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Author(s): Chitchai, Kuandachakupt

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Osaka University
A semiotic analysis of iconicity in Thai images on Japanese matchbox labels
Chitchai Kuandachakupt / Kyoto Institute of Technology

Abstract

This project aims to clarify the history of Japanese—Thai relationship regarding graphic design and visual communication through examination of visual elements in Japanese matchbox labels.

In early 20th century, Japanese matchboxes were imported to Thailand. To persuade Thais, the graphic elements on the matchbox labels therefore must suit with the local Thai perception and value. This causes Japanese matchbox labels to contain a number of visual elements, which were similar to Thai cultural symbols and icons, such as elephants image and cavalry figure. In this direction, this research analyzes a number of Japanese matchbox labels produced from 1910 to 1930, which gathered from collection of the Museum and Archives, Kyoto Institute of Technology, and compare them with Thai significant graphic elements from the same period. The objectives of this research are to portray how Japanese graphic design interacts with the local Thai society at that time and how the Thai influenced the design in return.

1. Methodology

The initiative idea leading to this research occurs during the observation of the matchbox labels collection of museum and archives in order to conduct the research on original labels in Kyoto institute of Technology, in the academic year of 2012. The objectives of this paper is to trace and collect fine details of Japanese matchbox labels exported to Thailand, regarding to their graphic elements, i.e. the expression of images by artisans, typography, colors and composition. When having notified the familiar labels in Japanese matchboxes, these labels would be compared with Thai historical archives, which relates to Thai public contexts and cultural values. Subsequently 4 categories of designs were selected for further research, including the white elephant, Payanak, the cavalry—the great man riding horse, and lastly the tiger. From the labels that were investigated, there are some similarities and differences in expression of visual images and elements, which signify the varieties of visual perception noted by Thai historians, artists and collectors. They are significantly demonstrated the different culture and value of the Thais from the Japanese.

Therefore it could be assumed that many Japanese labels succeed in rhetorically grabbing the attention of Thai customers by learning Thai culture and value perception and incorporate them in the pattern of the matchboxes. It consequently causes the imported Japanese matchboxes to harmoniously facilitate a quickly changes in Thai society. In this study, the overview of method is to find the connections between graphic
on Japanese matchbox labels and Thai cultural contexts. There are countless forms and themes of Japanese matchbox labels, which influenced Thais in visual communication and printing techniques.

2. Analysis and summary

The main objective of these analyses is to find similarities and differences between graphic on Countless forms and themes of Japanese matchbox labels and Thai cultural contexts. A Synchronic analysis of the four designs of Japanese matchbox labels (including: Design 1: White elephant and Royal Emblem of H.M. King Rama V, Design 2: Mythical characters and Payanak, Design 3: the cavalry, Design 4: Tiger and landscape) was conducted using semiotic, cultural and historical criteria. The documentary research on Japanese matchbox labels reveals that there are four images of the numerous repetitions in both Japanese and others from Meiji period. To summarize, motifs variation shows what people in the community believes, as well as how design motifs reflect their individual experiences and cultural context. Further, artistic expression were limited by difficulties of printing labels in early period compared with the Japanese, but Thais used their own skills to express in their original and simple ways.

3. Conclusion

This analysis concerns the study of forms and graphic elements that related to historical experiences, context of daily life and culture in Siam. In that, the main reasons of popularity of this motif; the popularity of cavalry, white elephants and Payanak labels emphasized that the absolute monarchy system prevails in Siam at that moment, causing people to pay respects to the King of Thailand, and this belief remain in the society nowadays. Also, before the widespread usage of photography and multi colored printing, Japanese matchbox labels served as printed media for cultural exchange the commercial purposes. As this study demonstrates, the intersection of semiotic and intercultural communication should continue to be intentionally combined together. This type of analysis exposes the method of extraction of cultural value orientations that are surrounded in everyday artifacts. Japanese matchbox labels are the great examples that serve not only as communicative tools in macro level but also as the identification of the method how objects communicate the unique cultural values.