

Research Article

Research and Application of Chinese Auspicious Animal Images in Contemporary Clothing Design—Take “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” as Research Example

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Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate the auspicious animal images in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”, exploring the profiling features and evolution of the auspicious animal patterns through cross verification of images, literature and cultural relics, and based on the research, the images are applied on the China-Chic clothing design. Ancient Chinese took the auspicious animals as things of blessing, which were endowed with many beautiful meanings to express our ancestors’ longing for a better life. Based on the concept of innovative design derived from the traditional culture, this thesis takes the images of auspicious animals in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” as its research object to analyze their origins and evolution in China-chic fashion and, together with the case study of modern clothing design and a certain extent summary, to promote the inheritance, development and application of traditional culture in modern social life. The thesis will delve deep into the cultural connotations and aesthetic characteristics of the auspicious animal images, analyze and investigate the types, characteristics and implied meanings of such image to extract representative visual element symbols, which are then integrated into the modern fashion design, fulfilling the inheritance, development and application of traditional culture in modern social life.

Keywords

Auspicious Animal Image, Cultural Inheritance, Design Application, Artistic Aesthetics, Design Elements

1. Research Introduction

“The Classic of Mountains and Seas” is an important cultural classic in ancient China, in which many exotic animals and rare birds are documented. Utilizing these elements may not only reflect the uniqueness and historical sense of traditional Chinese culture, but also facilitate better understanding and inheritance of traditional Chinese cultural spirit.

Ancient Chinese took the auspicious animals as things of blessing, which were endowed with many beautiful meanings to express our ancestors’ longing for a better life. This

worship of auspicious animals signifies the simple wish of our ancestors to pray for peace and happiness. It represents the reverence and respect for deified animals by humans in prehistoric times. This worship is the earliest artistic culture, some of which are kept till today [1]. Auspicious animals are always a symbol of auspiciousness. For example, Pixiu (a mythical wild animal) symbolizes bringing in wealth and treasures, Fenghuang (Phoenix) symbolizes bright and beautiful future, and Qingluan (Green Phoenix)

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symbolizes sweet love. Combing auspicious animal elements derived from “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” with China-chic fashion and integrating traditional culture and modern fashion elements can not only diversify the design works that are filled with mysterious, fantastic and ancient elements, but also increase their visual impact and attraction, enhancing the cultural connotation and popular value of the works.

In the process of investigation, the author searched and collected information through various channels, including ancient books, museums, cultural relics, historical materials, artistic works, etc., in order to comprehensively and deeply understand the form, characteristics, symbolism and other aspects of auspicious animals from “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”, helping more people to understand and feel the unique charm of auspicious animal culture. For example, by designing diverse costumes, accessories or cultural artifacts bearing images of auspicious animals can help more people get to know and experience the auspicious animal culture.

2. Research Overview on “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”

2.1. Basic Overview

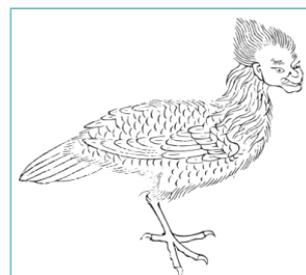
“The Classic of Mountains and Seas” is a mythological geography classic from the pre-Qin period, in which numerous myths, legends, rare animals and plants, and precious minerals are documented. The ancient classification system regards it as the book of mountain and river geography or natural resources. “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” embraces almost everything from ancient mythology, geography, animals, plants, minerals, to witchcraft, religion, history, medicine, folk customs, and ethnicities.

Though the author and completion date of “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” are unknown, contemporary scholars speculate that it was compiled by multiple authors from the late Warring States period to the early Han Dynasty. “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” features both pictures and text, but the original pictures were lost, and all the existing pictures are redrawn versions from Ming and Qing Dynasty (see [Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#)). It preserves many mythologies and legends, reflecting not only the exploration and imagination of ancient Chinese about the nature, but also their knowledge and concepts about social systems, ethnic relations, religious beliefs, medicine and health preservation. Therefore, it has very high historical, literary and scientific research value, reflected in geography, mythology, literature and history.



Picture Source: Zhonghua Ancient Books Database

Figure 1. “A Collection of Books Ancient and Present”/Zhu.



Picture Source: Zhonghua Ancient Books Database

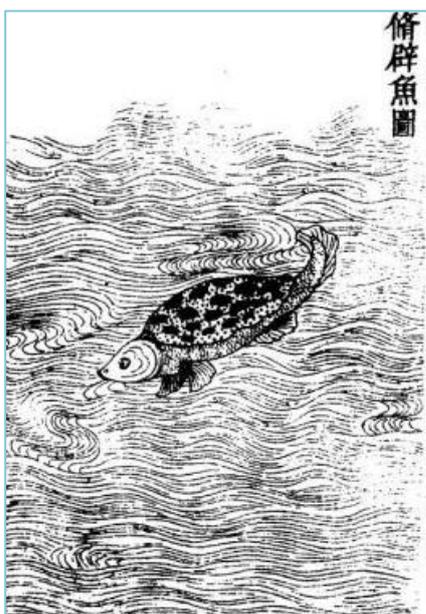
Figure 2. “The Illustrated Classic of Mountains and Seas”, Ming Dynasty/Fengniao (Phoenix).

Many famous ancient Chinese myths and legends are originated from “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”, e.g. “Kuaifu Running After the Sun”, who died and turned into Juyang Mountain and Yuanquan Spring; “Nuwa fixing up sky” by using five-color stone that turned into five famous mountains in China; the mythical bird Jingwei trying to fill up the sea with pebbles just for revenge; Dayu thrice passing his home without entering it as he was busy with taming the flood. These legends reflect not only the thinking of ancient Chinese on natural phenomena, social history, moral and ethical aspects, but also their imaginative and creative mythological thinking, providing inspiration and sources for many writers of later generations.

2.2. Overview of Auspicious Animal Stratified by Their Symbolic Functions

The auspicious animals in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” convey the knowledge and imagination of ancient Chinese about the nature, revealing the duality of creativity and destructive power of nature. These auspicious animals are known for their special features and abilities, thus giving positive impact and significance on humans. For instance, Xiupi Fish is a magical fish widely recognized as having therapeutic efficacy against psoriasis, its meat, once eaten by people, can alleviate the symptoms of the disease (see [Figure 3](#)). Tiangou (Heavenly Hound) is an exotic animal that can be raised, and people believe it is able to resist danger and protect people from harsh environments and evil forces (see [Figure 4](#)). These legendary auspicious animals not only demonstrate

human's eager exploration of mysterious creatures in nature, but also reflect the relationship and interdependence between humans and nature [2]. The fact that people pray for health, safety, and security by worshipping auspicious animals exemplifies ancient people's reverence for the power of nature and their understanding of the interaction between themselves and the environment [3]. These auspicious animal images are not only legendary characters in ancient culture, but also the symbols conveying the concept of harmonious coexistence with nature, encouraging people to protect and respect nature for better life and well-being.



Picture Source: czhiyao.com

Figure 3. "The Encyclopedia of Birds and Insects"/Xiupi Fish.



Picture Source: czhiyao.com

Figure 4. "Gallery of Rare Birds and Beasts"/Tiangou.

3. Cultural and Artistic Value of the Auspicious Animal Images in "The Classic of Mountains and Seas"

The auspicious animals in "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" contain not only rich and colorful images and functions, but also profound cultural connotations and values. They not only mirror the ancient people's knowledge and attitude towards nature and social reality, but also express their yearning and pursuit for a better life and ideal realm [4]. The cultural and artistic value embodied by those auspicious animals in the "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" are analyzed in four aspects as follows:

3.1. Exhibit the Aesthetics of Design and Painting in Ancient Times

Auspicious animal images in "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" are important components in ancient Chinese mythological thinking and decorative art, reflecting not only the simplest design thinking, but also the understanding of ancient Chinese about the relationship between humans and nature, as well as between heaven, earth and humans, with their primitive thinking patterns and cultural heritage preserved [5]. Although the original picture book of "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" was lost, the auspicious animal image has been long rooted in traditional Chinese culture (see Figure 5).



Picture Source: Private library

Figure 5. Xuanniao Pattern of Shang Dynasty.

3.2. Exhibit Ancient Chinese Concept of the Interconnection and Influence Between Heaven, Earth and Everything

Many auspicious animals in "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" are associated with celestial phenomena or geography, such as the Zhujiuyin (Nine Yin Candles) controlling sunset

and moonrise, Gudiao (a venomous eagle) bringing storms and lightning, and Kuiniu (a bull beast) causing earth vibrations. All these indicate that ancient Chinese believed that nature is an organic whole, with close connections and interactions between various phenomena [6].

3.3. Exhibit the Worship and Reverence of Ancient Chinese for the Power of Life and Spirit

Many auspicious animals in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” possess abilities or characteristics that go beyond convention or common sense, such as Qiongqi (a winged tiger) swallowing all living beings, Chiru (a fish with human face) curing diseases and prolonging life. All these indicate that ancient Chinese had a great reverence for the power of life and spirit, and hoped to gain benefits through communication with them [7].

3.4. Exhibit the Yearning and Pursuit of Ancient Chinese for Beautiful Things and Ideal Realms

Many auspicious animals in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” convey beautiful meanings or symbolic meanings [8], such as the Xuanniao (a divine bird) representing the sun or imperial power, the Jiuweihu (a fox with nine tails) representing wisdom or auspiciousness, and the Pixiu (a mythical wild animal) representing civilization or wealth. All these indicate that ancient Chinese were yearning for beautiful things and ideal realms, and they expressed their thoughts and desires by creating these exotic animals [9].

4. Application of Auspicious Animal Image Elements from “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” into Clothing and Fashion Design

4.1. Application of Auspicious Animal Image Elements in Fashion Design

The images of auspicious animals are often presented through various techniques such as printing, dyeing, and embroidery [10]. They are often depicted with exquisite and delicate techniques, showcasing the beauty and mystery of traditional culture. These patterns mostly appear in the form of localized patterns on multiple parts of the collar, cuffs, hem, chest, back, etc., making the overall design full of artistic and cultural connotations [11]. Taking the LANCY brand (Figure 6) as an example, the designer cleverly integrated popular high-end colors into the form of the auspicious animal pattern. With the help of exquisite embroidery techniques, the auspi-

cious beasts depicted by contemporary painters are vividly reproduced.



Picture Source: Sohu.com

Figure 6. Image of LANCY/The Classic Series.



Picture Source: VOGUE RUNWAY

Figure 7. Valentino 2018 Early Autumn Col./ “Dragon”.

In Valentino brand’s 2018 Early Autumn Collection, creative director Pierpaolo Piccioli meticulously applied shimmering decorations and jewelry to the sporty long, glossy nylon trench coat, to redefine the classic dragon pattern, using delicate lines and patterns to express a very stylish visual

effect (see Figure 7).

4.2. Creative Adaptation of Auspicious Animal Image Elements in Clothing Design

This design leverages the auspicious animal images of Wenyaoyu (a bird winged fish) and Zhiyuan (a kite) in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” to conduct down jacket design (see Figure 8 and Table 1 for details, dress-up rendering see Figures 9-10).



Picture Source: Author Drawing

Figure 8. Practical Rendering of the Auspicious Animal Image Elements in Fashion Design.

Table 1. Image Comparison of Wenyaoyu and Zhiyuan.

Name Implied Meaning	Legend	Profiling Feature
<p>Wenyaoyu</p> <p>Signifies a bountiful harvest in the world, a symbol of prosperity and happiness [12].</p>	 <p>文鰲魚圖胡本</p>	<p>Long oval shape body, wide back/abdomen, both flat sides, tapered towards the tail. Wings of bird, relatively short head, flat bac, sloping downwards on both sides, and a narrow abdomen.</p>
<p>Zhiyuan</p> <p>Endowed with the meaning of pursuing auspiciousness and good luck, avoiding disasters and difficulties; embodiment of expectations for family reunion, longevity, and other good wishes [13].</p>		<p>Hard wing and skeleton, with lifting blades shaped like wings; higher edges at upper part and on both sides, wings slightly tilting backwards; hollow in the middle.</p>

Data source: Collected by author



Picture Source: Author Compilation

Figure 9. Dressed-up Rendering of the Fashion Design Practice.



Picture Source: Author Compilation

Figure 10. Dressed-up Rendering of the Fashion Design Practice.

5. Conclusions

(1) The auspicious animals in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” reflect the desire and reverence of ancient Chinese for exploring mysterious things [14]. These auspicious animals take various forms, mostly are combinations of different creatures, with unique and non-existent forms in nature. They exhibit the rich imagination and creativity of ancient Chinese, conveying their prayers for auspiciousness, happiness, and prosperity, while also reflecting our ancestors’ desire for spiritual peace and psychological balance.

(2) The auspicious animals in “The Classic of Mountains and Seas” contain extremely high cultural and artistic value, passing down to the present through different media and forms. In ancient times, the images of auspicious animals often appeared on artistic carriers such as architecture and handicrafts, serving as important elements for auspicious wishes and decoration. These artworks demonstrate reverence for auspicious beasts and incorporate cultural symbolism of auspiciousness and blessings. It is an important component of traditional Chinese culture, witnessing people’s exploration of mysterious things and their pursuit of an auspicious and beautiful life during historical changes.

(3) In modern design, the auspicious animal elements endow works with auspicious and spiritual qualities. By combining the symbolic significance of ancient auspicious animals with modern creation, it not only satisfies people’s pursuit of beauty, but also provides positive value and healing effects spiritually. This creative approach carries the inheritance of ancient wisdom, cleverly connecting the past with the present, and bringing a profound artistic experience to contemporary society [15].

(4) In contemporary design, sophisticated modern design techniques are often used to express profound respect and preservation for the connotations contained in the original auspicious animal culture. In fashion design, some China-chic fashion brands focus not only on visual uniqueness and innovation, but also on the in-depth understanding and reverence of traditional culture [16]. By delicately balancing traditional and modern elements, eye-catching fashion designs have been created, contributing positively to the inheritance and development of Chinese culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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Kailun Feng is a MA student at School of Fashion in Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT). He completed his MA in Fashion Design from BIFT in 2024. During learning in BIFT as a MA student, he won the honorable prize of 2022 “Charming Oriental China International Home Clothing Original Design Competition”, and also won the Gold Medal of “China (Guangshan) Down filled garment Products Design Competition and China Young Designer Entrepreneurship Competition”. Kailun FENG’ research field: Fashion design and Cultural innovation; Film and Drama costume design, etc.