

The Evolution of Artistic Characteristics of Phoenix Patterns in Chu Culture

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ABSTRACT

The phoenix pattern is a crystallization of the Chu culture, which was influenced by the region, culture, ideology and production level of different times, thus resulting in a unique image of phoenix. The purpose of this paper is to study the evolution of the phoenix pattern from the budding period to the transformation period of Chu culture, summarize the characteristics and laws of the evolution in different periods, and reveal its rich cultural connotation. This paper is divided into three parts: firstly, it explains the origin of the phoenix and the reasons why the Chu people admired the phoenix; secondly, it studies the characteristics of the phoenix pattern in each period; finally, it compares them.

Keywords: Phoenix pattern, Evolution, Chu culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The phoenix pattern is one of the traditional patterns in China and the Chu people even made it the representative totem of the nation. The fervor of the Chu people for the phoenix can be traced back to the beginning of the Chu culture, the Western Zhou Dynasty, as seen in the patterns excavated in different dynasties. During its long history, Chu culture underwent many changes: the period of infancy, the period of flourishing, the period of heyday and the period of transformation, eventually forming an inclusive, romantic and mysterious cultural system. And as the spiritual representative of Chu culture, phoenix is the crystallization of Chu culture for thousands of years [1]. In the history of the evolution of the phoenix pattern, it is no longer a single image application, but a continuous integration of the characteristics of the times, incorporating the background, culture, and spirit of the times into itself to better spread it.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE FORMATION OF PHOENIX PATTERN IN CHU CULTURE

2.1 *The Origin of the Phoenix Pattern Image*

The phoenix first originated in the Neolithic Period. As a tribal totem in primitive society, the victorious tribe would absorb a certain part of the totem of the defeated tribe into the totem of their own tribe. Therefore, the image of the phoenix has been changing along with historical development, bringing together a variety of birds, natural phenomena or animal features.

Phoenix patterns on painted pottery of the Neolithic Period have a history of more than 7,000 years, when the phoenix patterns were still in their infancy [2]. The creation of the phoenix couldn't be separated from the ancient worship of the sky and soaring birds, so early phoenix patterns were always accompanied by the sun. For example, in "Figure 1", the sun is in the middle, next to a pair of phoenixes, the beak and feathers are decorated with abbreviated abstract lines, and the overall image is like a sparrow [3].



Figure 1 Early phoenix patterns.

2.2 Reasons for the Chu People to Worship Phoenix

The origin of Chu culture and phoenix can be traced back to the Western Zhou period. At the beginning of the Chu State, Chu people took the phoenix as the representative of the national spirit. In the excavated cultural relics of Chu, there are countless phoenix patterns, all of which are endowed with the beautiful affections of Chu people for phoenix.

The Chu people's phoenix worship evolved from their primitive beliefs. The ancestor of the Chu people was Zhurong, and the ancient people believed that the phoenix was the incarnation of Zhurong, so the ancestral beliefs were converted into the worship of the phoenix. On the one hand, the phoenix was regarded by the Chu as a spiritual bird and an auspicious object. The phoenix was considered a bridge to the other world, not only as a deity in people's hearts, but also as a part of witchcraft rituals. Besides, the phoenix symbolizes freedom and nobility. In the Spring and Autumn Period, in *The Analects of Confucius*, the phrase "Jieyu asked: Phoenix, phoenix, why your virtue is so declining?" already links the phoenix with virtue,

which is in harmony with the Chu people's spirit of pursuing truth, goodness and beauty. It can be seen that the phoenix is a symbol of beauty and nobility in the hearts of the Chu people. The image of phoenix, which originated from the ancestor worship of Chu people, gradually became the main decorative pattern of Chu cultural artifacts in the evolution of history.

3. CHANGES IN PHOENIX PATTERNS IN DIFFERENT PERIODS

3.1 Phoenix Patterns of the Western Zhou Period

During the Western Zhou period, which was the infancy period of the Chu culture, the Chu State underwent the transformation from a primitive society to a slavery society, the Chu culture was in a pioneering and unconventional stage, and phoenix patterns were deeply affected. The phoenixes of the Western Zhou period often appear in a flat form, with natural and smooth faceted patterns, and the bold and unpretentious cutting techniques show astonishing artistic tension. ("Table 1")

Table 1. Western Zhou artifacts with phoenix patterns

Artifacts		
	Jade handle-shaped artifact with phoenix patterns	Bronze phoenix cup
Patterns		
Techniques	Carvings	Mould casting process
Material	Jade ware	Bronze ware
Modeling	Round eyes, curved beak, long tail, carved with straight lines and curves	A pair of phoenixes with round eyes, decorative lines on their bodies, long tails, with aigrettes upwarping to their tails

The main decoration on the jade handle-shaped artifact with phoenix patterns is phoenix patterns on one side, with a long pecking posture, the aigrette of the head tilts forward, and the tail upwarps behind the body to the top of the head. The phoenix's head, tail feathers, and claws are all covered with curly cloud patterns. The entire composition is gentle and smooth with a sense of spreading, and the image of the phoenix appears vividly on the jade handle. The abdomen of the bronze phoenix cup is decorated with two pairs of large phoenix patterns, with their beaks upward and the aigrettes on the top of their heads upwarping high up to their necks. During the Western Zhou period, the phoenix patterns had a strong sense of graphic decoration, as the cultural beliefs of the time influenced people's aesthetics, and because it was a slavery society, the phoenix images of that time had a solemn and mysterious aesthetic.

3.2 Phoenix Patterns of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, Chu State was on the road to prosperity, the slavery system collapsed, and Chu State took over the Central Plains. During that period, Chu culture developed its own unique cultural style and artistic characteristics, as a result of the social turmoil, the princes' competing for supremacy, and the contention of a hundred schools of thought [4]. In contrast to the solemn and mysterious style of the Western Zhou period, the phoenix patterns became agile, slender, and meek. ("Table 2")

Table 2. Spring and Autumn and Warring States artifacts with phoenix patterns

Artifacts				
	Jade horn cup with phoenixes	Pot inlaid with bird and beast patterns	Human, Dragon and Phoenix Painting	Painted lacquer cup with patterns of a pair of phoenixes with round ears
Patterns				
Techniques	Carvings	Mould casting process	Painting on silk	Lacquer painting
Material	Jade ware	Bronze ware	Painting on silk	Lacquerware
Modeling	Round head, round eyes, recurved aigrette, combination of straight lines and curves	A pair of phoenixes on the side with beak and aigrette bending over the head, standing on one claw, with tails on the ground, curly	Oval phoenix head with small eyes, slightly open beak, phoenix body with floral decoration	A phoenix with curved beak, long neck, small wings, with the tail being divided into two strands, and the body is decorated with scaly feathers

The top of the jade horn cup with phoenixes is carved with phoenix patterns, with a full head and round eyes, a slightly right-angled, recurved aigrette, and the lines of the tail being similar in shape to the aigrette. The phoenix patterns on the pot inlaid with bird and beast patterns are either looking back or back standing in pairs, with their pointed beaks open and their tails drooping until they are flush with their claws and presenting a

curling cloud shape, which are mostly expressed in curves, giving the phoenixes a strong sense of movement. There is a woman in Human, Dragon and Phoenix Painting, and above her is painted a light and graceful phoenix, which flies in the air. The wings are carved with thin lines and the phoenix claws are carved with bold lines, revealing the phoenix's agility. The painted lacquer cup with patterns of a pair of phoenixes with round ears has

two pairs of phoenixes in the middle in an S-shape, forming a central symmetry, without aigrettes, with curved beaks, slender necks, smaller wings, and two strands of tails to the ground, and the scaly feathers on the body are meticulously depicted [5]. Most of the phoenix patterns from the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period have long and slender necks, distinguishing them from the heaviness of the earlier periods, with phoenixes being portrayed in a more upright and beautiful manner [6].

3.3 Phoenix Patterns of the Qin and Han Dynasties

During the Qin and Han dynasties, the Han emperor revered Confucianism, and the theory of the immortals and the necromancers was very prevalent, and the phoenix was used extensively as one of the four spiritual animals. ("Table 3")

Table 3. Artifacts with phoenix patterns of the Qin and Han dynasties

Artifacts		
	Eaves tile with Kuifeng patterns	Eaves tile with rosefinch patterns
Patterns		
Techniques		Carvings
Material		Eaves tile, stone
Modeling	Holding its head high, with the aigrette upwarping, raised tail, two phoenix claws being in front and behind respectively	Wings spread in the shape of flying, with scaly decoration and two phoenix claws being in front and behind respectively

The eaves tile with Kuifeng patterns has the pattern of a standing, sideways phoenix. The phoenix stands with its head held high, its aigrette upwarping, its wings spreading to the back of its tail, its tail splitting and upwarping high, its claws being bent and strong, and its spreading body exactly matching the round shape of the eaves tile. The eaves tile with rosefinch patterns is decorated with sideways phoenix patterns, with the phoenix holding a jewel in its mouth, standing tall with its head held high and its tail cocked, with its wings spreading into a flying shape and scaly patterns decorating its wings, and the image of the phoenix is vivid and lifelike. The phoenix pattern of the Qin and Han dynasties are complete, realistic and concrete, with the image of the phoenix mostly in the form of a dynamic bird with wings spread and flying, without a complex background, and with a simple but not monotonous composition.

4. COMPARISON OF THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PHOENIX PATTERNS IN DIFFERENT PERIODS

4.1 Being Abstract to Realistic

The shape of the phoenix has changed a lot with the times. ("Table 4")

The phoenix pattern of the Western Zhou period has large, round eyes, a cocked aigrette, and a beak that bends downward and gradually becomes thinner. The body of the phoenix is a straight line parallel to the ground, the tail of the phoenix is slightly curved to be flush with the head of the phoenix, and the two phoenix claws being in front and behind respectively. The phoenix patterns of this period resemble a combination of birds and other animals, and are full of early people's bold imagination of the phoenix.

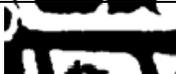
During the Warring States period, the phoenix pattern had the rudiment of the image of the phoenix as it is known today. The phoenix head and eyes become smaller, the aigrette becomes elongated, the phoenix body is decorated with simple feather patterns, the phoenix tail is upturned and divided into two strands, the phoenix claws present the posture of running with two claws being in front and behind respectively, and the legs have long and thin lines with variations in thickness.

The Qin and Han dynasties already had a more mature image of the phoenix. The head of the phoenix is long and slender, the beak is curved downward, and the aigrette is divided backward

into two strands, with one being slightly curled upward and one part being downward until it is curved horizontally. The wings are decorated with feathers and flutter backwards, and the neck is slender, with the head held high. The tail of the phoenix is divided upwards into two strands, with a clear variation in thickness. The two phoenix claws are in front and behind respectively, with carved muscle lines, joints and toes.

From the Western Zhou to the Qin and Han dynasties, the phoenixes were less imaginative, and the portrayal of phoenixes became more realistic with the development of techniques and expressions.

Table 4. Evolution features of phoenix patterns — Being abstract to realistic

	Phoenix shape	Phoenix head	Phoenix body	Phoenix tail	Phoenix claws
Western Zhou					
Spring and Autumn and Warring States					
Qin and Han					

4.2 Being Restraint to Unabashed

The Western Zhou period was precisely the period of slavery, when the image of the phoenix had a solemn, introverted beauty. The phoenix body of the Western Zhou period is shaped like poultry, with wings closed on both sides of the body and decorated with simple patterns; the phoenix body is less detailed, and the claws are upright and short. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, when the Chu State was flourishing, the art form was more daring and lively, and the phoenix patterns became more lively and alive. Compared with the phoenixes of the Western Zhou period, the phoenixes of the Spring and Autumn period changed from being solemn and restrained to being gorgeous. The two phoenix claws are in front and behind respectively, and the

lines of the legs have been obviously thickly and thinly carved, appearing robust and strong; the phoenix body is slender and mostly curved, and the wings are stretched out, showing a desire to spread their wings and fly. The phoenix pattern of the Qin Dynasty was as imperial as the society of the time. The phoenix body is upright, slightly tilted backwards, with wings fully spreading to fly; the two phoenix claws are in front and behind respectively, with the front claw raised high and the back claw upright; the overall form of the phoenix appears to be spreading its wings and flying high.

From the Western Zhou to the Han dynasties, from being restraint to being unabashed, with the development of the times, more crafts and artifacts appeared, and the image of phoenix pattern also became more exquisite. ("Table 5")

Table 5. Evolution features of phoenix patterns — Being restraint to unabashed

	Phoenix shape	Phoenix claws	Phoenix body
Western Zhou			
Spring and Autumn and Warring States			
Qin and Han			

4.3 Straight Lines to Curves

The phoenix patterns of the Western Zhou period have a strong sense of decoration, and because of the production level and cultural beliefs of the time, the images of phoenixes are mostly linear in shape, showing a solemn and grave decorative atmosphere. The aigrette of the phoenix head is straight line in the shape of a mountain, the phoenix beak is curved downward, the phoenix tail is a slightly-curved straight line, and the phoenix claws are upright. The artistic expression of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period received major reforms and breakthroughs. Compared with the phoenixes of the Western Zhou period, the images of phoenixes in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period changed from being rustic to being ornate. The aigrette is depicted with thick and thin changing curves, the phoenix beak is pointed and curved, the

phoenix body is carved with flowing curves, and the phoenix claws focus on muscle lines and joints. Around the phoenix, some floral and vine patterns are also added to make the overall composition more soft and beautiful. The style of the phoenix patterns of the Qin and Han dynasties continued the characteristics of the phoenix patterns of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, with more curves used to carve the image of the phoenix. The phoenix head is long and slender, the phoenix eyes become willow lines, the phoenix body has mostly S-shaped curve, the phoenix legs are carved with curves to show muscle and joint changes, and the wing lines are as smooth as hair.

In general, from the Western Zhou period, when straight lines and curves were used together, to the Qin and Han periods, when curves were used a lot to depict, it reflected the change of aesthetic tastes of the ancients. ("Table 6")

Table 6. Evolution features of phoenix patterns — Straight lines to curves

	Phoenix shape	Phoenix head	Phoenix tail	Phoenix claws
Western Zhou				
Spring and Autumn and Warring States				
Qin and Han				

5. CONCLUSION

The phoenix pattern is one of the representatives of Chu culture. In this paper, the evolution of the phoenix pattern in Chu culture is taken as the main subject of study, the phoenix of each period is analyzed in terms of pattern, technique, material and shape, and the development pattern of phoenix patterns in each period is compared: (1) Being abstract to realistic: Compared with the phoenix patterns of the Western Zhou period, the phoenix patterns of the Qin and Han periods have more fluent lines, less imagination and exaggeration in the image, with more realistic phoenix patterns. (2) Being restraint to unabashed: The phoenix pattern of the Western Zhou period is stately, while those of the Qin and Han dynasties are varied and unabashed. (3) Straight lines to curves: In the Western Zhou period, phoenixes were mostly depicted with a combination of straight lines and curves, and in the Spring and Autumn

Period and the Warring States Period, the depiction of phoenixes began to use curves on a large scale.

The phoenix pattern has undergone historical evolution and is a carrier that accommodates the aesthetics, beliefs and culture of multiple nationalities, and is one of the important representatives of the Chinese national spirit. By studying the evolution of the phoenix pattern, it is possible to derive the changes in people's tendency to create objects and aesthetics, which is the inheritance of traditional culture and has reference value for the design of related phoenix patterns.

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