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# The Inspiration of “*The Spirit Resonance Theory*” in Poster Design

Yu Tian

College of Art, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, Hangzhou, China

**Email address:**

109340564@qq.com

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**Abstract:** This paper studies how to achieve the expression of poetic language in poster design, so as to solve the problem of ignoring people's inner feelings caused by the highly rational, cold and monotonous design language under the influence of the internationalist style. As early as the Tang and Song Dynasties, China's ancient Spirit Resonance Theory put forward the proposition that "spirit resonance makes poetry and painting valuable" and gives inspiration to poster design, which can be summarized as the wonderful idea of poster, the spirit expressed by graphic language, colors decided by the spirit, the real texture achieved by observation, and the layout penetrating feelings. Only by organically integrating and thoroughly understanding these factors can works with spirit resonance be realized.

**Keywords:** Poster, Design, Spirit Resonance Theory, Poetic, Inspiration

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## 1. Foreword

The term poster refers to the promotion materials posted on walls and other places. It is said that during the Qing Dynasty, when foreigners transported goods from the ocean into China's coastal terminals, in order to promote their goods, they posted publicity notices about the goods, which local residents called posters. [1] They capture people's attention with strong visual impact and resonate with the audience, hence fulfilling the purpose of transmitting information quickly, accurately and effectively.

Some people say that, with the development of digital technology, posters have become an obsolete art form. It is a known fact that posters are no longer a part of the mainstream media, but as a form of art, like the language of paintings, it will never die out and will always play a role other art forms cannot replace. [2] Ikko Tanaka believes that: "The poster is like a phoenix that is reborn after every fatal moment. Although looked down upon as a relic from the nineteenth century, it still lives on in this era. There is an inevitable reason for its existence, and that is that all you need is a piece of paper. All you have to do is print some information on a piece of paper of about one square meter. It is the easiest way to spread information." [3] As we can see, posters can be displayed anywhere without sophisticated

machinery, and this piece of paper with a condensed symbolic overtone is still eye-catching to this day.

Although the poster is still alive, its communication function is no longer dominant in the commercial field. Commercial advertising as its branch shall carry on its communication function. Today's posters began to focus more on artistry and expressiveness, and become vehicles for international cultural exchange. Poster design is no longer a mainstream strategy in merchandising, but reveals more about a culture's vitality and aesthetic interests. Especially under the context of profound changes in China's economy, society and cultural values, the focus of posters is shifting from the material to culture and from functionality to emotion, and this has become a new trend in poster design. [4]

However, along with the pursuit of functionality and rationalization of internationalism, the structure of posters have become increasingly more rational, standardized and formulaic, the visual language of posters is therefore inevitably monotonous and rigid, and people's emotional needs are neglected. As Sagmeister said: "I advocate that design should be close to life, people and mankind. The pure and mechanical style of Bauhaus, in my opinion, is completely divorced from life and human feelings. With that boring style, even though their design drawings may be perfect, they are extremely far away from us and our life."

What I prefer are those designs and creations that relate to real and ordinary things, or those that directly relate with our lives." [5] On the National Forum for Education of the Visual Communication Design held by the China Academy of Art, the dialogue between "poetry and rationality" sparked reflections of many in the design industry. As an important vehicle of visual communication design performance, the return of poetic language in posters will become the focus of the design industry. As early as in the Tang and Song Dynasties, *The Spirit Resonance Theory* of ancient China has been advocating that "the value of poems and paintings is in their spirit resonance", and is the source for the return of the artistic poetic language. Of course, this is also applicable to the expression of poetic language in poster design.

## 2. Origin of the "Spirit Resonance Theory"

In ancient times, the term "spirit"(shen) mostly referred to mysterious nature phenomena such as lightning. Humans back then could not explain them, thus they tended to personify masters of natural phenomena as "heavenly spirits". Later, the term "spirit" extended to the mysteries of human affairs. As is stated in the "Book of Changes • Shuogua" "When we speak of Spirit, we mean the subtle." Later on, the meaning of "spirit" was extended to include the spirit relative to the physical body.

As is stated in "Er Ya", "Paintings are Forms." By the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the portrait painting developed, and people had achieved quite a high level regarding form, however, they were not satisfied. Gu Kaizhi put forward the "Spirit Resonance Theory" [6] which argues that "When it comes to painting, figures are the most difficult, followed by landscapes, then dogs and horses; as for pavilions, they have fixed shapes. Although difficult to paint, but easy to achieve resemblance". [7] As we can see, to the figure paintings were pursuing an expression of the spiritual. At the same time, he also clearly stated the best way to express the character's spiritual temperament: "expressive portrayal is to be in the center", which shows that the portrayal of the eyes is the window to the character's inner world, and key to achieving vividness and spiritual resonance in character painting. However, in "expressing the spirit in form" [8], the spirit is abstract and represents the essence of things, but cannot exist independently. The spirit needs the form as its vehicle, it needs to be conveyed through concrete forms. [9]

Xie He, an outstanding figure painter of the Southern Qi Dynasty, adopted Gu Kaizhi's theory. He summed up the "Six Principles of Chinese Painting", which are: "Spirit Resonance", "Bone method", "Correspondence to the Object" "Suitability to Type", "Division and Planning", and "Transmission by Copying". [10] One of the most famous criteria is the "Spirit Resonance". Although later generations have different understandings of it, it is generally believed that "spirit resonance (Qiyun) is also synonymous with "vitality".

Zhang Yanyuan, the master of painting theory from the Tang Dynasty, provides a further analysis on Gu Kaizhi's "Spirit Resonance Theory" and Xie He's "Six Principles" in his work Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties - *On Six Principles of Chinese Painting* "Ancient paintings may be able to change their form but their core doesn't, it is difficult for the common people to search for meaning outside the form. Although today's paintings have form, but they have no spirit, if you look for the spirit in the painting, you will find the form within... The image must be based on the form, and the shape must be with substance. Both the form and the substance are based on the idea of returning to the brush, so there are many painters who are also good at writing." [11]

Su Shi, a poet of the Northern Song Dynasty, also developed quite high attainments in his views on the Spirit of Resonance Theory. He believed that "if a painting is similar in form, it may be painted by children", that is, it's naive to measure the quality of a painting by the form. At the same time, he further proposed the judging standard for spirit expression: "when I admire the paintings of others, it is like watching the horses that are in high and vigorous spirits. However, the painters often only focus on whips, coat, stables and fodders, which do not have handsome hair and make viewers tired after watching the paintings from a few feet." [12] "Looking at a painting is like observing a well bred horse" that the most important thing for Su Shi was to observe horse's spirit. As for whether the coat is to be dark or yellow, he never cared.

## 3. "Spirit Resonance Theory" as an Inspiration in Poster Design

Inspired by *The Spirit Resonance Theory*, the return of the poster poetic language is valuable for its spirit resonance. The spirit resonance in paintings and posters are both different and interrelated. First of all, they vary in their creation purpose, creation motivation and audience groups. Traditional Chinese painting advocates the unity of the subject (painter) and the object (image), while the poster spirit resonance advocates the unity of the subject (the designer and the design theme) and the object (image). As for the interrelationship, they both bring out the pursuit for poetic language and the expression of the beauty of life.

### 3.1. Concept of "Theory of Association and Penetration" in Poster Design

"Theory of Association and Penetration" is the artistic view of Gu Kaizhi, a painter of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, which usually refers to in-depth thinking based on life experience. Through subjective and objective integration of mind and objects, the artist incorporates his emotions into the object of artistic expression, and succeeds in exquisitely capturing the essence and spirit of objects through full artistic imagination. The concept of a poster, which has certain similarities with the art of painting, is intended to be the soul of the work. It is based on the mutual integration between the designer and the design

theme. Through ingenious conception, the designer gives the design theme vitality and the people a reasonable but unexpected feeling. The ideas come from life. If you don't recall your past sufferings, don't know how to reflect and appreciate, don't favor good and abandon evil, don't know how to think, don't understand life, but live an empty life with a blank mind, where can you get inspiration and creativity from? [13] At the same time, the idea of association and penetration is more rooted in culture, because culture is the source of innovation. German designer Gunther Kieser said that he asked his Chinese students to design works of their own, because they grew up in their own distinctive cultural backgrounds and dealt with Chinese problems, and should design Chinese-style works. Otherwise, the Chinese people will not be able to show their own characteristics when they make works that are the same as those of Europeans and Americans. [14]

### 3.2. Convey the “*Spirit with Images*” in Graphic Language

Although the unifying role of the “spirit” is emphasized in the Chinese spirit resonance theory, it does not overlook the pursuit of “form”. The unification of “Form and spirit” is the highest goal in the painting expression. Kaizhi's figure paintings particularly emphasize the important role of the shape of the human head and face in expressing the spirit resonance. The head is the most important part of a character. If anything goes wrong, the spirit conveyed would be all wrong. One shall be prudent during painting. Give it time and don't rush. When dealing with facial features of the head, the eyes are the most important, as they are “the window to the soul”. “The spirit conveyed differs based on every detail of the eyes, be it the length, hardness, depth, width, size, or shade.” Accordingly, Gu Kaizhi painted figures without pupils for years. As we can see, even the slightest change would result in difference in the spirit conveyed. The traditional Chinese wisdom of painting has a characteristic understanding of form and content, which served as an inspiration to graphic designers. It helps express the theme through simplified graphics, dynamic construction and localized arrangement.

Matthies Holger, a famous German graphic designer, once said: “A good poster should rely on graphics rather than text.” [15] Graphics plays a significant role in poster design. It is not only the most direct language for information transmission but also an effective vehicle for emotional communication. While carrying the information of specific themes, graphics should also focus on emotional and poetic expression. Only when the relationship between the concrete, explicit and singular “form” and the abstract, implicit and plentiful “spirit” is properly handled can the poetic context of the work be naturally conveyed. “Form” does not mean perfunctory decoration on the outside, it is inevitably connected with the essence, and represents the structure of things. Designers cannot focus on the content and ignore the form, just as they focus on the form and ignore the content.

### 3.3. Spirit-Based Coloring in Color Tones

In traditional Chinese painting, there are descriptions such

as “application of colors according to categories” and “realistic coloring”, emphasizing the role of coloring and its importance in theme expression. Coloring not only serves as the most emotional factor, but carries information. Spending time on the colors will help create a more vivid environment for the spirit resonance.

In modern poster design, setting the color tone is of great importance. The color tone of a poster will directly affect its artistic visual effect and artistic expression, and it also affects the audience's understanding of the poster. Color tone is the basic color of the whole poster. It can be a single color, or a combination of various colors. It could be harmony of similar colors, or a strong contrast between different colors. Cold and warm, heavy and light, strong and serene, business and culture, classical and modern, etc., can all be felt from the color tone of the poster. Like creating the color atmosphere for the stage, the color tone of the poster design shoulders the mission of building the “stage”, and it is the “stage” for all colors in the poster.

### 3.4. “*Truth Grasping*” in Texture Application

Jing Hao from the Five Dynasties said in “Notes on Brushwork” that a: “Painting is created by the painter, who seeks the truth with the right measure” The “truth” in the ancient painting refers to the essential characteristics of the painting, and as in the case with figure painting, it refers to the spirit of the figure. Jing also says that: “If a thing is beautiful, capture its beauty; if a thing is real, capture its reality, you cannot force the truth. If you are not skillful and careful, you will not achieve the truth”. This paragraph shows that the beauty of things is objective, and the beauty of each thing is different, and has its own inner personality. Some are gorgeous, and some are real. The painter needs to use the “measure” to find the essence hidden under the appearance. If the texture in the poster design fails to bring out the theme, then the poster would just be a soulless body. As an effective expression language, the texture can not only trigger visual impressions, but also convey important thematic information. When the elements embodied in the texture agree with the emotional elements of the human heart, the work will often arouse an inner response and bring the information a certain warmth. In the era of computerized designing tools, many designers only focus on vectorized graphics of computer software during the theme expression, or they just use artificial brush stroke or modify the form. Their awareness of application of texture application gradually went down, which is harmful to the construction of poetic poster language. Only by rational application of both natural and artificial texture can great emotional expression be achieved.

### 3.5. “*Placing and Arrangement*” in the Layout Space

The placing and arrangement were first introduced by Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, which Xie He from the Southern Dynasty later called position management and which is now called structural composition. By means of effective combination of design elements in the

two-dimensional plane, it formulates the space and dynamic potential of the picture, so as to convey the emotional concept of the designer, the theme and to generate a visual sense of beauty. The constructional factors in *The Spirit Resonance Theory* exist in the form of the frame, position and the skeleton. The frame refers to the edge of the picture. Sometimes, forms and colors of the work are fully displayed within the frame, forming a closed space so that the viewer's eyes can concentrate on the painting's content. Sometimes the visual elements in the works are cut off by the frame, and intersect with the frame to form an angle, forming an open pattern, so that the audience's imagination is free to roam the world outside of the painting. The position concerns the distribution of the elements in the picture. The elements are mostly distributed in the middle or around the picture, left and right, in upper and lower or diagonal positions of the picture, which can produce different visual feelings of subordination, parallelism, superiority, cause and effect, etc. The skeleton is the basic shape of the general structure of the picture, which is generally composed of vertical, horizontal, oblique and arc lines. It often gives people varied feelings of movement or stillness, rigidity or gentleness, wonder or danger; thus helping determine the emotional tone. Division and planning of the layout are different from the physical space in nature- it is an artistic and psychological space created in a two-dimensional plane.

The placing and arrangement of the poster design is used to convey a specific theme, which is an important goal of the layout arrangement. The emotional concept of a specific direction and degree requires a combination of shapes and colors of a specific style to match it. The visual presentation of the spirit resonance can upgrade the emotional concept from the expected state to new levels and broaden the space of interpretation. A great layout can invite the audience's attention, and produce a strong visual effect, in order to make organic connections between factors and form a concise, prominent and complete body of information with a certain visual gracefulness. The poster layout space involves many visual factors such as primary and secondary, virtual or real, strong and weak, hidden or revealed. It not only conforms to the psychological sequence of the cognitive process and the logical sequence of thinking development, but also helps in catching the audience's attention in an instant in order to effectively carry out the information and emotional persuasion, bringing people into the realm where infinite meaning is expressed in limited words.

#### 4. Conclusion

The ancient Spirit Resonance Theory is the embodiment of human wisdom. This important theory has been continuously extended by later generations. Its extensibility has brought many inspirations to poster creators. The concept of association and penetration in poster design, conveying the

spirit with images in graphic language, spirit-based coloring in color tones, truth grasping in texture application and placing and arrangement in the layout space are all key factors that poster designers need to master. Of course, it is necessary to be good at integrating various factors organically, in order to bring out the poetic artistic conception and give birth to an artwork with a resonating spirit.

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