

Research on the Design of Traditional Patterns of the Li Hou Tiger in IP Visual Image

Duo Qian

School of Design and Art, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China

Abstract: The Li Hou Tiger is a visual remnant of the agricultural civilization of the Yellow River Basin, carrying profound life-protection beliefs and folk aesthetic characteristics. In the contemporary context, the visual translation and living inheritance of traditional folk art have become important topics of concern in design studies. Taking the traditional patterns of the Li Hou Tiger as its entry point, this paper first sorts out their cultural origins and folk meanings, and then analyzes the "holistic segmentation" modeling principle, the five-element color system, and symbolic expression from the perspective of design studies. Building on this, the paper proposes a set of design strategies for bringing traditional patterns into IP visual imagery. I first isolate the relevant motifs, then break them apart and reassemble them, and finally adjust the palette to match. This process produces the visual identity of the "Yao Yao Tiger" character, and from there I develop a set of applications: derivative illustrations, animated emoji packs, and a range of cultural-creative merchandise. The aim throughout is to push back against the flat, clichéd image that traditional folk customs often carry, and to give designers working on intangible heritage arts like the Li Hou Tiger something concrete they can actually use when building a brand and drawing younger audiences.

Keywords: Li Hou Tiger; Traditional Patterns; IP Character Design; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cultural-Creative Products

1. Introduction

Traditional folk art holds the aesthetic sense and practical wisdom of the Chinese people. The Shanxi Li Hou Tiger, a national-level intangible cultural heritage item, functions above all as a carrier of folk blessing rituals; it is also artistically rich. Modern lifestyles, however,

have changed how traditional cloth art survives, where it is used, and what its audiences find beautiful. As "Guochao" (China Chic) has grown in popularity, IP-based design has become one way to keep intangible heritage alive. Cultural-creative design practice is now more common than before, but the question of how to preserve traditional symbols while translating them into a modern aesthetic is still open.

Research on the Li Hou Tiger has largely been historical and craft-oriented. Design studies that treat its traditional patterns as a subject of systematic visual translation, and that carry that translation into contemporary IP image creation, are still few. This paper takes the traditional patterns of the Li Hou Tiger as its object of study, analyzes their modeling and color characteristics within a design-studies framework, and examines how such patterns can be transformed for use in modern IP visual imagery. The design practice of the "Yao Yao Tiger" IP and its derivative cultural-creative products serves to test whether this approach works in practice. The broader aim is to contribute a workable case to the revitalization of regional intangible cultural heritage arts.

2. Cultural Origins of Li Hou Tiger Patterns

As a highly representative gem of folk cloth art in the Licheng area of Shanxi, the Li Hou Tiger has historical origins deeply rooted in ancient tiger totem worship and the agricultural civilization of the Yellow River Basin. In primitive societies where productive forces were extremely low, ancestors, confronted with the oppression of nature and the challenges of survival, often placed their hopes for survival in certain beings possessing supernatural power. The tiger, by virtue of its fierce and mighty natural attributes, was regarded by ancestors as the "chief of all beasts" and further became the embodiment of warding off evil and disasters and protecting peace. This reverence for and supplication to the tiger gradually settled over

the long course of history, forming a "tiger culture" belief with highly distinctive regional characteristics. From the perspective of cultural genesis, the birth of the Li Hou Tiger was not a purely aesthetic creation but was rooted in the ancient ancestors of the State of Li's intense longing for the continuation of life. In ancient times when medical conditions were scarce and infant survival rates were extremely low, people transformed this anxiety about life into the concrete creation of the "tiger." The "tiger" in the form of the cloth tiger has shed the ferocity of the wild beast in nature and has been endowed with gentle and charmingly naive anthropomorphic features. It is not only a child's toy but also a life amulet with which elders entrust their hopes for their descendants to be "tiger-headed and tiger-brained" and to "grow up healthily," carrying the most simple and sincere prayers of the folk.

The naming and formalization of the Li Hou Tiger are inseparable from the unique geographical location and historical evolution of Licheng, Shanxi. Situated in southeastern Shanxi, Licheng has since ancient times been a strategic location contested by military strategists and also a frontier zone where the agricultural culture of the Central Plains and the nomadic culture of the north converged and collided. According to historical records, the ancient State of Li was established in this area during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The Li Hou Tiger initially served as a totemic symbol of the Li Hou state court and later, with the change of dynasties and the downward diffusion of the ritual and music system, gradually flowed into the folk sphere and evolved into a cloth art product in the lives of ordinary people. However, the Li Hou Tiger did not look the way it does today from the very beginning. It actually underwent a gradual process of "descending from the altar": from divinity toward humanity, and from solemnity toward approachability. The early tiger totem bore the ferocious beauty of bronze vessel patterns, emphasizing mystery and deterrence. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, as folk handicrafts flourished, the modeling of the Li Hou Tiger began to draw on local paper-cutting, embroidery, and dough sculpture, gradually becoming the rounded, full, and vividly colored form it takes today. Behind this change lies the transformation of folk aesthetics and also the repeated selections and modifications that the people of Licheng have

made to traditional totemic symbols on their own land. More importantly, the vitality of the Li Hou Tiger derives from local folk customs. In the Licheng area, it accompanies local people at almost every important node of their life rituals—birth ceremonies, full-month ceremonies, hundred-day ceremonies, and the Dragon Boat Festival all cannot do without it. In these rituals, the Li Hou Tiger is not merely an object but a system of symbols. Taking an infant's full-month ceremony as an example, the maternal grandmother's family often sends a hand-sewn Li Hou Tiger, and the patterns on its body are not arbitrary decorations but mostly carry auspicious meanings: the "Five Poisons" pattern takes the meaning of "using poison to counteract poison," praying that the child will suffer less from disease; the pomegranate and peony on the tiger's back embody the expectations of abundant offspring and prosperity. These patterns transform abstract blessing concepts into visible decorations and also add a layer of warmth and protection to the rituals. Therefore, the study of Li Hou Tiger patterns cannot remain merely at the level of whether the surface forms are aesthetically pleasing; it must also examine the folk meanings and emotional structures behind them. This folk foundation is a readily available source of inspiration for creating the Li Hou Tiger IP image today, and it also implies that innovation must be premised on respecting the traditional cultural context.

3. Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Traditional Li Hou Tiger Patterns

3.1 Modeling Characteristics of the Li Hou Tiger

The modeling of the Li Hou Tiger is not an objective imitation of the tiger's form in nature, but rather a highly generalized and exaggerated representation made by folk artisans in long-term practice based on subjective imagery and practical functions. In terms of morphological structure, its most typical modeling principle is the "holistic segmentation method." This concept originates from a summary of the compositional laws of primitive art, namely that animal figures are distributed symmetrically on the left and right with the face or the central axis of the body as the reference. In making the Li Hou Tiger, the overall outline is usually sewn first, and then a crease is pressed

or pieces are joined in the middle to create a two-halves symmetrical effect. This composition gives the tiger's posture stability and dignity, and also implicitly embodies the folk understanding of yin-yang balance and the perpetuation of life. In terms of specific form, the Li Hou Tiger is rounded, full, and charmingly naive. To bring out the tiger's majesty and vitality, artisans often deliberately exaggerate the proportion of the head, making it account for one-third or even more of the overall form, creating a proportion of "a large head and a small body, with a tiger head and a tiger brain." The limbs are greatly shortened, the body is short, thick, and plump, and the tail is turned up high, giving the overall outline a strong sense of mass. Such treatment removes the fierce animal nature and retains a naive childlike charm, making it more readily accepted by the general public, especially children, and also reflecting the aesthetic pursuit of "modeling by meaning" in folk art.

The depiction of facial features follows the same approach: the eyes are large and round, and the nose is broad and wide. The nose is the core part of the symmetrical segmentation of the cloth tiger and mainly presents two categories. The first is the slender "tongding dandantype" (through-the-top hanging-gallbladder type), which has two forms: one extending from the top all the way to the chin, and the other extending from the top to above the mouth. The second category is the "broad ruyi-head type," whose nose modeling is three-dimensional and extends to the left and right, and which can be further subdivided into three types: the first is the overlapping hanging-bead type, composed of two or three hanging-gallbladder-shaped cloth sculptures; the second resembles nose wings blooming like a flower; and the third employs auspicious patterns such as butterflies and the Five Poisons. The treatment of the mouth roughly falls into two types: one in which the mouth is slightly open, with the upper and lower parts protruding three-dimensionally, or in a flat petal shape, with teeth and tongue extending from inside; and the other in which the mouth is weakened while the teeth or tongue are emphasized. The exposed, exaggerated tiger fangs possess both the dignity of the tiger and an added lively, worldly flavor. As for the ears, the styles are equally rich, such as maple-leaf shapes, child cloth sculptures, and Five Poisons patterns.

3.2 Color Characteristics of the Li Hou Tiger

Color is a highly prominent aspect of the artistic characteristics of the Li Hou Tiger, and it is influenced by both the traditional concept of the "Five Elements and Five Colors" and local folk aesthetics. In terms of color scheme, the Li Hou Tiger is dominated by high-purity primary colors such as red, yellow, black, white, and green (blue), with strong contrasts and striking visual impact. Red is used most frequently, taking on the meanings of warmth, festivity, and life, and is also the color most commonly used in folk customs to ward off evil and seek auspiciousness; yellow represents the earth and nobility, embodying the implications of a solid foundation, wealth, and good fortune. The large-scale interweaving of red and yellow constitutes the warm, unrestrained, and vibrant tonal foundation of the Li Hou Tiger.

In the treatment of details, artisans often use black and white for outlining and harmonization, and there is a local color-matching saying that "red interspersed with yellow delights the mother." Key parts of the tiger such as the eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth are mostly outlined with thick black lines to strengthen the contours and spiritual vitality; the decorative patterns on the body are embellished with cool colors such as green and blue, forming a warm-cool contrast with the warm red and yellow tones, so that the overall effect is lively yet steady. This color scheme appears rough and bold but is in fact full of tension; it conforms to the aesthetic standard of "vivid yet not vulgar" in folk art and also carries the folk psychological desire to ward off evil and invoke blessings and to pray for peace and health. As far as IP visual image design is concerned, this color language of high purity and strong contrast readily captures the audience's attention and possesses relatively strong brand recognition and emotional appeal.

3.3 Pattern Characteristics of the Li Hou Tiger

The patterns on the Li Hou Tiger are not merely visual embellishment but rather a system of folk symbolism with clear meanings. In cloth art production, artisans embroider various auspicious patterns onto the tiger's body by means of embroidery, appliqué, and painted decoration. The "Five Poisons" pattern is the most representative type, consisting of the snake, scorpion, centipede, gecko, and toad. In folk practice these creatures are not treated as evil.

Instead, the principle of "using poison to counteract poison" applies: their feared qualities are turned toward warding off illness and protecting children. This inversion—turning a dangerous symbol into a protective one—is a recurring strategy in folk art.

Beyond the "Five Poisons," the Li Hou Tiger also carries peony, pomegranate, lotus, fish, and cloud motifs. Each carries a conventional meaning: the peony stands for wealth and honor, the pomegranate for many descendants, the lotus for purity, and the fish, homophonous with "surplus" (yu), for abundance from year to year. These motifs are not placed at random. Their layout stresses symmetry and a clear hierarchy between primary and secondary elements. On the tiger's back, for instance, a large peony or lotus usually serves as the visual center, with cloud motifs and vines filling the surrounding space to produce a dense, full composition. Through homophony and metaphor, such patterns give visible form to abstract blessings and have come to function as cultural markers specific to the Li Hou Tiger. In contemporary IP image design, extracting, deconstructing, and reorganizing these patterns helps sustain the cultural lineage and also gives the character a further layer of cultural meaning and narrative.

4. Design Practice of Traditional Patterns in the IP Visual Image of the Li Hou Tiger

4.1 IP Character Positioning and the Extraction and Transformation of Visual Symbols

Having analyzed the artistic characteristics of traditional Li Hou Tiger patterns in the preceding sections, this design establishes the IP character "Yao Yao Tiger" on that basis, positioning it as a "Guochao cute and playful guardian." The extraction of visual symbols mainly focuses on the face of the Li Hou Tiger: retaining the iconic "Wang" (king) character pattern, exaggerated round eyes, broad nose, and naive tiger fangs; at the same time, auspicious patterns such as peony, pomegranate, and cloud motifs from the traditional Li Hou Tiger are adopted and subjected to geometric and flattened treatment. For example, the eyebrows are changed into streamlined cloud motifs, and the eyes incorporate the radial characteristics of the sun pattern, whereby the originally intricate folk patterns are transformed into concise and easily recognizable IP symbols. The color scheme is

dominated by warm orange, supplemented by low-saturation colors such as bean-paste green and cream yellow, which not only continues the festive tonal foundation of the traditional "Five Elements and Five Colors" but also brings out a fashionable sense in line with modern aesthetics.

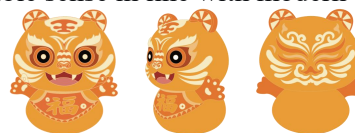


Figure 1. Orthographic Views of the Yao Yao Tiger Character

3.2 Deconstruction and Reorganization of Patterns in IP Character Creation

In the specific creation of the IP character, the deconstruction and reorganization of traditional patterns run throughout the entire process. The three-view drawing and character setting of the "Yao Yao Tiger" retain the Li Hou Tiger's morphological characteristics of "a large head and a small body, short, thick, and rounded," and the facial proportion is enlarged to enhance the sense of naivety and approachability. The "Fu" (blessing) character bellyband worn by the character directly adopts the traditional auspicious character, taking on the meaning of inviting blessings and guarding the household. Two derivative images, "Hu Doudou" and "Dai Dai Tiger," extend the design further. They are distinguished from the main character by a different palette and by replacing selected motifs—cloud motifs, for instance, give way to water-ripple patterns—so that the IP character set gains greater variety. The action and emoji designs draw on the "Yao Yao Tiger" persona of shaking its head and swaying while delivering blessings. Expressions include "serious," "crying," "surprised," and "angry," alongside playful movements such as "wink" and "push but never fall." Through these new carriers, the traditional patterns take on a different kind of life.



Figure 2. Orthographic Views of the Hu Doudou Character Design



Figure 3. Orthographic Views of the Dai Dai Tiger Character Design

3.3 Modern Transformation of the Color System and IP Derivative Applications

The color design reworks the Li Hou Tiger's traditional high-purity red and yellow scheme. Warm orange-yellow serves as the primary color and carries associations of auspiciousness and vitality. Bean-paste green and mint green are introduced as auxiliary colors; together with the warm tones they produce a soft warm-cool contrast, which makes the overall visual effect gentler and easier to sustain. Around this visual image, a range of cultural-creative products has been developed. In two-dimensional work, the IP image is paired with refined geometric patterns and applied to keychains, jigsaw puzzles, stickers, tape, and coasters; repeated arrangement of the patterns, or localized embellishment, gives these items a coherent visual identity. In three-dimensional work, the image becomes blind-box figurines, plush toys, and packaging boxes. The blind boxes, for instance, are organized into themed series such as "Auspicious Tiger Radiating Might" and "Lucky Tiger Bringing Wealth," each with its own pattern combinations and color schemes, which adds to the playfulness and collectible appeal of the product. Canvas bags and throw pillows extend the range further, carrying the Li Hou Tiger IP across different materials and everyday settings.

4. Conclusion

Li Hou Tiger folk art reflects the everyday spiritual aspirations of ordinary people and helps sustain shared cultural memory. Tradition and modern life now meet, and in that meeting both inheritance and innovation take place: forms change, but meanings persist. The IP visual design developed in this study follows this logic. It takes the blessing-and-auspiciousness meanings embedded in traditional patterns and renders them as visual symbols and emotional experiences that fit contemporary taste.

The practical work proceeded in three steps. It distilled a modeling principle of "holistic segmentation," reorganized auspicious patterns such as the "Five Poisons" and floral motifs, and reworked the "Five Elements and Five Colors" color system. These steps produced the "Yao Yao Tiger" character and its derivative applications, and in doing so tested whether traditional patterns can be transformed for

modern use. The result continues the cultural roots of the Li Hou Tiger while also responding to the visual tastes of the present.

In the future, the cultural and creative product design of folk art must not only safeguard its spiritual core and cultural connotations but also need to use vivid design language to close the distance with the audience, so that it can maintain vitality and room for growth in the development of the times and truly take root in people's hearts.

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