

# Research on Cultural Creativity Derivative Design Based on Phoenix Cultural Totem Symbols

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## ABSTRACT

The phoenix has been regarded as a representative of the romantic Chu culture in the southern region of China since ancient times. In this paper, from the perspective of cultural totem symbols, it specifically elaborates the design ideas and methods of cultural creation derivatives to achieve the organic integration between contemporary and traditional culture, and to present the Chu culture with the phoenix culture as a totem symbol through modern aesthetics and beauty creation. This is the vivid embodiment of deep cultural confidence in the field of design and the effective use of traditional culture in modern life scenes.

**Keywords:** Phoenix, Totem symbol, Cultural creativity, Derivative design.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

China has a long history in the study of phoenix cultural totem. People in the ancient Chu state revered phoenix as their own cultural totem symbol. In the 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the development of Chinese archaeology has made a significant leap. A large number of various cultural relics with phoenix cultural totem symbols have been unearthed in the field of ancient Chu State for scholars to study and explore the style of ancient Chu State in China. On the basis of this, this paper integrates with modern culture and carries out research on cultural and creative derivative design.

## 2. THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF PHOENIX CULTURAL TOTEM SYMBOLS

### 2.1 The Origin of Phoenix Totem

Unlike other tribes in the Central Plains during the same period, which used the dragon as their own cultural totem, the Chu people used the image of the phoenix as their own tribal cultural totem symbol. According to research, the totem worship of birds by the original ancestors of the Chu region mostly originated from the sun worship in the primitive period. [1] Due to the limitation of

scientific cognition and the fear of natural irresistible factors, the ancestors of the Chu region had a spiritual worship of the mysterious and distant sun and materialized it on the bird, combining the sun and the bird into the worship of the phoenix. [2]

The Chu people believed that after death, the soul would be transformed into a phoenix and ascend to the sky, thus achieving personal salvation and soul sublimation, while the human soul had to take advantage of the wind god in order to ascend to the sky to fly high and go on a long journey. There are many depictions of the ascension of through dragons and phoenixes to the sky in Chu's works. In *The Songs of Chu · Da Zhao*, it writes, "Let the soul return. Look at the phoenix flying in the sky (魂乎归来, 凤皇翔只)"; the *Sorrow After Departure* writes: "I make the phoenix fly and soar (吾令凤鸟飞腾兮)" "Luan and phoenix has been on the alert and cleared the way for me (鸾皇为余先戒兮)"; the *Jiu Bian* writes, "The phoenix flutters on the left, the dragon leaps on the right (左朱雀之茷茷兮, 右苍龙之跃跃)"... Here, 凤皇, 凤鸟, 鸾皇 and 朱雀 all refer to the phoenix. [3] The ancestor of the Chu people, Zhu Rong, was also considered to be the incarnation of the phoenix, as recorded in *Bai Hu Tong · Chapter of Wu Xing*: "Its god Zhu Rong ..... His spirit is a bird, and to the south of him is 鸾 (luan, a colorful phoenix)". [4]

Phoenix worship originated from the continuation of the geographical migration culture of the Chu people. The Chu ancestors were driven by traders to the area of Jing Mountain in the southwest of Hubei. In order to show the superiority of the Chu people's Central Plains ancestry and culture, also to deter the barbarians, the Chu people maintained the belief in the phoenix totem brought from the Central Plains. As the Chu State became more powerful, it regarded itself as the representative and hegemon of the south. In the culture of the Four Images of the Central Plains, the phoenix exactly represented the south. Therefore, Chu's insistence on phoenix worship was also a way to justify its possession of the southern territories. [5] Later on, the phoenix was gradually given more and more moral meanings in the culture of the Central Plains. It became popular again for the Chu people to wear phoenix-decorated clothing and use phoenix-embazoned utensils to show their moral cultivation.

## 2.2 *The Spiritual Connotation of the Phoenix to the Chu People*

The phoenix to the Chu people is the most sublime and divine animal that surpasses everything, it marks the beauty and transcendence of the worldly power, and the artistic atmosphere it shows is different from the rigid and majestic temperament to be shown in the Central Plains, which is a very obvious and strong contrast. What the phoenix expresses is an air of romanticism that is soft and gives rise to endless reverie. Nowadays, the image of the nine-headed bird represents more of the Jingchu culture around Hubei. This culture contains the enterprising spirit of the Chu people who trekked to the northwestern part of Hubei more than 3,600 years ago with their ragged clothes and hard work, the innovative consciousness of innovation, the open-mindedness of being inclusive, and the tradition of praising martial arts and patriotism, which still flow in the blood of the people in the homeland of Chu after more than 2,000 years. [6]

People living in the land of China used to call Hubei people "nine-headed birds", which fully expresses the dynamic and creative character of Hubei people. Ancient people said, "Even if there were only three clans left in Chu State, they could still destroy Qin State". The phrase "not obeying the Zhou (不服周, bù fú zhōu)" is an expression of the Chu people's disobedience to the inherited rituals, a unique trait inherited from the Chu

people's bloodline, which also fully demonstrates the Chu people's boldness to be independent and innovative. [7]

## 3. CHANGES IN PHOENIX CULTURAL TOTEMS

### 3.1 *Phoenix Totems in the Shang and Zhou Periods*

The phoenix patterns were widely used in Shang Dynasty bronzes, mostly in a more solemn and dignified manner. On Shang Dynasty bronzes, the phoenix pattern is mostly on the side of the bird, and its features highlight the crown and feathers of the bird. The phoenix crown mostly has a crown of teeth, a long crown and a flower crown, and the decoration of the phoenix crown is very gorgeous. The feathers of the phoenix, on the other hand, are characterized by their curly shape and the curved and smooth lines of the feathers. As shown in "Figure 1", the phoenix pattern varies from shape to shape, and each shape corresponds to the characteristics of the phoenix pattern in each period of the Shang Dynasty. In the Western Zhou period, the simple style of the Shang Dynasty began to change to a more decorative direction, with more uniqueness and artistry, as shown in "Figure 2". [8]



Figure 1 Shang Dynasty Zhengzhou Gui. (Image source: <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20220120A09W5X00>)



Figure 2 Phoenix patterns on Western Zhou bronzes. (Image source: <https://www.douban.com/photos/photo/2498270965/>)

### 3.2 *Phoenix Totems in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period*

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, phoenix patterns showed a new style. The yin-yang and five-element thoughts prevailed, and a large number of dragon and phoenix patterns represented by yin and yang appeared in arts and crafts, as shown in "Figure 3". [9] During this period, many pairs of phoenix patterns were found on bronzes, as shown in "Figure 4".



Figure 3 Warring States Period bronze sandalwood burner with phoenix holding a ring in the mouth. (Image source: <https://www.jianshu.com/p/d1168864c1ec>)



Figure 4 Spring and Autumn Period bronze mirror with phoenix patterns. (Image source: <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20220120A09W5X00>)

After the mid-Warring States Period, the decoration of phoenix patterns on bronzes was gradually linearized and patterned. For more than a thousand years from the Shang Dynasty to the Warring States Period, the development and evolution of the phoenix patterns on bronzes showed obvious changes, and the phoenix patterns

in this period changed from complicated to simple and abstract to concrete, as shown in "Figure 5".



Figure 5 Warring States Period lacquerware. (Image source: [https://tieba.baidu.com/p/5930237741?red\\_tag=2130219850](https://tieba.baidu.com/p/5930237741?red_tag=2130219850))

### 3.3 *Phoenix Totems in the Qin and Han Dynasties and Their Late Periods*

The phoenix patterns were frequently applied to everyday material decorations in the Qin and Han Dynasties, as shown in "Figure 6", in terms of the choice of materials, craftsmanship, and technical combination. The Qin eaves tile phoenix pattern was characterized by intuitiveness and flexibility. At this time, phoenix patterns were cleverly combined with dragons, tigers, and turtles, and became more graphic in terms of shape, as shown in "Figure 7".



Figure 6 Early Western Han Dynasty lateral jade with a pair of phoenix patterns-decorated dragon heads. (Image source: <https://www.xzmuseum.com/upload/pictures1/9625.jpg>)



Figure 7 Han Dynasty blue and yellow jade ware with chi patterns and phoenix. (Image source: <http://www.rn-hsw.com/bbs/thread-66076-4-1.html>)

These artistic features are the originators of the creation of the figurative phoenix patterns, and their artistic value is unsurpassed by later generations. Compared with its predecessors, the phoenix pattern of the Han Dynasty developed by leaps and bounds. It had a complicated image and more fluent lines. The image of the phoenix in the Han Dynasty was no longer static, but in motion, and this sense of movement in motion gives a sense of vitality and pleasure. The phoenix pattern in the Han Dynasty was widely used in tiles and stone carvings and other places, and was of great artistic value. After the Han Dynasty, the phoenix totem has been evolved in a series of ways until nowadays there are new cultural meanings and derivations.

#### **4. DERIVATIVE APPLICATIONS OF PHOENIX CULTURAL TOTEMS IN CULTURAL CREATIVITY DESIGN**

The word "totem" is originally an Indian dialect. The primitive ancestors in ancient times believed that any ethnic group was associated with a certain animal (animals, plants or non-living things). Therefore, each clan called an animal the totem of the ethnic group and mythologized its totem, which was later given a mystical or royal meaning. [10] When a clan settled in a particular geographical location, the totem was passed on and evolved through cultural, political, and economic factors. The people of the tribe regarded it as the "guardian god" of the tribe.

The term "cultural creativity derivative design" refers to the derivatives that are formed by the process of re-generation of human culture. [11] It is a cultural derivative design inspired by culture, realized by various media of modern technology,

and commercialized to create a high additional value, which has a certain cultural transmission value. Cultural creativity derivative design takes culture as the connotation and the designed itself as the carrier, and culture provides designers with more ideas and inspiration in the production process. On the contrary, the cultural creativity derivative design can promote the development and dissemination of regional ethnic culture.

As the totem of Chu culture, the phoenix has been presented to the world in various forms at different stages through cultural, economic and political factors in thousands of years of succession. As a result of historical choices, the cultural carrier of the phoenix totem symbolizes the temperament of the Chu people and their descendants, and in its figurative form, conveys to the world the attitudes and ways of life of the ancestors on the land of Jingchu, serving as a link for dialogue with the ancestors in the new century.

This paper intends to use the phoenix cultural totem symbols to redesign cultural symbols, so as to derive the cultural creativity design, which not only can attract the viewer's attention, but also can effectively draw closer to the viewer, and at the same time trigger a higher level of spiritual resonance and cultural connotation of the cultural creation itself.

The proverb "the nine-headed bird in the sky and the Hubei fellow on the ground" has been passed down for hundreds of years, reflecting the praise and teasing of the Hubei people by the ancestors and descendants. The "nine-headed bird" culture has been age-old. It originally originated from the totem worshiped by the ancestors of the Chu people: the nine-headed phoenix, the sacred bird. In recent years, the Hubei people intend to take the "nine-headed bird" as their cultural totem representative, an act that fully demonstrates the spiritual connotation of the world's so-called "nine-headed bird on the ground", and the spirit of resourcefulness and wisdom can highlight more its rationality on behalf of the Hubei people. The element of phoenix, as a branch of the heritage of the "nine-headed bird," highlights the positive and cultural nature of its cultural tendency. The phoenix has a certain connection with the impression of Hubei people in terms of representing the Chu culture, which is highly relevant and culturally strong. On the other hand, for Hubei people themselves, their cultural totems can both carry the connotation of their own attributes and help to

trigger cultural resonance, enhance cultural identity and promote the spread of local culture. [12]

In summary, according to the analysis of the phoenix cultural totem symbols and their origin and development, the phoenix cultural totem symbols need to carry Jingchu culture, but also need to discard the cultural elements that fail to adapt to the development of modern society according to the changes in the cultural environment, and moreover, need to guide the public to recognize, accept, and spread the good cultural elements in Jingchu culture through cultural creation, so as to promote the inheritance of Jingchu culture. [13]

#### 4.1 The Style Construction of Cultural Creativity Design

Cultural creativity design is essentially a refinement and extraction of cultural elements, a process of integration with design shape and function, and it is not a simple replication, but a purposeful use of traditional cultural elements. The purpose is to better meet today's lifestyle and people's unconscious love for traditional culture from the heart, and further achieve the transmission of culture. [14]

The initial to final solution of this cultural design is the process of extracting, refining and integrating cultural elements into the cultural design. In this process, the cultural elements are extracted through the signifier and the signified. The two interpenetrate each other, the signifier is the expression layer of the cultural symbols, and the signified is the inner layer of the cultural symbols. [15] The whole design extracts the signifier symbols: the fret pattern, the phoenix totem, the seal carving elements, etc. And the signified level is shown in "Table 1", which extracts the rich connotation of Chu culture at the inner level. In the whole design, the signified is changed by the signifier, and the signified derives more outer edges. In this way, the design is progressive, forming a logical and design-oriented cultural design process. The visible "form" is preserved as the invisible "quality" through the signifier and the signified, which fully reflects the core of the cultural spirit and provides the basis for the later design. [16]

After a series of analysis and design, the author finally designs several schemes and conducts a comparative study of design ideas such as grid system. "Figure 8" is the final design based on the symbols of the phoenix culture. The image of the phoenix has been simplified and redesigned to be a

phoenix image with a diagonal triangular composition facing to the right. The structure of the phoenix is simplified, its tail and body are combined with three color blocks in the form of upward intertwining, and the crown of the phoenix is on the top left of the head, highlighting the characteristics and providing the finishing touch. The overall intention is to express the imagery experience of "fire", "life" and "continuity", reflecting its "fire-loving" and "sun-loving" characteristics.



Figure 8 Final design scheme (Image source: drawn by the author).

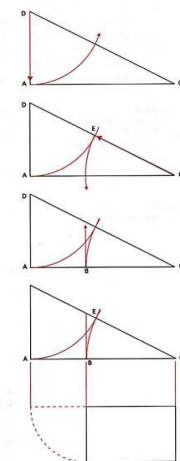


Figure 9 "Golden Triangle" in design geometry (Image source: Geometry of Design).

The three willow leaf-shaped elements in the body of the phoenix are a reflection of the ancient Chinese tradition of honoring "three". "Three" permeated many aspects of ancient society and was a critical point of qualitative change, profoundly influencing the aesthetic psychology and way of thinking of the Chinese. *Lao Zi* says: "Out of Tao, One is born; Out of One, Two; Out of Two, Three; Out of Three, the created universe". All things evolve according to this principle. *Xu Shen's Shuowen Jiezi* says, "Three, namely, the way of heaven, earth and man". *The Historical Records* says: "The number starts from one and ends at ten, with 'three' as the whole". Thus, after a series of

evolution and characterization, the number "three" in ancient China has an all-embracing meaning, giving the finite the infinite, and is the key to the growth of all things, the key point of the leap from quantitative change to qualitative change, and has evolved into a certain immaterial cultural characteristic of the Chinese over thousands of years. [17]

The design of the project consciously adopts a tilted dynamic shape, which not only preserves the traditional sense of beauty, but also breaks the convention to give people an image of flexibility. The design simplifies the head, body and tail of the phoenix into three main parts. The phoenix crown, a subtle leaf-like element, makes the overall design more dynamic, highlighting the head and tail, and expressing the tail in the language of design with the connotation of "Out of Three, the created universe", which can be interpreted as the infinite burning of the fire or the infinite growth of the vine, conveying an endless inheritance and continuation of vitality. The overall style is based on the uniqueness of the Chu culture and its resilience, which is an explicit design that presents the spirit of "the nine-headed phoenix" in a visual and graphic way.

The design is presented in the form of three willow leaf elements forming a right-angle triangle, which has the characteristics of stability, balance and flexibility. The edge of the phoenix in "Figure 8" is tangent to the length of the right-angle triangle, which is a right-angle triangle composition of the phoenix, and the ratio of the two right-angle sides is 1:2. In the golden ratio triangle made by the golden ratio relationship in "Figure 9", the division of the triangle produces the rectangular side lengths AB and BC, and their ratio is the golden ratio of 1:1.618. [18] And the most important point of the triangle, the point of rule of thirds, is just near the crown and the head of the phoenix, which is the visual center, as shown in "Figure 10".

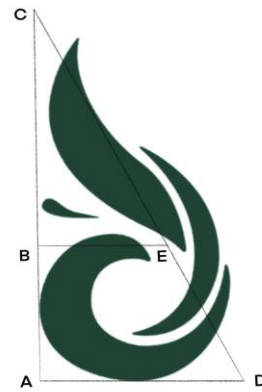


Figure 10 Proportional position of the final design scheme in the Golden Triangle (Image source: drawn by the author).

#### 4.2 The Visual Color Language of Cultural Creativity Design

In "Figure 8", the main color of the cultural creativity derivative design adopts the bronze green color of Chu ware bronzes, which implies the strong color of bronze culture and gives people a sense of heavy culture. Green bronze cultural colors in addition to its appearance have the meaningful attributes of vitality and life. In addition, its continuity and color give people a sense of continuity in the visual and psychological sense of continuity, giving them a cultural concept of inheritance and continuity. It conveys more positive characteristics, combining the color elements of Jingchu bronzes to try more color schemes such as "Figure 11".



Figure 11 Color draft comparison of design scheme (Image source: drawn by the author).



Figure 12 Color values of the Saigongsun (zhuang) father bronze Yi. (Image source: drawn by the author)

The color values are shown in "Figure 12". The upper part of "Figure 11" is divided into three schemes which adopt different levels of brightness of the same color system and extract three more appropriate levels through comparative analysis. However, since the last two schemes cannot highlight the design itself about the heavy sense of culture and the expression of this cultural attribute, the first scheme is finally optimized, as shown in "Figure 8". The three schemes in the lower part of "Figure 11" are presented with different degrees of gradient effects. The red color is generally recognized by the public as the color image of the traditional phoenix, the expression of red and bronze green makes the elements of the shape of this cultural creativity derivative design weakened, and the focus on the color form in contrast with the upper part of the color scheme makes the overall complexity prominent and cannot express the purpose of the shape to be conveyed, so the final expression is "Figure 8". The design analysis method uses multiple color expressions of the design scheme to compare and analyze the final most suitable expression scheme, which has certain reference value for logo design.

### 4.3 The Practical Application of Cultural Creativity Derivative Design

In the process of cultural creativity derivative design, it is not only about color deliberation but also about the evolution of shape. The design of "Figure 13" is intended to combine the fret pattern in the bronzes of Chu culture with the image of the phoenix, giving more decorous feeling and origin on the plane with the expression of traditional Chinese seal carving. In "Figure 14", the image of

the phoenix combines yin and yang, just like the combination of two phoenixes flying and hovering, but its image doesn't conform to the meaning of the phoenix.



Figure 13 Design scheme I (Image source: drawn by the author).



Figure 14 Design scheme II (Image source: drawn by the author).

The image of the phoenix in "Figure 15" is figurative in its tail features, but it is not well connected to the body and has little overall unity. The original intention of cultural creativity design is to combine form and culture, to create through the expression of modern design, and to fully reflect the deeper meaning of culture for the purpose, and at the same time, for the culture, it is a kind of inheritance, innovation and dissemination. "Figure 8" shows the cultural creativity design based on culture after abandoning the solidified form through visual analysis and proportional adjustment in the traditional sense. "Figure 16" and "Figure 17" compare the position of the phoenix crown, which is the finishing touch of the whole design, a "point" element that can make the whole design exciting and flexible. It not only makes the characteristics of the phoenix clearer, but also is the spirit of the whole design's direction, rhythm, and temperament. The position of the crown in "Figure 16" is closer to the head of the phoenix than in "Figure 17", allowing for more specific details about the physique and direction of the head, which is more storytelling. The position of "Figure 1" in the overall design is in the point of rule of thirds composition, which also expresses the upward,

tough and proud temperament of the Chu people, and the embodiment of continuity and inclusiveness for thousands of years. Therefore, a deep understanding and effective use of culture in a cultural creativity derivative design, as well as the choice of a broader and more far-reaching focus for design rather than storytelling details is the key to resonate with cultural creativity derivatives. Through this, one can get a clearer understanding of the cultural attributes of the region and deeply feel the strong vitality of the culture. [19]



Figure 15 Design scheme III (Image source: drawn by the author).








Figure 16 Design scheme IV (Image source: drawn by the author).



Figure 17 Final design scheme (Image source: drawn by the author, same as "Figure 8").

Comparing the five schemes, it is clearer to see the process of the whole scheme derivation and the differences in the individual details. (As shown in "Table 1")

Table 1. Comparison of the cultural creativity derivative design schemes of the phoenix cultural totem

Design scheme	Element extraction	Shape analysis	Graphical structure	Emotion vocabulary	Contrastive analysis
1	 Fret pattern Phoenix Seal carving	Based on a square shape, decorated with fret patterns, and integrated with the image of phoenix in the middle	Geometry Sharp corner Round corner	Heavy Unswerving Traditional	There is circle in the square, the phoenix is overly concise in its expression of the characteristics of the image, and the expression of the meaning is insufficient
2	 Fret pattern Phoenix Fire	The square shape is the base, the yin and yang positive and negative shapes depict the phoenix, and the torch symbolizes the heritage	Combination of geometry and curves	Elegant Solemn Upright and foursquare	A negative shape structure is added, the tail feature is too exaggerated, and the phoenix image feature is controversial
3	 Fret pattern Phoenix Tree	The head of the phoenix and the branch of the tree are extended with the beginning and the end of the fret pattern	Geometry and pictogram combination	Natural Delicate Fascinating	The phoenix crown and its tail are not simple enough and weak as a whole
4	 Phoenix Willow leaf	The overall sense of roundness prevails, with the phoenix pattern spreading back and forth	Spiral curves combined with pictorial images	Flexible Light and fast Vigilant	Integrated, unified, more fluent, but emotional, less popular
5	 Phoenix Willow leaf	The overall sense of roundness prevails, with the phoenix pattern spreading back and forth	Spiral curves combined with pictorial images	Flexible Graceful Vital	Integrated, unified, more fluent, High comfort, acceptance, culture



## 5. CONCLUSION

The phoenix totem culture is still regarded as one of the representatives of Hubei Jingchu culture. For the phoenix cultural creativity derivative design, it is not only the inheritance of this cultural totem symbol, but also a development of this culture in the new era. The cultural creativity derivative design can be presented to the public more through the coat of design, playing an important role in the dissemination of regional culture in the new era. In this paper, from a practical point of view, the design ideas and methods are specifically elaborated from the perspective of cultural totem symbols to realize the integration between modern cultural creation and traditional culture, and to present Chu culture through modern aesthetics. It will be a proven method in the field of cultural creativity derivative design research.

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