

# The Implantation Application of Traditional Chinese Calligraphy in Book Cover Design under Contemporary Aesthetic Trend

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In the information age, the public's aesthetic consciousness of art has changed dramatically, showing a new trend of pursuing abstraction and personalisation of art works. In this context, Chinese traditional calligraphy, which carries deep oriental cultural heritage and artistic taste, and is highly flexible and adaptable in terms of artistic form, has great application value in the field of book cover design. This paper first analyzes the trend characteristics of the development and transformation of public artistic aesthetic consciousness from the industrial era to the information age, and then explores the artistic form characteristics of traditional Chinese calligraphy, and proposes that traditional calligraphy has great application value in book cover design. Finally, several innovative and clever cases of incorporating traditional calligraphy into book cover design were highlighted, providing inspiration for design ideas and methods.

**Keywords:** aesthetic trend, traditional Chinese calligraphy, cover design

## Introduction

As is well known, the development of human civilization cannot be separated from the dissemination of culture. One of the most important media in cultural dissemination is books. As writer Gorky once said, books are the ladder of human progress. In the 21st century, with the worldwide application and popularization of the Internet, the way of cultural communication has changed greatly. However, books remain one of the most important mediums of communication. And the language information, cultural semantics and artistic images conveyed by books are far beyond the content of the Internet important position. The cover of a book should not only allow readers to understand the knowledge content in the book at the first moment, but also visually touch the readers, creating a psychological impact on them and creating a strong artistic feeling. As the famous British designer Richard Hollis said, "The cover is to the text as the clothes are to the body" (Richard Hollis, Twentieth Century, *Mid-20th Century Modernist Graphic Design*). Therefore, how to design a book cover with outstanding characteristics, distinctive personality and strong artistic appeal in today's extremely wide application of the Internet is an important issue that every designer needs to face.

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The constituent elements of a book cover mainly include graphics, text, color, and other aspects. Traditional Chinese calligraphy itself is not only an expression of words, but also can be transformed into various shapes and attached with various colors. Such characteristics make traditional Chinese calligraphy a source of inspiration for innovative book cover designs. As early as 1909 at the beginning of the last century, Lu Xun chose the title of the book written by Chen Shizeng in small seal script on the cover of his published *Collection of Foreign Novels*. What this paper is about is the analysis of the value and method of traditional calligraphy implanted into book cover design in the information age when the public aesthetic consciousness has been changing trend-wise.

### **Analysis of the Development Trend of Public Aesthetic Awareness in the Information Age**

Before analysing the application value and application method of traditional calligraphy art implanted in book cover design, it is first necessary to clarify the basic development trend of public aesthetic consciousness in the information age.

Before entering the present information age, human society was in a long period of industrialisation. The concept of aesthetics and aesthetic consciousness that corresponds to large-scale industrial production was gradually formed, and this aesthetic consciousness is centred on the concept of “technological aesthetics”, which stresses rationalism. “Technical aesthetics” focuses on the logic, rationality and inevitability of the process of artistic creation. It focuses on the basis for the creation of art forms and the laws of evolution. All kinds of art forms produced under the concept of “technological aesthetics”, including book cover art, have clear semantics and straightforward expressions. The so-called clear semantics means that readers or viewers can clearly and unambiguously recognise the content and intention of the creator from the artistic language of the work. A straightforward presentation means that the composition, colours and materials used in the artwork are simple and direct, with the sole purpose of clearly expressing the theme of the work. As Mies van der Rohe, the master of Western modernist architecture in the 1920s, famously said, “Less is more” (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1928, *Architectural Design Manifesto*). Therefore, in the age of industrialisation, the mainstream artistic aesthetic consciousness of the public is to advocate rationality and figurative thinking at the same time.

As far as book cover design is concerned, the works of many famous designers in the West in the industrialised era generally use simple and eye-catching, contrasting two or three colours to complete the cover composition, supplemented by strong lines of English titles, English author names, or other decorative lines reflecting the theme of the book, forming a clear theme and a characteristic artistic effect. Famous designer Alvin Le Stieg designed the cover of the two books *Mr. Inspector* and *America*, Paul Rand designed the cover of the two books *Prejudice* and *Modern Temperament*, and the cover of the book *Jazz Style* designed by Pallen Fleet, are all like this. This fully reflects the characteristics of the artistic aesthetic of the industrialised era.

With the advent of the information age, the former aesthetic consciousness and concepts of art have been impacted and gradually transformed in the opposite direction, with a strong rebellious nature. This is the same as the transformation of the handicraft era into the industrialised era, which brought about changes in the aesthetic consciousness of the public, and stems from the changes in socio-economic patterns.

The Information Age is also known as the Digital Age, and digitisation is a distinctive feature of this era. It is widely used in various fields such as economy, science and technology, culture, education and so on, and has

also penetrated into the life of every member of the society. It has not only changed people's way of life, but also changed many ways of thinking and concepts of thinking, including artistic aesthetic consciousness.

Numbers are abstract. It is expressed in the fact that not only mathematical concepts and symbols are abstract, but also mathematical methods are abstract. The ancient Western philosopher Pythagoras believed that number is the origin of all things. Wang Xiaotong, a Chinese scholar in the early Tang Dynasty, believed that mathematical theories are profound and extremely widely used, and that it is the most abstract study in the universe. The abstract nature of numbers and their extensive use in contemporary society, coupled with the development of a digital society, have gradually led the public's aesthetic consciousness to abstract and personalised thinking, which is a basic and significant trend in the development of the public's aesthetic consciousness in the information age.

The aesthetics of abstract art is a process from observation to analysis to understanding. In the process of thinking and interpreting the abstract symbolism of art works, people can obtain rich, multi-level psychological feelings and spiritual perception. Gestalt psychology research results show that the more abstract, more complex, seemingly incomplete and undirected graphics have greater stimulation and attraction to the aesthetic subject. It can arouse greater curiosity of aesthetic subjects, leading to their psychological tension and high concentration of attention, thus producing a series of creative perceptual activities in their minds. The public's knowledge of art works in the information age is increasingly not satisfied with the only answer. The demand is for works of art to have more potential for understanding and interpretation. This demand is precisely what abstract art works can satisfy.

The aesthetic consciousness of the industrialised era emphasises the commonality and universality of works of art, seeks to reflect the eternal and unchanging beauty of artistic thinking and universally applicable aesthetic principles, and seeks universally applicable laws and universal artistic language in artistic expression. The exclusion of sensual and personalised artistic factors is reflected in the exclusion of the sense of disorder and contingency in the form of artistic expression. But nowadays, in the face of complex, multi-level, multi-demanding aesthetic subjects, such an aesthetic sense is obviously outdated. In the information age, the public has begun to replace the former linear and uniform aesthetic thinking mode with a diffuse and personalised aesthetic thinking mode, and appreciates more the sensibility and contingency of artistic creation.

As explained above, the aesthetic consciousness of the industrialised era emphasised the purity of artistic expression and the clarity of meaning. In the information age, however, this basic concept has been seriously challenged. It is considered to neglect the complex emotions of human beings, which will make the artistic expressions deviate and oppose the emotional needs of the aesthetic subject. The trend of the development of the public's aesthetic consciousness in the information age puts more emphasis on compatibility, pursuing the use of diversified and ambiguous forms of artistic expression to satisfy the needs of the public at different levels, so that works of art can be differentiated and interpreted according to the cultural backgrounds of the aesthetic subjects, and thus presenting colourful and variegated aesthetic benefits.

## **The Artistic Form of Traditional Chinese Calligraphy and Its Application Value in Book Cover Designs**

Traditional Chinese calligraphy is an art form of writing based on the form of Chinese characters. In his book *Aesthetics*, the Western philosopher Hegel stated, “The elements of beauty can be divided into two kinds. One is internal, i.e. content. The other is extrinsic, that is, the thing by which the content reveals its meaning and character. The inner beauty is expressed through the outer beauty, and with the help of the outer performance, one can recognise the inner nature” (Hegel, 1835, *Aesthetics*). Traditional Chinese calligraphy has both formal beauty, i.e., external beauty and connotative beauty, internal beauty, and its internal and external beauty are highly unified. As described in the writings of Yang Xiong, a great scholar of the Han Dynasty, calligraphy is a depiction of the heart. As an ancient and elegant art form, traditional Chinese calligraphy has a unique art form and artistic expression. When the author of calligraphy is joyful, his calligraphy works will be soaring; when the author of calligraphy is angry, his calligraphy works will be bold and sluggish; when the author of calligraphy is calm, his calligraphy works will be peaceful and soothing. Traditional Chinese calligraphy is a visual art reflecting the emotions of the human mind, and the various temperaments shown in the external forms of traditional calligraphy works are the refraction of the inner world of the creators.

In traditional Chinese calligraphy, Seal Script is subtle, Clerical Script is simple, Regular Script is straight, Running Script is elegant and Cursive Script is dynamic. In terms of external forms, the strokes of traditional Chinese calligraphy are both simple and complex, with both “point” and “line” forms in the strokes, and when the strokes are enlarged, they can be changed into “surface” forms. Through the changes in the thickness, weight, stretch and twist of various strokes, as well as the overall layout of the writing, it is possible to change both the beauty of the form and the beauty of the mood of the art graphics.

Chinese characters are the symbols of language, which are naturally abstract. As an artistic expression of Chinese characters, traditional Chinese calligraphy also has an abstract meaning. This kind of art form with abstract meaning has a broader application space in the era of more and more respect for the abstract thinking of art. By implanting traditional Chinese calligraphy into book cover design in an appropriate way, the abstract aesthetic sense of books can be more in line with the changing aesthetic consciousness of the contemporary public.

The external form of traditional Chinese calligraphy is characterised by versatility. It is the simplest way to sketch out infinite variations of forms and deep-connotation imagery. When the same text is written in calligraphy, it can make corresponding morphological changes according to the general layout of different images. This feature makes traditional Chinese calligraphy have great flexibility and adaptability when applied to book covers. It enables traditional Chinese calligraphy to be appropriately embedded in the cover picture with changing and irregular forms according to the designer’s requirements for the overall layout of the cover, constituting an organic part of the picture and making the picture show strong individual characteristics. The external form of traditional Chinese calligraphy also has the characteristic of movement, which makes the cover image implanted by it also present the dynamic beauty full of personality.

For the aspects of graphics, characters and colours that constitute the elements of book covers, traditional Chinese calligraphy is firstly presented as the characters in the book cover images. Since the strokes of

calligraphy have a certain width, it is possible to partially embed some graphics, or to break down and embed different graphics in different strokes. In this way, traditional calligraphy is not only an expression of text, but also a graphic representation of the book's content. These graphics can also be transformed into drawings, so that the drawings are integrated into traditional calligraphy fonts, thus forming a combination of text and drawings, and achieving the organic fusion of multiple art forms in the same work of art, and realising a diversified visual art effect.

It can be seen from the above analysis that in the new aesthetic era which gradually advocates the abstraction, individualisation and diversification of artistic creation, traditional Chinese calligraphy with its unique art form and rich cultural connotation has great application value in the field of book cover design.

### Methodological Insights from Classic Cases

In recent years, there have been some designers focusing on the implantation of traditional Chinese calligraphy in book cover design, and some excellent design cases have appeared. The design ideas and design methods used in these cases bring a lot of inspiration.

The cover design of the book *Lost Games*, published in 2001, uses the three Chinese characters for “大败局” written in the free flowing script of traditional calligraphy as the most eye-catching irregular element on the cover. The title of the book and the author's name are written in regular Song characters, together with the author's irregular handwritten signature, forming a compositional relationship on the cover in which two irregular fonts and one regular font coexist side by side. The enlarged and seemingly exaggerated running script font give the cover a distinctive character and strongly attracts readers' attention. In addition, the designer has superimposed the artistic news report text graphics in the calligraphic strokes, so that the two forms of calligraphic strokes and text graphics are combined into one. Readers can feel the informative, heavy and profound content of the book from the cover, which increases the readers' desire to have a deeper understanding of the book. This kind of design will be more popular and well received only after the public's aesthetic awareness in the information age has undergone a trend change. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Cover of the book *The Great Defeat*.

The cover of the book *Pulse Diagnosis in Traditional Chinese Medicine*, published in 2001, uses the small seal script, which has the strongest sense of abstraction in traditional calligraphy, to write the word “脉”, which occupies almost the entire page, with a strong twist in the calligraphic form of the word, just like the human body’s meridians and blood veins, which emphasises the expression of the book’s theme. At the same time, the shape of the character seems to be a painting with ink stains, with strong individual characteristics, reflecting the aesthetic sense of the information age, which advocates abstraction and individuality. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Cover of the book *Pulse Diagnosis in Traditional Chinese Medicine*.



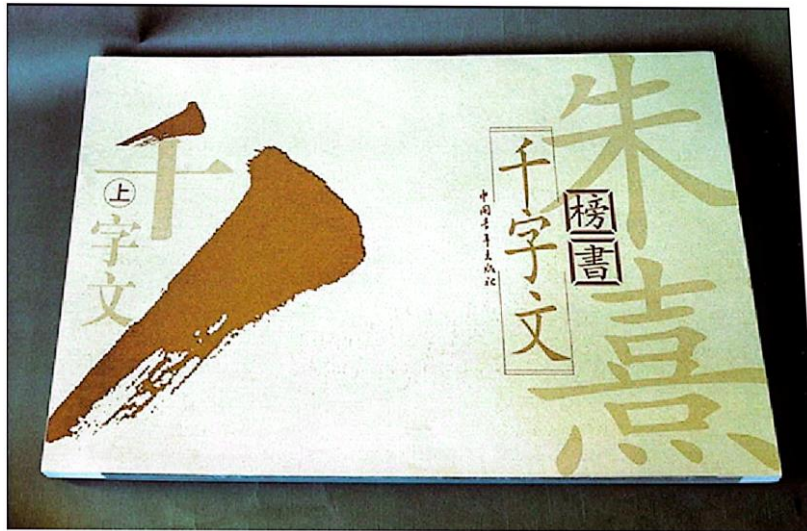
Figure 3. Cover of the book *70 Years of Ah Q*.

In the book *70 Years of Ah Q*, the word “Ah Q” in the cover is written in a more exaggerated style, with the braid in the side portrait of Ah Q drawn in ink on the cover as the final stroke of the word “Q”. The clever fusion of the calligraphic text and the portrait clearly shows the background of the time in which the character of Ah Q



lived and reveals the theme of the book. In particular, the stroke “O” in the character “Q” is written in eye-catching red, giving the cover an abstract and intriguing artistic image. (Figure 3)

On the cover of each of the three volumes of *Zhu Xi Bang Shu Qian Zi Wen*, one of the most distinctive strokes of each of the three Chinese characters “千”, “字”, and “文”, was chosen as a thematic element for the composition of the cover. This is a clever and eye-catching way to highlight the content theme of the book. The three running script strokes are vivid and smooth, with a strong traditional Chinese cultural flavour. Morphologically, these three strokes are different from three complete and realistic calligraphic Chinese characters, with a strong sense of abstraction and individuality, and thus have more aesthetic characteristics of the art of the information age. (Figure 4)



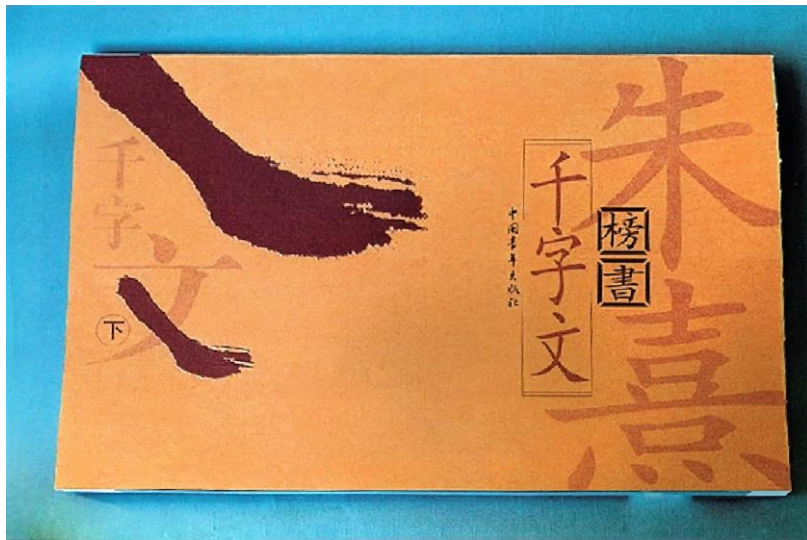


Figure 4. Cover of the book *Zhu Xi Bang Shu Qian Zi Wen*.

In terms of the application method of traditional calligraphy implanted in book cover design, the above four cases cleverly use the character shapes of traditional Chinese calligraphy, including the overall character shapes and part of the strokes, to bring a novel artistic aesthetic interest to the book cover. In addition, some designers have abstracted traditional calligraphy fonts into symbols and graphics with specific cultural meanings for readers to fully consider and savour, which is another creative idea and method in line with the development trend of the public's aesthetic consciousness in the information age. These symbols and graphics contain rich meanings and beautiful moods, and when readers see such book cover designs, they will first be attracted by their unique visual effects, and then they will analyse and associate with them, and then they will appreciate the aesthetic interests revealed by the book covers.

The cover design of the book *Kunqu* is clean and elegant, with a clever artistic treatment of the word "Kunqu". The upper part of the Chinese character "昆", i.e. "日", is abstractly transformed into the traditional Chinese cloud pattern which is similar to it, which not only has an abstract meaning, but also reflects the traditional Chinese culture. The lower part of the character "昆", i.e. "比", is written in clerical script, giving it a more subdued appearance and creating a strong contrast with the cloud pattern in the upper part. The Chinese character "曲" is also written in an abstract and distorted style, giving the strokes in the character different forms and meanings. The "日" in the Chinese character "曲" is abstractly transformed into a full moon, a symbol of harmony and beauty, which is reflected behind the cloud pattern, emphasising the moving charm of the art of kunqu. In addition, the designer abstracted the two vertical lines in the character "曲" into two water lines of different lengths, gradually falling from a high place, which expresses that the singing of "Kunqu" is like the clouds in the sky and the flowing water on the ground, which is as winding and unending as the clouds in the sky and the flowing water on the ground. (Figure 5)





Figure 5. Font Design for the Book Cover of *Kunqu*.



Figure 6. Font Design for the Book Cover of *The End of the World*.

Designer Han Jiaying's cover for the book "The End of the World" uses the Chinese character for "文" in the traditional calligraphy of the seal script, draws a sideways figure with calligraphic strokes, and combines the two to form a graphic with a strong sense of abstraction, which makes readers want to explore the meaning of the graphic, and ultimately discern the design theme—humanities. (Figure 6)

### Concluding Remarks

In today's era, the Internet dissemination of information is extremely wide, but at the same time, the publication of books has also been growing explosively, and the competition between the number of books issued has never been more intense. The external form of a book gives readers a crucial first impression about the quality of the book, which greatly influences their willingness to read and buy. Book cover design determines the market fate of books to a great extent. With the innovative thinking and methods in line with the development trend of public aesthetic consciousness in the information age, the clever application of traditional Chinese calligraphy art in book cover design will enable book designers to find a new path of creation, and will also enable the traditional Chinese calligraphy culture to be inherited and carried forward in the field of book design.

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