



ORIGINAL

## The Use of Nanyang han dynasty stone carved' Mythological Elements in Printmaking Designs

### El uso de elementos mitológicos tallados en piedra de la dinastía Nanyang han en el diseño de grabados

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** the Nanyang Han pictorial stones, a significant cultural legacy from the Han Dynasty, are rich in mythological and symbolic content. These pictographs offer a profound insight into ancient Chinese conceptions of life, nature, and the cosmos, depicted through refined lines and vibrant imagery. While these mythological elements are celebrated for their artistic and historical significance, they remain underexplored in modern art, particularly in printmaking design. Printmaking, rooted in Chinese engraving traditions, has evolved as a conduit for cultural expression, blending traditional motifs with contemporary aesthetics. Integrating the mythological components of Han pictographs into modern printmaking offers a pathway to culturally enriched art that resonates with contemporary audiences.

**Methods:** this study analyzed the mythological themes and artistic techniques of Nanyang Han pictorial stones, focusing on their line, surface, and spatial representations. Key visual elements, such as celestial figures, symbolic animals, and mythical beings, were examined for their design potential in modern printmaking. Through comparative analysis, the study explored how traditional motifs align with the structural and aesthetic principles of modern graphic design. Case studies involving reinterpretations of specific pictorial elements were also conducted to demonstrate their integration into contemporary printmaking.

**Results:** the results revealed a strong compatibility between the structural simplicity and symbolic strength of Han pictographs and modern printmaking techniques. Key similarities were identified in the use of lines, dots, and spatial composition, demonstrating the potential of Han pictographs to enrich the visual impact and cultural depth of contemporary print designs. The application of mythological motifs provided an aesthetic that both respects traditional forms and innovates within a modern design framework, offering a means of cultural transmission through visual storytelling.

**Conclusion:** incorporating the mythological elements of Nanyang Han pictorial stones into modern printmaking design represents a promising strategy for preserving and revitalizing traditional Chinese art. By translating historical symbols and styles into contemporary forms, designers can bridge cultural heritage with modern aesthetics, fostering a deeper cultural resonance and engagement with the art. This study underscores the importance of cultural continuity in art and presents a viable model for integrating traditional mythological themes into modern design practices.

**Keywords:** Han Stone Carving; Mythological Elements; Print Design; Cultural Heritage; Modern Design.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** como una pieza significativa del legado cultural de la dinastía Han, las piedras pictóricas de Nanyang Han contienen una gran riqueza de significados históricos y culturales, especialmente en la representación de motivos mitológicos reconocibles. Estos grabados, con sus líneas claras, imágenes vibrantes y profundas alegorías, reflejan el conocimiento y la imaginación del pueblo chino antiguo sobre la vida, el mundo y la naturaleza. Sin embargo, a pesar del reconocimiento general de la importancia artística y cultural de los pictogramas Han, existe poca investigación sobre cómo estos elementos mitológicos podrían aplicarse al diseño moderno, particularmente al diseño de grabados y estampados. Este estudio explora cómo integrar los elementos mitológicos de los pictogramas de Nanyang Han en el diseño de grabados, buscando revitalizar esta expresión cultural en un contexto contemporáneo y brindando nuevas oportunidades de transmisión cultural.

**Métodos:** se examinan a fondo los elementos mitológicos de las piedras pictóricas de Nanyang Han, enfatizando sus características artísticas y simbólicas, como el uso de líneas y la simplicidad de las composiciones. A través del análisis de ejemplos específicos, se identifica cómo estos elementos pueden integrarse en los principios y técnicas del diseño de grabado contemporáneo. Además, se considera la adaptabilidad de estos temas tradicionales dentro del lenguaje y la estética del diseño gráfico moderno, centrándose en los elementos básicos de composición visual: puntos, líneas y superficies.

**Resultados:** el análisis muestra que las características artísticas de los pictogramas Han, como la estilización de figuras mitológicas y el uso de composiciones simbólicas, son compatibles con el diseño gráfico moderno. La investigación evidencia cómo estas representaciones mitológicas pueden enriquecer visualmente los diseños contemporáneos, brindándoles una mayor profundidad cultural y simbólica. La integración de los elementos míticos de las piedras pictóricas en el diseño de grabados modernos aporta una nueva dimensión estética, conservando la esencia de la cultura antigua mientras se adapta a las sensibilidades visuales contemporáneas.

**Conclusión:** este estudio sugiere que incorporar los motivos mitológicos de las piedras pictóricas de Nanyang Han en el diseño de grabados y estampados actuales no solo contribuye a la transmisión creativa de la cultura tradicional, sino que también enriquece el valor estético del arte gráfico contemporáneo. La unión de la cultura tradicional y el diseño moderno permite que estos elementos míticos cobren nueva vida y asegure su relevancia en un mundo globalizado, preservando y difundiendo el rico legado de la dinastía Han.

**Palabras clave:** Talla en Piedra Han; Elementos Mitológicos; Diseño Impreso; Patrimonio Cultural; Diseño Moderno.

## INTRODUCTION

As a significant piece of Han Dynasty cultural legacy, Nanyang Han pictorial stones have a wealth of historical and cultural meanings, particularly when it comes to the portrayal of highly recognizable mythological motifs.<sup>(1)</sup> These stone paintings, with their clear lines, vibrant imagery, and profound allegories, capture the knowledge and imagination of the ancient Chinese people about life, the world, and nature. Myths were a type of supernatural story that conveyed people's respect for unidentified forces and also served as a reflection of the social, political, and religious ideologies of the Han Dynasty.<sup>(2, 3)</sup> These tales have been transmitted and perpetuated through numerous art forms, and they have progressively grown in significance as a component of Chinese culture. Nevertheless, despite the general recognition of the artistic and cultural significance of Han pictographs, comparatively little research has been done on how its mythological components might be applied to modern art design, particularly printmaking design.<sup>(4)</sup>

Chinese engraving and printing are the source of this age-old and expressive art style known as printmaking design. Printmaking has evolved over time to serve as both a medium for artistic expression and a vital conduit for the spread of culture.<sup>(5)</sup> In order to produce works with a more modern aesthetic value, modern printmaking design not only keeps innovating with new materials and processes but also taps into rich historical and cultural components. The integration of traditional culture with modern art design has gained significant attention in this context, particularly when it comes to incorporating the mythological aspects found in Nanyang Han pictographs into printmaking design.<sup>(6)</sup>

Han pictographs have a distinct artistic style with deeply culturally significant planarized lines and straightforward compositions. The qualities of printing design, which also stress the visual impact of images and the simplicity of lines, are quite suitable with this artistic style.<sup>(7)</sup> Thus, incorporating mythological themes from Han pictorial stones into printmaking design can both enhance the cultural meaning of contemporary printmaking design and offer a fresh avenue for Han pictorial stones' cultural diffusion.

The mythological components of Nanyang Han pictographs, a significant example of Han Dynasty culture, represent the people's worldview, religious convictions, and veneration of divine power.<sup>(8)</sup> Maintaining the distinctiveness of old culture while reviving it in modern design is a significant task for the design academy given the current cultural backdrop of globalization.<sup>(9)</sup> In addition to capturing the spirit of traditional Chinese culture, the legendary themes of Nanyang Han pictographs also have great aesthetic and visual significance. The organic merger of traditional culture and contemporary art can be realized, and fresh life can be infused into the craft of printmaking, by carefully uncovering the symbolic value of these mythological aspects and deftly incorporating them into current printmaking design.<sup>(10)</sup>

Currently, more attention is paid to the historical and cultural significance of Han pictorial stones than to the particular ways in which its artistic components are used in contemporary design. There is a dearth of systematic research in current printmaking design, despite the fact that some scholars have attempted to apply the image elements found in Han pictorial stones to some modern art works.<sup>(11,12)</sup> The majority of these endeavors are restricted to traditional art genres like painting and sculpture. Furthermore, the current literature on fusing the depiction of mythological aspects in Han pictorial stones with the techniques of contemporary printmaking design exhibits a theory-practice gap. Designers frequently place too much emphasis on formal innovation in the particular creative process, ignoring the in-depth analysis of cultural connotation, which leads to a work that has a comparatively singular cultural expression.

This article aims to investigate the effective integration of traditional cultural components into modern design through the use of current printmaking processes and shapes. The interpretation of the legendary elements of the Nanyang Han portrait stone will be thoroughly examined. Unlike previous studies, this one not only examines the cultural meaning and symbolism of the legendary components of the Han portrait stone, but it also confirms the usefulness of these features in contemporary printmaking design through particular design applications. In order to revive these mythological components in contemporary art design, this paper will also examine ways to maintain the essence of old culture while utilizing modern design language and technical methods.

## METHODS

The unique geographic location of the Nanyang region, which is situated between the Qinling and Huaihe rivers, makes the Nanyang Han portrait stone of the Chu style unique. Not only is Nanyang the cultural crossroads between the north and south of the region, but it is also home to one of the Chu culture's birthplaces. As such, the romantic and free Chu culture for the Nanyang Han portrait stone serves as a crucial foundation for the creation of the Nanyang Han, and as a result, the Nanyang Han portrait stone shares many characteristics with the art of Chu Romanticism.<sup>(13)</sup>

### (1) A likeness in terms of artistic style

Nanyang Han portrait stone inherited the imaginative artistic style of Chu culture. It is not limited to the intricate decorative, precise proportions, and rich detail; rather, it is more focused on the artistic temperament with vivid, simple, and line-based expression that it inherited from Chu paintings. It aims to demonstrate the allure of lines, the spirit of Chu culture's art, and the airy momentum to carry forward, as well as to lay the groundwork for Chinese painting's evolution based on lines.<sup>(14)</sup>

Most of the characters in the performance of the following three, when compared, highlight the image of the characters, which reflects the romanticism of the Nanyang Han paintings of the Chu region. This composition is inherited in the Chu painting "sparse and generous," in the myths, celestial phenomena, especially prominent, such as figure 1 and figure 2.

### (2) Expression Subject Inheritance

The most distinctive type of portrait stone found in the Nanyang area, the Han portrait stone, features mythological themes and is the most cohesive theme of Chu culture and art: celestial stars. It is also the most excavated in the area. The Chu dynasty outlined the twenty-eight star system, and Nanyang region astronomy research developed during the Han Dynasty. This led to the birth of China's renowned astronomer Zhang Heng, and thus the Chu-Han inheritance. However, this development only served to highlight the distinctions between the Nanyang region's celestial myths and other parts of the art of the subject matter.<sup>(15)</sup> It is challenging to create detailed, accurate scientific astronomical pictures on the Nanyang Han dynasty stone carved while departing from Chu's long-standing cultural heritage of astronomical knowledge and death rites.

The Han will be the Chu witch wind thought and the Huang Lao Tao of the doctrine of immortality, the formation of the pursuit of life obsessed with the ascension of immortality, and so they will be in the portrait stone performance of feathered man (figure 1, figure 2), beasts, in order to send people on the quest for immortality and the freedom of the pursuit of romanticism expression. In addition to astronomical stars and constellations, the superstitious feathered immortal type of portrait stone is also from the Chu culture. These

images include the wind god, the river, the rainmaker, the god of thunder, and other images from Chu. The method's romanticism in its expression.



Figure 1. Feathered Man



Figure 2. Feathered Man

### Utilizing surfaces, lines, and points

The most fundamental components of contemporary design concepts are dots, lines, and surfaces. By combining these elements, any graphic design can be created. The artisans of Nanyang Han portrait stone from the Han Dynasty have long been skilled in this area and have produced a number of charming works, particularly when it comes to mythological subjects.

Arranging the dots according to their size, position, sparseness, and weight will yield many beautiful effects. The Yangwu (figure 2) is one of the most popular examples of how dots are used in the mythological elements of Nanyang Han portraits. The scattered dots in this drawing represent celestial astrological phenomena, creating the ethereal impression of a divine bird, the Yangwu, flying in and out of the sky.

The use of lines is very typical of Han pictographs, especially in Nanyang Han pictographs, which are influenced by the Chu style. The lines are varied, refined, and generalized, which are the key factors of the ethereal and dynamic style of the Nanyang Han pictographs, full of tension. The zigzag, length, and sparseness of the lines are the key factors affecting the effect of the picture. For instance, the emperor of the Heavens sits in the center of “The Four Gods of the Heavens” (figure 3), with the Vermilion Bird on top, the Xuanwu at the bottom, the Qinglong on the left, the Baihu on the right, and Nuwa and the six South Dipper stars on the left. Nuwa and the Big Dipper’s six stars are etched on the left side, while Fuxi and the Big Dipper’s seven stars are inscribed on the right. The image has a lot of lines in the backdrop that symbolize clouds, giving it an ethereal and mysterious quality.



The Nanyang han dynasty stone carved make extensive use of the face element, utilizing a multitude of face shapes and overlaid form combinations to convey a range of moods. Faces are primarily used in portrait stones to represent the picture’s subject matter. For example, in the Four Gods and the Heavenly Image (Figure 4), faces are used to represent Nuwa Fuxi, the Four Gods, and the Heavenly Emperor. This creates a visual focal point, contrasts with the background’s sparse lines, and highlights the subject image’s authority and sacredness.



Figure 3. Yangwu

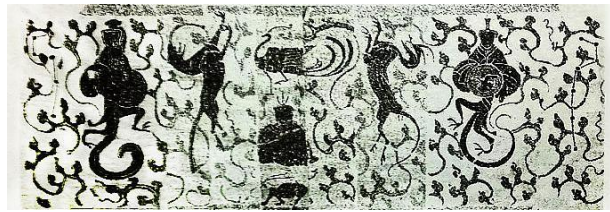


Figure 4. Heavenly Signs and the Topographies of the Four Gods

The Han portraits’ composition of points, lines, and surfaces not only creates a whole image on its own, but also connects the individual portraits to form a type of picture composition performance that aligns with contemporary aesthetic interests. This gives the two-dimensional image a sense of expansion or contraction, richness in the sense of lines and rhythmic changes, and vividness.

The combination and collision of dots, lines, and surfaces—the fundamental components of graphic composition—in contemporary graphic design has produced innumerable outstanding design pieces; the key to a piece of work’s quality is its appropriate use of these aspects. For instance, the author of Polish artist Jarek Bujny’s poster design “Looking for love” uses the Arab woman’s nearly all black veil as the focal point of the image. One of the woman’s eyes is placed after the veil, divided by a fence in the shape of a heart. The eye, the fence, and the veil create a striking juxtaposition of surfaces, lines, and dots that shockingly illustrates the severe lack of freedom experienced by women in the area.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy is arranged by repeating this line in Italian designer Maria Giovanna Mura’s “Humans at work” (Figure 5). Words alone are used to create the surfaces, lines, and dots, with single words serving as dots and lines as lines that are piled up to form surfaces, symbolizing the condition of modern people who are gradually crushed by the pressure of work. It captures the current state of affairs for modern folks who are progressively crushed under the weight of their jobs.

### Spatial representation inheritance

#### *Nanyang han dynasty stone carved’ Spatial Representation*

There are two distinct spatial expressions in Han portraiture: focused perspective and equidistant scattered perspective. The most popular composition technique in Han portraiture is called “equidistant scattering,” which refers to placing the content in the same direction and at the same distance. It is also the most significant use of spatial perspective in Han portraiture. Han portraits are frequently shown in multiple perspectives, including flat, above, and below. In the “Lei Gong car” (figure 6), for example, identical distance, same direction layout, and complete momentum are used to create a picture with Lei Gong, the driver, and three winged tigers that do not discriminate between front and back perspectives.

A few Han portraits, most of which were discovered in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, feature focal perspective. Its purpose is to watch and portray objects with a focal point. This means that an object’s closer point of view takes up more space; it’s a sort of “near big and far small” perspective style that works better for emphasizing the main body of the picture but is more difficult to describe in words than an equally distant scattered perspective.



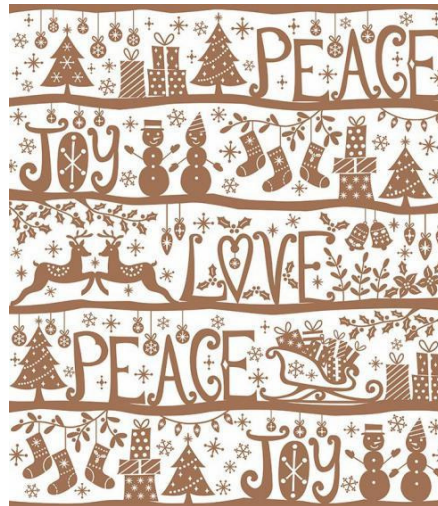


Figure 7. Semmy Lee, Christmas

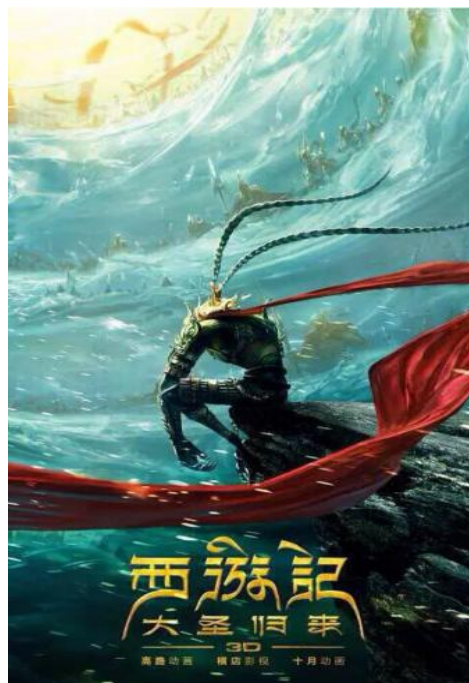


Figure 8. The Return of the Great Sage from the Journey to the West movie poster

**Form and beauty sharing a commonality**

*Nanyang han dynasty stone carved' Formal Beauty*

We refer to these particular forms and formal relationships, as well as the unique ways in which lines and colors are combined in each work of art, to evoke our aesthetic sensations. These visually pleasing forms and their combinations of color and line are called “meaningful forms.”<sup>1</sup> The harmony of yin and yang, the blending of the actual and the imaginative, and the relational rhythm define the beauty of forms in Nanyang Han portraiture.

*Yin and Yang in harmony*

An summary of the Chinese notion of yin and yang is given by Jin Zhilin in “The Philosophical Basis of Chinese Folk Art.” The human cult of reproduction and life is the source of the Chinese concept of yin and yang. It follows the path of human growth throughout history, albeit with distinct meanings in each era.<sup>(16,17)</sup>

*Yin and Yang Theory*

Dong Zhongshu produced significant developments during the Han Dynasty in response to the demands of the period, which allowed the new principle of yin and yang to pervade every part of society and be reflected in Han portraiture.



For instance, the sun and moon frequently live in opposition to one another (figures 11 and 12); Yangwu, the sun's symbol, and Toad, the moon's representative, always live on opposite sides; and the Queen Mother of the West's entourage is always divided into left and right parts of the yin and yang, all of which express the meaning of yin and yang harmony. Fuxi and Nuwa also always appear in pairs, with their tails intertwined or on the left and right columns (figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Fuxi



Figure 10. Nuwa





Figure 11. Moon God Holding the Moon



Figure 12. The Sun is Held by the Sun God

*Combination of the real and the imagined*

The cultural deposits that the Han pictures carried dictated that he had to finish the image forming, theme expression, and scene representation in his works by using the contrast between actuality and reality. “Sitting and Enjoying Music” (figure 13) features four people sitting and enjoying the music on the right side of the image, with the person on the right side only shown for half of the image, appearing to be exchanging glasses

and cups with someone so that the viewer can imagine that.



Figure 13. Listening to music while seated

#### PRACTICES OF CULTURALLY CREATIVE PRODUCT DESIGN

“Yi Shooting Ten Days” is a singular statue among the mythological and celestial collections of the Nanyang Museum of Han Painting (figure 14). There is a lot of tension in this composition. The god of archery Yi is at the bottom of the picture, and in order to save the people who were affected by the “ten suns” brought on by the thousands of miles of drought, he bent down and drew his bow. He wanted to shoot down the excess of the nine sunbirds so that the people could find a solution. The story of Yi shooting 10 suns embodies the spiritual strength of never giving up and not fearing authority, as well as the imagination of the sky’s ancient forefathers.

(18,19)



Figure 14. Yi shoots ten days



The artwork on the statue stone is echoed by the marble backdrop of the dial. There are only two sunbirds remaining on the Fusang Tree, symbolizing triumph when the final one is shot. The “Yi” and “Fusang Tree” in the stone serve as the hour and minute hands, respectively.

When the two reach a point of coincidence, the slower hour hand “Yi” emerges victorious, and the combination of the two of them appears to be pursuing the quicker minute hand “Sunbird.” The pairing of the two also symbolizes Yi’s unwavering and tenacious nature. The hour and minute hands’ rotation is transformed from a dull display of time passing to a vibrant myth and legend, which enhances the fun without detracting from the clock’s functionality and reflects the cultural significance of the Han portrait. This results in an organic unity of culture, fun, and usefulness (figure 15).



Figure 15. “SEED” clock design

The most distinctive aspect of Nanyang Han Painting Museum is its exhibition hall of myths and celestial imagery, where a variety of gods and goddesses, celestial gods, and stars will surely leave a lasting effect on visitors. These “cloud” images of gods and goddesses are full of powerful and ancient good wishes that have been passed down to the present day. In contrast, the portrait stones in other exhibition halls that express and record the living conditions of people in the Han Dynasty have been removed from the life and customs of the modern world due to the passage of time.

As a result, visitors will be more inclined to wear the contemporary aesthetic badges made by the Myths and Celestial Symbols series of portrait stones (Figure 16 and 17) after viewing the Han Painting Gallery and learning about the myths and meanings behind the collection of portrait stones. Additionally, as more visitors wear the badges, the artwork of the Nanyang Han portraits will become more well-known and widely circulated.

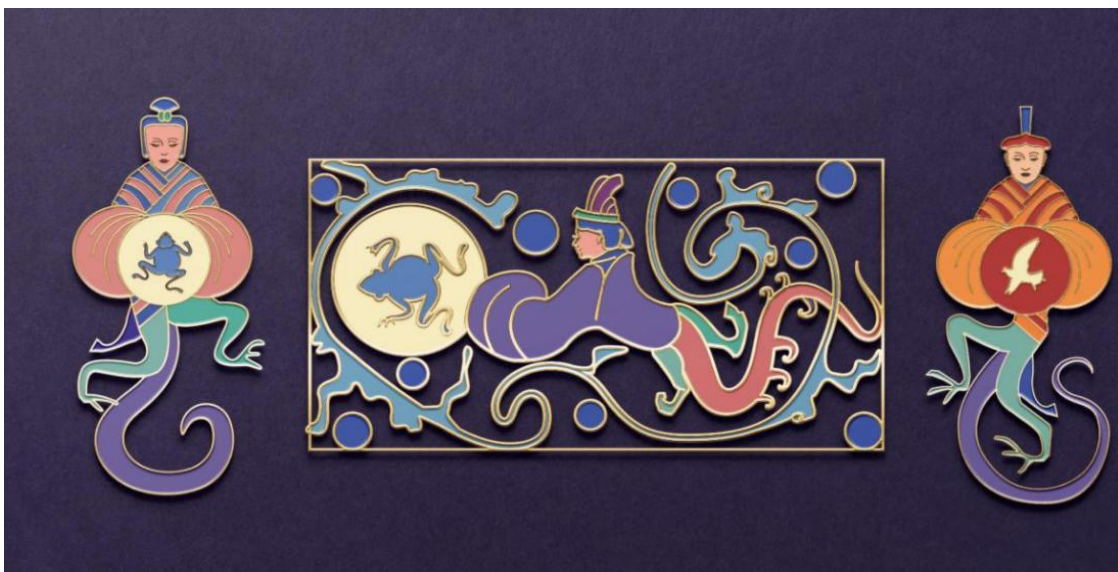


Figure 16. Myths and Celestial Signs Series Badge, Nanyang Han Painting Museum



Figure 17. The Myths and Celestial Signs Series Badge, Nanyang Han Painting Museum

## CONCLUSION

The application of mythological motifs found in Nanyanghan stone carvings in print design is examined in this study, highlighting the significance of these components for both modern design and cultural heritage. We discover that the artistic qualities and mythological overtones of the Nanyanghan stone sculptures strengthen the print design's visual expression while also adding to its cultural depth. The study's findings demonstrate how traditional art and contemporary design principles can be combined to produce products that have both commercial and cultural value. In addition, these traditional aspects can be promoted and distributed more successfully to support cultural innovation and development with the aid of modern technologies like digital media art. Subsequent investigations may delve deeper into the utilization of mythical components in many design domains and broaden their impact on contemporary design.

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*Methodology:* Nattapong Prompongsaton.

*Project management:* Xuan Feng.

*Resources:* Xuan Feng.

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