A Study of the Decorative Symbols and Image Functions in Chinese Traditional Woodblock Prints Space

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ABSTRACT
The decorative symbols in Chinese traditional woodblock prints have been long regarded as auxiliary visual elements. Their function is usually summarized as beautifying the picture or filling the blank space on the page. However, from the perspective of the generation process of the print image space, these small symbols located at the edges and blank areas of the main image are not merely simple forms of decoration. In the religious belief, character portrayal, text dissemination, and the process of plate production, they undertake multiple functions such as symbolic expression, spatial organization, and medium regulation, and jointly participate in the construction of the image space of Chinese woodblock print. This thesis takes the decorative symbols in Chinese traditional woodblock prints as the research objects, and discusses the function transition and meaning of decorative symbols in different image systems by analyzing various types of works such as Buddhist woodblock prints, portrait woodblock prints, and manuscript editions. The research believes that the decorative symbols in Chinese traditional woodblock prints space mainly have three functions: first, the symbolic function; second, visual function; third, the media function. This thesis, basing on the foundation of previous research, examines the decorative symbols within the functional system of the prints space. It believes that the decorative symbols are not just the simple filling of empty spaces, but represent a kind of space adjustment function which connects image meaning, visual construction and media technology. This research will contributes to deepen the cognition of the construction method of Chinese woodblock prints images, and provides new research perspective for the visual analysis of traditional image resource and contemporary art education.

Keywords: *Chinese woodblock prints, Decorative symbols, Print space, Image functions, Visual organization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese traditional woodblock prints, as the important component in Chinese visual culture system, are not only an image reproduction method based on the technique of woodblock printing, but also the comprehensive visual system which integrates image expression, text dissemination, cultural symbols and media practice. In the long development process, Chinese woodblock prints formed unique spatial organization method. The main image, text content, decorative patterns and blank areas together form a complete visual structure. However, in the previous researches of Chinese woodblock prints, the researchers paid more attention to the historical evolution, carving techniques, image content and artistic style of woodblock prints. Relatively insufficient attention was paid to the decorative symbols that exist at the edges of the main image, in the blank spaces of the prints, and in the gaps between the text and the images. These small and less prominent visual elements are usually regarded as auxiliary decorations used to beautify the picture or fill the space. Their functions in print image generation, space organization and meaning expression have not been sufficiently discussed.

In the practice of Chinese traditional woodblock prints, the term “blank space” is the visual space that can be organized and regulated. When there is relatively big blank space in the image, the creators

tend to reorganize the print space by adding cloud patterns, flowers, precious stones, border decorations, and other small image elements. Although these symbols do not occupy the dominant position in the image, they influence the overall image structure through their own form characteristics, cultural connotations and media attributes. Some previous studies have already noticed this phenomenon and have conducted discussions from various perspectives. For instance, Jing Yongshi pointed out in "A Discussion on the Book Production Techniques of the Western Xia Dynasty" that the small flower decorations in the Western Xia engraved books were not merely for decoration, but also served to support the paper; Wang Yanyun, in "The Categories and Evolution of Small Decorations in Western Xia Engraved Books", discussed the combination methods, formation rules and evolution relationships of the small decorations through type analysis. These researches provide important foundation for understanding the value of small decorative elements in woodblock prints. However, there is still room for further discussion regarding how these symbols function in different image systems and how they contribute to the construction of the printmaking space.

Basing on the cognitions above, this thesis will regard the decorative symbols in Chinese traditional woodblock print as independent research object, and examine it within the functional system of the woodblock print space.

2. SYMBOLIC FUNCTION: DECORATIVE SYMBOLS AND THE MEANING OF PRINT IMAGE

The Chinese traditional Buddhist woodblock prints not only undertake the functions like Buddhist scripture dissemination, interpretation of scripture meanings, and religious education, but are also the important media of constructing the religious visual experience. In Buddhist image, the main character is usually positioned at the center position, while the decorative symbols such as cloud patterns, lotus flowers, precious beads, flowers, and the bodhi tree that surround the main character together form a symbolic visual environment. Although these symbols are in a secondary position in terms of the overall image proportion, their cultural connotations and visual orientation deeply participate in the construction of the religious image's meaning.

Take the frontispiece of the woodblock print work "The Zhaocheng Jin Tripitaka" from the late Jin Dynasty and early Yuan Dynasty as example, the scene centers around the teaching scene, and is composed of thirteen main characters forming the main narrative space. Apart from the main character, the background displays a large number of flowing, streamlined cloud patterns that form continuous cirrus patterns along the edges of the picture and around the main character. In Chinese traditional culture system, the cloud has important meaning of connecting sky and ground, communicating god and people. In this frontispiece, the cloud patterns not only serve as a means of spatial division, but also, through their gentle and flowing curve forms, weaken the limitations of the real space, allowing the teaching scenes in the picture to break away from the daily environment and enter a transcendent religious space. Meanwhile, the precious elements such as flame jewels, coral, and rhino horns are scattered in the blank area at the bottom of the picture. These elements are not simply used to fill the image blank, but reinforce the sacred world described in Buddhist scriptures with cultural meanings such as offering, auspiciousness and solemnity through the various treasures' visual presentation of precious objects. At the same time, the lotus decorations in the image and the sacred objects held by the characters also further strengthened the sacred nature of the main character's image through the symbolic meaning. They do not merely aim for the richness of form, but rather establish a connection between symbols and religious concepts at the visual level, enabling viewers to enter a specific religious context through the images. Thus, the decorative symbols in "The Zhaocheng Jin Tripitaka" have the symbolic function which goes beyond the decorations themselves. On the one hand, these symbols enhance the spiritual connotations of Buddhist images through cultural symbolism, giving the Buddha statues and the scenes of his teachings a sense of sanctity; on the other hand, they expand the religious significance within the layout space through the symbolic environment formed around the main image.

As the spreading scope of woodblock prints expanded, the symbolic decorative language formed in Buddhist images gradually entered secular human portraits and underwent functional transformation in the new image environment. The symbolic system originally used to construct the religious sacred space has gradually become an important visual resource for individual identities

expression and social meanings construction. This change reflects the translation process of Buddhist visual resource in folk society, that is, the symbols in religious images are gradually separated from their original context and re-assigned with the function of expressing the identity of common people.

Take the woodblock print "Image of Lord Zengfu" from the Jin dynasty as example, the character images in this work do not merely rely on clothing, postures and appearance to define their identities; instead, their unique characteristics are further enhanced through decorative symbols in the surrounding environment. The coral, precious stones, elk, flowers, utensils, and the rocks and trees in the background in the picture together form a symbolic space surrounding the figure, enabling the figure's image to transcend the meaning of a common portrait and become a visual object that carries folk beliefs and social wishes. Among them, the fundamental meaning of the precious objects like precious stones and corals in Buddhist images is the symbolic meaning of giving. While when they enter portrait woodblock prints, their function gradually turns to the strengthening of figure identity. They highlight auspiciousness and wealth, symbolizing the respect and worship of the common people. This change shows the important characteristic of the decorative symbol in Chinese traditional woodblock prints: it is not the images with fixed meaning, but the cultural symbols that constantly transform and generate meaning in different image systems. In Buddhist woodblock prints, the decorative symbols serve the construction of sacred space; in portrait woodblock prints, it can be transformed into identity symbol and social meaning expression. Thus, the decorative elements in "Image of Lord Zengfu" actually continue the visual tradition of Buddhism and, through the process of secularization, give rise to a new way of shaping characters.

Through the analysis of "The Zhaocheng Jin Tripitaka" and "Image of Lord Zengfu", it can be seen that the decorative symbols in Chinese woodblock prints first have symbolic function. In Buddhism woodblock prints, the decorative symbols construct scared space through the elements like cloud patterns, lotus flowers, and various precious stones, enabling the abstract religious concepts to be expressed visually in a concrete manner; in portrait woodblock prints, these symbols are further transformed into identity symbol, enabling the character image to get symbolic meaning which goes beyond the realm of reality.

3. VISUAL FUNCTION: DECORATIVE SYMBOLS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PRINT SPACE ORDER

Chinese traditional woodblock prints do not just rely on main image to complete visual expression, but construct complex space relation between images, text, blank space and decorative elements. Thus, its organization method of space is different from common art work. The decorative symbols, as the important part of layout structure, transform the originally flat printed page into visual structure with order through the adjustment of the text area, image area and blank space.

In the frontispiece illustration of the Northern Song Dynasty edition of "The Lotus Sutra", the composition of the image is not a single subject-based layout. Instead, it creates a continuous image space through the combination of multiple narrative scenes. The whole image centers around the Buddhist narrative scenario, and the figures, buildings, trees, and cloud patterns together form a multi-layered religious narrative environment, maintaining both separation and connection relationship between different story plots. In specific layout, the story plots are arranged according to the narrative relation. The main character forms visual focus through a larger proportion of the image and a central position, and the attendants, the listeners of the law, and the environmental elements all jointly contribute to the overall story setting. The different scenes are not strictly distinguished by obvious spatial partitions. Instead, they form a visual transition through patterns and environmental decorations, allowing viewers to recognize different narrative units within the continuous sequence of images. Meanwhile, there are corresponding textual explanations provided beside each story scene. The text does not independently exist beyond the image. It is organized together with the thin borders, decorative patterns, and the image space, forming a unified visual structure with the image. Among them, the cloud pattern is prominent spatial decorative elements in the frontispiece. They distribute among characters, buildings and scenes, and connect different visual area in the form of a continuous curve shape. On the one hand, the cloud pattern weakens the space limitation between different scenes, and enables multiple story segments to form

an overall connection within the same frame; on the other hand, the cloud pattern itself has the repetitive and flowing form characteristics. By adjusting the visual rhythm of the picture through the changes of lines' density and direction, a balance between the characters' movements and the blank areas is created.

Thus, the decorative symbols in the frontispiece of "The Lotus Sutra", especially the application of cloud pattern, are not simply background decoration, but the important elements which attend the construction of image space. They make the scriptures, images and blank spaces jointly form a religious visual system with order by dividing narrative areas, connecting text and images, regulating visual rhythm.

4. MEDIA FUNCTION: DECORATIVE SYMBOLS, PRINT PRODUCTION AND TEXT SPACE CONSTRUCTION

Chinese traditional woodblock print is not only a kind of visual art form, but also a comprehensive media system which is formed rely on woodblock printing technology, paper materials and printing dissemination. Thus, the decorative symbols in woodblock prints do not entirely come from aesthetic needs, rather, they are visual structures jointly formed by the image production, text dissemination and printing practices. Especially in the manuscripts of the literature, the decorative elements gradually deviated from their primary functions of character portrayal and narrative expression, and instead began to participate in the organization of the text space, the establishment of reading order, and the stabilization of the layout structure.

Different from Buddhism woodblock prints and portrait prints, the core of the Western Xia literature manuscript "The Heavenly Prosperity Code: Reformed and Renewed Laws and Decrees", is the engraving of legal text. Its layout design first serves the accurate dissemination of text information. Thus, the borders, decorative patterns and small decorative symbols in it are not merely for enhancing the visual appeal, but focus more on playing a regulatory role in the arrangement of text, the division of space and the reading experience. Specifically, it can be seen as: first, in the layout structure of "The Heavenly Prosperity Code: Reformed and Renewed Laws and Decrees", the border primarily serves the function of defining the text area. By defining the text area, the main text content and edge of the layout form a stable relationship. In this way, the visual confusion caused by the continuous arrangement of a large amount of text can be avoided. Second, the decorative symbols in the layout has relatively specific location laws: some decorative elements like small flower patterns and bird patterns often appears at the end of a sentence or at the conclusion of a paragraph of text, while big decoration combinations often appears in the blank area after the chapter. This layout method indicates that the decorative symbols are not randomly distributed, but consciously arranged according to the text structure and layout space. The small decorative symbols located at the end of sentences, on the one hand, can alleviate the space gap that appears after the text ends, maintaining the visual continuity of the page; on the other hand, it can form the visual pauses between paragraphs to help readers perceive the structure of the text. While the big decoration combinations located at the end of the chapter play the role of regulating the large areas of blank space, creating clear spatial boundaries between chapters, and enhancing the integrity of the text paragraphs. Thus, these decorative symbols actually participate in the organization of text space, transforming the abstract text information into layout structure that has visual order. Third the form of decorative symbols is closely related to the medium characteristics of block printing. The block printing is distinguished from painting creation. Its image generation is limited by factors such as the wood material, the carving method, and the printing effect. In this process, the blank area in layout is not totally free. It needs to be reasonably planned according to the characteristics of engraving and printing. If there is large area of blank space, it would increase the difficulty of spatial processing during the engraving printing process. Thus, this kind of small decorative symbols serves to support the paper during the printing process. This shows that the decorative symbols in "The Heavenly Prosperity Code: Reformed and Renewed Laws and Decrees" reflect the interaction between technology and aesthetic sense in Chinese traditional woodblock print. They are not simply generated from the decorative interest, but the media language that was formed under the joint influence of material limitations, carving rules, text dissemination and visual requirements.

Through the analysis of "The Heavenly Prosperity Code: Reformed and Renewed Laws and Decrees", it can be seen that the decorative symbols in Chinese woodblock print has important media

function. They enable the textual content to achieve a more complete visual presentation through dividing text space, establishing reading orders and adapting the technological requirements of carving. Thus, the decorative symbols are also the important part of traditional printing system.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the decorative symbols in Chinese traditional woodblock prints are not easy fillings of the blank area in layout, but the important visual mechanism that functions in the image meaning, spatial structure, and media practice. First, at the symbolic function level, decorative symbols, through visual elements such as cloud patterns, lotus flowers, precious beads, and various precious stones that carry cultural connotations, transform abstract religious concepts and social values into visual language that can be observed. In Buddhism woodblock prints, these symbols construct religious spaces with sacred significance; while with the transformation of Buddhism visual resource into the folk image system, they further enter the field of portrait, and become the important media of expressing the character identity, social wishes and cultural meaning. Next, at the visual function level, the decorative symbols participate in the establishment of the spatial order of the print by adjusting the relationships between the subject and the background, text and image, as well as blank space and the entity. At last, at the media function level, the decorative symbols reflect the interaction between technology and aesthetic sense in Chinese traditional woodblock print. The decorative symbols not only play the role of dividing the text space and establishing the reading order, but also responding to the media conditions such as the material of the printing block, the engraving method, and the communication needs, enabling the textual content to achieve a more stable and complete visual presentation.

It needs to be pointed out that the three functions are not mutually independent categories. They interweave with each other within the specific space of the print and jointly exert their effects. The decorative symbols often simultaneously perform multiple functions such as meaning expression, spatial organization, and media adaptation, and participate in the generation of the image space during the interaction process among these three aspects. This thesis mainly discusses the functional mechanism of decorative symbols through three types of cases. It has not yet involved comparative studies among different regions, eras and printing systems. The future study can further integrate more image materials and conduct in-depth discussion on the evolution patterns of Chinese printmaking decorative symbols. From this perspective to re-scan Chinese traditional woodblock print, it can not only expend the cognition for the structure of print image, but also further reveal the inner relation between spatial organization, symbol expression and media practice in Chinese traditional visual culture. Meanwhile, the research on the function of decorative symbols provides new enlightment for contemporary art education.

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