"Bamboo fonts" – Cultural stereotypes visualised by display fonts

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Abstract

To visualise relation to the Japanese culture (and in some cases the Chinese as well) by Latin letters, Western as well as Japanese designers are using "Japanese style fonts"; which are also called "bamboo fonts" or "brush fonts".

The route of the so called "Japanese style fonts" can be tracked back to the beginning of graphic poster design in Europe in the late 19th century. This development – which can be seen as the foundation of contemporary poster design – happened at the same time as the movement in art Japonism. In some poster designs for product advertments, Japanese motifs were shown along with lettering styles which translated brush strokes inspired by Japanese calligraphy and applied to the shape of Latin letters. In colloquial speech, typefaces with these attributes are also known as "bamboo fonts".

This stereotypical style of typefaces - used to represent Japanese culture and products – was not only selected by Western graphic designers. Japanese designers themselves applied those fonts for graphics on packages of tea and other products back in the 19th century, to address and attract Western consumers. Until today "bamboo fonts" are used to represent the idea of Japanese culture with typographic means, moreover Asian culture in general.

Keywords

culture, visual identity, stereotypes, typography

Aim and Objectives

Display fonts as "bamboo fonts" are key visual elements for logo-types promoting Japanese culture in a popular way in Europe. In general those typefaces have a rather bad reputation as decorative and less "serious" fonts in Europe. To analyse the typical characteristics of the so called "Japanese look and feel" visualised in typeface design is one aim. At the same time to compare the way of perception and usage of those fonts in West and Japan is another objective.

Methodology

Examples of typefaces and typographic designs, showing variations of "bamboo fonts" from Western as well as Japanese origin, from historical to current designs will be selected, described and analysed according to their similarities and differences.

Introduction

Japonism – Historical coherence

After more than two hundred years of self chosen isolation, Japan was forced by America 1854 to open the country. This was not only the beginning of an intensive trade relationship between Western countries and Japan, but part of the intercultural meeting affected and inspired Western artists of that time.

From the end of the 19th till the early 20th century, European artists such as Monet, Manet, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec (just to name a few), architectures (Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut) and designer (Christopher Dresser) were inspired by Japanese culture and art. Japonism is the name of this movement.

The perception of Japan or the Japanese inspiration in the work of Western artist can be mainly defined into two categories. The term Japonism is used to describe artworks which originated in an intensive involvement with the visual characteristics of Japanese art and craft (mainly Ukiyoe-prints). Western artist analysed and translated "Japanese design principles" (as the the translation of three- to two-dimensional visualisation, light and shadow, structure of a layout and proportion of a format, use of ornaments, silhouettes, grid-structures, emphasis of the diagonal and image section) (S. Wichmann, 1980, p. 6) into an individual artwork.

While the Japanese source of inspiration is not necessarily obvious in artworks of the Japonism, this is different in case of Japonaiserie. In Japonaiserie, Western artists enhanced the exotic effect of Japanese culture and it's attributes. Kimono, fan and other stereotypical accessories together with ornaments were used as decorative elements to underline the exotic characteristic of a "Japan fashion" in the late 19th century. In this regard Japonaiserie can be described as part of Exotism and Orientalism movement in Western art history.

Observations/Results

Japonism and typography/poster design

Still Japonism is not accepted as a full art epoche but as part of different art movements such as Jugendstil (Art Deco), Modernism and Bauhaus (Klaus Berger). Klaus Berger and Claudia Delank claim, that Japonism had a strong influence on the development of the design discipline and in particular in the development of poster design in the late 19th century in Europe.

Jules Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec were the pioneers of graphic poster design in Europe. Their design released the former solely typographic monochrome poster and established a new style combining typographic and illustrative elements in one layout. This development – which can be seen as the foundation of contemporary poster design – happened at the same time as the Japonism movement in art. Inspired by Japanese woodcuts (Ukiyoe), Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec let their lettering and images interact and show a connection between the two elements. While Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec referred to current typographic trends (Sans Serif typefaces or Slab Serifs), other poster designers of that time (mostly working on advertisement posters) preferred a design in the tradition of Japonaiserie. Along with illustrations showing decorative Japanese pieces of scenery, the advertising designers used lettering styles, which translated brush strokes inspired by Chinese and Japanese calligraphy to the shape of Latin letters. Common features are the segmented shape of the Latin letters, the in- and decreasing stroke strength (similar to brush strokes) and angular or almost rectangular outline of the letters. In colloquial speech, typefaces with these attributes are also known as "bamboo fonts".

This stereotypical style of typefaces – used to represent Japanese products and at the same time the culture (and nowadays also restaurants logo types) – where not only selected by Western graphic designers. Japanese designers themselves applied those fonts for graphics on packages of tea and other products back in the 19th century to address and attract Western consumers.[1]

Typeface classification
Models of typeface classifications are one of the main discussion topics in Western typography. Classification systems for type should support different groups of users e.g. in design education, design practice as well as in the area of research with a defined nomenclature, which enables us to discuss characteristics of typefaces on an abstract level. Before the digital era, when most of the production of type was limited to print media, the number of available fonts was reasonable and the usage of Non-Latin typefaces was an exceptional case. Classification systems were developed in Europe which reflects the historical context of a typeface such as the system by Maximilian Vox (1894–1974) and the DIN-classification 16518 from 1964. Nowadays these classification systems are criticised as being inflexible to be extended towards new font styles on the one hand and more importantly towards Non-Latin scripts.

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1   This exoticism and at the same time validation of stereotypes by Japanese artist can be observed in the art movement Japonism as well. Japan was not only visualised by Western artists, but took actively part in portraying itself from the end of the 19th century. While Claudia Delank describes in her research the involvement of the photography studios based in Nagasaki who captured and produced images of the "old Japan" for the Western market. The work of Japanese photographers supported and encouraged the development of stereotypical images of Japan, such as Geisha, Samurai and Fujiyama in the Western mind.

	Serif/with contrast in stroke	Serifen/less contrast	Sans serif/with contrast	Sans serif/less contrast	Handwriting
Dynamic	Aa a	Aa a	Aa a	Aa a	Aa
Static	Aa a	Aa a	Aa a	Aa	Aa
Geometric	-/-	Aa a	-/-	Aa a	Aa
Decorative	A	A	Aa	Aa a	Aa a

Fig. 1
Typeface classification matrix by Kupferschmid, visualised by Mariko Takagi.

	Mincho	Gothic	Brush	Mix
Old	国あア	国あア 国あア	安あア	*Minchotai* + Angular *Goshikku* (Gothic)
Standard	国あア	国あア 国あア	安あ ア	*Minchotai* + Rounded *Goshikku* (Gothic)
Modern	国あア	国あア 国あア	-/-	*Mix Design Type*: combining more than two components
Design	国あア	国あア 国あア	安あア	

Fig. 2
Typeface classification by Komiyama, visualised by Mariko Takagi.

Hans Peter Willberg and Indra Kupferschmid independently introduced two font classification systems. In both cases it is a matrix system. On the one axis design characteristics as dynamic, static, geometric and decorative are defined. With one difference, Willberg introduces one more category for display fonts under the keyword "provocative". According to my personal judgement, the difference between decorative and provocative fonts are rather minor and extends the matrix unnecessarily. The systems by Willberg and by Kupferschmid show a more obvious contrast on the second axis. While Willberg differentiate between "antiqua", "varieties of antiqua", "gothic" (sans sarifs), "egyptienne" (slab serifs), "handwritten scripts" (lettering) and "foreign scripts" (Non-Latin, but limited to Cyrillic script), the system by Kupferschmid appears more accurately defined. She first differentiates between serif, sans serif and handwritten fonts. The serif and sans serif are both subdivided into "with stroke contrast" and "with minor stroke contrast". The system by Kupferschmid excludes Non-Latin scripts.

Similar to the classification approaches in Germany, there are typeface classification models in Japan, which are based on historical considerations mainly introduced by type-foundries. Based on an analysis of existing systems, Hiroshi Komiyama developed his own classification which he presented in a type specimen

catalogue 2008. A simplified version of this, which Komiyama published 2010 will be the subject in this present description.

In this system Komiyama firstly differentiates between Mincho, Goshikku (Gothic), brush-scripts and a category which he calls mixed. Subsequently he defines each group between three to four styles which he calls old-, standard-, modern and design-style. For the four Gothic styles, Komiyama further defines between a straight and a rounded stroke ending (final).

Once Komiyama's system is visualised in a matrix, parallels to the system by Kupferschmid becomes obvious.

In the first instance, both make distinction between serif (comparable to Mincho), sans serif (Goshikku, Gothic) and lettering/handwriting (brush stroke or calligraphy). Although the terms differs on the second axis, it is possible to find parallels by analysing the font samples in both cases. The "geometric" (Kupferschmid) is comparable to "modern" (Komiyama) and "decorative" (Kupferschmid) to "design" (Komiyama). Similar observation applies to "dynamic and static" by Kupferschmid to "old and standard" by Komiyama.

The typeface classification system by Kupferschmid for the Latin and Komiyama's system for Japanese frame the reference for my outline of a classification system that applies to both writing systems and can be seen as a slight extension of their combination. In this case as well it can be best represented by a matrix. The Y-axis describes the formative principle of a letter/character, which is compared in Japanese typography literature with "bone structure" or "skeleton". Based on Kupferschmid's system, I defined between dynamic, static, geometric and decorative shapes.

According to the image of a skeleton for the Y-axis, the X-axis represents the flesh/body of a letter/character.

Instead dividing the X-axis into two main groups, it appears to make sense to consider a slightly changed segmentation towards "serif", "semi serif"[2] and "sans serif". A fourth group collects fonts based on styles as hand writing, calligraphy (brush stroke) and seal engraving.

In each group there are subgroups that define the stroke strength, to distinguish between fonts with a significant change in stroke strength (behaviour) from fonts with adjusted stroke strength (the stroke behaviour is visually adjusted to demonstrate constant stroke strength).

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2   The terms "semi serif" and "semi sans serif" were introduced by the designer Otl Aicher (1922–91) 1988, with his typeface rotis, a super family consisting of four type families: serif, semi serif, semi sans serif and grotesque. Otl Aicher optionally describes semi serif with semi antiqua and semi sans serif with semi grotesque. Aicher points out the unique character of rotis semi sans serif, which shows similar stroke behaviour as a serif typeface but without including serifs. According to Aicher, this features enhances the readability of semi sans serif typefaces in comparison to grotesque. The semi sans serif is represented as sans serif with changing stroke strength in the matrix described above.

SHANGHAI
Bonzai
CHINESE TAKEAWAY
KARATE

Characteristics of "Asian style fonts"

"Asian style fonts" are Latin letters which mimic visual stereotypical ideas of Japanese and Chinese brush scripts. Common characteristics are the change of the stroke strength which is obviously inspired by brush strokes and an angular or almost rectangular outline of the letters. To achieve this visual impact, even letters of single strokes as e.g. capital C, O and U are sometimes segmented into two or more strokes. A single stroke has an almost triangular shape. Many fonts of this characteristic are single alphabets, limited on uppercase letters. Due to these qualities the counters as well as the outer shape of the letters are rectangular. Most of the typefaces in this category are decorative sans serif typefaces with in- and decreasing stroke strength or can even be categorised as brushstroke inspired typeface. In colloquial speech, typefaces with these attributes are known as "bamboo fonts".

Discussion

Poster design in Europe around 1900

In the European posters for "Cycles Clement" and "Amaryllis du Japon", both designed around the turn of the 19th century, the exotic image of Japan was used to promote a product with illustrative as well as typographic means. The "Asian style font" is only used for the headline text which is distinctly stressed in it's font size in comparison to the remaining text. Both designs show the style of Japonaiserie. Although the similarities between the two poster are significant on the first sight (woman/women in kimono), on closer examination the main difference seems to lay in the visualised scenario. In case of the Cycle Clement poster, the illustration shows an exotic picture of an ancient Japanese village. A woman in Kimono is riding a bicycle and friends, neighbour or family members are watching her. The bicycle is

the only advanced "western" invention in this image. The landscape in the back shows a wooden house and the mount Fuji. Paper lanterns, fans and umbrellas are part of this "Japanese setting" which is framed by bamboo. The headline "cycles clement" is visualised with a strongly fragmented brush stroke lettering. The outer shape of the solely capital letters is angular. Although each single stroke of the letters is slightly rounded and show a significant change in stroke from thin to thick as almost triangular outline, the overall impact of a letter is static. Not only the illustration, but the black lettering stresses the foreignness of this image.

The advertisement of the perfumery shows a slightly different approach and creates a different impression. The model with the kimono and the umbrella shown on the poster is obviously a western modern woman. The face, the proportion of the body, the bracelets, the gesture and the casual way of wearing the kimono are visual hints for this assumption. Similar to "cycles clement" this illustration is full of japanese requisites such as a partition screen, lilies and a crane. But different to the other poster, the designer visualised the Japan-fashion in Europe in the late 19th century. This tonality applies to the style of the lettering as well. The capital letters are a synergy of "Asian style fonts" and fashionable lettering styles of that time. The letters are less fragmented, the yellow font shows an outline in a darker colour and the strokes of letters with bowls (as R, P and O) are rounded instead of segmented. By this means the poster "Amaryllis du Japon" captures how the Japan-fashion was applied in Europe by fashionable people, while "cycle clement" shows how Europe imagined an antiquated Japan.

Tee packages around 1900 from Japan

Japanese tea was one of the most popular products for export during the Meiji era. The tea boxes were labeled with colourful woodcut prints. Those labels, called Ranji, were specially designed for the Western consumer market referring to the look of ukiyo-e prints. Beside the illustration stressing the Japanese origin of the product by showing motifs as woman in kimono, mount Fuji and other stereotypes of Japan, the
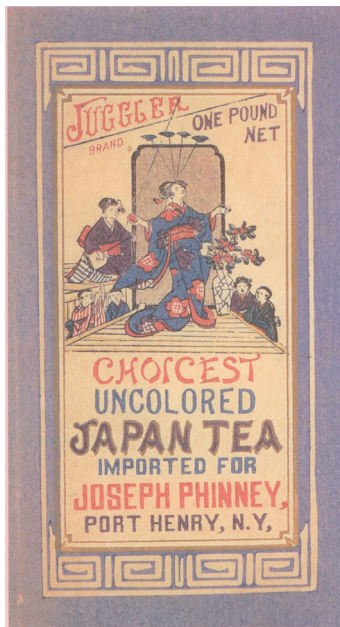
Fig. 7 (left)
Fig. 8 (middle)
Fig. 9 (right)
Examples of tee lables, Ranji.
Source: Doi, T. (2004) Chagaku.
World Photo Press, Tokyo,
p. 8–13.

style of the lettering showing an early interpretation of Latin letter by Japanese designers. The chosen styles are rich in variation and include all kinds of decorative typefaces inspired by contemporary European design. The labels were designed and produced by former ukiyo-e artists and printers and were addressed to the taste of Western consumers.

For the Japanese designer and craftsman of that time, to design with Latin letters was a rather unfamiliar situation. Examples of mirrored letters prove this unfamiliarity.

While the chosen motifs for illustration are comparable to the contemporary Western poster design, the styles of the typefaces show a different tendency. The segmented letters which stand out based on their larger font size, are present in the Japanese designs as well (fig. 7 and 8) but with some differences. Firstly the shapes of the letters are less fragmented and the strokes are rounder and more gentle. Secondly those styles were not used for the headlines. Interestingly in the japanese tea labels, slab serif typefaces with decorative and bold serifs represent the most eye-catching elements of the text layer. (fig. 8 and 9) Those font styles have a visual proximity to the so called "western fonts". At the same time, the angular thickening (swelling) at the middle of a stroke can be interpreted as a visual reference to the anatomy of a bamboo plant, in particular to the node (the single culm segments are joined through a node). Based on this, the lettering style shown on Ranji can be seen as an alternative interpretation of Bamboo Fonts.

Fig. 10 (left) Magazine
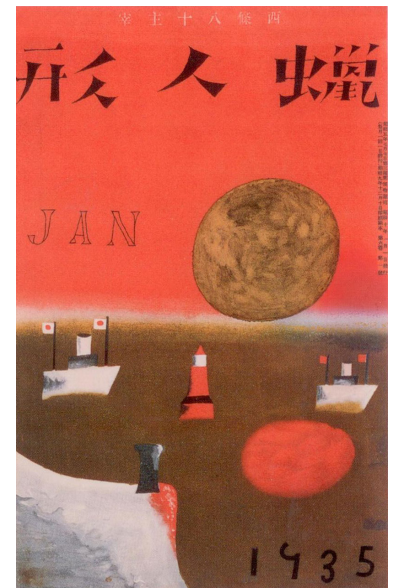advertisement, 1931
Fig. 11 (middle) Magazine
advertisement, 1931
Fig. 12 (right), Magazine cover,
1935
Designs by Takashi Kono.
Source: Ginza Graphic Gallery
(2003), p. 15, 16 and 21.

Takashi Kono's design

Different to the lettering design of the tee labels, Takashi Kono, a japanese graphic
designer, applied the segmented style on Japanese characters. In Kono's poster de-
sign in the early 1930s, for movie, theatre and dance performances, he repeatedly
used this style for his lettering. (3 images) As these designs were only published and
used in a local context within Japan, it can be assumed that this lettering design
rather reflects the fashion of that time and was not supposed to create or support a
Japanese image or stereotype.

Fig. 13 (left) Kinoshita, Y. (2010)
Poster design for Japanese-
Language Proficiency Test by
the Japan Foundation. Source:
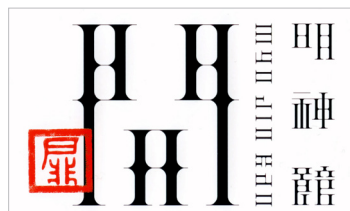Japan Typography Association
(2011), p. 106.

Fig. 14 (top right) Mizuno, M.
(2004) Logo-type for Hotel
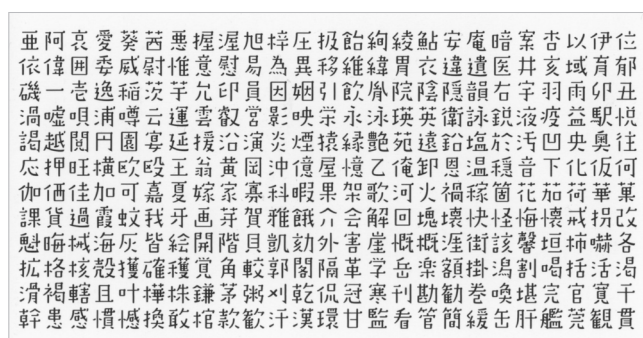Myojinkan. Source: Tokyo Type
Directors Club (2005), p. 171.

Fig. 15 (bottom right) Saikusa,
Y. (2004) "Mayumi" – Typeface
design. Source: Tokyo Type
Directors Club (2005), p. 148.

Conclusion

"Japanese style fonts" (or "bamboo fonts" or even "brush fonts") are definitely not remnant of the late 19th and early 20s century, nor can they be reduced to the exotic and stereotypical representation of Japan (and Asia in general) by the West. There are still typeface designers, creating fonts with an "Asian touch" to visualise and stress the idea of e.g. a product's cultural background and belonging, as the typeface Japan by Allen R. Walden (fig. 3) and other display fonts as Shanghai, Bonzai etc. (fig. 4). This practice is not limited to Western designers. Yoshio Kinoshita designed a poster (2010) with a bamboo style display font and the stereotypical colour setting of white-black-red to promote the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test by the Japan Foundation (fig. 13). For the corporate design of the Hotel Myojinkan (a Japanese traditional luxury hotel in Matsumoto, Japan), Mizuno Manabu designed a logotype (a combination of Kanji-characters and Latin letters) that firstly can be associated with the anatomy of a bamboo stem and secondly has a strong visual analogy to the vertical stroke (stem and serif with a rounded bracket) of a Didone (fig. 14). What's more, Mizuno indicate another Japanese visual citation as the seal in red ink. A slightly different approach can be observed in the design of the typeface "Mayumin" (fig. 15), created by Yasushi Saikusa, which shows a certain likeness to the lettering style of Kono Takashi in the 1930s.

Beside the visual link to Japanese culture, those display fonts represent a retro-fashion, especially in Japan.

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01. 08.)