

From Jingchu to Huaichu: Stylistic Evolution of the Phoenix Motifs on Lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb

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Abstract: More than 700 lacquered wooden artifacts were unearthed from the Wuwangdun Tomb, the highest-ranking Chu tomb unearthed to date. The sheer quantity, complete range of types, and intricate decorative motifs of these artifacts are rarely seen among excavated tombs of the State of Chu. The phoenix motif was the most frequently used design on the lacquerware from this tomb, covering various poses such as standing, looking back, and calling to each other. Taking the phoenix motifs on lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb as the research object, this paper conducts a typological comparison with phoenix motifs on lacquerware unearthed in the Jingchu region (represented by the Chu Tombs at Wangshan in Jiangling and Baoshan in Jingmen) in order to explore the evolution of phoenix motifs on Chu lacquerware during the middle and late Warring States periods from "bizarre and exquisite" to "flowing and rounded, and increasingly geometric". This paper argues that the stylistic evolution of the phoenix motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb embodied the aesthetic transformation of Chu art during the late Warring States period, under the influence of multiple factors. Its "restrained abstraction"—a tendency toward geometric and orderly forms while preserving the identifiability of the phoenix image—formed the core visual characteristic of the "Huaichu Style". This transformation not only followed the intrinsic logic of artistic development from figurative to semi-abstract and finally to abstract, but also reflected a conscious adaptation of Chu cultural aesthetic concepts under the influence of Qin culture.

1. Introduction

The lacquerware of the State of Chu marked the first peak of ancient Chinese lacquer craftsmanship. Since the mid-20th century, archaeological discoveries of high-ranking Chu tombs, including the Baoshan Chu Tombs, the Wangshan Chu Tombs, and the Tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng (Zenghouyi), have constantly deepened the academic community's understanding of the aesthetic characteristics, cultural connotation, and decorative patterns of phoenix motifs on lacquerware of the Chu State^{[1][2][3]}. However, these studies were mainly oriented to the core region of Jingchu (i.e., the Jiangnan Plain region of present-day Hubei), with relatively less attention paid to lacquerware

unearthed from Chu Tombs in the Huai River basin.

The archaeological discoveries of the Wuwangdun Tomb have provided a wealth of data for the study of Huai-Chu culture. Located in Huainan City, Anhui Province, this tomb has been deemed the largest and highest-ranking Chu tomb excavated to date since scientific excavations began in 2020. In total, more than 10,000 artifacts were unearthed from Tomb No. 1 of Wuwangdun Tomb, including more than 700 lacquered wooden artifacts^[4]. There were various lacquered wooden artifacts unearthed from this tomb, including *an* (trays), *zu* (sacrificial cutting boards), eared cups, boxes, *dou* (sacrificial vessel), plates, and *se* (large zither). The dragon-phoenix lacquered wooden table unearthed from the east side chamber of Tomb No.1 burial chamber, measured 133 centimeters in length and 78 centimeters in width, becoming the largest of its kind in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods^[5]. The phoenix motif on its surface, with an exquisite and unique style, inherits the cultural gene of the phoenix motif of Chu culture and also presents a stylistic character distinctive from that of the Jingchu region.

The discrepancy in the phoenix motifs between Chu tombs in the Huai River basin and those in the Jingchu region raised a question deserving deep exploration. What kind of stylistic evolution did the phoenix motifs on Chu lacquerware undergo during the middle and late Warring States period? What forces drove this evolution? This paper provided a systematic discussion on the above questions. It should be clarified in advance that, in the absence of archaeological material of Chu tombs in the mid-Warring States period in the Huai River basin, the comparison in this paper is, strictly speaking, a diachronic typological comparison—that is, a diachronic comparison between materials from the mid-Warring States period in the Jingchu region and those from the late Warring States period in the Huai River basin, instead of a comprehensive regional comparison. The terms “Jingchu style” and “Huaichu style” used in this paper primarily referred to different historical periods, while also giving consideration to regional differences.

2. Definition of Core Concepts

Two core concepts in this paper should be defined before the detailed analysis.

First, the term “Abstraction” used in this paper referred to the extent to which the phoenix motif shifted from a faithful depiction of natural forms toward geometrization and symbolization. In order to facilitate the operational analysis, this paper measures the degree of abstraction from three dimensions. To be specific, Preservation of Biological Features—whether the phoenix’s identifiable features were intact and clearly recognizable, such as beak, crest, wings, and talons; Degree of Geometric Transformation—the proportion of the phoenix’s body being transformed into geometric patterns such as cirrus cloud motifs, swirls, and S-shaped curves; and Image Integrity—whether the phoenix could be clearly identified as an independent visual unit, or integrated into the general decorative pattern.

Second, the term “Restrained Abstraction” refers to a mode of abstraction in which the phoenix motif has not yet completely lost its image while moving toward geometrization and schematization. The phoenix remained a phoenix, but its image was incorporated into a more rational and orderly formal framework. The core of this concept lies in “restraint”; in other words, the process of abstraction stopped at a critical point where “the image remained identifiable,” rather than completely transforming into purely geometric decorative patterns unlike certain motifs on bronze vessels. This characteristic distinguishes the phoenix motifs in the Wuwangdun Tomb from the bold and unrestrained semi-abstract forms of the Jingchu period, as well as from certain fully geometric decorative patterns after the Qin and Han dynasties.

3. Typical Characteristics of the Phoenix Motif on Jingchu Lacquerware: Bizarre and Exquisite Romanticism—Typological Analysis Based on Typical Artifacts

The phoenix motifs on Jingchu lacquerware represented by the Wangshan Chu Tomb in Jiangling and Baoshan Chu Tomb in Jingmen during the mid-Warring States period displayed the vivid “bizarre and exquisite” style. This style was primarily embodied in the highly exaggerated and distorted forms. For instance, The polychrome openwork lacquered screen with animal motifs unearthed in 1965 from Wangshan Chu Tomb No.1 in Jiangling, Hubei, measures only 15 centimeters in height and 51.8 centimeters in width, however, it contains 55 animals in combat by openwork carving and relief techniques on such limited dimensions^[6]. Artisans painted the phoenix's feathers in red, blue, and yellow, so that the phoenix and animals such as deer and pythons, formed a continuous pattern, displaying a dense and abundant decorative effect. As for the painted “Double Phoenix Cup” unearthed in 1987 from Baoshan Tomb No. 2 in Jingmen measured 9.2 centimeters in overall height, 17.6 centimeters in length, and 14 centimeters in width. Designed as a flying phoenix carrying two cups; its beak holding a black-lacquered wooden bead, and the phoenix's wings carved on both sides of the cup^[7]. The head, neck, body, and tail were all engraved with feather-like scaly patterns, as well as circular and dotted motifs in red, yellow, and gold lacquer, and the body was also inlaid with eight silver gemstones. More typically, the dragon-phoenix motif on the inner coffin of Baoshan Tomb No. 2 is dominated by phoenix motif, with the dragon motif intertwined beneath it. The phoenix is outlined in black and red, with its head held high while striding forward. The head of the transformed phoenix retained its features, but the body was transformed into stripes, curling clouds, or swirls, creating an appearance that was neither entirely cloud nor purely phoenix ^[8]. This semi-abstract stylistic language endows the phoenix motif with a strong sense of mystery and romanticism.

The Jingchu phoenix motif laid great emphasis on depicting dynamic flight. On the tiger-based suspended drum with a phoenix unearthed from the Wangshan Chu Tomb No.1, the multi-colored phoenix stood with its head held high and its feet resting on the tiger's back as if stretching its neck and crying out^[9]. A similar artifact unearthed from Chu Tomb No. 2 at Jiuliandun in Zaoyang, Hubei Province, consisted of a base with a crouching tiger facing away and a frame of a phoenix with its head holding high; the entire artifact was coated with black lacquer and decorated with red, yellow, silver, and white paint^[10]. The phoenix was mostly portrayed with its wings spreading wide in vigorous flight, glancing back over its shoulder, along with fluid and flexible lines, displaying the shape of forward momentum and the beauty of rhythmic movement. The decorative patterns were dense and plump. Craftsmen often created a fantastical and magnificent atmosphere against cloud-and-vapor motifs and scrolling plantain motifs. In terms of color, the Jingchu phoenix motifs were mainly characterized by black and red. The vermilion-colored phoenix on the black lacquered ground created a striking visual impact, and some artifacts were supplemented with yellow and gold, further adding the sense of grandeur. In a word, the Jingchu phoenix motif artistically expressed the free and unconstrained spirit of the Chu people, “communing solely with the spirit of heaven and earth”, displaying the style towards exaggeration, dynamism, intricacy, and mystery.

4. Stylistic shift of Phoenix Motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb: Rational Order and Restrained Abstraction—Formal Analysis Based on the Dragon-Phoenix Lacquered Wooden Table

Compared to lacquerware of the Jingchu style, the phoenix motifs on lacquerware unearthed from the Wuwangdun Tomb presented a significant transformation in style, which is obviously embodied in the Dragon-Phoenix Lacquered Wooden Table. It is analyzed here from the perspectives of form, composition, and style.

In terms of form, the phoenix motifs on the lacquerware unearthed from the Wuwangdun Tomb are more flowing and rounded. The surface of the dragon-phoenix lacquered wooden table, with a

black-lacquered base decorated with vermilion, presents two phoenixes standing opposite each other with elongated bodies, as if they were about to take flight with their wings spread^[5]. Unlike the exaggerated and transformed phoenixes of Jingchu, the phoenixes on the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb were in more balanced proportions with a leisurely, serene posture, without fierce or unrestrained dynamism. The tail feathers of the phoenixes were in S-shaped curves, which were calculated to be close to the golden ratio by researchers^[11], and indicated the Chu people's precise sense of formal beauty. This conscious pursuit of mathematical proportions drove the transformation of phoenix motif design from sensuous exaggeration to rational order.

In terms of composition, the phoenix motifs on the Wuwangdun Tomb primarily indicated symmetry and order. The dragon-phoenix lacquered wooden table was symmetrically arranged along the diagonal, where two phoenixes faced each other with their heads raised and wings spread as if trying to fly, and two dragons coiled beneath them, appearing majestic yet not fierce. The phoenix tails extended from the middle and tail section of the dragon's body and curl into a circle, as if young dragons and phoenixes were playing inside. The scales of the dragons' bodies were formed by grain patterns and interlocked cloud-and-grain motifs, displaying a graceful and fluid design by grain patterns and interlaced grain-cloud motifs, displaying a graceful and fluid design^[5]. This strictly geometric composition is in stark contrast to the dense, plump, and full-coverage layout without ground of the Jingchu phoenix motifs. Geometric patterns, such as cloud-thunder motifs, diamond lattices, and key-fret motifs, were often applied as two-directional continuous bands along the rims and ring feet of artifacts, so as to further intensify the sense of order and rhythm. The lacquered table was configured with water-retaining rims along three sides, decorated with gilded rivets on the rim and the outer surface, with four corners edged with gilded trim, and executed with the typical Chu lacquerware technique of "painting the interior in vermilion and staining the exterior with black"^[12].

From the perspective of style, the phoenix motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb completed a transition from dynamic to static, from elaborate to simple, and from bizarre to regular. The study revealed that, the dragon-phoenix motifs on Jingchu lacquerware were more exaggerated and bizarre, whereas the patterns on the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb tended to be more fluid and rounded that artisans particular focused on the fluidity of the curves when carving the phoenix feathers^{[3][13]}. The patterns no longer involved with an overwhelming visual impact, but instead sought dignity and elegance in symmetry and order. It is worth noting that the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb generally in line with Chu lacquerware, such as the lacquered ear-cup, but also highlighted a unique design. Although the lacquered ear-cups unearthed from Tomb No. 1 at the Wuwangdun Tomb closely resembled those from Yutai Mountain in Jingzhou and Jiuliandun in Hubei, artisans added irregular decorative details to the edges of each square ear, thereby enhancing the decorative effect^[4]. Besides, the decorative motifs, patterns, and arrangements underwent innovations, enabling the artifacts to be more dignified and plain. The phoenix-and-tiger-base drum stand unearthed from Tomb No. 1 of the Wuwangdun Tomb is as high as 1.92 meters, making it the largest of its kind discovered to date. There is a pearl in the phoenix's beak, and its body was intricately carved with feathers and dragon motifs^[4]. These details indicate that the evolution of the phoenix motifs of the Wuwangdun Tomb was not merely degeneration or simplification, but rather conscious innovations by artisans based upon the cultural heritage of the Chu civilization.

The abstraction in the phoenix motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb exhibited to be moderate across all three dimensions: key biological features of the phoenix, such as head, crest, and wings, remained clearly distinguishable, which revealing a high degree of preservation of the natural biological characteristics. However, the body and tail feathers were largely transformed into geometric patterns such as S-curves and curling clouds, leading to a significant increase in geometric abstraction. The phoenix could still be identified as an independent visual unit, without degradation in image integrity. This "Restrained Abstraction" is exactly the difference of the "Huaichu style" from the Jingchu period.

5. Evolutionary Trajectory and Driving Forces: Aesthetic Transformation amid Changes of the Times

A clear trajectory of Jingchu phoenix motifs and the phoenix motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb can be identified by placing their stylistic evolution in the diachronic context of the development of Chu lacquerware during the Warring States period. During the Jingchu period spanning the early to mid-Warring States era, phoenix motifs were primarily figurative or semi-abstract, characterized by exaggerated postures, dynamic movement, and dense compositions, and imbued with mythological elements and romantic imagination. During the Huaichu period of the late Warring States era represented by the Wuwangdun Tomb, phoenix motifs became increasingly geometric and schematized, with their postures growing more regular, compositions more orderly, and style more elegant. This evolution basically coincided with the trajectory observed in art history where visual motifs evolved from figurative through semi-abstract to abstract^{[14][15]}. The phoenix motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb are unique in that they had not yet completely lost their image while turning toward abstraction. The phoenix remained a phoenix, albeit incorporated into a more rational and orderly formal framework.

The new stylistic changes in the phoenix motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb were by no means a coincidental; they were driven by profound historical and cultural factors and a foundation of craftsmanship and technical expertise.

The infiltration of Qin culture and the adaptation of Chu culture transformed aesthetic preferences. According to historical records, the capital of the State of Chu was relocated eastward several times, eventually moving to Shouchun (present-day Huainan, Anhui) in 241 BC. The Wuwangdun Tomb dated precisely to this period when Shouchun served as the capital of Chu^[16]. The continued infiltration of Qin culture and the self-adaptation of Chu culture jointly shaped a new aesthetic preference with diminished mystery and enhanced order^{[16][17]}. In the aspect of art history, Chu art made a conscious response to the impact of foreign cultures^{[18][19]}. The Chu people established a new balance between tradition and transformation by adhering to the cultural roots of the phoenix totem and accepting the Central Plains culture's pursuit of order, symmetry, and rationality. The Dragon-Phoenix lacquered wooden table combined the worship of the phoenix in the Chu region with dragon motifs from the Central Plains, such that dragon and phoenix complemented each other and formed a harmonious whole, which is typically the cultural fusion between the north and south. It should be noted that the "influence of Qin culture" remains a speculative interpretation currently. It remains to be verified by further archaeological evidence exactly how the nobility of the late Chu State came into contact with Qin culture through specific channels such as the movement of artisans, the import of goods, or the infiltration of political and aesthetic fashions, to be transformed into the design language of lacquerware motifs^[20].

With the development of the society, the lacquerware handicraft became increasingly refined. The rapid development of the lacquerware handicraft in the State of Chu during the late Warring States period provided the material foundation for the refinement of the phoenix motifs^[3]. Scientific testing provided crucial empirical data. The archaeological team of the Wuwangdun Tomb used the "curved-surface micro-area X-ray fluorescence spectrometer (XRF)" jointly developed by the Institute of High Energy Physics, Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Palace Museum, for the first time at the archaeological site. This device employed the pioneering technology of curved-surface micro-area X-ray fluorescence imaging, enabling scanning of curved cultural artifacts with a spatial resolution of 0.4 mm, and could image elements individually or in combination. "The composition and materials when this artifact was first crafted could be discerned". Zhang Zhiguo, the head of cultural heritage preservation for the archaeological excavation project in Wuwangdun Tomb explained, "This device can overcome the limitations of visual identification, especially when it comes to discerning the

craftsmanship involved”.[21]

The outcomes of the XRF analysis were remarkable. Scholars previously believed that the pigments in lacquerware were primarily carbon black and cinnabar; however, high-precision elemental scanning revealed that the pigments in the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb also contained elements such as copper, calcium, iron, and arsenic. Taking the beast-face motifs on the top of lacquered wooden stands for *bianzhong* (bronze bell chimes) and *bianqing* (stone chimes) as an example, it was previously considered that these were applied with a carbon black base coat decorated with cinnabar outlines. However, the elemental scanning discovered a more complex process. The main pigment on the face contained copper; the pigment on the cheeks contained mercury; the pigment on the whites of the eyes on both sides of the pupils and the ears contained calcium, and arsenic was present only in small amounts but served as an accent [21]. The lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb was made with Chinese lacquer, including the pigments of cinnabar, iron oxide red, carbon black, orpiment, and realgar. Among these, cinnabar was mostly used for red, iron oxide red in reddish-brown tones, and the yellow was a mixture of realgar and orpiment [22]. Some decorative motifs on the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb were also applied with gold-line and lead-line techniques, as well as inlays of silver, tin, copper alloys, and quartz, among other materials[1]. The copper edging and a mercury amalgam gilding technique were seen in some other artifacts[12]. These techniques indicated that the lacquerware handicraft industry had developed the refined craftsmanship by the late Warring States period. However, technical expertise alone does not determine stylistic trends, since the Jingchu region also had relatively mature lacquerware-making techniques during the same period but did not move in the same geometric direction. Therefore, the shift toward geometrization in the phoenix motifs from the Wuwangdun Tomb was, in essence, a selective application of technical potential guided by aesthetic concepts, rather than a passive byproduct of technological progress[15][19].

6. Conclusions

The phoenix motifs on the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb occupy a unique status in the stylistic lineage of phoenix motifs in Chu culture and are outstanding examples of Chu lacquer art from the late Warring States period. From Jingchu to Huaichu, the phoenix motifs underwent a stylistic transformation from “bizarre and exquisite” to “fluid and rounded, and increasingly geometric”. To be specific, the design shifted from exaggerated distortion to a more fluid and rounded form, with the tail feathers forming S-shaped curves nearly to the golden ratio; as for composition, the motifs turned from dense, fully-covered patterns to an orderly layout in diagonal symmetry and two-directional continuity; with regard to spirit, the motifs evolved from being free-spirited and mysterious to being dignified and elegant. This evolution adhered to the general pattern of stylistic evolution from figurative to semi-abstract to abstract[14][15], and reflected the evolution of Chu cultural aesthetic concepts in the specific historical context of the late Warring States period[16][17]. What’s more, it benefited from technological advances in the lacquerware handicraft industry[3][21][22]. The high-precision XRF elemental analysis revealed that the pigments included cinnabar, iron oxide red, carbon black, realgar, orpiment, as well as various elements such as copper, calcium, iron, and arsenic. The mature application of complex techniques such as gold-line painting, lead-line painting, gilded edging, and inlay provided the technical foundation for the refinement of motifs. Nonetheless, the ultimate direction of style still depended on conscious aesthetic choices. The phoenix motif from the Wuwangdun Tomb is considered an outstanding example of the “Huaichu style” by virtue of its “Restrained Abstraction” and “Rational Order,” which constitute the core visual characteristics of this style and offer an important micro-case study for understanding the transformation of Chu culture during the late Warring States period. At present, the archaeological team has launched the

multispectral digital archiving project to establish a complete closed-loop process from conservation to regeneration, which will provide a more comprehensive data foundation for subsequent research on motifs and their revitalization and application ^[21].

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