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Understanding Culture Through Traditional Chinese Fairy Tales:
A Study on the effects of Chinese fairy tale characters on audience perception of culture

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design

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A Study on the effects of Chinese fairy tale characters on audience perception of culture

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Abstract

Classic of Mountains and Seas is probably one of the most ancient books about geography. The history of this book dates back to the Zhou Dynasty (1134 BC to 256 BC) or even earlier. Classic of Mountains and Seas is structured with 18 fascicles and has remained generally unaltered since the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). This book is not a narrative; it details descriptions of locations in the mountains, seas, lands, and wilderness. The descriptions are usually about medicines, monsters, and geological features. Many of the descriptions are very mundane. Chapters follow the same pattern, and the whole book consists of different topics in that way.

This book contains rich legends and fairy tales, which are valuable for historical studies, especially for research on elements of primitive society in China, such as surnames, tribes, understandings of the universe, and nature. Since ancient times, this book has been seen as an encyclopedia. It illustrates beyond the limits of space and time and records the magical figures, local cultures and rituals, and all kinds of gardens and treasures. Moreover, among hundreds of mythical monsters that were described in the book Classic of Mountains and Seas, most of them are obscure in terms of location, attributes, and function.

Since the old book designs are ancient, challenging, and use vague language, most versions of the book don’t have English descriptions. People with limited knowledge of Chinese culture may not understand the stories behind the monsters. The thesis project presented in this study is a redesign of the mythical monster characters in this book. The purpose of this project is not only to design memorable and attractive characters to give non-Chinese audiences direct information about the monsters but to also design a concise book that can convey cultural messages to those who want to know more about traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords

Book Design, Monster, Character Design, Chinese Mythology, Chinese History
Introduction

Problem Statement

With the evolution of history and technology, the world has become a global village, and people from different countries and nations communicate with each other continually. The desire of in-depth comprehension in Chinese traditional culture — more specifically, its mythical creatures — is a significant part of Chinese history. There is possibility of using modern or more creative forms of expression that could translate cultural messages of the traditional Chinese fairy tales to outlanders. Each country has its unique cultural peculiarities, which is rather difficult to describe in words, but figures and images contain information in multiple dimensions.

This provides the opportunity to develop a specific pattern that can represent the national personality. Will the specific pattern help me to create a totally new fairy tale character so that foreigners can understand Chinese fairy tales easily?

For this thesis, I proposed to design an illustrated book that explores the interpretation of imagery used in traditional Chinese fairy tales. To further narrow down the scope of my research to a more manageable level, I chose the fairy tale Classic of Mountains and Seas for my case study. Specifically, my research aims to answer the following questions:

1. Are there any patterns in Chinese traditional culture that are suitable to recreate new Chinese fairy tale characters and better distinguish their characteristics?
2. Different people have various levels of understanding of Chinese culture. What are the difficulties for the people without any knowledge of Chinese culture in understanding the fairy tales?
3. Will the audience's perception of fairy tale characters' personalities reflected through color patterns vary among different countries?

The results of this study provided an insight on the association between the Chinese fairy tale, pattern design, character design, and culture.
Target Audience

The target audience of the final work were people who want to gain a sense of or deepen their understanding of Chinese history and culture.

The specific target audience for the questionnaires and surveys were both people who have knowledge of Chinese culture and those who do not. The audience group surveyed was 20 to 50 years of age.

Situation Analysis

China is a country with a civilized history of over 5,000 years. During this long history, many Chinese traditional folklores have evolved. Chinese folklore includes songs, poetry, dances, puppetry, and tales. It often tells stories of human nature, historical or legendary events, love, and the supernatural, or stories explaining natural phenomena and distinctive landmarks.

Chinese folklore has provided inspiration for Chinese writers and poets for centuries. Folk songs, which were originally partnered with dance and other styles of performing arts, provided inspiration for courtly poetry. Classical fiction began in the Han Dynasty and was modeled after oral traditions, while Yuan- and Ming-era dramas were influenced by folk plays.

The main influences on Chinese folk tales have been Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Some folktales may have arrived from India or West Asia, along with Buddhism; others have no known Western counterparts but are widespread throughout East Asia. Chinese folktales include a vast variety of forms such as myths, legends, and fables. Several collections of tales, such as Pu Songling's Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, remain popular.

Modern iterations of traditional Chinese stories can be found internationally as well as in inherent Chinese literature. The Magic Paintbrush, from Laurence Yep, The Woman Warrior, from Maxine Hong Kingston, and Walt Disney Pictures’ Mulan all borrow from Chinese folklore traditions. As more people want to know about China, the study of Chinese traditional fairy tales is a good way to convey culture and history to non-Chinese people.
Evaluation Plan

I did some research on types of decorative patterns and color patterns, which can attract foreign people to study the design of Chinese fairy tale characters in how they affect an audience's perceptions of national peculiarities.

My analysis of the feedback was both qualitative and quantitative. After analyzing the feedback, I was able to incorporate the information into my research and design an application that displays my findings as well as give a reference to future designers regarding how color and pattern design affect culture peculiarities.

Deliverables

The final deliverables of this project include high-quality printed books, posters, T-shirts, buttons, and matching pair cards. The book has detailed illustrations and captions to introduce the characteristics of the monsters. During the MFA thesis show, people showed great interest in this work and gave high praise to this beautiful art design.

Design Process

Design Concepts

Different countries have different national personalities. Research was conducted on color patterns from different countries that could represent the nations. I also, studied whether the color patterns from other countries could be used with the Chinese traditional fairy tale characters, making Chinese traditional fairy creatures visually more comprehensible, giving the audience more direct information.
Content Organization

1. Research the characteristics of the monsters and the stories behind them.
2. Explore design styles.
3. Search for literature on books, websites, and articles.
4. Preferences of the target audience.

Implementation Strategies

My undergraduate major is animation. I have a background in painting, and I have previously drawn an illustrated book. Moreover, I am skilled in the use of the related design and paint software. Last year I chose zoological and botanical illustration, and I learned a lot from it; this course gave me some inspiration for my design component.

This project specifically required more research and study about how color and pattern design affect audience perception of national peculiarities. Graphic elements and typography were also applied into the final book design. The concepts were developed through sketches and storyboards. Further refining was done on screen after that. Some of the images and visual elements were created with watercolor or color pencils and scanned. This eventually lead to the printed book.

Evolutions of Logo

Inspiration

Inspiration came from Chinese traditional landscape paintings, which contain three important parts:

1. Layered and gradient colors.
2. Turquoise, gray, and blue color tones.
3. Artistic conceptions.
Logo Design Process

First, based on the concept of mountains and seas, I chose the curved shapes of triangles and waves to represent the name of this book. I tried different element combinations, like seas with mountains and seas with clouds. Ultimately the combination of mountains and seas worked best because of the balance of the shapes.

Figure 1: Early sketches of logo by using seas, mountains, and clouds

Figure 2: First versions of logo in different colors (seas with mountains)

However, the first version was too simple and not immediately clear to the users. Therefore, in the second version of the design, I added more layers based on the concept of Chinese traditional landscape paintings and reduced the use of colors. I also added a color gradient to show the center of the sea.
Considering that this is the logo design for a printed book, the combination of colors was further improved by trying different palettes based on Pantone color book. In the process, the shadow effect was added to make the center part of this logo pop up more. Moreover, irregular shapes were applied to the logo to follow the “randomness” elements of traditional Chinese paintings.

**Recreate Monsters**

**Research**

After researched the monster designs from old version of the book, I found that most of them use old drawing skills and simple colors, mostly black and white. I found that monsters in the same book are in different design styles. It is confusing to foreign audiences and needs attention.

Among hundreds of monsters in this book, ultimately, I chose eight monsters based on the breed and characteristic. Most of the monsters have extraordinary appearances and specific characteristics.

Three of them are birds, four of the are terrestrial animals, and the last one is an aquatic animal.
Figure 4: Eight monsters that I chose from the book

**Ideation**

I recreated the monsters based on real animals, so the audience can easily understand their appearances and characteristics. Because my thesis is based on traditional Chinese fairy tales, I kept some of the traditional Chinese painting skills, such as using gradient colors and strong line art in the designs.
Sketches

I did a lot of sketches based on the real animals and then polished the looks of monsters based on the descriptions in the book.

Figure 5: Early sketches of monsters
Refine the Monsters

These monster illustrations provide a way for the audience to learn more about the culture and history and allow them to experience what the fairy characters looked like in ancient Chinese history. The goal of the illustrations was to pass passion, happiness, and knowledge to the target audience.

During the whole design and illustration process, I played with colors and textures to make sure I had the best visual balance of the monsters. After I showed the early iterations to my thesis committee
professors, they provided some constructive suggestions regarding the colors and the elements used in the illustration piece — for example, that the triangle shape around the fish might give people a negative feeling that the fish is trying to escape. They also suggested trying a lighter background color to have the character pop up more, especially after printing.

![Early versions of monster illustrations](image.jpg)

Figure 7: Early versions of monster illustrations

During the design process, to make sure I could get the ideal colors on paper, I printed out all the artwork to make the process more efficient. The early illustrations focused only on the lines and physical details of the monsters. It’s hard for my target audience to see the characteristic of the monsters in a short period of time without a description. However, after changing the colors and details, the illustration had varieties of color changes and line thicknesses. From the feedback of the target audience, I believe that the refined illustrations are more readable and acceptable to audiences.
Fu Zhu

Fu Zhu is one of the creatures in traditional Chinese mythology. It looks like a white deer but has four long antlers. The first one on record was in the Qin Dynasty.

Fu Zhu has a very gentle personality and loves to groom itself. It likes to play around. According to the mythology, Fu Zhu usually appears along with a flood.
Bi Fang

Bi Fang is a precursor of fire in the ancient Chinese myths and legends.

Bi Fang looks like a red-crowned crane but has only one leg. Its name may have come from the crackling sound of bamboo and wood burning.
Final Monsters: Zhu Nou

Figure 10: Final Monster Design of Zhu Nou

Zhu Nou

Zhu Nou looks like a fox and has fish fins on its back, hiding like a fish in the river. It sounds like its name’s pronunciation.

The book said that once Zhu Nou appears in one place, there will be floods in the near future.
Final Monsters: Bo Yi

Bo Yi looks like a goat. It has nine tails and four ears, and eyes on each side of its back.

Some people say that if they can wear Bo Yi’s skin as clothing, they will become fearless.
Final Monsters: Luo Yu

Figure 12: Final Monster Design of Luo Yu

Luo Yu

Luo Yu lives in the Yangshui River, which runs through Gui Mountain. Luo Yu has two bird wings on his body and sounds like mandarin duck singing.

When Luo Yu appears, there will be floods in that place.
Final Monsters: Chong Ming

Chong Ming looks like a chicken and sounds like a phoenix. There are two pupils in each of its eyes, so it’s called “double-eyed bird” in Chinese.

Chong Ming is so strong that it can run quickly and catch other beasts. It can avoid natural disasters and bring peace and sound to the people.
Final Monsters: Di Jiang

Di Jiang lives in Tian Mountain in Western China. Strangely enough, it has a round shape with four red wings and six short legs but no face. However, it is really good at singing and dancing.
Final Monsters: Lei Niao

Lei Niao

Lei Niao looks similar to a general magpie but has long green and black feathers.

Lei Niao has two heads and four legs. People who raise it can avoid the risk of fire.
Final Monsters: Cartoon Version

At the end of the project, I also created cartoon versions of monsters for children, raising their interest in the monsters.

Figure 16: Final Design of Cartoon-Version Monsters
Book Design

Process

When designing the book, it was important to consider the design direction. There are lots of illustrations in this book, balancing the design and copy was important. To make the illustrations my key points in the book, I needed to choose the right typeface and layout.

Figure 17: Early designs of the monster page

Like the designs above, the monster illustrations are merged into the background a little bit. It's hard to see the details from a far distance. After a discussion with my professors, I added a white rectangular background to make sure the figures could be more obvious and enlarged the monster part to make sure it was big enough to see in the printing.
Each monster page has both English and Chinese descriptions. Beyond that, more Chinese elements have been added into the design, like traditional Chinese seals and the texture of Xuan paper. Xuan paper is well known for its fine, soft texture; it conveys artistic meanings of Chinese calligraphy and painting.

**Fonts and Size**

- **English text**: Avenir LT Std 35 Light
- **Chinese text**: 仿宋
- **English title**: Avenir LT Std 65 Medium
- **Chinese title**: 方正清刻本悦宋简体

**Considerations**

Friendliness. Readability.
Size of the Book

5" X 7.5"

Book Structure

1. Cover page
2. Introduction page
3. Content page
4. Chapter introduction page
5. Monster pages

Key Elements

1. Traditional Chinese seal
2. Chinese landscape paintings
3. Texture of Chinese Xuan paper
Final Book

Figure 19: Book cover
Final Book

Figure 20: Welcome page
Figure 21: Introduction page and content page
Final Book

Figure 22: Chapter introduction page and monster page
Final Book

Figure 23: Monster pages
Final Book

Figure 24: Monster pages
Figure 25: Monster pages

Final Book
Final Book

Figure 26: Monster page and back cover
Applications: Matching pair cards

Figure 27: Matching pair game cards
Applications: Stickers

Figure 28: Monster and logo stickers, book tags
Applications: T-Shirts

Figure 29: Monster T-shirt designs (front and back)
Evaluation and Discussion

Evaluation is significant to my thesis project. Feedback from both my advisors and target audience was collected, including face-to-face meetings and hard-copy surveys from the MFA thesis show. The final design was carefully revised according to this feedback.

Suggestions

I had weekly meetings with my three advisors during the whole process of this project. Their main suggestions were as follows:

1. The colors need to be refined to make the monsters pop up more.
2. Explore more applications like matching pairs to make this book more attractive.
3. Revise the descriptions of monsters to be more readable and acceptable for non-Chinese people.

Refinements

Based on the feedback from the advisors and target audiences, I have refined my thesis in the following areas:

1. As suggested, I made some changes of the book background and applied brighter colors to monsters.
2. I designed matching pair games for my thesis show so people could get a better understanding of this book.
3. I revised the monster description with a proofreader to eliminate awkward phrasing, repetition, passive voice, etc.
Conclusion

In this project, the following aspects have been significantly improved.

1. I used a clear, attractive, and well-organized method to improve cultural understanding and communications.

2. I simplified the original mythology and characters into easily understood stories and fun figures.

3. I based the designs on a deep understanding of the case background and target audience’s needs.

This design project shows the ancient Chinese fairy characters and stories behind them. The audiences are able to learn Chinese culture and history intuitively and explicitly. This book design project presents many aspects of the ancient Chinese fairy tales, including surnames, animals, understanding of history and nature, and many specific mythological objects. It provides an opportunity for audiences to learn Chinese culture through this book.

From the illustrations, coloring, and typography to the book designs, the goal of making this book was to make sure that this design work is easy to understand and pleasant to see. The result is a book design that attracts people’s attention and effectively transfers targeted messages to the audience.
References


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