

DESIGN FINDS A NEW LANGUAGE

A group of young designers are integrating the aesthetic elements of *hanshi* (Chinese characters) into their designs. And inspired by the stories about the *hanshi*, they aim to make the characters part of people's daily lives.

The designers are taking part in The Beauty of Chinese Characters: Global Youth Design Contest being held by Beijing Normal University and the Academy of Arts and Design at Tsinghua University.

Hanshi is one of the world's oldest hieroglyphics and has been one of the main carriers of Chinese cultural connotations for millennia. But, according to French Sinologist Joel Bellassen, people should also focus on the intrinsic beauty of the square Chinese characters.

Recognizing this aesthetic potential, this year's contest is asking young designers aged between 18 and 44 from around the globe to create designs that are inspired by 30 Chinese characters.

This year's theme is a Chinese saying: "Harmony in the family is the basis for success in any undertaking" and the 30 characters share the common component *baogaitou* (which implies a house).

Wang Lijun, a professor at BNU's School of Chinese Language and Literature, says that the characters are related to life in ancient times.

In ancient times when *hanshi* resembled tiny pictures, the character *jia* (home) consisted of a *baogaitou* on the top and the component *shi* (a pig) at the bottom.

This was to indicate that it was only when people started to rear animals that they began to lead a settled life.

And since the ancients typically stored their wealth at home, many Chinese characters with

the *baogaitou* component were related to wealth such as *bao* (treasure) and *fu* (rich).

Wang says the character *ning* (tranquil) for example, consists of components including *baogaitou*, *xin* (heart), *min* (which implies a utensil), and *ding* (which looks like a table), and the combination means that a meal at home calmed people.

Yu Dan, a professor at BNU who initiated the contest, says that *hanshi* reflects the origin of ideas and is a suitable way to tell foreigners about Chinese history and culture.

The last contest was held in 2016 and the theme was the component *xin*.

According to Yu, at that time the organizers received 1,250 entries from 16 countries and regions.

The gold award in that contest went to a series of clock designs called *Zhuanxin* (turning one's mind). The 30 themed characters featured in the contest were listed around the round dial without their component *xin*. The two clock hands were designed to represent the two shapes of the component *xin*.

One hand of the clock points to 10 components on the outer dial of the clock face, while the other points to 20 components on the inner dial. Depending on the position of the respective clock hands, a different character is formed by each one.

"Every moment had a unique meaning," says Lyu You, the designer, who wanted to combine all the 30 characters into a single product design.

Another award-winning design was by South Korean designer Kim Su-jin.

Kim, 32, has been learning Chinese for 16 years. And her design focused on the word *huainian* (missing someone).

The intrinsic beauty of the square Chinese characters is the focus of an ongoing contest for young designers. **Fang Aiqing** reports.



Clockwise from top: Entries of last contest, which should integrate characters with the component *xin* (heart) include a watch designed by Lyu You, a greeting card by Kim Su-jin and rings by Zhu Ailun. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



The Beauty of Chinese Characters contest this year asks participating designers to focus on 30 key characters which share a component *baogaitou* (which implies a house).

For her, if the component *xin* of the first character *huai* (inclusive) was removed, the word became *bunian* (not missing someone at all).

This led to her designing a card with temperature-sensitive printing ink.

When the card is opened, the word *bunian* can be seen. However, later the component *xin* also appears.

Through her design, Kim wants to remind people of the feelings that can be conveyed through the written word.

For Kim, one of the best things about the contest is that it's a crossover event.

"Crossover is popular among designers these days, yet it is not often applied to design contests. So, designs like mine are often turned down," says Kim. "Yet, this one (the contest) eliminates the boundaries between the different genres of designs, so you can apply many forms that you cannot present elsewhere."

Now, Kim says she has managed to find suitable materials to make her cards and is planning to turn the design into a product and sell it.

Chi Xun, an associate professor of visual communication at the Laguna College of

Art and Design in the United States, has long been using Chinese cultural elements in his teaching. Some of his students, who are participating in this year's contest, are using augmented reality technology in their designs.

"A Chinese character usually has more than one meaning. By using AR, multiple meanings can be presented at one time," says Chi.

"Every one of them (the characters) has its own history of evolution and 'family tree'. By looking into them, especially through the components, one can also learn about the culture and customs behind them," says Chi, who is fond of reading ancient Chinese prose.

Chen Nan, one of the other brains behind the contest and a doctoral supervisor of visual communication design at the Academy of Arts and Design at Tsinghua University, says that young designers should focus more on Chinese history and culture as Chinese characters have great vitality, especially considering that they have been passed through history.

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