Traditional Chinese Art And Culture In Modern Art Design

Art has been utilised for communicating messages and educating people for centuries. Even artists from the early Western period used art in this manner. Because of this, the elements of their works hold significance (Baig, 2020). Graphic design, which is a form of art, involves the exchange of colour and graphics information transmission. Graphics are a symbolic representation in visual space (Liu, 2016). At present, graphic design has become a fundamental component of visual communication, commerce, manufacturing, marketing, and research studies. The American designer William Addison Dwiggins coined the term “graphic design” that meant to create a print design for large quantity printing. In China and the West today, graphic designers do well at their work that they do not need to do extra work such as calligraphy, painting, art or design product distribution like in the old times. This is because both China and the West have more specialised and modern graphic design education (Kategaya, 2018).

Digital technology has brought cultures together, hence understanding another culture’s graphic language and finding its relationship with one’s own has become increasingly important. The artistic judgments and visual aesthetics of traditional Chinese culture differ from Western culture. The underlying principle of ancient Chinese aesthetics was derived from Taoist philosophy that highlights the relationship between human behaviour and nature (the primordial condition of things). This contributed to the conception of ancient ink painting as well as its specific painting styles which reflect the ancient Chinese artists’ design philosophy (Li, 2019).

Figure 1: Painter and Calligrapher Zhao Mengfu’s “The Autumn in Que and Hua Mountains”, 1295 A.D. (Li, 2019).

Chinese traditional pattern is closely linked to a promising concept. Chinese tradition has high regard for harmony, hence, Chinese people express admiration for harmony (Sun, 2016). For example, a designer named Mr. Jin has worked in harmony as he contemplates on his Chinese humanistic soul. Ink art element is the most significant form of cultural connotation and expression of his creations (Liu, 2016).

Figure 2: Ma Lin’s Ink on Silk, 1246 (New World Encyclopedia, 2017)

Chinese traditional pattern is generally classified into three types which are based on their different meanings and these are the cultural type, the spiritual yearning type, and the blessing type. The cultural type utilises modelling to express health and peace, as well as endless cultural and social concepts. For example, “cloud pattern”, “joyful reunion”, “Ruyi”, “the Eight Diagrams”, and “Taiji” are attributed to balance, completeness, and vividness. The spiritual yearning type uses personalization symbols and poetic articles to express spiritual yearnings and inner pursuit such as four gentlemen (orchid, plum blossom, bamboo, and chrysanthemum) and “three durable winter plants” (bamboo, plum blossom, and pine). The blessing type uses symbolism, pun, homophony, metonymy, metaphor, and other approaches to give plant and animals favourable meanings. For example, peach represents long life, bat symbolizes happiness, fish symbolizes richness, and chicken symbolizes luck (Sun, 2016).

In world history, China has a rarely excellent quality in terms of design, with wide-ranging themes. There has been a great development in traditional Chinese graphic patterns since the Neolithic period as ancient China relied on art design for the expression of its philosophical beliefs. For example, the over 20,000 utensil line drawings and pattern rubbings described and summarized ancient Chinese patterns methodologically. The pattern collection involves a lot of art forms like stone inscription, weaving, ceramics, silver and gold ware, jade ware, bronze ware, etc. (Gong & Chen, 2017). Traditional graphic and ceramic art elements, which have been China's cultural treasures for thousands of years, are the visual expression of Chinese arts and humanities. These are especially important for modern society where there is a scarcity of design talents. In Chinese history, there are various graphic components and the most customary are ornamentations and decorative figures that indicate auspiciousness (Sha, 2017).

Figure 3: Chinese Pottery from the Neolithic Era (Encyclopedia of East Asian Art, n.d.)

Chinese people, like Western people, are great at historic and modern documentation. Their culture and history came from ancient civilizations. For instance, information from the Xia dynasty in China was recorded and preserved using bamboo annals. Chinese military strength has ensured that its culture and traditions would be preserved. Despite the invasion of China by several Western countries such as France, Britain, Germany, Austria, Italy, and the United States, the Chinese population was still able to defend themselves against the destruction of their cultures as well as technology. Whatever culture and traditions their colonial masters had destroyed, they rebuilt them. Technological secrets, craft making, and artistic skills were passed down to the next generations with detailed instructions (Kategaya, 2018).

The concept of creativity in the Western world is completely different from that of the Eastern concept. In the West, the predominant definition of creativity rests on the product as design involves the application of technology and innovation. In the East, creativity is considered as a process of growth. In particular, the Chinese people have high regard for traditional principles (Alhari, 2017). For Western aesthetics, contemporary design is a significant medium (Gong & Chen, 2017). Today, many Western cultures have been introduced to Chinese culture, influencing its design aesthetics (Sha, 2017).

Figure 4: Western Art in St. Charles's Church, Vienna (Invaluable, 2019)

Due to the progress of social and cultural development, design has played an important part in civilization and culture. In modern graphic design, many designers have used ink painting symbols to pursue their innovative expression and to base their works on traditional cultures. Some designers borrow from another culture's design philosophy while integrating their own culture's style design (Liu, 2016). There are two types of form borrowing: one involves the combination of a particular culture's traditional pattern components with modern design ideas while the other involves the integration of another culture's traditional pattern components with one's own culture's graphic composition techniques, for example, the integration of Chinese and Western elements (Sun, 2016). Even Western culture has influenced Chinese ceramic art. The integration of traditional graphic elements allows learning of the implied meanings, historical background, or stories related to a particular culture (Sha, 2017).

With the rapid growth of the economy, innovation, and reform have also happened in the area of art. Contemporary art design has developed rapidly. Individuation has become stronger. Design forms and design demands have become more diversified resulting in more abundant design

materials. The integration between modernization and tradition is more obvious. Since the enlightenment period, Chinese aesthetics has been linked to Western aesthetics. Art communication between the East and West is never unidirectional. Eastern culture highly influenced Western design art. Chinese culture has become the source of China to acquire a secure position in global cultures. In the age of navigation, Westerners have yearned for and travelled to the Eastern world. To inherit the Chinese aesthetic spirit, one should not disregard the Chinese national civilization (Gong & Chen, 2017).

In research conducted by Li (2019), the effects of the integrating Chinese visual concepts on modern western graphic design were explored. The connection between the various components of modern graphic design and Chinese ink painting, including its specific techniques and composition, was tested and analysed. The study had introduced and elaborated on the Compositional Conceptual Design Theory to analyse the various components of Chinese ink painting. It also analysed the thinking and inspiration behind the typographic grid of western graphic design. Finally, it demonstrated that the integration of the elements of Chinese ink painting is a useful contribution to Western composition (Li, 2019). Sun (2016) studied the relationship of Chinese traditional pattern with modern graphic design, including the meanings and composition form of Chinese traditional patterns as well as its structured combination with modern graphic design. It was argued that by understanding the cultural connotations and implied meanings of Chinese traditional patterns, it can be recreated and applied to design works, not mechanically but by extracting its essence through the use of design principle and modelling rule. In China, graphic design is characterized by the continuous incorporation of nationalistic elements such as its strongly rich graphic resources (e.g. totems, figures, plants, and animals) and typical cultural connotations. Designers can get inspiration from Chinese traditional patterns in making creative designs. The process involves gradually excavating connotations and modifying patterns while maintaining its romantic charm and spiritual connotation based on their understanding of the pattern (Sun, 2016).

Baig (2020) compared and contrasted the elements of the Western and Eastern culture synthesized in contemporary art, specifically half-Persian half-Pakistani artist Raza Bukhari’s paintings. In the early times, Persian artists’ works were influenced by Chinese art (e.g. colouring techniques) and later influenced by Western perspectives. The study revealed that Bukhari attempted to capture the mixture of two cultures in creating contemporary paintings to make a visual representation of his expression as well as show his deepest thoughts (Baig, 2020). Sha (2017) conducted a study on the background and present situation of China’s ceramic art and expounded the fusion of ceramic art and traditional graphic components to provide inspirations to related professionals. It was revealed that science and technology informatization has made global art exchange more convenient, leading to gradually increasing cultural exchanges between Western countries and China. For instance, some Western cultures integrated Chinese ceramic art which is endowed with substantial Chinese characteristics (Sha, 2017).

Liu (2018) explored the principles applied in modern design packaging and stated that the information principle has become more and more influential in the future of design. Packaging designers should take into account consumers’ information, including culture, identity, character, and others. The emergence of the information era and exchange of culture has facilitated the progress of colours, materials, processing, and manufacturing. For example, modern Chinese designers have created fonts with a mixture of Chinese and Western elements (Liu, 2018).

Gong & Chen (2017) studied the inheritance of Chinese aesthetics in contemporary design. They argued that the traditional Chinese aesthetics was incorporated into Western art aesthetics in a Procrustean manner (Gong & Chen, 2017), that is, enforcing uniformity without regard to individuality. Liu (2016) described the developments and changes from China and the West in the advancement of graphic design. According to him, Chinese design has experienced a slow development in early times due to the limited level of productivity in terms of aesthetics. As the printing press emerged, graphic design, books, and illustrations developed in such a way that prints have a conventional design which also reflects people's aesthetic tendency at a particular time. While Chinese people pay more particular attention to the elements of traditional painting and the conveying mood, realism is important for Western people. Generally, whether it is the Eastern or Western culture, design is attributed to the details of the culture's design aesthetic (Liu, 2016). In other words, if a Western designer is inspired by Chinese elements, he does not literally apply all the components of Chinese design aesthetics but rather in a subtle manner that allows transference of thoughts, feelings, or anything particular that the designer wants to express.

There is a great volume of references from traditional Chinese art and culture in modern art design, reflecting profound national wisdom of cultural content and symbols (Gong & Chen, 2017). However, the literature shows that there has been little evidence on the integration of Chinese elements into Western culture. There is a need to examine the extent by which Western culture has adopted traditional Chinese patterns in graphic design and the extent by which modern Western designers have preserved their own culture's design aesthetics. Therefore, this study will explore on the embodiment and application of Chinese elements in modern Western graphic design. In particular, it would be best to focus on the integration of the two aforementioned most important Chinese graphic elements, the traditional ink painting and ceramic art elements. Examining which of the two Chinese elements is utilized more in Western graphic design would be essential.