



Experimental Typography

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Dis/re-appearance of vernacular Chinese letterform of Beiwei Kaishu in Hong Kong

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Abstract: The forms of Chinese characters have been evolving continually throughout millennia, and their writing is not only a means to communicate, but also an expression of visual aesthetics. The discourse surrounding letterforms, therefore, goes beyond text itself and delves deep into application, media, and the merging of aesthetics and function.

The historic calligraphy style BeiWei KaiShu dominated Hong Kong store signs during the 1950's and 60's, though its prevalence has gradually diminished amidst rapid urban development. Today, the style is re-emerging as *Zansyu*, a locally designed and much discussed digital font that is not a straightforward imitation of its 3rd century ancestor, but a modern re-interpretation applied in commercial design. This paper looks into the differences between BeiWei KaiShu and *Zansyu*, and explores how the calligraphy style has found its way transforming from ancient stone carving into contemporary commercial design.

Key words: *Chinese letterform, streetscape, vernacular culture, Beiwei Kaishu, Hong Kong.*

1. Introduction

What do letterforms do for a city, and how are they meaningful? Sociolinguists have in recent years been increasingly interested in the relationships between text, urban space, and urban living. As Uta Papen (2015: 1) pointed out, store signs play a significant role in the discursive re-construction concerning places, because “visual aspects of writing such as font or colour are essential for the meanings conveyed on signs”. She believed that the language and images employed by signs are inseparable from urban living, and the creation of written signs can create social meaning for a place (ibid: 3). We might,

therefore, attempt to understand the cultural representation of a city through the study of its written letterforms; the textual or visual messages attached to signs could accord specific meanings to urban spaces. Lettering is a visual expression of writing, involving the form, arrangement, and grouping of textual symbols (Gray, 1986: 9). By studying transformations and applications in lettering, we are given insightful glimpses into the culture, history, politics, and daily life of society at a certain point in time.

Hong Kong used to be a city saturated with text – its image of overlapping and cascading written signs in various forms, in full bloom across streets and alleys, had created a unique urban spectacle. The traditional Chinese saying “*writing as clothing*” highlights a cultural belief in handwriting as a symbol of identity; for the Chinese, a person’s character can be observed from their handwriting – or calligraphic – style. Similarly, sign calligraphy is seen as an expression of a business’s character and values. While store signs may be a straightforward matter, some businesses would commission written signs from acclaimed calligraphers in order to establish strong brand images, as well as attract public attention and good fortune. Such factors led to the local flourishing of the calligraphic style BeiWei KaiShu (or BeiWei in short), which features exaggerated strokes that make up highly legible letterforms – or characters – easily recognisable from great distances. BeiWei thus became widely adopted by various businesses as a go-to style for signs.

2. A brief history of BeiWei

During the Wei and Jin Dynasties (220-589 AD), a period of political and cultural upheaval in China, the prevailing calligraphy style of the time, LiShu, underwent a process of simplification and regulation, developing into a more formal writing system named the “True Script” (also known later as “KaiShu”), with squared character forms and straightened brushstrokes. In the late 3rd century Northern Wei period, religious and memorial stone inscriptions became highly popular, many featuring a novel style that expressed the morphing between LiShu and the “True Script” – referred to as WeiBeiTi (Wei Inscription Form). During the time, China’s rulers were Northern nomads who promoted calligraphic development through their culture-conforming policies. Later scholars would describe WeiBeiTi as a historically unique script style that integrated Northern boldness and Southern Confucian culture (Xu 2009, Tam 2014a).

Scholars in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) excavated a range of stone carvings from the Wei and Jin periods, which evoked a trend in calligraphers basing their personal styles on

WeiBeiTi – renowned calligrapher Zhao Zhiqian (1829-1884) was one of them (Xu 2009, Tam 2014a, Kan 2016). Such revival of the style could be observed well into 20th century Hong Kong, where some celebrated calligraphers would adopt a similar style when commissioned to write for store signs, the most well-known of which being Au Kin Kung (1887-1971). As their work became widely imitated across the city, WeiBeiTi – or BeiWei KaiShu as it is more commonly known today – had established a unique prevalence in Hong Kong’s streets and vernacular culture since the 1950’s and 60’s. Some attribute the style’s popularity to its easily distinguishable strokes and overall air of liveliness.

2.1 BeiWei style characteristics

While many BeiWei works show a similarity to LiShu, they feature straightened, forceful strokes and exaggerated sharp points (Xu 2009, Qiu 2007, Tam 2014a). Characters also possess a dynamic and often asymmetrical structure. Stylistically the script was heavily influenced by stone carving techniques of the Northern Wei period (386-534 AD), which involved making inscriptions by knife. Later practitioners would create rubbings from such inscriptions for calligraphic study. Using the brush to simulate carving marks, they developed heavy and angular strokes with defined edges (Figure 1).

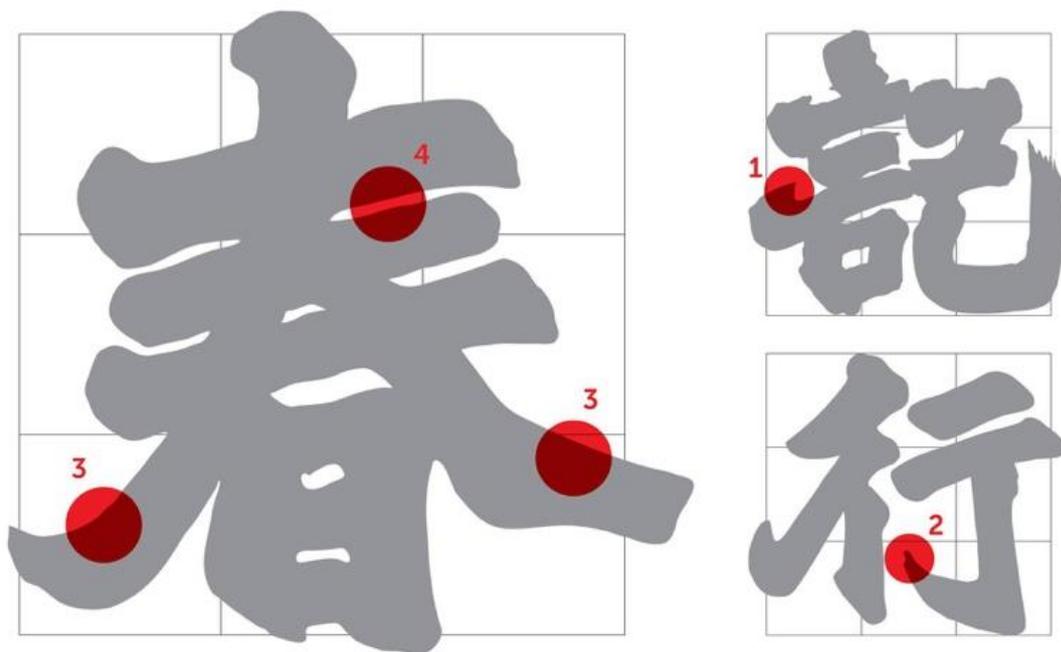


Figure 1. Highlighted below are some of BeiWei's distinguishing features:

1. Horizontal stroke
The beginning of a horizontal stroke is pressed from the opposite direction, creating an angled flare. The brushstroke is generally thick and slightly curved, ending in a quick but rounded stop.
2. Vertical hook
The vertical hook is one of BeiWei's most distinct features, with a deliberately elongated and sharp end resembling a knife-blade. This brings a sense of visual stability to the characters.
3. Left and right falling slants
BeiWei falling slants are straightforward and bold, bringing a strong sense of stability and balance to the characters.
4. Positive and negative space
The similar weights of both horizontal and vertical strokes in BeiWei contributes to a low contrast between positive and negative space. One of the style's features is its extremely condensed and narrow negative space.

2.2 Summary of BeiWei characteristics

A high density of strokes arranged towards the centre, and an outward expanding quality in BeiWei calligraphy create a distinct sharpness in its characters. Such features, combined with a remarkable stroke thickness which renders the text highly legible even from great distances, have culminated in an image that is at the same time strong, bold, rhythmic, and trustworthy – all desirable traits for store signs. While the popularity of BeiWei has declined significantly from its heyday, traces of BeiWei signs can still be spotted around Hong Kong, particularly on the storefronts of pawnshops and old businesses (Figure 2a-c).



Figure 2a. Yuet Wah Music Company, Wan Chai Road, Hong Kong.



Figure 2b. Kee Wah Bakery, Queen's Road East, Wan Chai, Hong Kong.



Figure 2c. Yuen Kee Dessert, Centre Street, Sai Wan, Hong Kong.

3. BeiWei Kaishu in new media: *Zansyu*

The calligraphic style of BeiWei reached a point of ubiquity in Hong Kong during the 1960's and 70's such that it could be found on signs across a wide range of businesses, including legacy clinics, banks, seafood stores, bakeries, pawnshops, Chinese restaurants, cargo trucks, and more. However, as a generation of renowned BeiWei calligraphers passed, and the technology of phototypesetting rose to eminence, many businesses had turned to default computer fonts, which led to the gradual decline and disappearance of BeiWei on the city's signs.

Designer Adonian Chan, of Trilingua Design, has been researching the historical development and calligraphic aesthetics of BeiWei in the social context of Hong Kong since 2011. He has also been continually collecting and recording the city's physical historical signs, a portion of which are in BeiWei. Through digital technology, Chan has extracted the essence of the style and re-created BeiWei as a new digital font called *Zansyu* (an archaic word for the general style known as KaiShu). His work advocates beyond the preservation and continuation of BeiWei's aesthetics, and focuses on the style's revitalisation, meaning to "re-interpret its creation with a contemporary aesthetic

perspective and medium, in the hopes of generating renewed appreciation from the public via applications in brand identity typography, cultural studies, and typographic design; to restore the vitality of calligraphy into contemporary typographic design.” (Chan 2016)

According to Chan (2018), *Zansyu* is not a vintage revival font, nor does it aim to imitate the strokes of a brush; it is a modern font set created with bezier curves in graphic software. Instead of attempting to recreate textural features in knife and brush marks, *Zansyu* puts a focus on delicate and smooth line qualities. At the same time, Chan deliberately simplified the shapes of original strokes and eliminated much of the expressive characteristics of knife and brush marks, only preserving the most essential lines and structures present in BeiWei calligraphy. Below are some of the major features in the design of *Zansyu*.

3.1 Horizontal stroke

In Chinese characters, the horizontal stroke is the commonest element, usually designed to be visually consistent in a font. In *Zansyu*, however, horizontal strokes have a number of different beginning marks, designed in response to differences in character structure and varying relationships between brushstrokes. For example, some horizontal strokes show a type of ‘reverse hook’ beginning (Figure 3a), which serves as an expression of the flowing connectedness between two consecutive strokes. Some stroke beginnings show a downward press followed by movement to the right, which is another feature found in BeiWei (Figure 3b). A third type of stroke beginning is gently tilted upward (Figure 3c), used for characters with cramped spatial structures.

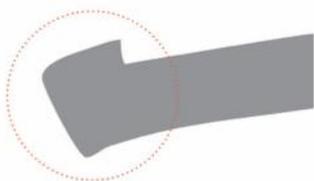


Figure 3a. A ‘reverse hook’ beginning.

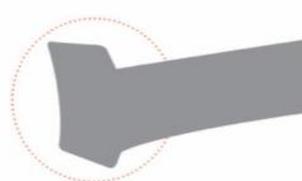


Figure 3b. A beginning with a downward press and movement to the right.

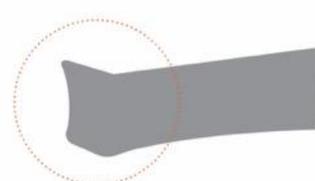


Figure 3c. A beginning that is gently tilted upward.

Note: *Zansyu* brushstrokes were directly referenced in the illustration.

In the example of Chinese character of “book” includes eight types of horizontal strokes (Figure 4). On the left is a “book” from a sign in BeiWei style, showing relatively consistent stroke beginnings and rather slanted brushwork. The same character in *Zansyu*, pictured on the right, features a set of distinctly designed stroke beginnings, and appears to be more visually level.

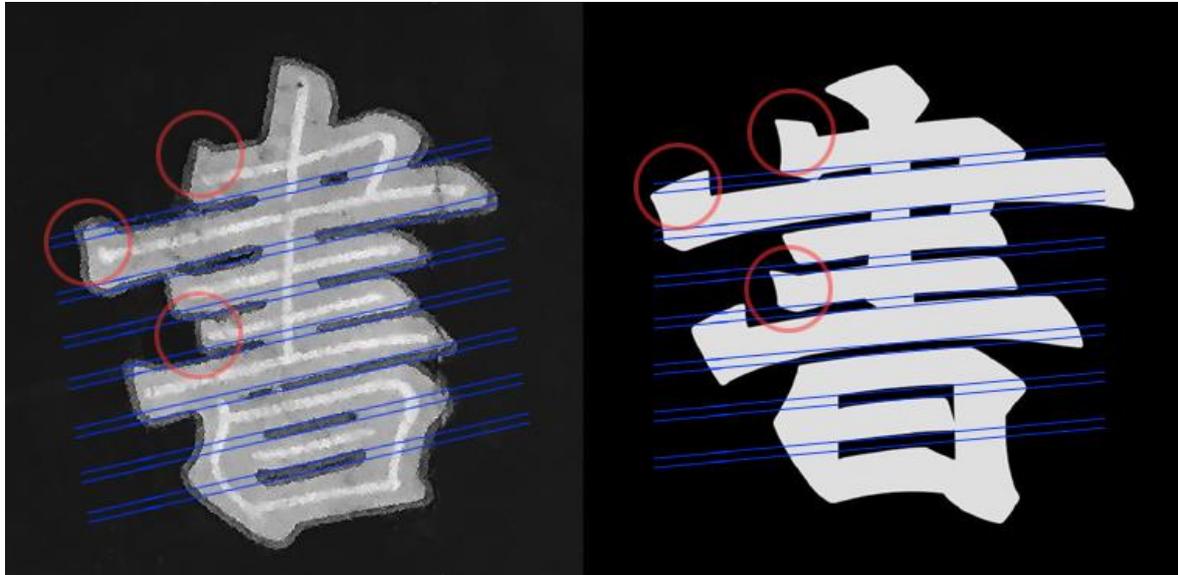


Figure 4. The Chinese character of “book” in BeiWei style (left) and *Zansyu* (right).

3.2 Vertical stroke

Vertical strokes in Chinese calligraphy play the essential role of stabilising character structure and balancing horizontal strokes on both sides, which is why they are usually presented as heavier than their horizontal counterparts. In *Zansyu*, there are in general two types of vertical strokes. The shorter version is slightly curved inward on both sides (Figure 5a); the longer version appears straight on the left and curves outward on the right, which creates an expanding space stemming from the bottom, and strengthens overall balance and stability (Figure 5b).



Figure 5a. Shorter vertical strokes are slightly curved inward on both sides

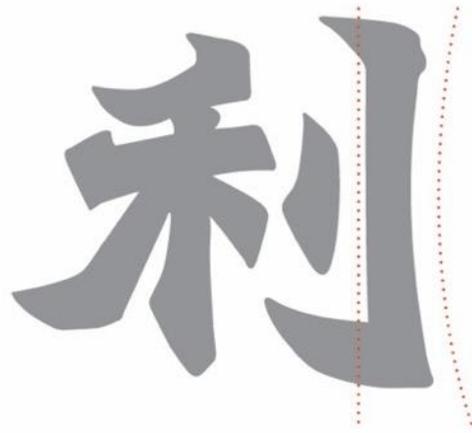


Figure 5b. Longer vertical strokes appears straight on the left and curves outward on the right

Note: Zansyu brushstrokes were directly referenced in the illustration.

3.3 Vertical hook

Another major characteristic of *Zansyu* is the ‘hook’ at the end of certain vertical strokes, where a sharp hooklike triangle is created via an upward flick to the left (Figure 6). In *Zansyu*, this feature is expressed as more pronounced and forceful than in general Chinese fonts.



Figure 6. A vertical hook in a Zansyu character (left) and in a typical KaiShu character (right).

Note: Zansyu brushstrokes were directly referenced in the illustration.

3.4 Left and right falling strokes

The left and right falling strokes in *Zansyu* characters are a visual expression of strength and rhythm. While most Chinese fonts have an arc design at the end of their left-falling strokes, the part is lifted upwards in *Zansyu* with a bold sense of movement (Figure 7). The end of the right-falling strokes in the font are either subtly tilted or extended horizontally, with the aim of maintaining spatial balance.

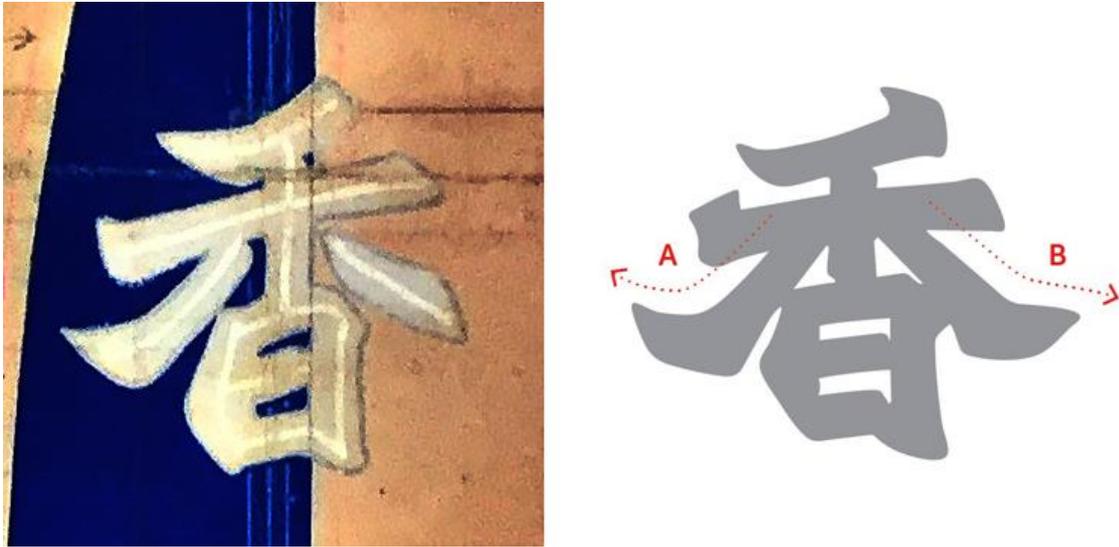


Figure 7. Left and right falling strokes from a sign in BeiWei style (left). Left-falling (A) and right-falling stroke (B) in *Zansyu* (right).

Note: *Zansyu* brushstrokes were directly referenced in the illustration.

4. Design Process

As Chan stated, the *Zansyu* font is not a plain imitation of BeiWei calligraphy. The design process involved stripping away textural details from brushwork to keep only essential lines, as well as incorporating a range of stroke beginnings to create variation in form. The creation of *Zansyu* mainly consisted of four steps (Figure 8a-c).



Figure 8a. Studying the structure of BeiWei through ancient works. Displayed above is a study based on BeiWei work by calligraphy master Zhao Zhiqian (1829-1884).



Figure 8b. Writing by brush to understand the structure of characters (left). Tracing the shapes of characters in pencil to create drafts (right).

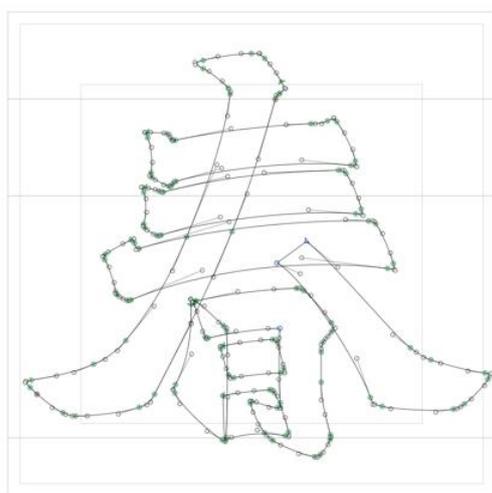


Figure 8c. Drawing the characters in font software, and making changes to stroke weight; evening out varying sizes among characters.

5. The application and realisation of *Zansyu*

Currently, *Zansyu* has mostly been applied in advertisement titles and lettering design commissions. The limited number of characters developed so far has provided a greater flexibility for typographic arrangement and transformation in design. Simultaneously, *Zansyu*'s unique form, as well as its vernacular cultural origins, have generated much attention for the font in Hong Kong's local design scene (Figure 9a-c).



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Figure 9a. Packaging and visual identity design for “Kowloon Beer” (2014), a local artisanal brand. By Adonian and Trilingua Design. Photo courtesy by Adonian Chan.



Figure 9b. Visual identity for Old Bailey (2018), a Cantonese restaurant. *Zansyu* was used in elements such as the logotype, business cards, and menus. Photo courtesy by Adonian Chan.



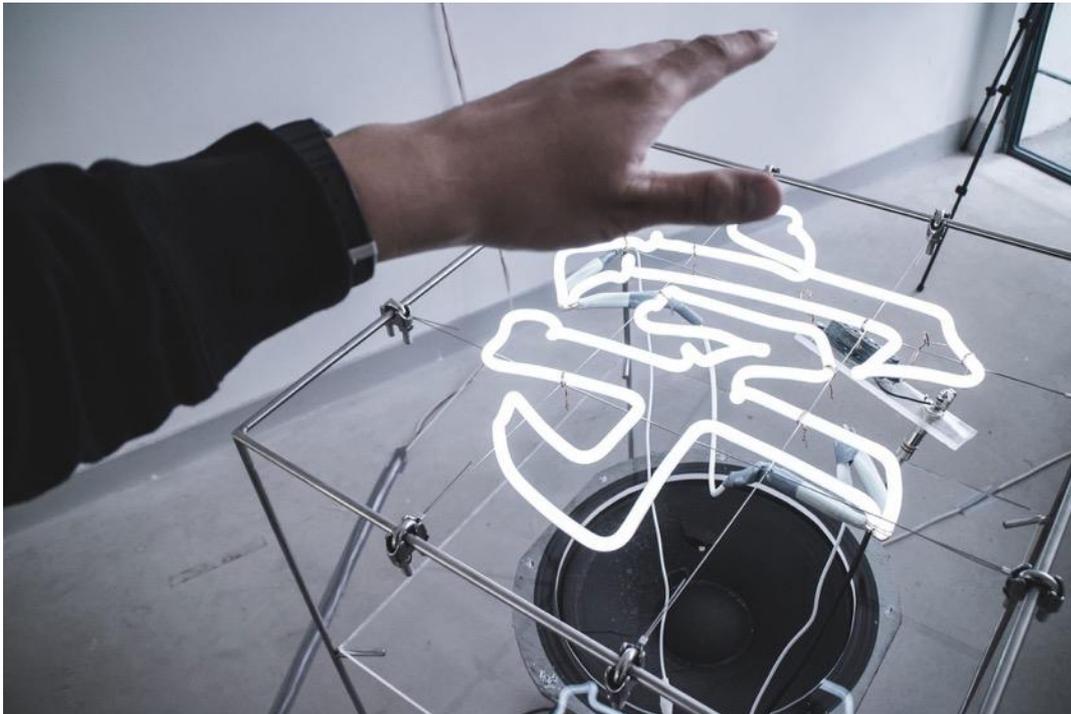


Figure 9c. An interactive artwork combining neon lettering and music (字無言 · 漫無減, 2015). The neon light's flashing increases in frequency as the viewer moves their hand closer. Photo courtesy by Adonian Chan.

6. Conclusion

From Wei and Jin period stone inscriptions to the Late Qing dynasty, and even through the 1950's and 60's, BeiWei KaiShu as a calligraphic style had experienced continuous evolution with every development in media and technique, bringing changes also to standards of lettering aesthetics, structure, and function. In an age when Hong Kong's city spectacle overflowed with sign calligraphy, the spirited and distinct form of BeiWei rose to prominence, favoured by businesses of all kinds.

Starting from the early 1990's, however, Hong Kong saw a gradual decline of BeiWei signs as they largely disappeared from the streets. This was due to a range of factors, among them technological advancement in personal computers and phototypesetting, the passing of elderly sign calligraphers, rapid urban development, and more. With this disappearance, the visual aesthetics and vernacular significance of BeiWei were slowly being forgotten.

Today in the 21st century, BeiWei has made a comeback – re-emerging in a new light with new media. Determined to rediscover the style's aesthetics and preserve Hong Kong's

vernacular culture, Designer Adonian Chan has been working on a digital font based on BeiWei. Instead of purely imitating the style for nostalgia's sake, Chan took into consideration the differences between digital and traditional media, as well as their limitations, developing as a result the *Zansyu* font, a re-interpretation of BeiWei that retains only its most essential qualities of line and structure. This is a design effort that serves to preserve and revitalise the style's unique aesthetic and historical value, and is sustainably applied in visual identity design for various industries, creating at the same time exciting possibilities across different media.

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