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Research on Poster Design of Chinese Zodiac Character Symbols from the Perspective of Traditional Chinese Culture

Master's Thesis submitted for the degree of **Master**

Specialty B2 Design

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The qualification work contains the results of independent research.

The use of ideas, results and texts of other authors is properly referenced.

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ABSTRACT

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The Chinese zodiac animals have existed for centuries, not just as the basis for a year calendar system. Rather, they have continuously been used as symbols, shaping folklore, legends, and codes within Chinese culture. Today's designers continue to use the imagery of the twelve zodiac animals, but many of them now rely on an additional design resource - Chinese logograms which represent the animals. The main challenge when designing a poster based on an animal and its corresponding logogram is the fact that each Chinese symbol has a unique silhouette, which cannot be mistaken with any other written sign. Too close connection of the two shapes will result in losing the meaning associated with the logogram, whereas too much separation will disrupt the natural link between the animal and its symbol. That is the key design issue which I intend to solve in my project, consisting of twelve posters designed in order to test various approaches to combining animal traits with the zodiac sign logogram.

The study incorporates the review of literature, observation of visual artifacts of tradition, analysis of existing design examples, and actual making of posters. All design choices will be guided by the aesthetic concept of "form-meaning-spirit" (xing-yi-shen) that determines how cultural allusions will be converted into visual form. In this research, decoration on bronze ware, ancient pictorial stone and brick carvings, paper-cut and Chinese calligraphy will be investigated individually to reveal specific features that each type of art adds. The study pays special attention to such visual characteristics as outlines, strokes rhythm and spatial structure that serve as a base of poster design. Then, each of the twelve zodiac signs will be studied individually. For each character, it will be revealed what animal physical traits define it and what is its cultural meaning that should not be lost in the course of poster making.

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Through the research, twelve unique posters are produced under the title of “One Cycle, Twelve Forms—The Zodiac Uncovered through Characters.” All designs follow the vertical layout and have consistent fundamental design structure where the zodiac character forms the main focus point. The chosen attributes of the animal naturally blend into the characters designed using geometric lines and metallic gradient effects. The year mark, the English name of the exhibition, and thematic Chinese texts are placed in the hierarchy of each poster while varying color schemes from one poster to another provide variety. The entire series uses four main graphic relationships—stroke sharing, figure-ground relationship, contour sharing, and structure juxtaposition—that are applied with flexibility based on each animal and its corresponding character. In the process of design, certain criteria are prioritized—first of all, the legibility of characters and recognition of the animal.

Keywords: Twelve zodiac images; Chinese character connotation; Design of poster; Chinese cultural legacy; Visual metamorphosis; Form-meaning-spirit aesthetics

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INTRODUCTION

The significance of the research is that it allows for addressing one of the most widespread flaws associated with the process of thematic serial posters' creation. Most of the conventional zodiac design pieces use the principle of simple placement of the images of zodiac animals along with the Chinese characters associated with them. As a result, this approach does not provide for rich visual effects and cultural associations. Based on this, the current study goes deep beyond the visual collage. The twelve zodiac signs are perceived by the author of the research as full-fledged carriers of culture including not only the images of the animals but also specific glyph structure and deep associations of the traditional culture. Instead of using of the ancient visual resources, the present research extracts the key elements of the culture and visual design that can be successfully used in modern conditions to create the whole collection of the posters.

The purpose of this research is to investigate an achievable and well-structured approach to generating the series design of twelve posters about the zodiac. Firstly, this research will sort out some typical cultural texts and traditional visual references of the zodiac. Based on the classification of materials, this research makes a careful analysis on the characters of each zodiac Chinese character and finds the morphology of its corresponding animal. With the above research results, this research is able to formulate the relevant design principles and design each poster individually. Finally, this research will conduct the whole optimization for the zodiac poster series. This research not only standardizes the general design criteria and visual style for the entire series but also maintains the unique visual effect and culture elements of each individual zodiac theme.

Objectives: This study is structured based on the following objectives:

1. The paper will investigate the interaction among the zodiac culture, Earthly Branches, folklore and visual tradition in order to sift out the cultural meaning and visual resources useful for the creation of the zodiac posters.

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2. This study examines the structure of zodiac-based Chinese characters as well as the morphological characteristics of the zodiac animals, and more importantly, explores the possibility of matching the two through certain distinctive characteristics.

3. The research utilizes the three dimensions of "form-meaning-spirit" aesthetic theory as the basic logic for achieving an effective transformation and interpretation of cultural heritage through the poster design process.

4. Such research visual design concepts for each of the twelve zodiac characters while ensuring that the whole collection of zodiac visual design concept is kept consistent in terms of layout structure and presentation format.

5. This essay is aimed at establishing a number of criteria for the operational assessment of poster products, emphasizing on cultural information inheritance, identification of both Chinese writing and zodiac animal icons, and overall fluency and precision in visual information transmission.

Research objective – The study is dedicated to the twelve Chinese zodiac systems with the description of the Chinese characters, animals and the visual resources of their traditions.

Theme of the study – In this study, attempts are made to identify ways of rendering zodiac cultural resources into visual form and to apply these in serial poster design.

Historical Framework - This paper employs cultural material from the history of the zodiac as the foundation for its theoretical base while concentrating on the current graphical representation of the same.

Territorial scope - This research focuses on the Chinese culture and design environment in examining zodiac posters that are both local and foreign. This is to examine the various visual models and design strategies used in various design cases.

The research takes a multidimensional research approach based on literature sorting, material analysis, case comparison and design practice. Firstly, related literature is sorted out to understand the essence of zodiac culture, Chinese character symbols and visual communication theories. The cultural essence of the whole research work will thus be defined. Secondly, the research studies traditional art

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resources including decorative art of bronzes, ancient stone and brick paintings, paper-cutting and calligraphy. Visual features in terms of outline lines, stroke rhythm, spatial composition and negative spaces of these traditional arts are analyzed to ensure that all the borrowed designs have cultural sources. In case studies part, this paper mainly focuses on the combination models of zodiac animals and Chinese characters, the relations between subjects and backgrounds and the creative combination approaches of traditional shapes and modern designs. Typical design cases are collected to show the various zodiac designs at present instead of only collecting individual design cases. Finally, practical design verification is used in this research. Through character structure analysis, multiple sketching and comparison of twelve posters, the research is completed.

This study is endowed with strong theoretical, practical, and cultural significance. Firstly, it summarizes the concept of traditional cultural resources and makes the cultural connotations concrete into operational design concepts. Secondly, it establishes a complete design database for the set of twelve posters, which consists of the material screening criteria, graphical design reasons, and uniform series standards. Thirdly, the finished works create new design attempts to inherit the traditional zodiac culture, which can be validated and improved by public feedback.

Classification of the research content in this study is based on three major dimensions. First, material research involves the extraction of objective and verifiable basic facts, including the naming rule of the zodiac, correlation between zodiac and Earthly Branches, as well as classic topics and historical context of traditional zodiac paintings. All information under this dimension is based on tangible cultural artifacts. Second, interpretation research is aimed at exploring the new visual association and integration of the morphology of zodiac animals and Chinese characters. Such an approach involves more subjective creative assessment and personal reasoning rather than objective facts. Third, empirical verification research centers on the practical impact of the design. That is, whether the design is understandable for the audience and capable of conveying the preset themes, either cultural or visual.

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CHAPTER 1

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ISSUE AND RESEARCH METHODS

1.1. **Review of the Literature**

The literature review considers the following three major issues. First, it discusses the existing literature in relation to the cultural value and connotations of the zodiacs in China consisting of twelve zodiacs. Secondly, the existing works of literature in relation to the graphic design in relation to zodiac designs and visual representation of Chinese characters are discussed.

1. Research Status in China

(1) Research on the Cultural Connotations of the Zodiac

The twelve zodiac animals in China have one-to-one correspondence with the twelve Earthly Branches. This connection creates the fundamental basis of this series of posters. As for the practice of designing, viewers should recognize the titles of zodiac animals, Earthly Branch symbols and other cultural elements designed by designers. Mixing up all these terms may result in misunderstanding regarding their origins and connotations. The zodiac has penetrated into the vocabulary and festivities and folk art in daily life. Knowing the visual form of these animals does not mean the fixed symbolic connotation of them. A zodiac animal might be considered as a symbol of good fortune in the New Year festivities, have other connotation in handicrafts and play other role in the myths. Incorporating either the lunar legends or ancient stories is related to the materials chosen by designers. According to Wang Juan in her work An Interpretation of the Symbolic System and Cultural Connotations of the Chinese Zodiac, the zodiac system is not merely a notation system of chronology but the complex cultural system. The zodiac signs and the Earthly Branches are an inseparable part of ancient Chinese world view. Along with the theory of Yin-Yang and Five Elements, they assist to understand the nature and maintain the social order [9].

The relationship between zodiac animals and Earthly Branches is not just related to the marking of time. Each zodiac animal within the traditional spatiotemporal

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system has its corresponding months, hours, and directions. More importantly, the symbolic zodiac animal may imply all three aspects simultaneously.

The folk culture also entails the natal year, whereby people are associated with the animals corresponding to their years of birth. Although these sets of the series do not revolve around folk beliefs, the designers have to keep in mind this particular culture because without it, the symbolism would just amount to the illustration of animals. The other thing that needs to be considered is what the central idea would be before creation.

Upon categorization of visual references, two layers of structures emerge. The first layer is related to the Earthly Branch system. The second layer gets its theme from the folk association rather than the visual structure.

For that reason, groupings within Earthly Branches can be used as an organizing principle for the series, and folk culture symbolism serves as a source of definitions for the fundamental idea expressed by each poster.

(2) Graphic Design Research on Zodiac Symbols and Chinese Characters

In graphic design, Chinese characters are not only the vehicles for language but also rich sources for visual elements. Modern zodiac characters based on Chinese writing differ from each other in structure complexity, balance and contour. Characters like ox, goat and horse have a natural form that allows to build a visual connection between the glyph and the animal. Characters such as monkey, pig and dog, however, consist of numerous strokes. Visual fusion in this case will impair the readability of the character. The key point is not in turning all the characters into animals but in finding out which strokes can be used to convey visual cues of the animal without destroying the readability of the character. In the process of sketching, three ways can be considered: complete fusion, where the character is embedded in the animal, partial fusion, where the animal is hidden in some of the character strokes, and simply echoing the character shape and visualizing it next to the animal. Designers should differentiate between modern, calligraphic and ancient writing types. Modifications in modern characters can look innovative but don't necessarily have the pictographic origin of the animal.

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Xu Jisheng delves into this aspect in his work Research on the Graphic Design and Application of the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Signs in Oracle Bone Script. He analyzes origin, meaning attributes and aesthetic theory related to the forms' meanings, abstraction and harmony with the visual rhythm. There are three categories of creative works which include graphic form research, typeface layout and scene setting by Xu Jisheng [14]. The author Zhang Dan in his work Graphic Design and Application of the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Signs takes a modern approach. He says that modern zodiac designs tend to become symbolically and industrially visualized and thus need a restructure under modern theories and user needs [19]. According to Li Tiantian in his work The Application of Decorative Zodiac Graphics in Cultural and Creative Product Design, there is a change from decorative and complex design to simplified design. Li says that modern designers need to decompose traditional decorative patterns and recreate new visuals with cultural tradition and modern aesthetics [3].

Zodiac-related Chinese characters derive from the initial stages of Chinese language. The signs ox, goat, horse, tiger, dog and swine are among ancient pictographs of oracle bones. Ancient Chinese scholars have recorded specific animal characteristics in their symbols; horns for ox and goat, mane and robust limbs for horses, stripes for tigers. The pictographs contain evidence of their animal origins even today. In contrast, the characters of monkey and pig that developed at a later stage do not contain as strong an element of pictorial relationship as the first group. This is a significant historical distinction with implications for design. For pictographic characters, animal traits can be brought back to reconnect with their inherent animal relationships. For the phonetic compound symbols, new visual connections need to be created without affecting legibility. This study will rely on modern standard Chinese characters.

(3) Zodiac Poster Design Practice and Case Analysis

There are some clear types of zodiac poster designs. There are those which combine the forms of Chinese characters with animal images. There are also those using folk art designs, which are taken from the pictures made during New Year

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celebrations. Modern designs make use of pure geometric forms with sharp color contrast and minimalistic design. Due to the lack of comprehensive records regarding the titles of the posters, as well as the designers' names and publication dates, this part of the work will focus more on visual analysis than on source checking. The main goal is to illustrate various approaches to visual translation. The first group of posters creates parallel forms through the correspondence of character strokes with animal features. The second group keeps the folk image and festive mood.

With reference to the visual translation theory, the accumulated cases can be categorized into three types. The first one is the isomorphic construction of animal body parts using character form. In this approach, characters' heads, horns, tail and limbs are formed into animal shapes. But too much exaggeration will make the characters hard to recognize and difficult to read. The second category utilizes folk visuals and festivals stories. In this case, saturated colors, symmetry and thick borders are usually used in the work. With regard to the pattern design based on paper cuts, designers should make sure of the relationship between decoration elements, zodiac animal, local features and festival context; otherwise, cultural meanings would be vague. The third one is based on modern visual communication theory.

Xu Yan, in her paper titled Research on the Visual Image Design of the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Signs, mentions that changing aesthetic tastes and foreign impacts have led to a decreasing attractiveness of the traditional designs of the zodiac signs. Her suggestion is to reinterpret the classic models and colour schemes by means of modern approaches to design and bring zodiac images back to life [15]. Wang Xinxin, in his work titled The Application of China’s Fine Traditional Cultural Elements in Poster Design, says that the transformation of traditional sources through visualization helps create posters with distinct cultural identity and enhanced expressiveness [13]. Yang Fan, in his paper titled Research on the Application of the Twelve Chinese Zodiac Elements in Graphic Design, talks about the differences in zodiac culture of different regions [16].

Each type requires its own way of designing zodiac images as opposed to books and craft work because people look at posters from a distance and just take one look

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around the surrounding visual chaos. In that case, the central image should attract the viewer's attention at first sight. It is necessary to establish a good hierarchy in characters, animals and additional text in order for viewers to grasp the meaning instantly.

Through the analysis of such examples, there appear to be some common trade-offs. The incorporation of animals' figures within characters is likely to attract viewers but can result in the sacrifice of readability of glyphs. Decorative features tend to make the atmosphere festive but may lead to generic visualization. Modern grids guarantee uniformity within the series, yet fail to preserve unique features of particular animals. This investigation also focuses on screen displays in addition to big print production.

2. Research Status Abroad

Foreign design methodologies bring forward many unique viewpoints on the visual representation of zodiacs. In this paper, an important issue to be discussed is whether bilingual explanation is necessary for the non-Chinese speaking audience to comprehend the zodiac culture correctly. Although there have been many studies conducted domestically on zodiacs, symbolical meaning, character graphics, and poster design, they mainly concentrate on case classification and summarization. They fail to establish any systematic and verifiable design philosophy which combines together animal images, character structures, and culture symbolism. Foreign studies have offered little theoretical guidance but have failed to offer many case studies and supporting evidence. This study targets at these knowledge gaps by employing the methodology of "form-meaning-spirit".

1.2. **Research Methods**

(1) Literature Research Method

The approach helps to clarify basic concepts such as zodiac culture, symbolization and communication through the Chinese character, and gather valid cultural evidence for design purpose. The literature review develops a classification of the relationship between claim, source and design implication for the "zodiac-Earthly

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Branch" documentations related to folk cultural interpretation and creative design methods. This literature review is based on title and abstract only.

(2) Design Material Analysis Method

The approach studies traditional visual elements in isolation, noting the provenance, medium, visual qualities, rules of composition and corresponding limitations for each element. In the course of study, it identifies the distinct aesthetic qualities of each of the traditional art forms, such as the continual design patterns of bronze decorations, the outline simplification of stone carvings, the hollow designs of paper cuts and the flexibility of calligraphic brush strokes.

(3) Comparative Case Method

The research contrasts existing design examples in various aspects: character and animal zodiac visual hierarchy, graphic combination ability, source culture utilization, recognition principle of audience, color coordination and layout standards, consistency of the series as a whole and its screen display ability. In case there is no information about the author and the publication, the research concentrates only on visual combination ability and formal features.

(4) Design Practice Method

The entire process of design is recorded, including cultural positioning, iterations of sketches, structural analysis of characters, sorting of references, and revisions of schemes. For the audience evaluation stage, all test tasks are prepared beforehand. Testers have to determine zodiac signs, decipher the character glyphs, and perceive cultural connotations. Another evaluation, accompanied by explanation, takes place after the primary evaluation stage; it helps distinguish between perception and understanding of the design's culture message by the viewers.

Conclusions to Chapter 1

This chapter offers a systematic review of previous studies related to zodiac culture, character graphic design and zodiac posters. The main knowledge gaps associated with the relationship between animal representation, character form and cultural meaning are highlighted. Four different research approaches are defined for the “form-meaning-spirit” analysis presented in Chapter 2.

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CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS OF DESIGN THEORY AND PRACTICE

2.1. **Lack of Theoretical Support for Zodiac Poster Design**

Zodiac posters design is a discipline that involves culture analysis, typography layout, graphic modeling, and media transformation. Current theories on the subject, such as semiotics and information visualization, are limited in their capacity to describe certain design principles, as they cannot provide specific guidelines on how to combine the traditional culture of zodiac symbols and modern posters design. To meet the gap in the theoretical area, this research brings together three theories of equal importance.

(1) The Three-Level "Form–Meaning–Spirit" Translation Theory

The current research adopts a comprehensive "form-meaning-spirit" tri-level model as the fundamental theory. The three levels act as design principles in coordination instead of decoration levels independently. "Form" refers to all visual elements that can be observed; "meaning" means the cultural connotation embedded within; "spirit" is the aesthetic spirit of the current age.

Form translation is made up of three parts. The first part involves the extraction of visual components from conventional media, which consists of animal silhouettes, character formations and calligraphy. In the second part, the conventional forms are abstracted and structured in a way that suits current posters without being overly imitative.

On the other hand, meaning translation begins with well-defined cultural grounding. Visual forms suitable for communicating fundamental themes are chosen. Visual content that is historically and culturally designed needs to be credible, while innovative visual association has been defined as subjective design interpretation.

Four kinds of cultural significance that can be associated with the twelve zodiacs include: temporal associations with Earthly Branches; folk lucky practices; material

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associations related to textures borrowed from traditional arts; and finally formal associations between the character and animal figure. These classifications suggest certain techniques of visualizing each kind of cultural significance through the use of appropriate motifs: temporal - the symbols of branches and numerals; folk – the motifs of rituals and festivals; material – textures of arts; formal – graphics coordination.

Spirit translation renews the visual elements of tradition by adapting to contemporary ways of viewing, rather than simply decorating visually with the elements of the tradition. The design responds to viewing through multiple scenes, such as exhibitions and mobile viewing screens, but retains visual rhythms throughout the entire sequence. The final design is arrived at by a cycle of optimization, whereby culture determines form and meaning, graphic experimentation corrects any unrealistic elements, and medium constraints as well as viewing environments govern visual complexity and text density.

(2) The Integration Theory of Chinese Characters and Animal Graphics

There can be no infinite deformation of Chinese characters. Before combining the animal symbols, the essential strokes, which ensure legibility of the symbol, should be selected. The visual metaphor is valid only if the key structural information of the Chinese symbol is preserved. Partial combination will work well for simple Chinese characters like those of the ox and goat.

The symbolism of the character in the zodiac chart requires active involvement in the visual construction process. There are four possible integration methods that could be used depending on the complexity of the glyph and the animal silhouette. Stroke Borrowing – replacement or extension of the key stroke by the element from the animal silhouette; for example, horns can be used to transform the upper stroke of the ox or goat while preserving readability of the symbol. Figure Ground Relationship – use of the animal silhouette inside the character to form a contrasted visual perception. Shared Contours – one line that works as the part of the character stroke and also the contour of the animal such as its back or tail. Structural Juxtaposition – use of the separate symbols when the glyph is too complex.

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This approach, however, is not applicable in all situations. There are three considerations in choosing the right strategy – the number of strokes in the character, how easily recognizable the animal silhouette is, and the amount of internal negative space in the character. Stroke borrowing is used in cases where there are simple characters with an obvious top structure, such as ox and goat. Figure-ground embedding is appropriate for characters that have many negative spaces in them, such as horse and dragon, where the silhouette of the animal is inserted within the framework of the character. Contour sharing is used when there are characters with curvy strokes, like snake. Structural juxtaposition is used when there are stroke-dense characters, namely, monkey, pig and dog.

Typography finds itself on the verge of conventionality and experiment with the glyphs. Although the graphic of the poster is open for any kind of creative manipulations, the explanation should be made in conventional terms, using common names of zodiac signs. Earthly Branches and Pinyin/English terms can be added depending on the need. The choice of ancient scripts like the one of dragon needs an explanation.

(3) The Translation Theory of Traditional Visual Resources

Traditional visual sources are chosen based on a five-dimensional system of documentation, which includes: item name; medium; visual features; cultural background; and the method of the source utilization. The choice of medium determines the nature of the visuals used: stone-carved patterns have one set of textural qualities, whereas paper-cuttings have another. Bronzes are distinguished by their continuous and repetitive decorative lines, while calligraphy is marked by the dynamism of the brush strokes. There is no reason to unite all these different types of visuals into one category of "classical style." Cultural background is another essential screening criterion: it helps to distinguish between authentic animal patterns derived from ancient sources and other motifs, made by subsequent artists.

Every traditional medium has its own set of references which can help create graphic designs. The decorations on bronze which have been done with symmetrical and continuous patterns act as a source of inspiration for designing the border of

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posters and their rhythms. Pictorial stones and bricks employ the outlines and composition technique of stories that help arrange animals and create a story through visuals. The paper cut art uses hollow carving, interlockings of shapes and alternations between negative and positive spaces to provide ways to deal with blank inner space and to create figure and ground. The calligraphy brings dynamics to the graphics of characters through variations in stroke and pressure of brush. However, the incorporation of the elements of the tradition cannot be made at random. There is a very clear difference between copying a particular object and learning from its overall visual concept. Direct copying from objects like bronze mirror needs proper citation and respect for copyright laws. However, the inspiration from the curvy lines of an artifact has to be mentioned in terms of concept.

When translating traditional visual graphics, there is a need for a harmonious approach when dealing with both texture and information. An overly decorative use of textures can divert the attention of the audience from the main elements of the image, like characters and animals. Every element applied in poster creation should have an important function, which would either facilitate visual recognition, help with composition, or have cultural significance.

2.2. **Survey of Zodiac Cultural Resources and Problem Analysis**

Construction of the Resource Spectrum

The different animals of the zodiac each have their own distinct visual qualities that are reflected both in their basic physical structure and also their specific pose and movement. Some examples of such visual qualities include the prominent horns of oxen and goats and their thick body shapes. Others include the smaller and delicate qualities of rats and rabbits through their ears, head/body proportions, and thin tails. Finally, tigers and snakes have distinctive qualities through stripes for the tigers and smooth curved lines for snakes.

Such a hierarchy of resources makes it possible to fine-tune the design materials needed for the production of every poster. Since the attention is concentrated on the essential resources in terms of their relevance to the thematic positioning, it is easier to eliminate the superfluous design elements.

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Main Problems in Current Design

The research presents three main shortcomings in the existing design of the zodiac posters. First, many existing designs cannot build an appropriate relation between zodiac animal images and their underlying cultural meanings. The gap between visual imagery and cultural meaning will only result in surface-level understanding of zodiac animals without further cultural significance being conveyed effectively. Second, the merger of traditional zodiac images and graphic design cannot be carried out logically. Many designs merely combine traditional images and graphic design techniques without natural logic, making the visual effect awkward and lacking aesthetic harmony. Third, the theories regarding design of zodiac visual design lack practical case verification.

Analysis of the Causes

These are the proposed solutions for addressing the above design issues. First, before any visual creation, there should be a proper cultural positioning of the design. It is important to separate historical facts from creative imagination and understand the cultural meaning of the visuals.

The traditional resources need to be reinterpreted instead of being copied. Instead of copying the motifs in the conventional design on the current layout, designers will try to find some formal logic behind these traditional designs. For instance, the paper-cut hollow forms can be used in a meaningful way in the creation of negative spaces in character graphics, while the placement of stones and bricks in the traditional painting can help in poster design.

This study will also set up an experimental design model by separating out the universal principles of the series as well as the personal processing principles for each of the zodiac signs. Creative innovation should be based on cultural origins rather than visual deformation that is random. A good design of the zodiac should incorporate creativity along with culture.

2.3. **Derivation of Design Principles and Core Requirements**

Design Principles

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With zodiac posters, varied objectives in creativity usually present inherent inconsistencies. Too much ornamental work may emphasize the conventional texture but limit negative space and de-emphasize the dominant image. Likewise, complete integration of animal/character forms makes for a more vivid picture but may minimize the effectiveness of the glyphs. The way to reconcile such contradictory elements is to adhere to the following order of priority: legibility should take precedence over visual compatibility with the dominant culture.

First, the cultural groundedness principle. All matters concerning the traditions, artistic elements and cultural development should be drawn from authentic literature and artefacts. If there are different views on some issues, the research clearly outlines which one was taken into account in order to achieve cultural validity.

Secondly, the concept of visual duality. Every poster keeps the identification of the zodiac animal and the Chinese character clear. Designs do not become too abstract to require textual explanation to understand their meanings.

Third, the principle of semantic integrity. All posters are based on a single cultural statement which stands on its own. All visual materials such as motifs, scenes, colors, and supplementary text support the key message, and any extraneous information is cut out or altered.

Fourth is the issue of uniformity and differentiation. The twelve posters uphold the systemic unity of uniformity through uniform frame ratios, grid format, and the uniformity of information zones that help the entire set gain coherence. On the other hand, the differences made according to how the characters and animals are integrated along with their symbolic meanings are in accordance with the uniqueness of each zodiac sign.

Core Requirements

As indicated by the above design principles, there are four essential requirements that should be fulfilled in this research project. Firstly, a standardized database of cultural resources needs to be developed, with accurate documentation, for cultural validity. Secondly, the design correlation system should be established between the zodiac character structure and animal pictures. Thirdly, visual specification and layout

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rules need to be unified for all twelve posters. Finally, full iteration history needs to be preserved due to expert and viewer’s perceptual analysis..

Conclusions to Chapter 2

In this chapter, the operational mechanism of the three-layered model of translation "form-meaning-spirit" is discussed in detail. Four methods of integrating graphics to make them effective for the characters and animal motifs are mentioned, while providing a systematic methodology for transformation and implementation of visual elements from tradition. Moreover, the translation of the three design problems into design principles and core requirements is carried out in this chapter.

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CHAPTER 3

DESIGN PROPOSAL

3.1. **Design Idea and Concept**

Core Design Concept

This thesis is based on the design idea that is called “One Cycle, Twelve Forms – the Zodiac in Characters”. The twelve posters use the order of the Earthly Branches to create a cycle, in which each of them concentrates on visual interaction between graphics of zodiac animals and Chinese characters. Rather than cramming several folk legends into each poster, each one will concentrate on an independent cultural topic with corresponding graphical approach. This leads to a multi-layered experience for viewers: recognition of the subjects of the zodiac, perception of their combination with characters, and analysis of cultural significance.

In order to connect theory with practice, all designs of posters share a standardized process. First, it is confirmed that all the zodiacs possess the attribute of an Earthly Branch. Then, valid cultural resources are gathered and the appropriate artistic metaphors are determined. After the extraction of characteristics from the animals and modern structure of characters has been made, it is time to experiment with how the elements can be successfully merged together using various visual styles of Chinese tradition.

With standardized procedures and total archival, there is assured objectivity in the design evolution process. There is systematic documentation including cards for the sources of cultural elements, structural analysis drawings, space exploration drawings, and log for revisions. The design is always analyzed relative to the entire set on the basis of the hierarchy of information, density, and readability.

Breakdown of Design Goals

For the classification of design goals, there are two main categories that include cultural representation and series standardization. Regarding cultural representation,

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each poster will feature a four-tiered information format that includes integrated animal-character imagery, standard zodiac characters and earthly branch indicators, concise cultural explanations for themes, and bilingual serial indicators. Regarding series specification, the whole design will have a clear visual hierarchy in order to prevent conflicts with style and chaos in visuals. Exhibition descriptions and appendices will be standardized as well.

3.2. **Project Description**

The 12 poster designs have been done in accordance with the research plan using the same set of rules of layout and series design. In each of the poster designs, there is a different direction that has been taken up with respect to the animals' identifying characteristics, character strokes, culture stories, and traditional designs.

The main elements in all twelve posters are zodiac Chinese characters with their animal counterparts. There are four different methods that have been used for visual integration: stroke borrowing, figure-ground integration, shared contours, and structure. Sometimes, the most distinctive feature of the animal becomes the stroke of the character, creating intertwining contours of the text and animal. Other times, the animal silhouette appears in the negative space of the poster, following the outline of the glyph, with the guarantee of character readability. All twelve posters have identical vertical format. The main character of the zodiac appears in the center, while the year of the exhibition is located on the left side of the poster. The English title of the exhibition is located at the top, while the Chinese theme text is located on the right side of the poster (Fig. 3-13 to Fig. 3-24).

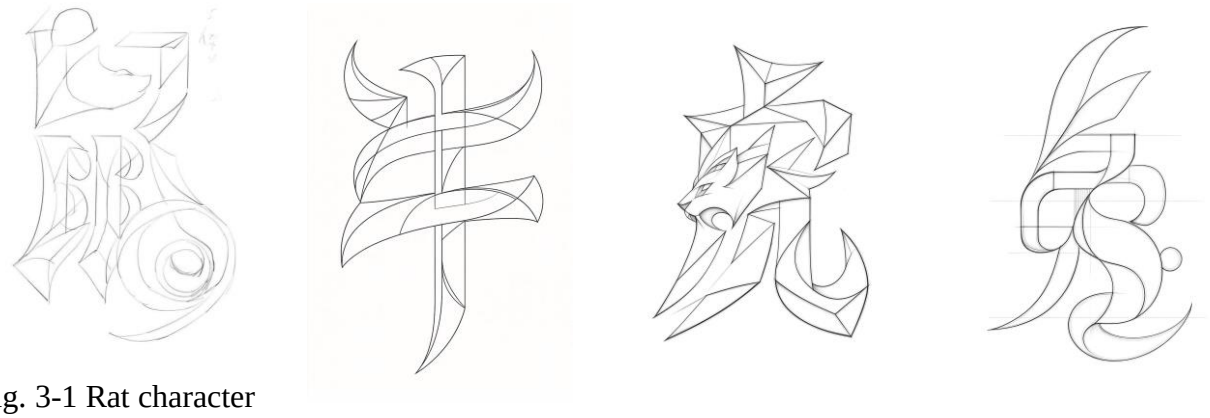

Fig. 3-1 Rat character

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sketch (by the author)

Fig. 3-2 Ox character sketch (by the author)

Fig. 3-3 Tiger character sketch (by the author)

Fig. 3-4 Rabbit character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-5 Dragon character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-6 Snake character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-7 Horse character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-8 Goat character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-9 Monkey character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-10 Rooster character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-11 Dog character sketch (by the author)



Fig. 3-12 Pig character sketch (by the author)

3.2.1 Overall Visual Uniformity: A Shared Visual System for the Series

This set of artwork uses a concise and display-friendly visual format that utilizes a consistent content hierarchy. The visual hierarchy consists of four components that go in this order: core graphical imagery, Chinese characters, earthly branch designations, and a short cultural explanation. All relevant texts have been designed and formatted for effective reading at all scales, so that viewers can view them clearly either on desktop computers or smartphones. The twelve posters have been ordered by the Earthly Branch numbering system, starting with Rat and ending with Pig, to create a coherent display flow. However, each individual artwork has been designed in such a way as to be able to stand alone.

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The design first emphasizes the uniform systemic laws and then the individual differences. The uniform grid structure is used throughout the set in order to regulate the placement of all key graphics, zodiac names, branch marks, explanatory notes, and serial numbers. Under such condition, dynamic poses and distinctive designs are created according to the characteristics of each animal sign.

Color scheme is based on the traditional cultural texture and the themes. The entire color scheme system is consistent because there are distinct accent colors for each zodiac sign. Consistency in serial color does not mean that there must be the same background color. Rather, there should be a standard hierarchy of colors in order to achieve harmony and diversity simultaneously. No matter whether they choose the paper-cut style or other styles of traditional cultures, all designs have a consistent grid system and information system framework.

Regarding the specification of texts, cultural descriptions about China are brief and to the point. English subtitles are designed for intercultural audiences with standardized language. There are two sets of versions for printing and screen presentation, respectively. Though the vertical adjustment of screen makes partial auxiliary information compressed, all cultural descriptions related to zodiac are preserved.

3.3. **Practical Implementation**

Software Design

All visual/textual elements in the design have editable source files which are separated for export for use in the printed form as well as screen display. All scanning, photography and imported image files are converted to layered high resolution files with the strict verification of copyright clearance. Additionally, all the designs in this thesis document include only practical work and results of operation processes and not the names of software used.

Documentation and Data Processing

During the initial documentation process, there will be individual reference cards created for each of the zodiac signs. These documents will provide information such as the name of the theme, the Earthly Branch connected with it, its cultural

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background, source of resources, types of visual styles that can be used for the design, as well as morphology and copyright. Unproven legends and vague visual elements are marked appropriately in order to separate subjective creations from factual references. In the design reasoning process, sketching is done, which involves simplified animal shapes, structure of characters, and figure-ground experiments.

Presentation Formats

All posters are created using the same basic grid and have their basic graphic element placed in the center of the design as the central visual element. Other elements such as title, number, description of culture, colors, and backgrounds are carefully placed to form an effective visual hierarchy in the design. After one poster is completed, the entire collection is checked for any discrepancy in terms of visual weight of any poster.

Following this, the texts are optimized and formatted for both printed and screen presentations. The optimization process includes a number of technical criteria such as use of appropriate font size, margins and color mode settings. Preview and proof reading are done before production in order to avoid any issues related to the format presented on different carriers.

These deliverables include twelve poster designs for the zodiac, which have all been created according to the same specifications for display, along with twelve cultural reference cards. All the initial drawings, the designs that were tried out, and any changes made through the process have been thoroughly documented.

Testing and Optimization

All the evaluation documents are archived with all versions of the work in detail. The entire test procedure can be segregated into three successive levels: spontaneous identification, reiteration of the content through guided interpretation, and critical analysis through juxtaposition. The test procedure takes a detailed account of the feedback from the audience, including correct identification, unclear perceptions, misunderstandings, and reiteration of cultural content.

Further assessments of the design will be based on differential evaluation aspects, which include checking cultural information, visual resource analysis and public

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accessibility tests. The first two are concerned with the authenticity of interpretation of folklore, the logic of selecting visual resources and the logic of usage of ancient characters in designs. The public test is mainly concerned with key effects such as readability of characters, identification of animals, logic of visual hierarchy and consistency of style.

Iterative Refinement

The process of design correction is governed by the principle of priority selection in accordance with different kinds of design problems. In the case of recognition problem, the priority will be given to the optimization of basic structure of zodiac figures and animal illustration to solve the confusing visual elements. For the problem of misunderstanding of core culture, the priority will be given to the establishment of relation between visual narration and thematic statements to increase the clarity of cultural information.

All optimization procedures will be documented in iteration tables, where existing problems will be documented, reasons for revisions will be provided, measures taken to make adjustments and improved outcomes will be stated. However, it is important to emphasize that in this study the emphasis will be put on developing an optimal evaluation and optimization system for designing zodiac posters. The work will mainly deal with procedures that can be used for testing, without providing any test data.



Fig. 3-13 Rat poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-14 Ox poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-15 Tiger poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-16 Rabbit poster (by the author)

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Fig. 3-17 Dragon poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-18 Snake poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-19 Horse poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-20 Goat poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-21 Monkey poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-22 Rooster poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-23 Dog poster (by the author)



Fig. 3-24 Pig poster (by the author)

Conclusions to Chapter 3

The chapter centers on the main topic One Cycle, Twelve Forms – the Zodiac Presented in Characters as the key point of the research. The concept is based on the order of the twelve Earthly Branches that create visual communication between each character of the zodiac and its corresponding animal picture. The paper provides the analysis of the structure of the individual zodiac symbol, and establishes the unified standards of systematics including grid construction, typography, color matching, and hierarchy of information.

As for the realization of practice, this chapter outlines the whole process of designing, which includes cultural resources description, graphic reasoning, production of posters integration, result archiving, and test-based revision. After this process of design, a complete set of twelve zodiac posters is accomplished to achieve the whole visual design concept put forward in this study.

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On the other hand, this chapter makes clear the research limitations in terms of the design approach. Firstly, zodiac culture is associated with different meanings depending on the geographic location and the era, which means it is difficult to create one set of posters with all of the meanings included. In addition, the use of characters and graphics of animals only plays a role as a design experiment, not as an in-depth origin analysis of the texts. Finally, the feedback system created through this paper still exists in theory and procedure and lacks quantitative data. Nevertheless, the final set of twelve posters proves the effectiveness of the approach.

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CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this thesis has made complete theoretical analysis and practice research. The key issues of design are defined, the visual resources of the traditional zodiac are organized in an orderly manner, and the “form–meaning–spirit” three-level visual translation mechanism is developed. Based on this, the personalized design standards for the twelve zodiac topics are formed, and the twelve unique posters are developed in the end. Although the theoretical structure and design system have been fully established, the actual effect still needs to be confirmed. The later user assessment will further verify the visual and cultural recognition of the artworks by the public.

By concentrating on the traditional Chinese zodiac culture, this study takes into account the combination of folklore legends, traditional art language, and modern poster communication to create a complete design system. The study proves that in the combination of zodiac characters and animal graphics, there is a need for different techniques to be used. Based on the difference of character shapes and animal visual characteristics, there are four flexible ways in which zodiac characters can be integrated with animal graphics; these include stroke borrowing, figure-ground relationship, contour sharing, and structure combination. Rather than seeking full combination in an identical manner, this flexible method enhances both visual recognition and cultural connotation.

This study designs a full set of graphics experiment series based on the twelve zodiacs in practical application. With unified standards in grids and consistent layouts of information, each theme is ensured to be unique through individualized visual perception process. The whole process ranging from culture research to final output makes a clear and traceable logical chain.

This research has clear limitations too. Even though it has all designs and process documents, it does not have proper source checking, reviews by experts in the profession and adequate audience reaction. Without any numerical information, it is difficult to ascertain the effect that these works have on the cultural communication.

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The future research will include the classification of high-definition works, proper source collection and testing of audience reactions.

In addition, this research focuses only on the design of static posters, without doing any big tests on the audience, and there are inadequate data supporting the communication effect. In further research, we can enlarge the sample size of the experiment to enhance the objective evaluation. Also, the approach that incorporates the zodiac characters and animals can be used for other kinds of dynamic images or multimedia.

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APPENDIX A (Case Analysis)

This appendix selects the following nine zodiac design works as key reference projects, grouped by type of visual outcome: serial zodiac visual design (Fig. A-1, Fig. A-4, Fig. A-8), single zodiac theme design (Fig. A-3, Fig. A-5, Fig. A-6, Fig. A-7), and zodiac cultural and creative derivative design (Fig. A-2, Fig. A-9).

Such visual outcomes are usually completed collaboratively with graphic design software such as PS and AI and motion software such as AE, and can serve as a reference for the production process of the poster series.

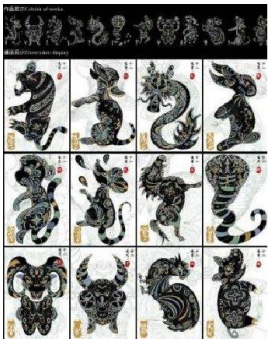

Fig. A-1 Artistic illustration of the twelve zodiac signs



Fig. A-2 Cultural and creative design inspired by oracle bone script



Fig. A-3 Comprehensive case of zodiac design



Fig. A-4 Horse-year zodiac cultural exhibition

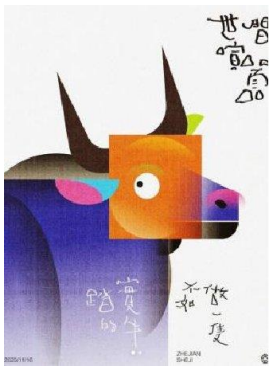

Fig. A-5 Geometric illustration with an ox-year theme

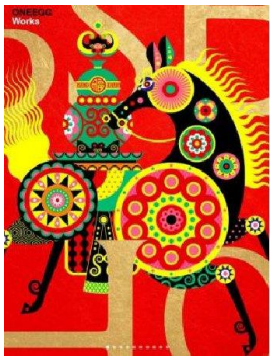

Fig. A-6 Horse-year paper-cutting style design

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Fig. A-7 Horse in folk decorative style



Fig. A-8 Horse in vector decorative style



Fig. A-9 Fengxiang clay sculpture cultural and creative design

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APPENDIX B (Sketches and Design Proposals)

The design task cards and sketch records of the twelve zodiac signs. Each task card contains the zodiac sign, the Earthly Branch, the selected cultural proposition, the source supporting the proposition, the graphic translation method adopted (stroke form borrowing, figure–ground embedding, shared contours, structural juxtaposition), the animal's recognition features, the character analysis, the scheme comparison records, and the basis for revision. In the formal thesis, the original character sketches, animal contour analyses, positive–negative form experiments, and comparisons of composition and color schemes are collected according to the actual outcomes; the finished serial posters and display effect images are also collected in this appendix.

(1) Design Sketches



Fig. B-1 Rat character sketch (by the author)

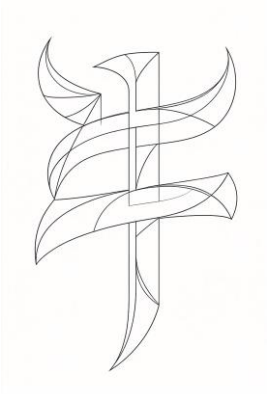

Fig. B-2 Ox character sketch (by the author)



Fig. B-3 Tiger character sketch (by the author)

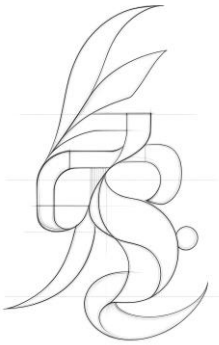

Fig. B-4 Rabbit character sketch (by the author)



Fig. B-5 Dragon character sketch (by



Fig. B-6 Snake character sketch (by the author)



Fig. B-7 Horse character sketch (by the author)



Fig. B-8 Goat character sketch (by

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the author)



Fig. B-9 Monkey character sketch (by the author)



Fig. B-10 Rooster character sketch (by the author)

the author)



Fig. B-11 Dog character sketch (by the author)



Fig. B-12 Pig character sketch (by the author)

(2) Finished Serial Posters



Fig. B-13 Rat poster (by the author)



Fig. B-14 Ox poster (by the author)



Fig. B-15 Tiger poster (by the author)



Fig. B-16 Rabbit poster (by the author)



Fig. B-17 Dragon poster (by the author)



Fig. B-18 Snake poster (by the author)



Fig. B-19 Horse poster (by the author)



Fig. B-20 Goat poster (by the author)

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Fig. B-21 Monkey poster (by the author)



Fig. B-22 Rooster poster (by the author)



Fig. B-23 Dog poster (by the author)



Fig. B-24 Pig poster (by the author)

(3) Display of Effect Images



Fig. B-25 Gallery display of the poster series (by the author)

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Fig. B-26 Framed display of the posters (by the author)



Fig. B-27 Poster card display II (by the author)

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Fig. B-28 Cultural and creative gift box of the poster series (by the author)



Fig. B-29 Gallery scene display II (by the author)

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Fig. B-30 Cultural and creative set III of the posters (by the author)



Fig. B-31 Scroll display of the poster series (by the author)

Fig. B-32 Acrylic stand display of the posters (by the author)