

The Inheritance and Application of Chinese Reverse Contrast Typeface Style

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This paper discusses the inheritance and application of Chinese character reverse contrast typeface style. It begins by analyzing the visual features of Western reverse contrast typeface styles, with a focus on Caslon Italian and French Clarendon, providing a Western perspective reference for subsequent Chinese character reverse contrast typeface style designs. The paper then traces the origins of the Chinese reverse contrast style, from the calligraphy style "Lacquer Script" to the earliest printing type "フワンテール形", exploring the historical background and cultural significance of the Chinese reverse contrast style. In the methodology section of Chinese character reverse contrast typeface style design, the discussion is conducted from two dimensions: inheritance and application. In terms of inheritance, through an in-depth analysis of "Lacquer Script" and "フワンテール形" typeface style, the paper summarizes three basic theories for modern Chinese character reverse contrast typeface style design. In the application section, it examines in detail the two most influential recent typeface styles, "Ribaasu" and "Basic Artistic", outlining three directions of application: extreme horizontal stroke variations, exaggerated contrast, and diverse decorative strokes, showcasing new directions and possibilities for Chinese character reverse contrast typeface style design. This paper not only reviews the developmental history of the Chinese character reverse contrast typeface style but also analyzes the design methodology of Chinese character reverse contrast typeface style through specific case studies.

Keywords: reverse contrast fonts, Chinese character font design, design method

Introduction

Research Background and Objectives

Reverse contrast fonts, as a non-typical but distinctive style in Latin print font design, defy traditional design logic yet have secured a place in Western design history due to their uniqueness. In recent years, this style has regained attention and popularity in the global design field. Its exaggerated, alternative, and dynamic visual effects have injected new vitality into modern graphic design, winning the favor of numerous designers. Meanwhile, Chinese characters, one of the world's oldest writing systems, are also facing innovative challenges in the reverse contrast style. With the renewal of design concepts and technological advancements, the traditional aesthetics of Chinese characters are undergoing a profound deconstruction and reconstruction. Against this backdrop, Chinese reverse contrast font design shows vitality and innovation; especially works like "Ribaasu"

and “Basic Artistic” have not only won design awards but also sparked widespread attention and research in the font design community.

In contrast, research and practice in Chinese reverse contrast fonts are still insufficient. The design methods, practical applications, and aesthetic explorations in this field are still in the preliminary stage, waiting for further exploration and innovation by designers and researchers. Therefore, this study aims to promote the diversification process of Chinese character design by delving into the development trajectory and innovation mechanisms of Chinese reverse contrast fonts, contributing new perspectives and thoughts to the future trends of font design and cultural heritage. This assists Chinese characters in maintaining their unique charm and achieving innovative cultural transmission in the globalized era.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and explore the design principles and development trends of Chinese reverse contrast fonts, aiming to provide solid theoretical support for the design practice of Chinese reverse contrast fonts. This study will first delve into the visual characteristics and evolutionary laws of Latin reverse contrast fonts, seeking their main changes to gain deep design concepts and aesthetic guidance. Next, this paper will explore the unique calligraphy style “Lacquer Script” in the development process of Chinese characters, combined with the early example of Chinese reverse contrast font design “Fantail”, to analyze the design features and unique expressions of Chinese reverse contrast fonts, providing a historical and theoretical foundation for their design. Finally, through an in-depth analysis of two significant Chinese reverse contrast fonts “Ribaasu” and “Jiben Meishuti” from recent years, the study seeks new creativity and innovation in Chinese reverse contrast font design, aiming to promote the diversified development of Chinese character design and encourage cultural heritage and innovation.

Reverse Contrast Fonts

The design rule for Latin script fonts has always been based on the horizontal thin and vertical thick strokes, which was established by the designer of the first Roman font, Nicolas Jenson, in 1470, evolved from Western calligraphy. The fundamental reason for its formation is that vertical strokes are more prevalent in the structure of Latin letters. In the mid-20th century, the renowned Dutch calligrapher and designer Gerrit Noordzij developed a set of writing theories to explain the variations in pen movements in Western writing, advocating for the writing direction to be the basis of type design. He believed that without this imaginary pen moving across the paper, relying solely on font outlines is ineffective. According to the habits of using a flat pen, the more the stroke direction aligns with the pen head and writing direction, the thinner it appears visually, showing a gradual change from thick to thin. However, with a pointed pen, by applying extra pressure while moving vertically, more ink can spill from the pen head, quickly thickening the stroke, resulting in a more pronounced contrast. These correspond to what Gerrit Noordzij termed “translation” and “expansion”, two sets of stroke logic. Noordzij’s theory actually reflects a more general cognition of letter shapes, where the horizontal strokes of Latin letters are usually thinner than vertical ones, and upward strokes are thinner than downward strokes, generally creating a “horizontal thin, vertical thick” visual impression. Conversely, if a font is “horizontal thick, vertical thin”, then it has reversed the conventional contrast, hence the name “reverse contrast”, which is the inverted relationship of thickness.

In 1821, Caslon and Catherwood released a new font that significantly caught the attention of the design world at that time. It broke the traditional rule of horizontal thin and vertical thick strokes, featuring horizontal thick and vertical thin strokes, and was known as “Italian” or “Reversed Egyptian” at that time. This is the

precursor to reverse contrast fonts. The most significant feature of reverse contrast fonts is actually the restructuring of the traditional visual proportions of Latin letter shapes, breaking the visual impression of vertical thickness in Latin letters, thereby creating a uniquely peculiar visual sensation.

Chinese Character

Chinese characters hold a crucial position in graphic design and, for Chinese designers, represent a significant tag of national cultural creativity on the international design stage. They also stand as an unavoidable niche both in academic and practical fields.

According to Wikipedia,

Chinese characters are logographs used to write Chinese languages and others from regions historically influenced by Chinese culture. They have a documented history spanning over three millennia, representing one of the four independent inventions of writing accepted by scholars; they are the only writing system continuously used since its inception. Over time, the function, style, and method of writing characters have significantly evolved. Modern states using Chinese characters have standardized their forms and pronunciations based on a long tradition of lexicography: mainly, simplified characters are used in mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia, while traditional characters are used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.

Initially introduced to write Literary Chinese, characters were later adapted to write languages spoken in other countries throughout the Sinosphere. In Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, Chinese characters are known as kanji, hanja, and chữ Hán, respectively. Each of these countries used existing characters to write both native and Sino-Xenic vocabulary and created new characters for their own use. These languages belong to separate language families and generally function differently from Chinese. This has contributed to Chinese characters largely being replaced by alphabets in Korean and Vietnamese, leaving Japanese as the only major non-Chinese language still written with Chinese characters.

From this explanation, it can be understood that the countries using Chinese characters are not only limited to China. Therefore, when conceptualizing articles, the aim is not confined to one country but to find suitable designs for reverse contrast Chinese characters. Chinese characters cover a vast range, unlike Latin scripts; they are numerous, with complex structures and hard-to-unify styles, making their design one of the more challenging fields in the design industry.

Literature Review

Visual Characteristics of Latin Reverse Contrast

Italian typeface style. The birth of the “Italian” font represents a revolutionary breakthrough in the history of font design, with its extremely exaggerated visual dramatic effects. The stark contrast between the thickness of the horizontal and vertical strokes, the minimal presence of vertical strokes, and the horizontal visual connection formed by the arrangement of letters challenge the long-standing habit of vertical visual balance. This is because human eyes, due to their physiological structure, require something in the vertical direction to provide a sense of stable gravity. Traditionally, vertical strokes have played a role in bearing weight and balancing structures in Western font design, and the emergence of horizontal visual fonts gives the illusion of incorrect orientation. The “Italian” font faced criticism and attack from the font design community of the time, deemed as a malformed font, a crude visual expression. It was not until 1986 that font designer Walter Tracey pointed out that such styles should not be judged by traditional aesthetic standards; they were created in a “spirit of play”. Indeed, they defy convention, but that’s precisely where their charm lies. Since then, reverse contrast fonts have gradually gained more recognition.

At the same time, the “Italian” font is the earliest discovered Latin font with reverse contrast characteristics. According to Professor Sills’ research, Caslon Italian from a 1821 Caslon and Catherwood type specimen book was one of the first. The original Caslon Italian were cast metal types, including only capital letters and numbers, without lowercase, clearly intended for commercial advertising posters. This style was a novel and radical innovation in the metal type industry of the mid-19th century Industrial Revolution, still timeless even by today’s standards.



Figure 1. Caslon Italian font (1821).

Consequently, most Latin reverse contrast fonts in the subsequent design market have characteristics of this “Italian” style. For instance, the font Maelstrom designed by Kris Sowersby takes inspiration from Debow, a font born in 1837 based on Caslon Italian with even more exaggerated contrasts. Font designer Paul Barnes has reissued and supplemented Caslon Italian, evolving it into new Italic, Contra, and Shaded versions.

French typeface style. While the classic reverse-contrast style, Caslon Italian, did not become widely popular, another type now categorized as “Bold Serif” reverse-contrast fonts contradicted the trend in Europe and was extensively used by typographers and warmly welcomed in the United States. The 19th-century England saw the birth of the Clarendon font, which later donned the “French” mantle and thrived in America. In 1854, Besley released the French Antique font, which clearly thickened the upper and lower horizontal sections, creating a visual effect similar to railway tracks. This unique visual effect likely spurred a new visual style, namely French Clarendon.

Due to the widespread market acceptance of French Clarendon, by the end of the 19th century, American foundries also began innovating in this style. Possibly influenced by French Antique, the reverse-contrast style known as French Clarendon was born in the United States and was massively produced as wood type suitable for advertisement creation. French Clarendon wood type then became extremely popular in the United States; its exaggerated visual effect combined with the relatively low cost of wood type ensured its widespread use until half a century ago. French Clarendon features thick and noticeable serifs, while the letters themselves are narrower. This quirky exaggerated shape helps differentiate between text and headings, fitting the poster creators’ pursuit of a bold and noticeable style, hence its extensive use in advertising, posters, signs, and other scenarios.



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Figure 2. French Clarendon (1854).

French Clarendon style fonts are often associated with the “Wild West” imagery, appearing in scenes of American western movies, as well as on wanted posters, warning signs, and other props. In the film industry of the 1950s and 1960s, it was quite popular and thus became a distinct branch within the reverse-contrast font style.

As one of the two most influential branches of the reverse-contrast style (Italian and French Clarendon), many modern Latin reverse-contrast design works also reference the characteristics of the French Clarendon font. For example, two Swiss font design masters—Max Miedinger, who designed Helvetica, and Adrian Frutiger, who designed the Frutiger font—drew inspiration from French Clarendon. Max Miedinger designed Pro Arte in 1954 with characteristics of French Clarendon, and Adrian Frutiger’s reverse-contrast font Westside perfectly incorporated his own style and characteristics, but the basic type structure is still based on French Clarendon.

Chinese Characters’ Reverse Contrast

Lacquer Script. Lacquer Script holds a unique position in the history of Chinese calligraphy, with its strokes being thick horizontally and thin vertically, creating a significant contrast between the two. Its originator, Jin Nong, merged styles from Han Li (a style of Clerical Script from the Han Dynasty in China) and Wei Kai (a style of Regular Script from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period) scripts to create what later generations have referred to as “Lacquer Script”. This style shares similarities with reverse contrast fonts, using Lacquer Script as a prototype, combined with modern typographic aesthetic forms, to reinterpret this art form, which serves as one of the creative directions for Chinese characters’ reverse contrast design.

Jin Nong’s creation of Lacquer Script was inspired by the brushwork methods of “Tian Fa Shen Ge” stele. Its characters often appear in a flattened square shape, with a structure that favors a horizontal stance, where strokes extend to the left and right, pressing against the space of other strokes, minimizing the internal blank space of the characters. When writing characters with left-right structures, more significant gaps between strokes are deliberately left, creating a stark contrast between the extensive external spacing and minimal internal blank spaces. In analyzing Lacquer Script, it represents not only a continuation and refinement of the structure of Clerical Script forms but also innovations in writing tools and techniques.

The structure and framework of “Lacquer Script” revise a modern aesthetic of “reverse contrast design”. The significant difference between thick horizontal and thin vertical strokes, along with its unique script structure, perfectly encapsulates the aesthetic momentum of “reverse contrast design”. This distinctive calligraphic

structure provides a practical reference for contemporary Chinese reverse contrast design. The recently released font “Jin Nong Mo Li” is a digital re-creation of Jin Nong’s Lacquer Script. While preserving the characteristics of Lacquer Script, it reorganizes and optimizes some structures and strokes, making it more suitable for digital media applications.

フワンテール形. The first real application of reverse contrast Chinese characters in the actual market was in Japan at the end of the 19th century. At that time, a company named Tsukiji Type Foundry was inspired by the “Lacquer Script” and from a copy of an American book titled *Eleventh Book of Specimens of Printing Types and Every Requisite for Typographical Use and Adornment*, which included information about the Latin Fantail font (the exact time of the first production of this font is still unclear; it is considered to originate from the West, named for its ornamental elements resembling a “peacock or pigeon-like” tail structure). This printing company attempted to transplant the original Fantail into the East Asian context. The designer or design team of Tsukiji Type Foundry keenly captured the typical “thick horizontal and thin vertical” characteristics of Fantail, applying the same approach to Chinese characters, resulting in a font named フワンテール形 (Fuantail form), which first appeared in the company’s *Type Specimen Book* in November 1903. The Japanese Printing Society’s publication *Printing Encyclopedia* provides a brief overview of this font:

A decorative font. Similar to the Gothic style but with a reversed structure compared to the Mincho style, with thinner vertical lines and thicker horizontal lines. Apart from New Year’s cards or advertisements, it is generally not used for any other purposes. It is a font designed and sold by the Tsukiji Type Foundry in Tokyo during the middle of the Meiji era and became a phototypesetting font in 1937.

The フワンテール形 (Fuantail form) can be said to be one of the oldest Japanese fonts created for printing. Although the font was not widely used at its inception, it marked the beginning of the reverse contrast style taking root in Japan’s typographic printing market. This aesthetic, derived from the British Isles, thus began its journey in East Asia.

Discussion

Inheritance

In this chapter, we will focus on analyzing two representative works of Chinese character reverse contrast design mentioned previously: “Lacquer Script” and “フワンテール形 (Fantail)”. These two font styles not only reflect the unique aesthetics of the earliest reverse contrast design in Chinese characters but also showcase their application and evolution in different historical periods and cultural contexts. Through in-depth analysis of “Lacquer Script” and “フワンテール形”, we aim to extract their common advantages and unique features in design, and discuss how these elements can be effectively applied in modern Chinese character reverse contrast font design.

Treatment of type skeleton structure. In Western reverse contrast fonts, the visual weight is typically positioned at the top and bottom or either, aimed at showcasing the contrast between horizontal thickness and vertical thinness. The visual gravity is set at the top and bottom, not the middle, relating to the structural nature of English characters themselves. In Chinese reverse contrast font design, the key is how to maintain a constant overall visual weight for each character during mass design and ensure a strong, unified, and connected horizontal visual gravity. However, in “Lacquer Script”, due to the writing tool, the variation in horizontal and vertical strokes is quite uniform, leading to the issues mentioned above. When these two types of strokes cannot vary,

each character, due to differences in the number of strokes, tends to have inconsistent centers of gravity and chaotic structure. This issue does not arise in “Lacquer Script” calligraphy works because there is a type of “slanting stroke” that is not limited by horizontal or vertical directions, balancing the overall visual center and adjusting the structure. For example, structures like “pie, na, dian” (left slant, right slant, and dot) can achieve uniformity in “zimian” (character face), “bubai” (spacing), and “huidu” (gray scale) of the font.

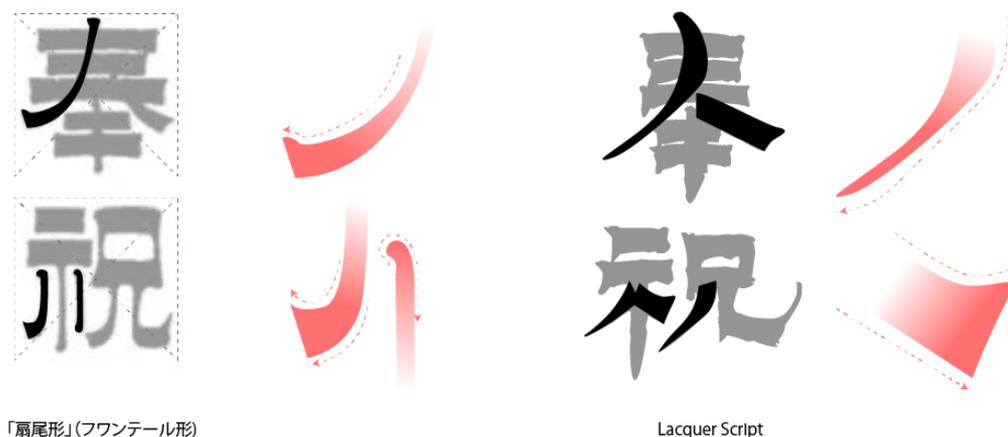


Figure 3. Comparison of slanting strokes in Fantail and Lacquer Script.

While “slanting strokes” can resolve the structure issue, “Lacquer Script” as a calligraphy style has too high a degree of freedom and randomness in strokes, making this solution not entirely applicable in digital font design. On the other hand, “Fantail” (ファンテール形), intended for print, handles the structure more standardly and uniformly. Besides adopting the squared structure typical for Chinese movable type, it also incorporates unique considerations in the “pie” and “na” structures. For example, in the character “zhu”, the left component’s “pie” and “na” are significantly reduced, or the “na” is even changed into a vertical stroke, to free up visual space for the right component, thereby unifying the overall “huidu” (gray scale) of the font. This special treatment of strokes provides a solution for modern Chinese reverse contrast font structure handling.

Variation of horizontal strokes. Unlike Latin characters, Chinese characters have multiple and complex horizontal strokes. While discerning the structure of Chinese characters, it is also necessary to consider the hierarchical relationship between different components, especially under the reverse contrast attribute where horizontal strokes are typically thickened. This necessitates a detailed analysis based on the specific character structure. In “Lacquer Script”, due to the uniqueness of calligraphic writing which progresses from top to bottom, there is no particular emphasis on “character height”. Additionally, given its unique writing tools, the horizontal strokes in Lacquer Script do not exhibit significant thickness variations. This approach, however, is not applicable to modern Chinese reverse contrast font design. In contrast, the horizontal strokes in “Fantail” (ファンテール形) more closely adhere to modern font design logic. In the “Fantail” (ファンテール形) font, horizontal strokes closer to the center of gravity become finer, while those towards the top and bottom ends display stronger contrast. This treatment bears resemblance to some characteristics of the French Clarendon font but has been further optimized. In Chinese characters, the strokes in the middle part are not the focal point of visual gravity, so this subtle treatment does not affect the overall reverse contrast character form. Furthermore, with this unique variation in horizontal strokes, there is a greater sense of rhythm in the contrast between different characters.

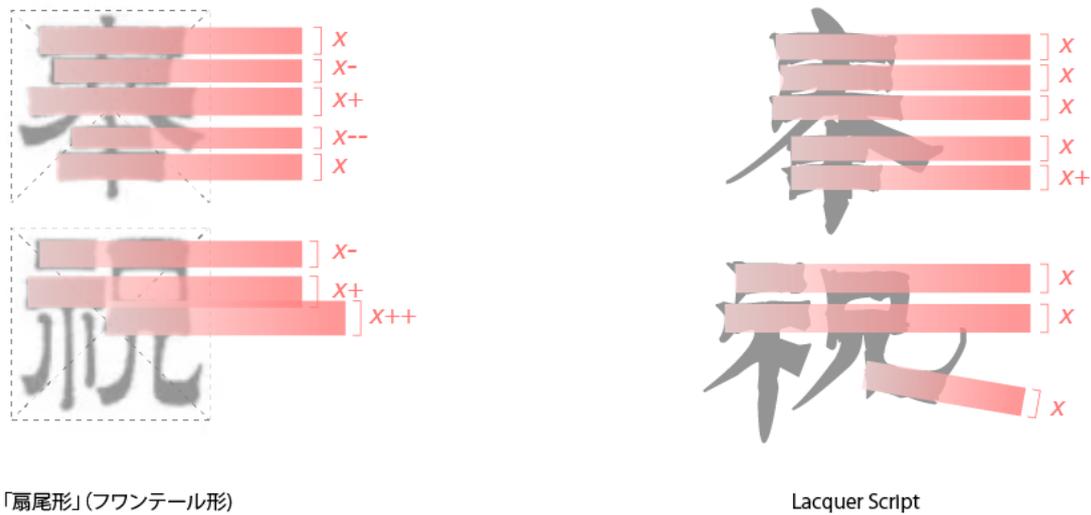


Figure 4. Variation of horizontal strokes in Fantail and Lacquer Script.

Stroke integration. “Lacquer Script” has always existed in the calligraphy world as a style with a distinct and unique stance, not only due to its reverse contrast stroke characteristics but also because its initiation and termination strokes do not adhere to the basic features of traditional calligraphic fonts. Specifically, the “slant” stroke is executed with sharp and acute precision, contributing to a unique calligraphic aesthetic. Conversely, the “press” stroke is dealt with in a straightforward manner, transforming a horizontal line into a “press” by simply tilting it. Notably, despite weakening some of the commencement traits of brush calligraphy in “bend” and “lift” strokes, the structure based on Chinese characters can still reflect the framework of Song-font. As for the “Fantail” (フワンテール形) used in print, its approach to merging strokes holds greater reference value. Beyond the reverse contrast characteristics of horizontal and vertical strokes, the structures of “slant” and “press” in this font essentially merge completely with those of the “Song-font”, exhibiting unique features like “trumpet mouth” and “goose head hook”. However, this integration, due to the absence of decorative elements in both horizontal and vertical strokes, also carries features of the “Hei font”, notably with horizontal strokes that are concave in the middle and convex at both ends, a fundamental characteristic of “Hei font”. Additionally, for printing purposes, the “Fantail” (フワンテール形) maintains certain “ink traps”, providing a direction for modern Chinese reverse contrast design.

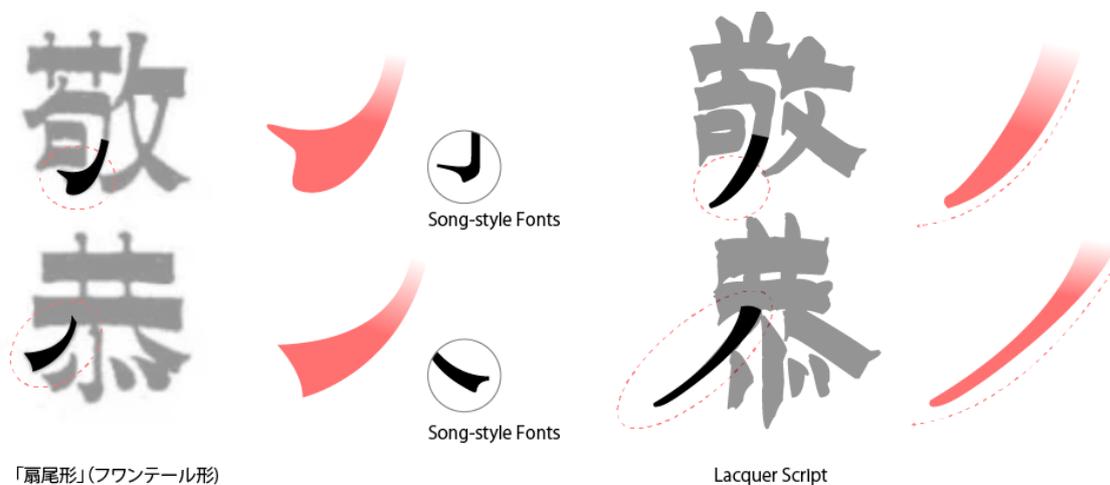


Figure 5. Characteristics of strokes in Fantail and Lacquer Script.

Innovation

Following the analysis of two influential Chinese reverse contrast fonts in the previous section, we have gained an understanding of the basic design methods for Chinese reverse contrast design. Building on this, this section will focus on discussing the two most impactful Chinese reverse contrast fonts in recent years: “Ribaasu” and “Basic Artistic”. Through an in-depth analysis of these two fonts, we will unveil key features and innovative techniques in modern Chinese reverse contrast design, while also exploring future trends in the Chinese reverse contrast style, bringing new insights and directions to the field of Chinese character design.

Exaggerated vertical and horizontal stroke contrast. Compared to the two fonts previously introduced, “Ribaasu” has more exaggerated stroke contrast, closely resembling the characteristics of the French Clarendon font. Its horizontal strokes are significantly thicker, while its vertical strokes are much finer. However, there is not a strong sense of abruptness within the font, thanks to “Ribaasu’s” unique handling of vertical strokes, which includes variations in the bell-shaped endings. This approach allows for a visual transition where horizontal and vertical strokes intersect, softening the stark contrast between them. This makes the overall appearance softer, more vibrant, and youthful. This special “bell mouth” design is also reflected in the “stroke”, “hook”, and “dot” components. Using this treatment in traditional font design would diminish the distinctive features of reverse contrast characters, but exaggerated “bell mouth” designs help balance the font by adjusting accordingly.

For the “Basic Artistic”, changes in the strokes are less complex. This font designates eight levels of thickness for horizontal strokes and six for vertical strokes. Such combinations accommodate most Chinese characters and improve the efficiency of font creation, yet they restrict the style and structure of characters.

Variation of horizontal strokes. In the treatment of horizontal stroke variations, fonts like French Clarendon have provided new ideas for Chinese reverse-contrast design, as evidenced by the “Fuanteeru” font and continued in modern fonts like “Ribaasu” and “Basic Artistic”. These methods are increasingly used to an extreme degree, most notably in Ribaasu, where only the top and bottom horizontal strokes are thickest and consistent, while the horizontal strokes in other parts of the character adjust according to their position. This design aligns more perfectly with each Chinese character, maintaining a high level of consistency between characters. In “Basic Artistic”, the eight levels of thickness for horizontal strokes cover the needs of most Chinese characters. This standardized stroke design maintains a highly consistent visual style for “Basic Artistic”, with a smoother change in visual gravity gradually moving towards the center of the font and becoming thinner.

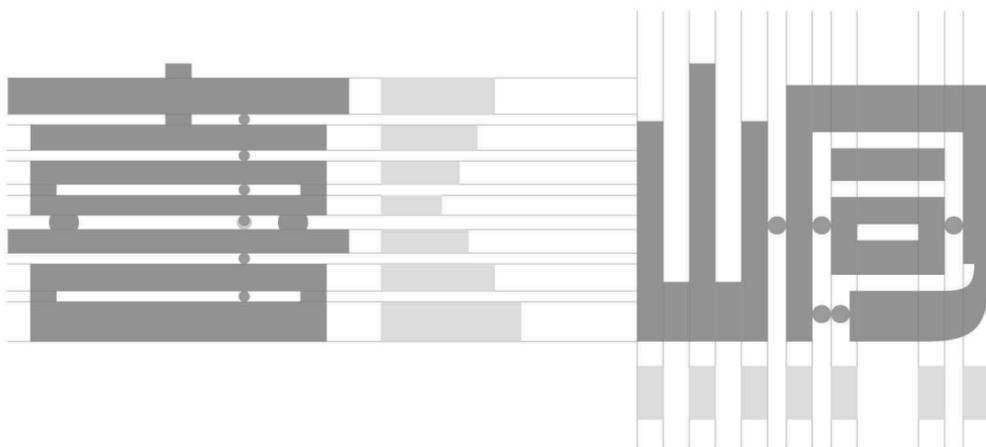


Figure 6. Horizontal and vertical strokes in “Basic Artistic”.

Diversity of stroke elements. The “trumpet mouth” structure used in the previously mentioned Ribaasu font not only serves to adjust the stroke structure and optimize the character frame but also helps to unify and define the font style. This decorative element, simple yet versatile, is applied across almost all Chinese characters, enhancing visual memory and revealing a unique font style. In contrast, the “Basic Artistic” font incorporates a more diverse set of decorative elements, likely due to its detailed specifications for horizontal and vertical strokes. This necessitates the introduction of creative and playful elements to highlight the font’s style and characteristics, such as designing the “dot” stroke as a circle and setting “ink traps” at the bends of vertical strokes to visually even out the curved parts. Moreover, “Basic Artistic” introduces an innovative way of combining characters: When typing a four-character Chinese idiom, the font transforms into a composite character as shown below, adding fun to the font while also expanding its application scenarios.

Results

In this thesis, we have delved into the unique design methodologies and evolutionary processes of Chinese reverse contrast typefaces. The initial sections introduce the core characteristics of reverse contrast typefaces, followed by a discussion on different reverse contrast styles in Latin scripts, particularly focusing on the “Italian” and “French” styles as notable examples. In exploring the origins of Chinese reverse contrast, we trace back to the 17th century during the Qing Dynasty, where early examples of reverse contrast characteristics in Chinese calligraphy were identified, providing unique guidance and inspiration for modern Chinese reverse contrast design. Although reverse contrast features in Chinese characters were present during the Qing Dynasty, the actual application in the printing domain was realized with Japan’s “フアンテール形”, marking the beginning of the use of Chinese reverse contrast typefaces in printing. By analyzing these two early typefaces, we have summarized inheritable design methods applicable to modern design: such as balancing the type structure with “slanting strokes”, adjusting horizontal strokes to fit different character forms, and blending with other style typefaces. These design methods have been applied and innovated in recently designed typefaces “Ribaasu” and “Basic Artistic Font”, showing innovations in more exaggerated vertical and horizontal stroke contrasts for a stronger visual impact. Compared to earlier works, these two new typefaces feature bolder and more standardized horizontal stroke treatments, resulting in more cohesive structures and styles. Moreover, these typefaces display unique styles in decorative stroke treatments, enhancing the typeface’s playfulness and creativity. Through the analysis of this study, not only have we summarized the core methodological approaches to Chinese reverse contrast typeface design, but we have also highlighted new trends in design, providing new directions and insights for the future of Chinese typeface design.

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