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Original Paper

Symbolic Translation of Ink-Wash Art and Its Applications in Contemporary Poster Design

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Abstract

Ink-wash art is an important part of traditional Chinese aesthetics. The brush lines, different shades of ink, textures and empty areas give it a special visual appearance. They also show Chinese ideas about artistic mood, rhythm and the use of space. How to use these old artistic elements in today's visual communication is a question worth studying. Based on semiotic theory, this paper uses literature research and case analysis to discuss the visual features and cultural meanings of ink-wash signs. Three posters are studied from three aspects: the redesign of graphic elements, the arrangement of the layout, and the design of characters. The analysis shows that using ink-wash art in modern posters is not just copying traditional painting. Designers need to choose useful visual elements, understand their cultural meanings, and combine them with present design methods. In this way, traditional Chinese aesthetics can be connected with the communication needs of modern posters, and a poster can have its own cultural characteristics.

Keywords

ink-wash art, symbolic translation, poster design, visual signs, traditional aesthetics

1. Introduction

Digital media has provided many new ways for poster design. However, posters with similar visual styles are also becoming common. For designers, one problem is how to express information clearly and at the same time show the characteristics of local culture. Chinese ink-wash painting can provide some ideas for solving this problem. It has its own brush-and-ink methods, and also contains traditional ideas about empty and solid space and the spirit of an artwork. These characteristics make ink-wash art useful for modern visual design. Some researchers have discussed this subject. Zhang (2022) studied the use of ink-wash art in graphic design through ink forms, artistic meaning and color. Chen (2024) analyzed the ink-wash posters of Kan Tai-keung and explained how traditional elements can be

combined with modern design methods. These studies are helpful, but there is still a need to study how visual forms express cultural meaning and how ink-wash elements can be changed into a modern poster language through actual examples. For this reason, this paper uses Saussure's theory of the signifier and the signified to examine ink-wash signs and their use in selected posters. The analysis mainly looks at graphics, layout and typography, hoping to provide some reference for the modern use of Chinese ink-wash art.

A poster needs to catch the viewer's attention quickly and let people understand its main information. Although digital tools make more visual effects possible, having many tools does not mean that a design will have clear cultural features. Ink-wash painting has formed its own recognizable style through a long historical development. When its features are used according to the needs of a poster, the work may show not only the appearance of Chinese traditional painting, but also a feeling related to the topic. Therefore, designers should first think about what elements can be taken from ink-wash painting. They also need to think about how these elements can still express cultural meaning after being changed.

2. Method and Analytical Framework

This paper mainly uses literature review and visual case analysis. The relationship between the signifier and the signified in Saussure's theory is used as the basic framework. Three posters are then discussed from the perspectives of graphic form, layout and character design. The analysis pays attention to how traditional ink-wash features are changed to fit the cultural meaning and information needs of contemporary posters.

2.1 Formal Characteristics of Ink-Wash Visual Signs

Saussure (1980) explained that a sign includes the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the visible or perceptible form, while the signified refers to the concept behind it. In ink-wash art, lines made by the brush, ink shades and textures can be understood as the visible forms. The aesthetic feelings and cultural ideas suggested by them are the meanings. Both parts work together to form the visual signs of ink-wash painting. Brushstrokes are one of its most basic elements. Different ways of using the brush, such as the centered tip, side brush and the dry-brush effect called flying white, can produce thick or thin lines and different rhythms. Texture strokes, rubbing, dots and washes also make the picture richer. In poster design, designers can take these features and change them into points and lines to guide the viewer's eyes. Ink shades and textures can also be used as larger visual areas. The change from heavy dark ink to light ink forms different layers. When ink spreads on paper, its edge and shape are sometimes difficult to predict. This natural effect is different from regular geometric figures, so it can be used for poster graphics, backgrounds and expression of emotion.

For poster design, brushstrokes are useful not only because they look like calligraphy. They also show movement and changes of strength. A long stroke can lead the viewer to another part of the poster. A dark ink mark can make one area more noticeable. The combination of wet and dry strokes can create a

certain rhythm. Designers may change these effects into outlines, lines connecting elements or supporting graphics. In this way, people can still recognize ink-wash characteristics even when the whole traditional painting is not shown. But the lines must be selected according to the poster's theme. If the designer uses too many similar brush effects, the picture may become complicated and the important information will be less clear.

2.2 Cultural Meanings of Ink-Wash Visual Signs

Ink-wash signs do not only mean what we can see on the paper. They are also related to ideas in traditional Chinese aesthetics. Zong (1981) discussed artistic conception and the understanding of space in Chinese art, which helps explain the relation between painted and unpainted areas. One important idea is qiyun shengdong, often explained as spiritual resonance or rhythmic vitality. It concerns the feeling of life and energy in an artwork. The movement of the brush and the strength of ink can show the painter's emotion instead of simply describing an object. In a modern poster, flowing ink and shapes without fixed boundaries may help create an atmosphere. This means the poster can express some feelings beyond the objects shown in it. Another important idea is the relationship between solid forms and empty space. In Chinese painting, the empty part is not always meaningless. It can be an active part of the composition. The ink marks and the blank areas influence each other and make a simple picture suggest a larger space. In posters, the same idea can help make the main image more obvious and guide the order of reading. However, the meaning of ink-wash signs may be different when the poster theme, using situation or audience changes. Designers therefore need to keep some traditional characteristics and also adjust their meaning to the subject of the poster.

Blank space is particularly important in this process. Modern posters also leave space between pictures and words to make reading easier. But in ink-wash painting, blank space can also help express artistic conception. Leaving enough space around the main subject can make the poster cleaner and draw attention to important text or images. A large empty area may also give viewers room to imagine something outside the picture. Still, designers cannot use blank space without considering the poster's purpose. If the poster contains much information, too much empty space may leave too little room for necessary words. For a poster that mainly expresses a mood, fewer visual elements may make the atmosphere stronger.

2.3 Mechanisms of Modern Symbolic Translation

Using traditional ink-wash art in modern posters can be seen as a process of changing visual signs. In this process, both the shape and the meaning need to be considered. It mainly includes three aspects. First, designers choose and simplify traditional strokes, ink shades and textures, turning them into points, lines and areas. Second, they use these elements to express traditional ideas such as rhythm, empty space and artistic conception in a way suitable for modern communication. Third, they reorganize the selected elements together with contemporary graphics, layout, letters and colors. Thus, modern translation does not mean putting a traditional painting directly into a poster. It involves choosing, simplifying and recombining elements after understanding their cultural background. By

doing so, traditional ink-wash art can have a new form in contemporary design.

Extracting graphic elements is different from just making a traditional image smaller, cutting out one part or changing it into a digital file. Designers need to find the main visual features that people can recognize. For instance, when taking a branch shape from a painting, they may keep the direction of the line and the places where it turns. When taking an ink texture, they may keep its changing dark and light parts and uneven edges. If viewers can still think of Chinese ink painting after seeing a simplified graphic, the extraction has kept an important feature. Designers should then select elements according to the poster's topic. Putting too many traditional details together may weaken the main image.

After the forms are selected, their meaning and their position in the poster also need to be decided. The same ink mark can give different feelings in posters with different themes. For this reason, designers should not think that one ink effect always has one fixed cultural meaning. They need to consider the title, colors, composition and the place where the poster will be shown. An ink-wash element may work as the main picture, a background or part of the text. The important point is whether it helps organize the information. Only when brushwork, cultural ideas and the message of the poster work together can ink-wash elements become part of the design instead of being only decoration.

3. Results: Applications in Contemporary Poster Design

When ink-wash elements are used in modern posters, cultural meaning and clear information should both be considered. The following three examples show different methods, including the redesign of traditional graphics, using ink textures in layout, and changing the forms of written characters.

3.1 Modern Transformation of Traditional Pictorial Forms

Traditional ink-wash painting usually has a complete composition, while modern posters often need one clear main image and easily understood information. Therefore, designers often have to select and simplify old pictorial elements and then arrange them in a new way. In Figure 1, Xu Wei's Twelve Flower Deities does not copy a complete traditional landscape painting. The designer takes elements such as branches and flowers and changes them into block-like, almost pixelated shapes. The black winding forms remind viewers of dry branches or paths among rocks, and the light pink flowers provide small areas of color. Black, white and gray are used with large blank areas to form a clear spatial relationship. The original ink-wash image now has a digital appearance. Even though the branches and flowers are simplified, people can still recognize them. This shows how realistic pictorial elements can be changed into more abstract visual signs. The designer keeps their main characteristics instead of every detail, so the poster has a new style while still referring to traditional culture. This example also shows that extracting graphics is not simply cutting something from an old picture. The designer needs to decide which features should remain according to the poster's purpose. For traditional objects with familiar cultural meaning, keeping their special outlines may help viewers understand them.

From the perspective of symbolic translation, this poster keeps some features of natural objects but

presents them in another visual form. The branches could have been drawn with smooth brush lines. Instead, their shape is changed into pixels, bringing traditional natural imagery together with a digital style. The flowers are lighter in both color and form, while the branches are dark and heavy. These two parts create a contrast. Although the design method is modern, the viewers can still connect the image with traditional paintings of trees and flowers. It is a new way of showing familiar cultural elements.

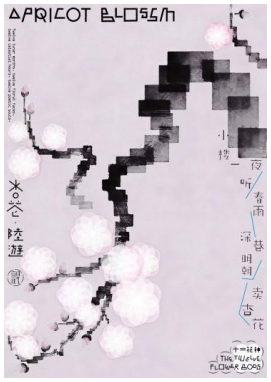

Figure 1. Twelve Flower Deities (design by Xu Wei)



Figure 2. Ecological Poster (design by Ye Pingping)

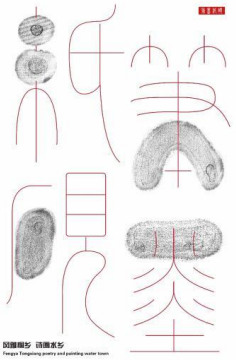

Figure 3. Brush, Ink, Paper, and Inkstone (author's original design)

3.2 Integration of Ink Textures with Modern Visual Order

Ink-wash painting often shows the natural movement of brush and ink, including some effects that are not fully controlled. Modern poster layout, however, pays more attention to the order of information and how people read it. When combining them, designers should make the irregular ink effects helpful to the poster instead of adding them only for decoration.

Figure 2 shows an ecological poster designed by Ye Pingping. The designer puts many Latin letters in an orderly arrangement and adds grainy textures similar to ink inside the letters. The regular structure of the text and the uneven ink effects create a clear contrast. This relationship can also be considered in connection with Arnheim's (1998) ideas about visual balance, shape and tension. The poster mainly uses black, white and gray, while the bright green plants make the ecological theme easier to notice. In this work, the texture of traditional ink is changed into a feature of modern letters and graphics. It brings more visual detail and also supports the theme. Importantly, the ink texture is not simply added beside the text. It becomes part of the letters themselves, linking a traditional material feeling with modern typography. The designer still needs to control how much texture is used. If the ink effects become too strong, the letters may be difficult to read and the layout may lose its order.

This poster can be studied from the structure and the texture of the letters. Their repeated arrangement gives the page a stable reading order, even though there are many small details. At the same time, the particles and uneven areas inside the letters make them look less mechanical. The texture is therefore not an extra background pattern. It changes how the letters look. When reading the words, viewers can also notice the natural qualities of ink marks.

3.3 Coexistence of Chinese Character Imagery and Ink Texture

Chinese characters have meanings as words, but they also have their own visual shapes. The traditional idea that calligraphy and painting share a common origin gives designers a reason to explore Chinese characters in posters. Text does not always need to play only a reading role. By changing the strokes, simplifying their forms and adding textures, characters can become the main graphic. Figure 3 presents the author's design, Brush, Ink, Paper, and Inkstone. In this poster, Chinese character strokes are simplified and rebuilt by using thin lines and gray ink-like textures. Some parts look like geometric line structures, while the gray areas help form the characters. This produces a balance between reading and abstract expression. Different from the other two examples, this work mainly changes the forms of the characters themselves. The thin lines keep their basic structures, and the gray ink areas create a relationship between filled and empty parts. The work expresses the meaning of the words and also shows the feeling of traditional ink materials. However, designers should first make sure that the words are related to the theme. The characters cannot be changed so much that viewers are unable to read them.

Changing Chinese characters is not the same as drawing ordinary decorative shapes, because the characters still need to carry information. In Brush, Ink, Paper, and Inkstone, the four characters refer to materials used in traditional Chinese art. Their meaning is directly related to the ink-wash theme. The use of thin lines and gray texture is therefore based on the content of the characters, rather than a random visual effect. The line structures help people recognize the words, while the ink-like areas remind them of traditional painting materials. As a result, the meaning and appearance of the characters support each other.

The three posters show that ink-wash signs can be used in graphics, layout and typography. Although the design methods are different, none of the works simply puts an entire traditional painting into a modern poster. Each of them chooses features that fit its theme and uses them in the poster's visual arrangement.

The three examples also have different focuses. Twelve Flower Deities changes natural forms from traditional art into digital-looking graphics. The ecological poster combines natural ink textures with regular text arrangement. Brush, Ink, Paper, and Inkstone explores the relationship between Chinese character structures and the appearance of ink. These examples suggest that there is no one method for applying ink-wash signs in all posters. Designers may use them in different parts of a composition depending on the theme, medium and amount of information. But the ink-wash elements should have a real function in the design, not be added as a decoration after the poster is already finished.

4. Discussion

4.1 Cultural and Visual Value of Ink-Wash Signs

Ink-wash visual signs have cultural value when used in modern poster design. Brushstrokes, different shades of ink and empty space can remind people of traditional Chinese aesthetic ideas. When these

signs are redesigned for a contemporary poster, they may help the work show Chinese cultural characteristics, instead of only giving information. Their visual qualities are also useful. Natural textures, black-white-gray colors and the relation between painted and unpainted areas can make poster graphics richer. If these features are combined with geometry, modern type and digital composition, the poster may look contemporary while keeping something from tradition. Ink-wash elements may also be used in different fields after simplification, such as cultural publicity, public-interest posters and brand visual design. However, whether they work well still depends on the subject, the order of information and the medium in which the design is presented.

One reason for using ink-wash signs is that their appearance is relatively easy to connect with Chinese art. Compared with common geometric shapes, the changing force of brush lines, layers of ink and the use of blank space can give viewers a traditional aesthetic feeling. If they are redesigned carefully, these elements can make a poster more culturally recognizable without copying an old painting completely. However, recognizing a traditional style is not the same as understanding the full cultural meaning. Designers also need to consider the words and the overall composition to see whether the poster expresses the right message.

4.2 Limitations and Conditions of Application

There are also some problems in using ink-wash art in modern posters. In certain works, designers simply put ink textures or calligraphy-style words onto a picture, but these elements have little relation to the subject. Such posters may look similar to each other and do not express much cultural meaning. In addition, ink-wash images are often abstract and emotional. If their position and size are not well controlled, the main information in the poster may become hard to recognize. Screen images and printed posters also show ink effects differently. Light shades and fine textures formed by ink on paper may change when they are displayed or printed. Therefore, designers should not use the same ink-wash effects in every poster. They need to connect the visual elements with the theme and adjust them according to the medium. The goal is to keep the traditional artistic feeling while making modern information clear.

The way an image is reproduced is another practical issue. On real paper, ink changes because the paper absorbs and spreads the liquid. Screens and printing equipment create similar effects in different ways. When a picture becomes smaller, fine dots, very light gray shades and soft spreading edges may be hard to see. If the texture is too complicated, it may also make the words difficult to read. Designers need to adjust the layers and details according to where the poster will be used. They should keep the recognizable ink-wash features, but avoid making details stronger than the main message. This adjustment does not mean removing traditional culture. It can help the traditional elements work better in modern media.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the visual signs of traditional Chinese ink-wash art and how they can be used in modern poster design from a semiotic perspective. Brushstrokes, shades of ink, textures and blank space are important visual features. At the same time, they are connected with traditional ideas of rhythm, artistic conception and the relation between empty and solid areas. In contemporary posters, these signs can be changed mainly through simplifying and rebuilding graphics, combining them with layout, and redesigning characters. These methods make the traditional visual language more suitable for modern communication. The three poster examples show that the important thing is not whether a poster includes an ink effect, but whether the effect supports the theme and helps express information. This research mainly looks at static poster works. It has not fully studied how audiences understand these posters, how effective the communication is, or how ink-wash signs work in moving media. In future research, digital animation and interactive design could be considered to explore more possible applications.

The analysis also suggests that modern symbolic translation does not require designers to keep every detail of traditional painting. It is more important to select the features and cultural meanings that are still useful in a new design situation. After careful selection and rearrangement, a brushstroke may become a graphic with rhythm, an ink texture may work with modern letters and layout, and blank space may help both organize information and create an artistic mood. These methods have different purposes, but they all show how traditional ink-wash language can be used together with contemporary design methods.

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