



**Cross-Cultural Communication**  
Vol. 10, No. 3, 2014, pp. 69-71  
DOI:10.3968/4322

ISSN 1712-8358[Print]  
ISSN 1923-6700[Online]  
[www.cscanada.net](http://www.cscanada.net)  
[www.cscanada.org](http://www.cscanada.org)

## Chu Culture Modeling Elements and Their Inspiration for Urban Visual Image Design

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**Supported by** Wuhan Municipal Fund for Social Science Research: Hubei Folk Decorative Art and Urban Visual Design Research project (No.13g249).

Received 12 December 2013; accepted 15 April 2014  
Published online 26 April 2014

### Abstract

This paper will concentrate on the artifact culture of Hubei, the cradle of Chu culture. It begins with the analysis of visual elements in ancient Chu culture, including the forms, colors, ornamentations, etc. Based on that, it explores the possibility of adopting the essence of visual art in Chu culture into contemporary urban visual design of Hubei province.

**Key words:** Chu culture; City image design; Visual element

LI Jianwen (2014). Chu Culture Modeling Elements and Their Inspiration for Urban Visual Image Design. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(3), 69-71. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/4322>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4322>

Since the external appearance is the most immediate and vivid representation of the image of a city, urban image design has long been an essential part of urban image planning as a whole. Vivid and iconic urban image is helpful for the preserving and promoting traditional culture and value, it is also good for increasing the influence and popularity of the city in question. Considering the cultural diversity in different cities, it is important for a city to establish its own cultural individuality that not only promotes the repute and fame of the city, but also become so impressive to individuals that it can influence the mindset of tourists and residents.

Urban culture is the core of city images and it is the intrinsic values of city landmark. Hubei province is the cradle of ancient Chu culture, which is a significant component of ancient Chinese civilization. Borrowing from the culture of Shang Dynasty in the north and, to a less degree, from Wuyue culture in the south, our ancestors in the ancient State of Chu have created a magnificent civilization. Compared to Zhou culture of the same time, Chu culture is more innocent, naturalistic and religious. Such characters are reflected in wizard culture, which is famous for romantic expressions and love of freedom. In other words, the pursuit of independent character and unlimited spirit are essential qualities of Chu culture.

The historical heritage of Chu culture has been a source of inspiration for today's urban visual designers; therefore an analysis of artistic characters and expressions methods of Chu culture is necessary for future planning and designing. Through systematic designing, summarizing and abstraction of visual art in Chu culture, it is hoped that some set of symbols can be arrived, which represents contemporary urban culture, and at the same time reflects the tradition values and historical contexts underneath. Based on such ideas, I will give a brief analysis on some visual characters of Chu culture in form, color and ornaments, which might proved helpful for contemporary urban visual design.

Religious and mundane life is closed connected in Chu culture visual arts. Through the magnificent techniques in sculpting, coloring and ornamentation, the artworks of Chu culture express both social customs and esthetic ideas of that time. Chu people are not only excellent in depicting real-life objects; they are also exceptional in transforming and combining one form into another by the power of association. The decomposition, recombination and abstraction of various forms are not resulted from randomly juxtaposition and collage; instead, they are realized in an enhancing process from concrete contents

to abstract forms. The 'phoenix on a tiger', which is a funerary object excavated in Tomb 4, Lijiatai, Jianglin, is an excellent example on this point. The sculpture is composed of three parts, namely a tiger, a deer and a phoenix. The tiger in the podium is crouching with its head stretching upwards and the tail curves down, because it succumbs to the phoenix, which stands gloriously upon the tiger's back. The phoenix is relatively larger than the tiger underneath. The wings stretch out horizontally and the beak opens upward as if it is singing loudly. More specially, there is a large pair of antlers on the back of the phoenix, which has more than 20 branches. The presence of the antlers expands the volume of the phoenix, contributing to the overall impression as if the phoenix is just about to fly. It is said that the sculpture is a surprising combination of masculine and feminine beauty. Phoenix is a fiction creature from mythology, while tiger is a real beast. The smart combination of fictive and actual animals by ancient Chu people produces intense sense of beauty, tranquility and harmony.



**Zuo Hu Li Feng sculpture, excavated from Tomb 4, Lijiatai, Jianglin**

The use of colors in Chu culture is motivated both by profound philosophical thinking and the desire for sensory pleasures. Here the shock in mind and enjoy in bodies are intertwined in mystic ways, which often produces surprisingly vivid and saturated colors.

Visual beauty comes from the feelings and sensations of colors. Every color has its own character and quality. As

a result, every culture and nation has its own independent psychology and tendencies in esthetics of color. By arranging and positing different colors in systematic schemes, Chu people have created harmony of beauty from conflicts and chaos of everyday life. Red and black paints are widely used in Chu handicrafts. Black suggests calm, tranquil and compatibility, while the preference for red has its root in totem and ancestor worship of pre-historical times. Red is the color of fire and life, a symbol of warm south, while black is the color of north. The juxtaposition and mixture of red and black imply the harmonious interaction of Yin and Yang. In lacquerwares of Chu culture, the contrast of red and black often serves as a background upon which more complicated and subtle motives are applied. The latter can be highly ornamental and subjective.

In Chu lacquerwares, the practical consideration is combined with saturated, vivid color pattern, which contributes to a significantly religious scenario. It can be said that these lacquerwares have become material bearer of religious spirits of Chu people. Such color patterns are also seen in Chu tapestry and embroidery. Red and brown are widely used in tapestry works, which is a direct reflection of the Chu worship of fire. The expression is clearly based on the awareness of abstract color patterns. Chu people have developed their own ideal in colors, which corresponds perfectly with their special esthetic way of seeing the world in terms of abstraction and symbolism. One of the general esthetic features is a perspective that transcends still life and superficial appearance in everyday life. Chu artists do not intend to represent those visible objects. Instead, they were trying to present those invisible things in creative and imaginative ways through the use of vivid, subjective colors.

The practical and embellish motives express the romantic ideas of Chu people and therefore are highly valuable in esthetics.

Analogy, pictograph, abstract geometries and complex figures are frequent motives Chu visual arts. Sometimes they are mixed together into more complicated forms. The examples can be given as following. a) Realistic figures: realistic figures originate from what people saw in real life. As mentioned above, Chu people do not intend to choose some random details of real life objects and depict them as realistically as possible; rather, they usually emphasize the most characteristic parts and structures of the object depicted, using them as a basis, upon which new figures are created. Examples of this kind can be found in Kui Dragon motive and phoenix motives. Dragon and phoenix figures are often highly exaggerated to form interesting themes. b) Abstract figures: in Chu visual arts, abstract figures are widely applied in bronze vessels and lacquerwares. The basic forms includes linear, phoenix and coiled dragon motives. Based on these basic form, Chu people create many further ones by transformation and combination, such as concentric squares, waves, curved triangular

bands, vertex and clouds, etc. The symbolic expressions in Chu arts create romantic atmosphere. Furthermore, in motive design, the design is usually made according to the particular shapes and volumes of the vessel and sculptures in question. Many perspectives are used and techniques such as cavalier perspective, symmetry and overlaying are adopted in order to enhance ornamental effects. Considering the frequent presence of exaggerated and complex figures, it is obvious that Chu people were organizing various kinds of natural forms: some of them take a continuous pattern along skeleton lines, some are arranged in horizontal or vertical symmetric patterns, while others are scattered in interlacing lines. Animal figures like dragon and phoenix are usually used to fill the spaces between the motives. The arrangement helps to create an overall sensation of order while retains a lively sense of variation. Although the whole structure is composed of overlapping layers, the effect is well controlled in order to avoid overcrowding of forms.



**Dish of Zeng Hou Yi Excavated from The Tomb of Zeng Hou Yi, Hubei Province**

One can always feel a strong vitality in patterns of Chu visual arts. The lively masculine impulse is like a spirit in full of its power. In its thousands of years' history, Chu culture has developed varied meanings, connotations and metaphors through the designing of form, color and motives. Having penetrated deeply into every aspect of Chu people's lives, these meanings and metaphors become the defining features of Chu culture, making it distinct from any other culture and civilizations. As Gropius, the founder of Bauhaus School, once suggested: "The real tradition is resulted from constantly progressing, instead of being standstill, the essence of tradition is movement. Tradition does not cease in pushing us forward."

Seeing in the sense of semiotics, the relation between culture and designing is that on the one hand, since culture is composed of human expressing actions that are

made possible by the use symbols, it requires creating and specific symbols to express meaning. On the other hand, designing is exactly the concrete actions of using symbols for realizing ideals. Designing is a process in which the designer's internal picture of the world is *externalized* into perceptible concrete forms. In other words, designing is a concrete form of cultural existence, which will be constantly renewed and updated by contemporary development in ideas and technologies. The essence and spirit of Chu visual arts are a result of precipitation history that is unique to Chu people. Therefore any innovating attempt in urban visual design that pay respect to Chu culture inevitably involves not only reviving and inherit the tradition, but also adopting it to fit the contemporary urban space. It is by no means a simple copying, parody or emulation to the original art form; rather, it is the recreation of traditional form.

More specifically, such recreation requires the modification, extraction and adoption of traditional designing elements, either making them compatible with esthetic preference of modern people. Alternatively, in order to express contemporary ideas and vernacular characteristics, one can also try to use tradition design methodologies and expressions directly onto modern designs. More generally, to create new urban visual forms, designers have to transcend from superficial aspects of traditional esthetics and explore deeper into the realm of ideas and thoughts underneath. Only when one arrives at a thorough understanding of the essence of traditional arts and is at the same time kept open to plural varieties of designing ideas, then he or she is able to find the connecting point between the tradition and the modern. It follows that by exploring and discovering vernacular cultural codes representative of cities in Hubei province and by find suitable urban culture images and the ways for cities to express themselves, the designers are able to give these cities their contemporary significance.

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