

Cultural Differences in Spatial Composition and Visual Directionality: A Comparative study of English and Chinese Newspaper Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to demonstrate the notion that visual communication is not an unbiased, universally perceived means of communication. Instead, it is even more culturally loaded than verbal language in that it operates very often at the unconscious level of mind and thus often escapes from critical analysis. This paper draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework of visual grammar, especially the two descriptive categories under visual composition -- spatial arrangement and visual directionality, to analyze several subscription advertisements of several Chinese and English newspapers. It is found that these advertisements display very different features in visual communication which can only be satisfactorily explained with consideration of a complex array of underlying factors including traditions of visual culture, writing system, philosophy, etc.

Key words: cultural difference, newspaper advertisements, spatial composition, visual directionality

1. Introduction

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate the notion that visual communication is neither a culturally transparent nor universally perceived means of communication. Instead, it is even more culturally and ideologically loaded than other communication systems in that it operates very often at the unconscious level of mind and thus is more easily free from the critical analysis. I will draw on the insights from social semiotics, specifically the visual grammar developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) to analyze some advertisements in Chinese and English newspapers.

While Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) based their theoretical thoughts mainly on the modern western visual practices and didn't include much discussion about oriental visual culture, this paper uses some advertisements on an English newspaper and two Chinese newspapers to reveal the profound divergence between English and Chinese visual practices and the philosophy behind the textual composition of advertisements.

By doing this, I hope that this paper can make it clearer that the style of visual representations are deeply rooted in specific cultures, and a better awareness and understanding of these culturally-specific visual practice will

certainly enhance intercultural communication.

2. Theoretical framework and data description

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) is a milestone work in the analysis of visual grammar. It borrows the main notions from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and extends to the visual mode of communication. They propose three dimensions in the analysis of visual images, namely representation, interaction and composition, parallel to the ideational, interpersonal and textual meta-function of language. This paper focuses on the last dimension, that is, the textual meta-function or composition. More specifically, it aims to examine the distribution of information value through use of space and visual directionality across cultures.

2.1 Descriptive categories

In this paper two descriptive categories, spatial arrangement and visual directionality, are deployed to examine the difference between western and Chinese print advertisements in terms of visual communication.

2.1.1 Spatial composition

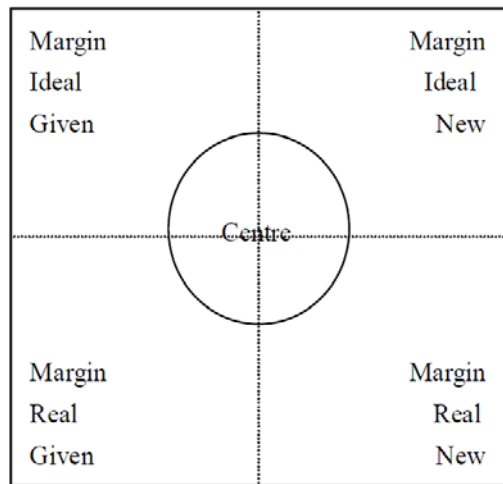
According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the placements of elements (participants and syntagms that relate them to each other and to the viewer) endows them with the specific informational values attached to the various 'zones' of the image: left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/[2006]: 177). Each of the spatial arrangements conveys a specific pattern of distribution of information value in visual space.

The most influential, and also the most challenged claim of Kress and van Leeuwen is the correlation between left-right composition and dichotomy of given-new information. Inspired by the functional perspective towards information flow in linguistics which sees language, especially spoken language, as flowing from given information to new information, they propose that in a visual text, what is placed on the left expressed something already given, something the reader is assumed to know already while what is placed on the right expresses new message.

In the similar vein, they argue that in a top/bottom composition what is placed on the top is presented as the Ideal, and what is placed at the bottom is put forward as the Real. The Ideal means the idealized or generalized essence of the information, and also the most salient part. The Real provides some specific and practical information. For instance, in a cosmetics ad, the image of a beautiful woman's face on the top is the Ideal and the details of the product which are often placed at the bottom is the Real.

The third type of composition, centre vs. margin, is related to the inequality of status of information packed in different parts of the visual space. Specifically, the Centre is the nucleus of the information to which all the other elements are in some sense subservient. The Margins are these ancillary, dependent elements.

Figure 1 Use of space and information values



(Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 208)

They observe that the three types of spatial arrangement are often used in a combined way in actual visual practices. In this complicated special space, the distribution of information value in the visual space is summarized in Figure 1.

2.1.2 Visual directionality

Interrelated with the polarized spatial composition is another descriptive category, visual directionality, which might be revealing of the cultural difference in visual communication. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argue that the directionality from left to right indicates an increasing degree of newsworthiness and importance in information value. Similarly, viewing from center to margin indicates a shift from dominant to subservient information. In contrast, the two parts of the top/bottom structure bear “usually less connection, less ongoing movement”, but “a sense of contrast, of opposition” (Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/[2006]: 186). The upper section tends to make some kind of emotive appeal and to show us ‘what might be’; the lower section tends to be more informative and practical, showing us ‘what is’.

However, conscious of cultural factors, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) notice that different habits of visual directionality may interfere with the way of interpretation. For example, they point out that in some cultures where people read and write from right to left, what is placed on the left is Given information while things on the right is New information. Oyama (2000) also found through comparing British and Japanese advertisements that the visual directionality of right to left, while in British advertisements realizing an unwanted and negative sense, manifests ‘positive’ values in Japanese ones.

It is hence postulated in this study that visual directionality is another fundamental characteristic across cultures in visual semiotics. Although the contemporary western culture which adopts a left-to-right and top-to-bottom reading directionality has penetrated deeply into the visual practices in China with the process of globalization,

culture still remains a powerful motivator of the different patterns in visual design.

It is necessary to briefly mention the traditional Chinese visual directionality here. It is sharply different from the contemporary one which is introduced from the west that it deserves a brief explanation. First, while the contemporary Chinese, like western people, writes from left to right in horizontal rows which ordered from top to bottom, traditional Chinese write from top to bottom in vertical columns which proceed from right to left. Likewise, the Chinese calligraphy and traditional ink painting, as forms of displayed art, have their title and production information marked at the left most margin of the page. This is very different from the western practice of putting the title below the displayed picture at the bottom of the page.

Although Kress and van Leeuwen are quite aware of the culturally specific nature of their conceptualization since it is based on the generalization of analysis of modern western visual documents (see e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/[2006]: 194-195), the cultural difference is given scanty illustration or further reasoning. Moreover, although the divergence between eastern and western visual communication has also attracted the attention of many researchers (see Jun and Lee 2007, An 2007, An and Kim 2007, Callahan 2007, Wu 2008), most of them start from the models of inter-cultural values like Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of intercultural difference and adopt the method of content analysis of advertisements of various types. At the same time, research attempting to reveal the cultural difference with regard to the composition and directionality of visual artifacts is relatively few. This study is an attempt in this general direction, with an emphasis on the patterns of spatial arrangement and visual directionality between English and Chinese advertisements. It hopes to make sounder generalizations on the basis of a reasonable analysis of authentic and convincing samples.

2.2 Data description

Kress and van Leeuwen claim these principles can be applied not only in the analysis of independent visual images like photos and paintings, but also in that of composite visuals, visuals which combine text and image and, perhaps, other graphic elements (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/[2006]: 177). Therefore, the framework is applicable to the analysis of advertisements on newspaper since they are composite visuals or multimodal texts.

The data I use in this paper are subscription advertisements of one English newspaper and two Chinese newspapers. The English newspaper is *the Wall Street Journal Asia* (Dec 31, 2008-Jan 1, 2009) of Dow Jones Publishing Company and the Chinese ones are *Jingji GuanCha Bao (Economic Review)*, Sep 15, 2008) and *Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekend)*, Nov 20, 2008). The former is targeted to provide global and regional business news for the pan-Asian corporate executives and government decision-makers. Since it is edited and published by western organization and read by a group of elites who have more modernized and internationalized habits and thinking and even identification, it can serve as a sample of western newspaper. The two Chinese newspapers are pure Chinese in the sense that their news source, editing, publishing and selling are all limited in Mainland China, in other words, their content, reporters, editors and readers are all Chinese. Both of them are nation-wide influential newspapers instead of local or provincial newspapers, so they represent characteristics of Chinese newspapers in general. Therefore, they can make appropriate samples for Chinese texts in comparative analysis of western and Chinese cultures.

The specific issues are chosen here because they have their own subscription ads for the coming year 2009. It means that the advertisements used here are not the commercial consumer product ads like what we most often see on newspapers, but advertisements for themselves, with the purpose to attract readers to subscribe, or continue to subscribe in the coming year—2009. There are altogether 7 such sample ads under scrutiny, three in the *Wall Street Journal Asia*, three in *Nanfang Zhoumo* and one in *Jingji Guancha Bao*.

The reason I chose these ads is that they are interesting in that they are more than just ads; they are also a form of propaganda of their own image and tenet. Since the three newspapers are all targeted and received by middle class or upper class people in China who are experienced and regular readers, they must base the point of their subscription ads on their previous work and achievement and their long-term tenet of development. Therefore, these ads can best reveal the deep underlying principles and philosophy of English and Chinese printing industry.

3. Textual analysis and discussion

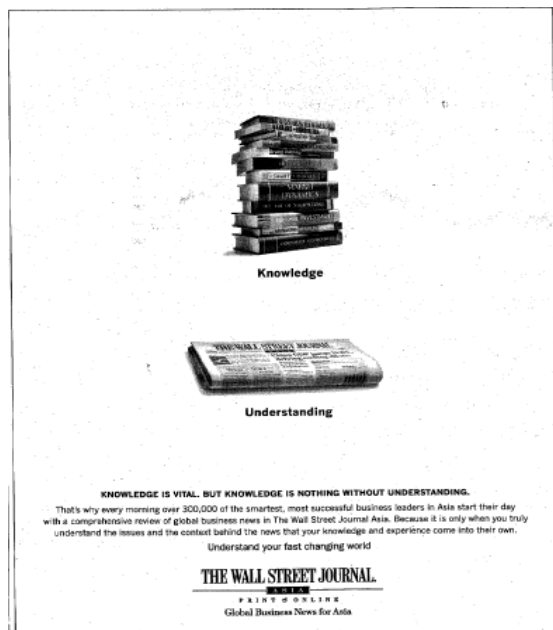
3.1 Spatial arrangement

In this section, I will examine the composition of these seven samples.

3.1.1 Advertisements in the English newspaper

For all the three sample advertisements in *Wall Street Journal Asia*, the whole ad page is a composite of visual and verbal text. Visual images are placed on the top and verbal text is at the bottom. All of them have a typical polarized composition. Further, in the visual part of each of them, there are two images, either placed in a top/bottom (Plate 1 and Plate 3) or a left/right structure (Plate 2). I will analyze them in detail one by one.

Plate 1



In Plate 1, the visual part consists of two images, one of a pile of books on the top and the other of a folder of the newspaper *Wall Street Journal Asia* at the bottom. Below the pile of books there is a word 'Knowledge' whereas below the folder of newspaper the word 'Understanding'. The verbal text below reads:

KNOWLEDGE IS VITAL. BUT KNOWLEDGE IS NOTHING WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING.

That's why every morning over 300,000 of the smartest, most successful business leaders in Asia start their day with a comprehensive review of global business news in The Wall Street Journal Asia. Because it is only when you truly understand the issues and the context behind the news that your knowledge and experience come into their own.

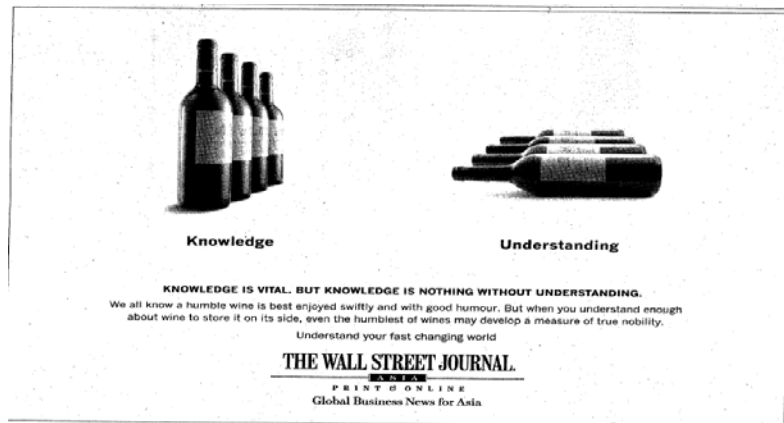
context behind the news that your knowledge and experience come into their own.

Understand your fast changing world

In Cheong's (2004) terminology in analyzing multimodal advertisements, the first line in capitalization (Knowledge is vital. But knowledge is nothing without understanding.) serves as the Announcement (the key message) of the ad and the following passage the Enhancer (elaboration of the key message). The last line "Understand your fast changing world" is the slogan of the newspaper because it appears at the same position in each of the three subscription ads as later analysis will show. At the most bottom is the brand and logo of the newspaper which isn't reproduced here. The verbal text makes the meaning of the visual part clear. That is, the two images in the visual component in this ad are presented as contrastive. If translated into the verbal mode of expression, the visual part means something like this: "Books are good for they can provide knowledge. *But* The Wall Street Journal is even better because it can provide understanding." Therefore, the polarized composition is in accord with the opposition in meaning.

Plate 2 is similar to Plate 1 in theme—knowledge vs. understanding, but in Plate 2 a different distribution of space—left/right—and visual directionality is used. On the left is an image of four bottles of wine standing in a line, with the word 'Knowledge' below it. On the right is that of the same four bottles, but lying on their side this time, with the word 'Understanding' below it. This visual image may be a little puzzling for Chinese readers who have little knowledge about the western wine culture. The verbal text provides clues for the readers to reach the intended interpretation of the visual part. It reads as following.

Plate 2



KNOWLEDGE IS VITAL. BUT KNOWLEDGE IS NOTHING WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING.

We all know a humble wine is best enjoyed swiftly and with good humor. But when you understand enough about wine to store it on its side, even the humblest of wines may develop a measure of true nobility.

Understand your fast changing world

The verbal text helps readers anchor the interpretation of the visual images. That is, the images on the left and on the right represent two ways of storing wine. On the left is the wrong way while on the right is the right way. The

two images on the two poles also stand in contrast. Notice the “but” in the verbal text, both in the capitalized Announcement and in the Enhancer. Therefore the verbal component and the visual component are isomorphic in that they are both composed of two parts of information standing in semantic contrast.

Plate 3

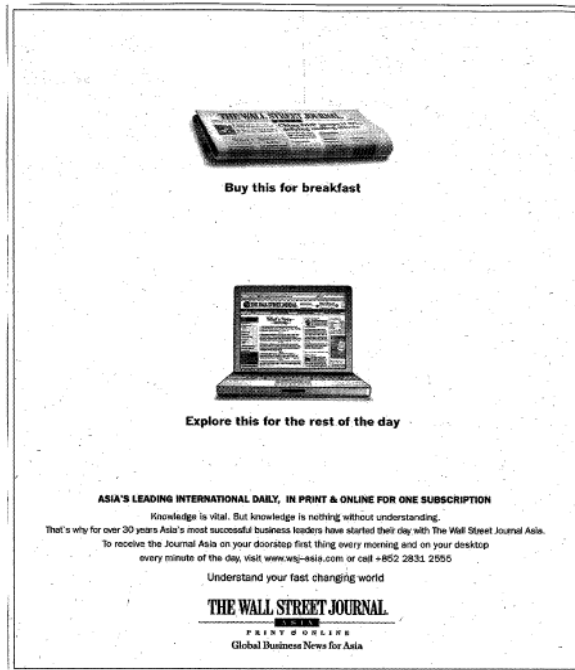


Plate 3 shows another top/bottom polarized composition. On the top is an image of a folder of print newspaper *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, with “Buy this for breakfast” below it. On the bottom is a lap-top which shows a webpage on its screen. Although it is too small-sized for the readers to recognize the content on the screen, but experience and world knowledge tell us that it must be the online version of *The Wall Street Journal Asia*. Below it is the phrase “Explore this for the rest of the day”. The verbal text below is modified from that of the previous two ads.

It reads as follows:

ASIA'S LEADING INTERNATIONAL DAILY, IN PRINT & ONLINE FOR ONE SUBSCRIPTION

Knowledge is vital. But knowledge is nothing

without understanding. That's why over 30 years Asia's most successful business leaders have started their day with The Wall Street Journal Asia. To receive the journal Asia on your doorstep first thing every morning and on your desktop every minute of the day, visit [www. wsj-asia.com](http://www.wsj-asia.com) or call +852 2831 2555

Understand your fast changing world

In this verbal text, the Announcement “*Asia's leading international daily, in print & online for one subscription*” is different from that of the previous two. Together with other different things in the Enhancer, it is modified to conform to the theme of the whole ad—double versions available. The two images in the visual component, the folder of print paper and the laptop screen, show the two different forms of the newspaper, in a sequential order. The order of sequence or succession of the two semantic messages in image is echoed in the “&” in the Announcement and “and” in the last sentence in the Enhancer (*To receive the journal Asia on your doorstep first thing every morning and on your desktop every minute of the day ...*). So the visual and verbal mode of expression tell the same messages, and in the same order—first print version, then electronic version. The visual order of top to bottom is in accord with the linear verbal order. Different from the two previous ads, this polarization doesn't express contrastive meaning, but succession. The succession is consistent in the placement of the two images in the visual space, in the rhetorical and logical organization of the verbal text and in reality in which morning comes before the day.

Based on the analysis of the spatial arrangement in the three subscription advertisements of The Wall Street Journal Asia, we can reach the conclusion that the preferred spatial composition of western visual culture is the polarized, including both the top/bottom and the left/right. And careful examination shows that the polarized composition often represents contrast in meaning, and may indicate succession in fewer cases.

3.1.2 Advertisements in the Chinese newspapers

Of the four Chinese sample advertisements, three are designed with a center/margin composition, and the remaining one is not polarized either. We will look at them one by one.

Plate 4, 5 and 6 are subscription ads in *Nanfang Zhoumo*. In Plate 4, the Lead image is a printed page of newspaper in a much-decreased size. At the center is a teapot-shaped block of blank in which some verbal texts are written in red in two different directions. The horizontal line of verbal text (深度报道是一种微雕艺术, meaning “deep reportage is a form of micro-engraving art”) is written at the place where the teapot lid should be and the several columns of verbal text, read from left to right, at the place of the teapot where there are usually decorations like Chinese paintings or poems. The texts and their English translation are reproduced below. At the right bottom of the advertisement page is the emblem and slogan of the newspaper (“在这里，读懂中国。” literally translated as “In here, read into China”). At the most bottom of the page details of subscription information are provided.

Plate 4



深度报道是一种微雕艺术

每平方厘米五十字，/不是刻在核桃壳上的红楼梦，/你看到一尺见方的新闻，/你看不到 1500 公里的奔波和 50000 字的手稿。/信息经济的时代，人人谈论成本和收益，/我们依然相信动人的故事需要耐心书就。

Deep reportage is a form of micro-engraving art (Announcement)

Fifty characters in every square centimeter, /it is not Dream in the Red Chamber¹ engraved on a walnut shell, /you can see new stories printed in about a square chi², /but you can't see the 1500 kilometers on the run and 50000-character-long drafts. /At the age of information economy, everybody talks about cost and profit, /but we still believe that moving stories need to be written with patience. (Enhancer)

The lead image is not of a polarized composition; instead, the reduced-size print page of newspaper is the background, on the centre of which is a teapot-shaped blank. At the center of the teapot-shaped blank the verbal advertising claims are placed. Therefore, this spatial arrangement can be viewed as the combination of central composition

¹ *Dream in the Red Chamber* is one of the four most famous classic long novels in China.

² 'chi' is a Chinese measurement unit of length, about 33 centimeter.

and layered formation. The three units of meaning, the newspaper background, the teapot-shaped blank and the verbal text on it, could be seen as representing three layers, each piled upon another. Here I mention them as background, middle ground and foreground. Along the sequence from background to foreground, the centre becomes increasingly focused.

Another remarkable point is the perfect fusion of the verbal and visual modes and also the content and cultural factors. The wording ‘微雕’ (*micro-engraving*) corresponds to the reduced-size Chinese characters that take up the whole background page. The image of teapot is here because of the traditional Chinese habits of reading newspapers while drinking tea leisurely, either at home or in bureaucratic offices. The arrangement of the verbal texts in the teapot-shaped blank forms the lid and poems on the teapot. In other words, words form a part of visual image and visual image is also a part in the whole page of characters. The two modes fuse into each other to form a harmonious whole.

Plate 5

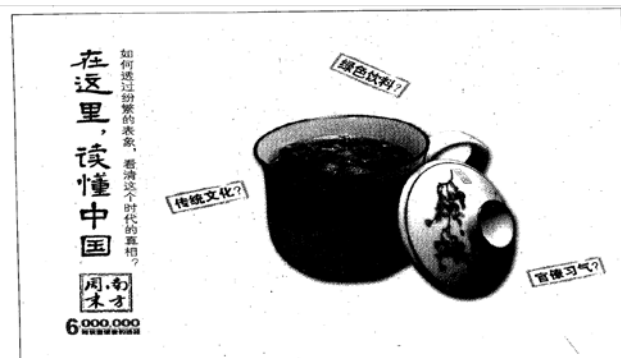


Plate 5 also makes use of the image of teacup. Here the teacup is at the center of the space, with its lid leaning against it. Around the teacup there are three labels with phrases printed in identical font and size, each followed by a question mark. They are respectively “绿色饮料” (green drink) over the teapot image, “传统文化”(traditional culture) on its left and “官僚习气”

(bureaucratism) on its right. The trans-semiotic translation of the image into language is something like this: *Tea, is it a green drink, or a traditional culture, or an embodiment of bureaucratism?* What needs to be noted in passing is that the sequence of the three labels represents a progression of the critical force in the point of view and creates the impression of increasingly deeper and revealing perspective in interpreting news events.

Compared with the image of teacup, the three verbal labels are much smaller. This makes the central teacup more prominent. The advertisement is of typical central composition in another sense that the image is at the center of the whole advertisement space with the verbal message at the leftmost margin written vertically from top to bottom:

如何透过纷繁的表象, 看清这个时代的真相?
(How to look through the complex surface into the truth of the time?)

On the leftmost is the big-size slogan of the specific newspaper in a vertical column, “在这里, 读懂中国” (In here, read into China), and its emblem. The “centre plus left margin” is a typical way of spatial organization characteristic of the Chinese painting practice. The painting occupies most of the page space and the information like title, author, production date etc. are placed at the left most margin.

Plate 6

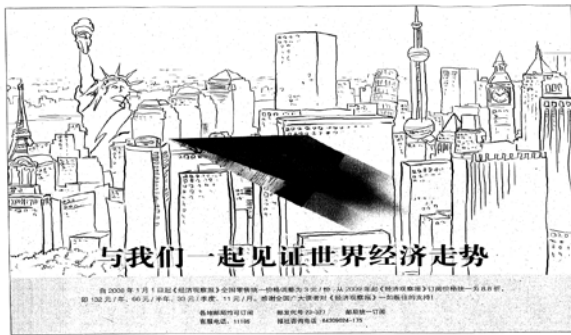


Plate 6 is a subscription ad of *Jingji Guancha Bao*. It is first of all a typical case of Kress and van Leeuwen's Ideal/Real type of advertisement. That is, the image which conveys an *ideal* condition brought by a specific product is on the top while the *real*—the specific and practical—information of the product is listed at the bottom of the ad page.

However, the Ideal—the Lead image on the top of the ad page can be analyzed as a relatively independent visual section. At first sight it might be perceived as a centre/margin composition. In the background is a drawing of many tall buildings among which some famous architecture of different countries in the world can be recognized, like the Statue of Liberty in the USA, the Big Ben in Britain, the Eiffel tower in France, the Oriental Pearl in China, and so on. At the center is a photo of a flying paper plane which is folded from a newspaper. It is natural for the readers in this context to make inferences and perceive the newspaper as the *Jingji Guancha Bao*. At the bottom of the background drawing is a verbal line which reads: “与我们一起见证世界经济走势” (Witness the trends of the world economy with us). What needs to be noted is that the central image—the paper plane—is a photo, with its full details while the drawing of the world miniature is composed of simple sketching lines and curves. Therefore, in this case, although there is a salient central image, the other images are not real-sense margins. Actually it would be more reasonable to conceptualize it as a foreground/background structure rather than a centre/margin one. The newspaper image at the center, which is the most important information in the ad, is fore-grounded and highlighted while the other images that carry less information value are not only put at a non-central position but also simplified and back-grounded. Therefore, the foreground-background composition can serve to indicate and highlight the information value of different components in a visual space. That is, what is placed in the foreground is usually more newsworthy than what is in the background. And grounding can also be used sometimes in alignment with other visual strategies, like the degree in the richness of details of the different components.

Plate 7

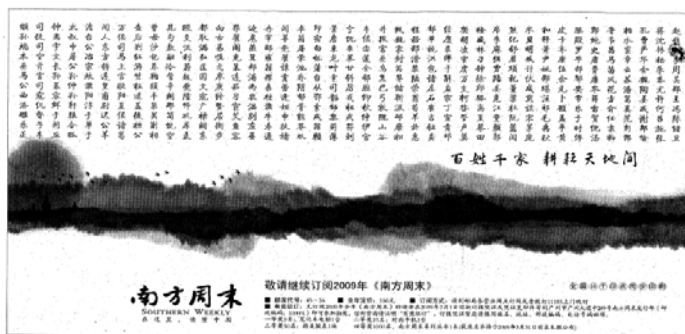


Plate 7 is another subscription ad of *Nanfang Zhoumo*. Its spatial organization is neither central nor polarized. The whole ad space can be divided into three parts vertically. The top is columns of Chinese characters which are “Baijiaxing”³ which includes most, if not all, of the family names in China. The middle is a traditional Chinese ink painting which depicts a peaceful natural scenery. The bottom part is purely verbal; it includes the

³ *Baijiaxing*, which literally means a hundred family names, is a traditional phrase referring to all ordinary people.

logo of the newspaper and its detailed subscription information. The three parts are framed apart by space of vacancy.

The upper two parts are connected in more than one way. From the formal point of view, there is a phrase “百姓 千家 耕耘天地间” at the right side of their implicit boundary which reads from left to right, which could be translated into English as, “(for) all families and people, (we) cultivate between the sky and the earth”. This phrase serves as functions as Announcement, that is, the key message of the advertisement, claiming that the newspaper is working for the mass people with a high degree of commitment. From the perspective of content, the “Baijiaxing” characters don’t contain any semantic information in relation to the subscription of the newspaper here and they are used as a signifier of traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, the Baijiaxing characters have been divorced from its original semantic content and used as a pictorial signifier which signifies Chinese identity connotatively. In other words, readers don’t have to read the characters to get information either about Baijiaxing or about the newspaper, or whatever, but to recognize them as a signifier of Baijiaxing which is a symbol of Chinese identity. In this sense, the Baijiaxing characters are also a part of the whole visual image, the other part is the painting. The columns of Chinese characters of Baijiaxing are used not as linguistic signs with semantic message, but as visual or pictorial signs connecting to the Announcement.

Another important point is the use of blank in the spatial arrangement of the advertisement. It is acknowledged that in traditional Chinese painting, leaving vacancy or blank is very important. Leaving proper blank (‘Liubai’ in Chinese) is regarded a technique in Chinese painting so as to achieve the highest aesthetic and artistic goal, which is the harmony, peace and wisdom of the spiritual world. This is very different from western painting which emphasizes the structure of composition and the vivid representation of the depicted object. Therefore, in works of Chinese painting there are often some designed areas of vacancy in the page space. In this advertisement, for example, the painting of the natural scenery, very probably, has its upper space vacant originally, to express the peace and vastness of the sky. To put it more clearly, the top part of the ad space, which is now filled with ‘Baijiaxing’ characters, should have been vacant or blank originally. Therefore it is possible for us to interpret the spatial arrangement of the advertisement as a layered one. That is, it seems that the Baijiaxing Chinese characters, which constitute the top layer, are added onto the vacancy of the painting. It would be reasonable to believe that in Chinese visual design the space is conceptualized as layered, with each layer of images, transparent yet filtering, together add up to a whole Chinese work of art. In this sense, plate 4 could also be seen as such a layered composition, only the layers in it are opaque. The bottom layer is the newspaper page, the second layer on it is the teapot shape, and the topmost layer is the characters on the teapot.

The analysis of the spatial composition of four Chinese advertisements reveal that the ways of using space in them are diversified, including typical center/margin, mediated foreground/middle ground/background, layered composition and the combination of more than one of them. This suggests the binary construction between Left/Right, Top/bottom and Center/margin of visual spaces introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen can be reconceptualized as a scale. That is, the Chinese advertisement designers prefer to see the space as a complicated whole, not only a continuum but sometimes also layered, and to employ various semiotic patterns on this whole

to realize their intentions. This may be partly due to the Chinese philosophy which pursues the conceptions like harmony, completeness, complication and centralization. Another important characteristic is that the Chinese characters are often used not as purely linguistic signs, but as signs combining both pictorial and linguistic function. The phenomenon is partly due to the iconic origin of Chinese language.

Summary of section 3.1

To conclude, as to the use of space, the western ads prefer to use polarized structure, such as Left-right and Top/bottom, to convey the contrast in meaning, while the Chinese ads prefer to arrange the space as a complicated whole and deploy centralized, scaled and layered patterns of organization. The Chinese way of using space is more diverse. The different patterns of spatial arrangement are summarized in Table 1. The difference between the western and Chinese advertisements reveals that the spatial composition in design is culture-specific. Unlike the wine-storing, teapot, paintings etc. which are explicit embodiment of cultural differences, the spatial composition is the subconscious display of different modes of thinking and different cultural practices.

Table 1 Patterns of spatial arrangement in English and Chinese visual communication

Western	Chinese
Polarized structure Left-right Top-bottom	Central structure centre-margin Layered structure foreground/(middle ground)/background

3.2 Visual directionality

3.2.1 Visual directionality in advertisements in the English newspaper

Plate 1: The verbal text clearly indicates that the pile of books which represents “knowledge” is given less significance than the folder of *The Wall Street Journal* which stands for “understanding”. Knowledge is usually thought of as something good and admirable, but in contrast, understanding is even better and *The Wall Street Journal* can provide it. Therefore, the pile of books can be regarded as the starting point of designer’s message while the folder of *The Wall Street Journal* is what the ad wants to emphasize and the most newsworthy component. This top/bottom polarization indicates something that is not included in Kress and van Leeuwen’s analysis. Their conception is to correlate top/bottom composition with Ideal/Real information value. Although they noted in passing that the top/bottom structure often indicates “a sense of contrast, of opposition” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 186) and its correlation with information value (van Leeuwen, 2005, Chp. 10), they did not make clear the directionality from top to bottom suggests a shift from an undesirable to good, desirable sense. As mentioned above, the image of books is presented as less desirable or positive, and the image of newspaper as ideal and desired. Therefore, the image of books is something given, that is, the common sense, and it serves as the starting point of the complete message of the ad. In contrast, the image of *The Wall Street Journal Asia* is the “issue” and more newsworthy. So the spatial composition of top/bottom does not always correlate with Ideal/Real dichotomy of information, but can also have the Given/New. Another point is that since people’s reading habits is to read from top to bottom, the visual directionality of top to bottom reflects a shift which has a

forward and positive sense.

Plate 2: From the verbal message we've got the hint that the image on the left represents a 'humble' status and a wrong way of storing wine, while the image on the right stands for the right and 'noble' way. In terms of visual composition, the thing on the left expresses "given-ness", here something specious that everybody takes for granted but is actually wrong. The thing on the right expresses the good and right, something new, and automatically the most newsworthy information. This shows that the directionality of left-to-right indicates not only shift from given to new, but also from negative to positive sense. That is, the left is often connected with negative sense while the right with positive sense. In short, the visual directionality of left to right in these English advertisements indicates a forward, positive sense of development. This is in resonance with other researchers' findings, for example, Oyama (2000).

In Plate 3, the two images from top to bottom, that is, from the print version to the online version of *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, at the surface level, corresponds to the temporal succession (as reflected in the "morning precedes day" in the verbal text), and at a covert level, indicates a "forward" sense of development since online version of newspapers is a new, advanced technology whereas the print version is the old, traditional form. Although in Plate 3 there is no obvious positive-sense shift in visual directionality as in Plate 1, the increase in the degree of newsworthiness and trendy-ness is still there.

Careful examination shows that both the left/right and the top/bottom composition can be used to express contrast in meaning. The shift from left to right and from top to bottom often indicates a forward, positive sense. Directionality from top to bottom may also indicate succession, plus a rising degree of newsworthiness between the two parts.

3.2.2 Visual directionality in advertisements in Chinese Newspapers

In both Plate 4 and Plate 5, an interesting point requiring attention is that the handle of the teapot or teacup is on the right and the spout on the left. This may seem nothing special by itself, but if compared with observation of van Leeuwen: "cups and jugs with a front, hence with a 'designed-in' left and right often –although not always –have the handle on the left and the spout on the right"(van Leeuwen, 2005: 212), it will be clear that culture difference causes the different patterns in visual directionality at the unconscious level of mind.

In Plate 4, two opposite directionalities of reading coexist. The Announcement, or the horizontal line at the lid position of the teapot-shaped blank, reads from left to right while the Enhancer reads from right to left in vertical columns. However, closer examination will reveal that the two directionalities of reading are not equal in status. The Announcement is more important and salient than the Enhancer. The former is an obligatory element of an advertisement whereas the latter is not. This is resonated in the typographical features of the Announcement and Enhancer text. The former is printed in large size and more diversified font than the latter. Another inequality engenders from the location of the Announcement and Enhancer text. The Enhancer text is printed at the place of the teapot where some decoration, like a small painting or a poem should be. Usually if not always, the

decoration is of traditional Chinese style to keep harmony with tea drinking which is a typical embodiment of Chinese culture. Therefore, the Enhancer text is printed in such a way as to create semblance with the writing system of traditional Chinese poems. However, its content is nothing of that which requires strict formal patterns and calligraphy of hand-writing. Instead, the text is an appraisal of the effort and commitment of the newspaper work. The imitation of only Chinese form without content reveals that the directionality of traditional Chinese writing is in a subordinate role and the directionality of modern culture is dominant.

In Plate 5 there also exist two opposing visual directionalities. The three verbal labels around the teacup are printed in different degrees of heights. "Green drink" is at the top, "traditional culture" is in the middle on the left of the cup while the "bureaucratism" is the lowest and right. This arrangement predetermines the reading path of left to right and top to bottom which is contemporary common practice. This is further correlated with the respective semantic distance of the three labels from the denotative meaning of the teacup image. In contrast, information like the title or caption, logo, slogan of the image is placed at the left, rather than the right, margin in a vertical column. This indicates a directionality of right to left. Similar to Plate 4, this is also an imitation of traditional Chinese painting.

In Plate 6 the only object of analysis of visual directionality is the paper plane which is flying from right to left. This may not seem significant at face value. However, if it is seen in comparison with western practices of directionality, a dramatic result will appear. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's correlation of Given/New and Left/Right, left to right is a widely, if not universal, visual directionality, even "time moves from left to right" (van Leeuwen 2005: 201). Therefore, in his train of thought, the most natural, normal direction of a moving object should from left to right. Therefore, the paper plane flying from right to left in this ad reflects by no means a universal visual directionality, but a cultural representation unique to Chinese culture. The key source of difference may be the writing systems between western and Chinese. That is, the traditional Chinese writing system from left to right is playing an important role here, though very much at the unconscious level of mind.

Plate 7 also accommodates two opposing visual directionalities. The Announcement reads from left to right whereas the Baijiaxing takes the form of traditional Chinese writing. However, as the Baijiaxing characters does not have real semantic content and thus Chinese readers only need to read the first several characters to identify the whole verbal block, they do not play a dominant role in the semantic construct of the advertisement. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the Announcement carries the key information. Therefore we can draw the conclusion that the modern directionality of left to right is more dominant than the traditional Chinese directionality of right to left.

To summarize, the analysis of the four Chinese advertisements shows that two different visual directionalities often coexist, with different forces. The key information is expressed in the modern directionality which originates from the west. In contrast, the traditional Chinese directionality is often deployed by designers not to convey semantically important message, but often to deliberately produce a flavor or sense of traditional Chinese culture, thus to appeal to the readers' emotional need for native identity. There are also cases in which the Chinese visual directionality often operates at the unconscious level of mind as part of the way of thinking, which is manifested

in various subtle ways.

Summary of section 3.2

Due to the strong preference for polarized structure, western visual design tends to achieve the purpose of the advertisement through contrasting relations between composing parts. The directionalities of Left to Right and Top to Bottom can both lead from Given to New information, or from less newsworthy or desirable information to more newsworthy and desirable information. Thus the shift from left to right and top to bottom often indicates a positive sense.

On the other hand, the contemporary Chinese visual culture mixes elements and patterns of both modern western and traditional Chinese. That is, the two opposing visual directionalities coexist in the same pieces of advertisement. However, closer examination discovers that the two do not stand in equal status: that of the modern or western tends to be more dominant than that of the traditional Chinese, since it is the former that carries the key messages whereas the traditional Chinese directionality serves to produce attraction in form. This shows that in contemporary China the visual culture has been modernized more or less in a westernized global environment while at the same time people consciously or unconsciously try to maintain the connection with the past traditional culture.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms the postulation that visual communication is also culturally loaded, only in a more covert way than verbal communication. That the western emphasize on clear logical relations among sections in a structure is confirmed in their preference for polarized spatial composition and contrasting semantic expression, whereas the Chinese holistic way of thinking is confirmed in their preference for central and layered composition and more diversified semantic relations among different parts. In addition, this study also unveils the unconscious attitudes in contemporary Chinese society towards the modern and traditional culture in the obscure practices of visual design.

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