

Exploring Chinese Aesthetics through Skins: A Case Study of Lunar New Year Skins in League of Legends

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Abstract

Over the years, League of Legends has released numerous character skins, with the Lunar New Year skins standing out for their distinctive incorporation of Chinese cultural elements. This study analyzes these skins across four dimensions: themes, styling, color schemes, and patterns, exploring how traditional Chinese aesthetics are adapted and reimagined. The findings reveal that these designs not only draw from Chinese art history but also incorporate futuristic and technological elements, expanding cultural expression across time. As these adaptations span different cultures and eras, game designers need to remain mindful of the balance between cultural appropriation and cultural exchange, ensuring that their work is both respectful and thoughtful.

Keywords: Chinese Aesthetics, Video Games, Skins, Lunar New Year

1. Introduction

As a game developed by Riot Games, League of Legends boasts a vast global player base and enjoys widespread recognition. Its substantial influence in esports contributes significantly to competitive gaming and popular culture, with collaborations in music, animation, and more. The game is cherished by its community and is distinguished by its unique business model (Enverga, 2021).

Notably, League of Legends is free to play, with skins serving as optional cosmetic items. These skins do not provide any gameplay advantages but solely alter the visual appearance of in-game characters. Consequently, they do not directly affect the gameplay experience or match outcomes (Gee, 2025). Despite this, the game generates substantial revenue from the sale of skins and other virtual items, in addition to benefiting from merchandise and brand partnerships. In 2022, League of Legends generated over \$2.5 billion in revenue, solidifying its status as one of the highest-grossing video games globally. This financial success reflects Riot Games' expertise in effectively monetizing skins over the years (Järvinen, 2023).

Riot Games began releasing Chinese New Year-themed skins in 2012, some of which received immediate attention, evoking enthusiasm, admiration, and criticism from players. This study aims to explore the integration of Chinese aesthetics into video game design and its contribution to virtual fashion within gaming environments. Specifically, the following discussion will examine four key aspects of these skins: character costume themes, styling, color schemes, and patterns.

2. Themed Creations: Lunar New Year Skins from 2012 to 2024

Since 2012, Riot Games has released limited skins themed around the Lunar New Year for 13 consecutive years, with some becoming favorites among Chinese players (see Appendix A). For example, the first New Year skin featuring strong Chinese cultural elements, *Dragon Fist - Lee Sin*, released in the Year of the Dragon in 2012, remains a popular topic among players to this day. Although this skin was designed specifically for the Lunar New Year and is no longer available through regular purchase channels, it can only be obtained through means like raffles. In 2018, Riot even added several new chroma skins to this long-standing Spring Festival skin, including a design inspired by Bruce Lee's iconic yellow outfit. The skins released during the Chinese New Year often include background narratives related to traditional Chinese culture, centering around one or more champions from League of Legends. The thematic keyword cloud related to these skins is shown in Figure 1. Through the data analysis presented in Figure 1, it can be observed that the themes for Lunar New Year Skins over the past 13 years primarily revolve around four key points.



Figure 1. Thematic Types in Lunar New Year Skins

2.1 Based on the Traditional Chinese Activities

The first category revolves around traditional festive activities during the Chinese New Year. For instance, the New Year-themed skins released in 2013, 2015, 2019, and 2022 were all designed around the key concept of "Firecracker." On the one hand, firecrackers, as symbolic elements, evoke a sense of identity and nostalgia among Chinese players associated with the Lunar New Year. On the other hand, the firecracker motif lends itself well to the visual representation of character abilities within the game. Additionally, skins featuring other themes, such as lion dances, introduce creative novelty to the design (Chen, 2023).

2.2 Based on Traditional Chinese Literature

The second category draws inspiration from traditional Chinese literary works. For example, the Chinese New Year skins released in 2016 were themed around *Journey to the West* (西游记). The choice of champions for this series was particularly intriguing, featuring three characters: Wukong, Morgana, and Caitlyn. Wukong, as one of the protagonists of *Journey to the West*, is portrayed in the game as the "Monkey King," donning golden attire, riding atop a somersault cloud, and wielding the Ruyi Jingu Bang (magic staff) in a ground-smashing motion. Morgana and Caitlyn, on the other hand, are depicted as alluring demons (妖精) inspired by the seductive villains in the original tale, with their splash art emphasizing an air of dark beauty and temptation. Together, these three champions evoke the narrative essence of the "Three Battles with the White Bone Demon" (三打白骨精) from the classic novel.

In 2017, the New Year skins continued to adopt themes from Chinese literary traditions. That year, three more champions received thematic skins: Azir, Garen, and Vi. Notably, while the English version of the skin line was titled *Warring Kingdoms*, the Chinese localization applied the "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" (信达雅) principle by tailoring the names to reflect the characters' appearances and personas. For instance, Azir's skin was named "Sima Yi" (司马懿) in the Chinese version. In his recall animation, Azir sits on the ground with a feather fan in hand, contemplating a Go board before him—a nod to Sima Yi's strategic genius and deep scheming, aligning perfectly with his character setting in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义).

2.3 Based on Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage

The third category focuses on traditional Chinese craftsmanship and intangible cultural heritage, serving as the inspiration for Lunar New Year skins. Notable examples include the *Chinese Paper Cutting skins* released in 2023 and the *Porcelain-themed skins* launched in 2022 and 2024. Both designs draw upon iconic Chinese handicrafts, with blue-and-white porcelain and paper cutting standing as cultural symbols representing China. By incorporating these heritage elements into the costumes of in-game characters through virtual technology, *League of Legends* has garnered positive feedback from players.

It is evident that both the thematic selection and localization of these Lunar New Year skins prioritize distinctive Chinese cultural elements, showcased with striking visual impact. To consumers, virtual skins share similar functions with real-world clothing—they serve as adornments, aesthetic expressions, and markers of identity.

Interestingly, the Lunar New Year skins released for the Year of the Rat in 2020 met with harsh criticism, receiving a notably poor reception from Chinese players. The negative response mainly stemmed from a mismatch between the skin design and the festive theme. Chinese players had anticipated traditional aesthetics aligned with the Lunar New Year, but the 2020 *Warring Kingdoms: Mecha skins* adopted a futuristic mecha style that clashed with the holiday atmosphere. Players felt that the skin’s design deviated from the expected elements of Chinese New Year, drawing more from Japanese anime and mecha aesthetics rather than Chinese cultural motifs. Many had hoped to see familiar visual symbols, such as auspicious dragons, lanterns, or traditional garments, which better resonate with the festive spirit. As a result, the skin series fell short of meeting cultural expectations, leading to widespread disappointment.

The backlash highlights the evolving aesthetic awareness and cultural discernment of today’s gaming community. Discussions on social media at the time were intense, with criticism centering on concerns about cultural appropriation and unmet artistic expectations. The core reason for the backlash was the skin’s divergence from the traditional New Year aesthetic that players valued. Riot Games, aware of the public controversy, responded by releasing a new set of skins with a stronger Lunar New Year theme in 2021.

This case demonstrates the influence of player feedback on the production and marketing strategies of game developers and publishers. A balanced combination of fair pricing and satisfying gameplay experiences enhances user satisfaction, motivating developers to further expand the game’s intellectual property (Johnson & Luo,2019). This dynamic forms a closed loop of game sales and post-purchase engagement, driving the continuous development of new content and follow-up releases.

3. Imitation and Reconstruction: Chinese-Style Costumes in Lunar New Year Skins

One of the primary ways *League of Legends* establishes and reinforces a character’s personality and traits through skin design is by meticulously crafting and showcasing their attire. In terms of costume style, Lunar New Year skins often incorporate elements from iconic Chinese clothing. This approach allows designers to draw from culturally significant garments without being constrained by the physical properties of real-world clothing, such as fabric, drape, or gravity. Consequently, designers enjoy substantial creative freedom to integrate technological innovations and reimagine traditional aesthetics in novel ways.

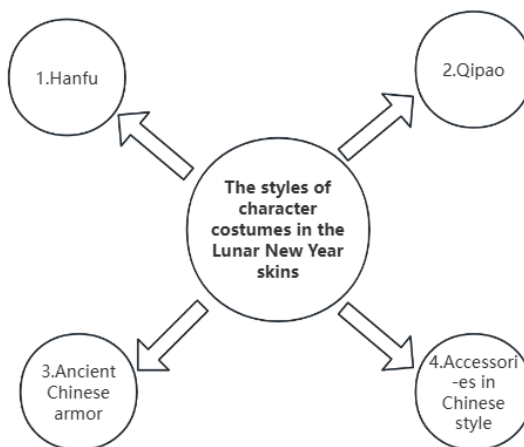


Figure 2. Chinese-Style Costumes in Lunar New Year Skins

In terms of costume design, Lunar New Year skins often feature iconic Chinese garments to convey the festive

theme. From a broader stylistic perspective, designers draw inspiration from three archetypal categories of traditional Chinese clothing: *hanfu*, *qipao*, and ancient Chinese military attire. These costumes are further enriched with distinctly Chinese accessories, such as flowing robes with wide sleeves, hairpins, and jade bracelets, subtly evoking the aesthetics of traditional Chinese dress and creating a cohesive Chinese-inspired character image (Liu, 2015, p. 51).

An early example is the *Dragon Fist-Lee Sin*, which relied on costume design to express “Chinese style” due to technical limitations at the time. In this skin, Lee Sin wears a traditional Chinese cross-collar jacket, featuring a golden dragon motif on the back, paired with black pants and traditional black cloth shoes. A later chroma skin introduced a yellow outfit inspired by Bruce Lee, sparking discussion and generating significant player interest.

As technology has advanced, more diverse silhouettes and elements have been incorporated into Lunar New Year skins. A notable example is *Mythmaker-Zyra* released in 2023, which stands out for its distinctive Chinese-inspired design. Zyra is dressed in a modified *qipao* with a standing collar and styled hair reminiscent of ancient Chinese women’s high buns. Her hands feature nail guards resembling the ornate finger accessories worn by Qing Dynasty women. What delighted players most was the inclusion of paper-cutting motifs in the visual effects of her abilities, which further distinguished the chroma skins. These variants not only differ in color from the original but also feature unique details, such as variations in the collars and buttons of the *qipao*. This multidimensional integration of intangible cultural heritage into skin and item design allows players to experience traditional Chinese culture within the game, offering a fresh and high-quality gameplay experience.

However, *Mythmaker-Zyra* is not the first character to wear a *qipao* in the game. *The Firecracker-Jinx*, released in 2015, also wore a red *qipao*, but the design was relatively simple, with fewer silhouette variations compared to more recent skins. Today’s Lunar New Year skins reflect a blend of traditional Chinese clothing with modern Chinese-inspired fashion, showcasing greater complexity and refinement in their designs.

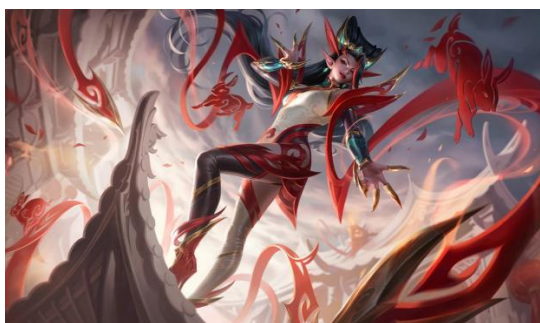


Figure 3. Mythmaker-Zyra

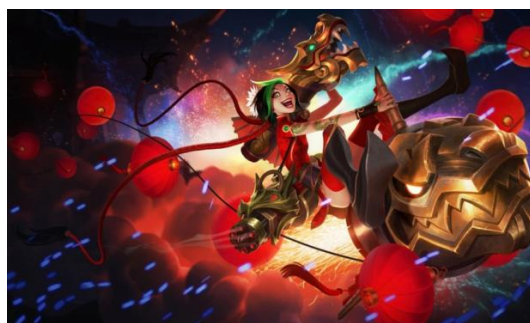


Figure 4. Firecracker-Jinx

In virtual visual worlds such as games, character skins are not direct replicas of real-world clothing styles but are instead modified to suit the character’s physique and enhanced with technological particle effects for creative innovation. The design process for in-game costumes differs fundamentally from real-world fashion design. Game designers are free from the constraints of gravity, fabric behavior, and material properties, allowing them to focus on extracting iconic elements from traditional Chinese attire. These elements are then reimagined to align with contemporary aesthetic trends, resulting in designs that resonate with players. Through this creative reinterpretation, character skins foster a sense of both personal and cultural identity among consumers.

4. Symbolic Representation: The Use of Colors in Lunar New Year Skins

The use of color in Lunar New Year skins stands out with distinct visual characteristics. A statistical analysis of the 71 exclusive Chinese-themed skins released so far (see Figure 5) reveals three key trends in Riot Games’ color choices for these skins.

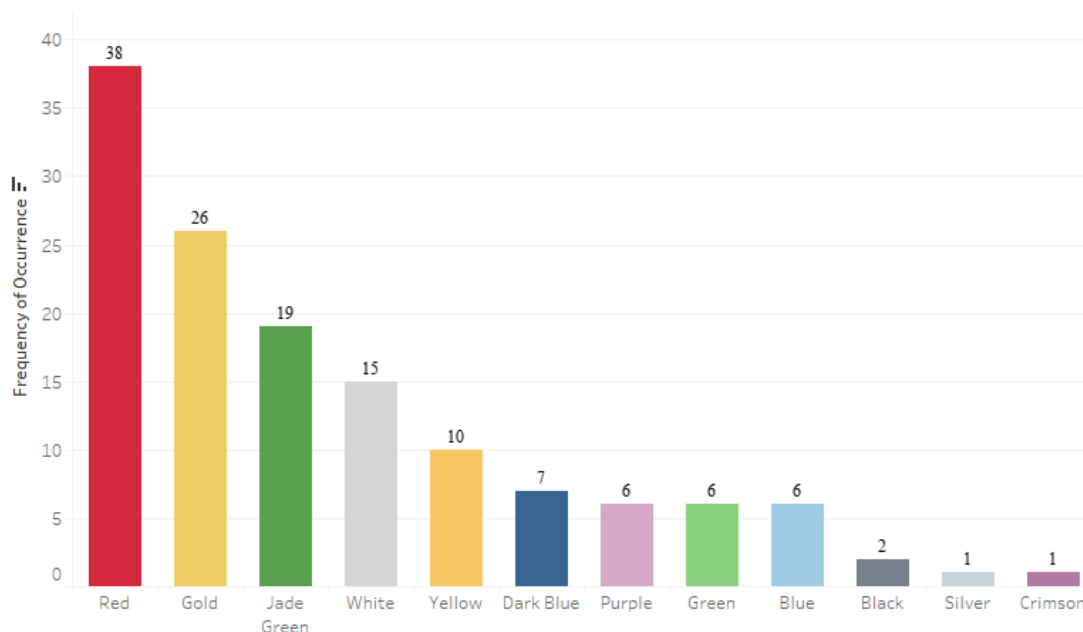


Figure 5. Main color usage of skins

4.1 The High Frequency of Red and Gold

In terms of color frequency, three main trends emerge: first, the design of League of Legends' Lunar New Year skins clearly centers on red and gold. These two colors appear with high frequency, occurring 38 times and 26 times, respectively. The combination of red and gold draws from traditional Chinese festive colors, with "Chinese red" symbolizing celebration, warmth, and prosperity. It is the most representative color for the Lunar New Year, often used to ward off evil spirits and seek blessings. Gold, which has historically symbolized wealth and auspiciousness in China, further enhances the blessing of "prosperity at the door" when paired with red. This classic color combination is a common design theme for the New Year and aligns with people's aesthetic expectations for the festive atmosphere.

4.2 The Integration of Cool Tones

Secondly, the introduction of cool colors such as jade green, blue, and purple creates a rich sense of layering and contrast. Although these colors may not be as mainstream as red and gold in traditional Chinese culture, their use as cool tones provides visual contrast that enhances the overall balance of the design. For instance, blue in skin design can convey a sense of mystery or highlight certain character abilities, while the inclusion of jade green indicates that designers are injecting new aesthetic layers into the traditional festive color palette.

Combining traditional colors with modern elements ensures these skins resonate with the festive theme and appeal to younger players. In designing the New Year-themed skins, there is an emphasis on balancing warm and cool tones, alongside innovative expressions of traditional Chinese cultural symbols. These symbolic representations evoke a sense of belonging among Chinese gamers.

It is worth noting that while white is generally not regarded as a lucky or celebratory color in traditional Chinese culture, its frequent appearance is primarily due to its use in the blue-and-white porcelain theme. The incorporation of white is essential for creating a cohesive design that showcases the unique visual characteristics of blue-and-white porcelain.

4.3 Yellow and Purple as Auxiliary Colors

Thirdly, yellow and purple serve as complementary colors, often used in fabrics and accessories to enhance the variety of skins. In traditional Chinese culture, yellow is regarded as the "imperial color," symbolizing power and prestige. For example, the 2024 Lunar New Year skins feature yellow as the primary color to convey the nobility of the characters. Purple, associated with mystery and nobility, is typically used in skins linked to magic or power. In the 2016 Lunar Wraith skins for Morgana and Caitlyn, purple dominates the costumes, reflecting the characters' enigmatic backgrounds and cold, aloof demeanor.

These design choices demonstrate that skin creation draws on traditional elements of Lunar New Year

celebrations while adapting to contemporary aesthetic trends through innovative combinations. The skins incorporate a diverse and vibrant color palette that mixes red, gold, jade green, purple, and blue, aligning with the strategy of using bright, colorful designs to captivate players. While traditional warm colors like red, gold, and yellow are prominent, cool tones such as blue, green, and purple are integrated to add depth, enhancing the visual appeal and ensuring characters stand out during gameplay. This layered approach not only reinforces the festive spirit but also conveys unique narrative traits and emotions through color, resonating with cultural expectations surrounding the Lunar New Year. Ultimately, the combination of traditional and modern elements showcases a creative reinterpretation of Chinese cultural symbols, appealing to the diverse tastes of younger players.

5. Decorative Patterns on Costumes in Lunar New Year Skins

In the design of Lunar New Year skins, patterns and decorative elements are also key ways to showcase Chinese aesthetics. The types and frequencies of the motifs are illustrated in Figure 6 and 7. The decorative motifs used in these skins can be broadly categorized into three types: botanical motifs, animal motifs, and geometric patterns, all of which are derived from traditional Chinese design elements.

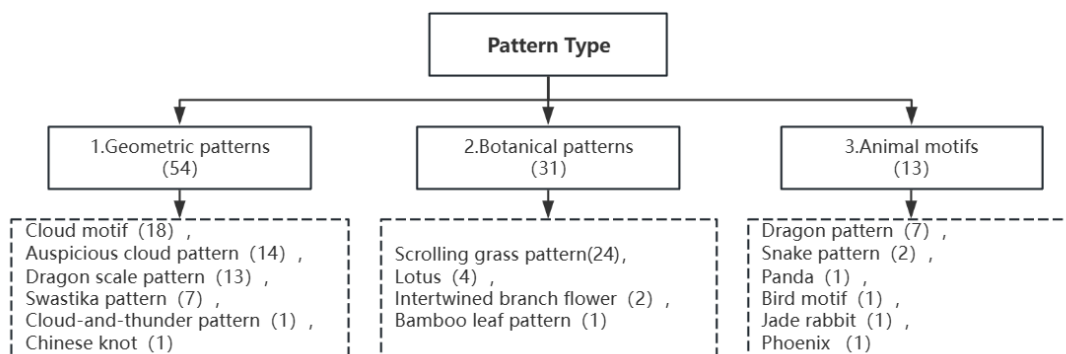


Figure 6. Types of Patterns in Lunar New Year Skins

5.1 Geometric Patterns

The geometric patterns in Lunar New Year skins revolve around several key motifs, including the cloud motif, auspicious cloud pattern, dragon scale pattern, swastika pattern, cloud-and-thunder pattern, and Chinese knot. These patterns are characterized by abstract designs or repeating shapes that emphasize symmetry and regularity. Often serving as decorative elements, they also convey symbolic meanings of good fortune. For instance, geometric motifs reflect the Chinese cultural values of “harmony” and “cyclicity.” Moreover, the auspicious cloud and cloud-and-thunder patterns specifically symbolize blessings and prosperity.

5.2 Botanical Patterns

The plant motifs mainly include four main categories: scrolling grass pattern, lotus, intertwined branch flower, and bamboo leaf pattern. Overall, in Lunar New Year skins, plant motifs often serve to soften the visual effect and highlight the characters' gentle and dynamic qualities. For example, lotus and intertwined branch flowers may appear on the edges of sleeves or capes, adding layers to the garment. Scrolling grass patterns are commonly used along seams or borders, creating a sense of natural continuity that makes the clothing look intricate without appearing heavy. Bamboo leaf patterns are well-suited for straight cuffs or belts, symbolizing the character's stability and uprightness.

5.3 Animal Motifs

The animal motifs primarily include the dragon, snake, panda, bird, jade rabbit, and phoenix. These motifs embody various mythological meanings and character traits, often symbolizing good fortune or strength in New Year traditions. In the context of Lunar New Year skins, dragon patterns and scales are frequently incorporated into armor and cloaks, representing power and heroism. Panda and jade rabbit motifs may appear on the back or as decorative elements, adding humor and warmth. Snake patterns, on the other hand, are often used for villainous characters, enhancing their aura of mystery and danger.

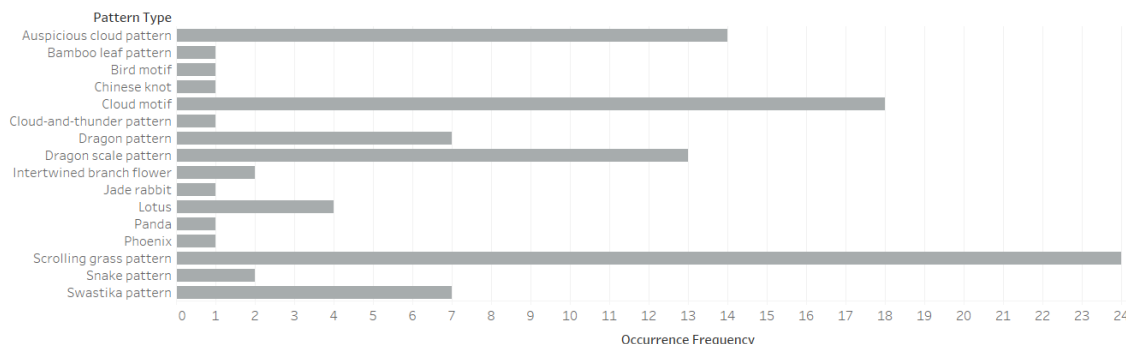


Figure 7. The Frequency of Pattern Occurrence

These patterns showcase the diversity of Chinese culture while enriching the aesthetic significance of League of Legends skins. From the perspective of decorative symbolism, motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, and auspicious clouds convey blessings and well-wishes, making them particularly fitting for the theme of the Chinese New Year. In terms of identity and power symbolism, elements like dragon scales and cloud-and-thunder patterns emphasize the hero’s strength and majesty, adding a sense of authority to the character's outfit (Zhong, 2023).

More importantly, from the perspective of cultural identity and innovation, these motifs, reinterpreted through modern design, not only enhance the visual appeal of the characters but also allow players to connect with the deeper cultural elements (Bao, 2021). Additionally, the decorative motifs found in both character costumes and skill effects deserve attention, as they collectively create a distinct Chinese aesthetic (He, 2023).

For example, in the porcelain-themed skins released during the 2022 Lunar New Year, Lux’s Q ability subtly incorporates elements of traditional Chinese aesthetics. The designers drew inspiration from the classical painting *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdresses* (簪花仕女图) and integrated it into her skill set. Baoxiang flowers (宝相花) are scattered around the ability, seamlessly blending into the character’s design. This exemplifies the successful fusion of artistic aesthetics with traditional culture (Ding, 2023).



Figure 8. The Demonstration of Lux's Q Ability in the Porcelain Skin



Figure 9. Painting of Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers, Zhou Fang, Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE)

6. Conclusions

This paper examines the Lunar New Year skins in League of Legends, focusing on their thematic design, costume styles, color choices, and decorative patterns, revealing how Riot Games has incorporated a broad range of traditional Chinese elements. These themes draw from classical literature, festive traditions, and intangible cultural heritage, offering rich narrative contexts. In terms of costume design, the skins borrow key features from traditional Chinese attire, blending them with advanced visual effects to create a distinct Chinese aesthetic.

The color palettes adhere to the symbolism of traditional Chinese colors, conveying festive blessings while giving each character a unique identity and emotional tone. The costumes integrate traditional garment styles with accessories, while decorative motifs—such as botanical, animal, and geometric patterns—draw from

Chinese cultural traditions, enriching the aesthetic presentation.

These designs reflect the cultural significance of traditional attire and explore new ways to integrate these elements into modern fashion. As a result, the costumes transcend their functional role, becoming a medium through which players engage with and appreciate Chinese culture.

In the virtual realm, the recreation of traditional festivals involves reinterpreting cultural symbols from the real world, transforming them into interactive, immersive experiences. This process offers new opportunities for cultural transmission. Although the 2020 Lunar New Year skins faced criticism, this response highlights the growing cultural literacy and aesthetic awareness among players, who can now recognize distinct aspects of their cultural heritage. To design skins that resonate with players, developers must not only employ cutting-edge technology to achieve visual excellence but also strike a delicate balance between cultural appropriation, imitation, and creative reinterpretation.

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Appendix A

Year	The theme and quantity of skins	Chinese elements
2012	5 Skins: Dragon Fist- Lee Sin, Guqin-Sona, Dragonblade-Talon, Jade Dragon-Wukong Lion Dance-Kog'Maw	Chinese Kung Fu, Chinese Dragon, Chinese classical instruments
2013	5 Skins: Dragonwing- Corki, Jade Fang-Cassiopeia, Panda-Annie Warring Kingdoms Jarvan IV, Xin Zhao	Firecracker, Qing Dynasty Clothing, Panda,Warring Kingdoms
2014	2 Skins: Dragonblade- Rivan, Lunar Goddess-Diana Warring Kingdoms Tryndamere	Chinese opera, Mulan and Chang'e, <i>Warring Kingdoms</i>
2015	3 Skins: Firecracker-Jinx Warring Kingdoms Katarina,Nidalee	Firecracker
2016	3 Skins: Radiant-Wukong Lunar Wraith-Morgana, Caitlyn	<i>Journey to the West</i>
2017	3 Skins: Warring Kingdoms-Azir, Garen, Vi	<i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>
2018	3 Skins: Lunar Empress-Lux Lunar Guardian-Nasus, Warwick	Chinese heaven,Chinese Myths and Legends
2019	4 Skins: Firecracker-Vaine, Sejuani Coin Emperor-Tahm Hench Lunar Wraith Sylas	Firecracker
2020	5 Skins: Mecha Kingdoms-Draven,Garen, Leona, Sett, Jax	<i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>
2021	10 Skins: Lunar Beast-Alistar, Annie,Aphelios, Fiora, Jarvan IV, Darius Shan Hai Scrolls Cho'Gath, Jhin, Nautilus, Neeko	Lunar New Year, <i>Shan Hai Scrolls</i>
2022	10 Skins: Firecracker-Xin Zhao, Teemo,Sett, Diana, Tristana Porcelain Amumu, Ezreal, Kindred, Lux, Lissandra	Firecracker,Blue and white porcelain
2023	5 Skins: Mythmaker-Zyra, Sivir, Irelia, Garen, Galio Lunar Empress Ashe Lunar Guardian Kha'Zix, Malphite Lunar Empress Qiyana Lunar Emperor Thresh	Chinese Paper Cutting
2024	12 Skins: Heavenscale-Smodler, Ezreal, Lee Sin, Master Yi, Diana, Kai'sa Porcelain Protector Aurelion Porcelain Darius, Graves, Irelia, Miss Fortune , Morgana	Chinese celestial court,Blue and white porcelain

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Authors contributions

PhD candidate Hu was responsible for study design, writing, and data collection. PhD candidate Zhang contributed to the literature review. Prof. Liu oversaw the study and revised the text. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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