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Formulating the Creative Logic of Chinese Typography

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Abstract

This study investigates the creative logic of Chinese typography as the central visual element in television commercials from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan nowadays. It explores differences in the creative strategies employed in using Chinese written characters to produce meanings according to the traditional definition of the families of characters and the basic component elements in Chinese written characters. Here, it examines three main concepts of creative logic which include pictograph adaptation, deconstruction, and reconfiguration of multi-element characters. By comparing the different design techniques in those outstanding examples from the three geographic areas, it illustrates the potential flexibility of visual design that is inherent within the basic rules of Chinese character usage. Also, it formulates and enhances the understanding of the visual language in Chinese typography in the modern context.

Introduction

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that *typography* is "the art or practice of printing" and "the style or appearance of printed matter." Very often we can find skillfully-styled and beautiful typographic design examples in Western languages within internationally-established design magazines or annual publications. Examples of such work in the Chinese language are rare compared to the number that can be found in the English language. Accordingly, the study of typographic design in Chinese can be considered underdeveloped as compared to the establishment of typographic design found in the West. With the progress and development in the past three decades, the innovative use of visual elements in typographic design works from the major Chinese language regions such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, has become prevalent as well as technically proficient, and can no longer be ignored.

The objective of this study is not to present a typographic design history of the Chinese language, but rather to serve as an investigation of the creative logic of Chinese typography as the central visual element in television commercials from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the past few years. Although the frequency of using such a visually creative strategy in television commercials is becoming more common and receiving attention with creative awards, the examination of such visual language is hardly being carried out in this three areas. This study serves as an inquiry of such creative logic for the first time, not only as an introduction of "Chinese Typography" as visual communication to the Western audience, but also to begin to establish a creative, visual theory for Chinese typographic design for the future development of visual communication in the global context. Hopefully, this will enhance cultural exchange, and also lead readers toward the understanding of some creative techniques commonly found in contemporary Chinese typographic design.

In this study I will examine creative adaptations of the Chinese language in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and outline a logic of visualization according to the traditional definition of the families of characters and the basic components of Chinese written characters. I will examine three main creative logics which include the concepts of pictograph adaptation, deconstruction, and reconfiguration of multi-element characters.

This paper will review some key concepts, trace the development of Chinese language, and explain the different Chinese language systems that are currently used in the three regions. Then, it will focus on the adaptation of the written language used in a selection of recently distinguished advertisements, which employ the visually-expressed form of Chinese typography as a main creative technique to deliver messages. Although this study is mainly an inquiry into the creation of visual forms of Chinese typography, rather than an investigation from the linguistic perspective, some basic structures of Chinese language will be given as a background for understanding.

The Chinese Language in Modern Context

In defining what is Chinese language, non-Chinese speakers may become confused with the systems that the Chinese are using in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. As many already know, China is using the simplified-form characters in writing and *Putonghua* (Common Speech) is the "language" that they speak. In Hong Kong, traditional-form characters are used in writing and people speak *Cantonese* (a speech which is considered to be one of the dialects that is commonly spoken in Yue [Guangdong province] linguistic division in daily conversation). In Taiwan, traditional-form characters are also the official "form" of the written language. *Guoyu* (National Language/ Mandarin) is the "Standard Language" (*Biaozhunyu*) that has been spoken in the region since the Guomindang (also known as KMT) government "took

over" in 1949. However, Taiwanese (Min) is the local speech of the majority on the island.

To avoid confusion concerning the Chinese language, we can take a suggestion from the well-known Chinese language professor, John DeFrancis (1984). He states in his book, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy,* that the word "language" alone can be used to refer to *spoken language* or *written language* or to both (p. 37-40). Here, I would like to adopt his generalized definition and refer to "all the forms of speech and writing" in Chinese language, including *spoken Chinese* and *written Chinese* as the basic understanding of "Chinese language" in this essay.

As John DeFrancis (1984) points out, "Chinese in both its spoken and written forms has undergone great changes over the years, as have all other languages as well" (p. 39). In the later section, I would like to examine the usage of Chinese language through the written form, *typography,* in a selection of television advertisements from these three regions in the contemporary context. Following, some basic structure of Chinese characters will be given to facilitate the understanding of typographic uses of Chinese.

Historical Development and Definition

As Roy Carter, *et al* (Carter, Day & Meggs, 1993) tell us in their book, *Typographic Design: Form & Communications*, typography began with the invention of writing over 5,000 years ago and evolved with new typographic forms along with the progress of technology. According to this development pattern of typographic design, Chinese writing in terms of calligraphy has a long history. The word "typography" is a new term for modern China which appeared at about the beginning of 20th century. Both this label for Chinese writing and the modern development of typography in Chinese were very much influenced by Western elements in conceptualization, art, visual style and expression (Minick & Jiao, 1990). In terms of the "progress of technology," the invention of "live characters" in China is attributed to the work of Bi Sheng, a block-carver, in 1044, which marked the birth of movable-type printing. However, the technology of printing did not continue to progress in China and as a result, did not contribute to typographic design as it did in the West.

Apart from the differing technology development stages found in the West and in China, the Chinese characters and Western writing are indeed evolved from totally different kinds of systems. Traditional Chinese characters originated as pictures which were refined and simplified into pictographs, ideographs, and finally the modern characters (figure 1). The unit of writing represents ideas and abstract thoughts without regard to sound, unlike the Western language and its adaptation in typography, where the alphabet can be combined into words and create a visual record of the spoken language which has been called "thoughts-made-visible" and "frozen sounds" (Carter, Day & Meggs, 1993, p. 25). Thus, different spoken dialects in Chinese are based on the same written language form.

Evolution of Character: Horse			
on bone	on bronze	seal	official
normal	cursive	running hand	simplified

Figure 1. Evolution of Characters

Also, the structure of Chinese characters marked its own typographic design system. Chinese characters are constructed from basic units of "strokes" which are composed of dots, lines, and hooks. They are designed to fit into an imaginary square. A simple character can appear as an independent character as well as a component element in compound or multi-element characters (figure 2).

Figure 2. Characters that have Multiple Elements

In Chinese tradition, the principles governing the formation of Chinese characters are said to be, "six such principles." Four of the six are based on the composition of the characters and two are based on their usage. They are the "pictographic principle," "simple indicative principle," "compound indicative principle," "phonetic loan principle," and "semantic-phonetic principle" (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 78-82) (figure 3). Those basic principles of Chinese characters provide a distinguished anatomy of Chinese typography, and a rule structure for combining and understanding Chinese characters. The six principles allow flexibility and adaptation in the usage of the characters in various modern visual communication media. Following, I shall examine the usage of such imaginative forms of visual expression in a selection of recent outstanding advertisements from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and review their applications in the three distinct creative visualization logics.

Six Such Principles		
水 shu (water) **Pictograph**	二 er (two) **Indicator**	月 yue (moon) **Ideogram**
他 ta (he) **Phonogram**	老 lao (elderly) **Deflective**	西 xi (west) **Loan Character**

Figure 3. The Families of Characters -Six Such Principles

Exploring the Logic of Visualization

"Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today," according to Judith Williamson (1978, p. 11). Many cultural critics also have noted the significant role of advertisements in portraying and influencing contemporary society. In the following section, I will analyze the adaptation of Chinese typography from selected samples which use type as the main visual. The samples of the Chinese language ads for this paper are all examples of "small budget, big idea" television commercial production and also represent the different creative levels in advertising. The function of the use of typography in advertisements is more than just simply giving out information but also works as an art form of visual style, and sometimes even becomes the center of the main creative idea. Furthermore, the creative techniques that are employed in those samples share some similarities in their creative techniques in Chinese typography.

Adaptation of Pictographs Concept

China is the late starter in advertising among the three regions. The advertising industry in China only experienced consistent growth following the open door policy since 1979 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. The advertising industry is still considered in a developing stage, and creative strategy and execution are often found less sophisticated and more primitive when compared to Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, with the rapid growth of the Chinese advertising industry during the past five years, we can find some distinguished and creative television commercials produced by mainland advertising professionals. The best example is a television commercial produced by Guangzhou Honesty Advertising Company for a Chinese nutritive juice, which uses typography as a main creative strategy.

From this entertaining commercial (figure 4), we can see a group of Chinese characters, "gu" - bone is being personified as a group of "animated

figures" to signify the daily activities of human beings and the importance of bone to the health of a person. The creator cleverly adopts the basic principle of Chinese characters, "pictographs" (xiangxing) in this case turning the type into a visual image with self-explained contents and meanings. As the story develops, the "bone breaking" and the presence of bandages on those animated typographic figures implies the "health problem." Then, a new Chinese character, "shen" - kidney is raised, superimposed and absorbed into the bone character. Soon the problem is settled, bringing out the real subject of the whole commercial, the product: "Benefit Kidney and Bones Nutritive Juice."

Figure 4. Client - Benefits Kidney and Bones Nutritive Juice (China)

This kind of conventional story-telling, "problem/solution" technique is certainly not a new creative strategy in advertising, but the creative use of the "image-idea" principle of written Chinese in typographic expression is a revolutionary and important cultural factor in advertising design in China. And most importantly, it opens up a new dimension in constructing a unique, individual language and expressing a cultural identity in Chinese language advertising. The cute animated figures, narrative format, and primary colors are playful, creative, and warm. Although they also lack the sophistication and symbolic depth that are commonly found in contemporary advertising language, it opens up the creative logic that Chinese typography can learned from it owns traditional heritage of the basic formation of the families of characters. With the modern visualization techniques brought by the three-dimensional animation, it does make possible the illustration of the traditional and boring rules of Chinese characters into a fun and modern interpretation.

Deconstruction of Multi-elements Characters to Universal Visual

Hong Kong became "The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China" after the reunification with China under the "one country-two systems" concept on 1 July, 1997. From what can be seen from everyday life, it seems noth..ng much is being changed dramatically apart from the disappearance of the British national flag, the arrival of the "Five Stars Red Flag", and the use of the name "SAR government" instead of "Hong Kong government." In the commercial realm, all the businesses in Hong Kong are as usual and so is the advertising industry. The standard of creativity in advertising of Hong Kong has always been regarded as the highest among the three regions. In fact, multi-national advertising agencies such as Ogilvy & Mather landed in Hong Kong much earlier than in the other two regions. In its combination of British colonial background, ongoing Western influence, and Chinese cultural heritage, Hong Kong proved to be a very unique context for the development of a distinct identity. This uniqueness is reflected in Hong Kong's advertising, including those

advertisements that make use of typography as their primary visual element. A commercial created for *Friends of the Earth* by Euro RSCG Ball Partnership, Hong Kong, illustrates both the comparative sophistication as compared to the example from China, and a different creative strategy that involves some key elements of Hong Kong's cultural identity.

Throughout the ad (figure 5), we can see that it follows the classic golden rules from modern design theory; "form follows function" and "less is more." The "form" in this case consists of the creative combining of abstract images of Chinese characters first starting with "sen" (forest), then "lin" (double wood), "mu" (wood), and finally the form of a "cross" (Christian's symbol) to signify death. The appearance of each form is deconstructing from one original multi-element character. In this case, "sen" (forest) is composed by three characters of "mu" (wood).

Figure 5. Client - Friends of the Earth (Hong Kong)

The creativity of this television commercial comes naturally with the basic structure and meaning of this character. The idea is just simply interpreting the "ideograms" element in this type which literary shows this multi-element character, forest is composed of more than one wood, so that if some "woods" are chopped off there will be no more forest, a simple message of environmental protection. In each deconstruction frame, it conveys a single message, showing people the negative aspect of the disappearance (chopping) of "wood," without narrative. Such a transformation process of the Chinese characters, from a 12-stroke character to a 4-stroke character once again is a clever adaptation and interpretation of the multi-element character rules in Chinese written language. Its direct, clear cut and bold visual forms, and the hard-edged black and white color scheme give a "Western" appearance and a business-like connotation to the style.

This selected sample from Hong Kong draws on key elements of its unique cultural identity as the place where "East Meets West", and where life is "sophisticated, fast-paced and money-driven" (Martin, 1996, p. 52). Its advertising language is composed of "Chinese" nature inside with an added Western (Modern) touch. This sample illustrates the potential of this creative direction of Chinese typography into a possible visualization logic of the world familiar visual either in abstract or a simple drawing. Such clever combination can also be found in another Hong Kong example, *Mother's Choice* television commercial (figure 6), which adapts this creative logic in a "ideograms" character, "yun" (pregnant) which is composed of two elements with a character, "zi" (baby), in the lower part. The deconstruction and interpretation rule in this commercial is just simply showing how the upper part of "yun" becomes pregnant with expanding belly, then the lower part "zi" struggles away from the upper part of "yun" implying the action of giving birth, then finally the independent "zi" turns into a baby face. In this interesting
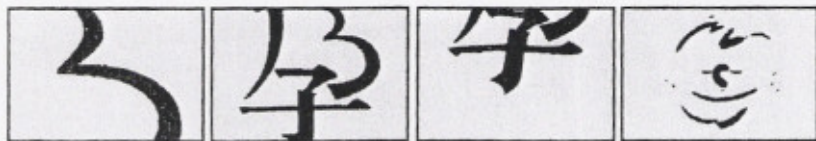
Figure 6. Client - Mother's Choice (Hong Kong)

black and white animation, it transforms an abstract Chinese character according to its original meaning and structure into a universal familiar symbol, a face of a baby to make a statement of the right of birth that organization, *Mother's Choice* stands for.

Although the non-Chinese audience may not understand the Chinese character used in this type of commercial, this creative logic does enhancing the cross-cultural comprehension with some existing universal visual language which is familiar in the West. Both *Friends of the Earth* and *Mother's Choice* samples demonstrate a creative logic by deconstructing the elements in a character and interpreting its meanings by integrating modern elements into the visual which leads to another layer of meanings in this visual language. These samples illustrate the formulation, this possible creative direction of Chinese typography.

Reconfiguration of Adds and Subtracts

The advertising industry in Taiwan began to experience unprecedented changes and dramatic growth in the mid-1980s with the strengthening economic environment. Also, other political, economic, and social developments such as the improvement "in living standards, deregulated media policy, Western marketing concepts, internationalized trading relations, dynamic cultural values, and sophisticated consumers markets" (Tsao, 1996, p. 103) have contributed to the blooming of the advertising industry in Taiwan in the past decade. Besides, the end of the martial law by Chiang Ching-kuo in 1987 and the abolishment of the "Temporary Provisions" marked an important political background for the new social and cultural development of Taiwan in all areas of life. An advertisement from the political campaign of "Chen Li-on and Wang Ching-fung" for the presidential election of 1996 illustrates a Taiwanese adaptation of Chinese characters in visual design. Although this example may demonstrate well the success of the political transformation of Taiwan from an authoritarian structure to a democratic system, the focus of the following analysis will be on the creative use of Chinese typography in the advertisement.

The message of the commercial in Figure 7 is rather complicated and indirect. Its creative strategy of using the Chinese typography is well planned and executed. The ad plays around with a multi-element character, "dang," which means political party in this context. It can be decomposed into three other characters. They are "hei" (darkness), "shang" (let's), and "dang" (suitable). With the deconstructing and reconstructing of the main character "dang" in sequence, it tells how those characters can relate to each

other with the presence of the non-stop male voice over. It opens up with giving out the problem of the society, "hei" (the arrival of the darkness), then the suggestion of taking a closer look, "shang" (let's), at the problem of "hei" (the dark side of the society). Then when these two characters, "shang" and "hei" combine into one character which becomes "dang," (a political party).

Figure 7. Client - Chen-Li-on and Wang Ching-fung

This combination implies that there are some "darkness/black" elements in some political party which the "advertiser" would like the audience to notice, so that they will make a "suitable/right" choice (this is achieved by the introduction of the character "dang"). Finally, with the presence of the character "dang" again, it creates the referent system to the audience of how they should vote in the Presidential election: "the calm and clean party - Chen Li-on and Wang Ching-fung." This selected sample from Taiwan represents the scholarly, creative thinking and approaches of Taiwanese style in advertising language through its use of traditional calligraphy on a rice-paper background. It tends to be more philosophical, inspired, indirect and even "educational" which is quite difficult to find in commercials produced especially in Hong Kong. Unlike those creative samples in Hong Kong, this sample found in Taiwan plays with the adding and subtracting rule of multi-elements characters, and can only be understood by a Chinese-reading audience. However, its creative logic does offer a system in producing visual images according to the rule of Chinese written characters.

Conclusion

The analysis of the above selected samples from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan on the usage of Chinese typography in television commercials show three main creative logics and directions in the modern context. The study illustrates three possible directions of adapting the pictographs concept of traditional families in Chinese written characters, deconstructing the multi-elements characters into simple universally recognizable symbols, and the reconfiguring of the character by adding or subtracting more and less elements. These simple directions of creative logic reviewed in this study show the potential of modernizing and rationalizing the visual language of Chinese typography. The examination of three creative logics represents the endless possibilities and combinations which bring out the essence of the Chinese language.

The study of this essay focuses on written Chinese, using visual examples of Chinese typography. Yet, language refers to speech and writing, and they are both related as John DeFrancis (1984) points out. The findings of this

article provide an introduction to how these three geographic regions make use of Chinese written language in advertisements and show a common distinguishable creative logic in Chinese typography.

Although the graphic design works in Chinese typography either on television commercials, print media, or poster, and has become more commonly used, the study on the design theory in this area is still very much underdeveloped in the sphere of international design theory knowledge. Thus, for the long term benefits to the development of Chinese typography, it is necessary to unveil its myth of creative logic in the modern context and study its design theory. Further directions should be developed in this aspect, and inquiry in this area should focus on the study of the relationship between the basic Chinese written characters' rules and the expression of ideas. Attention should also be paid to the relationship between cultural identities and the usage of Chinese language, including the examination of the influence and impact of daily "spoken" Chinese language in these three geographic regions on the creative use of Chinese typography in their advertising.

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