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Exploring the Design Aesthetic Connotation of "Observing Objects and Taking Images" in Zhouyi

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Abstract: The Book of Changes (Zhouyi) embodies profound cultural wisdom. Its core creative principle, "Observing Objects and Deriving Symbols" (Guan Wu Qu Xiang), provides subsequent generations with invaluable artistic creation concepts and a unique aesthetic framework. Interpreting the Zhouyi from a design aesthetics perspective reveals its extensive content and well-developed system; its concepts concerning material creation encompass nearly all dimensions of traditional design aesthetics thought. This paper elucidates the concept of "Observing Objects and Deriving Symbols" and employs the "Li Hexagram" (Li Gua) from the Zhouyi as a specific case for definition and discussion. Through this exploration of its expressed aesthetic thought, the paper aims to uncover the design aesthetics philosophy within the Zhouyi and its profound influence on the cultural essence and stylistic characteristics of traditional Chinese material creation. It constitutes a significant theme within ancient Chinese design aesthetics.

Keywords: Zhouyi (Book of Changes); Guan Wu Qu Xiang (Observing Objects and Deriving Symbols); Design aesthetics; Aesthetic thought

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1. Introduction

Historically, much of our aesthetic theory has been dominated by Western perspectives, largely excluding Eastern cultural traditions. Such a limited scope renders this understanding of aesthetics incomplete. There is now a growing recognition that culture cannot be monolithic or exclusively Western. It is important to cultivate a multi-cultural perspective. Designers, in particular, need to prioritize the study of aesthetics rooted in Eastern traditions, fostering their mutual enrichment with Western aesthetics.

A key emphasis emerging from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China is the call to "advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernization." Historical trends consistently demonstrate that development tailored to a nation's unique context ensures its enduring progress. This principle is equally applicable to design.

This paper examines and systematizes the aesthetic thought found within the Zhouyi (The Book of Changes). By harnessing the complementary strengths of both cultural traditions, it seeks to contribute to the advancement and broader recognition of the profound essence of Chinese design aesthetics globally.

2. The relationship between the Zhouyi and design

"The Zhouyi is revered as the 'primordial classic of all scriptures' and an extraordinary text encompassing the Dao of Heaven and Earth" [1]. Although its most immediate purpose served divination practices, the profound philosophies it contains have exerted significant influence on later societal development, human existence, and the evolution of knowledge. Within its content lie rich philosophical, military, economic, political, and artistic thought systems, naturally including pivotal design principles.

The design philosophy embedded in the Zhouyi directly shaped subsequent Chinese artifact creation and craft ideologies, establishing itself as the genesis of traditional Chinese design. The term "design" originates from the Western concept of "Design." Its formal emergence in China traces to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it was termed "Tuan'an" ("seeking solutions"; tu = strategize, an = proposal) or "Gongyi Meishu" ("craft art"). This conceptual continuity aligns with ancient China's core definition of design as "Zaowu" (artifact creation)—fundamentally addressing human needs through purposeful object-making.

Tracing its developmental roots, ancient Chinese design thought originates from pre-Qin philosophical texts, with the Zhouyi exemplifying the methodology of "Guanwu Quxiang" (observing objects to derive symbolic imagery). This study thus returns to China's oldest canon, interpreting the Zhouyi's "Guanwu Quxiang" philosophy to excavate its aesthetic depth. By harnessing the power of traditional culture, the study aims to inspire contemporary designers to reconstruct China's indigenous aesthetic framework and advance localized design discourse in modern practice.

3. Exposition of fundamental concepts in The Book of Changes

"The Book of Changes (Zhouyi) is regarded as one of China's oldest texts and also one of the most challenging to comprehend" [2]. Its difficulty arises from two aspects: first, its ancient origins and linguistic system differ significantly from modern conventions, resulting in obscure and arcane language; second, its primary function as a divinatory text encompasses extensive philosophical content, making its deeper meanings inherently complex.

The Book of Changes evolved from King Wen's refinement of Fu Xi's primal Eight Trigrams system. Within it, each "hexagram" (Gua) constitutes a complete unit, totaling 64 hexagrams. Every hexagram is composed of six "lines" (Yao), categorized as either "solid lines" (—, yang yao) or "broken lines" (--, Yin Yao). This structure reveals the text's emphasis on the balance of complementary opposites (yin and yang), epitomizing the "Doctrine of the Mean" (zhongyong zhi dao) and the "aesthetics of harmony" (Zhonghe Zhi Mei).

In divination, lines are interpreted sequentially from the bottom upward. These six lines are divided into two sets: the lower three lines form one group, and the upper three lines constitute another. This grouping is termed the "image" (Xiang), central to the concept of "observing forms to derive images" (Guan Wu Qu Xiang) discussed in this study. Additionally, adjacent pairs of lines are grouped into three tiers, known as the "Three Talents" (Sancai):

(1) The lowest two lines symbolize Earth (Di),

(2) The middle two lines represent Humanity (Ren),

(3) The uppermost two lines signify Heaven (Tian).

Thus, the hexagram structure embodies the cosmic triad of "Heaven, Earth, and Humanity." The hexagram Ji Ji ("After Completion") exemplifies this division of "image" and "Three Talents" (**Figure 1**).

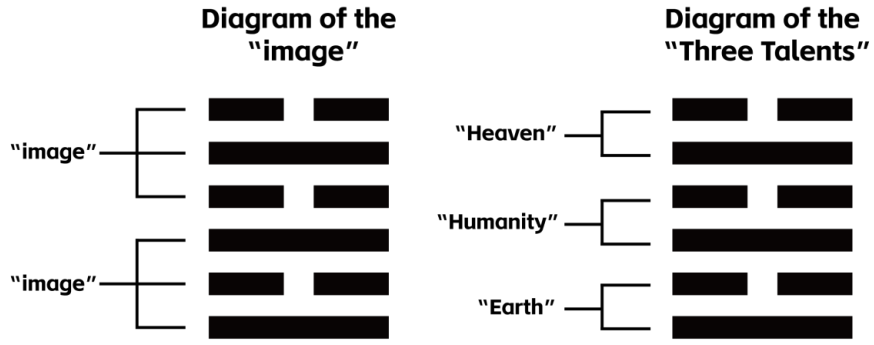

Figure 1. Division of "Xiang" and "Three Talents" in the Book of Changes.

"Graphically, the 64 hexagrams comprise distinct six-line configurations. Much like the symbolic nature of the primal trigrams, these hexagrams metaphorically represent 64 categories of phenomena. Structurally, their symbolic forms adhere to specific combinatorial rules and sequences, while their inherent meanings follow a coherent logical framework. The establishment of hexagram forms gives rise to hexagram statements (Guaci), commentaries (Wenyan), and appended judgments (Xiici), collectively forming the integrated system of the Book of Changes. Here, graphic design serves as the foundational origin. From a design perspective, this represents one of ancient China's most monumental design achievements" [3].

4. "Observing Objects to Derive Images" in design aesthetics

The core concept of "observing objects to derive images" is documented in Xici Zhuan: "In ancient times, when Bao Xi ruled the world, he looked upward to observe the images in heaven, looked downward to examine the patterns on earth, observed the markings of birds and beasts and the adaptations of the land. Drawing from near, he took symbols from his own body; drawing from afar, he took symbols from objects. Thus, he created the Eight Trigrams to comprehend the virtues of divine intelligence and classify the nature of all things."

5. Key philosophical dimensions

5.1. Observation as dynamic foundation

Observation transcends mere visual perception; it involves dynamically scrutinizing the sensible manifestations of phenomena and their inherent laws. This process is constrained by three interconnected factors: timing, geographical advantage, and human harmony—collectively termed the "Three Talents" in the Book of Changes. These dimensions integrate moral, rational, and philosophical considerations.

In design practice, this holistic observation crystallizes into a systematic design methodology. The Kaogong Ji explicitly states: "Examining curvature and assessing configuration to harness the five materials for crafting tools—this defines the work of artisans" [4]. Here, "examining" embodies observation, emphasizing that artisans must meticulously analyze an object's characteristics to formulate rational solutions.

5.2. Image" beyond literal representation

While "objects" refer to tangible entities, "image" requires deeper contextualization. Xici Zhuan clarifies: "An 'image' is a semblance." It encompasses both mimetic depictions of observed reality and abstract distillations of essential qualities [5].

Crucially, Xiang diverges from Western "artistic imagery," which relies on aesthetic subjectivity. Instead, it functions as a dual-natured construct: objective reflection and conceptual refinement, transcending purely aesthetic boundaries.

5.3. Derivation as creative synthesis

Deriving images synthesizes observation with creative interpretation. Fu Xi's derivation of the Eight Trigrams exemplifies how empirical analysis of natural phenomena—sky, thunder, water, fire, marsh, wind, mountain, earth—evolves into symbolic systems. King Wen later expanded these into the 64 hexagrams of the Zhouyi.

This process unifies rational cognition (classifying laws) and intuitive creation (symbolic expression), paralleling Western discourses on "beauty and truth." Such dialectics profoundly influenced the Chinese literati's aesthetic philosophy and became foundational to traditional ornamentation [6]. Every classical decorative pattern traces its lineage to this synthesis.

As the genesis of ancient Chinese aesthetics, "observing objects to derive images" centers on Xiang as both objective and outcome. The transition from observation to derivation completes the pre-material design conception, encompassing:

(1) Cognitive mapping: Systematizing natural/social patterns;

(2) Creative abstraction: Transforming observation into symbolic language;

(3) Ethical integration: Harmonizing human, temporal, and spatial factors.

This framework established enduring paradigms for design thinking, where artifacts embody cosmic principles (e.g., ritual bronzes mirroring heaven-earth hierarchies) and social ethics (e.g., furniture reflecting Confucian order). Its legacy continues to radiate enduring brilliance in East Asian design philosophy.

6. The Li hexagram: The aesthetics of interplay between solid and void

The Li hexagram is the thirtieth hexagram in the Book of Changes (Zhouyi). Both its inner (lower) and outer (upper) trigrams are "Li", hence its name. The "Li" trigram symbolizes fire (see Fig. 2). This hexagram is selected for its profound connection to ancient craftsmanship and aesthetic philosophy. As noted by Zong Baihua, "The Li hexagram is intrinsically linked to ancient Chinese architectural art, reflecting the relationship between art and productive labor. The hexagram's aesthetics are tied to crafted objects (Qi). These objects embody human creativity" [7]. Thus, discussions of design and design aesthetics cannot overlook the Li hexagram (**Figure 2**).

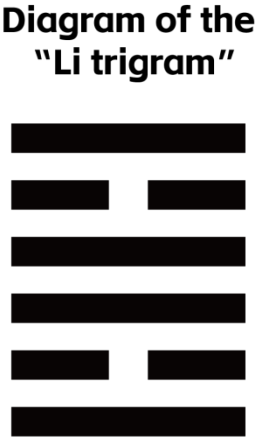

Figure 2. Diagram of the "Li trigram."

6.1. Symmetry: Foundational harmony

The hexagram's structure reveals symmetrical beauty, as both upper and lower trigrams mirror each other. In ancient China, symmetry was revered as a unique aesthetic principle, prominently featured in the ornamentation of Shang and Zhou dynasty bronze ware [8]. Furniture, decorative objects, and sculptures were often arranged in symmetrical pairs. This principle extended to classical garden architecture, where balance governed spatial composition and visual rhythm.

6.2. Adornment (Lì): Unity of form and substance

Zhu Xi's Zhouyi Benyi states: "Li means lì (adornment)," highlighting objects as vessels of artistic expression. The Erya dictionary further defines "lì as attachment." Ancient thinkers regarded adornments on objects as inherently beautiful, emphasizing harmony between attachment and beauty [9]. The Li hexagram's structure—broken (Yin) lines at the second and fifth positions flanked by solid (Yang) lines—symbolizes this balance. The yin lines must "adhere" to Yang lines to achieve equilibrium, echoing the concept of "central harmony" and perfect unity.

In aesthetics, this translates to the relationship between ornamentation (wén) and substance (zhì). Ornamentation must complement substance without overshadowing it—akin to Yin's yielding nature. Substance, as the foundation, must be robust yet restrained. Only when ornamentation aligns with appropriate materiality does beauty emerge, allowing both to coexist synergistically.

6.3. Interplay of solid and void: Transparency as metaphor

The broken (Yin) lines at positions two and five represent "void," while the solid (Yang) lines signify "solidity." This structure epitomizes solidity containing void, evoking the imagery of latticed windows that filter light, a metaphor for permeability. As Zong Baihua observed, this aesthetic mirrors ancient Chinese architectural philosophy: "separation yet connection with the external world". The dialectic of solid-void permeates all artistic creation. Concepts like "reserved blank space" and "breathing room" in design emphasize the necessity of void [10]. It grants work transparency, enabling integration with their surroundings and achieving universal harmony.

7. Conclusion

Throughout history, the concept of "observing objects to derive forms" has been extensively applied in product design and production. From ancient Chinese pictograms to bronze vessels and porcelain, and further to creations featuring mountains, rivers, birds, beasts, flowers, and trees, this philosophy remains deeply embedded in artistic practice. Its application manifests in two primary aspects: firstly, transitioning from one form to another—a direct visual abstraction that extracts the essence of "objects" while preserving their fundamental structure and elevating their external attributes, representing the most widely used and effective method; secondly, evolving from form to meaning, where the shift transcends mere graphical transformation to embody conceptual and symbolic interpretation, requiring deep excavation of spiritual connotations from diverse entities to yield symbolic cultural products. Through creative endeavors, we advance from object to form and ultimately to meaning.

In summary, "observing objects to derive forms" has endured across eras with timeless vitality. As designers, we should fully leverage this scientifically grounded creative philosophy. China's extensive history has yielded exceptional works and theories, offering rich references and robust support for subsequent artistic creation. The concept, rooted in the Zhouyi, embodies a distinctive Chinese artistic ethos. Guided by this aesthetic principle, traditional Chinese decorative patterns emerged, integrating vivid and harmonious concrete symbols alongside classical creative methodologies. These elements hold profound significance for modern design; only through rigorous study, analysis, and revitalization of their underlying classical aesthetics can China's traditional heritage radiate renewed brilliance.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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