

A Study on The Value of Traditional Graphics in Visual Communication Curriculum in China

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Abstract

Visual communication is a common major in Chinese design institutes. Its specialized curriculum includes: the basic training of visual elements, graphic design, multimedia, comprehensive design and so on. However, the concept, method, technology, content and values of the whole visual communication education system are almost originated from the West and China has no local discourse power on design. China, on the other hand, has rich design resources represented by traditional graphics, which can be used to develop visual communication professional curriculum in local context. Its value not only lies in the teaching and learning of curriculum, especially in contemporary practice and inheritance of Chinese traditional design. In this way, Chinese local design theory and education system can be built while different from the western context.

Key words: Visual Communication, Curriculum Development, Traditional Graphics, Value Research

Graphic design, as the core of visual communication, is the foundation of the complete course of visual communication. Graphics is not only the manifestation of visualization but also conveys aesthetic standards and value systems. In current specialized courses of Chinese visual communication, graphic design is programmed under the guidance mainly of western design concepts. This essay attempts to discuss the value of traditional graphics in Chinese visual communication course theoretically from three aspects, i.e., lecturing contents, teaching technology and evaluation standards, with the aim to provide reference comments for development of visual communication course in native context.

I. Significance of traditional graphics as lecturing contents

With a history of artistic design for thousands of years, China has abundant traditional graphic resources. Art is a tool for education and can facilitate knowledge transfer and sciences to infants and schoolchildren. [1] In lecturing visual communication, teachers could select excellent traditional graphics and incorporate them into their lectures.

On one hand, as a visual arts, traditional graphics could help the students feel the inside information of history and affect their concepts of artistic creation. The visual arts, like multicultural education, play a vital role in our understanding of diverse human experiences. [2] As we all know, art is borderless, but artists have their nationalities. It is because the artists are from different countries and cultures that they could create numerous beautiful and diversified art works. In ancient times, due to restrictions of productivity, communications

between different cultures were not so convenient as nowadays. It was high mountains and large oceans that make communications of art difficult. However, even under such circumstance, various splendid artistic works have been created worldwide. Till today when the productivity is well-developed, the discourse power is grasped in the west and the grand occasion of contention of a hundred schools of thought has become history. After implementation of the reform and opening policy, "Bauhaus" and other design educational thoughts have been promoted quickly and widely in Higher Education in China. The training programs of various art specialties, including visual communication, are founded on the educational theory of west arts and many teachers are qualified with western art education. In this case, the teachers' lecturing contents include mainly western art philosophy, western artistic works as well as western art aesthetics and value systems. If things continue this way, traditional Chinese culture would have less and less influences on art education and even disappear. If art education in the world continues to be established in west context, arts would be homogenized gradually. Taking traditional Chinese graphics as the lecturing contents of the course of visual communication could affect the students to create art works with Chinese styles, which not only is of great significance in guiding art creation, but also in inheriting local art and enriching the culture of mankind.

On the other hand, art is a creative work. Creative work tends to emerge from a first person, subjective experience, while scientists tend to require a third person, objective viewpoint.[3] So does the lecturing contents of visual communication. Comparing with objective explanation of the teachers, it could guide the students to feel and understand themselves more effectively. Both as the carrier of information, graphics has obvious advantages in this aspect than characters, for it has no language barrier and could convey visual information more intuitively. Traditional Chinese graphics have dual attributes, i.e., *xing* and *xiang*, the former of which means morphology while the latter refers to the meaning. In thousands of years of heritage and development, traditional Chinese graphics have formed various specific morphologies which have corresponding meanings. For example, traditional Chinese auspicious graphics emphasize "the graphics must be meaningful and the meaning must be auspicious", which expresses people's hopes for beautiful life with partial tones and other methods. The followings are some typical and commonly seen graphics: The first is bat, which is pronounced in Chinese "fu", which has the same sound as happiness, so the image of bat has become the symbol of happiness; the second is Lingzhi mushroom, which is called "ruyi" ("ruyi" in China

means being obedient to one will), so Lingzhi image is the symbol of smoothness; the third are red date, peanut, longan and lotus seed, which are pronounced respectively "zao", "sheng", "gui" and "zi", meaning "may you have a son soon" in Chinese, which shows ancient Chinese paid great attention to progeny multiplication. So, traditional graphics involve in extensive topics. Graphics left over from generations not only have beautiful visual images but also have deep symbolic meanings. In case they are taken as the lecturing contents of visual communications, the students' perception and understanding of the internal meaning and external morphology of graphics would be cultivated and deepened, and their art appreciation would also be cultivated.

To sum up, great significance of traditional graphics as the lecturing contents of visual communication could be manifested in three dimensions of two aspects, i.e., cultivation of artistic creation philosophy and artistic appreciation.

TABLE I

Significance of traditional graphics as lecturing contents

	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3
Cultivation of artistic creation philosophy	Guiding artistic creation	Inheriting local art	Enriching human culture
Cultivation of artistic appreciation	External form	Intrinsic meaning	Perception and understanding

II. Significance of traditional graphics as lecturing technology

Traditional Chinese graphics have been used widely in ceramics, weaving and dyeing, sculpture, furniture, architecture, tools, knitting and other traditional crafts. Traditional art technologies created jointly by people of all nationalities in China in long-term social life practice contain culture values, wisdom and practical experiences of Chinese ethnic peoples and they are an essential part of intangible cultural heritage. [4] In the course of visual communication, teachers could introduce traditional arts with traditional graphics.

On one hand, traditional graphics and traditional crafts supplement one another. The old distinctions between craft and art have completely blown up.[5] When the students are learning traditional graphics, they would be interested in their carriers — traditional crafts; and when they are studying traditional technologies, they would know of together their decorations — traditional graphics. Visual communication design refers to the design to communicate various information with visual symbols, among which "visual symbols" correspond to "traditional graphics" and "design" corresponds to "traditional technology". Traditional graphics and traditional technology have formed traditional Chinese visual communication design jointly. Meanwhile, both of them also have obvious differences. Traditional technology lays more emphasis on practicability, for "practical technology is the real technology". [6] While traditional graphics lays more emphasis on decoration. Though their focuses are different, combination of both could create larger value. For example, "blue and white porcelain" in Jingde Town of China is one of the models of perfect integration of traditional stripe graphics and traditional

ceramics. In ancient times, blue and white porcelains had created giant economical and cultural values not only in China, but also in Middle Asia, North Asia and Middle East. In contemporary times, it has become one of the typical designs which could manifest traditional Chinese culture. Thus, integration of traditional graphics and traditional technology is larger than simply one plus one. In the course of visual communications, introduction of traditional technology with traditional graphics not only could facilitate the inheritance of them in contents but also could cultivate students who are qualified to design comprehensively by both of them so that it is possible that fine art with high artistic quality and market value, just like blue and white porcelain, in future creation.

On the other hand, teaching combining traditional graphics and traditional technology could enrich greatly practice in the course of visual communication. At present, in the practice of the course of visual communications in China, there is an obvious problem, that is, the students' design ideas are rigid and deficient. The reason is that western design system is applied mechanically in the teaching. Though western design system has been universally applied and recognized in the world and it also has advantages, it is not acclimatized in some aspects in actual operation in China which has long history and culture. A better solution is to integrate the advantages of China and the west in the course. Advantage of west design system is that it lays emphasis on practice, for example, teaching method and other practice teaching could cultivate the students' creativity while helping them know of the industry dynamics more intuitively. However, the advantages of traditional Chinese design are nationalized design style, distinguished and outstanding graphic elements and multi-component practical technology. In the practice of design, it could widen the students' design ideas, enrich their visual language, promote them to think over the combination of traditional Chinese culture and contemporary technology as well as potential innovation in contemporary art market.

To sum up, great significance of traditional graphics as the lecturing technology of visual communication could be manifested in three dimensions of two aspects, i.e., introducing traditional technology and cultivating design ideas.

TABLE II

Significance of traditional graphics as the lecturing technology

	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3
Introducing traditional technology	Inheriting traditional contents	Comprehensive design	Integration of art and market value
Cultivating design ideas	Widen design thoughts	Enrich visual language of the works	Promote creative thinking

III. Significance of traditional graphics as evaluation standards IV. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the last procedure of the course is evaluation and the evaluation standards of each specialty are different. In terms of the specialty of visual communications, the visual imagery in visual works usually determines the results of the evaluation. Visual imagery have "pervasive influence in, both positive and negative senses: they can inform, direct, influence, arouse, confuse and infuriate". [7] Evaluation

of the sense of works is subjective. At present, the evaluation standards of the course of visual communications depend on heavily and imitate simply the evaluation standards of west design. It is a challenge for and innovation of the current evaluation standards of visual communications to bring traditional graphics into the course of visual communication s and to set the evaluation standards in local context.

On one hand, the students' studying enthusiasm for traditional Chinese culture could be inspired by praising works which utilizes properly traditional graphic elements in the course of visual communications. Introduction of traditional graphics into the class of visual communications is not only a rational educational behavior but also an active cultural behavior. As a part of traditional culture, traditional graphic is a graphical language, telling the spirits of creating and admiring beauty which have been accumulated in China for thousands of years. When guiding the students learning traditional graphics in class, the teachers shall not only use the form but should also lay emphasis on understanding the meaning of the graphics. "Form" in traditional graphics is the symbolic form which manifest the characteristics of Chinese culture while "meaning" in traditional graphics is the artistic humanistic spirit of Chinese people. It is a challenge to the current evaluation standards of the course of visual communications as well as support of local design to take the students' excavation and interpretation of cultural connotation contained in traditional graphics as well as their creative design capacity as the evaluation standards of the course. Localization of the evaluation standards could enhance the cultural confidence and proud of the next-generation designer of China. In the long run, it could facilitate the awakening and development of the consciousness of local design.

On the other hand, to establish evaluation standards in local context is not to say to abandon completely western design system. Western design system is established on complete design theory and technology. Though western design theory is on a par with traditional Chinese theory, there is still large gap in design technology between China and the west. Traditional graphics have higher values in teaching technology, however, traditional technologies in China are mostly handcrafts, which could not match in efficiency and marketization to western design technology. So, to establish evaluation standards in local context shall root in traditional local culture with the belief of win-win and lay emphasis on cultivating interdisciplinary talents who could integrate traditional design spirits and contemporary design technology.

To sum up, significance of traditional graphics as the evaluation standards of the course of visual communication could be manifested in two dimensions of two aspects, i.e., inspiring learning enthusiasm and cultivating interdisciplinary talents.

TABLE III
 Significance of traditional graphics as evaluation standards

	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
Inspiring learning enthusiasm	Enhancing cultural confidence and sense of pride	Awakening and development of local design consciousness
Cultivating interdisciplinary talents	Win-win	Integrating traditional design spirit and contemporary design technology

IV. Conclusion

In this essay, the significances of traditional graphics in the course of visual communications are discussed theoretically. No matter as lecturing contents, lecturing technology and evaluation standards, traditional graphics could promote the development of the course of visual communications and even the specialty, which could facilitate the establishment of Chinese local design theory and education system. However, Rome was not built in a day, to achieve this objective, there are still various problems remaining to be solved by Chinese design educators, for example, training of professional teachers, selection of traditional contents and development design of the course, which is a long-term project.

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