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Poetic Imagery - The Visual Translation of Chinese Characters

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Abstract: Traditional narratives usually depict scenes through words and convey content using paintings. However, during the research, the author found that in the evolution history of Chinese characters, there exists a unique way, that is, through the ingenious visual translation of Chinese characters, the text content is presented in a visual form. This study aims to explore the design method of visualizing Chinese characters, selecting outstanding Chinese character creations from past dynasties as research objects, with a particular focus on Su Dongpo's "Evening View" and the "Bamboo Leaf Poem" from the reign of Emperor Guangxu of the Qing Dynasty. Through an in-depth analysis of the structure, meaning of Chinese characters, and their usage in different contexts in these two works, this article attempts to reveal how to utilize the image-based characteristics of Chinese characters to represent the content of the text in creation. Ultimately, this study explored the unique value of Chinese character visualization in textual representation and its potential for future applications across multiple dimensions.

Keywords: Chinese character visualization; visual design; textual representation; Su Dongpo; Bamboo Leaf Poem; Chinese calligraphy

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1. Poetic Reflection - Poetic Exploration in Text Construction

Traditional texts rely on textual descriptions. For instance, in Laocoon, it is mentioned that poetry is good at expressing "actions" or "events." In ancient China, there is also the saying that "nothing is better than words in expressing things," all of which illustrate the power of textual description [1]. The form of Chinese characters possesses poetic qualities and can depict the intentions of things. For instance, in the work "Bamboo Leaf Poem" (as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2), at first glance, there are two slender bamboo plants. Upon closer inspection, one can discover the content of the poem composed of the structure of the bamboo leaves from the interlaced bamboo leaves: "Ungrateful to the Eastern Lord, the painting stands alone." "Never complain that a single leaf is too pale; it will never wither." A poem is presented in sequence from the bamboo leaves in the upper-right corner of the picture [2]. The structure of the characters conforms to the structure and growth of bamboo leaves, and the strokes of the characters also take the shape of bamboo leaves. In China, bamboo is often used to convey willpower and character, and its beauty as a plant has been elevated to the beauty of personality [3]. The author uses the characteristics of bamboo to reconstruct the form of the text to echo the content of the poem, expressing the emotions contained in the poem through the text's form. It is precisely the unique morphological and structural features of Chinese characters that enable such ingenious changes. The "Poem on Bamboo Leaves" depicts bamboo. By using characters to paint bamboo and bamboo to write characters, the two elements blend into one in terms of image, creating a new form of expression [4]. This

breakthrough enables Chinese characters to display unexpected ingenuity that viewers could not have imagined.

Figure 1. "Poem of Bamboo Leaves 1" (Image source: Zhang Daoyi, "Beautiful Words").

Figure 2. "Poem of Bamboo Leaves 2" (Image source: Zhang Daoyi's "Beautiful Words").

Chinese characters can construct texts with spatial variations, and poetry can be contained within them by changing the spatial form of the characters. Figure 3 shows the seven-character poem "Evening View" by Shen Zhi Ti, which is precisely constructed using Chinese characters to create a text with spatial variations. Condensing the twenty-eight characters into 12, when observing a poem, one must interpret its meaning from the changes in its shape and structure. Each shape has its own characteristics, with some being long and others being short. There are horizontal and side writings [5]. There are reverse writings and reverse writings in the book. This method of constructing text using the size of characters, number of strokes, orientation of positions, and density of arrangements breaks the traditional way of depicting scenery with characters and highlights the spatial structural characteristics of Chinese characters [6]. The unique spatial characteristics of Chinese characters make the information contained in individual characters rich and

intriguing. At this point, it is necessary to mobilize the viewer's perception ability and require the viewer to readjust their perception to extract information. Its visual presentation method does not undergo such ingenious changes compared to traditional typesetting. The "Poem on Bamboo Leaves" depicts bamboo. By using characters to paint bamboo and bamboo to write characters, the two elements blend into one in terms of image, creating a new form of expression [7]. This breakthrough enables Chinese characters to display unexpected ingenuity that viewers could not have imagined [8].

Figure 3. "Gazing at the Evening" Author: Su Dongpo (Image Source: "Gazing at the Evening", authored by Lu Shengzhong in "The Artistic Conception of the Text Scroll").

Chinese characters can construct texts with spatial variations, and poetry can be contained within them by changing the spatial form of the characters. Figure 3 shows the seven-character poem "Evening View" by Shen Zhi Ti, which is precisely constructed using Chinese characters to create a text with spatial variations [9]. Condensing the twenty-eight characters into 12, when observing a poem, one must interpret its meaning from the changes in its shape and structure [10]. Each shape has its own characteristics, with some being long and others being short. There are horizontal and side writings. There are reverse writings and reverse writings in the book. This method of constructing text using the size of characters, number of strokes, orientation of positions, and density of arrangements breaks the traditional way of depicting scenery with characters and highlights the spatial structural characteristics of Chinese characters [11]. The unique spatial characteristics of Chinese characters make the information contained in individual characters rich and intriguing. At this point, it is necessary to mobilize the viewer's perception ability, requiring the viewer to readjust their perception to extract information. Its visual presentation method is different from traditional typesetting, and the viewer needs to understand the meaning of the information through a gradually revealed method. This method of obtaining information can be regarded as an aesthetic element attached to the content of textual information [12]. The integration of this aesthetic element is the key to creating Chinese characters [13].

2. All-Encompassing - The Universality of Traditional Chinese Characters

Chinese characters originated from pictures, and the earliest forms of characters depicted the shapes of objects. Both painting and writing are ways to express the objects that are seen [14]. The difference lies in the fact that painting aims to reproduce the true state of the object, whereas writing focuses on conveying meaning. Sometimes, as long as it can be recognized by sight, it is sufficient to ensure safety. Simultaneously, the characteristics of Chinese characters are inseparable from their writing tools and methods. The brushstrokes and brushstrokes endow the writing of Chinese characters with subtle changes [15]. Each Chinese character has a unique shape and structure, and the handling and combination of strokes demonstrate great flexibility.

With the development of Chinese characters, their unique composition methods have enabled them to constantly adapt to different contexts and be combined with various technical means, resulting in a rich variety of forms. For instance, traditional auspicious patterns such as "Everlasting Joy" and "Peace throughout the world" have integrated the decorative nature of characters into

various crafts such as copperware, lacquerware, pottery, silk fabrics, and architectural bricks and tiles, creating exquisite works of art [16]. The "Changle Weiyang" eave tile of the Han Dynasty (Figure 4) is a typical example. In it, the relief seal script and patterns are harmoniously integrated, demonstrating the graphical characteristics of Chinese characters [17]. This not only reflects our predecessors' profound understanding of the forms of Chinese characters but also inspires us to combine the visualization of Chinese characters with different techniques and decorative symbols to create a harmonious interwoven effect. With specific designs and scales, the visualization of Chinese characters not only enhances their decorative quality but also demonstrates their expressiveness in visual arts. Therefore, finding the balance between Chinese characters and images can add dynamism and creativity to the design, making Chinese characters not only convey information but also be aesthetically pleasing and full of tension [18].

Figure 4. Han Dynasty Changle Weiyang Tile (Image source: Zhang Daoyi's "Beautiful Words").

The bird seal script, also known as the bird and insect script, is a unique form of writing that begins with the head shape of an insect or bird and uses the body curves of insects as strokes [19]. In the inscriptions on the Sword of King Goujian of Yue, unearthed in China during the Warring States Period, each character is adorned with bird-shaped decorations (as shown in Figures 5 and 6) [20]. This technique endows the text with unique visual features, allowing it to blend perfectly with natural elements and create a harmonious visual experience for the viewer. This visual harmony benefits from two key points: "realism" and "variation." On the one hand, text design needs to reflect the characteristics of natural objects, enabling viewers to recognize their forms [21]. However, it also needs to meet the structural change requirements of Chinese characters. By carefully controlling factors such as proportion, perspective, density, time, space, and light and shade, a dynamic combination of text and natural objects can be achieved, reaching visual balance and harmony [22].

Figure 5. Inscription on the Sword of King Zhouju of Yue 1 (Image Source: Zhang Daoyi's "Beautiful Words").

Figure 6. Inscription on the Sword of King Zhouju of Yue 2 (Image source: Zhang Daoyi's "Beautiful Words").

In the design of Chinese characters, it is particularly important to understand and apply techniques that combine nature and characters. Only by mastering the principles of "realism" and "variation" can the unique characteristics of Chinese characters be fully utilized in modern technologies and application scenarios. "Realism" does not mean an exact depiction of natural objects but rather enables viewers to identify the forms of natural objects through simple features. As for "change," its purpose is not to pursue novelty in form but to ultimately achieve visual harmony [23]. In summary, the integration of characters and natural objects requires finding a balance between "realism" and "variation." It is necessary to retain the core features of natural objects while integrating them into the structure of Chinese characters and create a harmonious visual effect through ingenious design methods. This design thinking is not only applicable to traditional craftsmanship but also provides rich inspiration and a practical basis for modern Chinese character design [24].

3. Endless Variations - Inspiration from Traditional Modules

In "Everything," Redhou elaborated in detail on the construction principles of Chinese characters, pointing out that Chinese characters achieve infinite changes through the combination, regeneration, transformation, and conversion of parts [25]. Redhou regarded radicals and components as replaceable "modules," and the flexible combination of these modules formed a complex Chinese character system. Each module has a specific meaning and is closely related to the overall meaning of the character, enhancing the readability and flexibility of Chinese characters [26]. Modularization not only enhances the readability of Chinese characters but also makes it possible to visualize them. For instance, the "insect" and "two" in Figure 7 are formed by removing the external components from "wind" and "moon," and are used to metaphorically represent the artistic conception of "boundless wind and moon [27]." This kind of word game of disassembly and recombination is precisely the concept of "dynamic Typography readability" mentioned In the book "New Directions In Kinetic Typography", that is, emphasizing the change of text accompanied by the transfer of meaning [28].

Figure 7. Boundless Wind and Moon (Image source: Zhang Daoyi's "Beautiful Words").

In this design, readability does not depend on individual Chinese characters but on the grasp of the overall meaning. Interpreting "Bug Two" as "Wind and Moon" not only

requires the viewer's ability to recognize words, but also demands that they perceive the connection between words and images as well as metaphors. "Boundless Wind and Moon" creates an "objective connection" by linking the text with the viewer's consciousness. This interpretation approach is in line with the modern dynamic font design concept, demonstrating the potential application of the modular characteristics of Chinese characters in modern design.

The variations in strokes while writing Chinese characters have created diverse styles of Chinese characters. In the development of traditional Chinese characters, a creative technique exists that takes Chinese characters as image units and conveys information by combining them into paintings. This approach is based on idioms or simple sentences, and through the variation of strokes, it uses Chinese characters to construct figures or objects with pictographic meanings, such as Kui Star, Zhong Kui, and Shou Star. In addition, Chinese characters can form patterns through their arrangement and combination. For instance, in the stone carving of "The Star of Longevity" depicted in Figure 8, the image is composed of the seven Chinese characters "The Way connects heaven and Earth, beyond the form" through variations and combinations of the characters. It is evident from the case that Chinese characters, as design elements, vary greatly. Although from the perspective of traditional text, this design approach discards the conventional appearance and layout form of text, it pursues a brand-new way of viewing and expressing it. Moholy-Nagy of the early Bauhaus school once advocated that text design is a communication tool. It should break through the traditional appearance and layout limitations of text and instead emphasize how to view it and how to build connections between the text and daily life. He advocated for expanding the field of human perception through text design and making text a medium for sensory experience. The way Chinese characters are combined into pictures embodies this concept, fully leveraging the pictographic features of Chinese characters, integrating characters with images, and pursuing new visual experiences and expression methods. The modular nature of Chinese characters inspires us to understand character diversity. During this process, the interpretation of Chinese characters is accompanied by a transformation of their meanings. Through flexible changes in modules, Chinese characters can establish "objective connections" among different identities. To identify this information, viewers must grasp the overall meaning of the image. The rich variations in Chinese character modularization can not only stimulate the viewer's perception but also continuously expand their understanding and experience of the relationship between characters and images. This creative approach reflects the unlimited potential of Chinese characters in visual designs.

Figure 8. Stone Carving Rubbing "The Star of Longevity" (Image source: Zhang Daoyi's "Beautiful Words").

4. Conclusion

The relationship between images and words has evolved since ancient times. In fields such as literary creation, painting, and sculpture, artists and designers have explored

subtle connections between the two through extensive practice and creation. However, with the rise of new media technology, the exploration of the relationship between images and text has ushered in new development opportunities. Against this backdrop, leveraging the unique advantages of Chinese characters has become an urgent issue that requires attention in design practice. By looking back on the past and exploring the creative practices of the past, the author hopes to draw on the advantages of traditional Chinese characters to guide contemporary design. Exploring the relationship between Chinese characters and images is key to Chinese character innovation. Only by fully leveraging the unique combination of Chinese characters and images can the potential of Chinese characters be stimulated, making them more expressive and attractive in terms of design. When Chinese characters are reasonably combined with images, viewers can understand the important information in the text in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. This creative form not only enhances the visual experience but also strengthens the effect of information dissemination. In this process, "realism" and "variation" are the two core elements that endow the text and images with vitality. Realism is not a mechanical replication of reality; rather, by capturing the essential features of things, it enables viewers to identify them intuitively and generate associations. In contrast, change emphasizes flexibility in design, enhancing the expressiveness of the work through deformation, proportion adjustment, and dynamic design. In design creation, to make Chinese character design vivid, interesting, dynamic, and touching to viewers, it is necessary to learn to observe carefully in daily life, understand the narrative rules and expression patterns of objects, transform these daily observations into design thinking, and integrate them into dynamic Chinese character design. This is the core driving force for innovation in Chinese character design, which is not only a continuation of tradition but also a response to the demands of modern design. By delving deeply into the relationship between Chinese characters and images and integrating observations and insights from daily life, we can achieve more breakthroughs and innovations in contemporary Chinese character design, thereby enabling Chinese characters to regain new vitality in the modern media environment. This is also an important direction for the development of Chinese character designs.

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