

An Exploration of the Artistic Nature of Contemporary Chinese Character Posters

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Abstract: This article explores the artistic characteristics of contemporary Chinese character posters from the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics. In the process, the method of work exposition and case analysis is used, and the artistic interpretation is combined with historical, social and cultural factors. Through analysis, it is concluded that Chinese character design is the "content symbol" of posters, Chinese character posters are the "visual representation" of Chinese aesthetic paradigms, and the contemporary artistic expression of Chinese character posters. The article proposes that Chinese character posters will exist and develop as independent works of art in the Chinese design environment. Chinese character posters will also become an important link between China's cross-cultural communication and Chinese character culture, integrating multiple factors such as culture, art, concepts, and politics.

Keywords: Semiotics; Chinese character posters; Artistic expression; Contemporary

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1. Research background of Chinese character posters

1.1. Research status

It has long been a trend abroad to study posters as a separate art form, and there is an independent poster history study. In 1968, Muzeum Plakatu Wilanowie became the world's first museum with a poster theme. In 2015, the Poster Museum in New York, USA, was established. In China, the discussion of poster design is still placed in a broader design history and focuses on factors such as form and composition. Foreign countries started to study poster types earlier, such as "Cultural Art Poster Research" ^[1], "Poster Type" Research ^[2], "Commercial Art Poster" ^[3], etc. In China, some studies have been carried out in recent years, such as "Contemporary Art Exhibition Posters" ^[4], "Olympic Games Posters" ^[5], "Movie Posters" ^[6], etc. However, the confirmation and research of Chinese character poster types is still insufficient. In fact, when the first Chinese character art poster was presented to the public, people had already unconsciously felt and appreciated it as a work of art. This is different from any other form of poster design because the Chinese characters as visual symbols have multiple identities of culture, art, and aesthetics, which makes the poster itself. We will call it an "independent

work of art” for the time being. The study of Chinese character posters is carried out in the continuous development of Chinese character culture and poster art.

1.2. Innovation of the research

Chinese character posters have always been classified into different types of posters, such as cultural posters, font experimental design posters, exhibition posters, etc. The difference lies in the proportion and visual intensity of Chinese characters as symbols or as text in the picture. This classification and definition is obviously random and general. This study takes Chinese character posters as an independent poster art form and explores it in depth from the perspective of art and design. Subsequently, the use of a variety of comprehensive research methods, such as semiotics, philosophy, art design, etc. for scientific research is the innovation of this study. The research object is the artistic interpretation of Chinese character art poster design and the artistic creation and expression techniques.

2. Development background of Chinese character posters

2.1. Hong Kong Chinese character posters in the 1990s

As an “independent work of art”, contemporary Chinese character posters began to appear gradually after the reform and opening up in 1970. Before that, Chinese characters were only used as a text element in posters, playing the role of text decoration or theme description. It was not until 1978 when China implemented the “reform and opening up” policy that Western design ideas first spread in coastal cities such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Hong Kong and Shenzhen first saw a group of graphic design masters with modernist ideas, such as Chen Youjian, Li Yongquan, and Jin Daiqiang. They began to look for how Western design ideas could develop in the Chinese context and the special expression of Chinese culture. They also brought this modern design style with Chinese language to mainland China, setting off a craze for Chinese character poster design.

Language and speech constitute a “symbol system.” Language is a social habit and meaning system, and speech is a personal convention that can be chosen and realized. They are in a dialectical relationship^[7]. Hong Kong designers choose Chinese characters as “speech” for design, generate Chinese character posters, and convey “language.” At this time, Chinese characters are both text symbols selected by designers and language symbols (artistic language, cultural language) that have been thought, designed and understood. Some Chinese character poster designers in this period became “traditional cultural language expressers,” decomposing, reconstructing and combining visual elements in the picture through Chinese characters, thus forming a new symbol system. Chinese character semiotics scholars point out that from the perspective of signifier and signified, it can be seen that the signifier (sound) of Chinese assumes some functions of the signified; that is, the signifier of Chinese is far more complex than the signifier of Indo-European languages^[8]. This also provides a symbolic basis for the content output of Chinese character posters. The use of Chinese characters to construct poster design language is a unique landscape of poster art in this period. As a visual symbol, Chinese characters have both cultural attributes and traditional Chinese visual language. The Chinese character script forms of different periods are infinitely expressed as visual styles in posters.

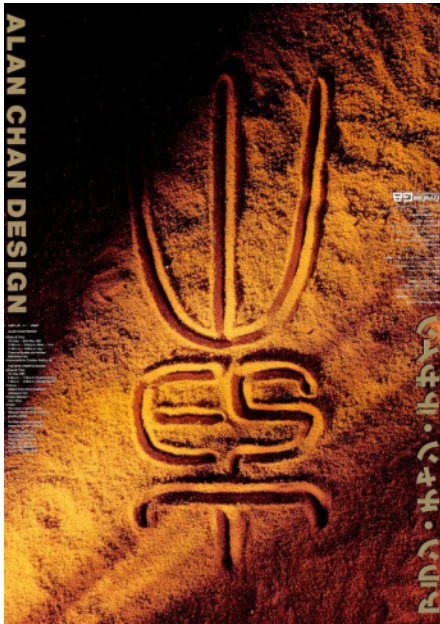


Figure 1. East Meets West by Chen Youjian.



Figure 2. Emotions of Words: Mountains, Rivers, Clouds and Wind by Jin Daiqiang.

Figure 1 is a very typical example. As a typical and excellent work combining Western design ideas with Chinese culture, it is still praised today. Chen Youjian is very good at combining Western culture with Chinese culture. The bridge between the two is undoubtedly “Chinese characters.” He made the four letters of the English word WEST become the strokes of the Chinese character “East.” The combination of Western and Chinese characters symbolizes the West and the East. The two are blended, but the overall design still presents a strong Chinese flavor. The author consciously expressed the design idea through the Chinese character poster, that is, at present and in the future, Chinese culture and Western culture are compatible, but as a designer, he still needs to constantly find the Chinese language and present Chinese characteristics.

Different from Chen Youjian’s direct and frank modernist style, Jin Daiqiang represented another style of Chinese character posters during this period: the ink painting style (**Figure 2**). He was more concerned with the artistic conception of the poster, that is, the expression of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. As a medium, posters naturally became a platform for him to understand and convey Chinese culture, and ink painting and Chinese characters also became his way of expressing Chinese culture and aesthetic philosophy. The use of ink painting in posters, the contrast between a large amount of blank space and ink painting, the minimalist composition method, and the strong contrast present a unique and strong “new Chinese” connotation. It is traditional, but also extremely modern. At that time, everyone was deeply struck by this modernist form of Chinese aesthetics, which appeared in front of the viewer in a familiar but novel image. Eastern and Western cultures were integrated here, and artists gradually found a way to integrate into the cultural impact and created works with ideas ^[9]. Since then, this poster expression method combining ink painting with Chinese characters and Chinese images has been popular to this day.

2.2. Contemporary art expressions of Chinese character posters

Roland Barthes divides the “form” and “content” of philosophy and aesthetics into two levels: “the content

of an expression” and “the form of an expression”; “the content of a content” and “the form of a content.” Culture includes Chinese characters. Culture is the content expressed by Chinese character posters, and posters are the form carrier of expression; the theme of Chinese character posters is the content of Chinese character posters, and Chinese character poster design is the external form of this theme. In short, Chinese characters are the core of Chinese character posters. As a symbolic form, Chinese characters are the projection of people’s cognition and ideas, and their most important function is to formalize experience. Through Chinese characters, some experiences of the ancestors can be presented for people to intuit, recognize, and understand. These experiences include sensory perception, the understanding and understanding of life, and the abstraction and imagination of the world. Sometimes, these three aspects of experience can be concentrated in a certain word and then become some important theoretical concepts^[10]. In a sense, Chinese characters themselves are aesthetic symbols, and they are already forms that carry content. Chinese character posters are the artistic expression of this formalized experience, and their artistry is precisely reflected in the aesthetic category.

Hong Kong’s special geographical location and political factors have been influenced and nurtured by Western modern culture, including the gradual integration of traditional Chinese culture with the mainland represented by the nearby coastal cities. Chinese characters have increasingly become design elements for designers to express Chinese culture. During this period, representative works in the history of Chinese poster design emerged. From the continuous enrichment of Chinese character design expressions to the continuous breakthroughs in poster layouts, Chinese character posters have increasingly focused on conveying profound Chinese design language and visual style. The artistic characteristics of contemporary Chinese character posters have gradually shown that the structure of Chinese characters is relatively weakened, and graphic languages, including ink painting, calligraphy, and other forms, are becoming stronger and stronger. Designers pay more attention to the symbolic meaning and symbolism of Chinese characters themselves. Concepts and consciousness have become the main characteristics of modern artistic Chinese character posters, and pure Chinese character posters are increasingly used in various fields.

In general, since the 1980s, art posters, which had been banned for nearly 40 years, have gradually revived. The liberation of thought and the acceptance of Western art schools have gradually broken the long-term backwardness of design. Abstraction, modernity, and opinion have emerged in contemporary Chinese character poster art, and Chinese character posters have gradually been established as an “independent art form.”

3. Artistic interpretation of contemporary Chinese character posters

3.1. Analysis of the Chinese character poster works in the “ Beginning of spring “ series

Before interpreting these four poster works, let’s first talk about the creative theme of these four works, Lichun “立春”. It is the first solar term in spring. It is the beginning of the 24 solar terms and the beginning of the year. It represents the end of the cold winter and the beginning of warmth. “立春” in Chinese is composed of two Chinese characters, “立” and “春”. The two characters “立” and “春” were first seen in the oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty. The etymology is shown in **Figure 3**. “立” looks like a person (“大”) standing on the ground, and the horizontal line below is a pictographic symbol, meaning the ground. A person or an object stands there with a fixed posture, indicating the meaning of determination and establishment. “春” is a pictographic character. The oracle bone script is composed of grass (wood), and grass and trees grow in spring; in the middle is the character “屯”, which looks like grass

and trees breaking through the ground. The bloated part on the soil, that is, the embryo shape that has just broken through the ground, indicates that all trees grow in spring; “屯” also serves as a phonetic symbol. After the change from small seal script to official script, except for “日”, the other parts cannot be seen. “Lichun” means that spring officially begins at this time.



Figure 3. Origin of the Chinese characters for “立” and “春.”

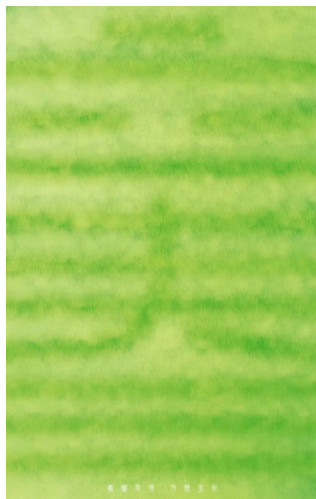


Figure 4. Poster 1.



Figure 5. Poster 2.



Figure 6. Poster 3.



Figure 7. Poster 4.

Comparing the four posters (Figures 4–7), we can find that Figures 4, 5, and 7 are all composed in the order of the Chinese characters for “立春”, with “立” on top and “春” on the bottom. Although the two characters “立春” in Figure 4 are a combined character with the main body being “春”, the character “立” is still in the upper position. Only in Figure 6 is “立” at the bottom of the picture, with “春” at the top left. We can understand that the author grasped the etymological meaning of the character “立” when creating it, that is, standing on the ground. The work is in the form of traditional ink painting, and seemingly carelessly extends the last horizontal stroke of the character “立春” as the main visual element and composition guide in the picture, like a bamboo or bamboo leaf (we can understand it as any plant that grows out of the ground) that breaks through the ground and points directly to the sky. The thin tip at the top connects to the character “春”. The stroke shape of “春” is consistent with the shape of this “bamboo leaf,” which is thin and sharp, full of vitality. When our vision extends from the last stroke of “立” to the top of “春”, we find that the last horizontal stroke of “立” and the last horizontal stroke of “春” are the same, that is, the thin bamboo. White space originated from Chinese painting, which is influenced by traditional philosophy and has a unique oriental aesthetic^[11]. A large amount of space is left in the picture, and the viewer can feel the sky, the earth and the air. This plant breaks through the ground and becomes an important image in one-third of the picture. The poster copy “Spring is coming and it can’t be stopped” is inconspicuously scattered next

to the visual image. The red seal “春” in seal script hangs obliquely at the root of the bamboo, playing the role of “dot” and color emphasis. This has to be associated with the seal in traditional Chinese ink painting. Although the poster does not use ink, but uses minimalist black geometric lines, there is no doubt that it still follows the spirit of “freehand brushwork” in ink painting, which is the cultural attribute of Chinese character posters. Chinese director and screenwriter Wang Chaoge once said that Chinese aesthetics is closely related to Chinese philosophy. White space is not just a painting style, not just an imagination of heaven, earth and water. White space is Chinese philosophy, a place for imagination, and a larger place. This poster is a kind of “freehand” expression in terms of composition, color, image, and copywriting. To put it more deeply, it is a typical paradigm of Chinese aesthetics, which can be said to be an expression of “limited form but infinite meaning.” Although **Figure 7** is also in black and white, it has a strong “decorative” meaning, and the creation concretizes spring. In Chinese character posters, it is a common technique to express the theme with strokes. The new leaves and branches are spliced into the word “Spring,” which directly shows the meaning of spring. The special thing is that the author uses the trend of leaves and branches to cleverly integrate the word “Stand” into the word “Spring.” The black characters on a white background can show the visual image more deeply, and the traditional spirit still comes from the meaning of Chinese ink painting.

Figure 4 and **Figure 5** are two opposing expressions. The former abstracts the Chinese characters, uses a full-page composition, infinitely extends the green grass, and uses the randomness of grass growth to deliberately integrate the beginning of spring into the grass. The Chinese characters become the composition of the grass. The work presents a visual implication, attempting to immerse the viewer completely in this implication, connect with the author’s mind, and feel the spring. Color has become the most obvious visual symbol and language of this work. The tender green grass is soft and fluffy, bringing a visual “touch,” and the main body of the poster is conveyed through the technique of “synaesthesia.” The latter is more playful and direct. Obviously, the author wants to express his creative intention through the techniques of “symbolism” and “association”. The work conveys the concept of festival (signified) and food culture (signified) through dual signifiers: Chinese characters (signifier) and spring rolls (signifier). French semiotician Roland Barthes once said that symbols are two-sided and both are inclusive. The “spring rolls” eaten by the people during the beginning of spring are used as symbols, and the taste buds are used to associate festivals. Spring rolls replace the strokes of the Chinese character for the beginning of spring. This is essentially the same as the creative technique in **Figure 7**, but the visual expression is quite different. The montage-style collage feeling brings more “fun” to the poster, which is obviously more contemporary and more “poster-like.” Therefore, the composition is more lively and relaxed. The English copywriting echoes the main visual and is also composed of spring rolls. The smaller copywriting serves as decoration and meets the needs of typesetting (size contrast, thickness contrast). The whole picture is messy but not chaotic. If a certain product logo is added, it may be more like a commercial advertisement. Perhaps it is also the “surrealism” among the four works.

3.2. Chinese character design is the “content symbol” of the poster

By comparing four Chinese character posters with the same theme, we can find that Chinese character design plays an important role in posters symbols. Roland Barthes believes that a symbol is a mixture of a representation component (signifier) and a represented component (signified). The representation component (signifier) constitutes the expression aspect, while the represented component (signified) constitutes the content aspect^[12]. Peirce proposed the triadic theory of symbols. He believed that the signification process of a symbol has three items. The first item is the object, that is, the corresponding thing or concept; the second item

is the representation item, that is, the thing represented by the object; and the third item is the interpretation item, that is, the understanding and interpretation of the recipient. In the Chinese character poster, “Lichun” as a representation component is formed into a visual image of the poster after the stroke design, style design or color design of the Chinese character. When these images are seen by the audience’s eyes and transferred to their minds, the image becomes the content (signified), and the Chinese character design completes its function as a symbol. Just as a poster without an audience cannot be called a poster, only when it has the process of communication and understanding can it have the attributes of a poster. Therefore, unlike the graphic design in general posters, Chinese character design is both the signifying component and the signified component of the poster. In posters, graphics can only be used as signifiers because there is a lack of definition and guidance from text, while Chinese character design includes both graphics and text definition and guidance, so it is clear as a signified component (content symbol).

3.3. Chinese character posters are the “visual representation” of the Chinese aesthetic paradigm

The process of spreading an image and then accepting it is a visual representation ^[13]. Many contemporary local designers use their practice to explore the design expression context that belongs to China ^[14]. Chinese character posters are different from other types of posters. They often have a special aesthetic paradigm-Chinese aesthetics. It is based on the core of Chinese characters, originates from Chinese character culture, and expresses the meaning of Chinese characters. Many works are inseparable from or actively present the Chinese aesthetic paradigm, and Chinese aesthetics is closely linked to Chinese philosophy. Posters are communicative (posters construct images, spread to the audience, and then to the audience’s acceptance). Chinese character posters have naturally become a representation of the Chinese aesthetic paradigm. Chinese character poster design is a way to spread Chinese character culture and art, and it is also a continuation and development of China’s excellent culture ^[15].

4. Conclusion

Based on Roland Barthes’ semiotics theory, this study systematically explores the main characteristics of contemporary Chinese character poster art. First, Chinese character design not only conveys information as a “content symbol” in posters, but also becomes a “visual representation” of an aesthetic paradigm through its unique visual expression. Secondly, the design of Chinese character posters deeply integrates traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. Chinese characters, as the core of the symbol system, form a visual language with modern artistic expression. Further analysis shows that with the evolution of design concepts, Chinese character posters have gradually developed into an independent art form in the Chinese design environment and have become a link for the dissemination of Chinese character culture in cross-cultural exchanges. It can be said that contemporary Chinese character posters have constructed a unique design language that embodies profound cultural connotations and artistic values.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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