RESEARCH ON THE VISUAL-ART CHARACTERISTICS AND CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF HAN EMBROIDERY IN THE JINGCHU REGION

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ABSTRACT
Han embroidery is an important traditional embroidery craft in the Jingchu region, combining intangible cultural heritage value with functions of cultural identification. This study focuses on Jingchu Han embroidery and adopts a qualitative approach: using literature and case studies of embroidery works, as well as semi-structured interviews, and employing thematic analysis to summarize four categories of visual characteristics patterns, colors, composition, and embroidery techniques followed by an interpretation of its cultural connotations (historical memory, regional symbolism, folk-cultural meanings, and cultural value) and its relation to Jingchu aesthetic preferences. The findings show that Jingchu Han embroidery has a stable style characterized by a freehand "dynamic sketching" approach to form, layered color effects with gold-thread arrangement, a full yet well-ordered compositional system with preserved "embroidery ground," and the "qi-ping-shun" control of stitch work. Its cultural meanings are activated in usage contexts such as weddings, longevity celebrations, and festivals. The study also identifies issues including transmission challenges and insufficient youth participation, and proposes strengthening documentation and modern communication to promote sustained inheritance.
Keywords: Han Embroidery, Jingchu Region, Visual-Art Characteristics, Cultural Connotations

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional handicrafts is an important component of intangible cultural heritage, carrying regional historical memory and cultural identity. As a representative embroidery art of the Jingchu region, Han embroidery has formed a relatively stable visual language through the long-term development of its patterns and technical systems, and is widely applied in scenarios such as weddings, longevity celebrations, festivals, and home furnishings, used to express blessings and maintain etiquette.

Jingchu culture values nature, life, and mythological imagination, thereby forming an aesthetic tradition characterized by dynamism and symbolism. Patterns such as phoenixes, dragons and phoenixes, flowers and birds, cloud motifs, and auspicious animals, together with vivid colors and full compositions in Han embroidery, may be related to this regional cultural tradition. However, such relationships cannot be determined solely on the basis of individual patterns. They must be analyzed in conjunction with specific works, contexts of use, embroidery techniques, and transmission experiences.

Existing research mostly focuses on the historical development, technique inheritance and pattern classification of Han embroidery, yet there is still a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the overall relationship between patterns, colors, compositions and embroidery techniques, as well as the historical memory, regional symbolism, folkloric connotations and cultural values carried by visual forms. Early studies have already noted that Han embroidery may face the risk of insufficient social attention and the weakening of skill inheritance (Qiu, 2006). At the same time, its transmission is confronted with problems including changes in production methods, insufficient participation among younger groups, and uneven industrial development (Li et al., 2020; Lu & Gao, 2024).

Research Objectives

Based on qualitative induction, study the visual elements and cultural connotations of Jingchu Han Embroidery, and extract the "aesthetic expression-usage context-cultural symbolism" element chain for cultural and creative item development, providing analysis dimensions for translation and communication.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Traditional Crafts

Intangible cultural heritage includes not only the works themselves, but also the skills, knowledge, practices, and modes of transmission related to the works. Its cultural expressions continue to develop through the practice, transmission, and re-creation of relevant groups and individuals (UNESCO, 2003). Knowledge of traditional craftsmanship is often difficult to transmit completely through text or images, and instead requires demonstration, imitation, and long-term practice to master. Material selection, stitch control, operational force, and aesthetic judgment collectively constitute the knowledge system of craft practice (Adamson, 2007; Dormer, 1997; Sennett, 2008). Therefore, embroidery should be understood as a complex cultural form that combines visual expression, material practice, production knowledge, and socio-cultural functions.

Jingchu Culture and the History of Han Embroidery

Jingchu culture takes the pre-Qin Chu culture as its important historical origin, mainly forming and developing in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, with its core area located in today's Hubei Province. Relevant studies generally point out that pre-Qin Chu culture advocated nature, valued the expression of life, and presented aesthetic tendencies such as rich imagination, strong symbolism, and dynamic forms; traditions such as nature worship, mythological imagination, and symbolic expression can also be seen in pre-Qin Chu culture and traditional Chinese silk culture, which provides a historical reference for understanding the cultural background of Han embroidery in the Jingchu region (Cook & Major, 1999; Kuhn,

2012). At the same time, there was no regional embroidery system of "Han embroidery" in the modern sense during the pre-Qin period; Han embroidery is a regional embroidery style gradually formed in the production, life, and folk heritage of the Jingchu region (especially Wuhan and its surroundings), and with the development of textile technology, clothing culture, and local customs, it is widely used in scenarios such as clothing, weddings, longevity celebrations, festivals, opera decorations, and home furnishings, undertaking functions such as expressing blessings, maintaining etiquette, and transmitting local memories (Feng & Zhao, 2010; Feng, 2022).

Current Research and Limitations of Han Embroidery Studies

Existing research has already initiated discussions on the historical origins, regional cultural context, pattern types, technique inheritance, folk applications, and intangible cultural heritage protection of Han embroidery, providing a foundation for understanding its artistic characteristics and cultural significance (Chen & Zhang, 2018). Overall, most studies focus on the sorting of pattern genealogy, craft knowledge, and functional roles, but there remains a relative lack of comprehensive analysis regarding how patterns, colors, compositions, and techniques synergistically generate visual effects and cultural meanings; meanwhile, some achievements pay insufficient attention to the connecting chain of "how visual features are activated in usage scenarios, and how they are interpreted and acquire cultural meaning through inheritance experience." Based on this, this paper combines literature, work cases, and interview data to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the visual artistic characteristics and cultural connotations of Han embroidery.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design. It integrates literature analysis, case studies of Han embroidery works, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis and data triangulation are used to summarize the visual characteristics and cultural connotations of Han embroidery.

Data Sources

Table 1 Data Sources and Their Purposes

Data type	Number	Purpose
Literature	15 sources	To examine the historical background of Han embroidery, Jingchu culture, theories of traditional crafts, and the current state of research
Han embroidery works	24 works	To analyze patterns, colors, composition, and embroidery techniques
Interview participants	8 participants	To understand craft experience, cultural meanings, contexts of use, and transmission

Case Selection and Case Materials

This study adopts purposive sampling to select 24 Han embroidery works. Four works with representative visual characteristics and relatively complete documentation are selected as key cases. The selected works must have clear origins in, or transmission links with, the Jingchu region; present characteristics of patterns, colors, composition, or embroidery techniques; and have sources that can be verified through collection records, catalogues, inheritor statements, fieldwork, or relevant literature.

To highlight the visual-art characteristics of Han embroidery, the 24 cases are classified according to their dominant patterns into four categories: floral and plant patterns, animal

patterns, human-figure patterns, and character patterns. The contexts of use, functions, and cultural settings of the works are used as supplementary analytical dimensions.

Table 2 Classification of Han Embroidery Works Based on Dominant Patterns

Pattern category	Number	Main patterns	Main analytical content
Floral and plant patterns	6	Lotus, peony, lotus flowers, branches and leaves, pine trees, etc.	Plant forms, color relationships, life symbolism, and compositional methods
Animal patterns	8	Nine-headed birds, phoenixes, dragons, fish, bats, magpies, etc.	Stylized transformation of animal forms, dynamic forms, mythological symbolism, and regional culture
Human-figure patterns	4	The God of Wealth, folk figures, mythological figures, etc.	Figure forms, narrative qualities, folk beliefs, and aspirations for a better life
Character patterns	6	Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi, and combinations of auspicious characters	Character forms, the combination of characters and patterns, and blessing meanings
Total	24	-	-

Interview Participants and Data Collection

1) Interview Subjects

The interview subjects consist of 8 individuals, including 3 Han embroidery inheritors and 5 Han embroidery artisans. To ensure the interview information highly matches the research questions, this study employs purposive sampling, prioritizing respondents who possess relatively complete technical experience, can explain the connections between "pattern-craft-usage context", and have certain practical or inheritance experience. The interview locations are primarily the respondents' work or living environments to facilitate explanations combined with actual works and production experience. All interviews were conducted based on the respondents' informed consent, and the data is used for academic research; in the paper citations, anonymous labeling H01-H03 and A01-A05 is uniformly adopted, with undisclosed information processed according to the scope of informed consent when necessary.

2) Interview Outline and Thematic Scope

The interviews utilize a semi-structured outline. Core questions are set around "four connection points":

(1) How do you identify/name patterns and main symbols?
(2) How do the shape, color, and composition of patterns form visual recognizability?
(3) What are the roles and trade-offs of needlework/stitching/gold thread in the image?
(4) How does the meaning of the same pattern change in different usage scenarios?
(5) Which modifications would lead to semantic or aesthetic distortion?
(6) How do key experiences in production (material selection, sequence, strength) guarantee effects?
(7) Which "irreplaceable" points do you believe cultural and creative translation should retain?
(8) How do you summarize the key points of its aesthetic and cultural value transmission?

Among them, inheritors focus on "core content that cannot be changed at will and the reasons", while artisans focus on "materials and needlework details as well as their translation distortion risks".

3) Recording, Transcription, and Anonymization

Interviews were conducted after obtaining respondents' informed consent, with a duration of about 30 minutes (semi-structured, revolving around "four connection points"), and full audio

recordings were made with permission. After the interviews, researchers performed word-for-word transcription of the recordings and completed a second proofreading of the transcript (reviewing transcription terminology, pauses, and key expressions); subsequently, a brief read-back confirmation was conducted with the respondents' consent to correct possible understanding deviations and expression inconsistencies, and only after the read-back were they included in subsequent coding and citation use. To protect privacy and undisclosed information, anonymous labeling (H01-H03 and A01-A05) is uniformly used in the paper, and generalized processing is applied to content that might point to personal identity or sensitive inheritance details; expressions involving unpublished works or undisclosed inheritance information are limited within the scope of informed consent.

4) Usage in Thematic Analysis

In the coding and induction phase, the interview transcripts are used as evidence sources for "semantic interpretation and practical experience": on one hand, researchers correspond the citation content with visual element dimensions (pattern/color/composition/technique) and further categorize them into cultural significance dimensions (historical memory/regional symbolism/folklore implication/cultural value), thereby forming a traceable chain from "respondent insight-visual evidence-analytical proposition"; on the other hand, researchers draw on respondents' judgments on the coverage of cultural-creative elements and "irreplaceable points" to verify the rationality and explanatory consistency of the refinement of cultural-creative items.

Data Analysis

This study employs thematic analysis to integrate literature, artwork images, and interview texts: first, observable features such as patterns, colors, composition, and embroidery techniques are extracted from artwork images, while semantic coding related to symbolic interpretation, craft experience, understanding of usage scenarios, and inheritance changes is performed on interview texts; subsequently, based on preliminary coding, visual elements are grouped into four categories, and semantic interpretations are classified into analytical dimensions such as historical memory, regional symbolism, folklore implications, and cultural values, while utilizing relationship mechanisms such as "usage scenario-semantic change" and "inheritance experience-presentation rules" to explain the correspondence between "visual form-cultural meaning"; finally, through cross-checking the three types of materials-literature, artworks, and interviews-citations and key observation points of artworks are embedded into the analysis paragraphs, and judgmental statements are revised according to evidentiary differences to ensure the closure and traceability of the argumentation chain.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Visual-Art Characteristics of Han Embroidery

By comparing 24 pieces of Han embroidery works, this paper summarizes their visual art characteristics into four aspects: patterns, colors, composition, and embroidery techniques, and selects HS-01 to HS-04 as key cases, with Figure 1 to Figure 4 below used to present their key visual characteristics.

1) Diverse Pattern Themes with Dynamic and expressive freehand forms

Common patterns in the cases include phoenixes, dragons and phoenixes, flowers and birds, floral motifs, cloud patterns, auspicious beasts, and auspicious characters: animal patterns mostly point to luck, nobility, and protection; floral as well as flower and bird patterns are often associated with life, growth, and a beautiful life; characters such as Fu (Fortune), Lu (Prosperity), Shou (Longevity), and Xi (Happiness) directly express wishes through their literal meanings. Han embroidery does not aim for realistic reproduction, but enhances decorativeness and a sense of movement through extension, enlargement, generalization, transformation, and

reorganization (Chen & Zhang, 2018; Feng & Zhao, 2010), and presents expression, vitality, and symbolic meaning through subjective transformation.

A01 pointed out: "The phoenix in Han embroidery is generally not embroidered exactly like a real phoenix. During the embroidery process, its tail and wings must be elongated, so that the embroidery has momentum and appears more vibrant." Building on this practical explanation, the dynamic freehand approach can be understood as a controlled transformation strategy rather than arbitrary deformation - elongation of specific parts (tail and wings) functions as a formal mechanism to produce “momentum,” “vitality,” and decorative appeal.

As illustrated in Figure 1, HS-01 "Phoenix Playing with Peony" places the phoenix in an extended visual form that parallels the “elongation” logic described by A01; the treatment of lines and the layered relationship with peony petals further demonstrates this dynamic freehand modeling path.



Figure 1 HS-01 "Phoenix Playing with Peony"

2) Vivid Colors and the Strengthening of Emotional Expression through Contrast

The case analysis shows that Han embroidery commonly uses red, yellow, gold, blue, green, black, and white, highlighting the main subject through the technique of "using darkness to support brightness"; the combination of red and gold strengthens the sense of festivity and ritual in contexts such as weddings and festivals. Gold and silver threads are mostly used to outline edges and key structures, coordinating with different color scales to organize layers. H01 pointed out: "We have at least 12 shades for a single color, ranging from light to dark and dark to light, we only take one color as the primary, and all other colors serve as supplements." Accordingly, the vividness of Han embroidery is not only achieved through high-saturation colors, but also through structured color scaling within a controlled hierarchy (one primary hue and supporting shades).

As illustrated in Figure 2, HS-02 "Chu Heaven Divine Bird" uses contrast with the background and surrounding decorative colors to foreground the bird, while the multi-level color scaling enhances both layering and visual dynamism.

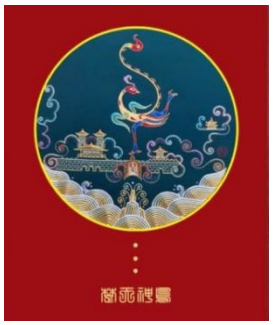


Figure 2 HS-02 "Chu Heaven Divine Bird"

3) Full Composition with Clarity Maintained through Order

Han embroidery composition primarily uses methods such as symmetry, centering, continuity, and scattered points to organize the visual field: symmetry reinforces stability and solemnity;

centering highlights the main focus; the continuous style creates decorative rhythm through repetition and interlacing; the scattered style brings agility via changes in density, direction, and size. Related characteristics are also reflected in a sense of order described as "full but not cluttered" (Chen & Zhang, 2018; Zou, 2021). A03 summarized: "The main pattern, of course, must occupy the most important position of the screen, and then the auxiliary patterns are on the side, performing some filling and supplementation. Leaving water paths is actually to highlight a sense of hierarchy and three-dimensionality of the pattern, making the design clearer, but without creating a suffocating feeling."
HS-03 "Han Embroidery Sedan Curtain (Partial)" is used to present the "full but not cluttered" compositional order in a marriage context; in particular, the controlled placement of auxiliary motifs and the preservation of “leaving water paths”/clear boundaries support hierarchy and avoid visual suffocation (Figure 3).



Figure 3 HS-03 "Han Embroidery Sedan Curtain (Partial)"

4) Embroidery Techniques Shaping Material Texture and Craft Distinctiveness

Embroidery techniques are not only a component of the visual characteristics of Han embroidery, but also an important carrier of craft knowledge and heritage value (Cao, 2022; Feng & Zhao, 2010). Case observations show that Han embroidery forms different stitch densities, surface textures, and boundary expressions through techniques such as satin stitch, flat stitch, and laying, pressing, winding, and nailing combined with gold thread techniques; the direction, density, and length of stitches collectively influence outlines, transitions, and turns (Feng & Zhao, 2010; Zhao, 2018; Zou, 2021).
A05 pointed out: "This embroidery must still meet certain requirements: first, it has to be perfectly flat; second, the stitches must be neat and even; and third, it must be well aligned—meaning the threads should be laid smoothly and the direction should be properly organized. Otherwise, it will look messy, and the gloss will inevitably be much worse."
This demonstrates that the technique’s cultural and visual distinctiveness is produced through strict control of flatness, neatness, and stitch direction, which directly shapes surface smoothness and glossiness in Han embroidery.
HS-04 "Dragon and Phoenix Bringing Prosperity" integrates the character "Fu" (blessing) with dragon and phoenix patterns, where the stitch arrangement and surface texture support the decorative effect of the text and patterns (Figure 4).



Figure 4 HS-04 Dragon and Phoenix Bringing Prosperity

Cultural Connotations Carried by the Visual Characteristics of Han Embroidery

1) Visual Forms Preserving Historical Memory

Research shows that the historical memory of Han embroidery is primarily sustained through three ways: patterns, embroidery techniques, and usage scenarios.

First, patterns such as the phoenix, dragon and phoenix, flowers and birds, cloud motifs, auspicious beasts, and auspicious characters preserve local society's concepts of good fortune, life, marriage, family continuity, and a better life. Second, the coordination of neatness, flatness, smoothness, and various stitching techniques preserves material experience, operational standards, and craftsmanship knowledge within traditional embroidery. Third, usage scenarios such as weddings, longevity celebrations, festivals, traditional opera, and home furnishings link Han embroidery to the ritual relationships, emotional expressions, and life experiences of local society.

Therefore, the historical memory of Han embroidery is not only preserved through written narratives but also continuously transmitted through patterns, materials, processes, and methods of use. This characteristic of continuous extension through practice, knowledge, and intergenerational transmission also aligns with the dynamic definition of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

H03 stated: "Stitching techniques require people to learn. To put it bluntly, it is still about economic support. If everyone comes to learn these techniques, they will not disappear or be forgotten. It still takes economic support and audience recognition for people to purchase and then learn, only then can it be inherited." This indicates that the historical memory of Han embroidery exists not only in pattern names, but the living inheritance of the craft also relies on the shared support of learners, audiences, and the market.

2) Multiple Visual Elements Collectively Forming Jingchu Regional Characteristics

Research findings indicate that the regional characteristics of Han embroidery do not rely entirely on a certain fixed pattern, but are collectively formed by multiple factors such as pattern themes, color schemes, composition methods, embroidery techniques, material textures, and usage scenarios. Although patterns like phoenixes, flowers and birds, and cloud motifs possess strong decorative and symbolic qualities, their regional significance still needs to be understood in conjunction with specific works, production experience, and local life backgrounds.

H02 stated: "In the past during the Ming and Qing dynasties, our Han embroidery was mainly for embroidering theatrical costumes, and we are still using Chu embroidery patterns today." This illustrates that the local characteristics of Han embroidery do not stem from a single fixed pattern, but are accumulated gradually through long-term inheritance, relying on the tradition of Chu embroidery patterns and historical application scenarios passed down through generations.

Integrating observations of works, interview data, and related research, it is evident that the Jingchu regionality of Han embroidery is not determined by a single pattern alone, but is collectively formed by pattern combinations, color relationships, compositional order, embroidery techniques, material textures, and usage scenarios, gradually developing into a comprehensive visual and cultural style through long-term production, use, and inheritance (Zhao, 2018).

3) Folk-Cultural Meanings Shaped by Pattern Combinations and Contexts of Use

The folk symbolic meaning of Han embroidery is primarily formed through symbolism, homophones, characters, pattern combinations, and usage scenarios. There is no fixed one-to-one correspondence between different visual forms and cultural meanings.

Taking examples such as dragon and phoenix in red and gold with symmetrical composition (weddings), combinations of the longevity character and auspicious birds (birthday celebrations), floral and fruit patterns (festivals or family), and exaggerated colors with

auspicious beast motifs (opera or ceremonial activities), it is evident that folk symbolic meaning does not rely solely on pattern names, but requires judging semantic differences based on pattern combinations and usage contexts.

A02 points out: "Patterns for weddings are generally more vivid and festive, more complex and lively. Embroidery for birthdays is more steady, representing a kind of respect for the person, and more elegant. The colors for opera are even brighter." This indicates that different usage scenarios such as weddings, birthday celebrations, and opera directly shape the pattern appearance and color preference of the embroidery, and the scenario conditions constrain the visual expression of patterns, thereby influencing people's interpretation of the pattern's connotation.

4) Cultural Value

The cultural value of Han embroidery is reflected in the preservation of historical memory, artistic expression, craft inheritance, and participation in social life, specifically manifesting as the visualization of Jing-Chu etiquette and emotional expression (Cui, 2023). Its visual language is supported by the combination of pattern-color-composition-technique, while technical requirements such as "neatness, flatness, and smoothness" have settled into the embroiderer's bodily experience and tacit knowledge; in contexts such as weddings, longevity celebrations, and festivals, embroidered works maintain emotions and participate in social life through blessings and rituals (Cao, 2022; Feng & Zhao, 2010; Li et al., 2020; Lu & Gao, 2024).

Content elements framework developed for cultural and creative items

Based on the previous induction of Han embroidery visual art characteristics (patterns, colors, composition and embroidery techniques) and cultural connotations (historical memory, regional symbols, folk metaphors and cultural values), this study further integrates "perceivable visual forms" and "understandable cultural metaphors" into a content elements framework for the development of cultural and creative items. The framework emphasizes: the cultural meaning of Han embroidery is not directly determined by a single pattern, but is activated under the collaborative action of pattern combinations, color relationships, compositional order, embroidery techniques and contexts of use; among them, aesthetic performance serves as the main triggering dimension, while functional contexts of use and cultural symbolic information serve as the interpretation and reception layers. The framework integrates "aesthetic performance" (dynamic freehand style, layering and contrast, full but not cluttered and leaving ground, smooth and even texture with gold thread), "functional contexts of use" (configuration and layout logic in weddings/birthdays/festivals/opera decorations/home furnishings), and "cultural symbolic information" (symbol systems and pattern-color-composition-technique synergy, contextual meaning changes) into an element chain for the development of cultural and creative items.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study summarizes the visual art characteristics (patterns, colors, composition, and embroidery techniques) of Jingchu Han Embroidery through literature, 24 work cases, and data from 8 interviews, while explaining their connection with historical memory, regional symbols, folk meanings, and cultural values. The results indicate that the regionality of Han Embroidery is not determined by a single pattern, but comes from the synergy of pattern combinations, color relationships, compositional order, techniques, and usage scenarios; the understanding of cultural semantics shows significant context dependency.

Due to limited samples and interview subjects, the conclusions mainly reflect the specific scope of the materials; follow-up research could expand the sample size and conduct cross-regional comparisons to test the robustness of this framework.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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