Representing Traditional Culture - Poetry Applying Elements on Product Design

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ABSTRACT

Chinese culture is rich and diversified. Chinese styles and culture are becoming focal points in the world in recent years, so poetry cultural elements will certainly become an accelerating force for the pursuit of cultural and creative industries. The essence of cultural product design lies in refining culture elements and transferring them symbolically through metaphors so as to attach new aesthetic significance to the product design thereby providing a moving experience for consumers. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to build a transformation model of cultural product design. The approach includes two phases. In phase one, the transformation model for design development is constructed by design principles, design process and literature review. In phase two, we undertake design practices based on the transformation model in order to prove its effect.

Keywords: Poetry, cultural product design, Chinese character

1 INTRODUCTION

As the demands of life increase, the consumer market advances in an era of experience-focus and aesthetic economics. The distinctness of local culture and the structure of innovation-knowledge become the national core competency. It’s seen within the trend of the promotion of cultural and creative industries as an important strategy for economic development in each country. For example, the transformation of the pewter-manufacturing industry in the UK (Yair, Press, &
Tomes, 2001) and Oktoberfest in Munich of Germany aim to integrate their the cultural assets in order to enhance the national image and improve competency of their industries. By the transformation and migration abroad of industrial structure, we have to endeavor to increase the value and added-value of the product through the design activities of cultural innovation (Lin, & Lin, 2009).

Recently, Chinese culture has caught the attention of the world not only in the field of design application but also the style of movies. The multi-cultures and friendly people in Taiwan have been deemed as our characteristic. Products with distinctness are popular in the consumer market but that distinctness is gradually disappearing because there are too many products with the same function and style. As a result, consumers start to ask for a product with cultural distinctness and recognition. The characteristics of traditional culture in Taiwan bring potential application-value in the design field. However, most cultural design products simply copy a form or are decorated with cultural totems. Products without the spirit of the culture will not help to upgrade the life culture (Lin, 2005; Li, 2007).

Therefore, it is critical to design a product with cultural value and localized characteristics. Therefore this exploration studies the feasibility of poetic rhyme transformed into cultural product design. In order to construct the model for transforming cultural elements into product design, we’ve investigated the literature and surveyed current applications of cultural innovations of Chinese characters. Following that model, we invest the traditional culture into modern product design. Therefore, this exploration will serve as reference for future investigation of Chinese characters and the design of cultural products.

2 CULTURAL ELEMENTS AND PRODUCT DESIGN

The design and development of cultural products help to improve life quality and the social culture level. Along with technology progress, designing “feeling” into products to present the emotional communication of user experiences became a design trend in the 21st century. Design should not only focus on function and elegant appearance but also on the heritage and connection of the culture concerning problems in our society in order to redefine people’s life style.

2.1 Three Cultural Levels

Culture generally refers to styles of human activity and symbolic structures. Moreover, culture has been described as the evolutionary process that involves language, customs, religion, arts, thought and behavior. From the design point of view, Leong and Clark (2003) developed a framework for studying cultural objects distinguished by three special levels: the outer ‘tangible’ level, the mid ‘behavioral’ level, and the inner ‘intangible’ level. Furthermore, the UNESCO (2005) thinks that the cultural product possesses an economic and cultural nature and becomes a carrier of culture characteristics, values and meaning through the experience of use and the preservation of cultural heritage.
Based on previous studies (Leong & Clark, 2003; Hsu, 2004; Lin, 2007), a framework for studying cultural objects is summarized in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, culture can be classified into three layers: (1) Physical or material culture, including food, garments, and transportation related objects, (2) Social or behavioral culture, including human relationships and social organization, and (3) Spiritual or ideal culture, including art and religion. These three culture layers can be fitted into Leong’s three culture levels given above. Since cultural objects can be incorporated into cultural design, three design features can be identified as follows: (1) the inner level containing special content such as stories, emotion, and cultural features, (2) the mid level containing function, operational concerns, usability, and safety, and (3) the outer level dealing with colors, texture, form, decoration, surface pattern, line quality, and details. In each layer of exploration, this figure can help to focus on the key point when we design a cultural product.

![Figure 1. Three layers and levels of cultural objects and design features (Hsu, 2004; Lin, 2007)](image)

### 2.2 The Distinctness of the Culture of Chinese Character

The character is the most important tool to record the history and culture. Among well-known cultures, the Chinese character is the only one to be used till now, and which is deemed as a most antique character like Sumerian Cuneiform and the Egyptian Hieroglyph. The Chinese character presents not only the heritage and development of the culture but also the symbol of the traditional esthetics. The Chinese Character originated from illustration by transforming the tangible materials into images on the plane surface. After a long development, structure and proportion have become more esthetic. As the Chinese character contents the cultural value and the calligraphy shows the esthetic of art, people always like it as a beautiful painting even they don’t understand it.

For instance, the logo of the 2008 Olympics held in Beijing made people see the various applications and transformations of the charming Chinese stamping culture. This logo was designed in Chinese stamping style with red color, the basic color in
Chinese tradition. The Chinese character 「京」 was writing by seal character and looked very dynamic. It helped the people around the world to re-know the application and variation of Chinese characters. Since 1980s, modern calligraphy became popular in Taiwan. In 2001, Taiwanese calligrapher Hsu Yung-Chin, was retained by our Tourism Bureau. He designed the symbol for the Taiwanese tourism industry. He boldly wrote down “Taiwan” using calligraphy. The Taiwanese cultural custom shown up in this word has become the vivid symbol of our culture. And the artist, Tsai Yu, surprised the public with her design of “Chinese Character Jewelry” by the combination of the humanity of Chinese characters and the fashion of jewelry. In the international auction in Beijing in 2010, the art work “Dreams Come True” was designed according to the Chinese character 「夢」 which it was made of jadeites and diamonds (Tsai, 2009). The Taiwanese cultural innovation of Chinese character was successfully to be seen in the global art market.

2.3 Design Theories Relevant to Cultural Products

Thanks to the improvement of technology, it is easier to implement innovation. In order to satisfy consumers’ demands, the design should be accomplished by the enhancement of investigation of the product and human-product interaction. In the future Industrial Design should concern aesthetics of humanity. Norman (2004) also suggested that a successful design should consider the suitability, practicability and aesthetics of the product in which emotion is the most important factor. The design concept for emotion can be accomplished by the aesthetic value of the product. As a result, the intention of the design gradually focuses on humanity with the consideration of the consumers’ feelings when they use the product.

Cultural features are considered to be unique characteristics that can be embedded into a product for both the enhancement of its identity in the global market and individual consumer experience (Handa, 1999; Yair, Tomes, & Press, 1999). They could trigger a cultural reflection by consumers through design. In general, the common discussion of cultural applications to the product is the theory of product semantics. For example, Lin and Huang (2002) classify the logic of figurative designs whose forms are based on some reasonable visual connections. It defines visual connections such as metaphor, simile, allegory, metonymy, and analogy borrowed from linguistics, and then systematically analyzes these elaborate relationships between products and the signs. In addition, Butter (1989) suggested that the design process can be seen as somewhat linear with clearly distinguishable phases and suggested eight steps for the systematic generation of semantically relevant design concepts. Based on this literature, an approach was undertaken to integrate the design theories and provide assistance for cultural product design.

A good understanding of the cultural attributes will benefit articulating the context between the culture and product design and therefore accelerate concept development. Based on the cultural product design framework and process, the cultural product is designed using scenario and semantics approaches. And according to the literature review and expert opinions, design guidelines are developed based on the research of consumers’ needs, cultural content and design
theories. Hsu, Lin and Lin (2011) provided a practical design process in four phases and ten steps which are used to design a cultural product, namely: identification (telling a situation), investigation (setting an objective), interaction (writing an analysis), and implementation (designing a product).

3 RESEARCH METHOD

We can see the traditional localized culture in our life; the distinctive totem or image intangibly shows up in our life materials. Globalization brings people convenience in life but their localized culture drives people to look for a prosperous quality in the life and mind-set. In order to avoiding the application arbitrarily of product design from the distinctive localized characteristics. As a result, it is important to understand well the cultural elements and product languages in the field of cultural product design.

When we design, we should consider the characteristics in various aspects like tangible materials, traditional custom and spirit. The understanding and analysis will help us to consider the design transformation in order to add the cultural elements into the cultural product. In general, there’s a procedure and model in the development and manufacturing process in each industry. We are wondering if there’s a procedure to apply which can help in the deliberation and transformation during the design process. Lin (2007) taught students to explore the three levels and model of design using the ceramic pot of the Rukai Tribe in Taiwan. In Figure 2, A is the hand bag transformed by the appearance and decoration of the clayware pot which is deemed as the transformation of appearance. B is fruit bowl made of stainless steel transformed by the function and use behavior as the transformation of behavior. C is a hollow candleholder. When we light up the candle, there will be human shadows swaying by the wind like the campfire surrounded by aborigines.

This exploration is to build up the model of the transformation of cultural product design integrating consumers’ expectations and design behavior though Hsu, Lin and Lin’s (2011) step six to ten of the design procedure of cultural products and Lin’s (2007) exploration in regards to cultural products derived from the clayware pot. Having analyzed and synthesized a literature review, we construct a model for transferring cultural elements into product design. The five implementation steps are: (A) Analyzing and selecting the cultural elements; (B) Connecting the reasonable relationships between cultural elements and design concepts; (C) Selecting the rational concept; (D) Developing the concept; (E) Completing the design. Steps A to C refer to the process which connects reciprocally the cultural elements and the product. Step D and E address the rationality, and embodiment of the product and maturity of the transformation of the cultural elements.

In order to design a modern product with traditional poetry and cultural elements, we adopt “The Pipa Tune” of Bai Ju-yi, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, as the source of inspiration for considering different cultural levels and the method of transfer, transit and transform of the cultural elements of this poem (Figure 2). This
model is a reference for designer(s) which can lead logically to an adequate design transformation and expose the cultural elements properly no matter whether the design is transformed from a tangible or intangible culture.

When we design a cultural product, we must analyze its property first in order to discover the reasonable connection between cultural elements and the product in each culture. During the design procedure much uncertainty exists which is hard to control by designers. The “design features” and “transformation of design consideration” in Figure 2 helps us not only to understand and explore the cultural elements but also to consider the application scope of a cultural product. We will be able to design a product in which there’s cultural transformation of application and product design with cultural elements instead of merely copying the appearance of relics or totem.

![Figure 2. The Transformation Model of Cultural Product Design](image)

### 4 THE DESIGN PRACTICES BY POETRY

In Taiwan, the promotion of cultural and creative industries has been the focus of development. Localized cultural elements, products and tours have gradually become an opportunity for animating the regional economy. Various types of souvenirs and the use of cultural product spring up all around. However, most of them lack distinctive and localized cultural elements or are limited to craft works. These cause less recognition from the consumers and become less popular in life.

In order to make cultural elements to enhance life quality, it is necessary to develop modern products with cultural intention. In Taiwan, we’ve initially seen the improvement of the combination of traditional craft artworks and cultural innovation. However, the majority of cultural innovation products are still limited to the application of material culture. It is worthwhile to explore the intangible cultural
assets like Chinese characters. The current design application or research of Chinese characters is focusing on the transformation of the font (Lin, Lin, & Hsieh, 2005). The Chinese character has fostered much precious poetry and many tunes. The Chinese character culture is unique and deemed to be an innovation cause in the fields of art, fashion and the design. It also leads the fashion trend of eastern style.

Literary works as rhymes derived from Chinese character, such as classical poetry, tune, are very touching and worthwhile exploring. Sometimes the wording of Chinese poetry describes concrete articles but other times the feeling hiding behind the articles or circumstances. As a result, the reference information for design will be rich with good understanding of the poetic rhymes. We even can manage the design by the transformation of different cultural levels (Figure 2). We give the following as an example in order to explain the design of a cultural product from Chinese poetry.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 3.** "Jade Plate" utensil

### 4.1 Material Application of Cultural Product

The design of material application is the transfer of cultural elements. We consider the design by the enhancement of color and understanding of totem and application, innovation of the material, extraction of the appearance entirely or partially, enhancement or simplification of the lines, arrangement of tiny aspects, recombination of the structure, etc (see D in Figure 2).

This design was inspired by the poem “The Pipa tune” of Bai Ju-yi (772-846), a poet of the Chinese Tan Dynasty. We selected several phrases in this poem which describe the sound of Pipa: “The thick strings loudly thrummed like the pattering rain, and the fine strings softly tinkled in murmuring strain. When mingling loud and soft notes were together played, it was like large and small pearls dropping on a jade plate.” The mingling loud and soft sound of the Pipa is like the sound of pearls dropping on the plate. The concept of this product design is to combine the article in the jade plate with the wording describing the intangible music played by Pipa. We can imagine the product surrounded by the aerial music. The stainless
steel shows the aesthetics of an ancient jade plate and modern innovation. Therefore, we conclude this design as the transfer of the appearance (Figure 3).

4.2 The Use Behavior Application of Cultural Product

The design application of use behavior is the transit of cultural elements. We can explore it by the reservation and extension of the function, the method of operation, the intuition and safety-convenience when in use, the stationary or the track of movement, the structure and assembly, etc (see E in Figure 2).

The design concept in Figure 4 was also originated from phrases of “The Pipa tune” of Bai Ju-yi. In the past, people used to put precious article on a jade plate which itself is of high value. We transit it into a life product as a piggy bank. When we insert different size of coins, the tinkling sound of rolling coins makes us recognize the beautiful wording and aesthetic Pipa sound in this poem. “Pearls dropping on the jade plate” describes the regular tinkling music played by Pipa and the classical melodious sound makes us imagine and think about the ancient times. Consumers not only can feel the fun of the sound “Pearls dropping on the jade plate” but also recall the memory of the pinball machine in childhood.

The visual fun makes users enjoy the use of it because they can see the saving money and the moving of coins through the transparent material. This product was designed based on the material and experience of use. Consumers will easily feel the aesthetics of Chinese poems in their life and the renewed design innovation for the traditional culture. When we use it, on the other hand, we are also inspired with new recognition of the product. This is the design transit of use behavior.

Figure 4. “Pearls dropping on the jade plate” Piggy Bank

Figure 5. “The Pipa Tune” lampshade

4.3 The Ideology Application of Cultural Product

The design transformation of ideology is the transform of cultural elements. We can explore it through cultural characteristics containing special meaning, hearsay legend, the feeling when we use it, the life style, etc (see F in Figure 2).
We can sense the distinct scenario in Chinese calligraphy and poetry. The concept of the product in Figure 5 is also derived from the “The Pipa tune” of Bai Ju-yi: "One night by the riverside I bade a friend good-bye, In maple leaves and rushes autumn seemed to sigh. ... Without flute songs we drank our cups with heavy heart, the moonbeams blended with water when we were to part. Suddenly over the stream we heard a pipa sound, I forgot to go home and the guest stood spellbound. ... Listening to her sad music, I sighed with pain, hearing her story, I sighed again and again. Both of us in misfortune go from shore to shore, meeting now, need we have known each other before?"

In "The Pipa tune" of Bai Ju-yi, the cantatrice from Chang-An talked about the joy and happiness in youth with sadness. She is now not only old but also has a vagrant life. The author suddenly revealed the sadness of his demotion from official life. We design the product as a plain lampshade using foggy material. It will be solid after swirling cutting. Then the user can give it different shapes of his choice. When there’s the light, the twisted characters and the shadow are like large and small pearls dropping on a jade plate. The room will look Chinese Style and be full of nostalgia. It will enrich the consumers’ feeling when they use the product in this way through the transformation of ideology.

5 CONCLUSION

Recently, Taiwan dedicated itself to the promotion of cultural and creative industries. However, the design application for now is to transform mostly the concrete products of traditional life into creative applications in industries. We can see prosperous characteristics of Chinese cultural materials in which Chinese characters are the most distinctive around the world. Chinese characters not only has distinctive features but are also loved by people worldwide. If we make good use of this precious Chinese character, the ideas of innovation and practical applications will be more prosperous and distinctive.

Regarding the application of cultural innovation, the design is not only to fit consumers’ needs but also to imbed the cultural assets and to show it in an aesthetic way through the product. Chinese poetry describing not only concrete articles but also emotional expression inspired by the scenery, inspires people to continuously aftertaste, investigate and study. The design of cultural innovation derived from Chinese poetry helps consumers to experience both the history and the modern creation when they use this modern life product. The idea to transfer, transit, and transform intangible cultural into cultural and creative industries will enhance the distinctness of industries or even create the cultural and creative industries of Taiwanese style.

REFERENCES


