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DESIGN FEATURES OF MOVIE POSTERS IN MAINLAND CHINA DURING THE 1980S

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Abstract. *The purpose* of the study is to analyze in-depth the design characteristics of movie posters in mainland China during the 1980s, focusing on aspects such as graphic use, color schemes, and layout composition. The research will also compare these characteristics with those of movie posters from the previous historical period, the 1950s and 1960s, to highlight the differences in design principles and specific design features across these two periods.

Methodology. The methodology is based on systemic-analytical, comparative, imaginative-stylistic, complex-historical, compositional-constructive methods, which allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the problem and the drawing of well-founded conclusions. By closely analyzing the visual elements of these posters, the study reveals the unique design features of 1980s Chinese movie posters.

Results. The movie posters of the 1980s in mainland China demonstrate a significant richness in terms of composition and the integration of graphics and text. The posters show distinct differences from those of the 1950s and 1960s in their graphic use, color configuration, and layout. The 1980s posters place greater emphasis on emotional expression and thematic representation, reflecting the shift in Chinese society and culture from a singular focus on revolutionary heroism to a more diversified cultural backdrop. This shift is reflected in specific iconographic changes within the posters.

Scientific novelty. For the first time, the design features of mainland Chinese movie posters in the 1980s were identified and described, and a comparative analysis was conducted, offering a systematization of movie poster designs in different periods. The study focused on the evolution of poster graphics, colors, and layouts, revealed new trends in artistic expression and cultural communication in mainland Chinese movie posters in the 1980s, and it was explored how these changes reflect the development of Chinese society and culture.

Practical relevance. The research provides an overall view of the design evolution of movie posters in 1980s China. It contributes to understanding the aesthetic principles and historical trends of Chinese movie poster design from both a historical and textual perspective. From a practical perspective, the study offers historical insights that can serve as a reference for contemporary movie poster design practices.

Keywords: movie poster, design, Mainland China, symbols, composition features, color features, layout, graphic, culture, communication, visual.

INTRODUCTION

This research is focused on the transformative period of Chinese society and culture in the 1980s. During this period, movie posters not only reflected new artistic and design trends but also mirrored the gradual opening and diversification of societal thought and popular culture. The background emphasizes the role of movie posters as a medium for cultural communication and their role in documenting and reflecting societal changes.

ANALYSIS OF PREVIOUS RESEARCHES

Domestic research on the design of 1980s movie posters in mainland China is mainly framed within the Frankfurt School's approach to mass culture, which examines political, economic, and cultural perspectives through image analysis. Studies in this field have summarized the key visual characteristics of movie posters during this historical phase, focusing on how these posters reflected the distinctive features of the 1980s in China.

One representative work is Zuyu's Research on Movie Posters from the 1950s–1960s and 1980s in China, which explores the development of movie posters during these two periods. It discusses the formal language, artistic expression, and socio-cultural contexts of these posters, emphasizing the importance of movie posters as visual cultural symbols and analyzing how they were influenced by domestic and international artistic trends [19].

Historical and Comparative Analysis Approaches is normal. In studies such as 1950s Movie Posters and Aesthetics-Aesthetic Images Under the People's Aesthetic Expression by Cui Jianjian and Yang Zhiying, the authors analyze the artistic forms of 1950s Chinese movie posters, exploring how these posters inherited traditional Chinese painting styles while adhering to the "People's Aesthetics" principles, reflecting the era's spirit and political ideology [2].

Image analysis is a key method in many related studies. For instance, Han Yanbing's On the Composition Design of 1980s Chinese Movie Posters dissects the compositional characteristics of 1980s movie posters, exploring how different composition patterns influenced the visual effects of the posters [8]. Similarly, Aidi Sha's Disorderly: Not Seeking Accomplishment but Avoiding Faults—An Analysis of the Aesthetic Value of 1970s Chinese Movie Posters uses image analysis to classify and summarize the aesthetic value of posters from the 1970s [1]. Another area of significant research focuses on categorizing movie posters based on film genre. Notable work includes Yan Wei's A Study on the

Visual Language of Documentary Film Posters in China since the 1980s [16].

Some studies focus on the design symbols and languages used in Chinese movie posters across different historical periods. For example, Ling Lan's On the National Decorative Language Features in Chinese Movie Posters since the 1990s analyzes the characteristics of national decorative languages in movie posters and discusses how these elements reflect harmony, symbolism, and the era's spirit [14].

Globally, most studies view movie posters as tools for political and cultural communication, examining how they reflect China's social, political, and cultural changes. However, there is less focus on the formal artistic analysis of movie posters. A representative work is Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization, which explores how Chinese propaganda posters evolved from the revolutionary era to the modernization process [11]. The article "Red Aesthetics, Intermediality and the Use of Posters in Chinese Cinema after 1949" argues that such "posters" were not limited to printed materials but extended to other cultural objects that conveyed political messages through aesthetic forms [10].

In the 2023 paper The Reproductive Future: "Space Babies" in Chinese Posters 1950s–1980s by Yu Jin, the study takes an interesting approach by analyzing the "space baby" theme in Chinese propaganda posters between the 1950s and 1980s [18]. The paper explores how children's exploration of space was visually represented and compares it with similar artistic forms in the Soviet Union and the United States. It also investigates how these posters reinforced political, social, and gender discourses while promoting reproductive policies and emphasizing the future of children.

PURPOSE

The research objective is to summarize the specific characteristics of the graphic use, color application, and compositional patterns in 1980s mainland Chinese movie posters through extensive case analysis and comparisons with movie posters from the previous historical period, thereby further identifying the design features of mainland Chinese movie posters in the 1980s.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Compared to the previous historical period, Chinese movie posters in the 1980s not only focused on shaping the image, including realistic depictions of character designs and storylines, but also emphasized emotional

expression, particularly the delicate portrayal of the protagonist's psychological activities. This approach aligns with the conceptual features of movie posters, which, as noted, "differ from other advertisements in that they place particular emphasis on image creation and emotional rendering. The artistic expression of form reflects the creator's direct life experience, while a movie poster reflects and expresses the life created by the filmmaker, rather than simply repeating the art of cinema" [6, p. 140].

This indicates that Chinese movie posters in the 1980s marked significant progress compared to previous eras, reflecting the diversity of cultural development at the time as well as the relative freedom in artistic and design forms. Changes in the thematic focus of the posters are reflected in their visual expression, with significant innovations in the use of graphics, color schemes, and layout composition compared to the earlier historical period.

It is worth analyzing the use of graphics in movie poster design. From the 1950s to the 1970s, political propaganda posters became popular in China, and this influence was also reflected in the movie posters of the time. "Visual image design, as a form of cultural communication and information exchange in society, plays an important role in shaping national image, creating space for international political communication, and building the nation's identity" [17, p. 139]. At that time, "Chinese movie posters of this period were primarily influenced by Soviet and Polish political posters, which often featured strong color contrasts, bold and muscular character designs, and simple compositions" [3, p. 115]. While these posters showed some awareness of composition and modern design concepts, the graphics were relatively simple, mostly consisting of portrait illustrations or basic decorative graphics.

In contrast, the most significant difference between 1980s movie posters and those

from the 1950s to 1970s is "the focus on using a variety of illustrative and conceptual graphics for design, such as painted illustrations, photographic illustrations, collage illustrations, and typographic symbols" [7, p. 108]. The expression techniques were much more diverse.

Comparing the posters of *Blessing* (Fig. 1.a) and *Half is Flame, Half is Seawater* (Fig. 1.b), both place the characters in the lower-right corner of the composition. However, the latter is clearly more visually complex than the former. It not only includes graphic elements that refer to specific objects but also features symbolic graphics (such as sunglasses, and the blue sea and golden skyscrapers reflected in the lenses) as well as decorative patterns (such as the red lines embellishing the movie title). The poster of film (Fig. 1.c) "The broken promise" appears to have the same composition as the previous two posters, but in reality, it places the symbolic statue in the bottom right corner, while the path taken by the character in the bottom left corner forms an S-shaped composition, which enriches the poster's sense of depth.

On the other hand, movie posters in the 1980s began to emphasize conveying the meaning of graphics, focusing more on the psychological activities of the main characters in a more nuanced way. This was achieved through various aspects, such as the character's expressions, gaze, actions, and clothing, to portray the character's image. Additionally, background graphics were carefully used to accentuate the film's themes. For example, in the poster of *Half is Flame, Half is Seawater* (Fig. 1.a), the leather jacket and sunglasses are cultural symbols of a rock-and-roll youth, while the sunglasses at the top of the poster serve as a graphic window that reveals more content. The blue sea and golden skyscrapers within the window are concrete graphical elements that relate directly to the film's title, symbolizing the character's two vastly contrasting emotional experiences, love,



Fig. 1. a – poster of film "Blessing", 1956; b – poster of film "Half is Flame, Half is Seawater", 1989; c – poster of film "The broken promise", 1986

and attitude toward life. In the poster of *The Broken Promise*, the statue, which occupies about two-thirds of the frame, is the landmark of a northern village in the film. It symbolizes smallholder mentality and narrow rural concepts, while also serving as a historical reflection on acts of betrayal, carrying rich and profound symbolic meaning.

These characteristics are distinct from the movie posters of the 1950s–1970s, which were rigid and simplistic in depicting the characters' appearances and introducing the film's plot. In contrast, 1980s posters emphasized the "contrast and contrast" of graphics, providing a profound sense of realism and directly addressing the theme.

It is worth considering the configurations in the combination of colors in the depiction of characters and scenes. Compared to movie posters from the 1950s and 1960s, movie posters from the 1980s paid more attention to color usage, focusing on enhancing the storyline through background tones and the arrangement of colors. They aimed to evoke emotions and vividly highlight the film's theme, rather than just listing stills to narrate the plot.

For example, in movie posters from the 1950s and 1960s, color usage mainly revolved around managing the color layers in the image. However, these posters either focus on highlighting the main heroic character's image, or abruptly combine the character with symbolic scenes, without paying attention to the unity of the two.

In contrast, movie posters from the 1980s paid much more attention to the organic integration of characters and scenes to highlight the theme of the film. "They focused on maintaining a unified color tone that was consistent with the film's thematic content, while also emphasizing the expressive qualities of specific colors, reflecting the symbolic use of color in poster design" [15, p. 244]. In terms of color

usage, these posters typically employed simpler color schemes, avoiding overly bright or exaggerated hues. Common colors included basic socialist symbolic colors like red, yellow, blue and green, as seen in the posters for *The Herdsman* (Fig. 2.a), *Hibiscus Town* (Fig. 2.b), *Along the Silk Road* and *The Battle Years* shown below.

Consider the design of layouts. The film posters of the 1980s saw a rich variety of layout changes, with more diverse fonts and more dynamic arrangements. This marked the most significant formal achievement of Chinese film posters during the 1980s. At this time, film posters focused on the flexible and vivid contrasts of movement and stillness, reality and illusion in their layouts, revealing a light, natural arrangement rhythm and strong decorative colors. Unlike the film posters of the 1950s and 1960s, which simply used neat text arrangements to introduce the film's title, credits, and production company, the posters of the 1980s paid more attention to the flexible unity of text and images, skillfully showcasing the themes of the films. Specifically, there are four basic compositional styles in 1980s film posters.

Let's highlight the "pyramid" compositional scheme as one of the most frequently used in movie poster design. This composition is "an artistic continuation of the 'Cultural Revolution' film poster style" [20, p. 36]. For example, the 1980 poster for *The Death of a Marshal* (Fig. 3.a) places the protagonist in the absolute center of the image, with a towering, standing posture occupying more than half of the space. The upward angle emphasizes the heroic figure's grandeur. In the later 1980s film posters, the upward angle gradually shifted to a straight-on perspective, focusing more on rich, dynamic postures of the characters to convey relationships and emotions. In the film *Cold Night* (Fig. 3.b), the male protagonist is lying in the female protagonist's arms, which not only highlights their power dynamic but also foreshadows his ultimate fate



Fig. 2. a – poster of film "The Herdsman", 1982; b – poster of film "Hibiscus Town", 1987; c – poster of film "Along the Silk Road", 1982; d – poster of film "The Battle Years", 1982

(death in war). The image predominantly uses a misty blue tone, evoking a cold, desolate atmosphere. The woman's back figure walking away in the top left corner hints at a key plot point and leaves the audience in suspense visually: is she walking towards the light, or towards her doom? The poster of *The Secret Service in Action* demonstrates the widespread use of this type of composition in spy and action film poster design. The silhouettes on the left and right represent the struggle between the enemy and us, a design element that was later commonly seen in Hong Kong action film posters involving police and gangsters.

Also, the Grand Reunion composition is a poster layout style that was widely used in the 1980s and continues to influence designs today. It focuses on portraying a group of characters, and "the arrangement of these figures can be divided into two main types: horizontal and circular" [5, p. 138].

The horizontal Grand Reunion mode arranges characters in a line based on their importance, with the most significant figures placed at the center or in the foreground. The advantage of this style lies in its symmetrical or balanced composition, which provides the viewer with a sense of visual stability and harmony. However,



Fig. 3. a – poster of film "The Death of a Marshal", 1980; b – poster of film "Cold Night", 1984; c – poster of film "The Secret Service in Action", 1981

if not handled properly, it can appear rigid. For example, in historical films like *Xu Mao and Her Daughters* (Fig. 4.a) and *Echoes of the Qilian Mountains* (Fig. 4.b), which feature a large number of characters, this layout helps clearly present the profiles and relationships between characters.

In contrast, the poster for *Son of the Earth* (Fig. 4.c) uses a circular Grand Reunion composition. The heroic male protagonist is placed in the background, while the supporting characters

are arranged in a surrounding pattern in the foreground. This arrangement not only highlights the close connections between the characters and the shared challenges they face, but also adds depth and a sense of dynamism, making it more flexible and lively than the aforementioned posters.

It should be noted that, compared to the previous historical period, movie posters in the 1980s began to develop an awareness of layered composition. "Through layering, the viewer's



Fig. 4. a – poster of film "Xu Mao and Her Daughters", 1981; b – poster of film "Echoes of the Qilian Mountains", 1984; c – poster of film "Son of the Earth", 1982

gaze is guided to move across the image, which not only better captures their attention but also conveys the film's themes while adding visual depth" [4, p. 86]. Based on the arrangement of visual elements on the poster, this can be further divided into horizontal and vertical compositional styles. Horizontal staged composition arranges narrative elements in a horizontal manner, dividing the space with vertical lines. According to the number of frames, it can be categorized into two-part, three-part, and six-part compositions, as shown below. Horizontal staged composition is particularly effective in

guiding the viewer's gaze and creating suspense in posters for genres such as suspense films and action movies [9]. For example, in the poster for *The Culprit is Right Next to You* (Fig. 5.c), the leftmost section shows the female protagonist chasing the killer, filling the largest space and facing directly toward the audience. In the four sections to the right, the four characters are depicted in profile or semi-profile, with indicative symbols such as a dagger, hunting dog, judgment seat, and sunglasses, suggesting their potential roles as suspects, creating a sense of suspense.



Fig. 5. a – poster of film "Xu Mao and Her Daughters", 1981; b – poster of film "Young Heroes", 1980; c – poster of film "The Culprit is Right Next to You", 1985

Similarly, the vertical stage composition arranges narrative elements in a portrait format, dividing the element spaces with horizontal lines, which helps to enhance the sense of depth in the image. This technique became more widely used in movie posters in the 1980s. Films like *The Right Person* (Fig. 6.a) and *Peacock Princess* (Fig. 6.b) adopted the simplest layering method, placing characters in the upper layer and title information in the lower layer, using invisible frames to create separation. They also added decorative touches using traditional Chinese cultural elements in the blank spaces, such as the sword in image a and the flying horse in image b. *The Girl, Look at Me* (Fig. 6.c) and *Stranger Friends* (Fig. 6.d) follow a similar approach, positioning the characters at the top and bottom to form a balance, with the title and other text information in the middle. In image C, the male protagonist's white hat and the female protagonist's upward gaze convey their respective identities (doctor and patient). Image D shows a stronger sense of decoration, with the tilted title frame and small portraits of people standing in the upper and lower corners of the image, which effectively enhance the design. In image E, the poster for *Rickshaw Boy* (Fig. 6.e) arranges five main characters vertically, along with narrative symbols from the film (camel, rickshaw, copper coins) and regional symbols of Old Beijing

(Shichahai, Qianmen, candied haws) as smaller images at the bottom of the poster, not only increasing the decorative appeal but also highlighting the film's regional culture and literary nature.

In addition, in some movie posters, the two approaches mentioned above are combined, resulting in a composite stage-like composition. The film *Chen Geng in Distress* (Fig. 6.f) places the two characters – the protagonist Chen Geng and the female student he influences – on the upper and lower parts of the poster, respectively. Overall, this creates a vertical layered composition. The film title, credits, and other textual information divide the characters, forming a horizontal layered composition in certain areas, which gives the effect of the characters being imprisoned, echoing the plot.

CONCLUSIONS

The 1980s, as the first historical period of cultural flourishing following China's Reform and Opening Up, served as a bridge for film art. It both inherited the political nature from 1949 to 1979 and gradually began to explore the intrinsic value of the art form. This is reflected in poster design, a decorative form of graphic art, which started to break free from the rigid principles of the previous historical period – where hero figures were prominently emphasized and political



Fig. 6. a – poster of film "The Right Person", 1981; b – poster of film "Peacock Princess", 1982; c – poster of film "Girl, Look at Me", 1985; d – poster of film "Stranger Friends", 1982; e – poster of film "Rickshaw Boy", 1982; f – poster of film "Chen Geng in Distress", 1984

guidance was prioritized – leading to more lively and flexible explorations in form. "These explorations were evident in the use of graphics, color schemes, and compositional styles, all of which exhibited a certain richness" [13, p. 27].

Specifically, in graphic design, there was a shift towards using more diverse graphic elements; in color configuration, there was a focus on the integration of characters and scenes, with a relatively simple use of color. The most notable innovation was in compositional form. In addition to inheriting traditional pyramid-shaped compositions and the more common "grand reunion" compositions, the most significant development of the 1980s was the staged/layered composition model. Staged composition plays a significant role in guiding the viewer's attention, creating atmosphere, and conveying the film's themes. "At the same time, it creates a strong decorative effect, laying a solid foundation for the design aesthetics of contemporary Chinese movie posters" [12, p. 109]. The above features were further developed in the film poster designs of the 1990s, ultimately influencing the aesthetic standards of today's Chinese movie posters.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Ян І, Дубрівна А. Особливості дизайну кіноплакатів у материковому Китаї в 1980-х роках

Мета дослідження полягає в аналізі дизайнерських особливостей кіноплакатів у материковому Китаї в 1980-х роках та вивченні їх характеристик з точки зору графічного дизайну, конфігурації кольорів та композиції макету. Проводиться порівняння з дизайном материкових китайських кіноплакатів у попередньому історичному періоді, а саме, у 1950–1960-х роках, де підсумовуються відмінності принципів дизайну і конкретних особливостей проектування плакату.

Методологія базується на системно-аналітичному, порівняльному, образно-стилістичному, комплексно-історичному, композиційно-конструктивному методах, що дозволило всебічно дослідити проблему та зробити обґрунтовані висновки. Ретельно аналізуючи візуальні елементи цих плакатів, дослідження виявило унікальні особливості дизайну китайських кіноплакатів 1980-х років.

Результати. Кіноплакати 1980-х років у материковому Китаї демонструють значний розвиток з точки зору композиції та інтеграції графіки та тексту. Плакати демонструють чіткі відмінності від плакатів 1950-х і 1960-х років у їх графічному вияві, кольоровій конфігурації та макеті. Плакати 1980-х років приділяють більше уваги емоційному вираженню та тематичному представленню, відображаючи перехід у китайському суспільстві та культурі від єдиного фокусу на революційному героїзмі до більш диверсифікованого культурного фону. Ця зміна відображена в конкретних іконографічних змінах у кіноплакатах.

Наукова новизна. Вперше було визначено й описано особливості дизайну кіноплакатів материкового Китаю 1980-х років, а також проведено порівняльний аналіз, що пропонує систематизацію дизайну кіноплакатів у різні періоди. Дослідження було зосереджено на еволюції плакатної графіки, кольорів і макетів, виявило нові тенденції художнього вираження та культурної комунікації в кіноплакатах материкового Китаю в 1980-х роках, а також було досліджено, як ці зміни відображають розвиток китайського суспільства та культури.

Практична значущість. Дослідження дає загальне уявлення про еволюцію дизайну кіноплакатів у Китаї 1980-х років. Це сприяє розумінню естетичних принципів та історичних тенденцій дизайну китайських кіноплакатів як з історичної, так і з текстової точки зору. З практичної точки зору, дослідження пропонує ідеї, які можуть слугувати еталоном для сучасних практик дизайну кіноплакатів.

Ключові слова: кіноплакат, дизайн, материковий Китай, символи, особливості композиції, особливості кольору, макет, графіка, культура, комунікація, візуальний.

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