

A Short Film Interpreting the Chinese Characters: ‘Trace Back’

Zhe Yu^{1*}, Szu-Ming Chung²

¹Arts of Digital Media, Quanzhou Vocational and Technical University

²Arts of Digital Media, Quanzhou Vocational and Technical University

Abstract. In this study, a group of students worked as a team to create and cocreate a short film in a situated learning environment. The film presents Chinese Han characters in a narrative that employs the poetic audio-visual features of Han characters. We used expert interviews to verify the teaching and learning effects of a short film to interpret the Chinese Characters: ‘Trace Back’.

1 Introduction

As ideograms, Chinese characters have natural audio-visual imagery. Therefore, creating a short film with Chinese characters offers a unique opportunity for transforming ideograms, or one of the six forms of Han characters, into images. [1] These characters have cultural elements that can be used as a reference for the style, narrative, and creativity of the image. These elements transform the imaged text into a unique medium for the promotion and dissemination of Chinese character culture. The figurative expression of the audio-visual imagery disrupts the static state of the characters, and presenting this information in a short film adds time elements that transform the characters into moving images. For ‘Trace Back’, a group of Digital Media Arts students collaborated in a situated learning environment established by the researchers to demonstrate these concepts through creation and cocreation. The following sections present the reviewed literature, research objectives, methodology, production content, and results of expert interviews.

2 Research Objectives

For the production of the animated short film, the following four objectives were established:

- (1) The potential and methods for converting Chinese characters into images were explored. The audio-visual connection between Chinese characters and images determines whether Chinese characters are suitable for transformation into images and how they can be transformed into videos.
- (2) The ideography and imagery of Han characters can enable creation of film images, and both should be used to determine the style and quality of films and television productions on Chinese characters.
- (3) The difficulty of comprehending Chinese is increased by the difficulty of the written language. An

animated short film may assist people in comprehending the meaning of Chinese characters at a sensory level and thereby improve the dissemination of Chinese characters.

- (4) The visual beauty of Chinese characters is difficult to recognise in daily life or in cultural environments. Images in a short film that are based on the ideography and imagery of Han characters can promote the learning and dissemination of Han characters as well as comprehension of their beauty.

3 Reviewed Literature

Using Chinese characters to tell Chinese stories and transforming Chinese into an international language has become key to promoting and disseminating Chinese character culture. Audio-visual language is the most internationally accessible form of language and can break through regional cultural boundaries.

Montage is the film style that most aptly conveys the feeling of traditional Chinese poetic idioms. The Britannica dictionary definitions of montage [2] are (1) a work of art that is made up of several different kinds of things (such as strips of newspaper, pictures, or pieces of wood, [e.g., a photographic montage])’ and (2) ‘a mixture of different things’—usually with ‘of’, as in ‘a montage of emotions/sounds/images. The similarities between a montage and traditional Chinese poetic idioms can be observed in the following example from Ma Zhiyuan’s Tianjin Sha: Qiu Si. Yuanqu writer Ma Zhiyuan composed the scattered song ‘Xiaoling’. ‘Qiu Si’ (‘Autumn Thoughts’) is a famous poem that uses a series of concrete concepts to describe natural phenomena and a picturesque scene to elicit a sentimental mood. Ma’s poem employs a series of images with consideration for the rhymes and rhythms of Chinese Han characters. The direct translation of the original poem is as follows:

*yuzhe2020@foxmail.com

*Dead vines, old trees, dusk crows,
Small bridges, flowing water, people's homes,
Ancient roads, west wind, thin horses,
Sunsetting, broken bowl people at the end of the world*

Ma uses the unique, crisp rhythms and ending vowel rhymes of Chinese monosyllabic expressions to compare an old man to dead vines, old trees, and dusk crows and to discuss this person walking through his normal, young life across small bridges, flowing waters, and people's homes and ending his life at the end of the world. This example demonstrates the adaptability of ideograms written in Chinese Han characters to the montage film style.

Xu Sheng's *Shuowen Jiezi* (an ancient Chinese text from the Han Dynasty) employs the principle of sixes (*Liushu*; that is, the six graphs or six methods of forming Chinese characters: pictograms, phonetic loans, ideograms, ideograms plus phonetic aspects, combined ideograms, and transfer characters) to label character entries and provide definitions and examples of deconstructed Chinese characters. We employed ideograms and combined ideograms to elicit student creativity.

Qin Zhanyi's *Ancient Chinese Character Flow and Image Montage*, published in *Film Review* [3], illustrates the relationship between film images and ideograms from the perspective of words, poetry, and the connection between Chinese character flow and montage. In the article, Qin offers many poem examples, including 'riding a horse on a bridge at an angle', in which the word for 'at an angle' is subtle and a visual signifier of a change in perspective. Filming of this line would have irregular composition most likely involving a small, full mirror upward shot. Another example is 'the window contains a thousand autumn snows in the West Ridge, and the door is docked on the East Wu Wanli Ship'. Here, the window, Xiling Snow Mountain, and the snow are figurative instructions; these content words suggest the need for a dynamic push shot that is pushed out of a window. These examples demonstrate the influence of ideograms in Chinese poetry and their connections with imagery.

'Thirty-Six Words' [4] is a colour cartoon released in China in 1984. The cartoon was produced by Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio, written by Ada, and directed by Xu Jingda. The cartoon tells the story of a father who teaches his son to read and explains the origin of Chinese characters and hieroglyphs. Two other animated films, 'Characters from ['word' with 'since' in Chinese] Meeting You' and 'Five Thousand Years of Chinese Characters', present the Chinese character for 'pen'. The first film discusses the evolution of the form of the 'pen' character and the production of the brush and the history of the brush. The film provides direct visualisation of the Chinese character for 'pen'. The film uses Adobe After Effects (Adobe Systems, USA) software to present an animation of the strokes of the Chinese character for 'pen'. The editing includes light music and commentary. The film explains the historical evolution of the word for 'pen' in a few short minutes. This discussion demonstrates the potential for Chinese characters to be converted into animated images.

4 Production Contents

The participating students were inspired by a traditional text called 'The Book of Songs: Jiangjia Cangcang; Tracing Back: A Road of Hindrance and Longing'. The students created an animated short film called 'Trace Back' and created imagery that told a story related to their study path. The title of the film is presented in calligraphy, which was considered appropriate for the Han characters. The short film tells the story of a girl who practiced calligraphy since childhood because her parents asked her to. She traces her growth through a dream and wishes to break free from what is considered normal and find herself.

The story is loosely divided into three acts. The first comprises the first 58 seconds of the film and presents the backstory. This act is the logical starting point of the story; the protagonist has begun to wither in the shadow of her parents' authority.

The second act continues from 58 seconds to 3 minutes and 3 seconds. The second act presents the protagonist's escape and reasons for escaping her parents. Expectations from parents, relatives, and friends and the pressure of various honors lead the protagonist to issue a cry for help. She starts running, which builds the action to the climax of the story. At 2 minutes and 5 seconds, the pace of the film accelerates.

The third act continues from 3 minutes and 3 seconds to the end of the film and presents the theme. The protagonist retrospect on her self-growth and her parents' influence on the process of her growth. She asks herself, 'What about me? What do I want to be?' The most important thing to her is identifying her interests.

In the protagonist's dream, the depth of field is blurred, the outlines of the characters are feathered, and single-light lighting is used. In addition, a Hitchcock-style zoom is used to visualize the frightened state of the protagonist (Figure 1).

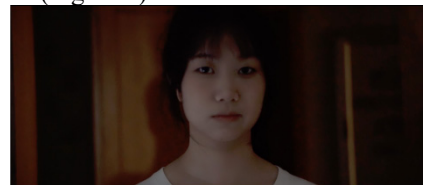


Fig. 1. Frightened protagonist

When relatives and friends discuss the protagonist's lack of clear self-definition, the subjective perspective of the characters is employed (Figure 2).

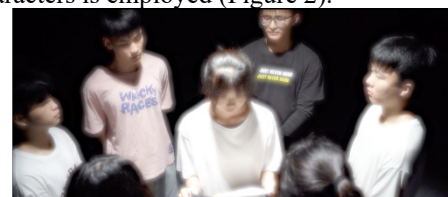


Fig. 2. The blurry shot

The completed film was uploaded to <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1hV4y1J7tw/> for viewing.

5 Methodology

In this study, an animated short film was created that conveyed the sentiment of Chinese characters. Analyses and discussions of Chinese characters and images were used to assist students in brainstorming and developing a plot for ‘Trace Back’. The students created and cocreated a short film through dynamic actions.

During this collaboration, the teacher played the role of the producer, supervising and assisting in solving technical problems and offering possible solutions.

After the production of the film was completed, interviews were conducted to verify whether the study achieved its research objectives. Table 1 lists the interviewees’ background information. The interview questions are listed in Table 2.

Table 1. Coding and background information of the interviewees

Coding	Expertise	Working experience
C1	Documentary film and theory	University teachers, 3 yrs.
C2	Documentary film creation	Director, 5 yrs.
C3	Film production manager	Producer, 3 yrs.
C4	Documentary film creation	Editor, 3 yrs.
C5	Digital Mass media, Documentary film creation	University professor, 23 yrs.

Table 2. Interview questions

Item	Question	Research Objective
1	Do you believe that Han characters can be interpreted through dynamic actions in a short film?	(1)
2	Is this short film closely related to the themes of the poem ‘Trace Back’?	(2)
3	Is the imagery of the poem ‘Trace Back’ expressed appropriately in this film?	(3)
4	What are your suggestions for improving this short film?	(1)(2)(3)(4)

The interview was completed within 45 minutes through telephone, email, and chatrooms. The analyses and discussion of this study are presented in the following sections.

6 Interview Results

After we sorted and summarised the interviews with the five experts, we obtained the following conclusions:

(1) Visualising Han characters in a short film is feasible because of the similar form of creativity of Han characters and images—both are symbolic and can be applied in montage thinking. The five experts agreed that Han characters can be visualised. Two factors reinforced this agreement: the relationship between the characteristics and meaning of Han characters and the symbolic meaning of images. (a) Expert 1 cited an example of a montage of Eisenstein in a movie; he recognised that Chinese characters are theoretically and practically similar to film images. However, the experts suggested that the imagery of Chinese characters should not be limited to surface meaning. (b) The experts reported that the themes

and contents of film creation can be diverse and culturally rich. Expert 2 used Chinese character documentaries (e.g., ‘Book Briefing China’ [5] and ‘Words from Meeting You’ [6]) to illustrate how Chinese characters can be presented. ‘Regardless of whether three-dimensional animation or fonts or paintings are used, film is a vivid means of expressing the appeal of Chinese characters. The aforementioned points illustrate the similarity between Chinese characters and film images.

(2) The structure and style of the short film ‘Trace Back’ can be considered retrospective, and the film’s audio–visual language is mature and effective. The experts understood the film’s intended tone from its structure and style and were able to visually identify the meaning and imagery of the poem ‘Trace Back’. Expert 1 noted that the short film incorporated dreams and memories into its structure; Expert 2 noted that flashbacks were used to represent the pressure the protagonist felt to practice calligraphy, to identify the cause of the problem, and to investigate the protagonist’s past.

- (3) Two main points were identified in the experts' answers to question three: The first was that the retrospective imagery was represented in the narrative structure of the film and the audio-visual design contributed to this. The other was that the title and content of 'Trace Back' were somewhat off-target. Expert 5 reported that the short film did not represent specific Chinese characters; it mainly discussed the protagonist's calligraphy and her feelings toward the practice. Nevertheless, the audio-visual design used to express her feelings was effective. Expert 5 believed that 'Trace Back' was not associated with the poem in title or theme; it was associated in style. That is, the imagery of the poem 'Trace Back' was expressed in the audio-visual composition and design. However, the film 'Trace Back' had several problems with its visualisation. The experts presented many suggestions for improving the short film. For example, (a) the film should support the themes of the poem and, therefore, the team should deepen their understandings of the poem 'Trace Back' and focus less on emotions; (b) the design of the ending or coda should be adjusted; and (c) the script and music of the story should be optimised. Expert 5 also suggested that the students adjust the direction of the story and adopt a multilevel and diverse perspective to attract audiences of different ages and classes and thereby improve the spread of Chinese culture through Han characters.
- (4) The analyses and suggestions of the experts provided the following potential directions for revising the animated short film: The story should include references to the history of Han characters. This would also reference the protagonist's experience of learning calligraphy, and the theme would become more prominent in the two-line narrative. The number of camera shots of calligraphy should be increased. The experts suggested adding a poem at the end in, for example, song form, as has been done with Charles Bukowski's *Bluebird*. This would solve the problem of the sluggish end of the story and reference the actions of the protagonist after she retrospects on her experience of learning calligraphy.

7 Conclusion

To motivate a group of students to work as a team and produce a short film, the teacher of this study employed a situated learning environment and introduced the students to a classic text and the meaning of its Han characters through vivid imagery, research, and documentaries. The students successfully produced a film on the subject with a narrative associated with its title. Interviews with experts revealed that (1) the audio-visual connection between Chinese characters and images renders the characters suitable for transformation into imagery and film; (2) the ideography and imagery of Han characters are translatable into video, including film and television; (3) through dynamic actions short films can enable people to understand the meaning of Han

characters at a sensory level and can improve the dissemination of Chinese characters; and (4) the images produced in the animated short film of this study were developed with inspiration from the ideography and imagery of Han characters and can play a role in the promotion, dissemination, and comprehension of the beauty of Han characters. Expert 5 suggested that this type of filmmaking can be expanded and enhanced to ensure that all can understand and appreciate such films.

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