

Nong Mon Qilin: Souvenir Design Based on Local Identity of Saensuk Subdistrict, Chonburi Province, Thailand

Suparat Khampeera^a
Jirayut Pitanon^b
Siriporn Khetjenkarn^{c*}

^a Lecturer, International College, Burapha University, Thailand,

E-mail: suparat.kh@go.buu.ac.th

^b Lecturer, International College, Burapha University, Thailand,

E-mail: jirayut@go.buu.ac.th

^{c*} Asst. Prof. Ph.D., Lecturer, International College, Burapha University, Thailand,

E-mail: siriporn.kh@go.buu.ac.th

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Abstract

The Qilin, a Chinese mythological creature representing virtue and prosperity, has become emblematic of the local Teochew-Chinese identity. This research employs Qilin symbolism to develop a culturally appropriate souvenir design for the Nong Mon community in Chonburi Province, guided by three objectives: 1) to extract Qilin-related identity keywords reflective of Teochew-Chinese heritage; 2) to establish evidence-based design standards for Nong Mon souvenirs; and 3) to validate the proposed designs with community stakeholders. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, across three phases, involving 35 key informants in total (n = 35): 25 participants contributed focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in Phase 1, and 10 design and community validation specialists participated in Phase 3. An evaluation of 156 existing Nong Mon souvenirs was also conducted to identify market gaps. Data were analyzed through thematic and content analysis. In response to Objective 1, analysis identified seven Qilin identity keywords: virtue, longevity, prosperity, protection, auspiciousness, cultural continuity, and local belonging-which formed the design brief. In response to Objective 2, these keywords informed a five-element colour palette (blue, red, yellow, white, black, with gold and jade-green accents) and morphological design standards (e.g., dragon-scaled skin, deer-hoofed feet, single horn), applied to a 3D-printed collectible figurine prototype. In response to Objective 3, evaluation by ten key informants (design experts, cultural heritage specialists, and tourism scholars) produced four validated themes: cultural authenticity of the Qilin's iconographic translation, material quality and refinement needs, narrative engagement potential, and community acceptance and heritage alignment. These findings contribute to the advancement of sustainable tourism while safeguarding Teochew-Chinese cultural heritage in the Saensuk subdistrict.

Keywords: Cultural Souvenir Design, Teochew-Chinese Heritage, Qilin Symbolism, Sustainable Tourism, Community-Based Cultural Heritage, Saensuk Subdistrict

Introduction

Bang Saen Beach, Khao Sam Mook, and the Nong Mon local market, noted for its processed seafood and traditional sweets, are prominent tourist attractions in Saensuk, a Chonburi Province subdistrict (Nakpathom et al., 2024). The generations of Teochew-Chinese immigration in Saensuk have shaped its cuisine and culture (Luangpipat, 2025). The Qilin (Khee-Ling in Teochew) symbolizes morality, longevity, and wealth for Saensuk residents (Lukman et al., 2018). “Nong Mon Qilin” builds on this cultural bedrock and uses the Teochew-Chinese traditions of Saensuk to strengthen locals’ and visitors’ spiritual and cultural ties (Lang & Numtong, 2025), creating a sense of belonging in a tourism sector that often prioritizes profit. Research has shown that turning mythical animals into modern Thai souvenirs to boost local tourism is successful (Ponimin, 2021). Saensuk has many cultural treasures, yet its souvenirs are lacking. Many of these souvenirs do not accurately depict the subdistrict’s culture and use obsolete design (Husa, 2020; Qiu et al., 2024). This mismatch hurts

Saensuk, whose economy relies on tourism. This area’s souvenirs do not represent Nong Mon’s Teochew–Chinese identity beyond food. Lack of cultural transference to modern creative outputs causes two main issues: younger generations’ erosion of Teochew–Chinese heritage due to disconnection from traditional symbolism (Huang & Fang, 2021) and consumer preferences for generic mass-produced or imported goods over locally made products that reflect community identity. Heritage preservation and local economic survival are threatened by this pattern. Addressing this twofold dilemma demands culturally authentic design. To ensure authenticity, this study uses a qualitative research method with community members and 3D scans of archaeological designs from the Sawang Phon Foundation and Chao Mae Sam Muk Shrines. The proposed design integrates Thailand’s Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) economic model, which emphasises material innovation and sustainability (Edyvean et al., 2023). To practice “circular localism,” modern Qilin souvenirs incorporate bamboo tubes from Khao Lam and oyster shells from fishermen in the area (Dumée, 2021; Jitpakdee et al., 2025). This redesign approach simplifies complex historical forms into modern graphic designs and resin copies, making it useful for cultural souvenirs.

This study reimagines the Nong Mon Qilin as a modern collectible to promote cultural preservation and local economic growth. This study also investigates how culturally significant souvenir design, such as the Qilin, might meet heritage conservation and economic development goals. This study creates a culturally authentic memento that promotes sustainable tourism and makes Saensuk stand out (National Economic and Social Development Council, 2025). BCG principles and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2017) are used to create concrete cultural anchors that protect the Saensuk’s Teochew–Chinese heritage, benefit local artisans and entrepreneurs, and resolve the conflict between heritage preservation and commercial tourism.

Objectives

This study aims to:

1. extract and analyze Nong Mon Qilin identity keywords from Teochew symbolic imagery and cultural narratives within the Saensuk–Nong Mon community;
2. develop design standards for culturally authentic souvenirs, including prototypes, color palettes, and pattern specifications, based on the extracted identity keywords and existing art and design principles; and
3. validate the design outcomes using qualitative feedback gathered from community stakeholders and design experts.

Literature review

National policy framework and Bio-Circular-Green economy

Thailand's development policies support culturally-based product innovation. The 20-year National Strategy (2018–2037) aims to “link cultural identity and local wisdom to create social value and economic added value,” using local cultural capital to deliver valuable products and services through cultural and creative tourism (Netwong et al., 2024). Thailand relies on tourism for 12% of its GDP (Piboonrungraj et al., 2023). Thus, Thailand's tourism industry must use sustainable methods to balance economic growth with cultural preservation. This framework is expanded by the National Economic and Social Development Plan No. 13 (2023–2027), which emphasizes quality and sustainability (National Economic and Social Development Council, 2025), spatial identity, diverse community tourism options, ecological conservation, and cultural heritage. Thailand's BCG economy model uses biodiversity and cultural assets to innovate in four key sectors: agriculture and food, health and medicine, bioenergy and biomaterials, and tourism and the creative economy (Edyvean, 2023). This strategy integrates UN SDGs 11.4, 8, and 12 on trash reduction and recycling. Cultural tourism, which accounts for 40% of worldwide tourism earnings, helps communities grow economically while preserving their legacy (UNESCO, 2017). Souvenirs anchor travelers' memories of a destination (Masset & Decrop, 2020). The convergence of BCG principles and cultural tourism offers opportunities to create souvenirs that promote environmental sustainability and cultural preservation.

Cultural product transformation framework

Global market homogenization has increased customer demand in culturally rooted items (Zhang & Dong, 2023). Culturally authentic gifts can differentiate destinations, boost tourist satisfaction, and boost local economies (Chang et al., 2021). Designers must incorporate indigenous workmanship and local myths into modern product designs to appeal to modern consumers (Zhang, 2021). Systematic cross-cultural design techniques bridge heritage and commercial innovative identities. Semiotic frameworks like form–semantics–pragmatics balance visual form, cultural meaning, and social application to prevent auspicious or mythological themes from semantic drifting (Lou, 2025). Cultural products are sociolinguistic and spiritual. Cultural symbols including regional themes, historical narratives, and legendary entities are deconstructed and reinterpreted by designers before being used in current product designs (Lin, 2007). This translation procedure is three-tiered. The outermost level includes colors, textures, patterns, and morphological features that are only superficially represented. Usability, ergonomics, and consuming rituals in a cultural setting connect physical items, social contact, and lifestyle integration at the intermediate level. The core reflects philosophical principles, historical narratives, and symbolic significance (fortune, protection, and mercy) that evoke emotion (Lin, 2007). The methodical extraction and translation of cultural product designs across all three levels ensures that the products reflect cultural identity while meeting commercial demands.

Strategic design framework application

The cross-cultural design framework encompasses inquiry (finding culture elements), interaction (analyzing cultural scenarios), development (translating features into design elements), and implementation (Dhadphale, 2024). This framework organizes community-oriented product and sustainable cultural artifact design. Designers build authentic cultural objects by integrating local identity with exterior material developments (Zhang & Wen, 2020), creating bio-circular materials that respect traditional forms and incorporate modern sustainability. This methodology now incorporates BCG and participatory community validation through focus groups with local craftspeople (D'Amato & Korhonen, 2021). Recent research has used sustainable material

procurement and qualitative user experience evaluation to boost cultural authenticity and business feasibility (Santoso & Schrepp, 2019).

Cultural integration in souvenir design

Incorporating local culture in souvenir design offers tourists authentic experiences and fosters place memory and regional identity (Qiu et al., 2024). Design methods include conservative methods that conserve tradition and modern adaptations that simplify features for accessibility while retaining cultural essence (Olalere, 2020). Culturally influenced souvenirs might be conservative (traditional), flexible (combining heritage with accessibility), or modern (using minimalist aesthetics or lively colors to attract more demographics) (Imsonran et al., 2021). According to Zhu et al. (2023), keychains, tote bags, and t-shirts can convey regional identity by including local identifiers like religious symbols, indigenous textile patterns, and educational background. Cross-disciplinary design can transform folk culture aspects into unique souvenirs that promote cultural tourism (Qiuxia et al., 2022). Ceramic and locally produced fabrics are used in souvenir design and public art programmes for mature markets (Qiu et al., 2024). Financial assistance and traditional knowledge systems are needed to improve souvenir diversity and quality (Zhu et al., 2023).

Circular economy principles in design

Thailand's design and manufacturing industries are slowly adopting circular economy principles for resource sustainability. This paradigm promotes product reuse, value preservation, and waste management while optimizing manufacturing resources. Entrepreneurs working toward sustainable development are supported by the government (Amornkitvikai et al., 2024). Previous experiments have shown waste-to-souvenir conversion. Beachgoers can buy souvenir bags made from vinyl from damaged beach bed fabric, inner tubes, and beach umbrellas. Three prototype shoulder bags, chest bags, and backpacks have been sold to visitors with good satisfaction (Pattanasopon, 2023). These projects demonstrate that waste materials and local identification can create commercially viable goods that meet consumer needs. Besides synthetic materials, agricultural waste can be developed. Rice straw from the indigenous "Jek Choey Sao Hai," a byproduct of traditional rice production, is used to make artisanal paper for women's handbags and sustainable packaging. These goods receive positive reviews, with customers praising the benefits of using agricultural waste (Pramotemaung, 2024). This technique reduces agricultural burning and environmental damage while increasing waste product value and encouraging local storytelling mementos.

Qilin symbolism in Thai-Chinese culture

According to Breedlove and Fung (2020), the Qilin (麒麟) is a sacred entity with five animal features, including dragon scales, deer hooves, and a five-hued body (blue, red, yellow, white, and black, each hue signifying one of the five elements). Qilin statues and five-element symbols are often put at Chinese temple gates to ward against evil and attract good. The ancient Chinese five-element principle states that oneness creates protection and prosperity (Watt, 2008). Thai-Chinese societies revere auspicious things and animals. Anthropological research demonstrates that Thai-Chinese households and enterprises employ auspicious artifacts for luck, wealth, and entrepreneurial confidence (Pinnukul, 2021). Commercial enterprises strategically install Chinese auspicious objects outside and inside their premises to increase earnings, wealth, and owner trust. Choosing lucky symbols needs thought about their meanings. Dragons, phoenixes, and bats have unique connotations, as does the Qilin, which symbolizes compassion and good fortune (Watt, 2008). Qilin and other Chinese auspicious symbols emerge in religious and contemporary cultural products (Zhang & Dong, 2023), transmitting identity and cultural narratives to users and visitors. Research has shown that shrine art motifs like dragons, phoenixes, turtles, Qilin, lions, and bats can be used to produce contemporary wearable jewelry with subtly fortunate meanings. These jewelry items use fortunate animal forms and patterns as "symbolic codes" to

make adornment culturally significant (Breedlove & Fung, 2020). Qilin or dragon motifs convey auspiciousness and distinguish products in the market. This incorporation of traditional aspects into practical objects supports Thai-Chinese ideals and allows new generations to experience Chinese culture through concrete products.

Teochew-Chinese cultural capital in Saensuk-Nong Mon

Saensuk subdistrict in Chonburi Province, Eastern Thailand, is crucial for learning Chinese immigration culture. Tourism is important to Bang Saen, which includes Muang Saensuk on the shore. Coastal Chonburi has had large Teochew (Chaozhou) Chinese inhabitants since late Ayutthaya. This municipality's rich culture makes symbols, especially auspicious animals, important to local identity. Saensuk aims to build a "livable city" that preserves natural resources, promotes economic growth, and promotes sustainability (Nukkipid, 2022). Development initiatives in this region focus on local cultural assets and blending indigenous handicrafts and traditional practices into tourist activities and offers to increase creative tourism (Qiu et al., 2024). Souvenirs that incorporate cultural and artistic identities into modern designs through locality-based development and sustainable practices must be authentic, useful, and attractive (Zhu et al., 2023). After generations of settlement, Saensuk–Nong Mon's residents' deity worship, Chinese New Year celebrations, intricate artwork, and auspicious Chinese symbols reflect their Teochew-Chinese cultural heritage. Qilin, which represents virtue, longevity, and wealth, is essential to Teochew-Chinese beliefs. Qilin iconography is widespread in Chinese community art and architecture and are extensively shown in Nong Mon Chinese temple sculptures and paintings, representing Thai-Chinese ancestry and identity.

Research methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative exploratory approach that incorporates iterative design development and validation processes. The research philosophy is rooted in interpretivism, which emphasizes the importance of community voices and cultural narratives in guiding design innovation. This study is conducted in three phases.

Phase 1: Nong Mon Qilin identity keywords are identified via interviews, focus groups, and visual documentation.

Phase 2: A product design grounded in art and design principles is developed using the identity keywords extracted from Phase 1.

Phase 3: Qualitative validation is conducted by gathering community and expert feedback on the design prototype.

This study was conducted in Saensuk and covered five communities, namely, Hat Wonnapha (coastal heritage zone), Ruamjai Pattana (cultural preservation area), Khao Sam Muk (religious tourism hub), Bang Saen Lang (commercial tourism district), and Nong Mon (food heritage center). These communities were selected as they embody a rich tapestry of cultural heritage while sharing a common Teochew–Chinese ancestry. The focus group and interview sessions were conducted in Thai and followed the ethical protocols approved by the Burapha University Research Ethics Committee, Thailand (Approval No. IRB2-142/2568).

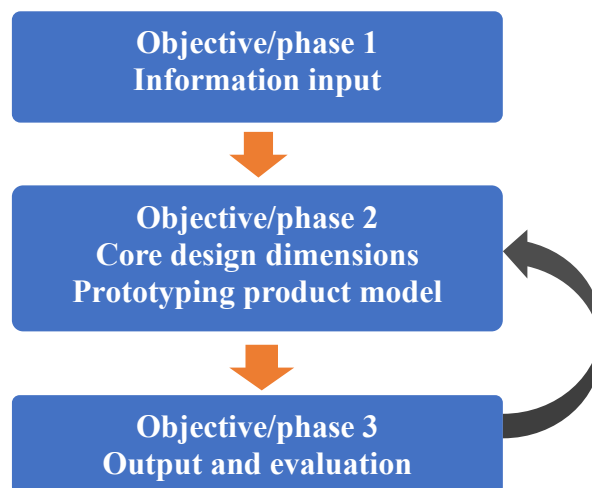


Figure 1: Research framework. The framework illustrates the study's three-phase progression-identity extraction, design development, and validation-and how findings from each phase feed into the next.

Source: Authors' own work

Sampling and participants

To gain cultural information and varied views, purposive and criteria sampling was used (Palinkas et al., 2015). Creswell & Poth (2016) used maximum variation sampling to represent stakeholder groups. A total of 35 key informants participated across the study: 25 contributed to Phase 1 data collection (interviews and focus groups; profiles in Table 1), of whom 18 also participated in individual in-depth interviews. A separate, independently recruited sample of 10 key informants (K1-K10)-design and material experts, cultural heritage specialists, and tourism scholars-participated in Phase 3 design validation. The two samples were non-overlapping, bringing the total number of unique participants across the study to 35.

Table 1: Participant profiles and selection criteria

Sample group	Number (people)	Description	Role in project	Inclusion criteria
Community leaders	3	Respected community leaders play a pivotal role in promoting cultural heritage	Integrating the project into the community while capturing local insights	Candidates must have a minimum of five years of experience
Local designers	5	Regional artists and designers engaging with local heritage and identity	Communicating creative ideas and local heritage	Relevant artistic works
Product manufacturers	5	OTOP business operators or local craftsmen in the Nong Mon community	Provide information on the production process, materials, and marketing	Distribution of local products
Tourists	8	Visited Nong Mon and bought souvenirs	Provide information on satisfaction, preferences, and needs	Has visited Nong Mon at least once
Local authorities	2	Officials from the Subdistrict Administrative Organization/municipality/provincial cultural office	Policy support and approaches for broader implementation	A local official who has duties/responsibilities in the area

Sample group	Number (people)	Description	Role in project	Inclusion criteria
Local expert	2	Local experts who have knowledge of Qilin, Nong Mon, temples, and Chinese shrines	Explain the legends, beliefs, and local identity	Recognized by the community

Source: Authors' own work

Note: All 25 participants listed above contributed to Phase 1 data collection. Local designers additionally contributed creative input during Phase 2 design development. Phase 3 validation was conducted with a separate, independently recruited sample of 10 key informants (K1-K10)-design and material experts, cultural heritage specialists, and tourism scholars-not included in this table. Total unique participants across the study: 35 (25 in Phase 1+10 in Phase 3).

Focus groups and interviews

Five to eight people participated in four community-based focus group sessions. For lively conversations and varied opinions, this number of individuals is ideal (Gundumogula, 2020). The collective cultural narratives were analyzed in semi-structured focus group talks. Trained moderators used narrative inquiry in 30–60-minute sessions (Adhikari, 2021). Discussion themes included community history, Teochew–Chinese cultural practices, Qilin and auspicious animal symbols, traditional festivals, culinary legacy, and tourism expectations.

Personal experiences and specific expertise were examined in 18 30–45-minute individual in-depth interviews. We sampled until theme saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). To study cultural identity development, transmission memories, tourism impacts, and preservation ambitions, each interview used phenomenological methods (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). A sample interview prompt was: “Could you explain a time when you felt linked to your Teochew heritage?” Our semi-structured interviews allowed for emergent themes while ensuring participant consistency.

Data recording and analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim in Thai following informed consent. Back-translation was used to check the accuracy of selected sections translated into English for this manuscript (Brislin, 1986). Field notes recorded the researcher's reflexivity, environmental context, and nonverbal communication (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Data was triangulated by at least two researchers to increase reliability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017); researchers discussed discrepancies until they agreed.

High-resolution photographs were used to chronicle shrine sculptures, paintings, architectural elements, cultural items, handicrafts, festival events, ritual performances, and souvenir products in the five selected communities, following systematic visual ethnography analysis (Brown & Collins, 2021). Standards documentation forms were used to catalogue the photographs' locations, dates, settings, and tentative descriptions.

Material culture was examined by assessing 156 Nong Mon Market souvenirs for cultural authenticity, design excellence, affordability, durability, and local narrative. A systematic evaluation matrix with criteria for each dimension was used to identify design improvements and market gaps (Yuan et al., 2022), with data triangulation following Noble and Heale (2019) to improve assessment validity. Community narratives from interviews and visual documentation of traditional Qilin representations were used to verify material culture findings.

Data analysis and theme development

Focus group data were analyzed using narrative inquiry (Adhikari, 2021) to surface collective cultural narratives, while individual interview data were analyzed using phenomenological methods (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022) to examine personal experiences of cultural identity. Transcripts from

both sources were then coded inductively using content and thematic analysis (Humble & Mozelius, 2022): codes were generated from recurring terms and descriptions of Qilin symbolism and Teochew-Chinese heritage, grouped into candidate categories, and refined through researcher triangulation until seven stable identity keywords emerged (Table 2). These keywords were cross-validated against the visual ethnographic documentation and the 156-souvenir material culture evaluation before being translated into design criteria (colour palette and morphological standards, Section 3.2). The same content and thematic analysis approach was applied to the Phase 3 expert interviews to derive the four validation themes (Section 3.3).

Conceptual framework for design development

Three theoretical lenses informed the design process. Peirce (1931-1958) translated cultural symbols into design features via sign connections: 1) iconic signs, graphic depictions of cultural symbols (e.g., Qilin paintings imitating shrine sculptures); 2) indexical signs, design elements expressing cultural existence through causal relationships; and 3) colour symbolism drawn from five-element Chinese philosophy. This strategy creates “cultural encoding mechanisms” that help tourists decipher local identity (Yang et al., 2022). Second, the Kapferer six-faceted prism guided community brand identity development through elements including physique (local cultural landscape expressed through colours, forms, and materials), brand persona, culture, relationship, and self-image projection. Third, three stages of cultural product design (Lin, 2007) were used to move beyond intuitive design: 1) physical level (outer), correct visual and material extraction-the Qilin’s hoofed feet (resembling deer) must not be misrepresented as claws; 2) social level (intermediate), how souvenirs anchor tourists’ journeys; and 3) spiritual level (inner), the Qilin’s associations as fortune teller and merciful beast.

Prototype development workflow

A concept sketch was produced, drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese paintings, real places, toys, art, and web media, using Krita Paint 5.3. 3D colours and shadows were added using Easy Diffusion. Hunyuan 3.0, an AI image-to-3D modelling tool, generated 3D models from the primary photographs; these were imported into Blender 3.6 for post-processing and optimization, with surface integrity and detail accuracy confirmed before 3D printing.

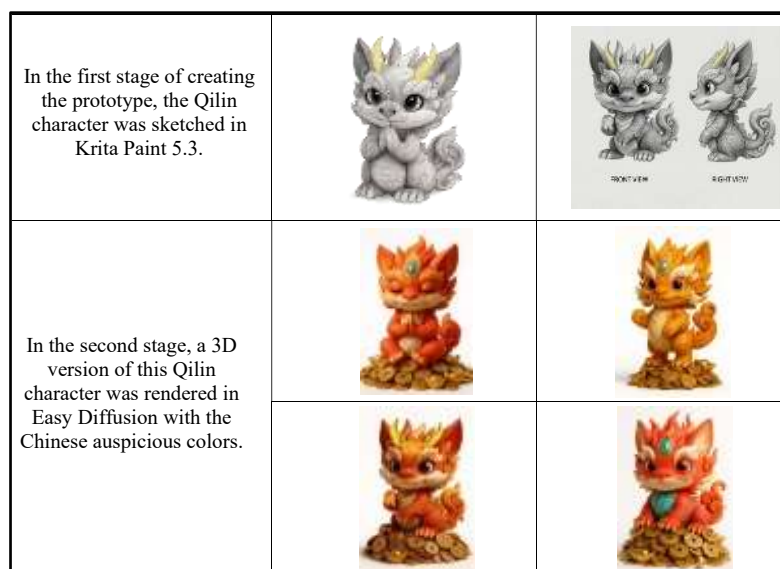


Figure 2: Character design using Krita Paint and Easy Diffusion. The concept sketch (top) establishes the Qilin’s proportions and pose, while the rendered version (bottom) applies the five-element colour system to preview the character’s surface treatment.

Source: Authors’ own work



Figure 3: 2D image imported to the Hunyuan AI 3D modelling app to create a 3D model. This step converts the flat character design into an initial 3D mesh, preserving key morphological features such as the dragon-scaled body and single horn for further refinement.

Source: Authors' own work

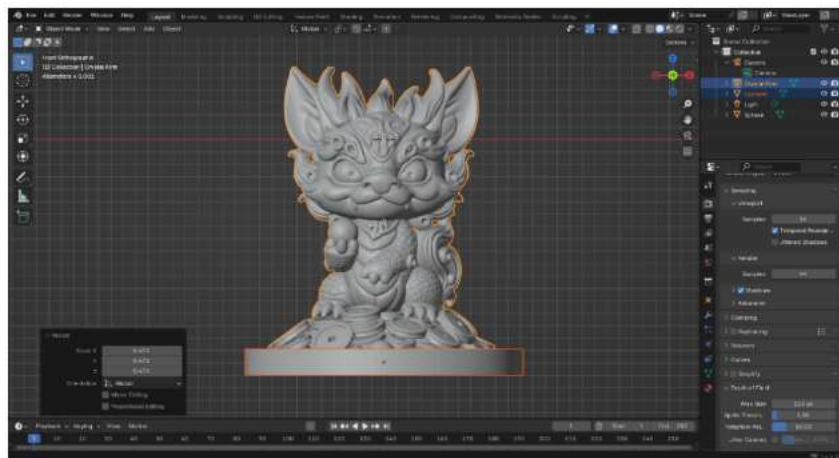


Figure 4: Character modification in Blender 3D software. The AI-generated mesh is adjusted here to correct proportional distortions and refine surface topology ahead of detail sculpting.

Source: Authors' own work

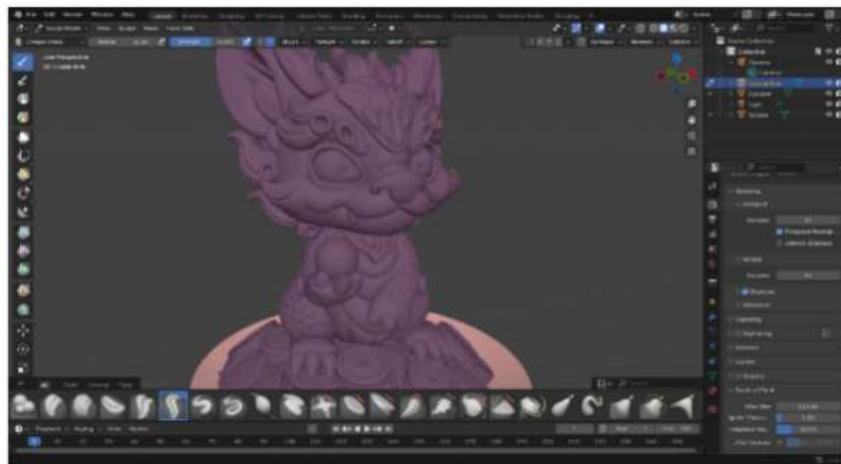


Figure 5: Character re-sculpting in Blender 3D software. Fine surface details—including scale texture and the deer-hoofed feet—are sculpted at this stage to meet the morphological design standards outlined in Section 3.2.

Source: Authors' own work



Figure 6: 3D printed characters in PLA+ filament. The physical prototype produced from the finalized 3D model, used as the basis for the Phase 3 expert evaluation reported in Section 3.3.

Source: Authors' own work

Expert evaluation procedure

After the prototype was produced, the design process followed human-centered design principles (IDEO.org, 2015): 1) empathize, synthesizing community cultural narratives; 2) define, articulating design challenges as “how might we...” statements; 3) ideate, sketching design alternatives; 4) prototype, creating low- then high-fidelity mockups; 5) test, iteratively incorporating user feedback; and 6) summarize. Ten key informants (K1-K10) were interviewed about the prototype: K1–K3 (design and material experts, industrial designers, product design academics) evaluated the prototype’s physical level and material innovation; K4-K7 (cultural heritage specialists, local historians, Saensuk Thai-Chinese

community leaders) assessed spirituality and Qilin identity; K8-K10 (tourism scholars, souvenir retail managers) assessed social and market potential. Content and thematic analysis was used to evaluate cultural translation, material sustainability, and market suitability (Humble & Mozelius, 2022).

Results

Results are presented by phase, corresponding directly to the study's three research objectives.

Phase 1 findings: Identity keywords and market gap

Material culture analysis of 156 Nong Mon Market souvenirs, triangulated with community narratives and visual documentation, produced seven core identity keywords (Table 2).

Table 2: Extracted Nong Mon Qilin Identity Keywords

No.	Identity Keyword	Cultural Meaning	Source of Evidence
1	Virtue	The Qilin appears only in the presence of a wise and benevolent ruler; it embodies moral righteousness	Focus groups; temple iconography
2	Longevity	Associated with long life and enduring community legacy across generations	Individual interviews; shrine carvings
3	Prosperity	Linked to commercial success and household abundance within Teochew–Chinese business culture	Focus groups; community leaders
4	Protection	Qilin statues placed at temple gates to guard against malevolent forces	Visual documentation; local experts
5	Auspiciousness	The five-hued body representing the five elements signals cosmic harmony and good fortune	Individual interviews; visual documentation
6	Cultural continuity	Participants described the Qilin as a living link between ancestral Teochew identity and present-day community life	Individual interviews; community leaders
7	Local belonging	The Nong Mon Qilin is perceived as distinctively local-differentiated from generic Chinese Qilin imagery by its specific shrine context and community history	Focus groups; local designers

These seven keywords formed the foundational design brief for Phase 2 and served as evaluative criteria for the Phase 3 validation process.

Souvenir market evaluation (156 items)

Each of the 156 souvenirs was assessed for cultural representativeness of Teochew-Chinese identity, visual excellence and craftsmanship, material suitability, tourism appeal, and conformity with local identity narratives. Most existing items scored poorly on cultural representativeness and local identity. Most featured generic Thai or generically Chinese motifs, such as mass-produced elephant figurines, printed cotton bags, and imported ceramic trinkets, without reference to Teochew-Chinese origin, the Nong Mon Qilin, or the community's settlement history. Synthetic and imported materials dominated all product categories with little local influence. Functional value for travellers was the strongest dimension, since prior items were portable and affordable,

but they offered little narrative or experiential value beyond basic utility. Artisanal objects were better-looking than mass-produced ones, but neither had a cultural basis.

These findings confirm the identity gap identified in the Introduction—the persistent mismatch between Saensuk’s rich Teochew–Chinese cultural heritage and its generic souvenir market—and support the need for a purpose-designed souvenir series based on the seven identity keywords above.

Phase 2 findings: Design standards and prototype

Applying the identity keywords and conceptual framework described in the Methodology, a five-element colour palette and set of morphological design standards were developed for the Nong Mon Qilin souvenir series. To make this translation explicit, Table 3 maps each identity keyword from Phase 1 to its corresponding design decision.

Table 3: Identity Keyword to Design Decision Mapping

Identity Keyword	Design Decision
Auspiciousness	Five-element colour palette (blue, red, yellow, white, black)
Prosperity, Virtue	Gold and jade-green accent colours
Protection	Deer-hoofed feet, single horn, dragon-scaled skin (morphological accuracy standards)
Cultural continuity, Local belonging	Composite pattern backgrounds (bat, cloud, lotus motifs from Nong Mon shrine art)
Longevity	Tiered pattern density across product categories, supporting sustained accessibility across price points

Source: Authors’ own work

Design requirements: colour palette

The five-element Chinese cosmology system inspired the colour palette. Blue (water element), red (fire element), yellow (earth element), white (metal element), and black (wood element) form the basic palette, each with cosmological significance and clear visual precedence in Nong Mon shrine imagery. Gold and jade green were chosen as accent colours because community informants believe they symbolise affluence and auspiciousness in Teochew–Chinese visual culture. Full Pantone and RGB colour specifications are in Table 4.

Table 4: Nong Mon Qilin Souvenir Colour Palette Specifications

Color Name	Cultural Element	Symbolic Meaning	Pantone Reference	RGB Value
Blue	Water	Wisdom, depth	#1A4F6E	26, 79, 110
Red	Fire	Vitality, fortune	#C03C2C	192, 60, 44
Yellow	Earth	Stability, abundance	#E8A820	232, 168, 32
White	Metal	Purity, longevity	#E8F0F2	232, 240, 242
Black	Wood	Strength, protection	#1C1C1E	28, 28, 30
Auspicious Gold	-	Prosperity, prestige	#EACD76	234, 205, 118
Jade Green	-	Virtue, harmony	#2A7A5A	42, 122, 90

Pattern and morphological design standards

Pattern specifications were created from thorough analysis of 156 souvenirs and visual ethnographic documentation of Qilin iconography at the five study sites. Morphological parameters were set to assure cultural authenticity in all souvenir applications:

The Qilin body must have dragon-scaled skin and deer-hoofed feet, not claws.

The Qilin's five-element colour distribution should match the shrine sculptures at Chao Mae Sam Mook and Sawang Phon Foundation.

All figurative depictions must show the Qilin's single horn.

Composite pattern backgrounds can include bat, cloud, and lotus designs, all fortunate symbols in Nong Mon shrine art, to enhance cultural layering without overpowering the Qilin form.

Pattern density was calibrated across three product tiers, following the conservative-flexible-contemporary spectrum in the literature: high for collector figurines, medium for ornamental goods, and simplified line-form for everyday accessories. Complete prototype specifications are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Phase 2 Prototype01 Specifications

Specification	Detail
Product type	Collectible figurine; decorative Art toy;
Dimensions	92 mm x 75 mm × 72 mm
Primary material	PLA+
Proposed future material	Bamboo composite; oyster shell powder (proposed; not yet tested)
Color system	Five-element palette + gold and jade green accents
Production method	3D printed model to create Silicone rubber mould

Phase 3 findings: Expert and community validation

Analysis of the ten expert evaluation interviews produced four validated themes, each supported by convergent feedback across multiple informants.

Theme 1: Cultural authenticity of Qilin iconographic translation

Across all four cultural heritage informants (K4-K7), the prototype's iconographic representation of the Qilin was consistently judged culturally accurate and community-recognizable, with convergence on the morphological fidelity of the deer-hoofed feet and the five-element colour distribution as consistent with Nong Mon shrine iconography. Informants further noted that this accuracy supported intergenerational transmission, with younger community members responding positively to the design's contemporary rendering while still recognizing its traditional referents.

Community leader K5 stated: "This is the Qilin we know from the temple. The colours and the feet are right. People here will recognize it immediately."

K4 further noted that the five-element palette reinforced the Qilin's cosmological meaning in a way that distinguished it from generic commercially produced Chinese souvenirs:

"Most Qilin products you find in the market use only red and gold. This design uses the five colours properly. That is important-it tells the whole story, not just the surface."

K6 and K7 both emphasized that the prototype's iconographic accuracy supported intergenerational cultural transmission, noting that younger community members shown the prototype responded positively to its visual clarity and contemporary rendering while still recognizing its traditional referents.

Theme 2: Material quality and prototype refinement needs

Informants K1-K3 (design and material experts) affirmed the prototype's structural integrity and the effectiveness of the 3D-printing workflow in capturing surface detail, while converging on three refinement priorities for production: surface finish, material substitution for tactile quality, and cost

management through simplified colour zoning at lower price points. No claims regarding market appeal or purchase intention were made by this group, as these fell outside the scope of material and design evaluation.

K2 observed: “The form is strong and the detail of the scales is well captured. For a production version, the surface finish will need more work-the layer lines are visible and will affect perceived quality.”

K1 commented on material considerations: “The current material (PLA+) works for a testing model, but for a souvenir that people will handle frequently, weight and feel matter. An Oyster shell mixed with resin or composite version should be tested.”

K3 raised the question of production scalability and cost: “The design is achievable, but the complexity of the five-colour application will increase unit cost significantly. Simplified colour zoning on lower price-point versions should be considered.”

No informant in the K1-K3 group made claims about market appeal or purchase intention, as these were beyond the scope of material and design evaluation. Such claims are therefore not made in this report.

Theme 3: Narrative engagement and cultural storytelling potential

Informants K8-K10 converged on the finding that the prototype’s cultural depth would not be readily accessible to tourists without an accompanying narrative framework-that the object’s visual distinctiveness alone was insufficient to communicate its cultural meaning at the point of sale.

K8 stated: “When I saw the keepsake, I wanted to understand why this community exists here and what its history is. The object itself is attractive, but tourists need a way in-through activities, ceremonies, or a story that explains its origin.”

K9 reinforced this view, identifying strategic cultural storytelling as a prerequisite for converting tourist interest into cultural engagement: “The design is distinctive enough to attract attention. What it needs is a story that tourists can take away with the object-something that makes them feel they have received not just a product but an understanding.”

K10 noted the retail context: “In a souvenir shop, this would stand out visually. But it needs a product card or QR-linked narrative so that the buyer knows what they are holding and why it matters.”

Theme 4: Community acceptance and heritage alignment

Across all ten informants without exception, the prototype was perceived as a meaningful and appropriate representation of Nong Mon’s Teochew-Chinese identity, with no concerns raised regarding cultural misrepresentation or inappropriate use of sacred symbolism. Informants additionally identified the prototype’s potential value as a tool for heritage preservation and intergenerational cultural education.

Community leader K5 summarized the collective reception: “This is something we would be proud to have represent our community. It is honest to who we are.”

K1 offered a complementary perspective from the design domain: “Its design is distinctive and its appearance is unusual in a good way. It functions as a reminder-of design, of belief, of a community’s story. It is the kind of object that people who see it need to understand.”

K7 added a heritage preservation dimension: “For younger people especially, having something they can hold and show others-that carries the Qilin’s real meaning-is important. This could be a genuine tool for cultural education.”

Prototype narrative feature

Drawing on strategic storytelling techniques, a cultural narrative was created to engage tourists with the items. According to this narrative, symbolic aspects were turned into prototype design features. Tale of Nong Mon Qilin and his friends: Over a century ago, wooden merchant ships braved the ocean winds to transport Chinese immigrants to Thailand’s eastern coast. To secure safe transit, good health, and a successful future in this unfamiliar place, immigrants brought their families, skills, and bodyguards. Five mythological guardians-carved into their ships’ bows and painted on their chests-left

their ships and settled in the new seaside communities. Saensuk shrines' beautiful woodwork and murals depict these protectors. Locals have known for decades that these five ghosts possess beneficial energy. Phase 3 included these auspicious animals in the prototype design and gave them Gen Z-friendly meanings (Lin, 2007). The Qilin symbolized luck and was painted in bright colors to send positive energy, while the dragon represented wisdom and knowledge. Figure 7 shows the characters and their meanings.

Summary of findings

Taken together, the three phases directly address the study's objectives. In response to Objective 1, Phase 1 fieldwork and the 156-item souvenir evaluation identified seven Qilin identity keywords and confirmed a clear identity gap in the existing souvenir market. In response to Objective 2, these keywords were translated into evidence-based design standards—a five-element colour palette and morphological specifications—realized in the Prototype01 collectible figurine. In response to Objective 3, validation with ten expert and community informants confirmed the prototype's cultural authenticity and community acceptance, while identifying specific refinement needs in material finish and narrative framing for tourist engagement. These findings collectively demonstrate a replicable, community-grounded process for developing culturally authentic souvenir design in the Saensuk subdistrict.

Saensuk Auspicious Animals



 康勇 (Kāng Yǒng) The Green Lion Meaning: 康 (Kāng) translates to health, vitality, and well-being, while 勇 (Yǒng) translates to bravery and courage. Character Identity: The Peaches of Immortality in his hands tie perfectly to “Kāng,” while his bold lion features represent “Yǒng.” He acts as the steadfast protector of physical well-being.	 坚寿 (Jiān Shòu) The Dragon-Headed Turtle Meaning: 坚 (Jiān) translates to steadfast, firm, or patient endurance, while 寿 (Shòu) means longevity and long life. Character Identity: The turtle shell (featuring the character for longevity) represents a long life, while the calm, meditative posture reflects the quiet, enduring patience needed to achieve such long life.
 雅宁 (Yǎ Níng) The Baby Phoenix Meaning: 雅 (Yǎ) translates to elegance, grace, and refinement, while 宁 (Níng) means peace, tranquility, and serenity. Character Identity: Standing gracefully on her treasure box with a lotus flower, which is a classic symbol of purity, “Yǎ Níng” represents a life that is both beautifully elegant and completely at peace.	

Figure 7: Meaning and identity of Saensuk auspicious animals. Each of the five guardian figures is paired with its Chinese name, symbolic meaning, and character role within the prototype’s narrative framework.

Source: Authors’ own work

To summarise the five guardian figures introduced above, Table 6 presents a comparative overview of their names, meanings, and symbolic attributes.

Table 6: Summary of Saensuk Auspicious Animal Attributes

Character	Chinese Name	Core Meaning	Symbolic Attribute
The Red Qilin	福瑞 (Fú Rui)	Blessing, fortune, auspicious omen	Holds a glowing orb; wards off negativity
The Meditating Dragon	智吉 (Zhì Jí)	Wisdom, intellect, good luck	Holds a scroll; embodies focused pursuit of wisdom
The Green Lion	康勇 (Kāng Yǒng)	Health, vitality, bravery	Holds Peaches of Immortality; steadfast protector
The Dragon-Headed Turtle	坚寿 (Jiān Shòu)	Steadfast endurance, longevity	Turtle shell; calm, meditative posture
The Baby Phoenix	雅宁 (Yǎ Níng)	Elegance, peace, tranquility	Lotus flower and treasure box; purity

Source: Authors' own work

Discussion

To bridge the “identity gap” (mismatches between identities and images; Nogueira & Carvalho, 2022) in local tourism, this work translated the Teochew–Chinese tradition of Saensuk into modern souvenir designs. Results show that Nong Mon Qilin uses cultural capital (Huang, 2019) to offer “spiritual anchors” for residents and visitors. This research goes beyond replicating traditional objects by seeing the design process as a cultural alchemy or a symbolic translation (Tang & Leong, 2025); rather, this work deconstructs and re-encodes the mythological Qilin into a modern setting, thus offering theoretical and practical implications for cultural product design.

Symbolic translation and authenticity: This research achieved a symbolic translation of the Qilin by following a rigorous creative design process. Physically, complex historical morphologies were streamlined into sleek, minimalist aesthetics to appeal to the tastes of Gen Z and foreign tourists. The main theoretical contribution of this work lies in its preservation of the inner level of artifacts (Lin, 2007). Expert and community validation (Theme 1, Section 3.3) confirmed that the design communicates historical narratives, thus maintaining the Teochew–Chinese identity among younger generations. This structured translation process preserves the semiotic indicators of the Qilin, such as its “beast of mercy” status. The souvenir prototype was validated by informants as a culturally authentic artifact that conveys local meaning.

Toward “circular localism”: a proposed Bio-Circular-Green direction: This work proposes integrating the BCG economic model with cultural product design. By upcycling oyster shells from neighbouring fisheries and bamboo tubes from Khao Lam, this work incorporated the indigenous Saensuk identity into its product design as a future development direction. The current prototype was produced in PLA+ (Table 5); oyster shell powder and bamboo composite were identified during Phase 3 expert evaluation as promising alternative materials (Theme 2) but were not experimentally incorporated or tested in this study. Should these materials be developed and validated in future work, such material innovation could satisfy SDG 12, which concerns waste reduction and resource optimization (UNESCO, 2017), and would build on Pattanasopon (2023), who reported high visitor satisfaction with Bang Saen seaside souvenirs manufactured from repurposed vinyl waste-though the present study did not

collect comparable visitor satisfaction data and this comparison remains suggestive rather than confirmatory. Testing oyster shell and bamboo composite integration is recommended as a priority direction for future research, given informant interest in material alternatives that carry stronger local resource significance than PLA+.

Practicalities for community-based enterprises: The strategic framework generated from community data synthesis appears scalable, based on informant feedback regarding narrative engagement and community acceptance (Themes 3 and 4, Section 3.3). Communities may boost perceived value by shifting from generic commodities toward culturally grounded creations. Informants (K8–K10) suggested that story cards narrating the Qilin’s cultural significance could help tourists engage with the object’s meaning (Theme 3); however, this study did not assess actual purchase behaviour, willingness to buy, or tourism expenditure, and such outcomes should be treated as directions for future research rather than established findings. This proposed approach aligns with the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan’s community income targets (National Economic and Social Development Council, 2025).

Design framework for practical implications

This study presents a systematic design framework for culturally genuine and sustainable memento products based on these findings. The framework applies to community-based tourism:

Empathizing with the community: Communities should recognize that many tourism products sold in the market are consumer goods like packaged snacks, processed seafood, and trinkets, which are neither modern nor appealing to visitors. Local entrepreneurs’ poor design skills contribute to this issue. Since the neighbourhood generates a lot of waste, such as oyster shells, this work built its prototype to suit tourist demand and combat pollution.

Identifying the problem: Focus group talks and in-depth interviews help communities appreciate the significance of their souvenirs. To impress travellers, these souvenirs should reflect the Teochew–Chinese community and their landscape as well as the Chinese community in Nong Mon and Saensuk. The community should also create a modern, versatile product model. They should use local garbage to save production costs without sacrificing quality. Manufacturing these things can employ locals. Prices should reflect the quality of these keepsakes.

Official souvenir product design: Researchers, designers, and local producers should collaborate on prototypes. The design method utilized Nong Mon culture. These prototypes showed community-based manufacture and inspired souvenir development.

Limitations and future research

Despite its use of rigorous qualitative techniques such as in-depth narrative inquiries and phenomenological methodologies, this study faces several limitations. First, the proposed material innovation-oyster shell and bamboo composites-was identified through Phase 3 expert feedback but was not experimentally incorporated or tested within the scope of this study; the prototype was produced in PLA+. To operationalize circular localism, future research should test these materials directly and explore additional indigenous, biodegradable alternatives. Second, although this study provided deep, qualitative insights into cultural narratives, future research could further explore the evolving meanings and cultural significance of “China-Chic” souvenirs within the Saensuk community.

Conclusion

This study set out to develop a culturally authentic souvenir design for the Nong Mon community grounded in Teochew-Chinese Qilin symbolism, guided by three objectives. In response to Objective 1, qualitative fieldwork across 25 Phase 1 participants and a 156-item souvenir market evaluation identified seven core identity keywords-virtue, longevity, prosperity, protection, auspiciousness, cultural continuity, and local belonging-that captured the community's understanding of Qilin symbolism and confirmed a clear gap between existing souvenirs and local identity. In response to Objective 2, these keywords were translated into evidence-based design standards, including a five-element colour palette and morphological specifications, and applied to a 3D-printed collectible figurine prototype. In response to Objective 3, validation with ten independent key informants confirmed the prototype's cultural authenticity and community acceptance, while identifying specific, actionable refinement needs in material finish and narrative framing for tourist engagement.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that a structured, community-grounded design process can produce a souvenir that is both culturally authentic and open to further development. The study's contribution lies in this replicable process-extracting identity keywords, translating them into design criteria, and validating outcomes with both community and expert stakeholders-rather than in a finished, market-ready product. Future work should test the proposed alternative materials, expand validation to a larger and more diverse informant sample, and evaluate the prototype's actual market performance, none of which fall within the scope of the present study.

AI Tool Disclosure

This study used AI-assisted tools (Easy Diffusion for rendering, Hunyuan 3.0 for 2D-to-3D model generation) during the prototype design process, as described in the Methodology (Prototype development workflow). These tools were used solely for visual and design prototyping and did not generate any text, data analysis, or research findings reported in this manuscript. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, modified, and finalized by the research team using Blender 3.6 prior to 3D printing.

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