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# MATERIAL SEMIOTICS PERSPECTIVE ON CHU LACQUERWARE: ANALYSIS OF IMPLICIT SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE IN FUTURE DESIGN SCENARIOS

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## Abstract:

The expression form of symbols carries the significance and profound connotations of culture. As the core material carrier of Chu culture, Chu lacquerware has formed a rich symbol system and aesthetic craftsmanship in the unique cultural ecosystem of the Chu region. This article takes typical Chu lacquerware as the research object. From the perspective of material semiotics and in combination with the theory of cultural ecology, it first sorts out the origin, definition and classification of the body craftsmanship of Chu lacquerware, compares its differences and characteristics with those of lacquerware in the Ba-Shu and Central Plains regions, and reveals the craftsmanship advantages and regional cultural attributes of Chu lacquerware during the Warring States Period. Secondly, deeply deconstruct the symbolic language system of Chu lacquerware, including the realistic, imaginative and "image-based" expressions at the form level, the features, design logic and classification at the pattern level, as well as the symbolic meanings of the colours mainly in red and black. Finally, on this basis, the application of Chu lacquerware cultural language in future design fields such as urban trash cans, furniture design, clothing design, and cultural and creative design is mainly discussed. The research aims to explain the semantics, categories and media of Chu's symbolic language, reveal the design concepts and aesthetic roots of Chu culture's symbolic forms, and provide innovative ideas and practical paths from the perspective of Chu culture for contemporary and future design.

**Keywords:**

Material Semiotics; Chu Lacquerware; Symbolic Language; Future Design

## Introduction

Phenomenological scholarship emphasizes the materiality of symbols. Symbols are understood through their tangible characteristics and immediate visual perception. They indicate patterns of cognition and behaviour and operate as perceptible signals or attributes within lived experience (Ho, 2019).

By contrast, logic-psychological approaches conceptualize symbols as abstract constructs. Physical properties are considered secondary. The primary concern lies in how meaning and connotation shape cognition and self-understanding (Schäfer, 2021).

Between these positions, a dualistic conception of symbols has become widely accepted. Linguistic scholars such as Belyayev and Gorlouvin argue that symbols, as carriers of social information, require material existence to be perceived and recognized (Blakley, 2018). From this view, symbols must satisfy three conditions. They must exist materially to enable transmission. They must signify meanings distinct from their physical form. They must convey socially shared information rather than individual interpretation. Only socially grounded meanings grant symbols binding force and representational power.

Applied to Chu lacquerware, this framework reveals a coherent symbolic system. Form, ornamentation, and colour operate as a visual language that transmits historical memory and cultural values of a specific era (Zhao, 2021). Chu cultural symbols reflect how the Chu people of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods perceived nature and the spiritual realm. These symbols form an integrated image system shaped through artistic abstraction. They condense both material practices and spiritual beliefs. The design of Chu lacquerware unites artifact production with regional customs, cultural psychology, and belief structures. Visual harmony among form, ornamentation, and colour is used to activate intuitive and imaginative perception (Di Toro, 2016). Dragons and phoenixes held central symbolic importance in Chu culture. The phoenix motif appears extensively in lacquerware decoration. These images depict everyday life and shamanic ritual practices. As symbolic expressions, they encode reflections on nature and social order. They represent the artistic transformation of materials derived from the natural and social environment into diverse animal and plant forms (Han, 2025).

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Chu lacquerware achieved both large-scale production and formal innovation. Its distinctive aesthetic reflects a mature symbolic system. Semiotics offers an effective analytical framework for interpreting such material culture. Through symbolic analysis, traditional customs and modes of spiritual thought can be reconstructed. Symbolic forms function as visible markers of regional, ethnic, and national identity, enabling cultural differentiation (Fan, Liu, Meng, & Wu, 2024).

Within the cultural landscape of the Hubei region, Chu symbols articulate historical development and collective ways of life. This study adopts a material semiotics perspective, informed by social science and anthropology. Artistic theory and design strategies are employed to uncover latent symbolic meanings. Through comparative analysis of Chu

lacquerware forms and patterns, the study examines production processes in relation to the Chu ecological environment. This integrated approach clarifies the structural logic, symbolic mechanisms, and cultural significance embedded in Chu lacquerware manufacturing.

### Overview of Chu Lacquerware

During the Warring States period, lacquerware was produced in large quantities and displayed exceptional craftsmanship. Its distribution was extensive, particularly in Chu tombs. The volume of lacquerware unearthed from these tombs far exceeds that of earlier periods, underscoring its central role in Chu cultural life.

Beyond quantity, Chu lacquerware embodies a distinct symbolic language in its design. This language reflects the artistic ethos shaped by the unique cultural ecosystem of the Chu region. Through form, ornamentation, and material treatment, lacquerware narrates the Chu people's relationship with their environment, values, and daily practices. It thus functions as a visual and material expression of Chu cultural identity.

For this reason, lacquerware from Chu tombs holds scholarly significance. Large-scale excavations conducted over the past century have yielded substantial material evidence, providing invaluable resources for Chu studies. These discoveries have greatly advanced the field and attracted sustained academic attention. The unearthed lacquerware offers not only rich historical data but also reveals the distinctive artistic, design, and symbolic characteristics of Chu culture (Ma, 2024).

### Origin and Definition of Chu Lacquerware

The term *lacquerware* refers to utilitarian objects, artworks, and handicrafts coated with lacquer. Early textual references to lacquerware appear in *Han Feizi · Ten Faults*, which recounts that during the succession from Yao to Shun, lacquered wooden vessels were produced for ritual and daily use. Trees were cut, shaped, polished, and decorated with lacquer and ink before being presented for consumption. Although this account lacks direct archaeological corroboration, it indicates the long historical lineage of lacquerware production in China.

By the Warring States and Han dynasties, Chinese society had entered an early feudal stage. Economic development and improvements in production tools stimulated advances in craftsmanship. The widespread adoption of iron tools played a significant role in enhancing productivity and contributed to the peak of lacquerware manufacture and use during this period (Zheng, Guo, & Wang, 2022). The base material, commonly referred to as the *body*, is fundamental to lacquerware production. As shown in Table 1, lacquerware can be classified according to body materials, including lacquer-removing bodies, wooden bodies, ceramic bodies, and metal bodies. With technological progress, the range of body materials expanded, resulting in increased diversity in lacquerware forms and techniques.

**Table 1: Classification of Lacquerware Crafts Based on Body Materials**

Num	type	describe
1	<b>Emerge</b>	<p>Historically known as <i>Jiacang</i>, this technique represents the highest level of craftsmanship in traditional Chinese lacquerware production. The <i>Jiacang</i> method fully exploits the drying and hardening properties of lacquer. It combines stripping techniques with soft textile substrates, allowing liquid lacquer to bond with fabric layers and form a bodiless structure that is lightweight, strong, and highly adaptable in shape.</p> <p>The study first identifies the functional advantages of bodiless lacquerware. It is significantly lighter than ceramic, metal, bamboo, and wood, which enhances usability. Although slightly heavier than paper-based materials, it offers far greater structural strength. It then examines the material stability of bodiless lacquerware. Unlike wooden-bodied lacquerware, which is prone to deformation and cracking due to climatic and temperature variations, bodiless lacquerware maintains its form over time. Finally, the study considers design flexibility and scalability. The <i>Jiacang</i> technique allows for unrestricted form-making, making it particularly suitable for abstract and complex shapes compared to bamboo or wooden bases. In addition, bodiless lacquerware can be produced in both small and large formats, with larger forms especially effective in demonstrating the technical and aesthetic superiority of the <i>Jiacang</i> method.</p>
2	<b>Wooden tire</b>	<p>Wooden body lacquerware can be made of materials with good wood grain and can be wiped through hundreds of coats of transparent or large paint. Not only are the wood grains clearly visible, but there is also a layer of glossy paint on the objects, which can integrate the simplicity of the wood with the purity of the paint. This technique is widely used in furniture and utensils.</p>
3	<b>Rope tire</b>	<p>The rope tire technology gives people natural and rustic beauty. Using rope as the material and weaving into a tool, the thickness of the rope determines the thickness of the rope tire. According to the texture of the rope, the decorative texture of the object can be made, and the carcass and decoration form a whole.</p>
4	<b>Paper base</b>	<p>Paper based lacquer ware has thin and lightweight walls, making it suitable for small and thin objects. This process can be easily mastered in terms of tire shape and is more suitable for complex shapes in terms of shape. Due to the thin paint wall, it can be handled at complex turning points.</p>
5	<b>Pottery embryo</b>	<p>The pottery mold is then polished and painted. Ceramic body lacquerware is processed on the basis of pottery, and making this type of lacquerware is relatively fast. It can be directly polished and painted on the pottery body.</p>

The lacquerware unearthed from the Warring States period far surpasses earlier periods in quantity, variety, craftsmanship, and geographic distribution. Chu tombs, particularly those located in present-day Hubei Province, yield the most abundant examples. Since the 1950s, more than 3,000 Chu tombs have been excavated, mainly across Hunan, Hubei, Henan, and Anhui provinces. Among these sites, the Hubei tombs are especially notable for their rich lacquerware assemblages. Lacquerware burial objects appear in tombs of all scales, from elite to modest burials. During the Spring and Autumn period, lacquerware was not yet widely used, and burial goods primarily consisted of weapons and daily utensils. By the Warring States period, however, lacquerware had become deeply integrated into social life. Its functions expanded to include musical instruments, handicrafts, and writing implements, encompassing nearly eighty distinct types (Di Toro, 2016). The Chu state existed for over eight centuries, from the early Western Zhou period until its annexation by the Qin at the end of the Warring States period. Its territory expanded dramatically, from a modest domain to a vast and powerful state.

Throughout this process, Chu engaged in frequent warfare and extensive cultural exchange. These interactions facilitated the wide dissemination and lasting influence of Chu culture across the region (Ho, 2019). This study focuses on lacquerware produced within the Chu cultural sphere, particularly objects originating from the core Chu state and its surrounding regions. These artifacts functioned not only as utilitarian items but also as material evidence of Chu achievements in artistic expression and technological innovation.

***Characteristics of Chu State Lacquerware Different from Other Lacquerware***

Based on production centres and stylistic features, three major lacquerware traditions can be identified: the Chu state, the Ba-Shu region, and the Central Plains. The purpose of this comparison is not merely descriptive, but analytical. By examining differences in production scale, material treatment, decorative logic, and pattern organisation, the comparison aims to identify how regional ecological conditions, cultural values, and technological choices shaped distinct lacquerware craftsmanship traditions. Table 2 summarises these regional distinctions and highlights the specific characteristics that differentiate Chu lacquerware from neighbouring traditions.

**Table 2: Characteristics of the Three Major Lacquerware Regions**

Region	Overview of excavation	Process feature
State of Chu	The largest quantity of lacquerware has been unearthed, including more than 250 pieces from Chu tombs in Xinyang, 5,012 pieces from the Tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, and 854 pieces from Yutai Mountain in Jiangling. Categories are comprehensive, covering daily utensils, handicrafts, musical instruments, and weapons.	Limited use of inlay. Typical burial forms include one coffin and one tomb beast. Decoration is highly flexible, with frequent variation in patterns and forms. Innovative motifs such as vortex patterns and “zhi”-character patterns appear, displaying a dynamic visual language closer to modern design principles.
Bashu	Second in quantity. Major finds include over 170 pieces from Qingchuan County Warring States tombs and 18 pieces from	Strongly influenced by Chu lacquerware. Patterns show rich variation, but overall

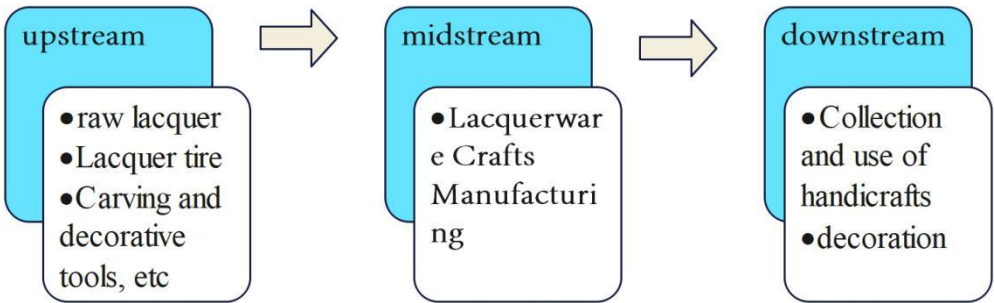


	Yingjing Zengjiagou. Categories are fewer and largely limited to household utensils.	compositions are more orderly. Ear cups are typically round (in contrast to Chu square forms), and plate interiors often feature distinctive Ba-Shu symbols.
Central plains	The smallest quantity of lacquerware. Due to tomb structure and burial conditions, most finds are fragmentary. Notable examples include fragments from Langjiazhuang Tomb No. 1 in Linzi and small numbers from Jinque Mountain in Linyi, Shanxi, and Hebei.	Inlay techniques are highly developed, including bone inlay, gold foil decoration, and clam-shell inlay. Decoration appears heavier and more restrained. Spring and Autumn period designs often imitate bronze, while Eastern Zhou examples adopt geometric patterns with relatively rigid composition. dull.

Based on the data presented in Table 2, several observations can be drawn. During the Warring States period, Chu lacquerware clearly surpassed other regions, such as Sichuan and Henan, in both production volume and craftsmanship diversity. The development of lacquerware across the three major production regions was closely shaped by local geographical conditions. Each region thus formed a distinctive lacquerware tradition. In contrast, lacquerware remains relatively scarce in northern regions, which limited the emergence of a large-scale lacquer culture. This scarcity may reflect either incomplete archaeological discovery or a comparatively underdeveloped lacquer industry in those areas.

### Symbolic Language Analysis

From a production perspective, lacquerware manufacture comprises three interconnected stages. The upstream stage includes the preparation of raw lacquer, base materials, carving, and lacquering tools. The midstream stage involves the fabrication of lacquerware objects. The downstream stage encompasses collection, use, and decorative application. Figure 1 presents a schematic overview of the lacquerware production process.



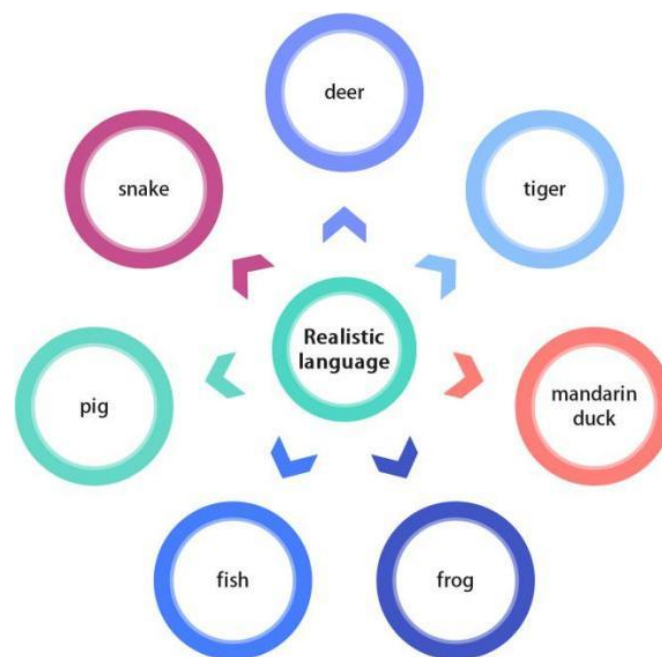
**Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of the Lacquerware Craft Production Process**

### ***Symbolic Language of Chu Lacquerware***

Chu lacquerware embodies a rich symbolic system, particularly in wooden lacquerware featuring animal and plant motifs. These works initially inherited and adapted techniques from bronze and jade craftsmanship. In early phases, the range of depicted animals was limited, and forms remained relatively simple due to technical constraints. Over time, especially during the late Warring States period, animal-themed lacquerware became increasingly diverse. Carved lines grew more fluid and refined, resulting in a more elegant and expressive visual language.

### ***Realistic Language***

Many Chu lacquerware motifs are derived directly from the natural world, including deer, tigers, mandarin ducks, frogs, snakes, pigs, fish, turtles, and dogs. These motifs are rendered using realistic techniques that emphasize vitality and lifelikeness. A representative example is the lacquered wooden deer unearthed from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng. The figure displays a poised yet dynamic posture, with the head raised as if gazing into the distance. Flowing lines extend from the neck and chest through the shoulders to the hindquarters, creating a balanced and coherent composition. The result is a vivid and naturalistic form, exemplifying the refined realism characteristic of Chu lacquerware.



**Figure 2: Natural Biological Objects Selected for the Shape of Chu Lacquerware**

### ***Imaginary Language***

The principle of *Shi Qi Shang Xiang* (valuing image-based imitation in making) in Chu lacquerware extends beyond realism and incorporates imaginative construction. Mythical creatures and legendary birds, particularly the phoenix, appear frequently in lacquerware forms. These images are often created by selecting and abstracting elements from real or imagined animals, then recombining them through deformation. This process produces forms rich in mystery and metaphor. The phoenix, like the dragon, is a composite mythical creature derived from multiple natural species. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* describes the phoenix as a divine bird composed of attributes from various animals, unified by five complete colours. Within the Chu

cultural context of fire worship and phoenix reverence, lacquerware design absorbed local myths and beliefs. Through abstraction and transformation, the phoenix became a central symbolic motif in both form and decoration. Its prominence in Chu lacquerware reflects the deep cultural significance attributed to the phoenix by the Chu people.

### ***'Shang Xiang' Language***

Chu lacquerware exemplifies *Shi Qi Shang Xiang* through its emphasis on phoenix imagery in structural design. Works such as *Tiger Seat with Flying Phoenix* and *Tiger Seat with Phoenix Supporting Drum* illustrate this principle. A representative example is the lacquered wooden carved screen from Wāngshān Tomb No. 1, dating to the Warring States period. This object combines round carving, relief, openwork carving, and painting to depict fifty-five animals, including pythons, snakes, frogs, deer, phoenixes, and sparrows. The four phoenixes, rendered at the largest scale, occupy the central position. Two spread their wings while gripping a struggling snake, establishing a clear visual hierarchy and dramatic tension.

While many Chu lacquerware animal forms employ realistic depiction, abstract thinking is also prominent. The lacquer ear cup provides a typical example. An ear cup excavated from Jiangling Tianxing Guan Tomb No. 1 abstracts the form of bird wings in its two handles, transforming natural imagery into a functional and visually dynamic object. Chu lacquerware also includes anthropomorphic forms, such as painted human figurines. These objects depict aspects of daily life and burial beliefs. Their carving styles range from simplified to highly detailed, reflecting varied expressions of Chu social life and worldview.

## **Chu Lacquerware's Symbolic Language of Ornamentation**

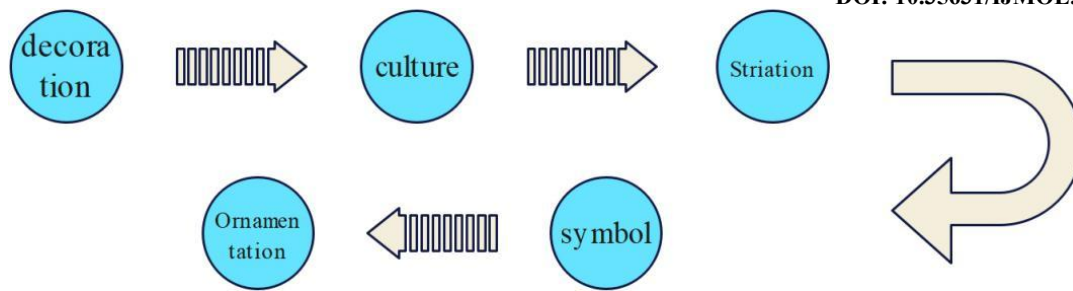
### ***Ornamental Characteristics***

Chu lacquerware ornamentation achieves a distinctive fusion of three-dimensional form and planar colour imagery. By integrating sculptural structure with painted decoration, it attains a high level of aesthetic unity. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Chu lacquerware patterns were influenced by bronze traditions but developed independently. Pattern types include animals, plants, natural landscapes, geometric forms, social activity scenes, and abstract human figures. Together, these categories reflect the broader principle of symbolic expression. Historically, phoenix motifs were rare in early Shang bronze ware but became dominant from the late Shang to the mid-Western Zhou period, marking the so-called “phoenix age.” In Chu lacquerware, phoenix imagery assumed an even more prominent role. It was widely applied across vessel types and gradually evolved into increasingly complex and refined patterns. This progression reflects the innovative and dynamic character of Chu ornamental design.

### ***Ornamental Design***

Although Chu lacquerware ornamentation draws from bronze and jade traditions, it departs from rigid stylization, such as cloud-and-thunder or animal-mask motifs. Instead, Chu artisans prioritized expressive freedom. Ornamentation was developed through deconstruction, dispersion, deformation, and recombination, resulting in a lively and unconventional visual language. This approach revitalized traditional decorative systems and generated a distinct artistic identity. Figure 3 illustrates the general process of Chu lacquerware ornamental design.





**Figure 3: Lacquerware Ornamental Design Process Method**

In Chu lacquerware, the evolution of decorative patterns is evident in the extension and transformation of dragon and phoenix elements, particularly their heads and tails. Artisans fragmented motifs derived from bronze ware and reassembled selected components using exaggeration and abstraction. This process generated new pattern units characterized by visual continuity and dynamic rhythm. For example, phoenix heads and wings were often isolated as independent motifs and combined with flowing cloud or vine patterns. The emphasis on curved lines enhanced symbolic expression and visual fluency. On an ear cup unearthed from Tomb 222 at Yutai Mountain, Jiangling, phoenix head and tail motifs are reduced to highly abstract symbolic forms. Cloud-and-thunder patterns and their variations also occupy a prominent position in Chu lacquerware. These motifs employ curling cloud forms arranged in dynamic compositions. Their smooth and elegant lines echo vessel contours, producing a unified and harmonious visual effect. Overall, Chu lacquerware patterns are concise, vibrant, and richly coloured. They express an energetic affirmation of life and function not merely as decoration, but as material manifestations of the belief in the unity of the divine and human within crafted objects.






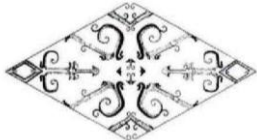
### ***Pattern Classification***

Through the extensive use of dragon and phoenix imagery, along with cloud-and-thunder motifs, Chu lacquerware conveys an upward and expansive worldview. The upward extension of deer horns, symbolically associated with dragons, and the unrestrained, soaring curves of decorative lines express freedom, transcendence, and openness. In this sense, Chu lacquerware materializes philosophical ideas associated with Daoist aesthetics, transforming abstract concepts into tangible form and evoking reflection on heaven, earth, and life.

Dragon and phoenix motifs also appear widely in Chu silk textiles, such as those excavated from Mashan Tomb No. 1 in Jiangling. In these compositions, intertwined dragons and phoenixes, their co-presence, and the visual dominance of the phoenix underscore the Chu people's pronounced reverence for the phoenix, often surpassing that accorded to the dragon. The repeated appearance of these motifs suggests that the phoenix functioned as a sacred guide, believed to lead and bless the soul's ascent to the heavens. This belief is echoed in Chu Ci, particularly in Da Zhao, which describes the phoenix soaring as the soul returns.

In Chu decorative practice, patterns are not limited to realistic depiction. Exaggeration, abstraction, deformation, and recombination are frequently employed. Design emphasis is placed on flowing curves and arcs, with lines that are clear, graceful, and rhythmical. This stylistic approach reflects the romantic and unrestrained spirit of Chu culture and expresses a profound engagement with the mysterious and unknown dimensions of existence.

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Phoenix pattern:	Centrally rotating phoenix pattern	Deformed phoenix pattern
		
Three headed phoenix	Long curled tail phoenix	Continuous deformation phoenix pattern on both sides
		

**Figure 4: Typical Lacquerware Patterns of Chu Culture**

Chu lacquerware demonstrates a distinctive aesthetic quality, particularly in lacquer paintings depicting human figures, deities, and flora–fauna motifs. These works rank among the most accomplished artworks of the Spring and Autumn period. They vividly represent daily life and ceremonial practices of the Chu people. A representative example is *Welcoming Guests on an Outing*, discovered in Chu Tomb No. 2 at Baoshan Hill, Jingmen, Hubei. The composition comprises five narrative scenes portraying outdoor activities of an elite Chu household, including reception rituals, encounters, and dynamic elements such as horses and dogs. Figures, attendants, carriages, attire, and gestures are rendered with precision. The refined use of colour, line, and spatial arrangement reflects advanced pictorial skill and provides valuable insight into Chu social customs and lifestyles.

Shamanic practice played a central role in Chu religious life, and related imagery frequently appears in lacquerware. Painted scenes depicting exorcism, flight, and spellcasting were unearthed from the Chutian Longtaiguan Chu Tomb in Xinyang, Henan. Similarly, a lacquer box with mandarin duck motifs from the Tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng includes scenes of shamanic dance, showing ritual performers and musicians in motion. These images underscore the Chu people’s deep engagement with shamanism and the centrality of sacrificial rituals in their worldview.

While Chu lacquerware inherited formal traditions from bronzeware, it also departed from the structural constraints of bronze ornamentation. The use of brushes and lacquer enabled greater expressive freedom. As a result, Chu lacquer decoration appears more dynamic and inventive. Within limited surfaces, artisans favoured elongated, flowing lines that integrate form and ornament into a unified visual system, producing a refined and highly expressive artistic language

**Colour Symbolic Language of Chu Lacquerware**

Colour functions as one of the most immediate elements of visual perception. Chu lacquerware is dominated by red and black, producing strong emotional impact. This chromatic contrast conveys the passionate and unrestrained character associated with Chu culture. Beyond this core palette, lacquerware patterns employ rich colour variations, reflecting a sophisticated pursuit of chromatic beauty. Archaeological evidence from the Qujialing culture reveals the early pairing of red and black in the Yangtze - Han River region. Classical texts further

document lacquer use. *Han Feizi · Ten Faults* records the application of lacquer to produce deep black surfaces, while early ritual vessels are described as black externally with red interior decoration. Commentaries in *Zhou Li · Jin Che* indicate that unspecified lacquer objects were conventionally understood to be black. These sources confirm that the red–black colour system emerged early and became foundational to lacquerware aesthetics. Black conveys solemnity, while red expresses vitality, together forming the primary chromatic language of lacquerware.

### ***Formation of Colour Symbols***

The distinctive red and black colour scheme that characterizes Chu lacquerware is not a random occurrence. It is primarily attributed to the easy combination and manufacturing of these two colours and is also subjectively influenced by the Chu people's aesthetic views on colour. They held reverence and worship for their ancestor, Zhu Rong, as the god of fire. He was a high official under Emperor Ku, responsible for managing sacrificial activities and enforcing fire policies. After his death, people commemorated him as the god of fire. For the Chu people, red symbolizes authority and has a close association with flames. In the prevalent 'Five Elements Theory' during the Spring and Autumn Period, the colour referred to as '赤' (red) represents fire, further strengthening the Chu people's sense of respect for flames and the colour red.

Furthermore, according to the records in 'Mozi - Gongmeng,' during the reign of King Zhuang of Chu, he often wore red clothing and adorned himself with red ceremonial attire. This indicates a preference for red among the ruling class of Chu. This notion is supported by archaeological evidence, such as the discovery of numerous burial garments adorned with red decorations in the Chu Tomb No. 1 in Masha, Jiangling, as well as the six-sided war flags found in the chariot and horse pit in Huaiyang County, Henan Province, all of which were entirely red.

### ***Colour Combination Symbols***

Although red and black form the chromatic foundation of Chu lacquerware, artisans pursued greater visual richness. During the Spring and Autumn period, advances in oil-based lacquer techniques enabled polychromatic effects. Mixed lacquer applications enhanced pattern vitality and expanded visual depth, elevating lacquer art beyond monochrome decoration. According to Yang Ming's annotations in *Ranshilu*, the addition of plant oils allowed precise control of colour balance and the depiction of fine details. This technique produced a broad palette, including deep red, yellow, green, blue, white, and earth tones. In *Welcoming Guests on an Outing*, a black ground is animated by red, cyan, white, yellow, and brown, vividly rendering figures, garments, vehicles, trees, and animals. Strong chromatic contrast enhances narrative clarity and demonstrates the Chu artisans' sophisticated command of colour.

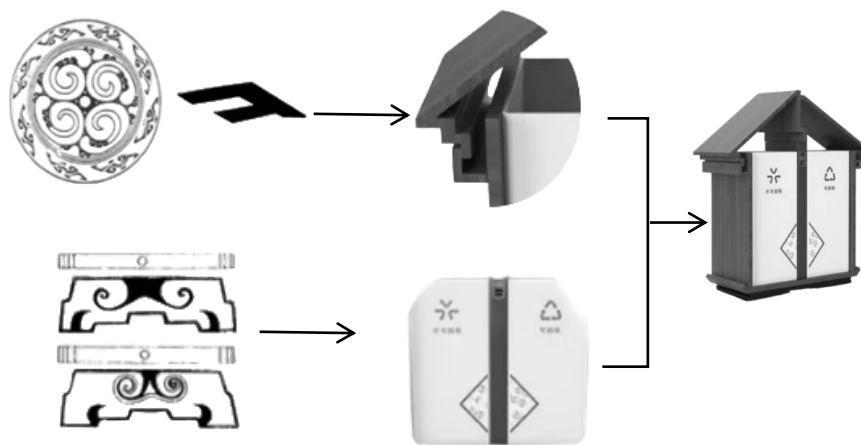
### ***Design Implications for Public Design and Cultural-Creative Industries***

The symbolic language and craftsmanship principles of Chu lacquerware extend beyond historical artefacts and offer transferable value for contemporary design practice. From a conceptual standpoint, these applications can be situated within two overarching domains: public design and cultural-creative industries. Within both domains, traditional symbols are not reproduced literally but are reinterpreted through abstraction, transformation, and contextual adaptation to meet modern functional, aesthetic, and cultural demands.

### ***Public Design***

In the context of public design, Chu lacquerware motifs provide a cultural framework for integrating identity into everyday urban infrastructure. Cloud patterns and geometric forms derived from Chu lacquerware are abstracted and simplified to suit contemporary public facilities, where clarity of function, visual legibility, and durability are essential. The rolling cloud motif conveys symbolic meanings of harmony, freedom, and aspiration, while geometric patterns suggest order and continuity. These motifs, commonly arranged in continuous or encircling compositions in Chu lacquerware, translate effectively into modern public forms.

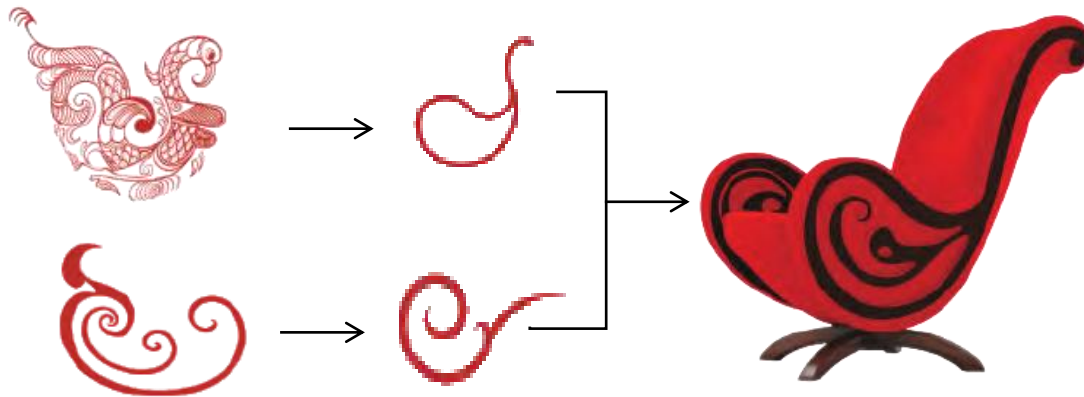
The urban waste receptacle serves as an illustrative case. By transforming cloud and geometric motifs into a restrained exterior language, cultural symbolism is embedded without visual excess. This approach enables cultural expression to coexist with modern urban aesthetics and public acceptance, demonstrating how Chu lacquerware symbolism can be meaningfully applied within public design systems.



**Figure 5: Urban Trash Can Design**

### **Cultural-Creative Industries**

Within cultural-creative industries, including product, furniture, and fashion design, Chu lacquerware offers a rich repository of visual language, material philosophy, and symbolic meaning. Design applications in this domain prioritise sensory experience, emotional resonance, and market relevance, while maintaining cultural continuity. In product and furniture design, Chu lacquerware phoenix imagery was translated through a sensory engineering framework. A semantic differential questionnaire was developed using phoenix image samples and sensory vocabulary, and dimensionality reduction analysis identified key perceptual factors. The most salient sensory image was selected as the design driver and integrated into furniture forms generated through AIGC. Fuzzy comprehensive evaluation results indicate that the resulting designs achieved a “medium” or higher perceptual rating, suggesting effective alignment with users’ sensory-cognitive expectations. This case demonstrates how traditional symbolism can inform contemporary form generation through data-supported design methods.



**Figure 6: Application of Phoenix and Bird Symbolism from Chu Lacquerware in Furniture Design**

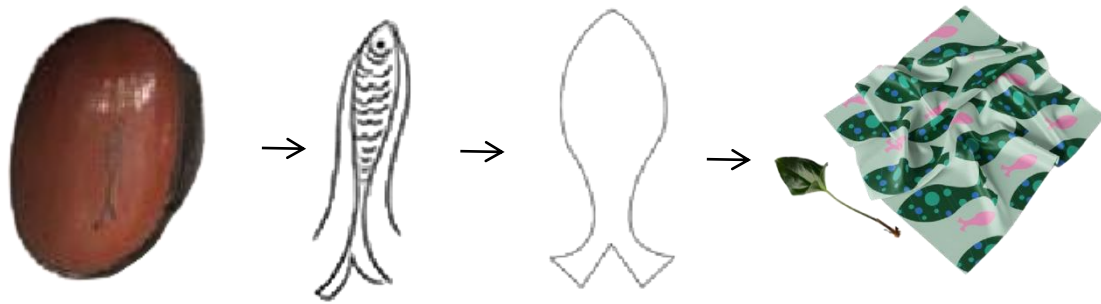
In fashion design, the transformation of Chu lacquerware symbolism follows a strategy of simplifying complexity. Painted dragon-and-phoenix motifs from Warring States lacquer ear cups were used as the primary reference. Through selective extraction and deformation, the S-shaped structural rhythm of the phoenix was retained while reducing visual detail. Iterative optimisation resulted in a highly simplified motif that preserves symbolic identity while conforming to minimalist contemporary aesthetics. This approach illustrates the effective translation of historical symbols into modern fashion language



**Figure 7: Simplified Clothing Design**

In cultural-creative product design, representative animal and geometric patterns were selected based on motif hierarchy in Chu lacquerware. A fish-patterned round-eared cup was used as a reference for individual pattern development. Through form transformation, key visual elements were refined into simplified geometric units. Applied to silk scarf design, these motifs were arranged using two-directional and four-directional continuity, as well as symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions. Fresh and elegant colour palettes were adopted to balance cultural expression with contemporary market preferences.





**Figure 8 : Design of Silk Scarf Cultural and Creative products**

### Conclusion

This study contributes a material-semiotic framework for interpreting Chu lacquerware, demonstrating how traditional symbolic systems can be systematically translated into contemporary public design and cultural-creative practices. This article examines Chu lacquerware through the lens of material semiotics, integrated with cultural ecology, to analyse the implicit symbolic language embedded in its design. As a primary material carrier of Chu culture, lacquerware possesses a long history and diverse craftsmanship. Large quantities unearthed from Warring States period Chu tombs testify to its cultural significance and artistic distinction. Chu lacquerware exhibits a complex symbolic system. In form, it encompasses realism, imaginative construction, and the principle of valuing images. Its decorative patterns display distinctive features, varied structures, and multiple classifications. Chromatically, red and black dominate, each carrying strong symbolic meaning.

The cultural language of Chu lacquerware offers substantial potential for contemporary design. In fashion, symbolic colours and motifs convey the aesthetic spirit of Chu culture. In furniture design, decorative patterns, colour application, and craftsmanship concepts enhance cultural depth and added value. In cultural-creative industries, interactive and reconstructed interpretations of Chu symbols foster cultural recognition and engagement.

Looking forward, the symbolic language of Chu lacquerware will continue to invigorate design practice through technological advancement and cultural exchange. In doing so, it contributes to the preservation and innovation of traditional Chinese culture while affirming its enduring cultural and design value.

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