The Application of Aesthetic Forms Combining Nihility and Reality in Character Design

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, elements of traditional Chinese calligraphy have become more and more common in character design, reflecting clear oriental characteristics and China's unique national cultural spirit. In Chinese calligraphy, the highest aesthetic pursuit is artistic conception. From the perspective of the artistic conception of calligraphy, this paper deeply analyzes the problems existing in modern character design and the application and integration of the artistic conception of "combining nihility and reality" in modern character design, thus making an innovative attempt.

Keywords: The aesthetic form of the coexistence of nihility and reality, Character design, Nihility and reality performance, Chinese characters.

1 INTRODUCTION

Traditional paintings and calligraphy pay much attention to the feeling of the picture, namely, the creation of the artistic conception, i.e., "combining nihility and reality". In fact, modern character design also pays much attention to the relation between "nihility" and "reality". The "nihility" and "reality" are originally integrated with each other, there can be nihility in reality, and there can be reality in nihility, and without the one, the other can't exist alone. However, at present, because of a series of factors such as recognizability, most of the character design on the market are lacking of nihility and reality performance, appeal, etc.

2 THE PROBLEM OF CURRENT CHARACTER DESIGN

2.1 Lack of Nihility and Reality Performance

In practical applications, where reading recognizability is required, the role of characters is quite obvious. If the layer of the characters is clear, it can improve the reading speed and thus achieve the effect of simplifying the information. The two most common characters are Song typeface and boldface, which are relatively single for the reader's senses, which is due to the defects of the early printing process and functional needs, making these commonly used characters in the functional needs far greater than the visual needs, and the design performance of nihility and reality is less considered based on recognizability. And some of the decorative characters on the market will use the design means of nihility and reality to achieve a stronger sense of design, but a lot of character design, due to the use of too much rnihility and reality means, can't be created under the established design rules, then the character design is meaningless. For example, the imaginary horizontal stroke is more common in Chinese calligraphy works, which starts with a pointed stroke and closes with a round stroke, while also combining a square stroke. So nihility and reality are both a relatively independent whole, but also in harmony with each other. But if the overall feeling between nihility and reality is not mastered, naturally there will be no nihility and reality, let alone appeal and resemblance. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the sense of the whole in terms of the relation between nihility and reality, so as to generate a greater sense of appeal.

2.2 Lack of Appeal

Huang Tingjian, a calligrapher of the Song Dynasty, once said, "Appeal is the mainstay of

painting and calligraphy". When a viewer praises a work of calligraphy, the word "appeal" is considered a high compliment. However, the art that is too rough and rigid can't be called a work of romantic appeal. Because "appeal" is a spiritual depositum of high artistic taste, it must satisfy both "great appeal and deep emotion" and "firm quality and noble spirit", which are complementary to each other and inseparable.

In terms of the current character design, the characters with faster brushwork, represented by the semi-cursive script and cursive script categories, which are characterized by soft brush writing, are not connected to each other because they appear as single characters in the character library. Coupled with technological constraints, such as computer screen resolution technology that imposes new requirements for visual recognizability of Chinese character design, the stroke thickness of the character in the Internet makes adjustments as the character size changes[1]. It is also not doable to shape the more complex contours of the shape in the brush type, which can't reflect the flavor of the dryness of the pen and ink and the speed of the brushwork in calligraphy. Such calligraphic characters, whether used in single characters or in rows or columns, lack the rhythm and appeal of calligraphy, also lose their recognizability, and can be discarded altogether.

3 THE EMBODIMENT OF "COMBINING NIHILITY AND REALITY" IN CHARACTER DESIGN

3.1 The Combination of Nihility and Reality of the Structure

In traditional aesthetic thought, if a special way is used to create a sense of space and three-dimensionality in a two-dimensional space structure, it is called "the combination of nihility and reality". Calligraphy is more concerned with sparseness and density; if it is too dense, it will give the impression of dullness, and if it is too sparse, it will feel empty. In addition to clearly distinguishing the relation between nihility and reality from the frontal structure, one can also start from the side to highlight the reality through the nihility and reflect the nihility through the reality, which needs to be appropriately grasped in order to produce a rich and gorgeous visual effect, giving people a lot of room for imagination.

Using the design methodology of combining nihility and reality can make characters present "nihility and reality" in the structure, increase the rich space layer of the structure, and thus break the shortcomings of the stiff Chinese characters themselves. While re-setting the radicals of Chinese characters, one may get some unexpected results by highlighting some nihilistic and real strokes in Chinese characters as needed. For example, at the foot of Mount Tai, a stone wall on the east side of the Ten Thousand Immortals Tower and Beipan Road is inscribed with the words "limitless wind and moon" and "limited time", which is a classic example of how to deal with the problem of nihility and reality, which is very cleverly handled and makes people feel the infectious power of drawing "ten" out of "one".

3.2 The Combination of Nihility and Reality of the Figure and Ground

Just as the imagery thinking of Chinese characters is also expressed in the figure-ground relation between black (reality) and white (nihility) of the Chinese characters, this feature can certainly be applied in character design. The development trend of modern character design also increasingly moves towards the direction of graphics, so people naturally pay more attention to the connection between figure and ground, and the use of the method of combining nihility and reality can more effectively help the character design to deal with the connection between figure and ground. The use of contrast between blank and real picture can not only better highlight the mood of the theme, deepen the theme, but also increase the expressive power of the character design. For example, Jin Daiqiang's poster design on the theme of "Interaction" ("Figure 1") uses the character "互" as the main body of the design, together with two human faces to form a new imagery, which shows the theme that interaction mainly lies in the interaction of people's thoughts. The design of the two faces is done with a lot of blank space and few lines and shadows. There is no other decoration for the faces, but a dot is placed at the overlap of the two faces, indicating that this is where the brain is located, which highlights the position of the brain in this design, achieving an effect of "all is in the speechless" and highlighting the theme that interaction is in the mind. The blank space outside the faces and the blank space inside the faces together highlight the existence of the lines, shadows and the character "互", which better enriches the actual picture and further deepens the theme that interaction exists in

the human brain. Another example is also Jin Daiqiang's poster design work "The Emotion of Words — Mountains" ("Figure 2"), which takes the character "山" in ink and wash style as its main body, with a form more like oracle bone scripts and most of the blank space in the middle, enriching the sense of volume of the character "山" and making its form more like hazy distant mountains in an ink wash painting. The blank space in the middle of the painting sets off the brush in the center of the visual, deepening the importance of the brush, which together with the character "山" forms an imagery that expresses the theme that the brush is as important as a mountain to the development of Chinese characters. Beyond the character "山" and the brush is a large blank space, which can be seen as either sky or water, adding to the misty mood of the picture and increasing the formal beauty of the composition. The contrast between such "nihility" and the "reality" in the center of the picture creates a rhythm of sparseness, density, nihility and reality. The role of blank space in character design is not only to set off the main body, but more importantly, to let the blank space have its own meaning when being designed, so that the blank space and the real picture together form a complete imagery, which creates a more artistic and abstract imagery and leaves a deep impression.
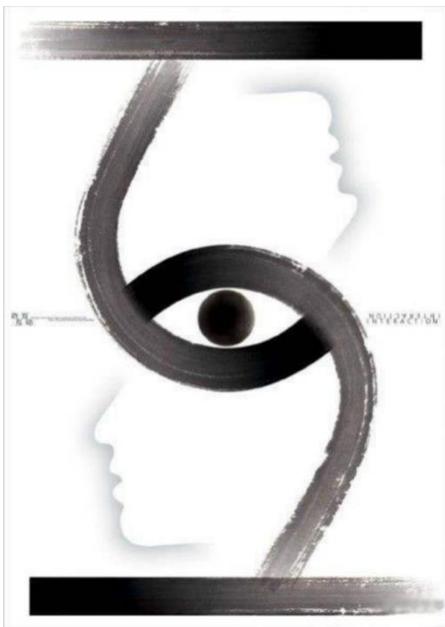

Figure 1 Jin Daiqiang's "Interaction".

Figure 2 Jin Daiqiang's "The Emotion of Words — Mountains".

3.3 The Combination of Nihility and Reality of the Brush

It is insightful to say that the expression of a work of art is to some extent an "expression of life", and this principle has been upheld by calligraphers throughout the ages in their works. A good stele is often both square and round, with the square in the round and the square not deviating from the round, with natural changes, strong in the point but not losing its delicateness in the painting. But the current character design is mostly presented in electronic screens, which is more difficult to indicate the nihility and reality of the brush. So the character design will generally use the method of broken strokes and connected strokes to show the nihility and reality of the brush. And the specific place where the strokes should be connected and broken must be natural and reasonable. Small connections, small breaks and small changes should be made on the basis of easy recognizability to achieve the clever distribution of point, line and surface relations in character design.

3.4 The Combination of Nihility and Reality of the Spacing

Usually, in the visual effect, the feeling of "nihility" is easily formed in the position of loosely spaced characters, lighter strokes, shallow strokes and drier positions; conversely, the feeling of

"reality" is easily formed in the position of shorter distance, heavier drawing, thicker ink and wetter ink. For example, in Wang Xizhi's "Xingrang Tie" (《行穰帖》) (as shown in "Figure 3"), as you can see, the first two characters "足下" feel very nihilistic because the gap between the two characters is particularly large, and the strokes are very light in strength, and the last character "佳" is also much lighter than the other characters. These characters are the nihilistic parts of the whole scroll. In contrast, the strokes in the middle, surrounded by white lines, are particularly thick, so that the overall relation between nihility and reality is clearer. Besides, in Wang Ci's "Yiri Wushen Tie" (《一日无申帖》) (such as "Figure 4"), the contrast between nihility and reality is more obvious, because the middle area is relatively concentrated so that people feel very "real", and other areas appear to be "nihilistic".
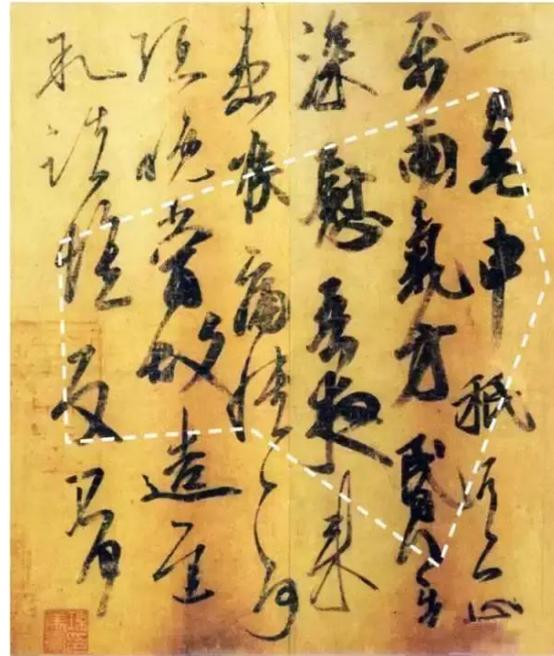

Figure 3 Wang Xizhi's "Xingrang Tie".

Figure 4 Wang Ci's "Yiri Wushen Tie".

4 THE INNOVATION PATH OF CHINESE CALLIGRAPHIC CHARACTERS OF "CREATING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING AND COMBINING NIHILITY AND REALITY"

4.1 The Sense of Appeal in the Nihility and Reality of the Glyph

The great master of Chinese painting, Qi Baishi, once said, "To be too similar is to flatter, not to be similar is to deceive, and the ingenuity lies in the middle of resemblance and dissimilarity"[2]. As far as the performance target is concerned, the language of ink and wash pursues the resemblance and dissimilarity of the figure or other objects, which often has a certain ability to summarize the shape, not to be all-inclusive or abstract and unrecognizable. In this way, the imagination of the viewer can be better mobilized, the beauty presented by this kind of nihility and reality lies between resemblance and dissimilarity, and the appeal that can be presented can form a variety of possibilities through the uncertainty of the movement of strokes, achieving unexpected effects[3].

Modern character design should master the character relation between nihility and reality, and mastering the "nihility" in calligraphy is to master

the "white" in black and white methodicalness. It is important to grasp the relation between the "figure" and the "ground"; the ground of the Chinese character is part of the image, and together with the real figure it forms a complete imagery, just like the blank space in Chinese painting. In Chinese aesthetics, there is no such thing as a blank space. Both art and calligraphy use blank space to create a rich spiritual experience, giving it many meanings. Modern character design should deal with the negative part, so that the designed character not only has the real part, but also has a certain sense of breathing.

4.2 The Sense of Rhythm of Fast and Slow Strokes

The greatest vitality of calligraphy is the sense of rhythm, the rhythm is inseparable from the speed of the brush, and this brews the unique appeal of calligraphy, giving rise to a variety and unity of its artistic forms, thus creating a form of beauty. The rhythm of traditional calligraphic characters should be used in modern character design. Just as a calligraphic brush will become bland and boring if it has no rhythm, it is also true when it comes to the lack of rhythm in the design of characters. The beauty of rhythm is reflected in many ways: the up-down, paused, reverse, rising, falling, quick, slow, heavy and light strokes, and the changes of the hidden and exposed brush all reflect the rhythmic beauty of the calligraphic brush, which seem to have a musical rhythm, being vigorous, upright and forceful, round and solid, just like drifting clouds and flowing water.

Teacher Liu Hongliu pointed out that "The rhythm of the brush is the main part of the consciousness of the universe of yin and yang expressed in the flow of brushwork"[4]. It can be roughly divided into several levels, such as "nihility and reality, capture and release, ingenuity and clumsiness, rigidness and softness, and straightness and curve". In "From the Movement of the Brush to the Shape of Stippling", teacher Deng Baojian divides the shape of stippling into coarseness and fineness, exposed and hidden brushes, square and round strokes, straight and curved strokes, pressing-down and pressing-outward, wetness and dryness, thickness and lightness, meticulousness and sloppiness, and evenness and multifariousness. This is a pattern of manifestation of a series of "alternating handling" that have been reunited through the "ingenious use" of the regular script calligraphers. On a general level, this is a concrete

expression of the traditional aesthetic idea of "yin and yang" in the structure of the Chinese regular script. In many calligraphers' eyes, each of these different art forms of stippling art is usually labeled with a different form of special artistic meaning. However, these different meanings of stippling art forms are not simply superimposed, but with the help of artistic expression means to achieve a sense of mutual balance of rhythm. Since this local conflict achieves consistency in general, the whole picture can produce a visual effect in which order and diversity coexist. The sense of order and connotation enrichment is a summary of the way yin and yang are expressed in relation to each other in calligraphic brushwork. The various forms of stippling are either straight or curved, rigid or soft, yet straight within the curves, rigid and soft at the same time, which is the artistic expression of Tai Chi treating and promoting each other mutually. And the rich and varied forms of stippling are combined with each other through a certain method of rhythmic changes, and they evolve and change with each other, presenting a balanced "sense of order" in general. The sense of order and the enrichment of content are originally a yin-yang relation, and the sense of order naturally implies richness. If you understand the rhythm of the quick and slow strokes and master the sense of nihility and reality contained in the relation between yin and yang, you will be able to design characters with more degree of capture and release.

4.3 Layering of Dry and Wet Ink

In the art of calligraphy, the brushwork is the framework and the bones, while the inking is the flesh and blood. Although ink wash painting may look colorless, a closer look can reveal the changes in ink color, the richness of the layers therein. This is created through the mutual blending of ink and water, where water and ink blend naturally to create a profound spatial relation. And it is still slightly difficult to integrate the natural layers in modern character design. The authors of this paper take the dry and wet texture of ink in calligraphy as the direction of character design, and design the corresponding "nihilistic" degree according to different dry and wet degrees, so as to generate a set of ink wash characters (such as "Figure 5"), which has participated in the proposition of Hanyi's Fifth Character Design Competition. The entire character is in the form of a relatively square boldface character, which follows the different degrees of ink dryness and wetness as well as the various parameters of ink dryness and wetness

made by the computer, and makes use of the turning points of the strokes to change its hierarchy. Since the texture created in the wet and dry ink is of key importance to the expression of the calligraphic connotation, the whole set of characters doesn't appear dull, but also gives the beauty of hazy mood. This is created by using wet and dry ink color changes, so that the three-dimensional sense, texture and expressiveness of the characters can be more prominent, giving the design of a group of characters a unique sense of appeal. This is the same as the usual designed patterns: If black and white is not divided, there is no yin and yang or light and shade; if wet and dry is unprepared, there is no verdant, pretty and smooth look; if thick and light is not divided, there is no concave and convex or near and far. Depending on the meaning of

different characters, the texture can be used to make subtle differences and changes, for example, when the authors design the character "毛" (such as "Figure 6"), they enhance the sense of dip of the left and right ink to form a fuzzy texture; while in the design of the character "光", they add the sense of diffusion of light and incorporate the layers of ink at different intervals to improve the effect. Furthermore, as a group of headline words, the same attention needs to be paid to their recognizability and readability. Therefore, the authors arrange them in a reduced size as headlines and short texts for inspection, and arrange them in both vertical and horizontal layouts (as shown in "Figure 7"), without losing the overall style or recognizability.

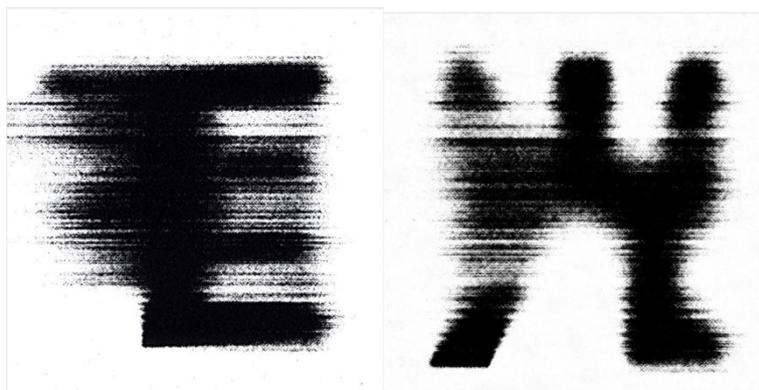Figure 5 Ink wash characters (authors' design).

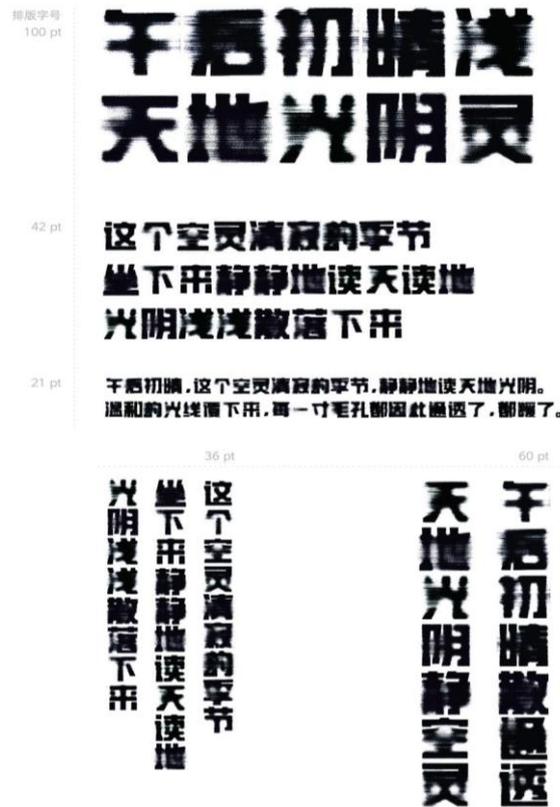Figure 6 Details of characters "毛" and "光" (authors' design).

Figure 7 Different layouts of ink wash characters (authors' design).

In general, beginners of calligraphy must first pay attention to the importance of water, which is the reason why a cup of water must be present at the calligrapher's desk in addition to ink, paper and ink stone. The incorporation of water plays a unique and extremely important role in enriching the changes of the character. The intensity and dampness of the character written depends crucially on the amount of water in the brush. Huang Binhong once said, "The ingenuity of the ancient inking method lies in the addition of water", referring to this principle. By adjusting the ink with water, it can make the ink color presented rich in the law of change, so that the ink color presents a certain state rather than the original mixed black one. The volume "Huatan" (《画谭》) wrote, "The key to inking method is water, namely, to use ink for the form and water for the pneuma. After the use of pneuma, the form will be vivid". In the final analysis, the calligrapher's successful use and mastery of ink and wash techniques is in fact a direct control of "water". For character designers, it is important to first understand the ingenious use of ink and water in calligraphy, without which it is difficult to clearly understand how to use the element of "water" and the extent to which it is used. It is only through continuous practice and exploration that one can understand certain techniques and adapt them to actual creative needs.

5   CONCLUSION

Chinese traditional culture is the spiritual lifeblood of the Chinese nation and is the key to strengthening the international influence of Chinese culture and making it stand firm in the midst of the cultural collision of various ethnic groups[5]. The spirit of tradition and new thinking should be used to guide today's design. In Taoist aesthetic thought, the aesthetic categories of "nihility" and "reality" are transformed into a specific design concept and thinking, i.e., "the combination of nihility and reality". The aesthetic form of "combining nihility and reality" is a good reference for both character design and other design fields. The expressions derived from the aesthetic idea of "combining nihility and reality" are a form of innovative intervention in the field of design. The aesthetic form of "combining nihility and reality" can present a new visual experience in character design, which is a new oriental aesthetic style". "Combining nihility and reality" can present a sense of layer and

space, and the expressions and artistic conceptions derived from the "nihility" and "reality" can push the emotions conveyed by the works to a higher depth, which can be a profound inspiration for the field of character design.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Ge Zhang was responsible for writing and design creation, and Zhixiong Huang modified the study.

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