

QING DYNASTY SLEEVE BAND MOTIFS AS CULTURAL HERITAGE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT, SYMBOLISM, AND AESTHETICS

Ge HUANG¹, Akapong INKUER¹, Chanoknart MAYUSOH¹ and Pisit PUNTIENT¹

¹ Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand;
s65584948019@ssru.ac.th (G. H.); akapong.in@ssru.ac.th (A. I.);
chanoknart.ma@ssru.ac.th (C. M.); pisit.pu@ssru.ac.th (P. P.)

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ABSTRACT

Qing Dynasty sleeve band embroidery, a vital component of traditional Chinese dress culture, embodies historical memory, identity symbolism, and aesthetic ideals, carrying significant cultural heritage value. Primarily used in women's clothing among imperial court and scholar-official elites, sleeve bands functioned beyond decoration, intertwining with social status and culturally encoded symbol systems. However, with shifts in lifestyles and dress institutions, these motifs have disappeared from everyday contexts, surviving mainly in museum collections and intangible heritage displays - a "static" condition detached from contemporary life. Centered on heritage-based reinterpretation, this study systematically examines the historical context, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic characteristics of Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs, aiming to develop a discussable "visual grammar" framework that provides theoretical foundations for understanding traditional motifs and supports their revitalization. Through literature review and visual material collection, the study analyzes a purposive corpus of 60 Qing dynasty sleeve band artifacts from the Palace Museum (Beijing), the National Silk Museum (Hangzhou), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and selected published catalogues, spanning the Qianlong through Guangxu reigns and encompassing both Manchu court and Han scholar-official traditions. Drawing on Barthes' semiotic framework, three analytical levels are defined: morphemes (minimal visual units), syntactic rules governing motif combination (symmetry, hierarchy, framing), and craft modulation, whereby stitching techniques assign hierarchical weight to motifs. The study ultimately establishes a structured visual grammar of sleeve band embroidery and identifies pathways for translating this framework into contemporary design systems and digital heritage preservation.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty Sleeve Band Motifs, Cultural Heritage, Historical Context, Symbolic Meaning, Aesthetic Characteristics

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INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of globalization, the revitalization of traditional culture and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage have become major issues of international concern. The adoption of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, together with the establishment of relevant laws and policy frameworks in China, has provided institutional support for the protection, transmission, and reproduction of traditional crafts. Within this broader context, Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs can be regarded not only as representative examples of traditional craft and aesthetic systems, but also as a key medium for understanding how cultural identity is materialized and symbolized. Their motif repertoire includes natural imagery such as flowers, cloud-and-dragon patterns, and landscapes, carrying symbolic aspirations for auspiciousness, well-being, and power, while embroidery techniques “fix” these meanings into visible forms. However, existing scholarship still shows structural limitations: on the one hand, systematic studies of sleeve band motifs remain insufficient; on the other, clearer methodological support is needed for interpreting sleeve bands as a heritage form and for connecting such interpretations with contemporary contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to return to the sleeve band motifs themselves and conduct an integrated analysis from three dimensions - historical context, symbolic systems, and aesthetic mechanisms.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study, centered on Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs as cultural heritage, proposes the following objectives:

- 1) From the perspectives of dress institutions and socio-cultural structures, to clarify the usage contexts of sleeve bands in Qing dynasty women’s clothing and trace the historical trajectory through which they shifted from decorative practice to heritage preservation.
- 2) Drawing on semiotics and cultural identity perspectives, to analyze the symbolic system of sleeve band motifs and reveal how identity order and value concepts are carried through subject selection, element combinations, and meaning encoding.
- 3) Focusing on aesthetics, to summarize the typical characteristics of sleeve band motifs in terms of compositional patterns, visual styles, and embroidery techniques, and to explain how their aesthetic mechanisms support the recognizability and communicability of their “heritage-ness.”

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Research on Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs not only engages with the macro-level agenda of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, but also intersects with multiple fields such as dress history, visual semiotics, and the aesthetics of embroidery craftsmanship. In recent years, amid globalization and cultural revitalization, the protection of traditional culture has become a shared priority both internationally and within China. The adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), together with the release of related Chinese policy documents, has provided an institutional backdrop and scholarly impetus for the reinterpretation of traditional crafts and motifs. Within this framework, sleeve bands have gradually been understood not merely as “dress decoration,” but as heritage units that crystallize historical memory, craft knowledge, and cultural symbolism. They are highly visible in Qing dynasty women’s clothing particularly among the imperial court and scholar-official elites where they are closely tied to status display, aesthetic taste, and symbolic expression, and therefore possess notable cultural heritage significance.

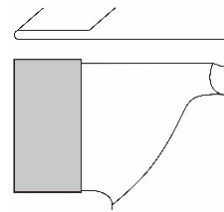
Studies on Historical Context: Origins, Institutionalization, and Manchu-Han Interaction

At the level of “historical context,” existing studies often approach sleeve bands through dress institutions, lifestyles, and broader political - cultural structures in order to explain their formation. A recurrent argument is that decorative details in dress can reflect the overall

structure of institutions and ways of life “a small ornament can express an institution, a belief, an emotion, and a way of life” a perspective that positions sleeve bands at the intersection of aesthetics, identity, and institutional order. Documentary and historical-source research further supplies key evidence concerning the “material form - modes of wearing - naming and regulation” of sleeve bands. For example, Qing sources record sleeve bands as “protective sleeves” (Table 1), emphasizing their placement at the cuff, their ability to be folded outward and displayed, and their dual decorative and functional roles. Moreover, periodization studies suggest that sleeve bands emerged during the Qianlong reign and remained popular through the Tongzhi and Guangxu periods, a trajectory linked to the revival of wide-sleeved forms, the flourishing of Han edging ornamentation arts, and the cultural dynamics of Manchu - Han mutual imitation.

Table 1 Schematic Illustration of Qing Chinese Sleeve Bands

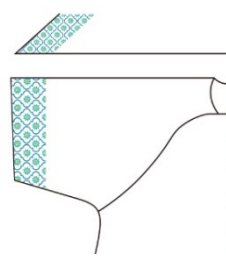
Clothing Name: Upper Garment of Court Attire, Armguard Illustration
Red Silk Gauze with Blue Border Trim



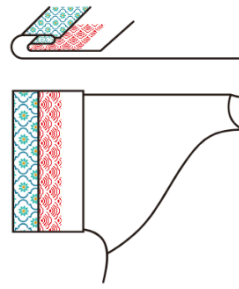
At the same time, the use of institutional history and archival materials has made the process through which sleeve bands moved from “fashion” to “regulation” much clearer. Policy evidence from the eighth year of the Daoguang reign - indicating that “weaving patterns on sleeves became customary” together with Tongzhi-period regulations specifying the materials of sleeve bands, the coordinated pairing of sleeve band motifs with the garment’s overall patterns, cuff dimensions, and both Han and Manchu styles (Table 2), shows that sleeve bands had entered a standardized system of court production and became an important node of “implicit integration” between Manchu and Han dress cultures. From the perspective of historical-context research, therefore, the heritage value of sleeve bands lies not only in their “antiquity,” but also in the way this cuff ornament unit records the negotiated interplay among Qing ritual order, political culture, and aesthetic fashion.

Table 2 Schematic Illustration of Han Chinese Sleeve Bands

Clothing Name: Woman's Blue Satin Changyi Schematic Illustration of Han Chinese Sleeve Bands



Clothing Name: Woman's Blue Satin Changyi Schematic Illustration of Man Chinese Sleeve Bands



Studies on Symbolic Meaning: Visualizing Identity Order, Ritual Blessings, and Female Roles

At the level of “symbolic meaning,” scholars generally regard sleeve bands as a readable semiotic system within dress. Although positioned at the edge of the garment, they carry complex social symbolism and function as an important medium through which women’s identity is expressed, ethical order is articulated, and motif languages are performed. Related studies have paid particular attention to the symbolic hierarchy of sleeve bands within the clothing systems of Qing imperial and aristocratic women. According to relevant records in the Collected Statutes of the Qing Dynasty (Qing huidian), sleeve bands worn by consorts and titled women on formal occasions often employed high-status techniques such as multicolored embroidery and gold-thread embroidery, and featured auspicious themes including “Long Live the Emperor,” the “Eight Auspicious Symbols,” the “Hundred Children” motif, and “Peony-and-Butterfly” patterns. These elements not only serve as visual expressions of blessing and reverence, but also implicitly encode cultural expectations regarding female virtue, marriage, and reproductive roles (as shown in Table 3). Therefore, the key contribution of research on symbolic meaning is to demonstrate that sleeve bands are not simply a “collection of patterns”; rather, they compress power order, ritual norms, family ethics, and gender roles into visible visual codes. Their heritage value is likewise manifested in this cultural structure in which meanings can be transmitted.

Table 3 Symbolic meaning of sleeve bands

Sleeve Band: “Four Consorts & Sixteen Children” on White Ground	Interpretation of the Sleeve Bands
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The Song Dynasty text *Shiwu Jiyuan* records that in the early Tang Dynasty, four consort titles - Noble, Pure, Virtuous, and Worthy - were established below the empress as part of the palace ranking system, reflecting real imperial consort titles. These “Four Consorts” were idealized as models of female conduct, aiming to promote social norms for all women through the exemplary influence of elite women.

Studies on Aesthetic Characteristics: Visual Conventions, Regional Embroidery Styles, and Craft Texture

At the level of “aesthetic characteristics,” relevant studies primarily examine sleeve bands through motif subjects, compositional order, color systems, and embroidery techniques. The review structure of your dissertation likewise treats “the motif composition, craft styles, and color - composition features of sleeve band embroidery” as an independent section, emphasizing its “rich and precise design language at the visual level.” In line with this, research in craft aesthetics shows that stitching methods are not merely technical procedures; they directly shape aesthetic effects and the “heritage recognizability” of the motifs. For instance, qi zhen (flat stitch) produces a strong sense of order and decorative clarity through neat stitches and smooth, even surfaces, and is often used for large-area primary motifs. By contrast, qiang zhen (shading stitch) creates natural gradients and light - dark layering through oblique short stitches interwoven with multiple colored threads, enhancing three-dimensionality and dynamism, and is regarded as an important marker of high-status embroidery in the Qing dynasty (as shown in Table 4).

In addition, comparative style studies locate sleeve bands within the aesthetic genealogies of different regional embroidery traditions. For example, Cantonese embroidery - style sleeve bands often use white as the ground color; in technique, they frequently combine flat stitch with couching gold, featuring dense compositions and fine, fluent lines. They also strengthen decorative order through a framed (cartouche-style) layout, while covering subjects such as figures, plants, animals, and landscapes. With bright coloration, they form an overall character that is “plain and elegant yet not lacking in splendor.” Taken together, these studies indicate that the aesthetics of sleeve bands do not depend solely on the “symbolic meanings of subjects,” but rather on the integrated organization of compositional conventions, color order, and stitch textures - precisely the kind of “formal evidence” that underpins their significance as cultural heritage.

Table 4 Aesthetic characteristic of Sleeve Bands

Sleeve Band: Couching-Gold and Interpretation of the Sleeve Bands
Flat-Stitch Embroidered Lior
Playing with an Embroidered Ball



This sleeve band uses gold couching (panjin) as its “bone” and flat stitch (pingzhen) as its “flesh,” achieving a harmonious balance of strength and softness. Gold couching outlines the motif in gold thread, creating a frame-like emphasis against the dark ground while also protecting the cuff area through the thread’s abrasion resistance. Flat stitch, through densely filled color fields and the gradient-shading technique (tuiyun), produces a sculptural transition of tones; together with the textural treatment of the lion’s mane, it results in an artistic effect that is brilliant and solid in outline yet delicate and refined in its inner silk textures.

Synthesis and Research Gaps: The Three Main Threads Still Need to Be Integrated Through “Heritage Interpretation”

Overall, existing scholarship has accumulated substantial findings across three dimensions historical origins, symbolic systems, and aesthetic craftsmanship while continuously strengthening recognition of the cultural value of sleeve bands. However, when approached

from the proposition of Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs as cultural heritage, there remains room for further development. First, many studies tend to discuss dress institutional history, motif meanings, or craft techniques in a segmented manner, and still lack a tighter explanatory chain showing how these three dimensions jointly constitute the heritage-ness of sleeve bands that is, how context shapes meaning, meaning attaches to form, and form is stably transmitted through craft. Second, interpreting sleeve bands as a “localized aesthetic unit” of heritage still requires a clearer and more structured mode of presentation, so as to avoid remaining at the level of motif listing or generalized praise. Consistent with the situation identified in your dissertation’s introduction, although research on embroidery has increased, systematic studies specifically focused on Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs remain insufficient. Therefore, this study advances an integrated framework of historical context - symbolic meaning - aesthetic characteristics, rearticulating sleeve bands as a cultural object that can be understood and interpreted within a heritage perspective, and thereby laying a foundation for more in-depth specialized research in the future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an integrated methodological approach centered on “literature - images - visual analysis”, drawing on the established research framework of the dissertation. It begins with literature review and visual-material collection to systematically examine the cultural connotations and visual characteristics of Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs, and then extracts and codes motif symbols to summarize their principles of visual organization.

The specific methods include:

Literature review: Reviewing the heritage-safeguarding context, dress culture, and embroidery craft studies in order to establish a theoretical reference point for interpreting the “heritage-ness” of sleeve band motifs.

Visual analysis of images and cases: Conducting comparative analysis based on visual materials to classify motif subjects, compositional structures, and stylistic features, and to distill their aesthetic mechanisms.

Craft - form correlation analysis: Drawing on the characteristics of representative stitching techniques (e.g., qi zhen/flat stitch, qiang zhen/shading stitch) to explain how craft practices shape visual order, layering, and expressive power, thereby supporting the aesthetic recognizability of sleeve band motifs.

Corpus selection and sampling parameters: To ensure empirical transparency, this study builds a purposive corpus of 60 Qing dynasty sleeve band artifacts selected according to four criteria: (1) provenance verifiability - items must derive from authenticated museum collections (Palace Museum in Beijing, National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) or from peer-reviewed published catalogues; (2) chronological coverage - spanning the Qianlong, Jiaqing, Daoguang, Xianfeng, Tongzhi, and Guangxu reigns (c. 1736–1908), so that stylistic change over time can be tracked; (3) cultural diversity - balanced representation of Manchu court style, Han scholar-official style, and regional embroidery schools (Cantonese, Suzhou, and Beijing traditions); and (4) visual completeness - specimens must retain a legible composition so that motifs, layout, and stitching can be reliably identified. The final corpus is tabulated by dynasty period, collection source, motif category, and dominant stitching technique, providing a shared reference base for the coding that follows.

Semiotic coding framework and the definition of visual morphemes: Building on Barthes’ two-order theory of signification and Hall’s notion of encoding/decoding, this study treats each sleeve band as a structured visual text and codes it at three analytic levels. First, a morpheme is defined as the smallest visual unit that carries a stable cultural meaning on its own for example, a peony (wealth), a bat (blessing/fu), a ruyi cloud, a dragon, a tripod, or a scroll. Morphemes are coded across five attributes: subject category (flora / fauna / ritual object /

figure / landscape), symbolic referent, scale relative to the band, position on the band (center / flank / ground), and color value. Second, syntactic rules describe how morphemes are legitimately combined: axial symmetry around a central figure, hierarchical nesting (primary motif + secondary motif + filler), cartouche framing, and rhythmic repetition along the cuff. Third, craft modulation records the stitch type applied to each morpheme (flat stitch / shading stitch / couching gold / seed stitch) and the corresponding hierarchical weight it confers, so that technique is treated not as mere execution but as a meaning-generating operation within the grammar. Two coders independently coded a pilot subset of ten artifacts to check inter-coder consistency, and disagreements were resolved through reference to the Collected Statutes of the Qing Dynasty and to authoritative craft scholarship, ensuring that the coding protocol is replicable by other researchers.

Integrated case analysis across history, symbolism, and aesthetics: To avoid compartmentalizing the three analytic threads, the study selects focused cases in which historical context, symbolic order, and aesthetic form visibly intersect - in particular, the Manchu-Han stylistic negotiation at the cuff, where wide-sleeved Han forms were absorbed into Manchu court dress and re-regulated through the sumptuary codes of the Daoguang and Tongzhi reigns. Each case is read as one “sentence” of the visual grammar: the historical setting provides the pragmatics, the motif combination provides the syntax, and the stitching technique provides the prosody that assigns emphasis. This case-driven integration operationalizes the “synergistic mechanism” named in the Discussion, so that the three dimensions are explained together rather than in sequence.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Historical Context: A Contextual Shift from Dress Decoration to Heritage Preservation

The study shows that Qing dynasty sleeve bands were widely used in women’s clothing, especially among the imperial court and scholar-official elites. They functioned not only as dress decoration but were also closely tied to symbols of identity and social status. As an integral component of traditional Chinese dress culture, sleeve bands possess notable historical and cultural value and can be regarded as an important representative within the intangible cultural heritage continuum.

However, with the transformation of modern lifestyles and dress institutions, sleeve band motifs gradually faded from everyday practice and have largely survived only through museum collections or intangible-heritage displays. As a result, they have shifted from “decoration in use” to “heritage on display,” facing the risk of becoming museumized and detached from lived experience.

Symbolic Meaning: A Motif System Carrying Auspicious Order and Identity Imaginaries

Sleeve band motifs are highly symbolic. Common natural imagery such as flowers, cloud-and-dragon patterns, and landscapes not only conveys feminine elegance and refinement but also reflects social aspirations for auspiciousness, well-being, and power.

Further visual analysis indicates that sleeve bands can also construct a meaning system oriented toward ritual order and self-cultivation through thematic clusters such as “object motifs.” For example, symmetrical compositions centered on wenfang (scholarly studio) objects - tripods, vases, censers, zithers, books, and scrolls transform concrete objects into symbolic signs through geometric and decorative stylization. Interspersed with flowers such as peonies and lingzhi, these motifs create a tranquil narrative of “scenery within objects,” allowing the sleeve band to carry cultural connotations of moral cultivation, prosperity, and peace.

Aesthetic Characteristics: “Heritage-ness” Co-produced by Visual Grammar and Embroidery Techniques

The aesthetic characteristics of sleeve band motifs can be summarized as a synergistic mechanism of “ordered composition + dense craftsmanship + elegant style.” On the one hand,

typical object-motif sleeve bands strengthen contour and structural clarity through symmetrical layouts and high-contrast line embroidery in black and white, forming an aesthetic orientation of “clarity, tranquility, beauty, and auspiciousness,” and embodying the restrained and dignified artistic tone of women’s dress.

On the other hand, embroidery techniques play a foundational role in aesthetic production. Qi zhen (flat stitch) creates strong order and decorative clarity through neat stitches and smooth surfaces, making it suitable for densely filling large motif areas. Qiang zhen (shading stitch) produces natural gradients and light–dark layering through oblique short stitches interwoven with multiple colored threads, significantly enhancing dynamism and three-dimensionality.

From the perspective of women’s life history, embroidery was not only an everyday skill but also a vehicle for emotional expression and cultural construction. Under the influence of ritual - ethical norms and moral education, women materialized ideals and cultural imaginaries through meticulous needlework, contributing to the formation of a stable style in sleeve band motifs through the interweaving of complex techniques.

Toward a Visual Grammar: Morphemes, Syntax, and Craft Modulation as an Integrated Case

To move beyond description and to demonstrate the “visual grammar” as a functional system, the three analytic threads are here recombined on the same object. Within the coded corpus, the single most recurrent morpheme inventory can be sorted into four classes: auspicious flora (peony, lingzhi, lotus), symbolic fauna (dragon, phoenix, butterfly, bat), ritual objects (tripod, vase, scroll, zither), and structural fillers (cloud-scroll, ruyi head, geometric fret). These morphemes do not appear at random. Their combination follows recurrent syntactic rules: a central-axial rule that places the highest-status morpheme at the center of the cuff panel; a flanking-echo rule that duplicates secondary morphemes symmetrically; and a cartouche-framing rule that encloses the figural scene within a patterned border. Together these rules form the “syntax” of the sleeve band.

Craft modulation then assigns hierarchical weight to the sentence. In the coded sample, the shading stitch (qiang zhen) is applied almost exclusively to the central morpheme - a dragon, a phoenix, a peony head - producing tonal gradation and three-dimensional volume that visually promote that motif to the status of “subject” of the visual sentence. By contrast, the flat stitch (qi zhen) is applied to secondary motifs and filler patterns, producing a flat, uniformly legible field that functions as the “predicate” against which the central morpheme is read. Couching gold, where present, operates as emphatic punctuation: it outlines the contour of the highest-ranking morpheme and signals courtly status. In grammatical terms, if the same peony morpheme is rendered in flat stitch it reads as a decorative noun, but rendered in shading stitch with couched gold outlines it reads as a ceremonial subject carrying court-level weight. Stitch choice is therefore not a stylistic preference but a hierarchizing operation, and this is precisely what makes the grammar functional rather than descriptive.

The Manchu - Han negotiation at the cuff offers a focused case in which history, symbolism, and aesthetics intersect on the same object. On Han-style changyi bands from the Guangxu period, the scholarly-studio morphemes (tripod, scroll, zither) sit at the center and are rendered in fine flat stitch, producing a quiet, literary register aligned with Han aesthetic ideals of restraint and self-cultivation. On Manchu court bands of comparable date, the same compositional slot is occupied by a dragon or phoenix rendered in shading stitch and couched gold, producing a louder, ceremonial register aligned with imperial status. The formal tension - same syntax, different morphemes, different stitch emphasis - visually inscribes the cultural negotiation that historians have described in institutional terms. Read this way, the sleeve band is not merely a product of Manchu - Han contact; it is the visual document of that contact, with the grammar itself encoding the ethnic-cultural settlement.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From a cultural heritage perspective, the value of Qing dynasty sleeve band motifs lies not merely in their being “exquisite patterns,” but in the way they compress social order, symbolic identity, and aesthetic ideals into a visual system that can be viewed and transmitted. Historically, within court and scholar-official contexts, sleeve bands signified identity and status. In terms of subject matter, they constructed a network of meanings related to auspiciousness and self-cultivation through natural imagery and object-based motifs. Formally, they developed an aesthetic mechanism that is “elegant and readily recognizable” through symmetrical structures, high-contrast line embroidery, and diverse stitching techniques.

Yet the contemporary predicament is equally clear: sleeve band motifs have largely withdrawn from everyday life and are preserved mainly through museums and intangible-heritage displays, leaving them in a marginal state that is detached from modern lived experience. At the same time, systematic research and methodological frameworks focused on sleeve band motifs remain insufficient. Therefore, this study concludes that, if sleeve band motifs are to move from “heritage on display” toward “heritage that can be understood and communicated,” it is first necessary to establish a systematic interpretation of their historical context, symbolic systems, and aesthetic mechanisms. This, in turn, provides the theoretical premise for subsequent work on motif documentation, visual-grammar modeling, and revitalization-oriented practice.

Building a living bridge between museum artifacts and contemporary creative industries, the visual grammar proposed in this study is directly translatable into three application pathways. First, in contemporary fashion and product design, the morpheme inventory and syntactic rules can be treated as a rule-based design system - analogous to a style guide - that allows designers to generate new compositions that remain culturally legible as “sleeve band” rather than decorative pastiche. Second, in digital heritage preservation, the morpheme-level coding scheme provides a structured metadata schema for museum databases and online collections, making Qing sleeve bands computationally searchable by morpheme class, syntactic configuration, and craft modulation, and supporting machine-learning-assisted pattern recognition for future corpus expansion. Third, in education and public communication, the grammar offers a teachable model that lets non-specialist audiences “read” a sleeve band as a sentence - identifying subject, modifier, and emphasis - thereby converting static museum artifacts into interpretable cultural texts. By refining the methodology with transparent sampling parameters and deepening the structural analysis through the morpheme–syntax–craft model, this study aims to contribute a reproducible analytical framework to cultural heritage studies and to keep Qing sleeve band motifs culturally alive in contemporary creative practice.

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