

CRAFT TRANSLATION AND MARKET VERIFICATION OF THE CHU PHOENIX IN ART TOY*

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Abstract

The Chu Phoenix is one of the most recognizable spiritual symbols of Chu culture. Its imagery embodies the Chu people's cultural imagination of the phoenix, life, ascension, guardianship, and rebirth. This paper takes the Chu Phoenix art toy prototype as the research object and discusses how a traditional Chu cultural image can be transformed into contemporary character design, 3D-printed prototyping, lacquer-based craft expression, packaging communication, exhibition presentation, and audience evaluation.

Based on the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum as the cultural prototype, the study extracts the symbolic structure of "phoenix above the tiger" and translates it into a contemporary art toy form composed of a female figure, a phoenix-inspired cloak, and a crouching tiger base. In response to the tension between rapid digital prototyping and the material authenticity of traditional lacquer craft, three-view drawings, digital modeling, model disassembly, STL export, 3D printing, and lacquer finishing were used to complete and verify the physical prototype. Traditional lacquer techniques were applied to strengthen material expression and cultural memory. The exhibition-based questionnaire evaluation

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(N = 168) further indicated strong youth-oriented communication potential. The findings suggest that the Chu Phoenix Series offers an operational model for translating Chu heritage into youth-oriented cultural products through cultural structure translation, digital prototyping, lacquer-based surface language, and art toy communication mechanisms.

Keywords: Chu Phoenix, art toy design, 3D printing, lacquer craft, young market

Introduction

Chu culture is an important representative of ancient regional culture in southern China. Its artistic language is often described as romantic, mysterious, dynamic, and highly decorative. Within this cultural system, the phoenix is not simply an ornamental pattern, but a core symbolic image related to ancestor worship, sun worship, shamanic belief, and the idea of spiritual ascension. Phoenix imagery repeatedly appears in Chu lacquerware, silk textiles, bronzeware, ritual objects, and decorative motifs, forming a distinctive visual tradition (Liu & Su, 2022).

Among the many Chu artifacts, the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum is one of the most significant cultural prototypes. The object is composed of a tiger base, phoenix birds, and a suspended drum. Its vertical structure can be understood as a symbolic order in which the tiger represents earthly strength, guardianship, and stability, while the phoenix represents spiritual elevation, renewal, and transcendence. This structure is therefore not only a visual arrangement, but also a cultural metaphor of the relationship between force and spirit, ground and sky, material support, and ritual imagination (Luo & Song, 2024).

In contemporary cultural and creative industries, the transformation of traditional culture should not remain at the level of copying decorative patterns or miniaturizing museum artifacts. Especially for young consumers aged between 18 and 35, cultural products need stronger visual recognition, emotional value,

social shareability, and collectability. Art toys have developed rapidly in recent years as a cultural consumption form combining character design, limited editions, collectible mechanisms, and emotional projection. They provide a suitable medium for translating traditional cultural symbols into contemporary visual forms (China Cultural Relics Exchange Center, 2023; Xu & Lei, 2025).

Based on this context, this paper focuses on the Chu Phoenix Series and examines its design process from cultural prototype to art toy character. It further discusses the role of 3D modeling, 3D printing, lacquer finishing, packaging, blind-box character cards, exhibition presentation, and questionnaire evaluation. Compared with ordinary cultural souvenirs, the Chu Phoenix Series is significant because it does not directly reproduce the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum. Instead, it extracts the symbolic logic of the artifact and uses contemporary character design and traditional craft surfaces to make Chu culture more approachable, collectible, and communicable for young audiences (Koljonen et al., 2019).

Accordingly, this study asks three related questions: how can the symbolic structure of the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum be translated into a recognizable art toy character; how can 3D-printed prototyping and lacquer finishing be integrated without weakening cultural authenticity; and which factors most influence young audiences' perception of cultural value, craft value, and market acceptance.

Objectives

1. To synthesize the structural and aesthetic rules of the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum and the Chu Phoenix motif, especially the symbolic relationships among phoenix worship, tiger guardianship, black-red lacquer aesthetics, and spiritual ascension.

2. To establish a transferable digital-craft integration pathway for translating the Chu Phoenix motif into contemporary art toy design through

three-view drawing, 3D modeling, model disassembly, 3D printing, lacquer finishing, and series-based color variations.

3. To identify the main factors influencing cultural recognition, craft perception, brand communication, and youth-market acceptance of the Chu Phoenix Series through packaging, blind-box cards, exhibition presentation, and questionnaire feedback.

Literature Review

1. Chu Phoenix Symbol and the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum

Chu culture has long been recognized for its openness, regional imagination, shamanic belief, and highly developed craft traditions. Previous studies on Chu lacquerware and artifact design emphasize that Chu objects are not merely functional vessels, but symbolic media that connect ritual, mythology, material craft, and visual imagination. In this context, the phoenix has particular importance because it is related to ancestor worship, the cult of the sun and fire, and the Chu people's spiritual imagination of ascent and rebirth (Yang, 2023).

2. Art Toys, Character Design, and Youth-Oriented Cultural Products

Character design studies often emphasize silhouette recognition, proportion, personality, color system, and story integration. For art toys, these principles become even more important because the product must be quickly recognizable, emotionally engaging, collectible, and suitable for repeated visual communication. Art toys are not ordinary toys. They operate between design object, collectible item, cultural symbol, and lifestyle product (Sloan, 2015).

For young audiences, cultural products need more than historical information. They need characters, stories, visual identity, and emotional value. The art toy format allows traditional symbols to become more approachable through stylized bodies, clear silhouettes, multiple colorways, limited editions,

and social-media-friendly presentation. This makes art toys a useful medium for the contemporary communication of Chu culture (China Cultural Relics Exchange Center, 2023; Xu & Lei, 2025).

Taken together, these studies indicate that heritage-based art toy design should not be understood as a simple transfer of visual motifs. Its key challenge is to balance three tensions: cultural authenticity and pop-cultural consumption, digital efficiency and handcraft value, and symbolic recognition and market readability. The Chu Phoenix Series is positioned within this intersection by combining artifact structure, character design, 3D-printed prototyping, and lacquer-based surface language.

3. Lacquer Craft, Digital Prototyping, and Surface Language

Chu lacquerware is one of the most representative craft achievements of Chu culture. Its black-red palette, glossy surface, dynamic patterns, and sophisticated finishing techniques form a strong material memory. In contemporary design, lacquer craft can provide cultural depth that ordinary industrial coloring cannot easily achieve (Liu & Su, 2022).

At the same time, 3D modeling and 3D printing provide a modern method for quickly realizing complex character forms. Digital prototyping can produce the basic structure of the art toy, while lacquer finishing can transform the printed body into a craft-based cultural object. The integration of digital manufacturing and lacquer craft is therefore central to the Chu Phoenix Series.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This paper adopts a practice-based design research approach, combining literature research, artifact analysis, design practice, craft experimentation, exhibition observation, and questionnaire evaluation. Literature research was used to establish the theoretical basis for design translation. Relevant materials

on Chu culture, Chu lacquerware, phoenix motifs, the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum, art toy design, and youth-oriented cultural consumption were reviewed and summarized.

Artifact and image analysis was conducted with the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum as the primary object. Instead of aiming at archaeological reconstruction, the study extracted major cultural and visual elements from the artifact, including the tiger, phoenix, drum, black-red lacquer palette, upward posture, ritual structure, and guardian symbolism (Luo & Song, 2024).

The research process followed a sequential workflow: literature review and artifact analysis, extraction of symbolic design elements, three-view character drawing, digital modeling and part disassembly, 3D printing, lacquer surface experimentation, packaging and card communication design, public exhibition, and questionnaire-based evaluation.

2. Design Practice and Prototype Development

The design practice included the development of the Chu Phoenix character through three-view drawings, digital modeling, model disassembly, STL export, and 3D printing. The process clarified the front, side, and back views of the character, defined the relationship between the female figure, phoenix cloak, and tiger base, and ensured that the final model could be printed and assembled (Sloan, 2015).

Craft experimentation was carried out on the 3D-printed body. The printed components were sanded, coated, dried, polished, decorated, and assembled. Black-red lacquer, gold leaf, eggshell inlay, and Xi-pi lacquer effects were applied to test how traditional lacquer surface language could be adapted to a contemporary art toy prototype.

For technical replication, the model was divided into the figure, phoenix-inspired cloak, and tiger base before STL export and dimensional checking. The final printed prototype was set at 33 cm in height. Before lacquering, the 3D-

printed surface was treated with 400-grit sandpaper to reduce visible layer lines while retaining slight micro-roughness for lacquer adhesion. Filtered raw lacquer was applied through repeated brushing, natural drying, light sanding, and polishing; the basic lacquer surface was built through at least five coating cycles, while the Xi-pi version required approximately twenty alternating lacquer layers before controlled polishing revealed the underlying pattern.

3. Exhibition and Questionnaire Evaluation

The evaluation stage connected the prototype with public exhibition and questionnaire feedback. The questionnaire examined audience familiarity with Chu culture and traditional handicrafts, recognition of Chu cultural features, perception of lacquer craft texture, evaluation of the CHUVOY Lab brand strategy, willingness to share the product on social media, and acceptable price range. This method allowed the design outcome to be evaluated in relation to both cultural communication and youth-market response.

For the exhibition-based survey, 201 questionnaires were collected through on-site QR-code scanning during public presentations in Wuhan. After excluding responses outside the target young-market age range, 168 valid questionnaires from respondents aged 20-35 were retained. The questionnaire used multiple-choice questions, 4-point agreement or effectiveness scales, a 5-level craft-preference scale, price-range selection, and open-ended comments. The data were analyzed mainly through descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequency distributions.

Results

1. Cultural Prototype and Character Translation of the Chu Phoenix Series

The core source of the Chu Phoenix Series is the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum. The artifact is composed of a lower tiger base, upper phoenix forms, and

a suspended drum. The tiger represents earthbound strength, protection, and stability, while the phoenix suggests spiritual elevation, transformation, and renewal. The drum is connected with ritual, music, and ceremonial space. In the Chu Phoenix Series, these elements are not copied mechanically. They are translated into a composite structure of female figure, phoenix-inspired cloak, and crouching tiger base.

The female figure is placed at the visual center of the design. Her upright posture and crossed arms convey confidence, calmness, and mystery, echoing the elegance and transcendence of the phoenix. The phoenix cloak is transformed from the imagery of bird wings and the ritual drum. Instead of existing as a separate object, it becomes part of the character's body and creates a visual effect of human-phoenix integration. The crouching tiger base preserves the supporting function of the original artifact. Its low posture, open mouth, and curling tail strengthen the sense of guardianship and power.

This design process represents a shift from artifact structure to character structure. What the Chu Phoenix Series preserves is not the detailed appearance of the artifact, but the symbolic logic of "tiger supporting phoenix" and "earthly force carrying spiritual ascension." Through this transformation, the Chu Phoenix is no longer only a totemic image within an ancient ritual object. It becomes a contemporary art toy character with posture, personality, and emotional projection.

2. 3D-Printed Lacquer Prototype of the Chu Phoenix Series Development

The prototype development of the Chu Phoenix Series began with three-view drawings. The front, side, and back views clarified the proportions, posture, and structural relationship of the character. During digital modeling, the human body, phoenix cloak, and tiger base were gradually integrated. The human figure adopted a stable art toy proportion, while the phoenix cloak expanded outward

to create a wing-like silhouette. The tiger base was modeled as a low sculptural form that provides both cultural meaning and physical stability (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Model disassembly for 3D printing.

(Source: Designed by the researcher)

After the unified model was completed, the design entered the stage of model disassembly. The figure, cloak, and tiger base were separated into printable parts. This disassembly was not only a technical step, but also a design strategy. It reduced printing risk, made surface sanding and lacquer application easier, and allowed the final object to be assembled more accurately. The modular joints followed a logic similar to mortise-and-tenon connection, which also echoed the hidden structural logic of traditional objects.

The separated parts were exported as STL files and checked for scale, alignment, volume accuracy, and joint position. After printing, the physical components clearly showed the relationship between the female figure, phoenix cloak, and tiger base. The final prototype was set at a height of 33 cm. This size was large enough for hand sanding, lacquer coating, polishing, and decorative application, while still remaining suitable as an art toy prototype (Figure 2).

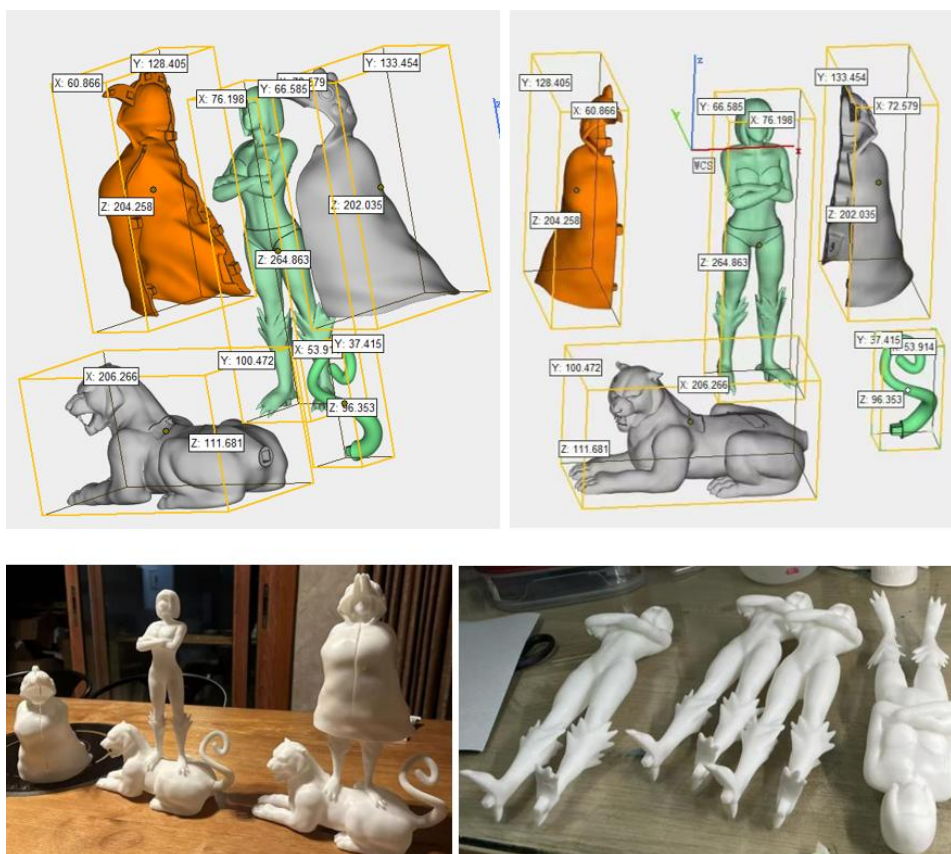


Figure 2 STL export and 3D-printed components of the Chu Phoenix Series.

(Source: Designed by the researcher)

After 3D printing, the Chu Phoenix Series entered the lacquer finishing stage. This stage is the most important part of the integration between traditional

craft and modern technology. Although 3D printing can efficiently produce complex forms, the surface of printed resin usually shows layer lines and an industrial material feeling. If the object is only spray-painted, it may remain at the level of a normal model. Therefore, this study uses lacquer craft as a surface language to transform the 3D-printed body into a cultural medium related to Chu lacquer aesthetics.

The first step was surface conditioning. The printed parts were sanded to remove obvious layer lines and support marks. However, the surface was not polished into a perfect mirror finish at this stage. A slight micro-roughness was intentionally retained to improve the adhesion of the lacquer layer. After surface conditioning, several rounds of thin coating, natural drying, light sanding, and polishing were applied to build a stable lacquer base.

Chu Phoenix I and Chu Phoenix II mainly use black-red lacquer surfaces and simplified phoenix patterns. Chu Phoenix I adopts black as the dominant tone, with gold edging and red patterns, creating a solemn, mysterious, and restrained character. Chu Phoenix II reverses the relationship by using red as the main tone and black patterns rising upward, creating a warmer, stronger, and more ceremonial atmosphere. The two versions form different emotional expressions through color reversal while maintaining one unified character structure.

Chu Phoenix III emphasizes gold-leaf and gold-powder effects. Vermilion and orange-red tones dominate the costume, while flame-shaped gold motifs rise across the surface. Gold increases visual brightness and reinforces the associations of flame, ascension, and sacredness. Chu Phoenix IV draws from eggshell inlay and mother-of-pearl-like effects. The white garment and crack-like eggshell texture create a surface between purity, antiquity, and hand-made trace. Chu Phoenix V focuses on the Xi-pi lacquer effect. Through repeated layering and controlled polishing, red, black, and yellow layers appear as interwoven veins.

This effect gives the art toy a strong sense of depth, time, and material complexity (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Eggshell Fragments Embedded into a Semi-Dry Lacquer Layer to Form the Initial Inlay Pattern. (Source: Designed by the researcher)

Together, the five Chu Phoenix prototypes create diverse surface languages within one unified form. Chu Phoenix I and II emphasize black-red graphic contrast, Chu Phoenix III emphasizes gilded ceremonial power, Chu Phoenix IV emphasizes eggshell texture, and Chu Phoenix V emphasizes layered Xi-pi lacquer. This approach is close to the art toy logic of "one form with multiple colorways," but the differences are produced through real craft processes rather than printed decoration alone (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Revealing the Xi-pi Pattern by Polishing to Expose the Underlying Lacquer Layers (Source: Designed by the researcher)

3. The Brand System of CHUVOY Lab in Exhibition Presentation and Questionnaire Evaluation

After the physical prototypes were completed, the Chu Phoenix Series was further developed within the brand system of CHUVOY Lab. In this project, packaging is not only a protective container. It is a communication medium that connects the character, the brand, and the consumer. Through packaging and blind-box character cards, the Chu Phoenix Series can move from an individual prototype toward a product system with cultural explanation, collectability, and social communication potential (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Packaging for the Chu Phoenix Series.

(Source: Designed by the researcher)

CHUVOY Lab is positioned as an experimental platform for Chu culture, contemporary art toy character design, and craft-based prototype verification. It is not intended to reproduce ancient culture directly. Rather, it functions as a laboratory for translating cultural symbols into character-based products and testing their cultural and market value. The Chu Phoenix packaging uses a restrained visual tone so that the character and lacquer surface become the focus. Compared with the Zhurong Series, which emphasizes flame, power, and action, the Chu Phoenix Series emphasizes elegance, ascension, mystery, and craft texture (Yang, 2023).

The blind-box character card serves as a secondary communication medium. It can include the character name, series number, cultural source, craft explanation, and QR code. For example, the card of Chu Phoenix III can explain the relationship between gilding and sacred flame, Chu Phoenix IV can introduce

eggshell inlay and crack texture, and Chu Phoenix V can explain the process of layered Xi-pi lacquer. In this way, the character card becomes a lightweight educational and collectible medium.

The blind-box mechanism also supports series-based consumption and social communication. The Chu Phoenix Series adopts a single-form, multiple-surface strategy. All versions share the same cultural prototype, but each version has a different lacquer expression. This strategy keeps brand recognition consistent while allowing collectors to value the uniqueness of each surface treatment.

To verify the communicative effect of the Chu Phoenix Series, the prototypes were presented in public exhibitions and evaluated through questionnaires. Exhibition presentation allows the prototypes to move from the studio into real public space. Visitors can observe, photograph, discuss, and respond to the designs immediately. Compared with expert evaluation alone, public exhibitions provide a more realistic setting for understanding how young audiences encounter cultural products and art toys.

One important exhibition context was the Handicraft Weekend Market at Xiananfang Historic Block in Wuhan. This site combines historical urban memory with everyday cultural consumption. Compared with a controlled gallery environment, the market setting is closer to the real context in which young consumers encounter creative products. The display included prototypes, packaging samples, posters, and related craft objects. The visual comparison between traditional lacquerware and the Chu Phoenix art toy helped visitors understand the relationship between heritage craft and contemporary character design.

The questionnaire was designed around four dimensions. The first dimension collected basic information, including age, familiarity with Chu culture, familiarity with traditional Chinese handicrafts, and art toy purchasing experience. The second dimension examined Chu cultural identity, asking visitors which

cultural features they could identify from the prototypes and which series most strongly conveyed Chu cultural identity. The third dimension focused on traditional craft and lacquer perception, asking whether craft texture was a visual highlight and whether lacquer finishing and hand-made details increased product value. The fourth dimension evaluated brand strategy and young-market response, including whether CHUVOY Lab was clearly perceived as a Chu-culture-based craft brand, whether craft-art toy integration was effective for engaging young audiences, whether visitors were willing to share the products on social media, and what price range they considered reasonable.

Table 1 Key exhibition-based questionnaire indicators supporting the market verification of CHUVOY Lab and the Chu Phoenix Series

Indicator	Key result (N = 168)
Chu cultural cue recognition	Lacquerware 67.16%, phoenix 65.67%, and black-red colors 62.69% were the most recognizable features.
Cultural translation appropriateness	98.50% agreed or strongly agreed that the prototypes translated Chu culture accurately and appropriately.
Craft value and authenticity	95.52% agreed or strongly agreed that lacquer finishing and hand-crafted details increased product value; more than 80% preferred genuine handcraft techniques.
Brand communication	77.61% perceived CHUVOY Lab as relatively clear or very clear; 98.51% considered it effective for making Chu culture easier for young audiences to understand.
Social sharing and price acceptance	89.55% were willing to share the brand on social media; acceptable price concentrated at 100-350 RMB (71.64%).

These data suggest that the market verification should be understood primarily through exhibition-based audience response. The preliminary survey mainly informed the earlier design direction, while the exhibition questionnaire provided stronger evidence for cultural recognition, craft value, brand communication, social sharing, and price acceptance.

The exhibition and questionnaire were not simple display records. They formed an important part of design verification. They helped evaluate whether the Chu Phoenix Series could be recognized as a Chu cultural product, whether

genuine lacquer craft could enhance the perceived value of an art toy, whether packaging and blind-box cards could strengthen brand communication, and whether the character had potential to enter the young market. Previous comparative evaluation also indicated that the Chu Phoenix Series performed strongly in cultural authenticity, emotional resonance, creativity and innovation, and market potential, even though its production structure was more complex than some other series. This suggests that the Chu Phoenix Series is suitable as a key direction for deeper development.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the translation of Chu cultural symbols into art toys requires more than decorative application. Compared with ordinary cultural souvenirs that often copy motifs onto products, the Chu Phoenix Series begins with the cultural structure of the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum. This allows the design to preserve deeper symbolic meaning while still becoming visually contemporary.

The study also shows that 3D printing and lacquer craft have complementary roles. Digital modeling and 3D printing make complex prototype development more efficient and controllable. Lacquer craft, however, gives the object cultural depth, surface richness, and hand-made value. This combination solves a common problem in heritage-based product design: how to make traditional culture both technically feasible and materially meaningful in contemporary product form.

This result expands the literature review by showing that craft authenticity can coexist with art toy communication. The lacquer surface does not function only as decoration; it also becomes a cultural signal that offsets the industrial feeling of 3D-printed resin. However, the study also reveals a tension between the slow, labor-intensive nature of lacquer craft and the scalability expected in

the contemporary art toy market. Therefore, the Chu Phoenix Series is more suitable for a tiered production strategy, combining limited handmade editions with more affordable versions that retain key craft-like visual effects.

In terms of communication, packaging, blind-box cards, and exhibition display helped the Chu Phoenix Series move beyond a single object. They transformed the prototype into a brand-based cultural product system. This is especially important for young consumers, who often understand cultural products through visual identity, stories, collecting behavior, and social-media sharing. The Chu Phoenix Series therefore demonstrates that cultural authenticity and market-oriented design do not have to be contradictory. They can support each other when cultural structure, character design, craft material, and communication strategy are considered together.

The evaluation also has limitations. Since the questionnaire was conducted in Wuhan, respondents may have had stronger regional familiarity with Chu culture than consumers in other cities or international markets. Therefore, the proposed design pathway should be understood as an initial practice-based verification model rather than a fully generalizable market conclusion.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the contemporary transformation of Chu cultural symbols should move beyond surface decoration and instead begin from structural translation. By extracting the symbolic logic of "phoenix above the tiger" from the Tiger-Base Bird-Stand Drum and converting it into an art toy character, the Chu Phoenix Series provides a design method that connects cultural prototype, character form, craft material, and audience perception.

The main contribution of the research lies in proposing a practice-based pathway that links cultural heritage preservation, digital prototyping, lacquer craft

intervention, and youth-oriented communication. The exhibition-based questionnaire supports the feasibility of this pathway by showing positive responses to cultural recognizability, craft value, brand readability, social-media sharing, and price acceptance.

Therefore, the Chu Phoenix Series can be understood not only as a single prototype, but also as a transferable model for revitalizing regional craft traditions through contemporary consumer technologies and character-based cultural products.

Recommendation

First, future research should expand the user study beyond Wuhan by comparing audiences from different cities, cultural backgrounds, and levels of art toy consumption experience. Cross-cultural testing could also examine whether Chu cultural symbols are readable to international audiences.

Second, future industrial application should explore a hybrid production framework. Limited handmade lacquer editions can preserve craft authenticity and collectible value, while scalable editions can use controlled surface effects or assisted finishing processes to maintain visual continuity at a lower cost.

Third, the Chu cultural universe can be extended through digital animation, short videos, augmented reality, online communities, museum-store products, and heritage education workshops. These channels may help connect physical art toys with virtual heritage experiences and broader public communication.

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