

Cultural Influences on Han Chinese Embroidery Patterns during the Late 19th and Early 20th centuries

XiuMian Chen¹, Rose Dahlina Rusli^{1*}, Rohana Zur¹, JinLian Bai²

**Corresponding Author*

¹ College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Shah Alam, Malaysia

² College of Art and Design, FuJian Business University, Fuzhou, China

2022897834@student.uitm.edu.my, dahlina77@uitm.edu.my, rohan316@uitm.edu.my, 405204639@qq.com
Tel: 601116576956

Abstract

This paper explored the influence of Chinese and Western cultures on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The objective was to examine the influence of Chinese and Western cultures on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during this period, specifically focusing on design subjects, composition, color schemes, and embroidery techniques. It employed literature review and field investigation methods. The research found that under this Chinese-Western cultural fusion, Han Chinese embroidery patterns exhibited the following characteristics: A wealth of embroidery pattern subjects, subtle and realistic compositional style, rich and diversified color palettes, and innovative embroidery techniques.

Keywords: Han Chinese, Embroidery patterns, Cultural Influences, Late 19th and early 20th centuries

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

The embroidery patterns of the Han ethnic group in China boast a long history and rich cultural significance. Renowned Chinese scholars pointed out that Han Chinese embroidery patterns are an essential carrier of Chinese traditional culture, and their developmental trajectory reflects the aesthetic and cultural spirit of the Chinese nation (Sun, 2007). Han Chinese embroidery patterns are not merely decorative art; they are also a system of cultural symbols, bearing profound cultural connotations and spiritual meanings (Chung, 2005). Han Chinese embroidery patterns evolved from simple decorative motifs to complex artistic expressions over a long developmental process (Yang, 2020). The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a significant transitional period for Han Chinese embroidery art, during which new thematic subjects constantly emerged, particularly in the selection of motifs, reflecting salient characteristics of the times (Fang & Wang, 2015).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, following the opening of treaty ports after the Opium Wars, China abolished the Manchu Qing Empire and established the Republic of China. Western culture entered China through various channels including missionaries, merchants, and students studying abroad. Western science and technology, educational systems, political thought, and art forms were gradually accepted. Western culture had a profound impact on Chinese society, and the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western cultures became the primary trend in cultural development. The Han Chinese embroidery patterns of this period displayed rich artistic

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features and cultural connotations, carrying long-standing historical traditions and deep cultural heritage, forming an important part of Chinese traditional handicraft art. However, researchers have conducted limited studies on the cultural influences on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during this period (Chen, 2005). Current research mainly focused on artistic characteristics, cultural connotations, and embroidery techniques of Han Chinese embroidery patterns (Sheng, 2021; Xiao, 2018), with relatively insufficient attention to the cultural influences on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during this period.

1.2 Aim and Objective of Study

This study aims to explore the influence of Chinese and Western cultures on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The objective was to examine the influence of Chinese and Western cultures on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during this period, specifically focusing on design subjects, composition, color schemes, and embroidery techniques. In the rapidly evolving contemporary era, Han Chinese embroidery patterns are facing new challenges and opportunities in cultural heritage preservation and artistic innovation. Therefore, studying them has important practical significance.

2.0 Literature Review

By reviewing the existing literature, it is evident that the research mainly focused on the artistic characteristics, cultural connotations, embroidery techniques and inheritance, as well as innovation and development of embroidery patterns.

2.1 Artistic Characteristics

Xiao and Liu (2025) systematically compared the characteristics of embroidery patterns in the Tibetan and Qiang regions of Sichuan, highlighting the shared influences of Han Chinese embroidery culture on these patterns. Traditional Han Chinese embroidery patterns in the Jiangnan region during modern times not only emphasize the connotations typical of traditional Chinese patterns but also reflect the influence of Western aesthetics, which values both connotations and formal beauty (Li, 2022). Some scholars have explored the characteristics and color-matching rules of Taoyuan embroidery patterns from an aesthetic perspective, arguing that they embody the artistic features and cultural connotations of traditional art (Hu & Zhang, 2025). During the Republic of China period, traditional aesthetics transitioned towards modern aesthetics, with pragmatic aesthetics significantly influencing the design paradigms and ideological shifts in traditional embroidery (Xing et al., 2022).

2.2 Cultural Characteristics

Traditional Han Chinese embroidery patterns, which often employ metaphors, puns, homophones, and symbolism, create a unique artistic form that perfectly integrates graphic design with auspicious meanings (Lv, 2016). Hakka embroidery is an important symbol of traditional Chinese embroidery culture, rich in humanistic connotations and aesthetic value (Zhang, 2024). Modern Chinese embroidery patterns are characterized by cultural inclusiveness, material culture, folklore, and aesthetic values, all reflecting profound cultural significance (Zheng & Cui, 2015). Cui et al. (2009) explored the relationship between embroidery patterns and traditional culture during this period, noting that these patterns retained traditional features while incorporating new elements from Western art.

2.3 Embroidery Techniques and Inheritance

By comparing embroidery with other art forms, such as painting and calligraphy, scholars have summarized the unique characteristics of embroidery techniques (Ding & Jiang, 2015). After years of collecting traditional Chinese embroidery stitches, the author systematically categorized them into nine types based on their complexity and developmental trajectory (Nian, 2017). The study also examined how women used embroidery to express their emotions and culture, reflecting the living conditions of women in traditional Chinese society (Zhang, 2016). Placing embroidery within the broader context of women's handicraft culture helps to better understand the transmission of embroidery skills and their cultural connotations (He, 2009).

2.4 Innovation and Development

In recent years, the innovative development of embroidery patterns has become a research hotspot. Scholars are exploring ways to integrate traditional Chinese embroidery elements into modern visual design, which holds significant importance for protecting Chinese cultural heritage (Cheng & Skliarenko, 2024). The application and inheritance of traditional embroidery techniques in modern fashion demonstrate the potential for integrating tradition with modern design (Shi, 2025). Applying traditional Chinese embroidery patterns to cultural and creative product design is an important pathway for the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional crafts (Zhang, 2025). It is evident that the application of traditional Chinese embroidery in modern design extends beyond the fashion industry to home decoration and digital art (Cheng & Skliarenko, 2024). This integration not only revitalizes embroidery but also contributes to the preservation and innovation of cultural heritage.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods. Data sources include literature review and field investigations. Following data collection, the researchers conducted data selection and coding procedures. Subsequently, the selected data were analyzed using Rose's visual research methodology (Rose, 2022).

3.1 Data collection

The literature review method refers to obtaining information and data needed for research by consulting literature and documents (Wasserfuhr, 2022). The literature review methodology systematically retrieves documentary materials through electronic databases, library archives, and internet resources. This study collected secondary sources related to Han Chinese embroidery from the late 19th to early 20th century, including academic literature, monographs, master's/doctoral theses, and journal articles. The literature screening criteria were as follows. Explicit coverage of the research period; availability of analyzable embroidery pattern images or detailed descriptions; source credibility (e.g., authoritative publications or academic institutional outputs). All included literature was meticulously documented with author names, publication years, and image provenance to ensure traceability.

To obtain primary visual data, the research team conducted field investigations at the following institutions: the Fujian Museum; China National Silk Museum (China's largest specialized museum of textiles and costumes); China Jiangnan University Heritage Center (systematically examining its collection of over 1,000 Han Chinese embroidery artifacts this period). During fieldwork, standardized documentation protocols were implemented. First, multi-angle photography of embroidery specimens matched the study period. Then, metadata extraction from accompanying texts (e.g., temporal attribution, geographic origin, functional labels). Last catalog number linkage to establish precise correlations between images and institutional metadata.

3.2 Data selection and coding

To ensure the representativeness of visual data and analytical rigor, the researcher performed the following steps. First, initial screening of images: Samples with severe damage or incomplete information were excluded, and embroidery works with clear patterns and clear cultural symbols were prioritized. Then, subject classification coding: based on the iconographic method, the embroidery patterns were coded by subjects. Thirdly, formal feature coding was performed: formal analysis method was used to label each image with visual elements such as composition, color palettes, and embroidery techniques. The whole process was cross-validated: coding was done independently by two researchers and disagreements were resolved through discussion to ensure reliability.

3.3 Data analysis

Rose (2022), in *Visual Methodologies: an Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* presents six visual research methods in this book. This article used the dual perspectives of iconography and formal analysis presented in the book to guide the analysis of visual image data. Iconography focuses on the subject matter, symbolism, and meaning of images. Formal analysis focused on visual elements such as composition, color, and lines in the images. The analysis examined how cultural influences affected the subjects, composition, color, and embroidery techniques of Han Chinese embroidery patterns during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

4.0 Findings

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the late Qing and Republican period, China underwent enormous social changes, and the development of Han Chinese embroidery patterns exhibited some unique characteristics. During this period, while preserving traditional elements, embroidery art also incorporated new Western elements and features, reflecting the influence of social changes and cultural exchange, demonstrating the unique charm and temporal characteristics of Chinese national embroidery art.

4.1 A wealth of embroidery pattern subjects

During this period, Han Chinese embroidery patterns combined characteristics of both traditional Chinese and Western elements. Against this unique social backdrop, the subject matter of embroidery patterns began to undergo significant changes. In coastal treaty ports such as Shanghai, Xiamen, and Guangzhou, Western cultural influences were particularly evident. While the embroidery patterns retained the essence of traditional Chinese themes—such as animals, plants, and figures—the depiction of these themes started to evolve. The portrayal of animals and plants began to incorporate expressive and freehand techniques, moving away from the more rigid, realistic styles of the past. Similarly, human figures were no longer confined to the stylized conventions of traditional Chinese opera; instead, they were depicted in a more lifelike and everyday manner. Influenced by Western art and culture, these patterns adopted Western painting techniques such as perspective and shading, giving the embroidery a more three-dimensional appearance.

As interactions between China and the West increased, Western motifs were integrated into Chinese embroidery, enriching the range of subjects depicted. Embroidery patterns of this era featured not only traditional Chinese auspicious symbols like dragons, phoenixes, cloud patterns, and peonies but also modern elements such as automobiles and electric lights. For the first time in the history of traditional embroidery, patterns began to include scenes from everyday life and Western-style landscape sketches, as shown in Fig. 1. This was a phenomenon previously unseen in traditional embroidery.



Fig.1: Western landscape sketches theme on women's gown of Han Chinese
(source: China National Silk Museum, the late 19th century)

4.2 Subtle and realistic compositional style

The composition of Han Chinese embroidery patterns exhibited a delicate realism that combined traditional Chinese and Western styles during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The principles of composition still maintained the traditional Chinese characteristics of central symmetry, balanced distribution, and well-arranged density. In traditional Chinese culture, symmetry aligns with the Confucian idea of "moderation" and also fits the Daoist aesthetic of "valuing stillness" as a form of static equilibrium. However, under the influence of Western culture, new compositional techniques such as perspective and chiaroscuro (light and dark contrast) began to be explored. The embroidery patterns of this period thus inherited traditional Chinese aesthetic principles while also being influenced by Western culture, creating a unique artistic style. In creating embroidery patterns, the traditional Chinese principles of high, deep, and level distance were retained, while also incorporating Western artistic principles of perspective and the treatment of light and shadow in space. This integration of Eastern and Western compositional forms added a vivid artistic appeal to Han Chinese embroidery works.

In the coastal treaty ports, Han Chinese embroidery patterns were significantly influenced by Western culture, resulting in a more realistic and delicate style. As shown in Fig.2, it was a Han Chinese cloud shoulder. The main form of the cloud shoulder is a four-part ruyi shape, with four layers of ruyi shapes stacked and symmetrically connected, forming a gradual layering through different color combinations and decorative edges. The embroidery themes include floral and fruit motifs, scenes of a good life, and depictions of opera stories, with all ruyi edges bordered by piping or narrow rolled edges. The decoration and color contrast are rich, with natural and harmonious interplay of points, lines, and planes, and the overall pattern is more intricate and complex. When viewed from the unfolded plane of the cloud shoulder, each embroidered detail is meticulously handled to faithfully reproduce the vibrant floral patterns and scenes of labor and life in each small piece of embroidery. Worn on the body, the layers of the cloud shoulder borrow from Western art's ingenious spatial handling techniques, creating a sense of space and artistic conception through variations in density.



Fig.2: Embroidered cloud shoulder of Han Chinese
(source: China Jiangnan University Heritage Center, the late 19th century)

4.3 Rich and diversified color palettes

The color use of Han Chinese embroidery patterns reflected a blend of traditional Chinese and Western elements during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this period, embroidery works continued to inherit the traditional Chinese color system while also absorbing the influence of Western color theories. Traditional Chinese color matching emphasizes "elegance" and "harmony," striving for a unified and harmonious relationship between colors, which presents a fresh and refined aesthetic. This approach aligned with the cultural pursuits of the urban middle class and also influenced the aesthetic preferences of the general public. After being influenced by Western culture, embroidery patterns began to focus on creating layered color gradients and employing more contrasting color environments. This was especially evident in the embroidery from coastal regions, where color expression became more daring, forming a unique artistic style. In terms of the symbolic meaning of colors, while traditional color cultural connotations were still maintained, new changes emerged. The traditional associations of red with celebration and yellow with nobility remained. Color selection increasingly considered market demand and aesthetic trends, reflecting distinct characteristics of the times. This shift in color perception illustrates how Han Chinese embroidery patterns were influenced and adapted to Western culture during the modernization process.

In terms of specific color application, Han Chinese embroidery works of this period exhibited the following characteristics: firstly, creating a vibrant and high-contrast color environment. Secondly there was a richer color gradation. Lastly a wider range of embroidery material colors is introduced. As shown in Fig.3, the wedding clothes integrated Chinese and Western cultural elements. In terms of design, it retained the basic form of the traditional Chinese women's jacket while incorporating Western elements such as the notched lapel. In color matching, bright and vivid colors were used, such as red, gold, and emerald green. Red and gold are traditionally considered auspicious, lucky colors in Chinese culture, with red symbolizing good fortune, and gold representing wealth. These colors were used to bless the bride with a lifetime of happiness and prosperity in her marriage. Using emerald green as an accent color added further richness to the overall color scheme. By skillfully combining colors from different color families into a high-contrast environment, the embroidery patterns achieved a bright and luxurious artistic effect.



Fig.3: Embroidered Wedding Clothes of Han Chinese
(source: China Jiangnan University Heritage Center, the early 20th century)

4.4 Innovative embroidery techniques

Han Chinese embroidery art during the late 19th and early 20th centuries underwent a significant period of development and transformation. During this era, Han Chinese embroidery not only preserved its exquisite craftsmanship but also incorporated Western aesthetic elements and innovative techniques, developing a distinctive embroidery style. Traditional techniques such as double-sided embroidery, twill embroidery, and knot embroidery were extensively utilized. Moreover, there was an attempt to integrate Western painting techniques, achieving breakthroughs in the depiction of light and shadow contrast and three-dimensionality. Particularly in silk threads, embroiderers innovatively employed gradient combinations of dyed silk threads. This not only enriched the color layers of the embroidery works but also created a delicate and soft visual effect.

Innovative embroidery techniques were also reflected in the use of materials. In addition to traditional silk threads, artisans experimented with new materials such as gold and silver threads and colored silk threads, enhancing the textural expression of embroidery works. As shown in Fig.4, this piece incorporates gold and silver thread techniques and colored embroidery methods. The outer circle uses gold metallic thread embroidery and gold-wrapped thread techniques, with the coiling and twisting of the gold threads creating smooth scrolling floral patterns, giving the design a three-dimensional effect. The central part employs traditional colored embroidery techniques, using flat stitching and layered stitching to depict flowers and leaves. The color palette includes red, pink, green, and other silk threads, with the vase and potted plant embroidery utilizing light and shadow contrast. The overall composition features a circular symmetrical layout, with the outer and inner circles forming a distinct decorative effect. The work blends traditional Chinese motifs with Western decorative styles, seamlessly combining gold and silver threads with colored embroidery. This not only preserves the intricate characteristics of traditional Chinese embroidery but also enhances the opulence of the piece through the use of gold and silver threads, showcasing a unique artistic effect. These technical innovations not only elevated the expressive power of embroidery art but also laid an important foundation for the development of modern embroidery.



Fig.4: Gold and silver color embroidery painting of Han Chinese
(source: China National Silk Museum, the early 20th century)

5.0 Discussion

This study explored Chinese and Western cultures influence on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during the late 19th and early 20th centuries through visual analysis (Rose, 2022). It was found that embroidery patterns of this period showed the fusion of tradition and innovation in terms of subject matter, composition, color and technique, confirming the phenomenon of cross-cultural adaptation in the “contact zone” of cultural contact theory (Pratt, 2007).

5.1 Manifestations of Sino-Western Cultural Fusion in Embroidery Patterns

While continuing the traditional auspicious patterns, the embroidery patterns absorbed the Western realistic style, reflecting the visual expression of cultural mixing (Bhabha, 2012). The traditional symmetrical layout gradually incorporated Western dark and light space techniques, while the color scheme retained symbolic colors such as Chinese red and gold, and borrowed the soft gradations of the European Rococo style to create unique visual layers. This phenomenon can be compared to the “Japanese and Western eclecticism” in the dyeing and weaving art of the Meiji period in Japan, which revealed the common strategy of non-Western societies facing modernization (Kikuchi, 2004).

5.2 Theoretical Implications and Cross-Cultural Comparisons

This study further supported the theory of cultural negotiation (Hall, 1997), which suggested that weaker cultures didn't passively accept stronger cultural influences but realized creative transformation through selective absorption. For example, the Western elements in Han Chinese embroidery was limited to the decorative level, while the core symbolic system was still retained, which was an interesting contrast to the “compromise on the surface and resistance at the core” model of Indian colonial textiles (Bayly, 1986).

6.0 Conclusions

This study explored the influence of Chinese and Western cultures on Han Chinese embroidery patterns during the late 19th and early 20th centuries through original image data obtained from field investigations at institutions such as the Fujian Museum, China National Silk Museum, and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Center of Jiangnan University in China. The research findings reveal that Han Chinese embroidery patterns under the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures exhibit the following characteristics: a wealth of embroidery pattern subjects, subtle and realistic compositional style, rich and diversified color palettes, and innovative embroidery techniques. To better protect and inherit Han Chinese embroidery patterns, governments and industries should collaborate on multiple fronts, including digital preservation, international exchange, and market-oriented innovation, enabling Han Chinese embroidery to continue showcasing its artistic and cultural value in the contemporary era.

6.1 Limitations

Firstly, the research subject of this study was Han Chinese embroidery patterns, but the field investigations primarily focused on several representative museums, and the images applied in this study are also typical cases. This may not fully represent all Han Chinese embroidery patterns. Secondly, the research mainly relied on visual images and literature review materials, while textual data such as interviews were not explored.

6.2 Recommendations

If the article's length permits, it would be ideal to combine image data with interview materials to provide a more comprehensive study of Han Chinese embroidery patterns.

Digitizing Han Chinese embroidery patterns and establishing specialized databases categorized by different periods and types would be beneficial. Additionally, using digital techniques to restore some damaged artifacts would allow future generations to continue appreciating and understanding these exquisite artistic treasures.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This work contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge in the field of embroidery craft and design.

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