

# Exploring the Design Elements of Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Shu Embroidery: An Iconographic Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Shu embroidery, a hallmark of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, exemplifies the fusion of artistry and culture with origins dating back over 3,000 years. Its patterns symbolize prosperity, harmony, and beauty, achieving prominence during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. This study explores the features of Shu embroidery patterns, focusing on classification, composition, and elements. Using Panofsky's iconographic framework, six traditional and modern Shu embroidery patterns were analysed. The findings reveal diverse forms, intricate compositions, and balanced or asymmetrical layouts, highlighting the transition from traditional craftsmanship to modern innovation. This research enhances understanding of Shu embroidery's artistic features and its adaptation to contemporary contexts. By comparing the six dimensions of traditional and modern Shu embroidery through Panofsky's theoretical lens, this research provides a deeper understanding of the artistic characteristics of Shu embroidery and its adaptation to contemporary contexts.

**Keywords:** Shu Embroidery, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Iconography, Design Element

## INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage serves as a vital repository of global cultural identity and collective memory (Alivizatou-Barakou et al., 2017). As a significant part of China's intangible cultural heritage, Shu embroidery also known as 'Sichuan embroidery' is celebrated as the 'Treasure of Shu'. Its origins can be traced back to the Sanxingdui civilization, making it one of the oldest embroidery traditions in China (Zheng & Saelee, 2025). During the Qing Dynasty, Shu embroidery reached its peak of prosperity and artistic excellence, earning its place as one of the four famous embroideries in China (Zhang, 2024). Boasting a rich history and deep regional roots, Shu embroidery reflects the essence of profound cultural traditions. Its distinctive artistic style, meticulous needlework, diverse materials, intricate patterns, and vivid colours have been diligently preserved and creatively enhanced across generations, showcasing a harmonious blend of tradition and innovation (Zhou & Li, 2023).

As early as three thousand years ago, the Shu people had mastered the technology of spinning and weaving (Zhou & Li, 2023). With the continuous advancement of social productivity, embroidery emerged, leading to the development of Shu embroidery—an ancient and highly accomplished traditional textile art in China. Characterized by its strong regional identity, Shu embroidery primarily utilizes silk threads and satin as its main materials. It is renowned for its simple yet elegant compositions, meticulous stitching techniques, and harmonious blend of realism and abstraction (Shen, 2024). Like many ancient Chinese artworks, Shu embroidery predominantly features motifs that symbolize beauty and good fortune, such as flowers, birds, fish, insects, the sun, moon, stars, rocks, clouds, and water (Zhang, 2024). It also incorporates images of gods, goddesses, and auspicious patterns, all of which reflect people's understanding of nature and their aspirations for a harmonious and prosperous life (Zhang, 2024). Shaped by the natural environment and the rich cultural and artistic heritage of the Chengdu region, Shu embroidery has been continuously enriched and refined over centuries, embodying a profound humanistic background and immense artistic value (Ling Zuo & Min Zhao, 2011).

This study exploring the design element of Shu embroidery by employing Panofsky’s theory of iconography as its analytical framework. Panofsky’s iconographic framework serves as a highly effective theoretical tool for analysing motifs, as it offers a structured and integrative approach to understanding visual arts within their cultural and historical contexts. As a form of intangible cultural heritage, Shu embroidery is imbued with rich symbolism and deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of Sichuan, China. The framework’s multilevel analysis aligns seamlessly with the intricate patterns and profound meanings found in Shu embroidery, making it an ideal foundation for this study. Through a detailed analysis of its core elements—patterns, classification, and techniques—the research explores the profound connotations embedded in Shu embroidery’s motifs, uncovering their cultural significance and artistic value. Drawing on Panofsky’s three-level approach, which examines symbols in their historical and cultural contexts, the study highlights the evolution of Shu embroidery from a traditional craft to a modern design resource. By revealing the deeper meanings of its artistic features and their adaptation to contemporary contexts.

As shown in **Figure 1**, Panofsky’s theory of iconography is structured into three levels. The first level, **pre-iconographic description**, focuses on the form and gestures of the image as objects of cognition (Hasenmueller, C, 1978). At this stage, the analysis identifies the characters, objects, and themes presented in the artwork, akin to formal analysis, which emphasizes the perception and substantiation of elements such as line, volume, and colour. The second level, **iconographic analysis**, delves into the implied *conventional meaning* of the image (Wang et al., 2024). This level interprets a particular theme by drawing on literary and historical sources that underpin the artwork itself. The third level, **iconological interpretation**, represents the highest stage of analysis, emphasizing the *intrinsic meaning* or *symbolic value* of the image’s content. At this level, the focus shifts to uncovering the deeper cultural and historical rules embedded within the image, encompassing intellectual, religious, scientific, and social concepts inherent to human culture (Wang et al., 2024). These three levels of analysis not only reveal the surface meanings of images but also explore their deeper cultural and historical significance, offering a comprehensive and systematic framework for the study of visual art (Hasenmueller, C, 1978).

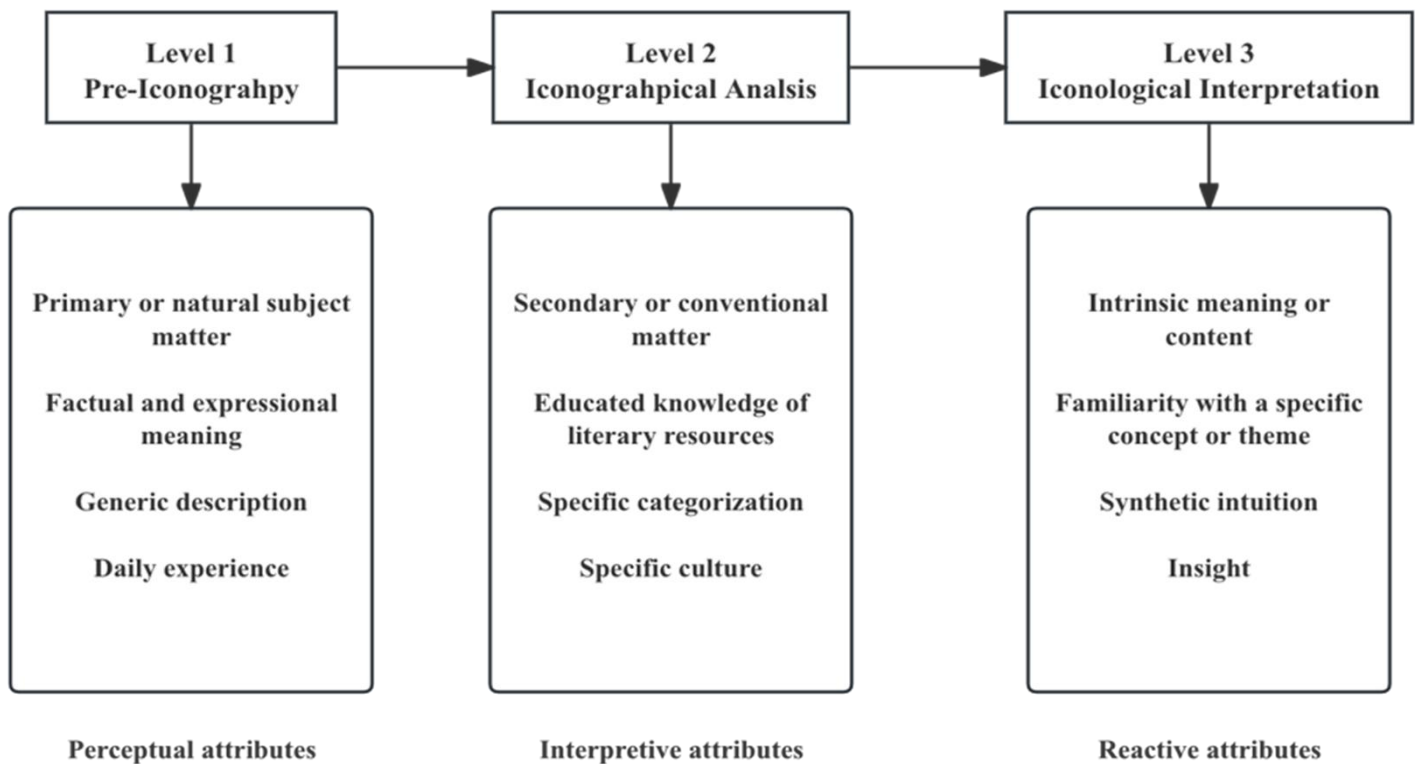


Figure 1. Panofsky's Theory of Meaning in Art

Shu embroidery patterns predominantly feature beautiful and auspicious objects as their subjects, representing a magnificent legacy left by Chinese folk artists (Zheng & Saelee, 2025). These patterns can be effectively analyzed through the lens of iconography. According to Panofsky’s theory, the visual representation of these

motifs can be identified which involves recognizing the forms and gestures of the patterns. This stage also reflects the iterative development of motifs across different historical periods, offering insights into the cultural and historical contexts underlying these changes (Xie Lisha, 2023).

This study aims to analyze the design elements of Shu embroidery, focusing on four key factors: Classification, Composition, Technique, and Element. Utilizing Panofsky's Theory of Iconography, the research examines traditional and modern Shu embroidery across three stages and six dimensions through a comparative framework. This comprehensive analysis provides insights into the patterns of Shu embroidery, establishing a foundation for understanding its cultural value and artistic significance in both historical and contemporary contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Origin of Shu Embroidery

The earliest record of Shu embroidery is the Western Han Dynasty Yang Xiong's "Shu Du Fu" depicted in the Shu brocade, image of Shu brocade colourful and vast, Shu brocade as waving brocade and embroidery in general, colourful, but also emphasizes the vastness of the Shu brocade, as if you cannot see the end of the brocade (Sun Dandan, 2019). Shu embroidery also largely records the history and cultural changes of the Sichuan region (Zhang Yichen, 2023). The culture, expressions and characteristics of Shu embroidery have been shaped in every historical period in Sichuan. In the trajectory of historical and cultural development, there were three distinct phases that had a profound impact on the culture of Shu embroidery (Zhang, 2024).

The traditional Shu embroidery style, which originated during the Tang Dynasty, is defined by delicate lines, dense embroidery, and bright colours. This style is prominently showcased in works featuring subjects such as flowers and birds, reflecting its emphasis on intricate detail and natural beauty (Zhang, 2024).

The national Shu embroidery style emerged in the first half of the 20th century, incorporating elements of western Sichuan's ethnic culture, including motifs of Tibetan and Sichuan embroidery dragons and phoenixes (Zou & Sirisuk, 2023). This style is characterized by concise lines, rich and varied patterns, harmonious proportions, and vivid colours, showcasing a blend of regional and national influences (Zhang, 2024).

The modern Shu embroidery style developed after the 1950s, incorporating modern art elements to form a unique contemporary aesthetic. It is characterized by simple and bright lines, vivid colours, and uniquely structured patterns, often expressed through abstract, symbolic, and decorative designs, reflecting the evolving artistic and cultural trends of the time (Zhang, 2024).

### Pattern Symbolism

Shu embroidery is often harmonized, metaphorical and borrowed techniques used in patterns, including geometric patterns, animal patterns, plant patterns, artifact patterns and character story patterns, etc., and through different combinations of patterns to form a combination of symbols of good luck (Chen Yanjin, 2017). Traditional animal motifs include fish, dragons, phoenixes, deer, herons, cranes, chickens, mandarin ducks, butterflies, bats and magpies. Many patterns are also known as "Auspicious Patterns" (also known as 'Auspicious Patterns'). Auspicious motifs often use elements such as plants, animals, people, characters and the natural environment to combine into one or more motifs to convey feelings and meanings (Chen, Pan, 2024). For example, the peony symbolizes auspiciousness and wealth, the lotus flower symbolizes the pursuit of purity, the koi carp symbolizes prosperity and happiness, and the magpie symbolizes the coming of good things, etc. They express people's good wishes for good fortune, protection from evils, survival and reproduction, and at the same time, they are also an important feature of Shu embroidery (Chen, Pan, 2024).

The origin of these materials used in Shu embroidery is also in line with the local language and culture, natural environment and customs, and has local characteristics (Ma et al., 2022). Butterflies and bergamot are widely used in Shu embroidery works, and the sounds of 'Hu' and 'Fo' in the Shu dialect are 'Fu', symbolizing good fortune and luck. For example, "Hundred Butterflies" and "Hundred Butterflies Quilt" mean happiness because

butterflies harmonize with “fu”. Butterflies are often used in Shu embroidery because there are many kinds of butterflies growing in Shu (Yeting, 2018).

### Gaps Identified

Although Shu embroidery occupies an important place in the study of art and culture, very little research has been done on the colour, classification and technique of the patterns. Most studies only describe its basic colours or patterns or compare it with embroideries from other regions. Compared with Hunan embroidery and Suzhou embroidery, the market consumption capacity of Shu embroidery is obviously insufficient, and its development potential has yet to be further explored. Research and analysis on the patterns of Shu embroidery is an important basic work to promote the inheritance and development of Shu embroidery. Traditional Shu embroidery is mostly expensive handicrafts, mainly reflecting its ornamental nature, which is out of the public life consumption. To realize the change of Shu embroidery, not only the innovative research of Shu embroidery pattern elements itself, but also the combination of Shu embroidery pattern elements with other forms of expression, technology, materials, and finally a new form of Shu embroidery to be displayed in the mass consumer market.

Therefore, this research focuses on the research and analysis of the elements of Shu embroidery pattern such as colour, classification, and technology based on the full study of Shu embroidery culture; by applying Panofsky’s Theory of Iconography to examine Shu embroidery patterns, this research demonstrates its innovative approach.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative analysis method. It combines observation with expertise in pattern form to analyse the form of Shu embroidery pattern tattoos. The purpose of this study is to summarize the formal characteristics of Shu embroidery pattern tattoos based on the first level of Panofsky' theory of patterning, analysing them in terms of colour, classification, and craftsmanship techniques. The classification of pattern method is based on the shape of the pattern, which is divided into individual pattern, suitable pattern and continuous pattern.

Table 1: Analytical Aspects of the Characteristics of Shu Embroidery Patterns

Aim	Aspects	Analysis Detail
The form Characteristics of Shu Embroidery Patterns	Classification	Single, Fit, Continuous, Corner
	Composition	Balance, Expansion, Symmetry
	Technique	Single-sided embroidery, Double-sided embroidery, Double-sided triple-heterogeneous embroidery
	Element	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Animals (dragon, fish, phoenix, deer, etc.)</li> <li>2. Plants (plum, orchid, bamboo, pine, etc.)</li> <li>3. Natural environment (clouds, sun, mountains, water, etc.)</li> <li>4. Character stories (longevity stars, ladies, children, plays, etc.)</li> <li>5. Architecture (houses, pavilions, temples, pagodas, etc.)</li> <li>6. Artifacts (bottles, flower baskets, flowerpots, mirrors, etc.)</li> <li>7. Characters (poems, songs and fugues, etc.)</li> <li>8. Geometric patterns (triangles, retracements, disk lengths, diamond shapes, etc.)</li> </ol>

The categorization of Shu embroidery patterns includes single patterns, matching patterns, and continuous patterns. In traditional Shu embroidery, the layout composition is characterized by predominantly thin lines and a seemingly random distribution of patterns (Tian, 2024). Despite this randomness, the embroidery process adheres to strict requirements for uniform distribution across the composition. For the sake of achieving overall symmetry, any pattern can sometimes be added at any position. For instance, the same peony leaves, the shape can be either narrow or oval, the edge may or may not be jagged, but most of the more with the pattern. While the pattern elements are categorized more widely root species are animals,

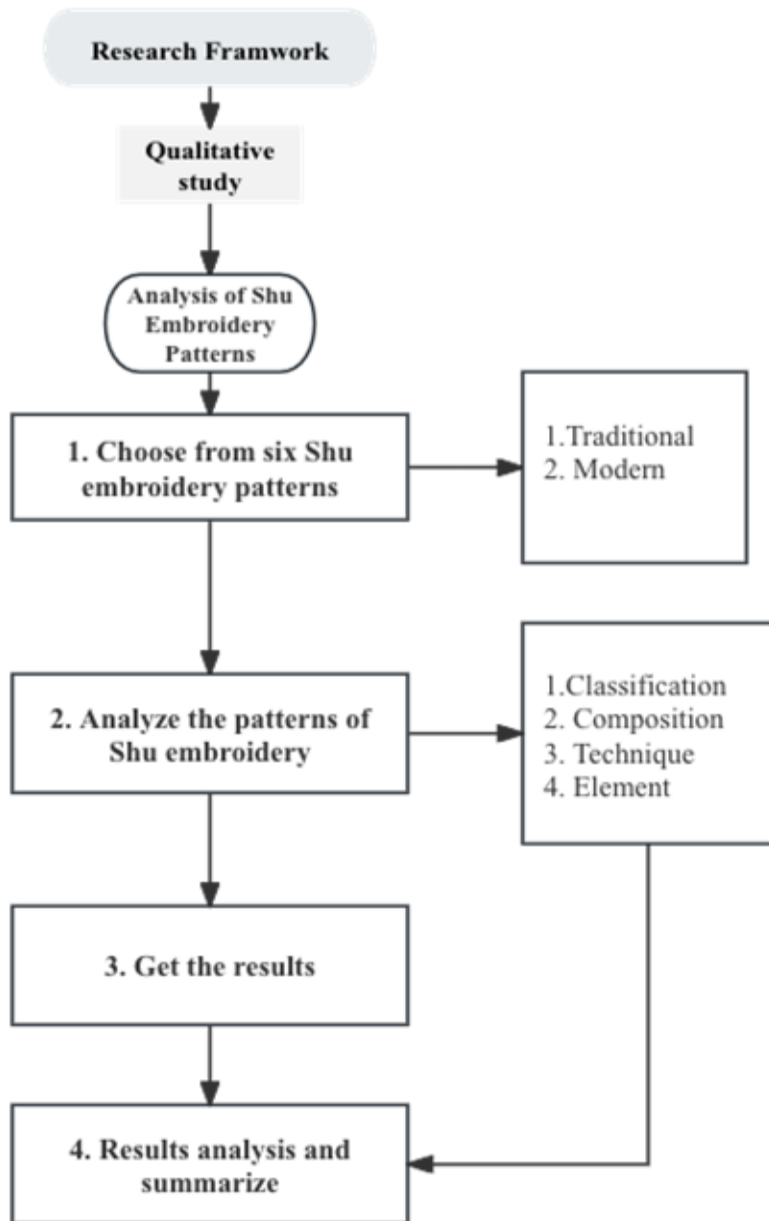


Figure 2. Research methodology framework diagram

The research framework of this study is illustrated in Figure 2. A qualitative analysis was conducted to examine Shu embroidery patterns, following a four-step process to complete the characterization of pattern morphology. In the first step, six traditional and modern Shu embroidery works were collected, representing a variety of categories and styles. The patterns selected encompassed diverse types and forms to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the analysis. A comparative analysis was then carried out between traditional and modern Shu embroidery works to highlight the innovations present in contemporary designs. In the second step, each Shu embroidery pattern was analysed in terms of four key aspects: classification, layout, technique, and elements. The third step involved synthesizing the results of the analysis for classification, layout, technique,



and elements. Finally, in the fourth step, these results were summarized and interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions about the evolution and innovation of Shu embroidery patterns.

## FINDINGS

The purpose of this section is to analyse and compare traditional and modern Shu embroidery patterns, uncovering the significant differences and connections between them and emphasizing their evolution across three distinct stages: traditional, national, and modern. Tables 2, 3, and 4 showcase representative works of modern Shu embroidery, while Tables 5, 6, and 7 highlight traditional Shu embroidery works. Table 8 provides a comparative analysis of the three stages and six dimensions of traditional and modern Shu embroidery patterns, structured within the framework of Panofsky’s iconographic theory.

Traditional Shu embroidery is defined by its symmetry, low-saturation colours, and motifs inspired by nature, such as flowers and birds, which underscore its emphasis on fine craftsmanship and cultural heritage. By contrast, modern Shu embroidery embraces bold colours, asymmetrical compositions, and abstract artistic elements, reflecting contemporary artistic trends and innovative approaches. This evolution illustrates not only the transformation of Shu embroidery over time but also its capacity to adapt to changing artistic and cultural landscapes.

### Modern Shu Embroidery Artwork

Table 2. Hibiscus and Carp Embroidered by Hao Shuping (Original Manuscript by Guo Ruyu)


	<b>Classification:</b> Single	The image focuses on a singular composition with elements like fish and plants, ensuring the artwork is not overly complex.
	<b>Composition:</b> Balanced	The artwork maintains a delicate balance. The upper section has lush plants and flowers that contrast with the spacious lower area, where the two fish swim. This provides a visual harmony between the detailed and empty spaces.
	<b>Technique:</b> Single-sided embroidery	The artwork could typically be represented using single-sided embroidery, where details are meticulously shown on one side, especially in the subtle textures of the fish scales and leaf veins. The gradation of colours in the fish, from light to dark, mirrors Shu Embroidery's precision in creating realistic images.
	<b>Element:</b> 1. Animals 2. Plants 3. Natural Environment 4. Characters	In traditional Chinese culture, fish are significant symbols of good fortune. The red fish represents joy and prosperity, while the black fish symbolizes resilience and strength. Among prominent plant motifs, the peony holds a central place, symbolizing wealth, prosperity, and honour. The depiction of rippling water beneath the fish introduces a dynamic sense of movement and tranquillity, enhancing the serenity of the natural scene. Additionally, the inclusion of Chinese calligraphy in the upper right corner adds a literary and cultural dimension, blending traditional aesthetics with poetic or artistic connotations.

Table 3. Double Sided Embroidery ‘Giant Panda in Jiuzhaigou’ by Hao Shuping

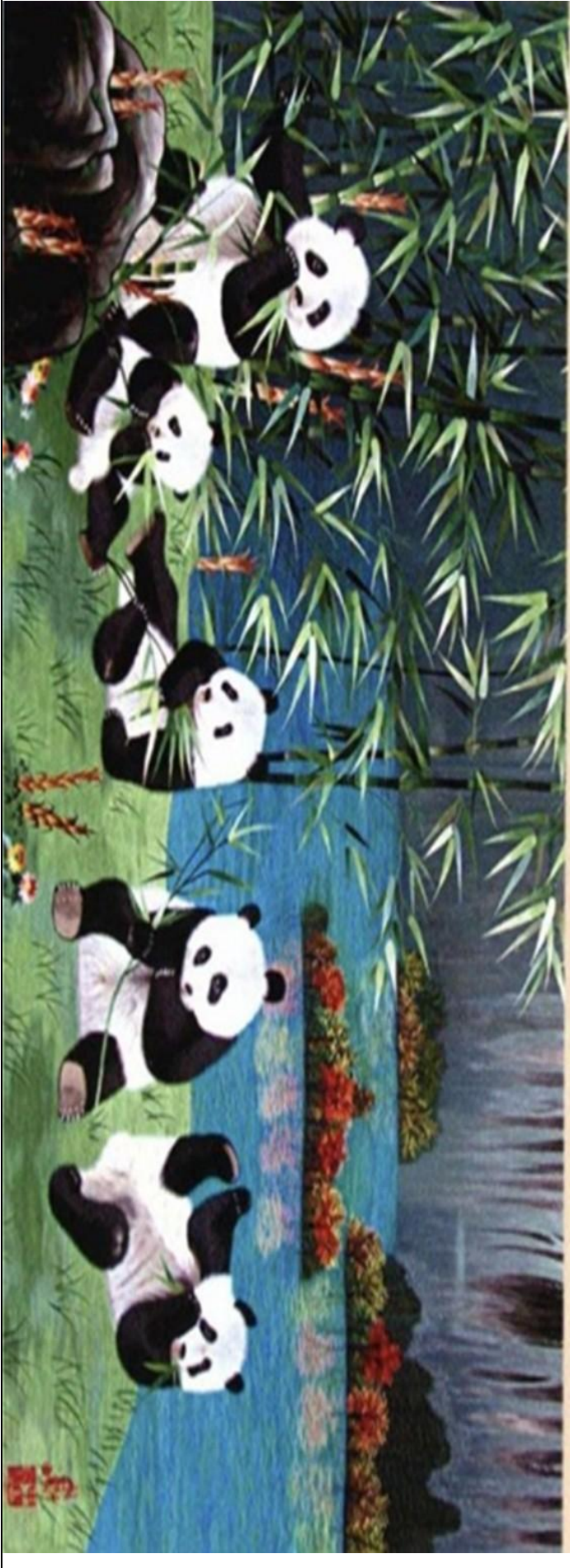

	<p><b>Classification:</b> Continuous</p>	<p>The scene spans horizontally, with pandas and bamboo creating a continuous, dynamic flow. The composition feels connected, guiding the viewer's eye smoothly across the frame.</p>
	<p><b>Composition:</b> Expansion</p>	<p>The dense bamboo on the left expands upward and outward, contrasting with the open space created by the water in the background, enhancing visual depth.</p>
	<p><b>Technique:</b> Double Sided Embroidery</p>	<p>Double-sided heterochromatic embroidery represents the pinnacle of Shu embroidery craftsmanship. This exceptional technique features the panda as the central subject on both sides of the fabric, yet the patterns and colors differ significantly, showcasing a mesmerizing effect. This remarkable achievement, pioneered by Hao Shuping, is executed on transparent silk as delicate as a cicada's wing, embodying both technical mastery and artistic ingenuity.</p>
	<p><b>Element:</b> 1. Animals 2. Plants 3. Natural Environment</p>	<p>The central focus of the artwork is the pandas, a symbolic animal in Chinese culture representing peace, friendship, and harmony with nature. The bamboo forests provide a lush green environment, a common and significant element in Chinese art and embroidery. The water, trees, and distant cliffs in the background add tranquillity and depth to the scene, evoking a serene natural landscape.</p>



Table 4. The Great Hall by Kang Ning

	<b>Classification:</b> Single	The focus remains on a single large-scale architectural structure, centered in the image, ensuring the visual theme is clear and unified.
	<b>Composition:</b> Symmetry	The artwork showcases near-perfect symmetry, with the central building acting as the focal point, flanked by identical or mirrored structures on both sides.
	<b>Technique:</b> Single-sided embroidery	single-sided embroidery with precise stitches to capture the intricate details of the building, including the roofing tiles, decorative eaves, and architectural symmetry.
	<b>Element:</b> 1. Architecture 2. Natural Environment 3. Characters	The central focus of the image is the traditional Chinese architectural structure. Elements such as pagoda-style roofs, columns, ornate gates, and intricate patterns exemplify Chinese design. Trees and greenery surround the building, softening the rigid architectural lines and adding natural harmony. Chinese calligraphy on the gates and the upper left corner of the artwork adds a cultural and artistic element to the scene.

**Traditional Shu Embroidery Artwork**

Table 5. Qing Dynasty ‘Shu embroidery heron haunts the lotus - black three spun satin women's blouses’ (Partial of the work)


	<b>Classification:</b> Single	The image focuses on a singular theme with one prominent subject — a heron surrounded by plants.
	<b>Composition:</b> Symmetry	The artwork achieves near-perfect symmetry, with mirrored plants on both sides of the crane.
	<b>Technique:</b> Single-sided embroidery	Shades of heron feathers, plants and flowers added depth and texture with single-sided embroidery.
	<b>Element:</b> 1. Animals 2. Plants	The heron is the central subject, symbolizing longevity, elegance, and peace in Chinese culture. The artwork includes wheat stalks, flowers, and grasses, representing growth, prosperity, and harmony with nature.



Table 6. Qing Dynasty ‘Shu Embroidery Fortune Peony Painting - Green Lady's Coat’


	<b>Classification:</b> Single	Each section features a single floral motif, focusing on one primary subject flower in different arrangements.
	<b>Composition:</b> Expansion	The floral elements expand outward from a central point, giving a sense of natural growth and movement.
	<b>Technique:</b> Single-sided embroidery	This floral artwork is represented with single-sided embroidery, showcasing precise stitching to achieve clean and realistic details.  The flowers use carefully blended shades of pink, red, white, and blue to create depth, dimension, and a natural gradient. The leaves similarly employ light and dark blues for contrast.
	<b>Element:</b> Plants	The central focus of the artwork is on flowers peonies, which symbolize wealth, honour, and prosperity in Chinese culture. The leaves and branches frame the flowers naturally.

Table 7. Qing Dynasty ‘Shu Embroidery Birds of Prey-Flower Satin Coat’








	<b>Classification:</b> Continuous	The intricate embroidery on the coat features a continuous flow of patterns, including birds, flowers, and decorative motifs, seamlessly connected across the fabric.
	<b>Composition:</b> Balance	The Shu embroidery achieves excellent balance by distributing the floral and bird motifs evenly across the decorative bands, ensuring visual harmony.
	<b>Technique:</b> Single-sided embroidery	Shu Embroidery techniques are used with single-sided stitching, ensuring clarity and vibrancy of the intricate details.
	<b>Element:</b> 1. Animals 2. Plants	The birds of prey symbolize power, grace, and agility, adding cultural significance to the embroidery. Floral patterns dominate the design, symbolizing beauty, prosperity, and harmony in traditional Chinese culture.

Table 8. Comparison of Traditional and Modern Shu Embroidery Based on Panofsky's Theory

Panofsky's Theory	Dimension	Traditional Shu Embroidery	Modern Shu Embroidery
Pre- iconography Description	Visual element	 <p>Absolute symmetry pattern</p>  <p>Longevity pattern</p>  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Traditional colours, low saturation</li> <li>2. The composition is mostly symmetrical</li> <li>3. Fine craftsmanship</li> </ol>	 <p>Continuous pattern</p>  <p>Character patterns</p>  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Diversified colours, bold and bright colour schemes</li> <li>2. innovative composition, no longer regular, symmetrical</li> <li>3. modernized style with many figures and decorative patterns</li> </ol>
	Pattern style	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. More ordinary characters</li> <li>2. More plants and animals</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Incorporation of modern design elements</li> <li>2. The appearance of many characters Shu embroidery</li> <li>3. The emergence of landscape painting Shu embroidery</li> </ol>

	Technique	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single sided embroidery</li> <li>Double-sided embroidery</li> </ol>	Incorporating modern technology (e.g. machine embroidery, digital design)
Iconographic Analysis	Symbolic meaning	Expression of good wishes (e.g. good luck, longevity and prosperity)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultural deconstruction and reconstruction</li> <li>Pluralization of symbolic meanings</li> <li>Pure Decorative Design</li> </ol>
Iconology Interpretation	Cultural connotation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasizing the cultural context of the times, many of the elements used in Shu embroidery patterns reflect local language, customs, and the natural environment, embodying strong regional cultural characteristics.</li> <li>The historical value of Shu embroidery is equally significant. In ancient times, traditional Shu embroidery was primarily used in clothing textiles and meticulously hand embroidered. Its use was often reserved for families of higher social status, particularly officials, who could afford such exquisite and expensive handmade products (Cheng &amp; Skliarenko, 2024). This exclusivity further highlights the cultural prestige and social significance of Shu embroidery.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflecting the aesthetics of the times and artistic innovation</li> <li>Reflection and development of tradition</li> <li>The emergence of commercialization, and regional cultural tourism economic products</li> </ol>
	Social significance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultural inheritance: As an important part of China's intangible cultural heritage, traditional Shu embroidery carries the essence of traditional Chinese culture. It expresses ancient people's knowledge of nature, life and the universe through patterns and techniques, and has a distinctive regional and national character.</li> <li>Social Identity and Emotional Connection: In ancient times, Shu embroidery patterns were often used as symbols of social status, for example, the embroidered patterns on officials' costumes reflected rank and status. Traditional Shu embroidery also carries the memory of family and regional culture and is a symbol of cultural identity for specific groups.</li> <li>Educational Functions: With its complex craftsmanship and rich cultural connotation, traditional Shu embroidery is an important carrier of intangible cultural</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultural inheritance: Based on inheriting traditional culture, modern Shu embroidery enhances the vitality of traditional skills in contemporary society by incorporating contemporary art elements and diversified cultural symbols. It not only continues the beauty of the craftsmanship of traditional Shu embroidery, but also advances with the times, adapts to the aesthetic needs of modern society, and becomes a form of cultural re-creation.</li> <li>Social Identity and Emotional Connection: Through innovative design, modern Shu embroidery gives traditional skills a broader form of emotional expression, breaking the traditional Shu embroidery restrictions on identity and class. It is not only able to show personalized emotional appeal, but also establishes intercultural dialogue through diversified art forms,</li> </ol>



	<p>heritage education. Through learning traditional Shu embroidery techniques, students can perceive the spirit of ancient craftsmen and cultural wisdom, thus cultivating respect and love for traditional culture.</p>	<p>providing a common cultural language for different groups to communicate.</p> <p>3. Modern Shu embroidery combines traditional culture with modern technology, becoming an important case for exploring cultural innovation and cross-border integration in art education. It encourages students to think about artistic creation and design since respect for tradition and develops their creative ability and multicultural awareness. At the same time, modern Shu embroidery offers a wider range of teaching possibilities for art education through digital means (such as virtual reality and digital embroidery drawings).</p>
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Traditional and modern Shu embroidery exhibits significant differences and connections in their artistic expression and social significance. As shown in Table 9, a systematic interpretation is conducted through the lens of Panofsky's iconographic theory, which operates at three levels: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation. These levels are further elaborated across six dimensions, providing a detailed comparative framework to highlight the evolution and innovation in Shu embroidery.

At the level of pre-iconographic description, traditional Shu embroidery is characterized by symmetrical compositions and low-saturated, traditional colours. Its visual elements primarily depict plants, animals, and natural environments. These motifs are rendered with delicacy and subtlety, showcasing intricate textures through single-sided embroidery techniques and emphasizing the precise presentation of handcrafted skills.

In contrast, modern Shu embroidery embraces a boulder and more diverse colour palette, breaking free from the constraints of symmetry and regularity. Instead, it prioritizes the dynamic visual impact of asymmetry and movement. Modern works integrate traditional plant and animal motifs with abstract art and figures, creating a richer and more expressive artistic form. Additionally, modern Shu embroidery incorporates mechanical embroidery technology and digital design, resulting in multi-dimensional visual effects that distinguish it from traditional embroidery.

At the level of iconographic analysis, the symbolic meanings in traditional Shu embroidery are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, conveying wishes for good luck, prosperity, and longevity using symbolic motifs such as the lotus flower and carp. These symbols serve as both artistic carriers and important mediums for cultural transmission, reflecting the values and aesthetic ideals of traditional Chinese society. In contrast, modern Shu embroidery has reinterpreted these symbols through cultural reconstruction, gradually shifting their significance from traditional allegories of blessing to more purely decorative purposes (Wang et al., 2024). Additionally, modern works utilize these symbols as platforms for cultural innovation, breaking through temporal and cultural boundaries. By blending traditional patterns with modern elements, contemporary Shu embroidery enhances artistic expression and expands its relevance to a global audience.

At the level of iconological interpretation, traditional Shu embroidery emphasizes the cultural connotations embedded within specific historical contexts. The designs of its patterns reflect the hierarchical structures and aesthetic values of ancient Chinese societies. These works were primarily used in the garments and artifacts of high-ranking families, functioning as both status symbols and materialized representations of cultural heritage. Through their exquisite craftsmanship and profound cultural depth, traditional Shu embroidery serves as an important bridge linking ancient and modern times.

Modern Shu embroidery, by contrast, places a greater focus on artistic innovation and cultural recreation. Its

works reflect not only the aesthetic sensibilities of contemporary society but also a deep respect and thoughtful reimagining of traditional culture. Through the integration of modern design principles, Shu embroidery has transformed into a global cultural symbol, creating new opportunities for cultural tourism and art education while reaffirming its significance in the modern world.

## CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the intricate design elements of Shu embroidery, providing a comprehensive analysis of its patterns through the lens of Panofsky's iconographic theory. By examining the pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological dimensions, the research has revealed the profound cultural significance and artistic ingenuity of Shu embroidery as a cornerstone of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. The findings emphasize the dual nature of Shu embroidery: its deep-rooted traditional symbolism, which conveys aspirations for prosperity and harmony, and its evolving modern applications, which incorporate innovative techniques and diverse cultural symbols. These insights contribute significantly to understanding the balance between preservation and innovation in Shu embroidery, positioning it as a dynamic art form that bridges the past and the present.

While much has been revealed about the artistic and cultural significance of Shu embroidery, its preservation remains challenging. Future research should focus on sustainable practices that adapt this heritage to contemporary demands, integrating modern technologies and aligning with global design trends to maintain its cultural authenticity and broaden its appeal.

Beyond its artistic value, Shu embroidery holds significant economic and educational potential. Further studies should explore its role in cultural tourism and its use as an educational tool to enhance public appreciation for traditional craftsmanship. These efforts can inspire new generations to support the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

In conclusion, Shu embroidery embodies the ingenuity of Chinese folk art, blending cultural identity and artistic expression. By harmonizing tradition with innovation, it provides a model for preserving intangible cultural heritage while fostering global appreciation for its timeless beauty and significance.

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