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Sichuan Shu Embroidery Fan: Artistic Features & Cultural Connotations

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the visual patterns of Sichuan Shu embroidery fans, exploring their unique artistic features (composition, color, and stitch techniques) and interpreting the underlying cultural connotations (regional customs and traditional aesthetics). Using literature review, case analysis of 30 typical works (spanning the late Qing Dynasty to 2024), and visual semiotic methods, the study reveals the artistic value and cultural significance of these patterns. Results show that Shu embroidery fan patterns form distinct artistic characteristics through the integration of Shu embroidery craftsmanship and fan structures, reflect Sichuan's regional culture and traditional Chinese aesthetics, and achieve inheritance and innovation in modern times. This research fills the gap in existing studies on Shu embroidery fan patterns and provides theoretical support for the inheritance and innovation of this intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Sichuan Shu embroidery fan; visual patterns; artistic features; cultural connotations; intangible cultural heritage

1. Introduction

As one of China's four famous embroideries, Sichuan Shu embroidery integrates with fan art to form the unique Shu embroidery fan, whose visual patterns carry rich cultural information and artistic achievements [1]. However, relevant systematic research is relatively scarce: statistics show that less than 10% of existing studies on Shu embroidery focus on fan-mounted works, leading to insufficient attention to their artistic and cultural value [6]. Current literature mainly focuses on the craft history of Shu embroidery or the general design of fans, lacking in-depth analysis of the specific artistic characteristics and cultural implications of Shu embroidery fan patterns [15]. To fill this research gap, this paper analyzes the composition, color, and stitch of Shu embroidery fan patterns, interprets their cultural connotations, and compares traditional and modern patterns to explore the inheritance and innovation of this art form.

2. Literature Review

Relevant studies can be divided into three categories. First, research on Shu embroidery art: Li (2022) discussed the modern inheritance path of Shu embroidery craftsmanship in the context of cultural and tourism integration, emphasizing the innovation of stitch application in practical works [1]. Wang (2023) analyzed the color matching rules of Shu embroidery in contemporary creative products, noting its integration of traditional warm tones with modern fashion color systems [2].

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Zhao (2024) further explored the digital protection of Shu embroidery stitch techniques, highlighting the application of rolling stitch in modern fan-mounted works based on database analysis [8]. Second, research on fan pattern design: Zhang (2023) studied the innovation of traditional fan surface patterns in modern decoration, pointing out that the combination of embroidery craftsmanship and fan shape needs targeted design logic [3]. Chen (2024) explored the composition optimization of circular fan patterns under contemporary aesthetics, providing a reference for the analysis of Shu embroidery round fan structures [4]. Huang (2025) focused on the application of new materials in fan pattern creation, emphasizing the adaptability of luminous threads and composite fabrics in embroidery fans [9]. Third, research on intangible cultural heritage inheritance: Liu (2022) proposed that the activation of traditional crafts should rely on industrial ecological construction and talent training systems [5]. He (2023) studied the "Shu embroidery +" cross-border innovation model, pointing out that cultural symbol extraction combined with modern scenes is the key to market popularization [10]. However, existing studies lack the integration of Shu embroidery craft, fan form, and pattern culture, failing to systematically reveal the unique value of Shu embroidery fan visual patterns [14]. This paper builds on existing research, focusing on the integration of art and culture to conduct in-depth research on Shu embroidery fan patterns.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Research Data

The research data mainly include 30 typical Shu embroidery fan works collected from the Sichuan Provincial Museum, Chengdu Shu Embroidery Research Institute, and folk collectors [6][7]. The time span covers from the late Qing Dynasty (1875-1911) to the present (2024), including three types: round fans, folding fans, and square fans (a rare type). The data includes high-resolution images of fan surfaces (resolution up to 300dpi), craft records (stitch process notes from embroiderers), and relevant historical documents (such as fan collection catalogs and craft inheritance records). The variables collected include pattern themes (flowers, birds, figures, landscapes), composition forms, color matching, stitch types, and cultural symbols.

3.2 Summary Statistics

To systematically present the basic information of the 30 Shu embroidery fan samples, Table 1 integrates core statistical indicators from the dimensions of fan type, time period, pattern theme, color tone, and stitch application:

Table 1. Basic Information Statistics of Sichuan Shu Embroidery Fan Samples

Statistical Dimension	Classification	Number of Samples	Proportion
Fan Type	Round Fan	14	46.7%
	Folding Fan	12	40.0%
	Square Fan	4	13.3%
Time Period	Late Qing (1875-1911)	8	26.7%
	Republic of China (1912-1949)	7	23.3%
	Modern (2000-2024)	15	50.0%

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Statistical Dimension	Classification	Number of Samples	Proportion
Pattern Theme	Flower and Bird	18	60.0%
	Landscape	7	23.3%
	Figure	3	10.0%
	Auspicious Pattern	2	6.7%
Color Tone	Warm Tone	22	73.3%
	Cool Tone	8	26.7%
Stitch Type	Rolling Stitch	25	83.3%
	Plain Stitch	22	73.3%
	Layered Stitch	19	63.3%
	Lock Stitch	12	40.0%
	Luminous Thread Stitch	6	20.0%

From the statistical results: In terms of fan type, round fans are the most common (46.7%), followed by folding fans (40.0%), while square fans are relatively rare (13.3%), consistent with the historical inheritance of Shu embroidery fan forms [15]. In terms of time period, modern samples (2000-2024) account for half of the total (50.0%), due to better preservation and easier access to collection resources; traditional samples (late Qing + Republic of China) also account for 50%, ensuring the representativeness of the historical context [6]. In terms of pattern theme, flower and bird themes dominate (60.0%), a typical manifestation of Shu embroidery's "focus on flower and bird realism" [1]. In terms of color tone, warm tones (73.3%) are significantly more than cool tones, reflecting Shu embroidery's traditional preference for bright and lively color matching[2]. In terms of stitch application, rolling stitch has the highest usage rate (83.3%), confirming it as the core stitch of Shu embroidery fan patterns [8]; plain stitch (73.3%) is mainly for background filling, layered stitch (63.3%) for modeling flower petals and leaves, and lock stitch (40.0%) for detailing small parts.

3.3 Research Hypotheses

The visual patterns of Shu embroidery fans have unique artistic features formed by the combination of Shu embroidery craft and fan structure.

The pattern themes and expressions of Shu embroidery fans reflect the regional culture and traditional aesthetic concepts of Sichuan.

There are obvious differences in artistic features between traditional and modern Shu embroidery fan patterns, but the core cultural connotations are inherited.

3.4 Research Methods

This paper adopts literature review, case analysis, and visual semiotic methods. The literature review combs relevant research on Shu embroidery and fan art. Case analysis conducts in-depth analysis of 30 typical works from composition, color, and stitch. The visual semiotic method interprets the cultural symbols and connotations in the patterns, referring to the symbol classification system proposed by Barthes (1972) to divide pattern symbols into denotative and connotative layers [11].

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4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Artistic Features of Visual Patterns

4.1.1 Composition Characteristics

Shu embroidery fan patterns adopt flexible composition methods according to the fan shape. Round fans mostly use central symmetry or radial composition; for example, the "Peony and Phoenix" round fan collected by the Sichuan Provincial Museum takes peony as the center and phoenix on both sides, forming a balanced and harmonious visual effect [6]. Folding fans adopt sequential composition, with patterns extending along the fan bone, such as the "West Lake Scenery" folding fan, which shows continuous landscape through the connection of each fan leaf[3]. Square fans (rare type) often use diagonal composition to avoid rigidity, such as the "Bamboo and Crane" square fan, with bamboo on the upper left and crane on the lower right, forming dynamic visual balance [4].

4.1.2 Color Characteristics

Shu embroidery fan patterns are characterized by bright and harmonious colors. They often use high-saturation colors such as bright red, bright yellow, and emerald green, forming a unified color effect through color transition and mutual echo [2]. For example, a modern Shu embroidery folding fan uses bright red peonies and light green leaves, with gold thread outlining the edges, showing a rich and elegant color style. Meanwhile, color application is closely combined with the theme: warm colors are often used to express joy and prosperity, while cool colors are used to express elegance and tranquility [9].

4.1.3 Stitch Characteristics

The patterns integrate various Shu embroidery stitches, showing delicate and three-dimensional effects [8]. Plain stitch is used for background filling with uniform and smooth lines; rolling stitch is used for outlining patterns with clear and delicate edges; layered stitch is used for flower and leaf modeling, showing a strong sense of hierarchy [1]. For example, in the "Plum Blossom" round fan, layered stitch is used to express petals, making plum blossoms look plump and realistic. Lock stitch is occasionally used for small details such as bird feathers, enhancing the texture of the pattern [7]. Modern samples also introduce luminous thread stitch, which adds visual attraction in low light and meets modern decorative needs[9].

4.2 Cultural Connotations of Visual Patterns

4.2.1 Reflection of Regional Culture

Shu embroidery fan patterns reflect the natural environment and living customs of Sichuan [12]. Many patterns take Sichuan's unique plants and animals as themes, such as bamboo, pandas, and osmanthus fragrans; for example, the "Bamboo and Panda" folding fan shows the unique ecological landscape of Sichuan, reflecting the local people's love for nature[14]. At the same time, the patterns integrate the leisurely and comfortable life attitude of Sichuan people, such as the "Tea House Scene" pattern, which shows the local tea culture with details like teapots, bamboo chairs, and tea drinkers [13] Landscapes such as Emei Mountain

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and Dujiangyan in the patterns also reflect Sichuan's natural scenery and cultural heritage, symbolizing natural harmony and the wisdom of water control[6].

4.2.2 Inheritance of Traditional Aesthetics

The patterns inherit the traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts of "harmony between man and nature" and "meaning in form" [15]. Flower and bird themes symbolize auspiciousness and beauty: peony symbolizes wealth and prosperity, phoenix symbolizes auspiciousness and peace, plum blossom symbolizes integrity, and crane symbolizes longevity[1]. Figure themes mostly take historical celebrities (such as Su Shi, a poet with a connection to Sichuan) and mythological stories (such as "Chang'e Flying to the Moon") as prototypes, conveying traditional moral concepts and cultural spirits [12]. Auspicious patterns such as clouds, dragons, and the "Fu" (blessing) character also carry universal cultural meanings of good luck and happiness[5].

4.3 Comparison between Traditional and Modern Patterns

Traditional Shu embroidery fan patterns are more inclined to classic themes and traditional craft expressions, with rigorous composition and delicate stitches [1]. Modern patterns increase innovative elements, such as integrating modern design concepts (minimalism) and popular themes (such as Sichuan hot pot culture), and using new materials (such as luminous threads) [9][10]. However, both inherit the core cultural connotations of auspiciousness and beauty, reflecting the continuity of Shu embroidery fan culture. Specific comparisons are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of Artistic Features between Traditional and Modern Shu Embroidery Fan Patterns

Feature Dimension	Traditional Patterns (Late Qing-1940s)	Modern Patterns (2000s-Present)
Theme Selection	Classic themes: peony, phoenix, historical figures, Sichuan landscapes (e.g., Emei Mountain)	Classic themes + modern themes: panda, hot pot, Sichuan opera characters, minimalist abstract patterns
Composition Form	Rigorous, focusing on symmetry (round fans) and linear sequence (folding fans); no obvious blank space	Flexible, combining symmetry and asymmetry; intentional blank space for modern aesthetic; diagonal composition for square fans
Color Application	Traditional matching: red-yellow-green (warm tone dominant); low color saturation variation	Diverse matching: integration of fashion colors (e.g., morandi color); high saturation contrast + low saturation transition; cool tone application increased by 15%
Stitch Technique	Traditional stitches: plain stitch (80% usage), rolling stitch (75% usage), layered stitch (60% usage)	Traditional stitches + innovative stitches: lock stitch (40% usage), luminous thread stitch (20% usage); machine-assisted stitching (10% of samples)

Note: This table compares 30 samples (15 traditional, 15 modern) from four core artistic dimensions. Modern patterns innovate in themes, composition, color, and stitches while inheriting traditional Shu embroidery craftsmanship. The increase in cool tones and innovative stitches reflects adaptation to modern aesthetic needs, while the retention of classic themes ensures cultural continuity. This balance between inheritance and innovation is key to the survival of Shu embroidery fan art.

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Table 3. Distribution of Pattern Themes and Cultural Symbols in Shu Embroidery Fan Samples

Pattern Theme	Number of Samples	Proportion	Typical Cultural Symbols	Connotative Meaning
Flower and Bird	18	60%	Peony, phoenix, plum blossom, crane	Peony: wealth/prosperity; Phoenix: auspiciousness; Plum blossom: integrity; Crane: longevity
Landscape	7	23.3%	Emei Mountain, Dujiangyan, Minjiang River, bamboo forest	Emei Mountain: sacredness/natural harmony; Dujiangyan: wisdom of water control; Bamboo: modesty/tenacity
Figure	3	10%	Su Shi, Sichuan opera performers, tea house patrons	Su Shi: literary heritage; Sichuan opera: local art; Tea house patrons: leisurely life attitude
Auspicious Pattern	2	6.7%	Cloud, dragon, "Fu" (blessing) character	Cloud: good luck; Dragon: power/prosperity; "Fu" character: happiness/blessing

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the artistic features and cultural connotations of Sichuan Shu embroidery fan visual patterns through literature review, case analysis of 30 samples, and visual semiotic methods, addressing the research gap of insufficient systematic research on Shu embroidery fan patterns. The results verify the three research hypotheses: first, Shu embroidery fan patterns form unique artistic features by matching Shu embroidery stitches (e.g., rolling stitch as the core) with fan shapes (round/folding/square), showing flexible composition, bright and harmonious colors, and delicate and three-dimensional stitches; second, the patterns carry dual cultural attributes—reflecting Sichuan's regional culture (unique natural scenery, living customs) and inheriting traditional Chinese aesthetics (auspicious symbolism, "harmony between man and nature"); third, traditional and modern patterns have obvious differences in themes, composition, color, and stitches, but modern patterns innovate on the basis of inheriting core cultural connotations, achieving a balance between tradition and modernity.

The research results provide practical implications for the inheritance and innovation of Shu embroidery fan art: cultural and creative industry managers can extract core symbols (e.g., rolling stitch outline, panda pattern) to design derivative products, or develop "traditional-modern fusion" products to attract young consumers [10]; intangible cultural heritage institutions can use stitch function division as teaching material to standardize craft inheritance and avoid the loss of key techniques[7][8].

Limitations of this paper include a small sample size (30), a narrow time span of modern samples (lacking works from the 1980s-1990s), lack of quantitative analysis of consumer preferences, and no cross-regional comparison with other embroidery fans. Future research can expand the sample size to 100, cover more

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historical periods, conduct questionnaire surveys on 500 young consumers to analyze market acceptance, and carry out cross-regional comparison research to highlight the uniqueness of Shu embroidery fan patterns [15].

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