Preliminary Exploration of Calligraphy Elements in Chinese Movie Poster Design

Zhongyi Shi

School of Media and Design, Zhejiang University Ningbo, Ningbo, 315000, China

Abstract. The design of movie posters is one of the most important forms for film promotion. It not only directly conveys the information of the film to audiences, but also presents the audience aesthetic spiritual enjoyment. Calligraphy is an important part of Chinese traditional culture as well as a symbol of the Chinese culture. During the process of film poster globalization, the calligraphy bears not only the role of film propaganda, but also the major responsibility of promoting Chinese traditional culture. This paper focuses on the analysis of the expression of calligraphy elements in the design of movie posters, and explores on the application and impact of calligraphy elements in film poster design.

Keywords: Movie posters; Calligraphy elements; Font design.

1. Introduction

With the development of the domestic film industry and the overall improvement of the cultural quality of the audience, there is a higher demand for the artistry and aesthetics of the film poster. As a symbol of Chinese culture, calligraphy has the dual functions of "picture" and "idea" in the design of movie posters, which is unmatched by any other design elements. The subject of how to apply traditional calligraphy elements more appropriately to contemporary movie poster design will be the key point for designers to think about and explore.

2. A Short History of Employing Calligraphy Elements in Chinese Film Posters

In the wake of times change, the expression of calligraphy elements in the design of movie posters has also changed. There are three elements in the poster's graphics, that is graphics, fonts and colors. The real film poster in the true sense should start from "Yanshan Xia Yin/燕山侠隐" [1]. The title of the poster is designed in art font, but the names of the crew were written in the style between the running hand and the regular script. From then on, the elements of calligraphy have been in accompany with the Chinese film posters.

"Flowing Light and Waving Shadow: The Collection of Movie Posters from 1905 to 1966" has collected 307 film posters released before 1949. One can find that there were 63 posters using calligraphy fonts which account for about one-fifth of the total. The choice of style was relatively single, and Wei stele and Li script fonts were mostly used. The style of calligraphy was more traditional, and it was written strictly in accordance with the aesthetic requirements of the traditional calligraphy. The arrangement of the calligraphy was also in accordance with the traditional composition style. For example, in the *Goddess of Mercy/*观世音 (1940), the title of the poster was written in the official script by Wen lanting, which was of the typical style of Cao Quan's stele. As far as the aesthetics of calligraphy concerned, it was an excellent work of calligraphy, but from the point of view of design, it lacks the correspondence between the calligraphy font and the theme connotation of the film. Calligraphic element was just acting as single existence in the design of film posters. In terms of the form and function of the design, the calligraphy elements in the movie posters of this period were more playing the role of transmitting information, and the redesign of the expression form was relatively lacking.

From the founding of the People's Republic till the 1980s, Chinese films have entered a new period of development, and many excellent films have come into being one after another. The author found that 319 posters in this period, 143 of which were in calligraphic fonts accounting for one half of the total. This showed the tendency of increase of the application of calligraphic in posters design It was relatively abundant in the selection of calligraphy style, the seal script, regular script, and running

script could all be found. It tended to be conservative in the lay-out, with graphics and pictures as the main body and the text as the supplement. The combination of pictures and texts was not close enough. However, in the terms of choosing the style of calligraphy, the stylistic features and the expression of movie themes were taken into account. For example, the film Flowers of the Motherland/祖国的花朵 (1955) told the story of children, in which all the classmates helped two students with learning difficulties to make progress together. According to the background of the film, the title of the poster was written in the regular script, which was standard and neat. In this way it made the audience understand the immature feeling of the pupils when they started to learn how to write. It was very accurate and proper to choose this font to express the story of the film. From the poster font, we can know something about the theme of the film background at once.

From the 1990s to the beginning of this century, the application of calligraphy elements in film poster design has made a new breakthrough. On the basis of retaining the aesthetic requirements of traditional calligraphy, the structure and strokes of fonts was more focused on the individualized expression of fonts. In the layout , the pursuit of the flexible, changeable format combinations could be found .For example, from the title design of the movie poster of *The Bride With White Hair*/白发魔女传 in 1993, the seal script, official script, running script and other strokes were all used in the five characters regardless of the distinction of traditional style of calligraphy. Some of the strokes of the characters, such as "white" and "hair" were treated with exaggeration. Nevertheless, this kind of exaggeration fitted perfectly with the theme of the film. With the changes of the font size, the alternation of the virtual and real characters, the whole font layout looked like evenly dense, and full of changes with uniform. During this period, as an important element of poster design, the calligraphy font design began to pursue a high degree of conformity with the spiritual connotation of the film.

Considering the continuous development and progress of the domestic film industry, the increasing of the media as well as the platforms of information dissemination, together with the continuous development of computer software technology, the Calligraphy font design must bid farewell to the single form of expression in the past. Its form of expression should be closely related to the theme and plot of the film.

3. The Creative Use of the Calligraphy in the Contemporary Chinese Film Poster Design

3.1 The Beauty of the Book Application

"Seals are graceful and comprehensive, and official scripts are precise and dense .the cursive scripts are elegant and smooth, and the Zhang cursive scripts are simple and convenient. Then sharpen them with the spirit of wind, soften them with the tenderness, strengthen them with withered energy, and enjoy them with leisure and elegance while writing. So the calligraphy can reach deep down to show our emotional nature and express our sorrow and happiness. [2]" After thousands of years of development, Chinese calligraphy has not only formed five styles, that is seal, official script, regular script, running hand and cursive script. A variety of writing styles have come into being. Each font and style of writing has got its unique aesthetic connotation. The basic requirement for the application of calligraphy elements in movie poster design should be based on different styles of calligraphy.

Seal scripts are well-proportioned and slender in structure with the overall style of ancient elegance, full of historical flavor and cultural connotation. The application of Seal scripts in some historical and cultural subjects film posters has a prominent effect, such as, in poster of the traditional opera film *Dou'e Injustice*/窦娥冤 and *A Dream of Red Mansions*/红楼梦. Xiaozhuan(小篆,a style of seal scripts calligraphy) has graceful structure with elegant style and charm, which is similar to the aesthetics of opera.

Official script is a font evolved from seal script. In its structure and the stroke, it tends to be like regular script, and at the same time, it has the style of clumsiness, stretching with changeable interest and charm. For example, the film *The Orphan of Zhao*/赵氏孤儿 in 2010 was about a story in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period. In response to the heavy theme of revenge

in the film, a thick official script font was used to express the theme of the film in the poster. In the layout, four fonts were changed in sizes, with the emphasis on the character of "solitary" enhancing the visual expression of the poster. The style of font design in accordance with the background and theme of the film, became the finishing touch of the whole poster design.

As far as the period is concerned, regular scripts are generally divided into Wei stele and Tang Kai(唐 楷 , The regular script in Tang dynasty). Wei stele is a transitional style from the steles of Han dynasty script to regular script, its font style is thick and simple, vigorous and precipitous Tang Kai has got the fonts of Yan, Ou, Liu etc. its overall style is dignified, strong and handsome. These fonts are well represented in different types of movie posters. For example, in the movie poster of "Everything will change", the font of Yan was put to use in the title design. With the style, the characters were expressed in the way that is strong and plump, and the structure is square and broad, and the momentum is dignified and magnificent. In this way the poster is closely related to the theme of the movie that the mountains and rivers are no longer existing there and the old friends couldn't be found.

The running script is the most popular and commonly used style, and most widely used in the design of movie posters. From Wang Xizhi's graceful and smooth, handsome and free style, to Yan Zhenqing's (颜真卿) strong and generous, broad and dignified style, the styles of running scripts are more changeable. For example, in the Mountain *Taihang*/太行山 movie posters, the running script was used in the title design. The font was calm and delightful with a solid and precipitous structure, combined with withered strokes to show the shocking and overwhelming momentum in order to express the theme of the film about the Eighth Route Army's brave and heroic fighting against enemies in Anti-Japanese War. But the running script used in the posters of Mei Lanfang is quite different. Three characters are graceful and fluent, and the overall style is elegant and beautiful, so it is very appropriate to express the features of Mei Lanfang's opera arts.

3.2 Incorporating Elements of Books and Pictures

As *Shuowen Jiezi*/说文解字 noted, "hieroglyphs, which are similar to their objects in the shapes, just follow the suit. Therefore, it is the case with the characters of 'sun', and 'moon' [3]". One can see that Chinese characters are transformed from graphics and highly generalized and abstract. Therefore, using the calligraphy in graphic way has inherent advantages. The combination of calligraphy fonts and graphic elements in the film is ingenious. It can visualize the theme of the film and convey the message of the film more vividly.

In the graphical process of calligraphy fonts, we should make full use of the pictographic, referential and ideographic characteristics of Chinese characters, combining with decoration, exaggeration and other means of expression for the font strokes' graphic processing. For example, in the title design of the movie poster of *Mermaid*/美人鱼, the font is bold, unconstrained, exaggerated and dynamic in handling strokes. Especially the left-falling stroke and right-falling stroke of the character "beauty" were expressed in official script with style of exaggeration and boldness. The withered stroke at the end was like the stormy waves in the sea. The first three dots of the word "fish" looked like the ups and downs of the sea, and the fourth dot evolved into the visual image of mermaid tail. Its design not only retained the original charm of calligraphy art, but also had a strong sense of beauty conveying the content and theme of the film vividly.

It should be emphasized that the content and theme of the film should be fully integrated with the graphic design of calligraphy fonts. Secondly, the graphical processing of strokes or structures should keep up with the recognition of the original characters. Otherwise, the original intention of the design will be lost. Finally, the combination of calligraphy fonts and graphics should be unified as a whole so that they can be perfectly integrated, getting twice result with half effort [4].

3.3 Digitising Traditional Calligraphy

With the development of computer software and the printing technology, the forms of calligraphy fonts are more diversified and artistic. The combination of different forms of expression and design

techniques makes the calligraphy elements in the movie posters bring different visual feelings and form aesthetics. The calligraphy fonts in movie posters are processed by the computer softwares such as Photoshop and Illustrator which can produce rich texture, different combinations and color compositions. In this way it can convey different psychological feelings and aesthetic trends to the viewers. For example, in the poster of the *Tangshan Earthquake/*唐山大地震 (2010), these three characters of the title "Great Earthquake" are written in heavy Wei stele fonts. With the help of software, the effect of earth cracking was achieved by filling the fonts with texture splitting design, through which the audience can intuitively understand the theme of the film.

When you go through the current poster designs of movies, it is not difficult to find that many calligraphy fonts use metal texture, three-dimensional effects and other forms of expression, and the visual effects are almost the same. Therefore, it is noteworthy to choose a design that conforms to the theme of the film to express the calligraphy font, rather than for merely technical show off.

4. Function of Calligraphy Elements

4.1 Rethinking the Function of Calligraphy Elements

The calligraphy elements in movie posters not only play the role of transmitting film information, but also make viewers feel the unique temperament contained in the film content at the first sight. "The purpose of an article is to be found in a book, for the book is a sign that corresponds to the Taoism which means principle. Therefore, it is the calligraphy that can give a full play to a person who can write [5]. Similarly, when the graphic language of the poster is "not expressive" enough, the calligraphy element is naturally the best choice to express the connotation of the film. For example, the font design of the title of the movie poster of *The Master of the Generation/*一代宗师 was written in the strong and vigorous Yan style in the words "generation" and "zong", while the characters of "one" and "master" adopted the bold and unrestrained strokes of cursive style. The combination of movement and silence implies the martial arts spirit of the film's protagonist who has the character of cultivation both from the internal and external aspects, also with dynamic and static combination. This kind of unspeakable expression is the specialty of calligraphy. At this time, the calligraphy elements are not only to convey the film information and beautify the picture, but also to convey the deep-seated ideological connotation of the film to the viewers.

4.2 Visual Pleasure and Meaning

The diversity of calligraphy forms of expression on film posters is determined by the huge calligraphy system. Combined with the modern design techniques, the visual language of the poster is greatly enriched. With the combination of the font changes, line thickness, ink thickness, and the layout, the calligraphy fonts are given a variety of vivid vitality to present a variety of different connotations of the visual images in the film poster. For example, in the poster of the international version of the film *Shadow/*影, the font is vigorous, forceful and wild. The last three left-falling strokes go from heavy to light with a freely flowing style of writing. The end of the strokes and the protagonist in the upper left corner produce a shadow effect, which vividly interprets the theme of the film.

5. Conclusion

The calligraphy art has got rich forms of expression, strong artistic appeal and profound cultural connotations. It is an inexhaustible resource treasury for the designers. The calligraphy art, as a visual element, is taken into consideration in the design of film posters, which not only brings the unique artistic beauty to the latter, and improves the cultural connotation of the film on the whole, but also provides fresh growing soil for the former, and provides a new display window for the former to step onto the world stage. With the rapid development of the times and technology, the forms of calligraphy in the film poster design are constantly changing. Based on the theme of the film,

designers should combine the modern design concepts and new technologies together to create some excellent film posters that are to not only meet the aesthetic needs of the times but also to enrich the ethnic cultural connotations.

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