

CHU PHOENIX TRANSFORMATION : FROM TRADITION TO INNOVATIVE SOUVENIR

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the transformation of traditional Chu phoenix motifs into modern souvenir design, with a focus on appealing to younger consumers and promoting cultural innovation. The research analyzes the symbolic meaning, spiritual connotations, and visual characteristics of the Chu phoenix artifacts in history, exploring how these elements can be integrated into contemporary design. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review, field research at museums and souvenir shops, and consumer surveys to gather comprehensive insights. Firstly, the analysis revealed that the Chu phoenix carries profound symbolic meanings and spiritual connotations, embodying themes of auspiciousness, ancestral reverence, and cultural identity. Second, eight key factors were identified as essential for effectively integrating traditional Chu phoenix elements into modern souvenir designs through the survey. The simplification and abstraction of patterns, modernization of colors, and diversity of materials are identified as the most critical factors in innovative souvenirs through 97 questionnaires. This research offers valuable insights for future cultural product development.

Keywords: Chu Phoenix, Innovation Souvenir, Cultural Transformation, Young Market

Introduction

The State of Chu was established in approximately the 11th century B.C. and lasted for over 800 years until its demise in 223 BC. It was one of the most significant vassal states during China's Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, as Hubei, Hunan, and Henan provinces in today (Zuo, 2012). Due to its unique geographical location, Chu culture combined characteristics of the Central Plains culture with those of various southern ethnic groups, resulting in a distinctive regional identity (Liu, 2023).

Artifacts unearthed from the Chu state reveal the ubiquity of the

phoenix motif across various art forms. The phoenix emerged as the ancestral symbol of the Chu people, revered as the totem of them. It was believed to communicate with heaven and earth, serving as a divine messenger embodying the Chu people's deep reverence for nature. Therefore, the Chu phoenix is regarded as a representative element of Chu culture. Symbolizing auspiciousness and light (Gao, 2022).

With globalization and the rapid growth of the internet, traditional Chinese cultural elements like Chu culture face challenges in preservation and evolution. To ensure their relevance, it's essential to extract cultural elements and apply them in contemporary design to cater to modern consumer demands. Integrating these elements into everyday life also helps convey a unique cultural perspective (Fu, 2018). The younger demographic, particularly those aged 20 to 35, represents the primary driving force within China's consumer market. This group possesses a strong desire to fulfill their personalized emotional values, fundamentally shaping their consumption patterns (Bai, 2021). This study analyzes the significance, spiritual connotations, and forms of expression of the traditional Chu phoenix found in cultural relics. It further examines how Chu phoenix elements can be effectively incorporated into modern souvenirs to appeal to the young market while promoting cultural innovation. The scope of this research includes historical artifacts, literature, and existing designs related to the Chu phoenix, as well as an investigation into the preferences of young consumers.

Research Objectives

- 1) To analysis the significance of the traditional Chu phoenix, focusing on its meaning, connotation, spiritual aspects, elements, posture and gesture.
- 2) To analysis the key factors of integrating traditional Chu phoenix elements into modern souvenir design effectively appeal to the young market and reflect cultural innovation.

Methodology

This study employs mixed-methods research approach, integrating literature review, field research, surveys and qualitative analysis.

1. Literature Review: An extensive review of resources, including libraries, websites, books, and journals, is conducted to gather insights into Chu culture, the phoenix motif, and modern souvenir design. This review serves as the theoretical foundation for understanding the cultural significance of the Chu phoenix.

2. Field Research: The study focuses on key site visits to the Hubei Provincial Museum, the Jingzhou Museum, and the Chu Intangible Cultural Heritage Skills Inheritance Institute and their museum shops. This is to observe artifacts and modern souvenirs featuring traditional Chu phoenix elements.

3. Surveys: The researcher conducted interviews with three experts (Pu Meihe, Professor at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts; Tian Tao, Modern Product Designer; and Ding Xiao, Chairman of a Cultural Development Company) on key themes influencing the innovation of traditional Chu phoenix cultural souvenirs, identifying eight critical factors. Based on the results of expert interviews, the researchers designed a survey questionnaire and collected responses from 97 young participants aged 20 to 35. (32 from visitors and consumers at the Hubei Provincial Museum and souvenir shops, 44 from undergraduate students at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts and 21 responses from individuals in various professions who familiar with Chu culture.) In addition, the five-point Likert scale was used to evaluate the questionnaire.

4. Qualitative analysis: This study employs qualitative analysis to explore consumer and expert perspectives on integrating Chu phoenix elements into modern souvenir design. Using thematic analysis, responses from 97 questionnaires and three expert interviews are examined to identify the simplification and abstraction of patterns as a one of key factors.

Literature Review

Chu Culture and the phoenix

The state of Chu was established in the 11th century BC and ceased to exist in 223 BC. Originating from a remote location in the Central Plains and initially regarded as barbarians by other Chinese states, Chu expanded its territory to become the largest state during the Warring States period. During the reigns of King Xuan of Chu (reign: 369-340 BC) and King Wei of Chu (reign: 339-329 BC), the state of Chu reached its zenith. The territory of the State of Chu is estimated to have covered approximately 1.5 million square kilometers with a population of over 5 million. The core regions of ancient Chu, now represented by the provinces of Hubei and Hunan, have a combined population exceeding 124 million. Chu integrated numerous ethnic groups in southern China, facilitated cultural exchanges and ethnic integration, and absorbed substantial cultural elements from the Central Plains, forming a large and distinctive cultural system in ancient China (Wei, 2022).

Geographical environments shape production methods and social structures, influencing regional customs and practices. The Chu inhabited a region characterized by significant topographical variation and complex terrain. The harsh living conditions and relative isolation from the Central Plains led to a societal structure that attributed supernatural powers to all things, thus developing a primordial religion ideology centered on ancestor and spirit worship (Blakeley, 1999). The Chu people held the phoenix in deep reverence, regarding it as a divine bird closely linked to their ancestral worship. They believed the phoenix to be the incarnation of their ancestor Zhu Rong, the god of fire and the sun. In Chu culture, honoring the phoenix was to honor their ancestors, and by extension, to express devotion to their nation. The phoenix was viewed as the most virtuous and benevolent of divine birds, possessing the mystical ability to guide souls to the afterlife. It was through the phoenix's guidance that souls could attain eternal bliss (Guo & Deng, 2018).

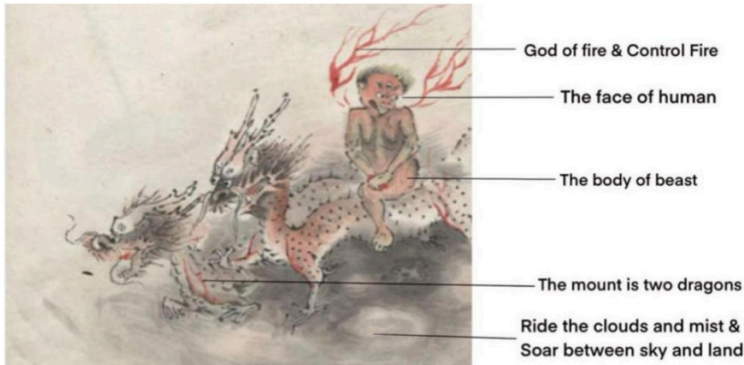


Figure 1 Zhu rong, the ancestor of the Chu people

Source: https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A5%9D%E8%9E%8D/17358?fr=ge_ala

Additionally, Chu customs were shaped by a reverence for fire and the sun, alongside the worship of the phoenix. In their belief system, Zhu Rong was not only their acknowledged ancestor but also the embodiment of the sun god and fire god who brought light to the world. In their minds, the phoenix was the immortal spirit of their ancestor, serving as a spiritual symbol of their culture. Therefore, the worship of ancestors was intrinsically linked with the veneration of the sun and phoenix.



Figure 2 Double Phoenix Pattern Lacquer Ear Cup and its Composition

Source: Cheng Tinghao, 2024

Phoenix elements Usage in the Chu Period

2.1 Artifacts Featuring Chu Phoenix Motifs

Phoenix motifs were a significant feature in Chu period artifacts, these motifs conveyed a sense of dynamism, freedom, and delicacy, reflecting

the Chu people's rich imagination and artistic expression. One of the most iconic artifacts from this period is the Tiger-Base Phoenix-Stand Drum, a masterpiece of Chu lacquerware, and a symbol of the romantic and mystical aspects of Chu culture. This artifact is among the "Top Ten Treasures" of the Hubei Provincial Museum and is renowned for its cultural and artistic importance. The Tiger-Base Phoenix-Stand Drum, standing at 136 cm tall and 134 cm wide, is a lacquered piece featuring two tigers sitting back-to-back, with two long-legged phoenixes standing atop them, supporting a large, suspended drum. The entire composition, adorned with black lacquer and decorated in red, yellow, and silver, white, represents the Chu people's reverence for the phoenix and the symbolic contrast between the earthly tiger and the soaring phoenix. In 2019, the Chu lacquer techniques used in such works were recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Chinese government, further cementing this artifact's historical significance. Moreover, many modern innovative souvenirs draw direct inspiration from this famous artifact, bringing traditional Chu culture into contemporary design.

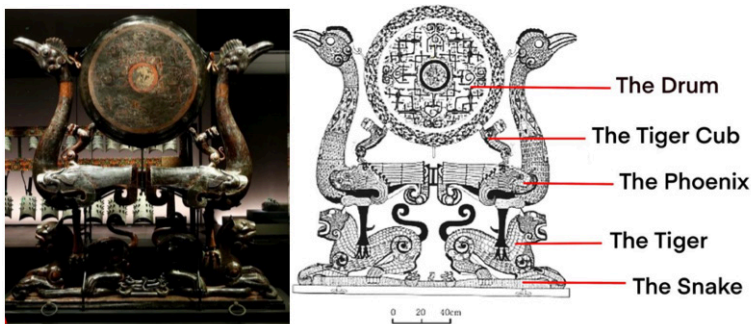


Figure 3 Tiger-Base Phoenix-Stand Drum



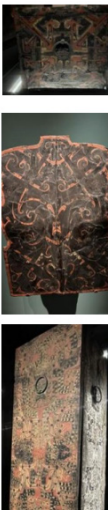

Source: Cheng Tinghao, 2024





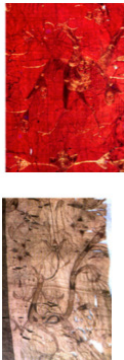

2.2 Types of Phoenix Patterns During the Chu Period

The phoenix patterns of the Chu state can be roughly divided into five styles. The first type is the complete phoenix pattern. The second type is the simplified phoenix pattern, where parts of the form are deformed or

exaggerated. The third type features elements of both the phoenix and dragon patterns, referred to as the dragon-shaped phoenix pattern. The fourth type is the three-headed phoenix pattern. The fifth type is the “phoenix and Fu-sang tree pattern (Zhang, 2024).

Table 1 Types of Phoenix Patterns

Category	Artifacts	Drawings	Description of Characteristics
Complete phoenix pattern			<p>The complete phoenix pattern exhibits a wide variety of styles. Most of the phoenixes are depicted with crowns on their heads. There are tranquil and serene standing phoenixes, as well as dynamic, flight-ready ones, with almost no two identical designs. The majority of phoenix motifs are rendered in profile, with others shown in frontal view. Their bodies are generally elongated, with hooked beaks, long legs, and sharp claws.</p>
Simplified phoenix pattern (S-shaped, C-shaped, X-shaped)			<p>The simplified phoenix patterns are based on realistic phoenix motifs, which can be classified into four subcategories. Most simplified phoenix patterns still retain some key characteristics of the original, such as the bird-like beak, the fish like tail, and the elongated legs. However, some simplified versions preserve only the basic outline of the phoenix. In these cases, the patterns undergo deformation.</p>

Category	Artifacts	Drawings	Description of Characteristics
Dragon-shaped phoenix pattern			<p>The dragon-phoenix pattern retains the bird's beak, while the body is elongated like a dragon. This pattern can be divided into two main types: the first type has a phoenix head and a dragon body, with the elongated body covered in scales, and the phoenix's legs and claws replaced by dragon feet, with a snake-like tail. The second type features a phoenix head at one end and a dragon head at the tail, connected by a snake-like body.</p>
Three headed phoenix pattern			<p>The three-headed phoenix has a round body, slender neck, long legs, and outstretched wings form two additional phoenix heads at the wing tips. One head extends into a vine-like plant that divides into three branches, echoing the three phoenix heads.</p>
Phoenix and Fu-sang tree pattern			<p>The Fu-sang tree, described in ancient Chinese mythology as a celestial tree closely associated with the sun, frequently appears in Chu silk designs intertwined with prominent motifs such as the phoenix symbolizing a unified, symbiotic relationship.</p>

For the posture and gesture of the Chu phoenix, first, they are highly versatile. The motif not only appears in its complete form but also in various simplified and transformed versions, often integrated with other elements, reflecting its adaptability in different artistic contexts.

Second, the design of the Chu phoenix is predominantly composed of curved lines. These lines are smooth and light, often with elongated features, giving the phoenix a sense of dynamism and freedom in its posture.


Third, the color scheme of the Chu phoenix primarily uses red and black as dominant colors, with a few other colors. This distinctive color palette adds symbolic depth and makes the design both unique and culturally significant.







In modern design as nowadays, many souvenirs integrate Chu phoenix motifs with other elements. The phoenix theme is reinterpreted through techniques like appropriation, deconstruction, and reconstruction.


The Innovative Application of the Chu Phoenix Motif in Souvenir

Through field investigations, it was found that museum shops offer a wide variety of souvenirs incorporating Chu phoenix motifs, including ice cream, clothing, refrigerator magnets, tea trays, and coasters. According to the Hubei Provincial Museum’s official visitor statistics report, the majority of museum visitors and souvenir consumers are young people aged 20-35. Notably, individuals under the age of 30 accounted for over 60% of total visitors, with those aged 18 to 24 making up 39.96%, significantly surpassing other age groups (Yu & Xu, 2023).

Table 2 Types of Souvenirs with Chu Phoenix

Souvenir	Photograph	Description
Magnet		The modern souvenirs—magnet, ice cream, makeup mirror, and bookmark—are all inspired by the Tiger-Base Phoenix-Stand Drum. Each item creatively reinterprets the core elements of the phoenix’s design, featuring phoenix standing atop tiger, a symbolic structure that reflects the cultural essence of the Chu State. In these souvenirs, the phoenix’s posture appears in simplified forms derived from the original, showcasing its adaptability in modern design.
Ice cream		The design features curved lines, creating a sense of dynamism, echoing the features of the traditional line of phoenix. The ice cream creatively combines traditional

Souvenir	Photograph	Description
Makeup mirror		<p>phoenix with a playful approach, blending food with cultural elements, making it a popular product.</p>
Bookmark		
Clothing & bags		<p>The clothing and bags feature traditional simplified phoenix patterns (S-shaped, C-shaped, X-shaped), continuing the red and black original color scheme, and preserving the aesthetic of the Chu phoenix.</p>
Hair clip		<p>The hair clip combines abstract cloud and simplified phoenix shapes. Its smooth curves and warm colors evoke tradition while being functional and decorative.</p>
Chinese red-tea		<p>The packaging displays original images of phoenix artifacts, emphasizing their cultural and spiritual significance, reflecting the premium quality of the tea.</p>
Lighting fixture		<p>The lamp's phoenix pattern uses a cut-out design to reflect the versatility of traditional Chu motifs, blending with other elements to create a modern yet adaptive version of the phoenix pattern.</p>

Souvenir	Photograph	Description
Scarves		<p>The scarves replicate the Chu phoenix and Fu sang tree patterns, featuring flowing and elegant designs that are both eye-catching and refined. These patterns reflect the beliefs and vivid imagination of Chu people.</p>

It shows that many souvenirs creatively adapt Chu phoenix motifs through simplified designs and modern reinterpretations, such as magnets, ice cream, makeup mirrors, bookmarks. In the analysis of literature and historical artifacts revealed that the Chu phoenix holds profound cultural significance, embodying rich symbolic meanings and spiritual connotations central to Chu culture. Historically, the Chu phoenix represented ancestral reverence and spiritual communication, reflecting the Chu people’s primordial belief system that revered nature, ancestors, and divine beings. Specifically, the phoenix was viewed as the incarnation of Zhu Rong, the ancestral deity associated with fire and the sun, symbolizing auspiciousness, virtue, and immortality. Visually, the Chu phoenix motifs are characterized by versatility in posture, smooth and dynamic curved lines, and a distinctive color palette dominated by red and black, adding both aesthetic appeal and symbolic depth. The diversity of phoenix patterns, including complete, simplified, dragon-shaped, three-headed, and phoenix combined with the Fu-sang tree, further illustrates its adaptability and significance in various cultural expressions and artifacts of the Chu state. Inspired by the Tiger-Base Phoenix-Stand Drum, these items retain core elements like the phoenix atop a tiger to express the cultural essence of the Chu State. From clothing and bags to lighting fixtures, each product reflects the Chu phoenix’s adaptability. The simplified motifs and modernized color schemes in these souvenirs mirror traditional styles while aligning with contemporary aesthetics, capturing the interest of younger consumers.

Research findings

1. The significance of the traditional Chu phoenix

The traditional Chu phoenix holds profound cultural significance, embodying rich symbolic meanings and spiritual connotations central to Chu culture. Chu phoenix represented ancestral reverence and spiritual communication, reflecting the Chu people's primordial belief system that revered nature, ancestors, and divine beings. Specifically, the phoenix was viewed as the incarnation of Zhu Rong, the ancestral deity associated with fire and the sun, symbolizing auspiciousness, virtue, and immortality. Visually, the Chu phoenix motifs are characterized by versatility in posture, smooth and dynamic curved lines, and a distinctive color palette dominated by red and black, adding both aesthetic appeal and symbolic depth. The diversity of phoenix patterns, such as complete, simplified, dragon-shaped, three-headed, and combined with the Fu-sang tree, highlights its adaptability in Chu cultural artifacts.

2. The key factors in modern souvenirs featuring the Chu phoenix

Through the survey of modern Chu phoenix-inspired souvenirs, combined with interviews with experts, key factors were identified for examining the transformation of Chu phoenix elements from their original form to modern designs.

1. Practicality of the product: Traditional Chu phoenix motifs were often used in ceremonial contexts. However, in modern designs, traditional Chu phoenix motifs now appear in functional products, integrating cultural elements into daily life.

2. Innovation in patterns: The versatility of the Chu phoenix lies in its ability to be depicted in both complete and simplified forms, making it easily adaptable to modern products while preserving its cultural depth. At the same time, it continues to maintain its cultural significance while adapting to modern trends.

3. Diversity of materials: The use of various modern materials enhances the versatility of the phoenix, making it adaptable for different products that appeal to a wider consumer.

4. Modernization of colors: The traditional red and black color scheme of the Chu phoenix carries deep cultural meaning. However, expanding this traditional palette to include vibrant hues allows the motif to balance tradition with contemporary aesthetics, making it more appealing to younger generations.

5. Simplification and abstraction of patterns: The intricate patterns of the traditional Chu phoenix may be overwhelming for modern minimalistic design preferences. Therefore, simplification and abstraction play a key role in making the motifs more adaptable to contemporary products.

6. Attractiveness of product pricing: Pricing is key to making Chu phoenix-inspired products accessible. Affordable pricing helps expand their reach.

7. Cultural symbolism of the Chu phoenix pattern: The phoenix's representation of ancestry, spirituality, and national dignity ensures that it continues to resonate with modern consumers who value heritage and identity.

8. Combination of the Chu phoenix with other traditional cultural elements: In both original and modern designs, the phoenix is often merged with other traditional symbols to create designs that are both more layered and visually dynamic.

To explore how traditional Chu phoenix elements can be effectively integrated into modern souvenir design, a survey was conducted to identify the most critical factors influencing the appeal of these products. The table below presents the results of the survey, which evaluated eight key factors related to the design and attractiveness of modern souvenirs inspired by the Chu phoenix. The data highlights how these factors are perceived by young consumers. This statistical data shows average (\bar{x}), standard deviation (S.D.) and variance.

Table 3 Analysis of the Attractiveness of Different Key Factors in Souvenirs (N=97)

Number	Key Factor	\bar{x}	S.D.	Variance
1	Practicality of the product	3.28	1.76	3.10
2	Innovation in patterns	3.75	1.28	1.64
3	Diversity of materials	4.02	0.99	0.98
4	Modernization of colors	4.09	0.93	0.87
5	Simplification and abstraction of patterns	4.13	1.41	1.99
6	Attractiveness of product pricing	3.91	1.80	3.24
7	Cultural symbolism of the Chu phoenix pattern	3.88	1.52	2.31
8	Combination of the Chu phoenix with other traditional cultural elements	3.46	1.65	2.72

According to the survey data, among the key factors, “Simplification and abstraction of patterns” ($\bar{x}=4.13$) and “Modernization of colors” ($\bar{x}=4.09$) received the highest average scores, indicating that these factors are perceived as the most attractive. In contrast, “Attractiveness of product pricing” (S.D.=1.80) and “Practicality of the product” (S.D.=1.76) had higher standard deviations, suggesting significant differences in how respondents from different groups value these factors, particularly in terms of price sensitivity and functionality.

Conclusion

This study explored the transformation of traditional Chu phoenix elements into modern souvenir designs, addressing two objectives.

First, the analysis of the symbolism, posture, and spiritual meaning of the Chu phoenix emphasized its cultural importance as a symbol of ancestry, spirituality, and national dignity. The phoenix represents ideals of truth, beauty, and prosperity, making it a significant cultural and spiritual emblem in Chu culture.

Additionally, the study found that the posture and gesture of the Chu phoenix are highly versatile, appearing in both complete and simplified forms. This versatility allows the motif to adapt to various artistic contexts, often being integrated with other elements. Its design, characterized by smooth, curved lines and elongated features, gives the phoenix a sense of dynamism and freedom. The red and black color scheme further adds symbolic depth, making the phoenix culturally significant.

Second, key factors were identified for integrating these elements into modern designs that appeal to younger consumers. Artifact analysis, field research, and surveys revealed that simplification of patterns, modernization of colors, and material diversity are essential for maintaining the cultural depth of the Chu phoenix while adapting to contemporary design trends. Young consumers prefer designs that blend traditional symbolism with modern innovation, enabling the phoenix to remain relevant in modern, functional products.

In conclusion, modern Chu phoenix-inspired souvenirs can effectively combine traditional symbolism with contemporary design, addressing the cultural expectations of today's consumers. These products not only preserve the cultural depth of the Chu phoenix and promote traditional Chu culture but also attract young consumers who value both innovation and heritage.

Discussion

In today's Chinese consumer market, young people are the primary driving force. With their growing purchasing power and cultural awareness, they increasingly favor products that blend personalization with cultural significance. Art toys featuring character design are especially popular among younger consumers, as they effectively combine distinctive character concepts with traditional cultural elements.

While Chu phoenix elements are common in many souvenir shops, products with complete character design concepts are still rare. Most focus on

traditional patterns, like tea sets and decorative items, without modern character integration. To address this gap, future designs could incorporate Chu phoenix elements into character design, promoting Chu culture while catering to the demand for innovative, personalized products. Key factors could guide this approach, making it more appealing to young consumers.

The author suggests that integrating Chu phoenix elements with character design could fill a market gap and create innovative, culturally rich products that appeal to young consumers. This blend of tradition and modern design offers a promising direction for future souvenir development.

In a backward way, these young consumers help preserve Chu culture through the souvenir market, keeping traditional Chu elements relevant in modern life. By choosing products that blend traditional cultural motifs with modernized designs, they integrate cultural heritage into everyday aesthetics, fostering innovation and cultural continuity.

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