

The evolution and revitalization of Chu culture in literature

Abstract

Taking the Chu culture as a focal point, this paper examines the evolution and activation processes of Chu culture by analyzing the changes in its natural and humanistic landscapes. It delves into the content of the cultural symbols associated with Chu culture. Throughout this exploration, the natural landscape—comprising rivers, mountains and climate—and the humanistic landscape, which includes religious beliefs, artistic expressions, and social systems, interact and collectively foster the multi-dimensional development of Chu culture. The aim of this paper is to extract valuable insights from the evolutionary process and apply them to modern design innovations, thereby promoting the preservation and advancement of Chu cultural heritage and providing a valuable reference for future cultural research.

Keywords: Chu Culture, Symbols, Application, Inheritance and Development

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Introduction

Chu culture is a significant aspect of Chinese civilization, and its extensive history has bequeathed a rich and valuable legacy to the world. The evolution of the landscape reflects the passage of time, and as time progresses, the landscape bears various marks of change. These marks are dynamic, manifesting primarily in two forms: natural growth and human creation. The natural landscapes and cultural architecture of the Chu region chronicle the rise and fall of Chu culture and its transformations over the centuries. Jingchu culture primarily refers to the regional culture centered on the Hubei area. The ancient cultural symbols from the remote mountainous regions in the west blend with the more developed culture in the center. In this context, both isolation and openness, as well as backwardness and progress, coexist. However, openness and tolerance are the prevailing themes of Jingchu culture, which is precisely where the intrigue of Jingchu culture, with its vibrant characteristics.¹ The aim of this paper is to explore the profound heritage of Chu culture by examining the evolution of its memory, investigating the unique elements of Chu culture found in both natural and man-made landscapes, seeking sources of inspiration for landscape design, and offering a new creative direction for contemporary landscape design.

Evolution and use of natural landscapes

The shaping and influence of the natural environmental characteristics of the Chu lands on Chu culture

The natural environment has a profound and undeniable impact on the formation of humanity and culture. First and foremost, human life has always been intricately connected to the surrounding nature, which has shaped people's lifestyles, values, and cultural heritage. This connection has a direct influence on human ways of life and economic activities. Such diversity is not only evident in the economic structure but also leaves a distinctive mark on culture and lifestyle. Secondly, the natural environment significantly affects people's belief systems and spiritual lives. Many cultures regard natural elements as sacred symbols, incorporating landscapes such as rivers, mountains, and forests into religious ceremonies, myths, and legends. These belief systems reflect people's reverence for and dependence on the forces of nature, while also contributing to a rich legacy of myths, art, and literature within the culture. Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary,

and grammatical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning. Chu culture, as a branch of ancient Chinese culture, is profoundly influenced by the natural environment, which encompasses the geography, climate, and natural resources of the Chu region. In Zuo Zhuan, In the twelfth year of Zhaogong's reign, Chu Ling Yin Zige addressed King Ling of Chu, saying: "In the past, my predecessor, Xiong Dedi began his career in the Jing Mountains, where he lived in the grassy plains. He trekked through the mountains and forests to serve the Son of Heaven."² The geographic remoteness of the Chu region in the south, with its crisscrossing waterways and encircling mountain ranges, created a terrain that was extraordinarily strange and steep, characterized by treacherous beauty. In this area, insects and snakes were prevalent, and constant flooding made the living conditions extremely harsh. This unique geographical environment not only instilled in the Chu people a reverence for the primitive and mysterious aspects of nature but also fostered their pioneering spirit of daring exploration and progress. Hong Liangji noted in the "Spring and Autumn Annals"³ that to express the temperament of its people. The mountains and lakes of Chu became a source of inspiration for literati and artists, with many literary works reflecting praise and depictions of nature. This natural freshness and vibrancy are deeply embedded in the aesthetic concepts of Chu culture, resulting in a distinctive style in literature, painting, and music. The unique aesthetic sensibilities of the Chu people, through their appreciation of the strange and magnificent beauty of nature, infused their artistic creations with a spirit of beauty. Utilizing bronzes, lacquer ware, murals, and other art forms, they shaped their love and reverence for nature into tangible works. These creations not only celebrate the beauty of nature but also represent a pursuit of beauty, serving as a medium for expressing their spiritual aspirations.

Influence of the natural environment of chudi on the use of plants

The landscape of Jingchu has always been defined by its numerous mountains and abundant water sources. According to research conducted by scholars such as Zeng Daxing, the natural geography of Jingchu features a dense network of waterways, several renowned mountains, and a humid climate. Through archaeological findings and literary works such as the gardens of Chu placed significant emphasis on plant arrangement.³ Influenced by the prevailing cultural practices, there was a preference for planting herbs, flowers, and trees. The symbol of the epidemic is often associated with the pursuit of good

luck. The unique geographic location of the Jingchu region makes this style of gardening a popular choice. This region's distinctive geography has fostered a complex and rich natural environment, resulting in a diverse array of plant resources. Influenced by this environment, the Chu people have developed a unique taste and preference for the selection and arrangement of plants. Historical documents indicate that the religious beliefs and witchcraft culture in Chu significantly impacted the local people's use of plants. Many herbs were considered by the Chu people to possess magical properties, believed to have the power to evil and prevent epidemics" as well as longevity and wisdom. These herbs are not only used in daily life for home decoration but also play a significant role in ritual activities, where they are thought to facilitate communication with the gods. Consequently, the Chu people's appreciation for herbs is not merely an aesthetic preference; it is deeply rooted in their religious and cultural beliefs. The description of plant configuration during that time can be verified through historical literature. For instance, in "The Nine Songs - Lady Xiang, that"³ Orchids are planted near the door, and jade trees are used as fences. The orchids were positioned by the entrance, while the jade trees served as a protective barrier for the wall. By carefully cultivating these plants, a fence was created to enclose the courtyard, transforming it into a distinctive space. This technique of using plants as boundaries establishes a contrast between the individual and the overall structure, producing both concealing and revealing effects that contribute to a rich, multi-layered sense of depth and space. Through this design of plant enclosures, the courtyard not only achieves a unique aesthetic appeal but also introduces a sense of hierarchy and a rich visual dimension to the entire site, enhancing the space's complexity and interest. The phrase "Dahurica repairs the lotus house, dazzling the dahurica" refers to the lotus house adorned with dahurica grass, which wraps around all four sides. The poem frequently mentions the arrangement of various plants, including lotus, dahurica, and other herbs, positioned in diverse locations such as the roof and the hedge in front of the pool. With their distinct forms and fragrances, these herbs skillfully embellish the surroundings, infusing vitality and tranquility into the entire scene. Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary, and technical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning. This plant arrangement not only gives the space more layers and variations, but also creates a poetic and pleasant natural atmosphere.

Evolutionary symbols of nature

Semiotics offers humanity a fresh perspective and a means to re-examine Human History.⁴ In the classification of these natural symbols, they can be primarily divided into four main categories: animals, plants, natural landscapes, and other objects. Among animals, dragons and phoenixes are regarded as the most representative motifs, frequently appearing in the artwork, artifacts, and architectural decorations of ancient cultures. These enigmatic and symbolic animal images serve not only as an abstract expression of nature's power but also as carriers of the myths, legends, and beliefs of ancient civilizations. In the symbols of Jing and Chu culture, the Chu people often employed a plethora of images depicting gods and monsters with human and animal forms, such as the three-headed phoenix and the feathered man, characterized by a human face and a bird's body. The phoenix and bird motif represents the epitome of beauty in their social production. This design was discovered in the Mashan Chu Tomb in Jiangling, Hubei Province, featuring a rectangular pattern that includes a phoenix and flowering branches arranged diagonally.⁵ The pattern is rectangular and features phoenixes and floral branches arranged diagonally.⁶ The Chu people hold deep feelings and symbolism for the phoenix, a mythical creature. In their literary works and artistic creations, the phoenix is often seen as a symbol of goodness and

beauty, while also embodying a strong spirit of romanticism. "The roc migrates to the south of the underworld, the water flows for three thousand miles, and the tumbler rises ninety thousand miles. The phoenix represents the Chu people's far-reaching vision and their spirit of continuous exploration. By using the phoenix as a metaphor, the Chu people express their adventurous spirit, great ambition, and courage to explore the unknown. They deified this mythical bird, and through the lens of aesthetics and imagination, the phoenix became their spiritual symbol and object of faith. The deification of the phoenix in Chu culture is not only a reflection of reality but also an expression of the Chu people's aspirations and ideals, desire for beauty, kindness, and the pursuit of ideals, along with the courage to explore the unknown, is evident in various cultural expressions. A distinctive use of the phoenix pattern can be observed in the Chu 800 Years Park in Jingzhou, particularly in the entrance management area.¹¹ The design features a phoenix hollow pattern on the top surface of the structure at the entrance. Additionally, the Jingzhou Garden Expo Park incorporates the phoenix motif extensively, including in the garden walls, where phoenix reliefs and double phoenix designs symbolize auspiciousness. The main venue of the Jingzhou Garden Expo Park, the Phoenix Plume Hall, showcases the overall shape of the Chu totem of the Chu Kingdom and illustrating the historical evolution of the State of Chu. Lotus flowers and dogwoods, frequently featured in plant motifs, hold significant symbolic meanings in Chu culture. The lotus flower represents purity, and individuals often embroider lotus motifs onto their clothing to convey their aspirations for peace and tranquility. These patterns serve not only as decorative elements but also as expressions of the pursuit of a better life and heartfelt prayers for well-being. *Cornus officinalis* is considered a plant of sacred significance in Chu culture, believed to possess the power to ward off evil spirits and impurities. As a result, people often embroider dogwood patterns onto their clothing, symbolizing their prayers for peace and health. This motif serves not only as an artistic expression but also embodies the community's heartfelt wishes for good fortune and happiness, reflecting the deep aspirations for a better life that the Chu people have woven into their decorative arts. Such embellishments are more than mere adornments; they represent a quest for purity and a fulfilling existence. The artistic representation of these patterns combines both animal and plant motifs, creating a distinctive style characteristic of Chu silk designs. The flowing and delicate forms of flowers, vines, and similar elements harmoniously intertwine with animal imagery, achieving a profound unity between humanity and nature.⁶ As for the symbols within the category of natural landscapes, the common forms of ornamentation include various elements that reflect the beauty and diversity of nature. The design incorporates thunder patterns, scrolling cloud patterns, and hooked cloud patterns. These decorative forms abstractly express natural phenomena, such as the power of thunder and the transformation of rolling clouds, showcasing an artistic technique that conveys emotions and celebrates the beauty of nature. The use of these motifs not only reflects the artist's observations and perceptions of the natural world but also embodies humanity's reverence and awe for nature's power. In Jingzhou's Chu 800-Year Park, the application of cloud and thunder patterns will be taken to new heights! In the park, street lamps, lawn lights, rest pavilions, and guardrails along the lake are strategically placed to incorporate the cloud thunder pattern.¹¹ These elements not only serve a decorative purpose but also resonate with the park's overall theme. In Jingzhou Park, the street lamps feature a design that combines the rolling cloud pattern, creating a sophisticated aesthetic. The elevated street lamps, adorned with the rolling cloud motif, evoke the image of stretching clouds in the sky, enhancing the park's sense of elegance.

Variation and use of human landscapes

Divine symbols

These symbols reflect the religious beliefs of the Chu people and their understanding of the divine. Similar to the gods in ancient Greek mythology, many deities in Chu culture are conceptualized based on human physical forms. The Chu people believe in a multitude of gods, including those associated with mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, wind, rain, thunder, lightning, as well as various birds and animals. They recognize different gods and goddesses, collectively referred to as the Chu people frequently make offerings in their homes. Overall, the rich diversity of these pattern types not only showcases the unique aesthetic concepts of ancient cultures regarding plants, animals, and natural landscapes but also reflects humanity's pursuit of mystery, power, and beauty. In contemporary design, the incorporation of these patterns can evoke memories of traditional culture while infusing unique historical and cultural connotations into the design.

Vital Symbols

The unearthed cultural relics and symbols found in the building and totems indicate that the Chu culture played a significant role in the daily social life and cultural practices of the Chu people. Whether it is a hunting map or figures of cars and horses, these artifacts provide valuable insights into the daily habits and lifestyle of the Chu people. Additionally, there are representations of sorcerers performing rituals to drive away evil spirits, highlighting various aspects of their religious practices. The content depicted in these images illustrates the Chu people's understanding of the meaning of life during that period, as well as their methods of worship and the intricacies of their daily lives. They sought significance beyond the earthly realm by praying for blessings to avert disasters and aspiring for the immortality of the soul.⁷ The life symbols encapsulated in these images reflect the Chu people's insights and contemplations regarding the essence of existence. These life symbols are interwoven with mythological and natural symbols, collectively forming a unique and rich symbolic system within Jing and Chu culture. For contemporary designers, the incorporation of these symbols not only effectively showcases the rich heritage of Jingchu culture but also imbues the design with distinct national cultural imagery. This design technique allows us to appreciate the wisdom of the ancient Chu people and their deep reverence for nature, all while promoting traditional culture and infusing unique historical and regional significance into the work. This mode of expression transcends the constraints of time and space, transforming design into not just a form of art, but also a means of cultural inheritance and continuity.

Inheritance and innovation of Chu cultural landscape

Chu cultural landscape is primarily expressed through its natural features and cultural characteristics.

Natural features

Natural features, on one hand, are embodied in the unique regional landscape barriers and the challenging variations in terrain.⁸ These elements can be organized within the overall design layout to establish the pattern and characteristics of the garden through a landscape framework. In the overall design layout, the landscape framework can be organized to establish the patterns and characteristics of the garden. This can be achieved by constructing mountains and water features to replicate the natural scenery of Chu. For instance, building platforms and restoring pavilions can enhance the natural essence of Chu, while

developing a water system can showcase the region's expansive waterways and rocky landscapes, blending the real and the imagined. On the other hand, the configuration of related plants, particularly the increased use of native species, is most suitable for growth in the local area. This approach not only reflects the regional characteristics that are essential elements of the landscape but also positions native plants as the focal point of regional landscape gardening. Additionally, we can incorporate Chu plants into the landscape design. The text will mention various herbs such as lotus, Xinyi, fungus, ShiLan, DuHeng, and Angelica dahurica for plant arrangements. Furthermore, we can utilize plants to embody elements of Chu culture, such as designing textures that evoke the image of a phoenix soaring with its feathers or creating the illusion of floating, submerged plants in water. This design aims to provide visitors with a rich, immersive experience of the local wildlife and plant life. The water network of Jingchu Water Town is particularly noteworthy in this context.

Cultural characteristics

The application of Chu cultural symbols is quite extensive, primarily reflected in Jing Chu costumes, artifacts, and literary works. Historically, these symbols were embodied in Jing Chu attire, objects, and literature.⁹ In terms of landscape representation, they can be categorized into two aspects: the expression of form and the transmission of spirit. The morphological aspect can be illustrated through alterations in lines, colors, and other methods that reinterpret Chu cultural symbols in a different context.

Abstraction and simplification of traditional forms

Jing Chu culture, as a relatively abstract concept, has evolved over thousands of years, and its cultural connotations cannot be clearly expressed through language alone.¹⁰ By abstractly simplifying cultural symbols, their applicability can be broadened; they can serve not only as decorative patterns but also be integrated into various aspects of daily life. For instance, the abstract symbolism of a chair or street lamps can merge practicality with cultural significance. An example of this is the use of floor tiles adorned with Chu cultural symbols, which were employed during the 800 years of the Chu Kingdom in Jingzhou. These tiles feature variations in shape and color to create distinct blocks, incorporating return patterns as decorative elements. Similarly, many seats utilize return patterns as decorative borders, enhancing their design. One specific design features a single back pattern, while the Jingzhou Garden Expo Park showcases a pair of back patterns, known as "pairs of pairs of back patterns," "wealth and prosperity continuing to flourish."¹¹

Abstraction of visual contours

When abstracting traditional cultural symbols, designers often create and transform the silhouette of a landscape object to convey their message and concept. The silhouette can serve as an aesthetic element, a primary outline, or a perspective view from a common angle. However, in any case, the transition from the point to the surface, from a visual perspective, can fully unleash the boundless potential of human imagination!

Form abstraction

This method involves refining natural objects by summarizing and extracting their most typical and essential elements, which are rich in expressive characteristics. The goal is to create simple, generalized forms and their corresponding images, imbuing them with spiritual significance. The reconstruction of Chu elements seeks to transcend traditional forms, moving beyond mere symmetry and neat

combinations to incorporate techniques such as disruption, variation, and interlacing.¹² This design approach adeptly integrates the core symbols of Jing and Chu culture into the overall concept, intentionally simplifying complex details while filtering out elements that do not align with contemporary values. Designers carefully select various materials and employ superior techniques to infuse the landscape with a new cultural perspective, effectively conveying the essence of the culture to the public through this innovative mode of expression.

Conclusion

Culture is the lineage, the bond, the root, and the soul of a people and a nation, while regional culture represents an exceptionally dynamic field.¹³ Drawing on the methods and traditions of Chu cultural memory, the exploration of this memory aids in shaping individuals' sense of identity towards local culture. It also contributes to the development of sustainable and eco-friendly landscapes, integrating modern landscape design to achieve enhanced cultural inheritance and innovation. By enriching the diversity and recognizability of the landscape, Chu culture can become more integrated into people's lives and truly.¹⁴

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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