THE APPLICATION OF CHINESE TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS TO MODERN GRAPHIC DESIGN

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by

Xin Zhang

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In today's market, multiculture has become a mainstream trend of modern life.

Multiculture has penetrated deeply into People's ideology. People always expect new things and a new look. This expectation allows designers to explore or import new ideas and new elements as resources of creation. Although not all inspiration comes from culture, it is still a very important influence for designers. Culture sources can bring enormous influences to our design. We can interpret styles and generate unique ideas born out of those influence.

China has five thousand years of history; its culture is extensive and profound. Chinese tradition is constantly being reinterpreted to produce a fresh and dynamic style of contemporary design. "With the current global preoccupation with Asian style---from food to interior design to philosophy---it was only a matter of time before attention came to rest on Chinese aesthetic [1]."

Chinese scholar Lao-zi stressed the importance of a simple existence and the need to live in harmony with nature and the world. As the pace of modern life gains tempo, more and more city dwellers ---both in China and around the world --- are finding that such classical serenity fits neatly into contemporary living [1].

A recent movie, Kongfu Panda, which was produced by Dreamworks, was loaded with lots of Chinese elements such as Chinese Kongfu, Chinese scenes, Chinese traditional
clothes, Chinese music to create a sense of Chinese atmosphere, and included a Chinese type of story and traditional Chinese type of thought. These were demonstrated vividly and incisively. It combines Chinese culture with modern animation technology, which makes the animation more vivid.

In the fashion field, the brand, "Longchamp," issued a style of bag that was designed for men. It was full of Chinese elements. It looks like a Chinese military bag of the 50s and includes a statement of Chairman Mao, which reads "为人民服务," or "Serve common people with heart and soul." The inside is the traditional Chinese red color. The designer is Philippe Cassegrain, the president of Longchamp. He loves Chinese culture and is inspired by it. He respects the spirit of "为人民服务." The inscription of Chairman Mao was pierced on Longchamp's finest leather, which made up the soft and reliable bag.

Louis Vitteon issued a creative bag in 2007 that was inspired by a kind of Chinese woven bag. It created a kind of new fashion. Since Chinese elements are so charming and also because I am originally from China, I explored the application of Chinese elements to my design.

In this thesis, I will only deal with traditional Chinese elements. These Chinese elements are symbolic of Chinese culture. They are also Chinese Arts. When we mention Chinese arts, Chinese painting is the most important. Chinese painting has a long historical
standing. It began about 4,000—5,000 years ago. Poetry, calligraphy, Chinese brushwork, drawing, seal and inscription are necessary parts in traditional Chinese painting.

Corporate Identity System

In this project, I designed a corporate identity system for a Chinese art auction corporation. Because of the nature of the company, the oriental feeling was a must. Moreover, since it is an art auction corporation, it should have an artistic feeling. The corporation prefers that it has both a traditional feeling and a modern manner. The corporation has three selling areas. Each area carries different art products including Chinese paintings, Chinese antiques, and western paintings.

1. Logo and seal

The first thing for designing the corporate identity system was designing a logo to embody the traditional feeling. Then I thought about the Chinese seal.

The seal is a symbol of traditional Chinese art and it can also act as an identification function for the corporation. The use of seals on paintings dates back to the northern Sung Period and became standard practice during the Yuan dynasty. Early on, clay was the medium used to make the impression [2]. In Chinese painting, when an artist finishes their paintings or calligraphy, they will stamp their own seal. The seal with the artist’s
name on it is necessary; sometimes they will stamp an additional one as well which
depends on the need of the artist. Traditionally, seals were determined to be a reliable
means of identification. Usually, stone, bowlder or jade made the material of the seals.
They can be carved by the artist or seal artists. A good painting must have a good seal. It
is balance.

Traditional Chinese seals need to have traditional Calligraphy, which is a type of Chinese
calligraphy for seals. Now a lot of people use also modern characters instead to make
seals. In order to create the traditional feeling, I thought the traditional type of Chinese
calligraphy perfectly fit the concept. Instead of carving the seal on jade, I created it with
computer graphics. The corporation’s name is The Xin house. It was named from my
name. I thought that in the future I would own this kind of art auction business. The name
was translated to Chinese Characters as “欣之屋”. The font I chose was FZXiaozhuan –
the traditional Chinese Calligraphy.

A Chinese seal is divided to intaglio and relief. The one I used for the design belongs to
intaglio where the characters are white and the background is red. The Chinese terms for
the two methods are yinke, yangke or baiwen, zhuwen based on the color of the
characters.

By the sixth or seventh century, with the proliferation of paper for official documents, the
use of clay was replaced by black ink or liquid cinnabar pigment. The cinnabar pigment became the standard medium for seal impressions because of its distinctive and attractive qualities [2]. The color I picked for the seal was close to cinnabar color, and it is even darker than the fresh cinnabar color. Because the Xin house is an art auction corporation, it has a serious traditional attribute, so I made the color more somber, more serious, and maintained the traditional feeling, thereby embodying the cultural depth. Moreover, I made the seal broken along the edges to give harmony and spacious balance to the seal. I created this kind of effect in Photoshop, which seems to look like the seal was stamped on paper.

Then the other issue is, it had to have a modern feeling. To achieve this objective, I designed a variety of logos based on the seal that combine with a traditional Chinese paper umbrella shape, and with a triangle shape, representing traditional Chinese roofs. Although they look good, some of them seemed too complicated and distracted people's attention from the seal; some of them seemed too traditional, and did not have a modern look. So I simplified it to straight lines, which still look like a house roof. It is simple and modern with English characters. Because the Xin house is a worldwide corporation, it should include both Chinese and English Characters.

The system includes a logo, a corporate identity manual, a catalog, and a brochure.

Business stationery (letterheads, business cards, envelopes) and signage were included in
the manual. Furthermore, because the corporation has three divisions, each division has its own color. The dark blue purple I chose is an old fashioned Chinese color. It is a steady-going, elegant and graceful color. It can be used for the antique area and the main administration department. The green was for the Chinese painting division, and the blue for the western art area.

2. Pattern

The patterns I created are on the cover of the manual, the business cards, the interior of the envelopes, the cover of catalog, and the cover of the product brochure. I created the patterns according to the plum flower. The plum flower is one of four popular flowers in traditional Chinese painting. Use of the flowering Plum in Chinese painting began from the Five Dynasties, however it became popular in the Song Dynasty [3]. From the Song dynasty, the recluse of the flowering-plum was the key idea in Chinese traditions in poetry and painting. By the late Song dynasty, the enthusiasm for the pure blossoms and the reclusion were widely certified in literature, art and life [3]. Plum-blossoms bloom in a very cold winter accompanied by cold, wind, frost, snow and ice, which makes it extraordinary among other flowers. The characteristics of the flowering plum were sublimated as the aesthetic and symbolic language in Chinese literature and art. The severe snowy cold wintry white environment endows it with such characteristics. The symbolic meaning and traditional aesthetic and methods explained the reasons I decided to use the flowering plum as the resource of the pattern. Not only does it fully embody
the feature of the typical Chinese traditional element, but because the corporation carries high-end art works, it possesses the characteristic of the plum blossom.

The rest is the pattern design. How to demonstrate it in a modern manner was a challenge. In traditional Chinese culture, the application of the flower plum is not exclusive to Chinese painting; the flowering plum is also extensively embodied as a motif in Chinese Ceramics, Pingfeng and motifs in textiles of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The plum pattern I created was inspired by the motif of a textile from an elite tomb that was recently excavated. The wife of an imperial clansman and the daughter of the supervisor of foreign trade at Quanzhou was buried there. Clothing and textiles excavated from her tomb suggest that at that time the plum blossom appeared in the weaves of gauze and satins. The Patterns were combined with other flowers and some other seasonal companions [3].

The patterns of plum blossom in the textile did not use the same technique of expression as in paintings. Its forms of expression were more abstract, ornamental; the branches were transformed to be different from the real branches of the plum blossom. This is the feature I adopted to create the pattern for the corporation. Unlike the form of textile pattern that we were talking about above, the pattern I created did not combine with other flowers or other ornamental elements. It embodied the characteristic of purity. It indicates the culture attribute of the corporation. In order to demonstrate the decorative feature, I
made each flower the same and organized the pattern in repeat order. The use of a watercolor brush, the size of strokes chosen in the software Illustrator and the tablet are the artifices to accomplish the drawing. After one unit of the pattern was finished, I duplicated the unit and changed the direction to organize the whole pattern design to form the aesthetics of orderliness.

The pattern on the business cards and the pattern on the front envelopes are different, but they are all in the same motif. Only the growth of branches is different. The reason is, for the specific small placement, the change prompts a kind of harmony. In other words, some kind of arrangement of branches fit some specific space better instead of having them all exactly the same.

Tea set

The tea company carries a famous Chinese tea—Longjing tea. The brand is Longjing Tribute tea. The tribute tea indicates good quality, because in ancient China the locals paid tribute to the emperor with superior local products. So the tribute tea was the best. The company wanted to sell it well, not only in China but also overseas. Knowing cultural diversity is very important for designers, a product that looks and acts like it was developed by people from the user’s culture can make the difference between just a good product and a really hot seller in the overseas market [4].
What’s the function of packaging? The answer is selling products. Selling the famous Chinese tea is not only selling the tea, but also is a culture sale. Thousands of years ago, the Chinese started drinking tea. So the tea culture is a deep Chinese cultural practice. How to demonstrate the practice and merge it into modern design is the response of the application of Chinese elements to modern design. It is a creativity issue. The majority of people always like something good, different, new and special. So companies are always trying to make their products unique. That is why creativity is needed. A creative idea is the soul of each design piece. Creativity is about combining different things and putting them together to make them work in a new way. Leo Burnett said, “Creativity is the art of establishing new and meaningful relationships between previously unrelated things... which somehow present the product in a fresh, new light [5].” So in this project, everything in the tea set needed to be created with Chinese culture and tea culture-based style to embody a Chinese feeling and be done in a modern design style.

The first element I brought in the tea set design is Chinese calligraphy. It embodies the distillation of Chinese culture. “The square or round forms, loosely or tightly interlocked; the slow or fast motion; the composition of the characters all contribute to the mood and spirit of calligraphy.” The movement and the rhythmic vitality are the most significant aspects in judging the beauty of this art [6]. Regardless of the minor styles, there are five basic ones which are Zhuan Shu, Li Shu, Kai Shu, Xing Shu and Chao Shu. The two types of calligraphy I used were Xing Shu and Zhuan Shu [7]. Other than
Chinese Calligraphy, I was inspired by a bamboo curtain to create the outside package. Bamboo has been used in China for over 5000 years. It has the earliest history of using bamboo. Bamboo was indispensable in people’s daily lives in Ancient China. Woven bamboo art and crafts are widely used in China, including toy animals, lanterns, flower baskets, trays, tea boxes, screens, curtains etc. In Chinese tea culture, sometimes, a woven bamboo tray is set up under the tea serving wares. For creating the feeling of nature, the teahouses in China always are surrounded by bamboo products, such as bamboo curtains, bamboo trays, bamboo plants, etc. Moreover, the atmosphere created is taken from traditional teahouses as well. The application of the bamboo curtain as a part of the background also creates the atmosphere of tasting tea, and creating the feeling of nature.

The overall package design is simple but not lacking in detail. This is also a principle of modern design. The logo I created included a tea leaf and English characters. The tea leaf was created originally from the taste of the tea. It embodies the feeling of aroma and the font of the English characters is in harmony with the aroma feeling. Furthermore, because the brand is tribute tea, I intended to put the royal element in it. I used a plaque instead of the dragon or complicated traditional patterns, because I was inspired by the plaque, which was hung at the palace of emperor. The use of the plaque created the royal feeling in a different way.
The interior package includes two small tea packages, a set of tea ware and a booklet. Instead of using a Chinese traditional tea package, I used a modern packaging method to develop the "pillow pack" shape [8]. The application of Chinese bush work and Chinese Calligraphy were shown on the small packages. Moreover, I tied a Chinese knot, which I wove around each package to create a kind of Chinese style. The inside color of the box is solid black. It is a modern way to present products. The black against the light color of the small tea packages makes them stand out better. For the booklet, I took a Chinese method--Xieye, combining it with a modern design principle of layout. This packing design merged both Chinese culture-based elements and modern design principles. It fully embodied creativity and innovation. It can attract Chinese consumers, because it is not only full of Chinese elements, but also has modern style; because it is full of Chinese culture based style, it will also satisfy western customers as well.

Many successful examples from other designers have permeated the western aesthetic with centuries-old ideas being reworked into valid directions for modern living. Although we have different directions, we have the same concept, which is the application of Chinese elements to modern design. The application of Chinese elements to modern graphic design not only provides creative ideas to graphic designers, but also influences customers to consume and enjoy. Bringing in the sprit of culture will result in merging multicultures rather than only applying Chinese elements into modern design.
Endnotes


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