by everyone. Traditional culture, with its inherent forms of expression, shows traditional characteristics in the era of new media. In the era of diversified information, its connotation cannot attract more audiences at the beginning.

C. The significance and function of symbols in cultural transmission

According to Robert Ezra Park, a representative of the Chicago School who is one of the important sources of communication of academic thought, society not only continues to exist due to transmission and communication, but also exists in communication [3]. Charles Horton Cooley's "looking glass self [4]" theory also inherits George Mead's

"symbolic self" theory: people's cognition of self comes from the symbolic interaction between self and others, self and society [5]. Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of semiotics, pointed out that the connection between signifier and signified is quite arbitrary, which is an inevitable channel for enriching the meaning of cultural symbols. Buffett, a German linguist, inherited Saussure's semiotics theory and formed a modern semiotics research system with graphics, colors and words as the elements [6]. In other words, we can explore the connotation expressed by culture in design by using these visual elements.

To explore cultural communication, especially information communication through visual design, it is necessary to explore the possibility of symbol selection and transformation. "Symbols are senses that carry meaning [7]", selecting symbols for traditional cultural meanings to express, and using symbols to convey meaning, can achieve the purpose of communicating meaning in vision.

III. INFORMATION EXTRACTION AND DESIGN TARGETS OF MONSTER IN *SHAN HAI CHING*

Shan Hai Ching described the ancient mythology of a bizarre world, it with a fantastic view of the ancient mysterious vision are described, and the contained range is very wide, not only the time of the folk customs, religion, geography, product, witchcraft, ancient history, medicine and so on, there are many monsters image in modern seems to be beyond the reality. Therefore, the public's cognition of the monsters by *Shan Hai Ching* mostly stayed in the "strange", recording some strange creatures. These are the results of the cognition and imagination of the primitive ancestors, but also leave us modern people a mysterious mystery and curiosity.

However, every culture has its own way of decoding. One of the characteristics of the monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* is to record the "distant places" that haven't been reached by human beings at that time. The role of imagination makes them idealized and utopian. The other is "eaten by monsters and die", which is demonization [8]. In essence, it contains the world outlook and values of the ancestors in natural life.

In the modern context, there have been many visual designs to develop the relevant content of *Shan Hai Ching*. However, because the monsters in the original book mostly describe their appearance, their "narrative nature" is not strong and rarely introduced the ins and outs of alien beasts and most do not have a coherent story. Its narrative and the modern habit of integrity are more difficult to describe and understand manner, so future generations will mostly be deformed and to continue its story. In the modern *Shan Hai Ching* related design, the image of the mysterious monsters was divided into pros and cons, and the image was dominated by grotesque and strange figures.

In the visual design teaching course, I led the students to try to explore different design thinking, and got the output results. The design goal is to take the description of monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* as the text, and to design the modern image of monsters from a certain Angle or multiple thinking angles by

using modern design techniques, so as to achieve certain dissemination effect and information transmission.

The text information extracted from *Shan Hai Ching* consists of three aspects: climate, super power and ferocious form.

IV. THREE KINDS OF DESIGN THINKING AND THEIR APPLICATION TO THE IMAGE DESIGN OF *SHAN HAI CHING* MONSTERS

The design will start from three kinds of thinking: one is the symbol-relevance thinking, the second is symbol-replacement thinking, and the third is symbol-communication thinking.

The starting point of these three kinds of thinking is that similar cultural content must have different bearing symbols in different era backgrounds.

- Symbol-relevance thinking is to find where traditional cultural symbols can adapt to modern cultural symbols, and try to integrate them into modern symbols for expression.
- Symbol-replacement thinking is still taking traditional culture as a carrier, and find modern symbols to replace certain parts of symbols in traditional culture.
- Symbol-communication thinking refers to modern communication symbols, mainly transforming traditional symbols into modern symbols.

This paper has drawn the following illustrations to express these three ways of thinking, in which ("Fig. 1") the blue circle represents the symbols and meanings in the modern context, and the red square represents the symbols and meanings of monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* and its time.

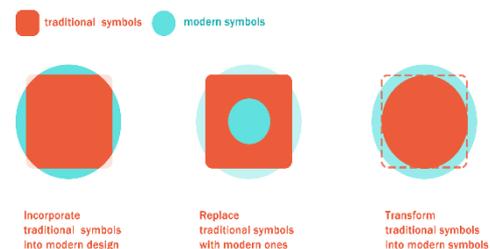


Fig. 1. Three design thinking diagrams (image designed by the authors).

A. Symbol-relevance thinking

The function of symbols is to spread ideas by means of information. They follow relatively fixed coding and decoding methods, and establish regional cultural systems through symbol systems and material carriers, so as to achieve a kind of ideological consensus among people. The traditional symbol in the contemporary performance, needs to borrow the contemporary symbol.

According to the specific application of semiotics in social practice, Charles Sanders Peirce divided symbols into three categories [9]: the image, the index, and the symbol. Among

them, the image refers to the similarity or the same quality between the symbol and the expressed object; the index refers to the causal relationship and the neighboring relationship between the symbol and the object; the symbol refers to social traditions and conventions, that is, the lack of causal relationships and similarity relationship between the symbol and the object are given new relationships and meanings in the context of modern communication.

Shan Hai Ching contains a large amount of meteorological information of ancient times, including the records and understandings of the ancestors on the natural environment, especially weather phenomena and climate change, in which there are a lot of climate descriptions that use monsters to make predictions.

Taking the description of monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* as an example: "there is a snake with two bodies, called fat waste, when seeing it, drought." "Mengshui has many fish, they have fish body and bird wings, sounds like mandarin duck, floods when see it, " In the modern context, the climate information associated with the monsters recognized by the ancestors needs appropriate symbols to express it. In the modern context, according to the classification of symbols, the image symbols of the climate include the actual natural objects such as the sun, the moon, and clouds; its indexing symbols are such as smoke and dryness; and its symbolic symbols are weather warning signs and weather forecast icons, etc. In modern communication, this paper will choose symbolic symbols as related objects, because the acquisition of relevant meanings of symbolic symbols comes from society's long-term feelings and cognition, which can fit the modern context and acquire cultural significance to the greatest extent.

Therefore, combination of the monsters with the weather forecast icon had been used in the design, and thus puts the icon of ancient monsters into the contemporary weather forecast icon ("Fig.2"). It is essentially using different visual symbols to express the same meaning thought of people in different space and time.



Fig. 2. Combination of *Shan Hai Ching* monsters and weather warning icons (designed by Daihui Chen from Nanfang College of Sun Yat-sen University).

B. Symbols-replacement thinking

Each group of cultural symbol elements can be decomposed into basic elements and variable elements [10]. The basic elements are the basic descriptions of monsters, such as the *Shan Hai Nan Ching* says: "bi fang bird is in the east, west of Qingshui, only one foot." Among them, the attribute of "bird" is the status symbol of the monster that cannot be changed at will. The variable elements such as the action form of the monster description: "only one foot," the scene "west of Qingshui", and special function "Bird of Fire", etc. are the part

of the variability that allows creativity and imagination in design.

The images of monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* are made by different combinations of limbs and organs of different creatures. Monsters in the book can be divided into two categories: one is the symbiosis between humans and animals, such as Nuwa with the head and snake body in *Shan Ching*, and the other is the exaggerated and deformed images of organs, such as the Three-Heads State and Xingtian in the *Hai Ching* [11]. This kind of exaggerated and strange description can arouse people's curiosity, and its content is still within the imagination of the ancients, such as few monsters can use tools and weapons, but by the "dive power" and appeared. Can this "divine power" be expressed by modern material symbols and forms? That is to say, the modern material symbols replace part of the images, so that the connotation of monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* is updated in the contemporary era, and the meaning carried by the modern symbols can be easily perceived by modern people.

Consequently, when exploring the replacement of forms, it was discovered that the monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* appeared as an animal with special abilities and foresight under the age of its birth, which represented the ability at that time to be different from their own species. A kind of expectation and trust in this kind of ability, such as being able to fly, fire, and spray water, has super powers that humans do not have, and can protect humans, protect homes, and even attack the enemy.

This expectation of ability is no longer deified in the modern context. Due to the development of science, people no longer rely on their imagination to impose other abilities on other species beyond themselves, but through the development of human technology, to transform objects, organisms, and even human beings, such as adding mechanical devices, organ replacement, hematopoietic stem cell replacement, and even switching of DNA fragments.

Therefore, based on different contexts, this paper tries to use the same way of thinking to replace the image of the monsters. The following example uses a mechanical element that represents one of the modern elements to do the replacement in design ("Fig.3").



Fig. 3. Use modern symbols to replace some structures of monsters in *Shan Hai Ching* (designed by Wangying Huang from Nanfang College of Sun Yat-sen University).

C. Symbols-communication thinking

Most of the images of monsters in Shan Hai Ching are grotesque, which reflects the life spirit of the primitive ancestors. Therefore, in its spread, it has the shortcoming of lagging behind and not matching the mainstream aesthetic of contemporary people.

The modern monster visual image is mainly based on the ancient style and ancient charm and Chinese style modeling, such as the animation "Peking Opera Cat", "Big Fish Begonia", the game "Yin Yang Shi", etc., which are redesigned in accordance with ancient Chinese painting styles. This kind of traditional elegant, complex and dynamic beauty.

With the increasingly frequent cultural exchanges between different countries, a large number of visual styles have been updated and integrated. Such as MO-E from Japan and South Korea cultures, such as Kumamoto bear and Line Friend, these Intellectual Property (IP), images have been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, their exaggerated body deformation, such as big head and small body, round shape, and changeable facial expression formed the mainstream of visual art, and because of its expression changes easily struck a chord with people, "meng" culture, and so did the visual update again. Groups who love similar cultural elements and certain visual style images, although their cultural backgrounds are not fully connected, through the unified recognition of the visual IP image, it can further add multiple meanings to the culture. Besides, as a cultural carrier with cross-media narrative ability, IP has the obvious characteristics of fast communication and wide audience, which is easier to arouse the resonance and emotional attachment of target users [12]. It is also the normal development driven by the content of the creative industry chain.

Based on the way in the context of modern transmission, this design has turned the strange and grotesque animals into cute ones, which is different from the original book description and the description of monsters in the traditional Chinese painting style ("Fig. 4"). These monsters no longer appear with scary expressions, instead they are replaced by a cute and affectionate image, while weakening the characteristics of their strange limbs, which are usually scary, retaining only special meaning characteristics and simplifying them. The expression of Shan Hai Ching monsters here is very close to modern popular visual elements, and has modern significance in its dissemination.



Fig. 4. Transform the images of Shan Hai Jing monsters into an easy-to-spread "moe" form (image design by Tingshun Peng from Nanfang College of Sun Yat-sen University).

V. CONCLUSION

The topic of how to better design and spread Chinese traditional culture in modern times has been explored by numerous scholars. The exploration of traditional culture needs to be carried out in a modern context. By extracting key information in traditional cultural texts, using different expressions and carriers to highlight the ability of visual communication, and at the same time analyzing how modern image contexts are generated and how they are transmitted and the contradictions and fusion points of modern and traditional culture hidden behind, finally, the exploration makes full use of image resources and cultural resources for reconstruction. This article is not limited to graphic form of thinking, how to make creative graphics, how to use the method of graphically creative, attempting to replace from symbol correlation, symbol and symbol transmission three directions to explore to transform a traditional culture to modern visual design methods, in order to promote the development of Chinese traditional culture in the visual communication.

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